

# Enabling water sensitive communities in the Illawarra Shoalhaven

## COUNCIL NAME

Illawarra  
Shoalhaven Joint  
Organisation

## WEB ADDRESS

[isjo.nsw.gov.au](http://isjo.nsw.gov.au)

## SIZE

5,500 square  
kilometres

## POPULATION

404,000

## FUNDING PROGRAM

Increasing  
Resilience to  
Climate Change

## Overview

For thousands of years, the coastline and waterways of the Illawarra-Shoalhaven have shaped the identity of a region and its people.

But research published in 2019 found the region's water system is under increasing pressure from population growth, new residential developments and, importantly, climate change.

The people of the Illawarra-Shoalhaven can expect a future of higher temperatures, unpredictable rainfall, higher flood risk and more frequent bushfires. These climate change impacts will directly influence the region's water system. The consequences could be far reaching, and include a decline in water quality, increasing damage to public and private assets, greater impacts on public health, failure of stormwater systems and loss of biodiversity.

In response, and with the help of a grant from the Increasing Resilience to Climate Change Program, the Illawarra Shoalhaven Joint Organisation began a two-year project, called Enabling Water Sensitive Communities.

## Background

Water Sensitive Urban Design, or WSUD, is an approach to planning and designing urban areas to make use of stormwater and to reduce the harm it can cause to our rivers and creeks.



Lake Illawarra. Credit ISJO

In natural environments, most rainwater evaporates, is absorbed by plants or soaks into the ground. But in urban environments, hard surfaces like roads cannot let the water through. Consequently, rainwater runs off hard surfaces, through stormwater

drains and into our waterways. This water is often polluted by chemicals and can affect the health our waterways and bays.

By incorporating WSUD principles into new or existing developments, councils can improve water quality and biodiversity of catchments. In planning for extreme climate events, like flash flooding, councils can consider the relocation and renewal of sewerage and stormwater infrastructure and build community resilience in a changing climate.

## Implementation

ISJO's project began with an audit to set a baseline for policy work across member councils - Wollongong City, Shellharbour City, Kiama Municipal, Shoalhaven City Councils. Three benchmarking workshops were undertaken to understand the current state of play and opportunities to encourage water sensitive communities. During those workshops, several barriers were identified:

- Fragmented and inconsistent water management policy and controls across the region
- Inconsistent guidance and application of water sensitive cities planning across teams
- A lack of collaboration and sharing in planning, implementing and evaluating water sensitive outcomes in urban development
- Poor integration and alignment with strategic water planning at the project level
- Resourcing constraints of human resources and capital and recurrent funds
- Insufficient capacity and capability, including a lack of knowledge about water sensitive cities among staff, community and developers.

ISJO's project team also developed a benchmark report, including a water sensitive communities capacity assessment. This report measured the region's communities and set a baseline based on seven goals of a water sensitive community:

1. Ensure good water sensitive governance
2. Increase community capital and capacity to engage in water sensitive practices
3. Achieve equity of essential services
4. Improve productivity and resource efficiency
5. Improve ecological health
6. Ensure quality urban space
7. Promote adaptive infrastructure.

From the benchmarking report, ISJO can now monitor progress over time. The project delivered other important outputs, including:

- Training and capacity building for all council staff involved in the planning, implementation and maintenance of the region's stormwater and water reuse systems
- Five 'next steps' workshops with councils, ISJO and the management committee to collect data, determine obstacles and opportunities, and identify priority actions for each organisation to deliver the vision for water sensitive communities
- Communication resources, including a podcast.



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## Outcomes

The centrepiece of the project is the Illawarra Shoalhaven Regional Water Sensitive Framework. This establishes a vision “to develop a water sensitive region where there is a high capacity for all players to work together and deliver liveable, sustainable, resilient and productive places”.

The project delivered on all planned milestones. Teams and key stakeholders now have a clear and shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities, and awareness of policy and practice, as the region works towards water sensitive communities.

## Key Learnings

The data collected at various stages throughout the project revealed a growing understanding of WSUD, but also the skills gaps and variation in knowledge among ISJO’s council members.

Following the ‘next steps’ workshops, councils identified better governance and community engagement as the two highest priorities – this was a shift from the project’s original focus on WSUD policy for urban development.

Council staff now understand that policy, while essential, must be supported by WSUD knowledge within the development sector.

## More information

Check out ISJO’s episode of Local Government NSW’s podcast series, Climate Resilience. Listen to conversations with engineers, environmental managers, policy advisers and ISJO’s project coordinator to learn more about WSUD and urban development practices.

There is also a short animation on water sensitive urban design on YouTube.

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