
Evaluation framework

—
Our approach to evaluation and learning
December 2022

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Evaluation framework on a page

Our evaluation framework supports and enables delivery of our mission and maintains accountability as we work towards our vision.

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 evaluation questions



How relevant are we as an organisation?

- To what extent are we operating in accordance with our principles?
- Are our governance arrangements effective, providing for quality decision-making and strategy?
- Are we building appropriate relationships with the right stakeholders? Are we maintaining trust and legitimacy?
- Do stakeholders perceive our work as useful? Is there growing demand for our work?
- Is our model design suitable to achieve our mission?



How effective are our initiatives?

- What occurred in the initiative?
- How well are we co-designing and implementing our initiatives?
- What difference did the initiative make?
- To what extent did our choice of activities and initiatives meet our assessment criteria?



What difference are we making?

- Which water and catchment outcomes have we contributed to or influenced?
- How and where have we contributed to or influenced changes in decision-making and policy processes?
- How have we helped build capacity in the institutions that manage Australia's waters and catchments?

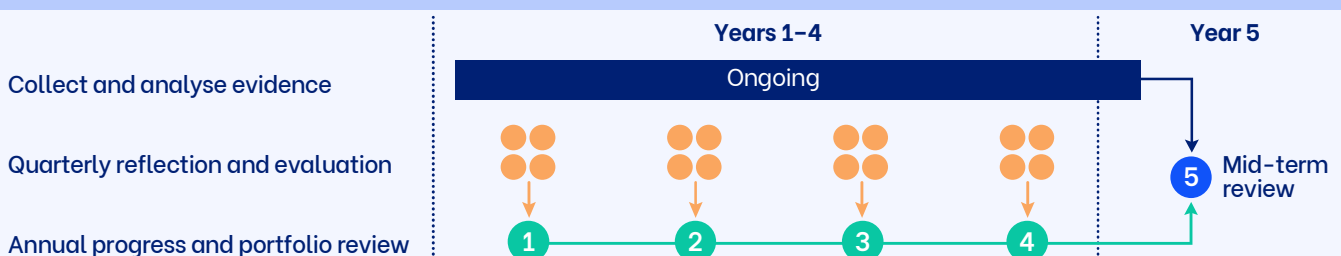
Evaluation methods

- Rubrics
- Document review
- Semi-structured interviews
- Expert panel

- Rubrics
- Document review
- Semi-structured interviews
- Expert panel
- Case studies

- Contribution analysis
- Semi-structured interviews
- Case studies
- Expert panel

Execution



A panel of independent external evaluators with a diversity of skills and experience will oversee the design, collection, analysis and interpretation of information to inform evaluation.

Introduction

This evaluation framework guides the approach to monitoring, evaluation and learning for Watertrust Australia Ltd (Watertrust). Implementation of the framework will assist us to learn and improve performance, make judicious resource deployment choices, track progress towards our mission, update our strategy, and maintain accountability with funders, stakeholders and policymakers. Having an agreed approach to evaluation from the outset enables systematic collection and gathering of evidence to inform both ongoing short-cycle learning practices *and* build an evidence base for the mid-term evaluation well ahead of time.*

The evaluation framework conforms with our strategy (see Table 1) and will enable us to maintain our strategic focus, increase our capacity to learn and drive improvements in our work. The complexity of the policy context, and our commitment to co-design, mean that traditional program logic approaches with fixed targets and metrics are unsuitable. Instead, we adopt a developmental evaluation approach in which we continually evaluate our work at the level of individual events, activities and overall initiatives.

The evaluation framework was informed by:

- the results of the Australian Water Study and subsequent research, analysis and design work undertaken to support fundraising, establishment and our first year of operations
- advice from our Board, Influence Advisory Committee, Expert Advisory Panel and allies across the water and catchments sector
- engagement with experts in evaluation with experience in applying a wide range of evaluation approaches across different sectors, including similar philanthropically funded organisations
- consultation with a cross-section of stakeholders, partners, funders and policy-makers to test and validate suitable evaluation approaches.

The framework † is described in four parts:

- 1. Context:** A description of our evaluation needs and requirements, in relation to the context in which Watertrust operates
- 2. Focus:** Outlines the focus and bounds of evaluation, including the pathways of influence, and key evaluation questions we seek to pursue
- 3. Methods:** Information, methods and tools that support the monitoring, evaluation and learning approaches
- 4. Execution:** Outline of how the framework will be applied and implemented – in both ongoing practice, and also to inform the mid-term evaluation

*The mid-term evaluation result at year-5 allows for refinement of strategy, tactics and a review of resourcing and is required to unlock the second five-year funding tranche.

† An implementation plan for executing the framework will be outlined in our Annual Operating Plans from 2023.

Table 1: Watertrust strategic and operational documents

	Description	Approval & revision
Strategic Plan	Describes Watertrust’s vision and mission, our unique offering, the core challenge we seek to address, our four goals and how we work to achieve them, our values and the strategic risks we face.	Approved by our Board (June 2022), assessed annually in May and refreshed as required.
Evaluation framework (this document)	Guides Watertrust’s approach to monitoring, evaluation and learning. Implemented through annual evaluation plans (see below) to assist us to learn and improve performance, make judicious resource deployment choices, track progress towards our mission, update our strategy, and maintain accountability with funders, stakeholders and policymakers. The evaluation framework conforms to our strategy and enables us to maintain our strategic focus, increase our capacity to learn and drive improvements in our work.	Approved by our Board (December 2022), defines a developmental evaluation approach that is not expected to change over coming years, however implementation will continually evolve as reflected in our Annual Operating Plan (see below).
Annual Operating Plan	Assesses progress to date (the ‘ <i>what</i> ’), what we have learned (the ‘ <i>so what</i> ’), and defines our program of work and budget for the year ahead (the ‘ <i>now what</i> ’). Includes an annual evaluation plan that reassesses our context and if/how it is changing, answers the key evaluation questions from the preceding year, and adjusts and refines our methods going forward. Intended primarily as an internal document.	Formally assessed by our Board annually (May), and tracked quarterly as part of regular Board business.

Context

Watertrust is a new organisation with an innovative focus on processes of decision-making. The model was designed to provide a response to a challenge that has bedevilled Australia since before federation: *building and maintaining workable agreements between conflicting interests in the management and use of waters and catchments where “facts are uncertain, values in conflict, stakes high and decisions urgent”*.¹

At the root of this challenge, competing interest groups seek to influence policymakers to implement their preferred policy outcomes. While it is tempting for policymakers, interest groups and thinktanks to assume their answer is “correct”, there are no simple panaceas or clever solutions to water policy conflicts.

Water and catchment policy is never finished; policy resolutions are always transitory. The business-as-usual competition between interests and advocates with different desired policy outcomes means that those interests who lose one policy contest do not disappear, they return to disrupt policy implementation or future policy development.

Watertrust was designed to respond to these challenges by focusing on *how* policy decisions are made. A focus on process seeks to find ways to help shift patterns of intractable dispute and disagreement towards constructive conflict (and potentially cooperation), and the development of workable agreements and processes to revise such agreements as required. Our design and strategy recognise the complexity of the issues faced by policy in the sector. However, as a non-governmental organisation we have no mandate and can only seek to contribute to the improvement of policy and decision-making processes without being able to control them. We must work with and through others.

Our strategy is built on establishing relationships of trust, maintaining independence, deploying a variety of approaches to change patterns of interaction, and identifying and building on successful outcomes, which are unknowable in advance. The Watertrust model was designed to fill a gap and bridge the “duelling certitudes” that entrench business-as-usual conflict and policy deadlocks. Our approach emphasises co-design, broad participation, creating independent spaces for deliberation and dialogue, mediating between divergent interests and synthesising evidence. It aims to open out, rather than close down, policy debates, complementing and adding to existing organisations in the water and catchment policy space. This context presents unique challenges for evaluation which this framework sets out to address.

A note on attribution and causality

Attributing significant outcomes to the work of any single actor in the policy system is difficult. Our evaluation framework is designed to help us develop, learn and improve, and to track **our contributions and influence** as we work towards our strategic goals.

Not all our work will be successful, but where we contribute to breaking deadlocks, bridging partisan divides to deliver workable agreements, or increasing institutions’ capacity for consequential deliberation, we will be sharing credit for these outcomes with a wide range of other organisations and actors.

Focus

Our evaluation framework is anchored on enquiry and learning. We seek to understand:

- how relevant we are as an **organisation** (foundations, modality, portfolio and approaches)
- what influence we are having through our **work** (output to outcome)
- what progress we are making towards our **vision** (outcome to vision).

Each focus area informs and interacts with the other [‡] **and builds over time**. The emphasis of early evaluations will be on us as an organisation and, as our portfolio of work evolves, the emphasis will increasingly move to the influence we're having, and on our progress towards our vision. Our strategy and operations are designed to build over stages to maximise the contribution of our resources as we learn and build the trust and relationships essential for our credibility, legitimacy and influence.


[‡]The focus areas are not mutually exclusive

The following sections outline the ways in which we influence and contribute to change, and present three key evaluation questions (KEQs), which structure our evaluation.

Our organisation

Establishing and maintaining trust, legitimacy and independence will create the authorising environment required to do our work and deliver our mission. We need each of the following foundations to be in place:

- **Principles:** The extent to which we hold true to our four guiding principles will underpin our relevance:
 1. *We do not take sides.* 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.
 2. *We experiment, learn and adapt.* We take an agile and adaptive approach and are committed to developing, deploying, iteratively testing, refining and validating new and innovative approaches that are fit-for-purpose. We are reflective and committed to continually learning, rebuilding our understanding and improving our approaches.
 3. *We enable others to work in collaboration.* We connect diverse perspectives and create the collaborative conditions to harness

 How relevant are we as an organisation?

collective intelligence and give voice to diverse interests. 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.

4. *We build trust across multiple interests.* We work with honesty and integrity, are candid, unbiased and informed by evidence. We are transparent, open and accountable for our actions and we communicate actively with our stakeholders.
- **Our governance, advisors, resources and capability:** 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 related policy area experts. Watertrust has a small internal staff and flexible bespoke teams to deliver our work, and is incubated at the Australian Academy of Science.
 - **Relationships and networks:** We actively build trusting stakeholder relationships and extensive networks of influencers, and a reputation as an 'honest broker'. Relationships will be built with stakeholders ranging from community and industry leaders, to experts and senior officials in government agencies, and state and Commonwealth cabinet ministers.
 - **Process for identifying and assessing opportunities to work:** Opportunities that align with our mission will be identified and prioritised against the criteria detailed in our Strategic Plan.
 - **Our approach to learning:** Process for evaluation, learning, improvement and refinement of our work and our strategy.

KEQ1. How relevant are we as an organisation?

This evaluation question focuses inquiry on the foundational aspects of our organisational design and structures. In the first stages of our development, evaluation will focus on sub-questions:

- To what extent are we operating in accordance with our principles?
- Are our governance arrangements effective, providing for quality decision-making and strategy?
- Do we have the requisite skills and capabilities?
- Are we building appropriate relationships with the right stakeholders?
- Do stakeholders perceive our work as useful?

At the mid-term review, it is likely that the sub-questions will also include:


- Is there growing and strong demand for our work, particularly relating to issues involving scale and significance?
- Are we maintaining trust and legitimacy?
- Did the portfolio of initiatives chosen support our mission?
- Do we have the resources and capability required to deliver our work?
- Is our model design suitable to achieve our mission?

Our work

Our work will be delivered primarily through co-designed initiatives focused on evidence-informed deliberation, dialogue and engagement across the policy cycle. Our initiatives aim to shift patterns of unproductive conflict towards constructive conflict, cooperation and the development of workable agreements. Over the longer-term our portfolio of initiatives aims to contribute to building broad demand, capacity and capability for more inclusive and deliberative approaches to decision-making across the policy cycle.

Our initiatives aim to integrate the following elements:

- **Bridging multiple perspectives:** convening independent spaces for deliberation and co-design helps mediate divergent values and interests and build more constructive relationships between stakeholders (and with and between governments)
- **Synthesising and communicating evidence:** making evidence more accessible to stakeholders, policy makers and those who influence them, acknowledging uncertainties and ambiguities, and framing issues from multiple perspectives allows policy debates to open out to a range of options rather than become locked in to “duelling certitudes”. Mobilising a wide range of expertise contributes to improving shared understanding of available evidence and its integration into improved collective decision-making processes.
- **Engaging policy makers:** engaging the institutions that manage Australia’s waters and catchments and a broad range of stakeholders in deliberative processes will contribute to increasing capacity for effective and inclusive deliberation across the policy cycle.
- **Supporting public participation:** Watertrust’s initiatives will contribute to increasing authentic, inclusive and consequential engagement and deliberation across the policy cycle.



How effective are our initiatives?

KEQ2. How effective are our initiatives?

This question will allow us to evaluate – at an event, activity and initiative level – how well a process was delivered, if it was appropriate for the context, if the work was useful to the policy makers and participants, what outcomes we have contributed to, and the likelihood the approach will be replicated by others. An evaluation plan will be developed for each initiative and will focus on sub-questions:

- What occurred in the initiative?
- How well did we co-design and implement the initiative?
- What difference did the initiative make?
- To what extent did our choice of activities and initiatives meet our assessment criteria (as defined in our Strategic Plan)?

At the mid-term evaluation the results of initiatives will be synthesised and analysed across all initiatives.

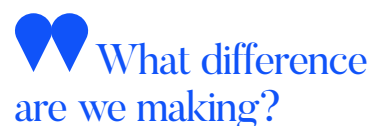
Our vision

Our vision is for 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 mission focuses on improving the *process* of decision-making across the water and catchment policy cycle. Our goals are to demonstrate innovative ways to blend deliberation, evidence, analysis policy and politics to:

- **Improve** deliberative engagement in decision making across the policy cycle
- **Build** demand for better and more inclusive decision-making processes
- **Increase** understanding of available evidence and its role in informing better decisions.

To deliver our goals, mission and vision we seek to build knowledge and capacity across the water and catchment sector for improved decision-making and policy processes that:

- **deploy a range of practical and pragmatic approaches** to finding ways to shift unproductive conflict into constructive conflict, workable agreement and coordinated action
- **involve all relevant stakeholders** in ways that allow for consequential engagement, deliberation and influence over outcomes
- **value engaging with available evidence** to open out debates and avoid premature lock-in.



KEQ3. What difference are we making?

The key evaluation question for this focus area is “What difference are we making?”. We expect that the difference that can be detected will increase over time, as our reach and influence increase.

Case studies will be used to explore our contribution and influence in depth.

At the mid-term evaluation, we will seek to answer these sub-questions:

- Which water and catchment outcomes have we contributed to or influenced?
- How and where have we contributed to or influenced changes in decision-making and policy processes?
- How have we helped build capacity in the institutions that manage Australia’s waters and catchments?

Methods

Early deployment of an agreed evaluation framework allows us to systematically collect and gather the evidence to inform ongoing learning and build an evidence base for annual and mid-term evaluation. There are a number of fit-for-purpose tools and methods available to measure the outcomes, influence and contribution of Watertrust (see Table 2). In selecting tools and methods, we have:

- sought to drive evaluation efficiency and minimise diversions from delivery (simplicity is key)
- focused on providing multiple lines of evidence to address evaluation questions.

We will establish a panel of independent external evaluators with a diversity of skills and experience to oversee the design of evaluation plans, and the collection, analysis and interpretation of information. In deploying the tools and methods, we will:

- confirm suitability of use for the specific context (including ethics, cultural appropriateness and safety)
- co-develop tailored information collection approaches in instances where the existing tools are not suitable for use
- collect, store and use evidence in accordance with Australian Evaluation Society code and standards and Watertrust Privacy Policy.

A summary of the specific tools and methods available to our team and evaluators is provided in Table 2. Further information on the suitable [data collection tools](#) and [methods](#) can be found at the [Better Evaluation online resource](#).

Table 2: Tools for information collection and analysis, and methods for evaluation

	Our organisation	Our work	Our vision
Key evaluation question	<i>How relevant are we as an organisation?</i>	<i>How effective are our initiatives?</i>	<i>What difference are we making?</i>
Information that we will collect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement activity and reach • Engagement quality • Stakeholder trust 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiative activity • Process quality • Initiative outcomes and influence (direct and indirect) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Downstream contribution and influence of our work • Changes in processes being adopted to make decisions • Institutional awareness and capacity to do deliberation
Evaluation methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rubrics • Document review • Semi-structured interviews • Expert panel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rubrics • Document review • Semi-structured interviews • Expert panel • Case studies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribution analysis • Semi-structured interviews • Expert panel • Case studies
Collection and analysis tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships log • Stakeholder or partner survey • Perception survey • Semi-structured interviews (relevance) with staff, partners and stakeholders. • Self assessment (team, advisors, Board) • Board evaluation surveys • Records of invitations and approaches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operational portfolio • Synthesis of initiative-level data • Participant feedback survey • Knowledge, Attitude and Practices (KAP) survey • Non-participant observation • Facilitator debrief • Semi-structured interviews (effectiveness) with staff, partners and stakeholders • Portfolio review (to analyse patterns, review resource allocation, identify case study topics) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribution log • Influencer action log and analysis • Synthesis of measurement data • Semi-structured interviews (vision) with staff, partners, stakeholders • Non-participant interviews • Network mapping for connections across partisan divides

Execution

Executing our evaluation framework requires we make choices regarding the evaluation activities we undertake, resources we deploy and broader operational planning. An **annual evaluation plan** will identify the focus for evaluation for the year ahead, and outline the appropriate mix of internal and external resources required to deliver the plan, taking into account the resource capacity, skills, capability and independence required. The evaluation plan will be integrated into our *Annual Operating Plan* (AOP) (see Table 1).

At an **initiative level**, a fit-for-purpose evaluation approach will be developed to identify what elements (e.g. events, activities) to evaluate before, during and after the initiative. Our fit-for-purpose approach means that the evaluation of some elements may be relatively modest. For ad-hoc workshops, for example, it might be limited to the collection of simple data that align with this overarching framework – i.e. participant and facilitator feedback. For more substantive elements, a full planning, implementation and reporting process may be needed.

A **formal independent evaluation** will be undertaken at year-5[§]. This “mid-term” evaluation will involve making systematic judgements about our effectiveness, processes, assumptions and any other areas of evaluative interest that may have emerged.

The evaluation will be structured around the key evaluation questions and sub-questions outlined in this framework. The evaluation will involve examining the evidence base that has been collected, and collecting additional information at the point of evaluation to answer these questions.

Detailed planning for the evaluation will be undertaken with the independent evaluators commissioned, and in consultation with Watertrust’s Board and funders, based on the specific evaluation needs of Watertrust at the point of evaluation.

Executing our evaluation framework ensures we are ready for the mid-term evaluation, and that our work builds and contributes to the evidence base required. Table 3 provides an outline of the preparation timing that ensures we deliver the mid-term evaluation in time to inform funders’ decision-making on continuing to support Watertrust.

A **regular rhythm of evaluation and learning** will be embedded into our operational practices. The approach is based on capturing learning at both short-cycle (drawing on our information collection and analyses) and a longer cycle (drawing on our evaluation).

Table 4 outlines the regular activities, who is involved, and how we will share findings.

[§]Note – the formal review point date to be confirmed and agreed with all funders

Table 3: Executing the mid-term evaluation

Months prior	Task
36	Establish panel of external evaluators; Systematically collect data to inform mid-term; Integrate the mid-term evaluation plan requirements into AOP.
12	Commission external evaluators for review; Identify expert panel; Co-design the mid-term evaluation plan
9	Synthesise available data and design new data collection tools; Establish expert panel
6	Collect new data and analyse against the KEQs, in line with the plan;
3	Convene expert panel and document draft evaluation findings; test draft findings with funders
1	Finalise evaluation report
0	Deliver evaluation report to funders

Table 4: Evaluation activity

Frequency	Activity	Who evaluates	How we share findings
Ongoing	Collect data and information, identify patterns and themes	Watertrust team, with support from external evaluators as required	Share learning at regular team meetings
Quarterly	Team reflection: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What has happened in our work? • What have we learnt? • Are we seeing signs of progress? Or back-sliding? • How will those signs inform our next move? 	Watertrust team, with support from external evaluators as required	Document and sharing findings of reflections with Directors at quarterly Board Meeting (standing agenda item) Share findings in mid-year progress update with funders (webinar)
Annual	Implementation progress and portfolio review: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are we doing the right thing? • Is it the right time to do the work? Has the context changed? • Are the right people involved? • What should we do next? • Is the evidence base adequate to support learning and improvement? 	Review facilitated by external evaluators with input from an expert panel. Undertaken in collaboration with initiative co-delivery partners, stakeholders and the Watertrust team	Document progress in annual report to our Board and to funders
Mid-term (year-5)	Independent evaluation	Undertaken by external evaluators in collaboration with a panel of sector experts	Publish findings of the evaluation and share with Board, funders, partners and stakeholders

References

- [1] Silvio Funtowicz and Jerome Ravetz. "Science for the Post-Normal Age". In: *Futures* 25.7 (1993), pp. 739–755.



**Watertrust
Australia** Ltd