



A pathway towards water reform

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As 2018 drew to a close, the Minister for Local Government Nanaia Mahuta released her long-awaited response to the issues raised in the Havelock North Drinking Water Inquiry.

The Cabinet Paper took the form of a road map for change, acknowledging the system-wide challenges facing the three waters sector and the consequent need for a system-wide response from source to tap and back again.

It confirmed the findings of the Havelock North Drinking Water Inquiry which highlighted the “systemic issues” that led to the contamination in which 5500 people became infected with campylobacter and at least four people died.

The Cabinet Paper said that the current system of drinking water delivery is unsustainable and that waste water plants are impacting on freshwater and coastal water quality. Sewage overflows are occurring at a frequency that is no longer acceptable for communities.

Lack of good quality information is also hampering good decision making particularly in the area of stormwater infrastructure and its susceptibility to climate change.

The Minister acknowledges that funding and financing to upgrade infrastructure lies at the heart of the problems facing drinking, waste and stormwater and that for many smaller councils, there is no clear way forward without reform.

The Cabinet Paper cemented the realisation of the problems that many in the water sector, including Water New Zealand, have known about for some time and we welcome the recognition that the status quo is not sustainable.

We can do much better. Both domestic and international models demonstrate that better quality services can be delivered to consumers more efficiently, effectively and with greater transparency.

The paper says there is a case for a significantly better system of coherence and stewardship than what currently exists.

Next year will see the process start with step change reform of drinking water and targeted reform of environmental regulation of wastewater aimed at lifting environmental performance.

From our perspective, the Government’s approach clearly recognises the issues that we have been talking about during 2018, particularly when we visited many towns and cities throughout the country talking of the future for the three waters.

Its approach appears very much focused on an approach that would ensure the efficient, effective and transparent delivery of three waters services in the long term.

What has also been evident for some time is the shortage of

capability and capacity in the sector and the Government has acknowledged that in the 2018 Cabinet paper.

As an organisation, Water New Zealand has spent considerable time over the past year looking into the gaps in the capacity and capability gaps in the water sector through the establishment of a Workforce Capability Strategy.

Smaller councils are most affected by skills shortages. They face a greater struggle to access and retain the specialist skills required to operate and maintain infrastructure and make complex risk assessments.

I am optimistic that the Government’s reforms will address this. Already it has acknowledged that funding and financing directly affect capacity and capability in the sector.

Looking to the future, there will be a need for new roles in the industry. Part of our strategy work in the past year has been to seek an understanding of exactly where the capability and capacity gaps are and what roles will be needed to fix the skills shortage.

Innovation, particularly around green infrastructure, continues to play a big part in the water sector and, not surprisingly, was a key theme at our conferences in 2018 including our Stormwater Conference and later at our Annual Conference and Expo in Hamilton in September 2018.

The growing focus on freshwater has also been occupying considerable attention.

Environment Minister David Parker has signalled he wants to toughen up water quality standards and has sought advice on the new National Policy Statement on Freshwater Management (NPS-FM) which requires regional authorities to set limits around water quality and quantity.

Water sector reform may have been the headline grabber last year, but as an organisation Water New Zealand continued to produce our key publications and technical documents including the National Performance Review, which benchmarks council performance.

Other technical documents essential for effective water management included the revised Waste Stabilisation Pond Good Practice Guide and updating of the National Asbestos Cement Pressure Pipe Manual, which is invaluable to engineers and consultants in this field.

Last year was certainly one of the more eventful years of the water calendar and this year will prove to be no less eventful, albeit undertaken through a careful step change process. **CP**