

BRIEFING

A BASIC LEVEL OF SERVICE IN REGIONAL AND REMOTE SOUTH AUSTRALIA



About SACOSS

The South Australian Council of Social Service (SACOSS) is the peak body for non-government health and community services in South Australia, and has a vision of justice, opportunity, and shared wealth for all South Australians.

Our mission is to be a voice that leads and supports our community to take actions that achieve our vision, and to hold to account governments, businesses, and communities for actions that disadvantage South Australians.

SACOSS aims to influence public policy in a way that promotes fair and just access to the goods and services required to live a decent life. We undertake research to help inform community service practice, advocacy, and campaigning. We have more than 75 years' experience of social and economic policy and advocacy work that addresses issues impacting people experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the traditional lands of the Kaurna people and acknowledge the Kaurna people as the custodians of the Adelaide region and the Greater Adelaide Plains. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of lands beyond Adelaide and the Adelaide Plains and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We pay our respects to the cultural authority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations and colleagues and recognise the cultural expertise that they hold.

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The issue

Some communities in South Australia have unreliable or inadequate access to safe, reliable and affordable water, especially some regional and remote communities.

A basic level of service guarantee would ensure that all South Australians have water services that are available, safe, acceptable and affordable for all regardless of their physical location.

SACOSS Policy Recommendations

The South Australian Government should:

- prioritise the development of a basic level of service for regional and remote communities, with a framework that recognises reliable access to clean, safe, accessible and affordable water as an essential human right.
- work to build water literacy among water insecure communities to facilitate advocacy, community input and co-design of ongoing water management policies.

Context

The importance of equitable water access was recognised by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 6 – “Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all”. A recent UN review noted that internationally efforts would need to increase fourfold in order to meet the 2030 target.¹

The draft of the updated National Water Agreement provides a framework for defining a basic level of service, including reliable access to clean, safe, accessible and affordable water for drinking and sanitation for all, including those in regional and remote communities. The draft Agreement also recommends that any subsidy provided for infrastructure investment to address inequitable water supply that is judged to be economically unsustainable, is made through a transparent mechanism.²

The South Australian Government committed to develop a standard for a basic level of safe and reliable drinking water by 2022^{3,4}, but it has not eventuated. Despite this, the government has indicated that they remain committed to developing the basic level of service.⁵

Understanding the issue

Ensuring that all water users have access to safe, reliable and affordable water is costly and complex. As it currently stands, where a person lives can dictate the cost, quality and quantity of water they are able to use. In 2024 DEW undertook a Stocktake and Water

¹ [The Sustainable Development Goals Report](#) UN (2022) 38.

² [Updated Draft National Water Agreement](#) DCCEEW (2024) Outcome 1A and Principle 2.9.

³ [Closing the Gap: South Australia's Implementation Plan 2024-2026](#), Attorney-General's Department, 93.

⁴ [South Australia's Implementation Plan for the National Agreement on Closing the Gap](#), Government of South Australia (2021) 71.

⁵ [National Agreement on Closing the Gap: South Australia Annual Report 2023-24](#), Government of South Australia.

Security Assessment for Self-Supplied Remote Communities.⁶ Of the fourteen communities audited, seven remote communities were identified as being at high risk of water insecurity within a decade.

Following this stocktake, DEW has begun working on water security standards for self-supplied remote communities to help achieve long-term water security and provide a robust basis for the identification of necessary improvements.⁷ SACOSS welcomes the development of security standards to form a baseline for supply, but when considering a basic level of service, there must be a push for the provision of safe, reliable and affordable drinking water to be considered from a human rights perspective.

The UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) provides a viable framework for approaching the provision of a basic level of safe and reliable drinking water from a human rights perspective. This approach would:

- Enable provision of water services that are available, safe, acceptable, accessible and affordable for all communities in SA regardless of their physical location
- Foreground the principles of core obligations, progressive improvement and the use of maximum available resources to be considered in determining not only the sustainability of water services but their ability to deliver on the most basic needs of all individuals
- Provide a means for South Australia to redress past disadvantage and consider how we move beyond a "minimum" standard for unserved or underserved groups and take positive measures to address structural causes of inequality
- Bring a different paradigm to discussions with the water sector; making the provision of safe drinking water not something simply to be desired for all, but as a legal entitlement, and importantly putting individuals and societies rather than economies at the centre of the debate.

One of the key points of the ORCHR approach is the idea of progressive improvement. This concept is important in "advancing beyond the predominantly economic narrative which in many states drives discussion of the sustainability of water services provision [...] progressive improvement considers how states can move beyond a solely economic provision to 'take stock of the current situation of human rights to water... and identify how best to achieve the highest level of services possible *for all people* from there'.⁸

More than emphasising universal access to water, this concept implies that certain disadvantaged groups must be prioritised and active steps must be taken to address the practical challenges facing their prioritisation.

Prioritisation can present inherent problems. The South Australian Government has begun the process of understanding the scope of the issue, through the self-supplied stocktake and

⁶ [Stocktake and Water Security Assessment for Self-supplied Remote Communities](#), Department for Environment and Water (March 2022).

⁷ [National Agreement on Closing the Gap: South Australia Annual Report 2023-24](#), Government of South Australia, 72.

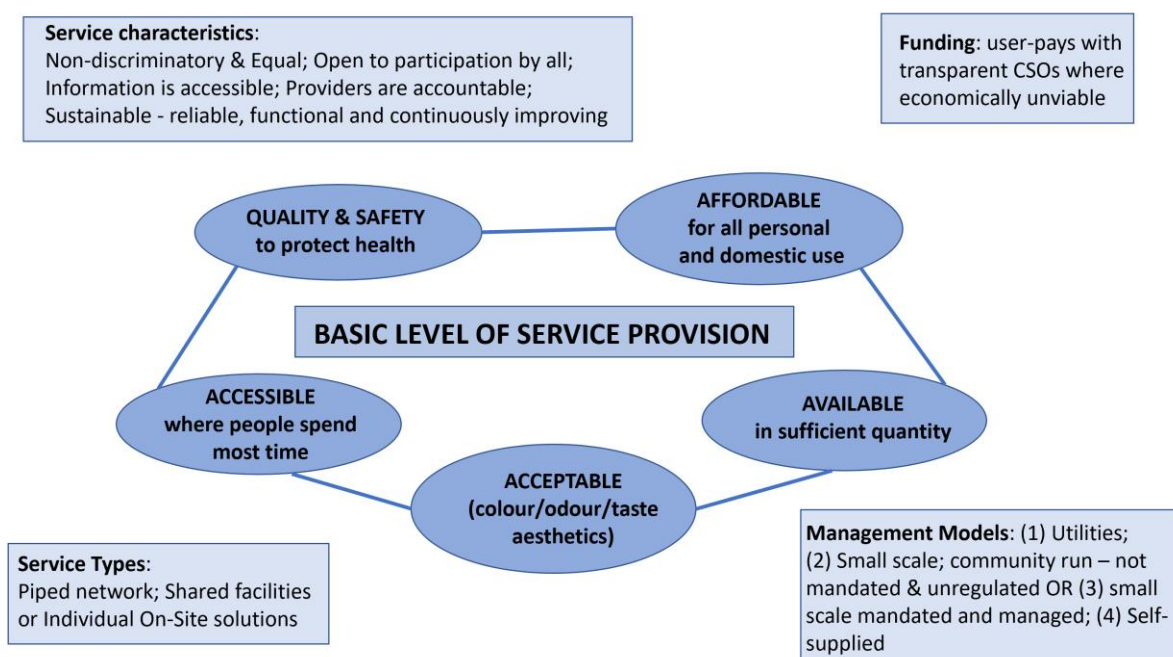
⁸ Cromar N & Willis E, [Issues surrounding the setting of a Basic Level of Service for long term water security in remote South Australia](#) (2022) 41.

ongoing studies on groundwater quality and quantity.⁹ While acknowledging the importance of initial steps such as these, it is also vital that the immediate needs of those currently at risk are met. A basic level of service requirement provides a clear guide as to when steps must be taken immediately to address an affected water supply.

What would be included in a ‘basic level of service’?

There is currently no definition of what constitute a basic level of service. The Productivity Commission has recommended that State and Territory Governments should commit to defining and ensuring a basic level of water service for all Australians, but provided limited guidance on how it would be set. The Commission notes the importance of clear definitions of basic service, including at a minimum the definition of ‘safe’ and ‘reliable’, but recommends that states and territories should define these terms based on their own circumstances and community needs.

Rather than simply reflecting a safe standard of water quality and a reliable supply, the basic level of service could take the opportunity to consider all the attributes of the human rights framework identified in the OHCHR documents. This would significantly reshape the concept of basic level of service – that Australians should be provided with water services that are available, safe, acceptable and affordable for all communities regardless of their physical location. These elements are summarised in the figure below.



Empowering communities

When considering the provision of drinking water, use of a human rights framework can help to mobilise groups by informing and empowering them. In other jurisdictions there has been a focus on improving ‘water literacy’ as part of water strategy. The goal is to build trust

⁹ [National Agreement on Closing the Gap: South Australia Annual Report 2023-24](#), Government of South Australia, 72.

and confidence in water management and decisions to build confidence and foster shared understanding.¹⁰

There are examples of community consultation, leading to the co-design of water policies by the people effected by them. An example of this is Coliban Water in rural Victoria.¹¹ The small township of Elmore did not utilise a mains sewerage system and asked the water provider to adapt their pricing to reflect this. The community was presented with a range of options and after a public vote, the residents of Elmore selected one of the payment options. In this case, weight appears to have been given to community expectations and preferences, with the standard of sewerage service provided in neighbouring towns used as a baseline to measure acceptable levels.

Case studies

In the 2022 study 'Issues surrounding the setting of a Basic Level of Service for long term water security in remote South Australia', a number of real-world examples were considered to explore how different jurisdictions define and apply a basic level of service.¹² A key issue raised in the study is whether a basic level of service requirement should relate solely to the bulk water supply system, or whether it should also consider the final water supply delivered to homes. Ultimately, the answer to this depends on the purpose of the requirement. If the objective is to contribute to a community's understanding of its water security position and provide guidance to planners and decision-makers, it may be sufficient to only consider the bulk water supply (for an example of this, see the Queensland – Level of Service case study below). However, if a basic level of service incorporates a tiered 'level of service' dynamic (as in the Tasmanian example), then the final water supply to individual homes must be considered.

Queensland – Level of Service

In the South East region of Queensland, Level of Service (LOS) objectives are legislated. These LOS objectives can be viewed as a planning tool creates targets for long-term water supply security for a community. The objectives relate to the bulk water supply system, rather than to the final water supply provided to homes.

The legislated objectives require bulk water supply network in South East Queensland to supply enough water to ensure that medium level water restrictions do not occur more than once every 10 years and allow 140L per person per day. The LOS objectives provide contingencies for extreme drought events and generally do not need to incorporate short-term interruptions such as floods, fire, operational issues or water leaks.

A set of water security LOS objectives can be used as a planning tool by a community to set targets for longer term water supply security. Having these objectives can

¹⁰ https://watersecurity.nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1247520/territory-water-plan.pdf pg 16.

¹¹ Cromar N & Willis E, [Issues surrounding the setting of a Basic Level of Service for long term water security in remote South Australia](#) (2022) 19.

¹² Cromar N & Willis E, [Issues surrounding the setting of a Basic Level of Service for long term water security in remote South Australia](#) (2022) 14; 26.

contribute to a communities understanding of their water security position and help guide those making decisions as to its future.

Tasmania – Service reflective pricing

In 2015 TasWater was formed as a result of the amalgamation of 29 local government water suppliers after ongoing issues with non-compliance with licences, boil water alerts and unmanageable debt levels. Operating as a single entity, it is now the major utility water provider in Tasmania. Tasmania has a dispersed population, with a density of 33 properties per kilometre of water mains, compared to an average of 66 properties on the mainland.

While all customers pay the same cost for their water, the customer base is divided into categories based on the services they receive. This includes full service customers for water, full service for sewerage, limited water quality customers, limited water supply customers, fire service customers, commercial and trade customers and septic tank effluent disposal scheme customers.

The TasWater scheme also utilises extensive programs of community engagement. For example, if a town is due to receive sewerage or water, there is a three-stage process and customers must agree to proceed at each stage. The early stages require 80% of residents to agree to be connected to TasWater, prior to the council engaging with them.

The development of a basic level of service for water security in regional and remote South Australia is an essential step toward addressing long-standing water security challenges. By incorporating a human rights framework, this initiative can ensure that all communities, regardless of location, have access to safe, reliable, and affordable drinking water. While progress has been made with the South Australian Government's ongoing efforts, it is crucial that the basic level of service definition not only addresses immediate needs but also fosters long-term, sustainable improvements. Empowering communities through engagement and prioritising disadvantaged groups will help move beyond minimum standards and ensure equitable access to water for all South Australians.

Recommendations

SACOSS recommends that the South Australian Government

- prioritise the development of a basic level of service for regional and remote communities, with a framework that recognises reliable access to clean, safe, accessible and affordable water as an essential human right.
- works to build water literacy amongst communities with water insecurity to facilitate advocacy, community input and co-design of ongoing water management policies.