

Stakeholder and Community Engagement Plan
Armidale Water Security Project



Restore & thrive

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1. Communication Aim

This Stakeholder and Community Engagement Management plan outlines the consultation and engagement process for environmental assessment and delivery of the Armidale Regional Council Water Security Project comprising:

- Restoration of Oaky River Dam and reinstatement of existing Hydropower station
- A water transfer system connecting Oaky River Dam to Armidale Water Treatment Plant
- Raising of Malpas Dam.

The plan has been developed to identify:

- Level of consultation to be carried out
- Key stakeholders and interests in project
- Potential issues, risks and mitigation strategies
- Consultation and communication activities to ensure effective, relevant and timely communication with all stakeholders
- Communication protocols and responsibilities within the project team.

Communication Protocols and Responsibilities

The Mayor is the primary spokesperson for the project, with the General Manager as secondary spokesperson. All media releases, fact sheets and public statements are approved by the General Manager prior to release, with messaging coordinated through Council's communications team to ensure consistency with the agreed key messages in this plan. Technical content is verified by the project team before inclusion in any public material. Enquiries from media, landholders or stakeholders received by project staff are referred to the communications team, with complex or sensitive matters escalated to the project manager and, where required, the General Manager. Engagement activities, feedback received and responses provided are recorded in the project's stakeholder register to inform the EIS and reporting to Council

2. The Project

As a Local Water Utility Provider, Council has an obligation to provide Safe, secure, sustainable, and affordable water and sewerage services for healthy and resilient communities, businesses, and the environment, now and into the future.

In 2019, Armidale experienced its driest and warmest year on record and the Guyra town water supply failed for the second time (it first went dry in 2014). Level 3 water restrictions were introduced in April 2019 and escalated to Level 5 by October 2019. Council's ability to deliver core services, including road maintenance and emergency response during bushfire seasons, was also severely constrained.

These restrictions remained in place until September 2020. During this time, the NSW Government classified Armidale's water supply at the highest level of risk (Category 5). Further, Uralla Local Government Area (LGA) located immediately south of the Armidale Regional Council area also experienced severe water shortages in 2019 following contamination of its water supply. This resulted in the need for bottled water to be trucked in for residents.

The combination of pressures from an adopted growth strategy, water security issues were further stressed when the New England Renewable Energy Zone (NEREZ) was announced in July 2020 with additional construction water needs and anticipated impacts from worker housing requirements.

These events have highlighted significant vulnerabilities in the region's water security and the urgent need for a resilient and diversified supply system. Accordingly, Armidale Regional Council and the NSW Government invested in studies to provide a water security solution for the region. Those studies have resulted in the purchase of the Oaky River Dam and the development of a Regional Water Security Strategy, to be delivered in two stages:

- **Stage 1.** Reinstatement of Oaky River Dam and hydropower station to its original capacity, and installation of a Water Transfer System to the Armidale Water Treatment Plant.
- **Stage 2.** Raising of Malpas Dam wall and progressively upgrading the pipeline (with a pumping capability) from the Armidale Water Treatment Plant to Malpas Dam.

3. Target Audiences

Water security for Armidale Regional Council impacts not only the residential communities within Armidale and surrounding towns, but also key industrial, employment and horticultural activities. The project also seeks to provide a level of water security in the longer term for the adjacent local government areas of Uralla and Walcha, as well as support the roll out of renewable energy in the New England Renewable Energy Zone under the guidance of EnergyCo.

Given the complex and far-reaching outcomes for the water security project, a list of stakeholders and their interests is provided below, noting this is not a comprehensive list but it does highlight the diversity of interests in the project. The engagement level assigned to each stakeholder reflects the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum (Appendix A), ranging from Inform (providing balanced information) through Consult (obtaining feedback) and Involve (working directly with stakeholders so concerns are understood and considered) to Collaborate (partnering on aspects of design and delivery).

Stakeholder	Interest	Engagement level (IAP2)
Residents of Armidale Regional Council with reticulated water	Will mitigate impacts from future droughts to ensure ongoing water for residential usage. This is relevant given the 2019/20 drought and level 5 restrictions placed on towns within ARC. As of May 2026, Armidale and Guyra were on Level 2 water restrictions.	Inform & Consult
Property owners along Waterfall Way between Kempsey-Armidale Road and Middle Farm Road	Properties impacted by the water pipeline connecting Oaky Dam to Armidale Water Treatment Plant (approximately 47 private properties directly impacted).	Involve
Property owners adjacent to Oaky Dam	Access easements will need to be formalised, with 3 property owners affected.	Involve
Property owners adjacent to Malpas Dam	Potential property impacts associated with raising of Malpas Dam (approximately 20 private properties directly impacted by increased inundation).	Involve
Armidale Aboriginal Land Council	The project will impact existing water bodies and streams, with engagement with First Nations communities to understand and mitigate potential cultural impacts.	Involve & Collaborate

	Further, there are 12 undetermined Aboriginal Land Claims affecting 13 impacted lots within the Oaky River Dam to Armidale Pipeline route	
Uralla Shire Council	The water security project aims to provide a level of water security to Uralla Shire Council. This is particularly important to the residents of Uralla Shire who were significantly impacted by the 2019/20 drought with water having to be trucked in.	Consult
Walcha Shire Council	As a result of the 2019 drought and water scarcity impacting Walcha's ability to appropriately manage activities such as bush fire management and maintenance activities, Walcha Council has also identified a water security issue for town and surrounding areas. There are opportunities in the medium to longer term for Armidale's water security project to address Walcha's issues.	Consult
Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure (DPHI)	The project will need approval under the state planning legislation as a State Significant Infrastructure in order to proceed. DPHI will be the approval agency.	Consult (statutory approval authority)
Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW)	Council will need to work closely with DCCEEW in obtaining any relevant water licences for the approval, as well as comply with relevant environmental policies, legislations and guidelines in the development and delivery of the project.	Consult (licensing and regulatory)
Department of Public Works (PWA)	PWA has worked with Council in developing an overarching water security strategy as well as concept designs for the dam upgrades and pipelines associated with the project. PWA provide technical expertise on water infrastructure projects.	Collaborate (technical delivery partner)
Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development	DPIRD is the NSW government agency with responsibilities including Agriculture. Given the importance of the Horticultural industry in Armidale and the link to water security, DPIRD is seen as a partner in the conversation around the need to address water security to ensure food security and employment opportunities for the region.	Consult
Controlled Environment Horticultural (CEH) industry	The growing horticultural industry within Armidale Council, is earmarked as a potential major growth area for employment within Council's LSPS. In order to expand, it will need some confidence of a safe and reliable water source, which this project will provide.	Inform & Consult
Transport for NSW	The proposed water pipeline connecting Oaky River Dam traverses along the Waterfall Way corridor which is owned and operated by TfNSW. Council will need to liaise with TfNSW in developing options for constructing the	Collaborate (corridor design)

	pipeline along the road corridor, including the potential use of bridge infrastructure to cross stream and rivers.	
EnergyCo	EnergyCo are a major water user associated with the development of the NE REZ. Council is in discussions with EnergyCo around funding pathways to implement a project which enables the roll out of renewable energy infrastructure as well as leaves a lasting community legacy for the community.	Collaborate (funding and REZ coordination)
Water NSW	State's corporate water management agency who can provide expertise and guidance on the project when required. Note Water NSW is not involved in the management and operation of ARC's existing water infrastructure but would be a key stakeholder in the design of the project.	Consult (licensing and regulatory)
NSW Reconstruction Authority	Due to role in Disaster Adaptation – would anticipate support for project due to addressing water security and minimising impacts from future droughts as well as floods / bushfires (flood mitigation via dam and water availability in event of bushfires). With the advent of the Disaster Adaptation Plans being rolled out across the State, it is anticipated the Proposal would be referenced in the relevant plan for addressing longer term resilience in the New England communities	Inform
State and Federal MPs	Council needs to keep the state and federal MPs updated on the proposal and progress, including discussing potential funding opportunities across Government.	Inform (regular briefings)
Alinta Energy (Oven Mountain Pumped Hydro)	Proponent of Pumped Hydro Plant further south of the Oaky Creek Dam along Kempsey-Armidale Road. Project currently in development, noting there may be some benefits with regards reinstatement of existing Oaky Dam Hydropower station depending on the outcome of the approval process and construction timeline.	Inform
UNE	Potential partner in supporting water security project to facilitate a strong and productive agricultural and food industry in the NE. They may also assist in conversations relating to innovation around water usage and how the dams would support food security in the tablelands.	Inform and Consult
Fisheries	Council will need to consult with Fisheries to ensure there is no net loss of key fish habitats associated with the project. Fisheries has previously been contacted with regards to the Proposal, with consultation to continue,	Consult (statutory)

	particularly with regards to water crossings and the design of dams.	
Dam Safety NSW	Council will need to consult with Dam Safety NSW in the design and operation of the dams.	Consult (statutory)

First Nations Engagement

Aboriginal cultural heritage consultation will be undertaken in accordance with relevant guidelines, including the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Consultation Requirements for Proponents 2010 (ACHCRP) and any requirements specified in the SEARs. This will include public notification, registration of Aboriginal parties and their involvement in the assessment of cultural heritage values across the project area. Registered Aboriginal Parties will be engaged in the development of the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Assessment Report supporting the EIS, including survey methodology, identification of values and development of management measures. Council will also continue to engage with the Armidale Aboriginal Land Council regarding the undetermined Aboriginal Land Claims affecting lots within the pipeline corridor. Engagement with First Nations communities will continue beyond the assessment phase through detailed design, construction and operation.

4. Key messages

There are four key themes around this project which provide justification for the investment, as well as highlight the order of works and key partners in delivery. The key messages for the project include:

- With current forecasts pointing to a warmer and drier 2026, and increasing water restrictions for Armidale and Guyra residents, developing an **alternative water source is of highest priority** for Armidale. This recognises the inevitability of future droughts, and a high likelihood a drought as severe as 2019 will be experienced again within the next 30 years.
- **Water security** is a regional issue and needs to be addressed in order to support Council's aspirations for the future (as per the Community Plan and the Local Strategic Planning Statement); ensure Armidale is well prepared for any future droughts; and assist adjacent councils in the future to manage their water security issues (ie Uralla and Walcha Councils).
- The **staging of the Proposal** addresses both water security and construction risk. Whilst the raising of Malpas Dam was initially identified as the key component to address water security, there is a risk that in raising the dam wall Council may impact water availability for the Armidale community townships and businesses. In raising the existing water supply dam, there needs to be a safe and reliable alternative water supply to support the community and ensure there are no water emergencies. This is why the restoration of Oaky Dam is the first stage of the water security project. In essence, Oaky Dam restoration is needed to safely raise Malpas Dam.
- The state strategy for rolling out **renewable energy infrastructure** in the New England region is both an opportunity and a pain point. EnergyCo has identified a significant need for water to enable the construction of the renewable energy infrastructure, thus placing pressure on Council's existing water supply. EnergyCo is however a potential funding pathway for the project, with Council engaged in regular discussions with EnergyCo and the wider NSW State Government on potential project costs, and potential funding pathways for implementation. The project also contributes to the energy transition, with the reinstatement of the existing hydroelectric power station at Oaky Dam returning renewable generation capacity to the region

5. Communications Tactics and Channels

5.1 Armidale Council Communication channels

Armidale Regional Council regularly engages with the wider Armidale community through various forums, strategies and mediums. This includes the development of significant strategic documents such as:

- Advancing Our Region Community Plan which sets out the vision and goals for the region, along with a 10 year plan shaped what Council has heard from the community including over 1800 community contributions during a 2021 engagement program and contributions received during the 2024 Community Plan review. Water security was a key theme coming out of these conversations.
- Council's Local Strategic Planning Statement (Advancing our Region: Towards 50,000) which sets out a 20 year plan to achieve Council vision of have a prosperous future with a diverse economy, vibrant community and unique environment to grow towards 50,000 people. Water security, including the need to upgrade Oaky River and Malpas dams, plays a critical role in achieving this vision.

Other communications channels for Armidale include updates via their website, including via a public engagement campaign referred to as Water Drops. Whilst the Oaky Dam restoration project is specifically mentioned on the public facing website, regular updates to the community are provided via a dedicated Water Drops page on Your Say Armidale and via council's social media Facebook site. It allows for Council to regularly share facts around water security, ask for community feedback on proposals or current issues, and assist implementation of water conservation measures by providing up to date information to the wider community.

Given the success of Council's utilisation of the website and social media pages, this is likely to be used as an ongoing tool for Council to communicate and consult with the wider community on the Project as it progresses through development and, subject to funding, into delivery.

5.2 Legislative requirements for State Significant Infrastructure

Community engagement and participation is an essential part of the assessment of all State Significant Infrastructure projects and is integral to improving the design of projects and informing decision making with regards to the proposed project. This is enshrined in the NSW planning legislation which seeks to ensure open and inclusive consultation with communities with genuine and proper consideration to community input around proposals and investment decisions made by government entities, such as the Project.

Landholders affected by pipeline easement will be notified of the scoping report submission under section 181(6) of the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Regulation 2021* (EP&A Regulation 2021). All landholders have been contacted by Council during project design. Council will maintain proactive engagement with landholders throughout assessment, easement creation and construction. Under the state planning legislation there is a mandatory timeframe for public exhibition of 28 days for the public to view and comment on state significant infrastructure proposals. Whilst this is managed through the Department of Planning online portal, Council would also be expected to hold information sessions and events during the SSI planning process to both inform the community of the proposal as well as seek their views around design and scope matters.

As such, it is anticipated that during the formal environmental assessment process, Council would utilise communication means including:

- media releases, including via Council's website and social media platforms
- media interviews
- public speeches
- fact sheets
- mayoral columns
- council quarterly publications
- advertising
- direct mail
- stakeholder forums and events
- workshops
- promotional items
- traditional media – print, TV & radio

5.3 Recording and responding to feedback

All feedback received through engagement activities, including submissions, enquiries and matters raised at information sessions and landholder meetings, will be recorded in the project's stakeholder register. Feedback will be considered by the project team during preparation of the EIS, and the EIS will document the issues raised through consultation and how they have been addressed or, where a change is not feasible, why. Council will report back to the community and directly affected landholders on how their input has been considered, including through the formal Response to Submissions following public exhibition.

6. Resources

The water security project is one of significant interest to the community as well as business, industry and agricultural sectors. It is also a significant investment for government, thus the resources in communication and engagement need to reflect the importance of this significant project.

As a minimum, it would be anticipated the project would need two full time staff working on consistent communication messaging including direct correspondence to key stakeholders, organising workshops and events, and drafting messages for media releases and social media posts.

7. Risks

It is noted the project appears to have broad support within the community, noting there are a few risks that could potentially disrupt the scope, timing or budget associated with the proposal. These are listed below:

Risk	Issue	Mitigation Measure
Loss of trust with community	As noted above, the project appears to be supported by the majority of the Armidale LGA community. This	To mitigate this, it is recommended messaging be established and agreed upon

	however could be eroded over time if messaging is inconsistent, confusing or is not clear.	during the Scoping Report phase, with this then being used consistently across all communication mediums.
Inconsistency messaging within Council	There are several key areas within Council that are key to achieving success for the project. These include assets, communication branch and growth & infrastructure. There needs to be consistency in messaging across these branches as well as conversations with external stakeholders. This includes messaging around the strategic importance of the project including how it links to key priorities around growth (Towards 50,000), the Controlled Environment Horticulture (CEH) industry and managing the impacts of future droughts.	Internal fact sheets and messaging are developed and promoted internally to staff key messaging and also provide a source for officers when attending meetings with external entities.
Confusion around project staging, in particular Oaky Dam and Malpas Dam	Initially the water security project was linked to the raising of the Malpas Dam wall. In 2022 Council agreed to purchase Oaky Dam with the intention of reinstating the dam wall and providing extra capacity for the region. Oaky Dam reinstatement was seen as a way to minimise risks associated with raising the Malpas Dam as it would be in place and connected, allowing the Malpas Dam upgrade to take place offline, alleviating any water emergency scenarios playing out during construction. There are still questions around the order of dam upgrades, including why Malpas is not being upgraded first.	Simple clear messaging provided through fact sheets and social media posts about how Oaky Dam and hydropower reinstatement and Malpas Dam wall raising relate to each other, and the need to undertake Oaky Dam works first to minimise any risks associated with Malpas Dam wall raising. This clarity of the order of projects needs to be developed in the short term, included in the scoping report for the SSI application, and then used across any other media collateral.
Equity in payment for water	During 2025 there was a growing dialogue in the community around perceptions of inequality in water charging, and concerns about fairness between residential/ business/ rural sectors and associated charges for access to water. This perception around inequity of water charging is becoming part of the conversation around funding for the Oaky Dam and water security project, particularly if alternative government funding cannot be found.	Council has commenced a conversation with the community in July 2026 to address some of this concern and inform future water charging rates. Council is also working with key government stakeholders to identify an appropriate funding source for project to minimise any cost shift onto the community for the project. This messaging needs to be consistent in any communications material on

		the project, with updates provided to the community on the outcomes of these conversations with state agencies.
Impact of the Renewable Energy Zone on water security	The construction of renewable energy infrastructure in the NE REZ has the potential to be a significant impact on the existing water supply and treatment plant for Armidale and surrounding Councils. At it's peak, a 2025 ¹ study indicates it could exceed existing water usage availability for residential/ business/ rural needs. This may result in a lack of support from the NE communities for energy transition	Develop a separate and cohesive engagement strategy with EnergyCo to build support for funding of the project in part of full. This includes developing a network of support from partner agencies and business groups who would benefit from the project to highlight to EnergyCo the importance of the project.

8. Timeline and major milestones

The communications activities below are pegged to the key milestones of the State Significant Infrastructure assessment process, from receipt of the Secretary's Environmental Assessment Requirements (SEARs) through preparation of the EIS, public exhibition and the Response to Submissions. This ensures the community and affected landholders receive timely information at each decision point in the assessment, rather than on an ad hoc basis. Dates are estimates based on the current EIS program and are subject to the timing of SEARs, technical studies and determination by the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure. The schedule will be reviewed and updated as the program is confirmed.

Activity	Message	Date	Actioned by
Landholder letters and stakeholder notification of Scoping Report lodgement	Scoping Report lodged with DPHI; project overview; what happens next in the assessment process	June 2026	Project team / Communications team
Media release, website and Water Drops update on Scoping Report lodgement	Water security need; project staging (Oakley Dam first); current Level 2 restrictions context	June/July 2026	Communications team (GM approval)
Website and social media update on receipt of SEARs	EIS studies commencing; what the EIS will assess;	August 2026	Communications team

¹ Energy Co 2025 "New England REZ Water and Wastewater Security Study"

Activity	Message	Date	Actioned by
	how the community can stay informed		
Direct contact with landholders ahead of field surveys (ecology, heritage, geotechnical)	Survey purpose and timing; property access arrangements; point of contact for enquiries	July to August 2026, ahead of the September to November survey window	Project team
Community fact sheet and progress updates during EIS preparation	Study progress; staging rationale; consistent key messages from this plan	Quarterly, mid 2026 to early 2027	Communications team
Community and landholder briefings	Project progress; consistent messaging, addressing community concerns	Ongoing through EIS preparation, June 2026 to February 2027	Project / Communications team
Briefings to agencies, neighbouring councils, EnergyCo and the local Member	Project progress; assessment timeline; funding pathway discussions	Ongoing through EIS preparation, June 2026 to February 2027	General Manager / Project team
Media release and website update on EIS lodgement	EIS lodged with DPHI; public exhibition to follow; how to view the EIS and make a submission	Estimated February 2027	Mayor (spokesperson) / Communications team
Exhibition notification: direct mail to affected landholders, advertising, social media	Exhibition dates; where to view the EIS; how to make a submission; information session details	Estimated March to April 2027 (minimum 28 day exhibition)	Communications team
Community information sessions during public exhibition	EIS findings; project detail; opportunity for questions and feedback	During exhibition, estimated March to April 2027	Project team / Communications team

Activity	Message	Date	Actioned by
Report back on submissions and Council's response	Issues raised in submissions; how feedback has been considered and addressed in the Response to Submissions	Estimated August 2027	Project team
Announcement of assessment determination	Outcome of the Minister's determination; conditions of approval; next steps toward construction	Estimated early 2028	Mayor (spokesperson) / Communications team
Pre-construction notification to landholders and community	Construction timing and staging; access arrangements; contacts for enquiries and complaints	Ahead of construction commencement, estimated mid 2028	Project team / Contractor

Engagement

Use the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum below to identify the level of participation from your identified key stakeholders and the community required to deliver a successful project. Please also review the *Draft Community Engagement Strategy 2025-28* to understand how and when we engage.

Activity	Message	Date	Actioned by

Appendix A : iap2 Public Participatiuon Spectrum

iap2 public participation spectrum

Increasing Level of Public Impact 					
	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Public Participation Goal	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decision.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public issues and concerns are consistently understood and considered.	To work directly with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.
Promise to the Public	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and issues are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advise and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.
Example Tools	• Fact sheets • Websites • Open houses	• Public comment • Focus groups • Surveys • Public meetings	• Workshops • Deliberate polling	• Citizen Advisory committees • Consensus-building • Participatory decision-making	• Citizen juries • Ballots • Delegated decisions