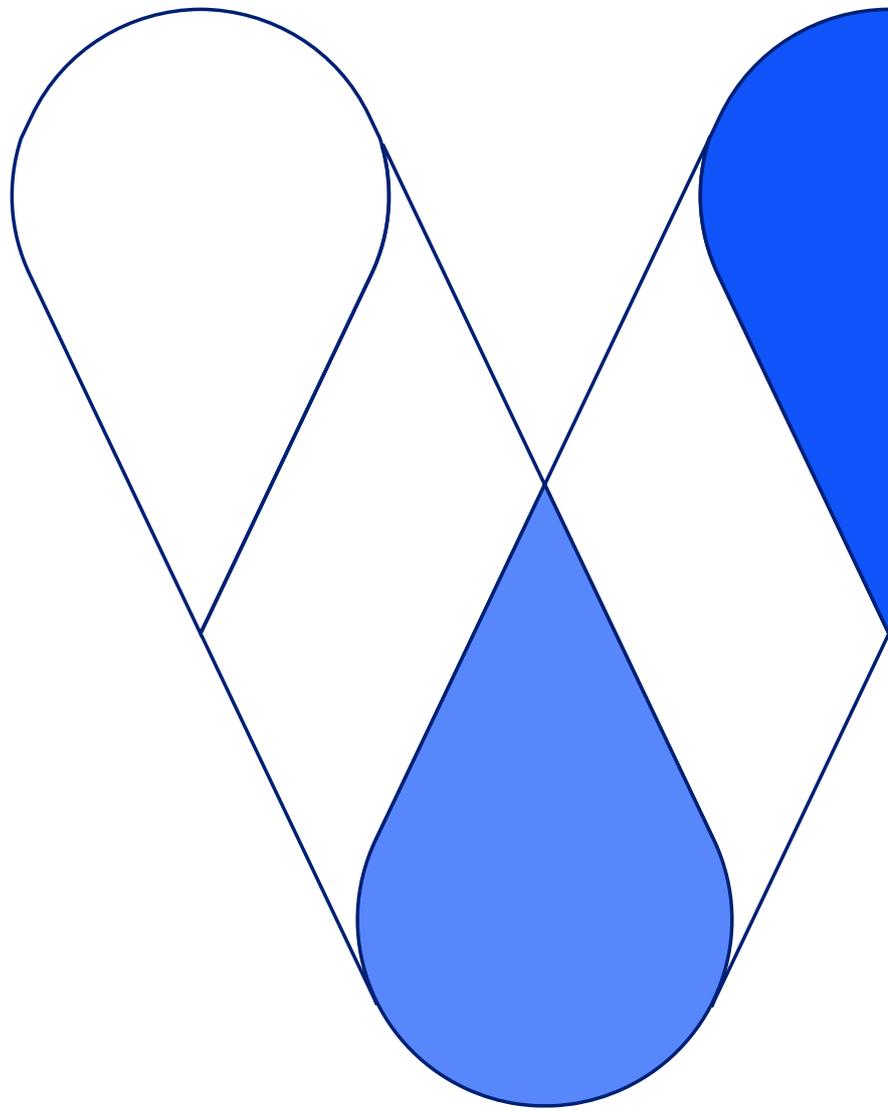


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# Strategic plan

—  
October 2022



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*Watertrust Australia acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.*

# Strategy on a page

**Mission** To **improve** water and catchment policy decision-making in Australia.

**Vision** Water and catchment policy and management decisions that citizens and decision-makers see as fairer, more reasonable, more consistent with the available evidence, and more legitimate.

## Our goals

1

Demonstrate innovative ways to blend deliberation, evidence, analysis, policy and politics.

2

Improve deliberative engagement in decision-making across the policy cycle.

3

Build demand for better and more inclusive decision-making processes.

4

Increase understanding of available evidence and its role in informing better decisions.



## Our work

We **discover**, **deliver** and **catalyse demand** for approaches to decision-making capable of improving the way water and catchment decisions are made in Australia. We work in the following four ways.



**Work with deliberative methods** to increase authentic, inclusive and consequential engagement and deliberation across the policy cycle.



**Convene inclusive policy dialogues and forums** on difficult policy issues to reframe policy deadlocks, explore multiple perspectives, and identify implementable outcomes.



**Synthesise evidence, make it accessible and communicate uncertainties** to reveal the issues that require deep deliberation.



**Engage with the institutions that manage Australia's waters and catchments** to increase their capacity for effective deliberation.



## Our Values

Independence and authenticity

Agility and tenacity

Collaboration and inclusivity

Humility and learning

Honesty and integrity

Transparency and accountability

# Strategy

## Our mission and vision

Our **mission** is to improve water and catchment policy decision-making in Australia.

Our **vision** is for water and catchment policy and management decisions that communities, stakeholders and decision-makers see as fairer, more reasonable, more consistent with the available evidence, and more legitimate.<sup>1</sup>

 Our mission is to improve water and catchment policy decision-making in Australia.

## Who we are

**Watertrust Australia is an independent not-for-profit organisation with a unique approach to building trust and finding common ground on water and catchment policy.** We want to improve how water and catchment policy decisions are made in Australia. Our focus is on people and process, rather than predetermined outcomes. We bring differing perspectives together to co-design new approaches to Australia's water challenges.

**We build on decades of work that demonstrates the transformative potential of broad participation, deliberation and analysis.** We deploy well-designed decision-making processes to shift preferences, bridge partisan divides, and increase participation and effective engagement with available evidence. We build trust to catalyse systemic change in the way water and catchment decisions are made.

**We occupy a unique role in an Australian water policy landscape dominated by deep division, partisan politics and contested evidence.** We meet a need, arising from a shared frustration with the status quo, for new approaches to water and catchment policy and management decision-making. Our role will change as policy-making evolves in response to our work.

**We are funded by a coalition of 16 philanthropies working together to finance 10 year's of work**(with a five-year review point). Our Board of Directors provides the independence, authority and knowledge required to govern the organisation. We are supported by an Influence Advisory Committee and an Expert Advisory Panel of highly-regarded sector leaders and water, catchment and linked policy area experts. We are incubated at the Australian Academy of Science.

## The challenge

**Water is essential for life.** Water and catchment management is a matter of national interest. Managing our waters and catchments well matters for human flourishing, environmental sustainability, agricultural productivity, liveable cities, regional development, reconciliation with First Peoples, successful industry, and adapting to a changing climate.

**Right now, Australia struggles with the good decision-making and the long-term collective action required for effective water and catchment management.** We confront a highly divisive politics driven by partisan interests, hollowed-out public sector capacity, declining trust in institutions and weaponised evidence. We enter a policy space dominated by technocratic solutions, partisan politics, legislative games, and interest group pressure. Some experts and advocates work to dissolve complex policy issues into simple certainties in response to structural incentives for a style of advocacy that magnifies polarised voices. The water portfolio at state and Commonwealth level has been described as a “poisoned chalice”.<sup>2</sup>

**Communities and stakeholders feel alienated from processes that demand deference to policy decisions made elsewhere.** Decision-makers find engaging effectively with stakeholders and communities difficult. Trust in the knowledge required to manage waters and catchments well has declined as evidence has been deployed to serve particular interests or simply ignored. In many areas where we have substantial evidence, the facts are not well-known or understood by important stakeholders. Debates around water and catchment policy are increasingly “fuelled by uncertainty, misinformation, misperceptions or misappropriation of available information”.<sup>3</sup> Instead of policy robust to uncertainties and unknowns, uncertainties are exploited through the rhetorical use of evidence, which drives wishful thinking, inertia and bias.

**Australia’s water policy reforms since the 1990s have delivered qualified successes, including increasing productivity of water use and the recovery of water for the environment.** Despite these successes, Australia continues to face a wide range of ongoing water and catchment management challenges. These include adapting policy and management to climate change, water market reform, water governance reform, agreeing sustainable levels of take, safe water supplies for regional and remote communities, Indigenous water rights, and managing future water resources and catchment development. A critical overarching need is the reform of policy processes to include considerations of equity, justice and fairness, which have received little attention to date.

**The long road to better outcomes requires trusted institutions that anchor the legitimacy of policy and management decisions by including people as partners to the policy process.** To meet the water and catchment management challenges of the 21st century, Australia needs a renewed focus on *how* we make decisions and *how* we will work together effectively. We need processes in this noisy partisan debate that allow the values and aspirations of stakeholders, communities and decision makers to be fully articulated, deliberated and engaged with the evidence.

 Australia needs to re-engage communities and stakeholders in water and catchment policy making in ways that allow them to be a more effective part of the policy process.

# Our goals

## Goal 1: Demonstrate innovative ways to blend deliberation, evidence, analysis, policy and politics

We know that for most important water and catchment decisions “facts are uncertain, values in conflict, stakes high and decisions urgent”.<sup>4</sup> This is why processes of decision-making that build trust across divergent groups and allow for collaborative co-design matter.

We show how innovative and well-designed decision-making processes can shift preferences, bridge partisan divides, increase participation and effective engagement with available evidence, build trust, and identify new ways forward.

We blend deliberation, evidence, analysis, policy and politics to deliver better decisions and help drive systemic change in the way water and catchment policy and management decisions are made.\*

## Goal 2: Improve deliberative engagement in decision-making across the policy cycle

We believe that better decisions come from ensuring decision-making processes are:

- **representative** of the breadth of voices, interests and values
- **engaged** with available evidence, expert knowledge and a wide range of knowledge sources
- **responsive** to values conflicts and questions of equity, fairness and justice
- **timely and relevant** to the challenge at hand
- **collaborative**, considered and with a view to the long-term common good

We link the collective intelligence of diverse stakeholders with available evidence to improve policy development, increase the potential for collaborative co-design, and find common ground.

We build new relationships and connections among First Nations, communities (both rural and urban), subject matter experts, stakeholders (water users, managers, farmers, industries, environmentalists), advocates, non-government organisations and government decision-makers.

## Goal 3: Build demand for more collaborative decision-making processes

Better processes that more effectively engage citizens and stakeholders with the evidence and allow them to work together to influence outcomes are more likely to deliver better decisions.



We will demonstrate innovative ways to blend deliberation, evidence, analysis, policy and politics.

\***Deliberation** is discussion and debate that involves weighing and reflecting on evidence, preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern. A good deliberative process can have a variety of outcomes. Providing a space for engaging with multiple knowledge sources and allowing for structured disagreement that clarifies conflict is more important than aiming at consensus.

We draw on a range of approaches from deliberative democrats (mini-publics like citizens' juries and assemblies, Deliberative Polls, deliberative policy analysis), decision scientists (structured decision-making, participatory modelling), legal practitioners (public dispute resolution) alongside a range of policy dialogues, roundtables, forums and other co-design processes.

Deliberation need not be public or formal. An environment in which participants can speak freely and engage with a range of evidence sources is crucial to good deliberation. Sometimes the quality of deliberation may be inversely proportional to the degree of public attention. Informal, private engagement early in the policy process can be beneficial, particularly when seeking alignment on key questions, sources of evidence, and options.

In 2020, a comprehensive OECD study across member countries concluded that deliberative approaches are “well-suited to address values-driven dilemmas, complex problems that require tradeoffs, long-term issues that go beyond the short-term incentives of electoral cycles [...and...] issues around which there is political deadlock.”<sup>5</sup> This describes water and catchment policymaking in Australia well.

## What we do

We mobilise the best Australian and global expertise to increase decision-makers' confidence in the ability of collaborative, inclusive, evidence-informed deliberation and engagement to deliver better decisions across policy and management cycles.

We build broader demand for well-designed, evidence-informed, inclusive deliberation that contributes to decisions that are more responsive to available evidence and citizens' interests, considered opinions and policy objectives.<sup>6</sup>

### Goal 4: Increase understanding of available evidence and its role in informing better decisions

Australia has a wealth of knowledge about managing our waters and catchments. Yet, prominent voices use partial and limited presentations of the evidence to support preferred policy options and close down debate.

We want to improve the shared understanding of available knowledge and allow full consideration of multiple values and perspectives. We transparently identify what is known and what is not. We show where evidence is uncertain and where it is contested. We aim to open out policy debates and clarify tradeoffs.

## What we do

We work in four major ways to improve the processes of water and catchment decision-making. We,

- **Work with deliberative methods** to increase authentic, inclusive and consequential engagement across the policy cycle
- **Convene inclusive policy dialogues and forums** on difficult issues to re-frame policy deadlocks, explore multiple perspectives, and identify implementable outcomes
- **Synthesise evidence, make it accessible, and communicate complexities, uncertainties and areas of contention** to reveal the issues that require deep deliberation
- **Engage with the institutions that manage Australia's waters and catchments** to increase their capacity for effective deliberation.

These ways of working are mutually reinforcing and we often deploy more than one in any particular project.<sup>†</sup>

Our focus on processes of decision-making rather than predetermined outcomes is designed to ripple outwards and be scaled and integrated with existing policy processes for water and catchment governance and management. Our approaches will grow and adjust as our work catalyses change across the sector.

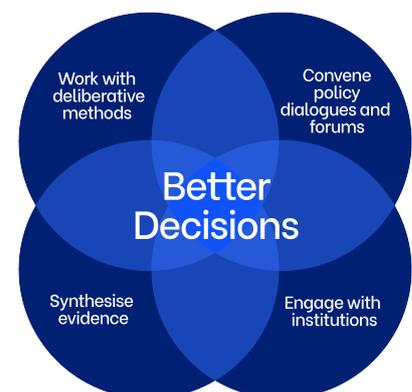


Figure 1: What we do

<sup>†</sup> Project details are outlined in our Annual Operating Plan.

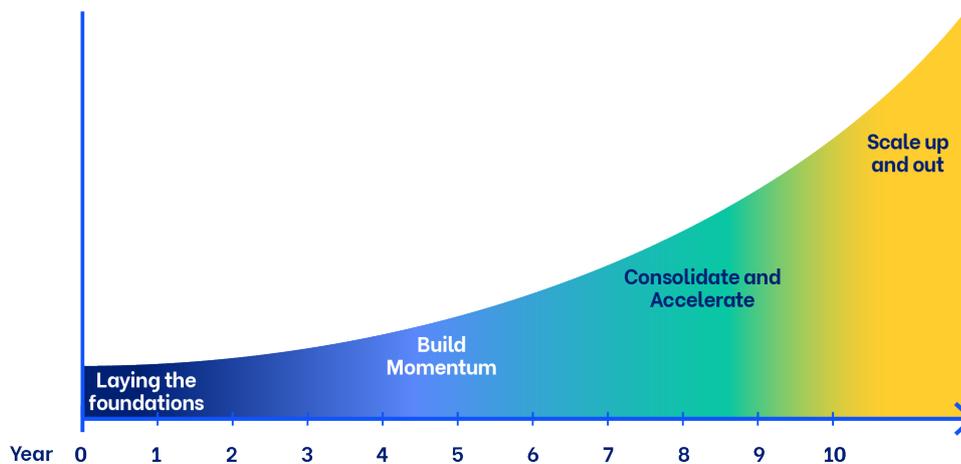
# Our values

Our values are what define us and shape our work.

<b>Independence and authenticity</b>	We are independent of any specific interests and we work for better processes of decision-making, not predetermined outcomes. We build authentic relationships through our ability to listen, show respect and understand others.
<b>Agility and tenacity</b>	We welcome change and build our work around learning and adaptation. We are dedicated and determined with the perseverance to work on wicked problems.
<b>Collaboration and inclusivity</b>	We believe improvements to decision-making will be built on connecting diverse perspectives and creating the collaborative conditions to harness collective intelligence and give voice to diverse interests.
<b>Honesty and integrity</b>	We are candid, unbiased and informed by evidence. We acknowledge uncomfortable truths and uncertainties.
<b>Humility and learning</b>	We recognise that our knowledge is limited and we rely on the wisdom of others. We are reflective and committed to continually learning, rebuilding our understanding and improving our approaches.
<b>Transparency and accountability</b>	We are open and accountable for our actions and we communicate actively with our stakeholders.

# Staging our work

**We have an agile and adaptive approach to developing and executing our strategy.** Our strategy and operations will evolve to maximise the impact of our resources as we learn and build the trust and relationships essential for our credibility and legitimacy. Our work will build over the following stages. We are well advanced in the first stage – *laying the foundations* – with projects underway.



**Figure 2: Our evolution**

## Staging our work

Stage	Focus	How we will do it
<b>Laying the foundations</b>	<b>Building</b> the capability, relationships, trust and knowledge required to deliver our strategy and <b>delivering</b> our first projects to demonstrate the value of better approaches to decision-making	<p>We are one year into this journey of actively:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Building</i> our team, partners, operational capacity and knowledge</li> <li>• <i>Delivering</i> projects that provide a foundation for building our reputation and credibility across the water and catchment sector</li> <li>• <i>Forming</i> new relationships and connections between citizens, communities, stakeholders and decision makers.</li> </ul>
<b>Build momentum</b>	<b>Build demand</b> for better decision-making processes, <b>target higher-leverage engagements</b> and evaluate our performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Build demand</i> for better decision-making processes among governments, stakeholders and communities by communicating our lessons learnt, advocating for a focus on the process by which decisions are made and building Australians' deliberative literacy and water literacy</li> <li>• <i>Target higher leverage engagements</i> by positioning ourselves for a role in more significant policy decisions and work at a larger scale (e.g. a role in major national policy reviews like the review of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan)</li> <li>• <i>Evaluate our performance and early impact</i> by integrating ongoing processes of evaluation and review into our work and building the foundations for our mid-term, 5-year review, which occurs at the end of this phase and will unlock the second 5-years' funding.</li> </ul>
<b>Consolidate and accelerate</b>	<b>Confirm the lessons</b> of our first five years work & <b>drive systemic changes</b> to processes of decision-making that improve democratic governance of Australia's waters and catchments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Confirm and continue to test</i> the lessons learnt during our first five years by consolidating our knowledge and delivering better decision-making processes</li> <li>• <i>Reduce</i> barriers to better processes of decision-making by continuing to demonstrate the benefits of processes that enable the deliberative engagement of communities, stakeholders and decision makers across the policy cycle</li> <li>• <i>Educate and raise awareness</i> of the benefits of decision-making processes responsive to the interests, considered opinions, and objectives of a wider constituency<sup>6</sup></li> <li>• <i>Scale our impact</i> by identifying projects that can be delivered by others and helping embed our lessons learnt in the institutions tasked with managing Australia's waters and catchments</li> <li>• <i>Build</i> the resources required for Watertrust Australia to continue its work beyond the current funding envelope.</li> </ul>
<b>Scale up and out</b>	<b>Scale</b> our impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Scale our impact</i> by building on our first decade's work and continuing to drive systemic change to the way water and catchment policy and management decisions are made.</li> </ul>

# Overarching strategic risks

**Watertrust Australia enters a deeply contested policy space at a time when trust in governments is low.** We are faced with the following overarching strategic risks. We will actively take account of these risks as we execute the strategy, although they cannot be entirely mitigated.

Risk	Detail
<p><b>Declining trust in institutions is broader than water and catchment management</b></p>	<p><b>There has been a broader erosion of public trust in governments in Australia.</b> Australians’ trust in governments has halved since the late 1990s.<sup>7</sup> A democratic deficit has arisen from a growing divergence between public aspirations and the actual performance of democratic institutions. Citizens increasingly distrust governments, political representatives and institutions because they are not delivering on promises of representation, responsiveness and good governance nor rising to the major challenges of our time.</p> <p>This is both a risk for Watertrust Australia as a small, new organisation with no formal mandate, and an opportunity to demonstrate the benefits of better decision-making processes for vexed policy issues, which might be adopted in other policy domains.</p>
<p><b>Overstating the benefits of a focus on the processes of decision-making</b></p>	<p><b>Better processes of decision-making will not “solve” Australia’s water and catchment challenges.</b> Deliberation and other approaches to better decision-making can make a contribution to improving Australia’s management of its inland waters and catchments, but better policy and management equally depends on a capable public sector, and a sound evidence base that informs decision-making processes.</p> <p>Better processes cannot substitute for the loss of important institutional capacity and knowledge or the decline in Australia’s research effort to generate the evidence to inform better water and catchment decisions. It cannot easily address the shift in government agencies’ perceptions of their role – from advising on policy options based on available evidence and the broader public interest to designing policy that meets the requirements of ministerial fiat.<sup>8</sup></p>
<p><b>Deliberation remains largely untested in the Australian water and catchment policy context</b></p>	<p><b>How deliberation is best integrated into water and catchment policy and management systems in Australia remains an open question.</b> Evidence suggests that deliberation can play a useful role in improving Australian water and catchment decision-making. A wide range of deliberative approaches have been used to tackle difficult, contentious and wicked policy problems across many environmental and natural resource management policy areas.</p> <p>However, deliberative processes have achieved various outcomes, from stand-out successes to failures. With some notable exceptions, deliberation in Australia has predominantly been used at local scales on single issue questions.</p>
<p><b>Lack of authorising environments for our work becomes a rate-limiting factor for our success</b></p>	<p><b>Without an appropriate authorising environment our work cannot proceed.</b> While we can work to help shape authorising environments, this is an element of our work not entirely within our control. Governments, communities and stakeholders can each contribute to providing the authorising environment, which recognises and accepts our goals and the role we can play. The characteristics of each authorising environment will shape our work.</p>
<p><b>We lose our impartiality, integrity or independence either in reality or in perception</b></p>	<p><b>Any loss, or perceived loss, of our impartiality, integrity or independence would have serious repercussions for our ability to meet our objectives.</b> We require independence from particular interests, impartiality, integrity, astute judgement and deft relationship management to achieve our strategic objectives. Trust in our work can only be maintained if we operate – and are perceived to be operating – with the integrity to respect a wide range of viewpoints.</p>

# Executing on the strategy

**We approach our work with urgency calibrated by the knowledge that this is difficult, risky business.** Our commitment to inclusive collaboration and deliberation requires us to co-develop our program of work with others. Our collaborative approach extends to co-defining with stakeholders and partners the challenges we work on, the approaches we adopt and the timeframes for delivery. We must be agile and adaptive and recognise that collaboration is messy and unpredictable.

Our Annual Operating Plan translates our strategy into specific, tangible activities and engagements by structuring our work across the following two horizons:

- **proximal goals** – these are our specific delivery objectives for each 12-month period, which contribute to our,
- **long-term goals** as articulated in this strategy.

 Our strategy emphasises agility and adaptation.

## Assessing opportunities

**We recognise the challenges of introducing a new approach to policy and decision-making into a sector that to date has tended to engage in limited and constrained forms of public participation.**

Watertrust Australia continues to be presented with a wide array of project<sup>‡</sup> opportunities as our team engages with governments, stakeholders and experts. Our primary challenge during the establishment period is to identify and prioritise opportunities that contribute to meeting our goals. Our focus will be on water and catchment policy challenges arising from values-driven dilemmas, complex problems requiring tradeoffs, long-term issues that go beyond the short-term incentives of electoral cycles, or issues around which there is political deadlock.<sup>5</sup> We will assess opportunities against the following criteria:

<sup>‡</sup>In selecting projects, we will harness and build on the lessons of decades of research globally into better approaches to decision-making around complex policy issues. One important lesson is that individual deliberative “events” will not reduce democratic deficits or improve decision-making in isolation.<sup>6,9</sup>

Criterion	Description
<b>Authorising environment</b>	Enables authentic, inclusive and consequential deliberation and analysis alongside realistic prospects of influencing policy outcomes
<b>Deliberative potential</b>	Allows for considered judgement and deliberative inquiry into the evidence alongside inclusive engagement with the perspectives of citizens and stakeholders
<b>Potential for influence</b>	Our work can influence broader institutional processes of decision-making and policy development and build deliberative capacity of citizens and institutions

*Continued on next page...*

Criterion	Description
<b>Provides a significant opportunity for learning</b>	Allows for the harvesting of rich insights and contributes to deepening our understanding of better decision-making processes
<b>Transferability</b>	A reasonable likelihood that the project will demonstrate an approach applicable to different political or biophysical contexts, at different scales, or on a wider range of issues
<b>An appropriate challenge</b>	“Goldilocks” problems that are neither too simple nor too intractable for the particular stage of Watertrust Australia’s development.

## Holding ourselves to account

Our funders set establishment key performance indicators (KPIs) for Watertrust Australia’s early years of operation with the expectation that a more detailed evaluation framework would be developed by December 2022. Like our strategy, our evaluation framework will adapt as we learn and course-correct. It will also establish the parameters for our first five-year review.

Annual progress reports are due to funders each September. Reporting will transition from the establishment KPIs to those in our evaluation framework once the framework becomes available.

Our Annual Operating Plan defines proximal goals, which set nearer-term, time-bound objectives for the execution of this Strategic Plan. We will also track our performance against our proximal goals in our annual Progress Reports.

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