

Levels of Service Strategic Sharing Group: Wrapping Up – Data, Customer Levels of Service and the Future of the SSG

Meeting Date January 21, 2022 from 1:00 p.m. – 2:45 p.m. EST
Facilitator Jenessa Doherty, Canadian Water Network

The eighth meeting of the Strategic Sharing Group **Advancing Levels of Service in the Context of Uncertainty** was held on January 21, 2022. In this meeting, a guest presentation by the City of Vancouver explored efforts to re-prioritize data collection and management to sustainably advance service levels. The slide deck and recording of this presentation can be found on the website's Members Area or by following this [link](#). Following the presentation, participants discussed key considerations to developing meaningful customer levels of service and first-hand challenges and barriers to applying customer engagement strategies.

Below is a list of the specific themes that emerged from the meeting.

- **Meeting Regulatory Requirements**
 - Including: reconciling technical with customer levels of service, transforming existing goals and targets to language that resonates (with council, customers, etc.), creating a corporate culture of customer levels of service
- **Equity in Service Delivery and Capital Spending**
 - Including: inequities highlighted by the pandemic, ensuring the engagement of historically underrepresented stakeholders, defining equity in a Canadian context, using an equity lens to evaluate existing programs
- **Competing Costs and Staff Capacity**
 - Including: balancing priorities, shifting expenditures and employee capacity to better meet service level priorities, updating and re-visiting utility plans, aligning utility actions, targets and goals with municipal plans

Key Insights

Meeting Regulatory requirements

- Some municipalities are starting to develop plans to meet the technical requirements of regulations in a meaningful way that resonates with customers. For many, the current **focus is on transforming technical levels of service into goals and targets that reflect what customers want and need**. To accomplish this, one municipality is working collectively at the corporate level before breaking into smaller service groups to balance priorities, which has been a challenge as the pandemic has forced the reallocation of funds.

Equity in Service Delivery and Capital Spending

- Some participants highlighted the **many inequities the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the forefront**. As a result, **many municipalities expect a cultural shift that will prioritize integrating**

equity practices across utility approaches and ensure broader engagement with all stakeholders. This may come in the form of third-party engagement specialists that are better equipped to determine the needs of stakeholders more proactively. One utility highlighted the **tendency of municipalities to engage the community after plans had already been made, making it more unlikely that input would be fully integrated**. Another municipality emphasized that engaging with the right people is a critical component of water equity. Yet, it remains a challenge for many municipalities as **many programs do not always target the communities or stakeholders that are most often underrepresented**. It was highlighted that **one approach to begin discussions of water equity could be collecting disaggregated data to identify natural trends**.

- For many participants, exploring and identifying equity practices within the water space is a topic that is still emerging across Canada. As such, much of the research and best practices for equity in Canadian water services are still being determined. **Municipalities are still unpacking what equity means, particularly regarding water access and the environment**.
- One of the many challenges in the equity discussion is **ensuring that historically underrepresented stakeholders have opportunities to share their experiences to help build effective equity practices**. This includes evaluating how programs, incentives and subsidies are received and ensuring they can be accessed equitably by the people who need them.

Competing Costs and Staff Capacity

- **The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a shift in expenditures and employee capacity**. Some municipalities are challenged with finding the resources to respond to the pandemic while simultaneously committing resources to advance other vital initiatives. **Some utilities use an approach of aligning utility priorities with the municipal plans** (e.g. Climate Action Plans, Asset Management Plans, Long-Term Financial Plans, etc.) to balance this. Initiatives implemented may not always remain the top priority as other emerging issues (e.g. wildfires, ice storms). So, to compensate for this, **a utility can ensure they use similar and aligned frameworks as the other programs/services that they might compete with**.
- One of the participating municipalities described the **“paradox of prevention”** whereby the financial and resource requirements of actions implemented to address an issue are questioned (by council, the public, etc.); however, if those same actions are not implemented, and it results in negative consequences, the municipality is criticized for not doing enough. For this reason, levels of service serve to tangibly allocate and justify spending on actions, initiatives and programs.
- One challenge for Class Environmental Assessment (CEA) master planning is that language and terminology in the CEA regulations are not consistent with municipal priorities and asset management regulations. The process does not easily allow municipalities to incorporate LOS into the planning process that municipalities must undertake. Language that more intentionally contains LOS could help better align what municipalities prioritize and the planning/CEA process they are regulated to undertake.

Canadian Water Network's 
Canadian Municipal Water Consortium

Attendees

Name	Title	Municipality/Utility
Meaghan McClurg	Team Lead (Service Levels)	City of Calgary
Katherine Craddock	Team Lead (Customer Experience Planning	City of Calgary
Shannon Abbott	Water Utility manager	City of Calgary
Jeff Haberman	Data Strategist	City of Calgary
Bu Lam	Director, Sanitary & Stormwater Utilities	City of Kitchener
Meagan Cuddihy Wheeler	Program Manager, Capital Planning and Strategic Asset Management	City of Ottawa
Michelle Revesz	Integrated Sewer and Drainage Planning Manager	City of Vancouver
Sushmitha Karunakaran	Civil Engineer (EIT)	City of Vancouver
Brandon Hildebrandt	Asset Manager	City of Vancouver
Heather Zarski	Planning Specialist	EPCOR
Susan Ancel	Director One Water Planning	EPCOR
Valerie Williams	Manager, Asset Management	Halifax Water
Brent Burton	Division Manager, Liquid Waste Services, Policy, Planning and Analysis Division	Metro Vancouver
Lisa Babel	Director, Project Planning and Delivery	OCWA
Erin Hobbs	Senior Project Engineer	Region of Waterloo
Pam Law	Manager, Engineering and Planning, Water Services	Region of Waterloo
Michael Latimer	Research and Initiatives Advisor, Corporate Asset Management	York Region
Carissa Cautillo	Project Manager, Asset Management Strategy	York Region