

Beyond septics: Connecting more households to effective wastewater systems



The township of Porepunkah adjacent to the Ovens River in north east Victoria.

North East Water has taken a fresh approach to community engagement to help septic tank customers in the townships of Moyhu and Porepunkah connect to more effective wastewater systems.

The problem

Septic tanks are a common feature of rural properties and unsewered townships. However, when not properly installed or maintained, they can cause contamination of soils, surface water and groundwater resources, leading to public health risks and pollution of the environment. Septic tanks require regular servicing to operate effectively, with responsibility for their maintenance falling to householders.

In some cases, it can be more effective for townships to replace septic tanks with a sewer system for improved and reliable management of effluent, as well as increased protection of the environment and public health.

The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) and the Environment Protection Authority (EPA), together with local government and the state's water corporations, are responding to a 2018 Victorian Auditor-General's Office audit *Managing the Environmental Impacts of Domestic Wastewater*, which identified a significant delay in residents using septic

tanks connecting to newly constructed sewer systems. This delay can prolong the adverse environmental impacts that arise from outdated and poorly performing onsite systems.

The following initiative being rolled out by North East Water for the townships of Moyhu and Porepunkah provides an example of an innovative approach being used to promote the take-up and connection to an effective community wastewater system.

In 2017 a Septic Tank Effluent Drainage System (STEDS) was built in Moyhu to address public health risks and environmental impacts as part of the Victorian Government's Small Towns Water and Sewerage program. The scheme was introduced to replace septic tanks, which serviced 104 properties in Moyhu.

In 2016, community engagement began to promote connections as part of the Moyhu Wastewater Scheme. At the time, some residents were concerned about the project due to the connection costs, and a community engagement plan was developed and implemented in partnership with the Department of Health (DH). This approach included working with residents to outline the support that would be provided to help them connect.

North East Water then applied the lessons from this engagement process to improve the connection rates to a legacy sewerage scheme that had been constructed in Porepunkah in 2005. The Porepunkah Sewerage Scheme services 260 properties, and while property owners had until June 2010 (five years) to connect to the scheme, 34 properties remained unconnected in 2019.

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The steps taken to address the problem

North East Water conducted significant community consultation with residents and community groups regarding connection to the compulsory schemes, with the consultation approach and process supported by the corporation's executive team and board.

Consultation around securing connections included direct engagement with the community, such as supporting or attending events in Moyhu to provide more information on the scheme, and by calling affected residents directly. Customers were also followed up regularly throughout the process.



North East Water attended community events including a local football match to provide information on the wastewater scheme.

North East Water developed templates such as fact sheets and information packs, and shared information and updates through community newsletters, local newspapers, local events and direct letters to residents to promote the importance of connections.

Surveys were also conducted with unconnected customers to better understand the barriers to connection.

Overcoming financial barriers

During the consultation process, financial hardship was identified as a key barrier to connection to both schemes. To help address this barrier, North East Water developed a Customer Support Program to assist eligible customers with some of the costs associated with scheme connections.

For both towns, an assistance package was provided by North East Water of \$50,000, supplementing grant funding from the DH Water and Sewerage Connection Hardship Relief Grant Scheme.

In consultation with financial counsellors and DH, North East Water structured their Customer Support Program to offer different levels of assistance, with customers prioritised within each level.

Level 1: Concession card holders (approved by DH)

- Plumber invoice paid in full by DH
- Connection fee waived
- Scheme contribution payments extended to over 20 years or allow the debt to remain on the property.

Level 2: Concession card holders not approved by DH or low income earners (assessed using DH criteria)

- Plumber invoice paid in full or partially (depending on the number of applications received)
- Connection fee waived
- Scheme contribution payments extended to over 20 years or allow the debt to remain on the property.

Level 3: Ineligible applicants (Plumbing Panel)

- North East Water developed a 'Plumbing Panel' where expressions of interest were sent to selected plumbers (including local service providers) to supply competitive quotes to customers seeking support
- Customers were required to nominate two preferred plumbers from the panel. North East Water then sent customer contact details to the nominated plumbers to organise a quote
- Plumber costs could be paid over three years or a negotiated time frame.

The results

The end date for final connections is 23 January 2022.

In June 2021, 80% of residents had connected to the Moyhu Wastewater Scheme. Since the roll out of financial assistance through the Customer Support Program in Porepunkah, 94% of outstanding connections have been finalised. Only two residents are yet to connect to the Porepunkah Sewerage Scheme.

The challenges and how they were met

North East Water faced a range of challenges throughout the sewer connection process, including the need to build relationships and rapport not only with its customers but with partner organisations.

As the initiatives progressed, it was necessary to navigate existing process inefficiencies and consider financial limitations facing some members within the community.

Building relationships and rapport

As strong collaboration is critical to the success of these schemes, it is essential to build strong relationships with

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relevant parties. North East Water worked closely with the Wangaratta Rural City and Alpine Shire Councils and gained commitment to work as a collective. This demonstrated to residents that both local government and the water corporation were working together to implement the schemes.

In addition, North East Water staff worked with DH to understand the evidence required for applications to be approved. As a result, DH was able to fast track applications received from the Customer Support Program.

North East Water also made a concerted effort to establish relationships with its customers and the Plumbing Panel and used opportunities to meet with the local community. This included information stalls at a local football match and provision of food and beverages at community information sessions.

Process inefficiencies

Residents were originally required to return the plumbing industry consent applications to DH, which slowed the process, and some plumbers took a long time to complete quotes. Residents also advised they considered the DH paperwork to be time consuming.

To combat this, North East Water looked for opportunities to make the process easier for customers. Improvements included assisting customers and plumbers with paperwork, and coordination with the Plumbing Panel to avoid delays. This was particularly helpful for the older demographic.

Consideration for financial hardship

To assist customers facing financial hardship without a DH concession (level 2), North East Water applied a 20% tolerance to the DH low income earner criteria for the Customer Support Program.

Lessons learnt

1. Consider connection rates upfront

When planning sewerage schemes, connection rates need to be considered as a dedicated phase within the project's early stages to ensure the project considers customers' individual financial circumstances. It is also important to develop support options.

2. Keep communicating

Regular communication using a range of platforms is essential – never assume that you have communicated enough. North East Water found that some residents

already thought they were connected to the schemes when they were not.

A project communications plan with timeframes and key messaging can help reiterate to residents the importance of connecting to more effective wastewater systems from a broader health and environmental perspective.

3. Take the local approach

Despite two local plumbers being included in the Plumbing Panel for the Moyhu Wastewater Scheme, residents raised this as a concern as most suppliers were based in other towns. This highlighted the importance of working with local suppliers as much as possible.

Beyond results

While North East Water successfully developed and tested a model that increased connections to wastewater systems in Moyhu and Porepunkah, properties that are currently vacant land will be required to connect to the scheme if they are developed in the future.

The results of this approach have wide ranging benefits. Ultimately, the increased rate of connection to sewerage schemes in both towns has helped to address onsite wastewater management issues, reduced the impact on existing stormwater systems and minimised the risks to public health and the environment.

It has also supported broader integrated water management (IWM) outcomes, particularly in relation to delivering more effective and affordable wastewater systems as outlined in the *North East IWM Strategic Directions Statement* and *Water for Victoria – Water Plan*.

The community engagement approach can be applied to both new and legacy domestic wastewater schemes, using a combination of face to face and remote engagement techniques, and there is confidence this approach could also apply to schemes in larger townships.

In building rapport and trust within the community, North East Water will also benefit more broadly from this program by increasing awareness and understanding of, and support for, the corporation's additional water management services and initiatives.

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Conclusion

The results from this project demonstrate that a considered community engagement approach can increase connection rates to more effective wastewater systems on a range of scales and stages of implementation.

The approach focused on developing a strong relationship with customers, plumbers and partner organisations including local government and DH, with a focus on clear communication and making the connection process as simple as possible.

An important factor to this success has been the proactive approach North East Water took towards managing the financial burden on residents – a key barrier to connection rates – and tailored support that addressed individual customer circumstances.

While North East Water can pursue enforcement provisions under section 147 of the Water Act 1989 to legally require properties to connect to the schemes and recover costs if the property owner does not comply with the request, community engagement is the preferred option.

The Moyhu initiative was well resourced with approximately 0.1 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) and the ability for face to face engagement.

The Porepunkah initiative, which was also resourced with 0.1 FTE, was limited to remote engagement due to bushfire recovery efforts and COVID restrictions in 2020.



Key messages

- To improve connection rates to alternative wastewater systems, it is important to have executive support/agreement to prioritise investment in building relationships and rapport with customers, suppliers and partner organisations
- Find out the key barriers to connection and tailor solutions that will suit individual circumstances
- Make the connection process as easy as possible and keep communicating with key stakeholders using different channels.

Further reading

- [North East IWM Strategic Directions Statement \(DELWP, 2019\)](#)
- [Water for Victoria – Water Plan \(DELWP, 2016\)](#)
- [Porepunkah Sewerage Scheme – Fact Sheet \(North East Water, 2015\)](#)
- [Managing the Environmental Impacts of Domestic Wastewater \(VAGO, 2018\)](#)
- [Guide to the proposed final Environment Protection Regulations \(EPA, 2020\)](#)

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