



Water Efficiency Strategy

Community Insights Report 2026

JULY 2026

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1 Why water efficiency

Cairns is growing, and with this growth comes increased demand for water and greater pressure on our infrastructure and natural systems.

Planning for water efficiency is an investment in the future of our city. This future-focused approach ensures we will have the right tools, infrastructure, and policies in place so Council and the community can work together to secure our water supply. We will do this in a way that respects our natural environment and supports the region's liveability.

More water demand creates a need for more complex and expensive water infrastructure (such as pumps to draw water from rivers and creeks, water treatment plants, and pipes that carry water around the region). We know that many community members have shared they are concerned about water efficiency or water security. Council heard this feedback during recent citywide engagement projects, and these concerns are reflected in relevant corporate strategies and plans.

This is why Council is developing a Water Efficiency Strategy (the Strategy). The Strategy will provide a long-term, responsible approach to managing the demand for drinking water, and it will contribute to a resilient, prosperous, and sustainable future for Cairns. The Strategy will focus on managing water demand, sharing knowledge, and planning for an efficient network.

A key aim of the Strategy is to reduce water demand so we can balance the needs of our growing region with affordable water services and a healthy natural environment.

Building a sustainable water future is a shared responsibility between Council, the Cairns community, and local business.

In early 2026, Council began engaging with the community to help shape our water use in Cairns. Ongoing engagement will remain central to the development of the Strategy, ensuring it reflects community values, priorities, and expectations for sustainable water management. The Strategy will:

- review past and current water efficiency initiatives and compare them with other water providers across Australia
- develop and prioritise water saving options that are appropriate for our climate
- create a plan that is measurable, achievable, and relevant.



2 About the engagement process

Council has committed to ensuring community and stakeholder engagement is central to the development of the Strategy.

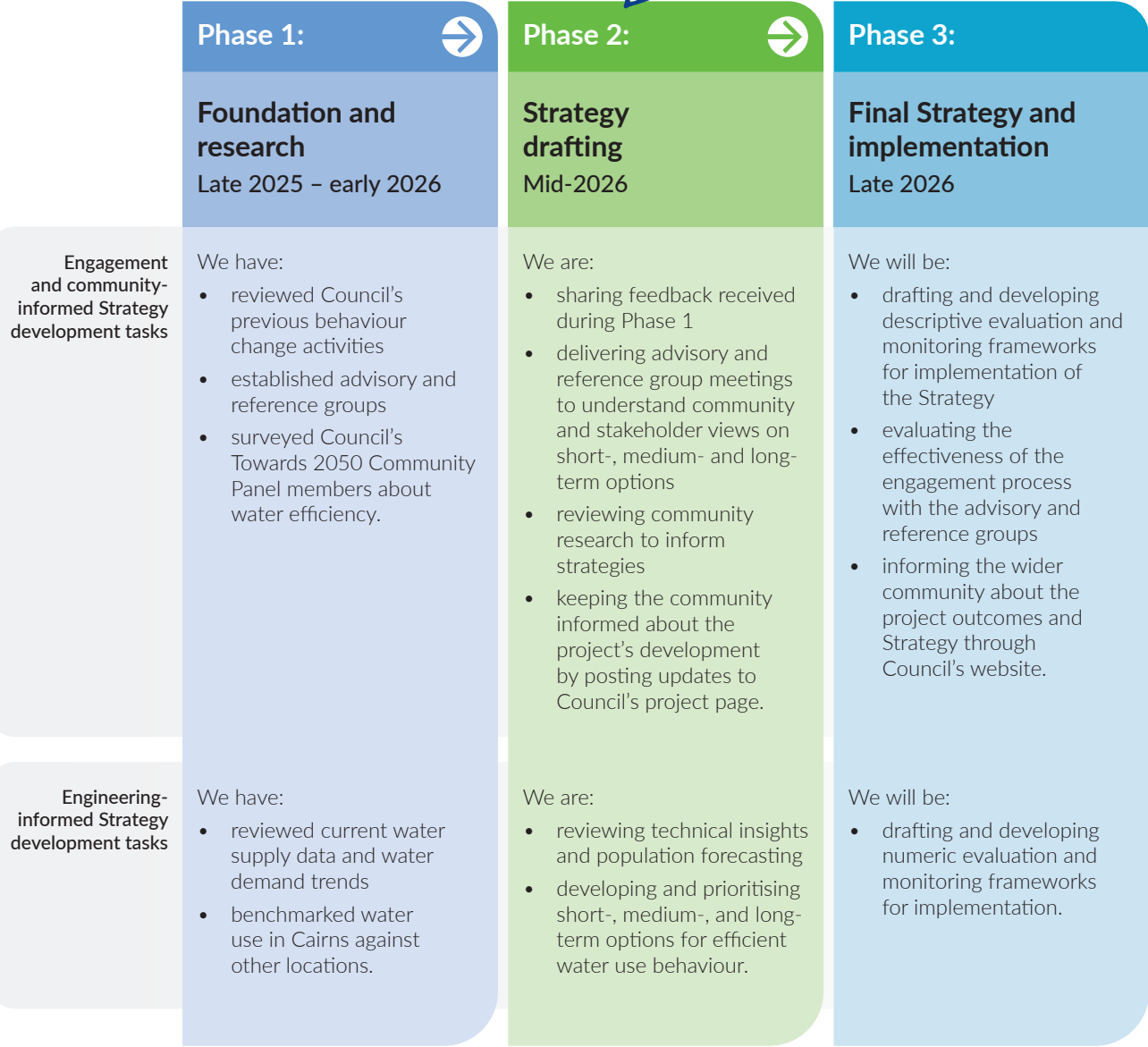
Engagement activities are designed to build an understanding of current water use behaviours across the Cairns community and gather insights to inform strategic direction and priorities.

By engaging with community members and stakeholders throughout the Strategy's development, Council can ensure the Strategy is informed by local knowledge, reflects community values and expectations, and delivers practical and sustainable outcomes.

It is important that we develop the Strategy together, because Council, the community, business and industry will need to work together to use water more efficiently.

Council is developing the Water Efficiency Strategy across three project phases. Each project phase will capture different technical inputs and community insights.

We are here



2.1 How we engaged

Early engagement activities focused on gathering detailed insights about water use behaviours and perspectives from a sample of the Cairns community. To achieve this we:

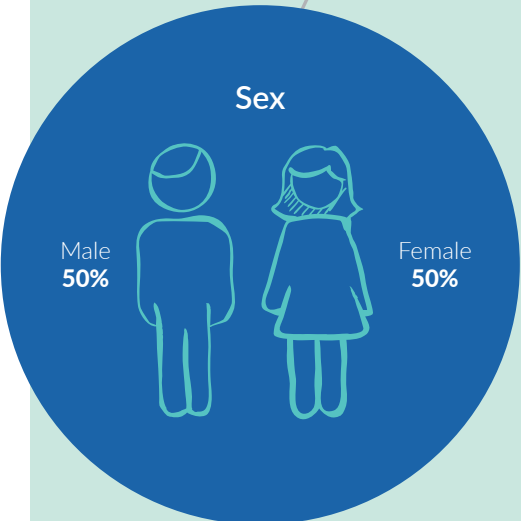
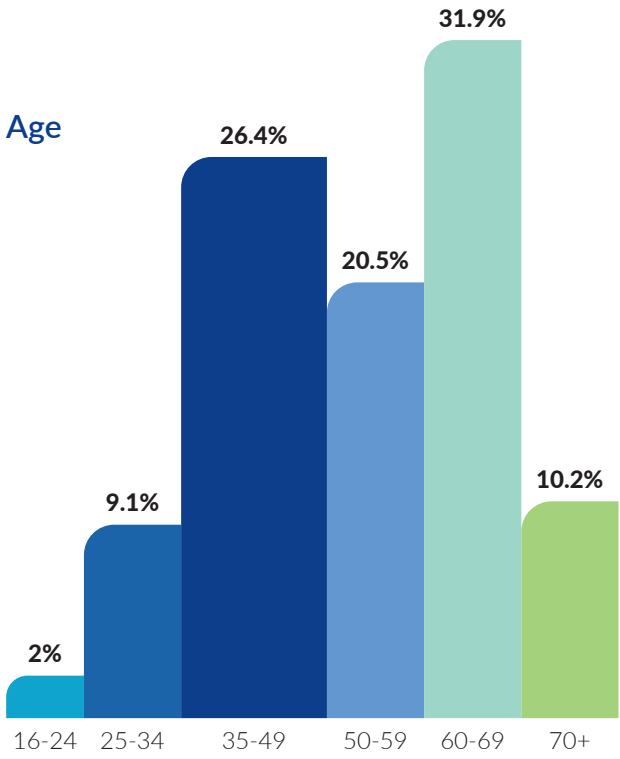
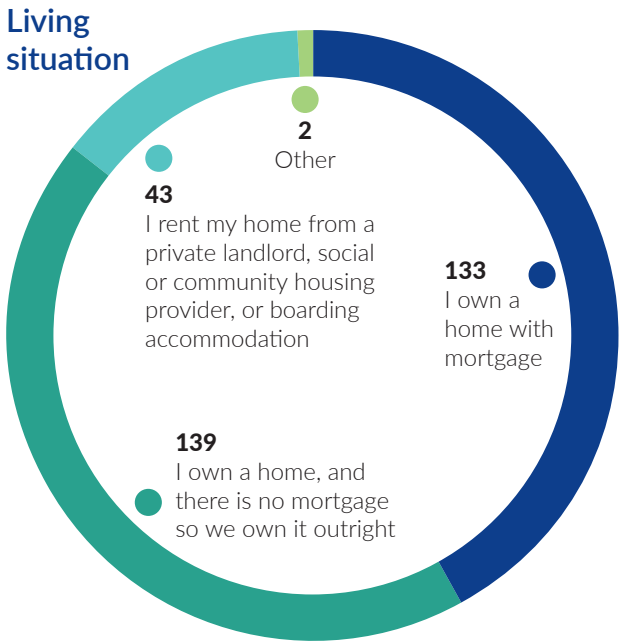
- Distributed a Community Research Survey to Council's Towards 2050 Community Panel. Participants reflected the diverse characteristics of the Cairns community.
- Formed the Water Efficiency Advisory Group (WEAG), which is made up of a range of local stakeholders representing local businesses, industry sectors, and government.
- Formed the Community Reference Group (CRG), which is made up of a diverse group of community members who completed the Community Research Survey.
- Planned and hosted the first meetings of the WEAG and CRG.

2.2 Who we engaged

Community Research Survey

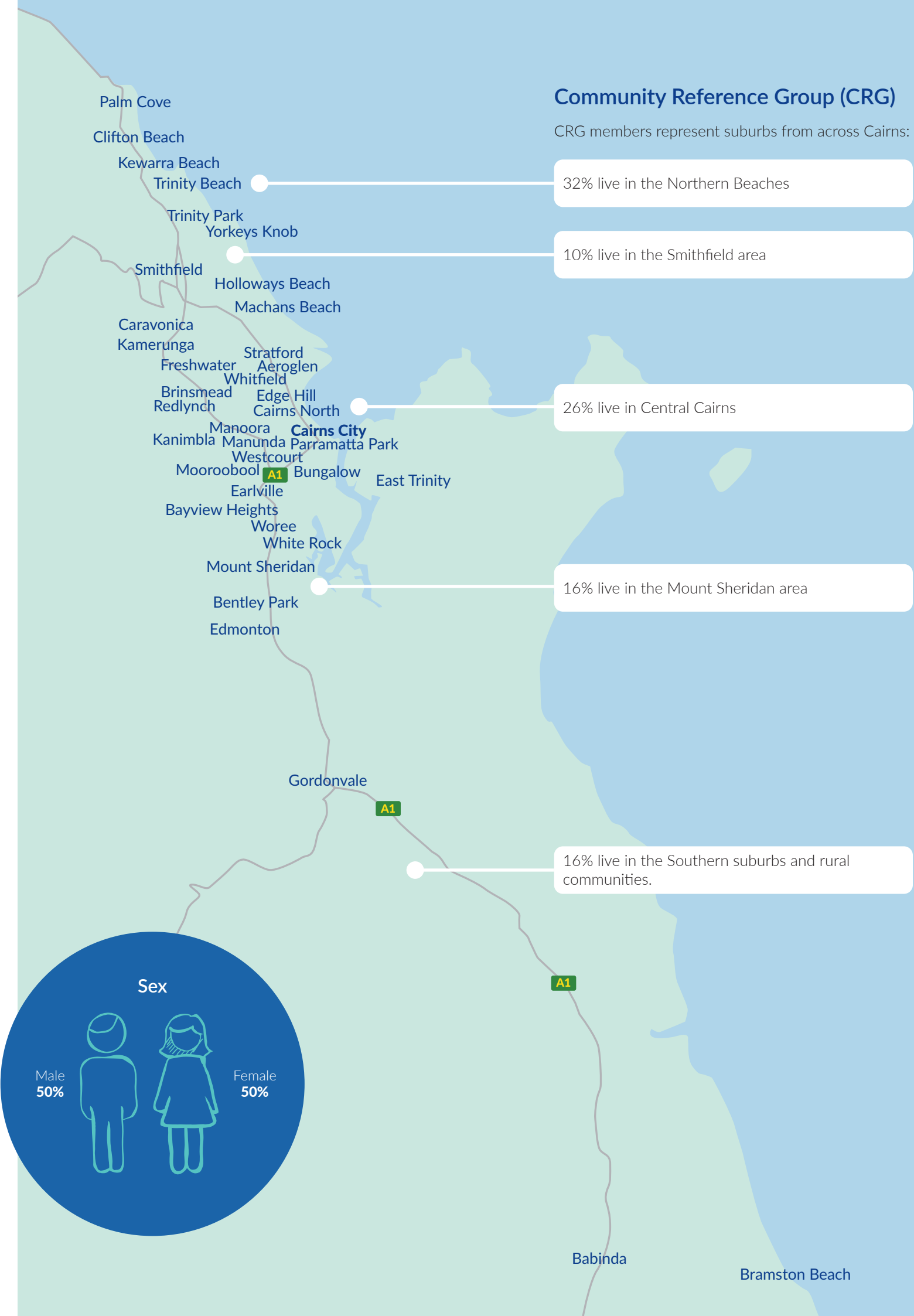
The Community Research Survey helped us reach community members across Cairns. We received survey responses from 317 people, who represented 78% of suburbs in the Cairns region, as shown on the map.

Survey participants represented a range of age groups and households.



Community Reference Group (CRG)

CRG members represent suburbs from across Cairns:



CRG members represent a wide range of ages:

- 9% are under 18
- 10% are between 25 and 34
- 19% are between 35 and 49
- 19% are between 50 and 59
- 38% are between 60 and 69
- 5% are over 70 years of age.

CRG members also represent the diversity that we see in the Cairns community. The CRG includes members who:

- identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
- speak a language other than English
- live in different homes and tenures (detached houses, flats, large rural blocks, owners and renters)
- live in homes with pools and rainwater tanks.

Water Efficiency Advisory Group (WEAG)

The WEAG includes members who are:

- elected representatives in local and state government
- working in key areas of state public service including health, housing and education
- part of peak bodies and advocacy groups
- representing major industries in Cairns
- representing local businesses.



2.3 What we asked

Community Research Survey



In the Community Research Survey, we asked participants about:

- their water use habits and behaviours
- what water means to them
- what informs their water use habits
- their understanding of where the drinking water in Cairns comes from
- their views about different potential water efficiency options.

CRG and WEAG



In Meeting 1 of the CRG and of the WEAG, we asked members:

- to consider and discuss their water use habits and understanding
- to imagine Cairns in 2035 as a thriving, resilient liveable place, and to describe the role water has in this future
- for their top-of-mind questions and views on:
 - water use history in Cairns
 - the biggest water users in Cairns now
 - water use and management in Cairns compared with other local government areas and water providers in Queensland.



3 What we heard during early engagement

We collated the feedback we received during early engagement. The information in this section of the report is a summary of this feedback.

It describes the key themes we heard about why water efficiency matters in Cairns, how water is used across Cairns, and how people see opportunities for change. We have also provided a short summary on how this feedback aligns with early engineering research.



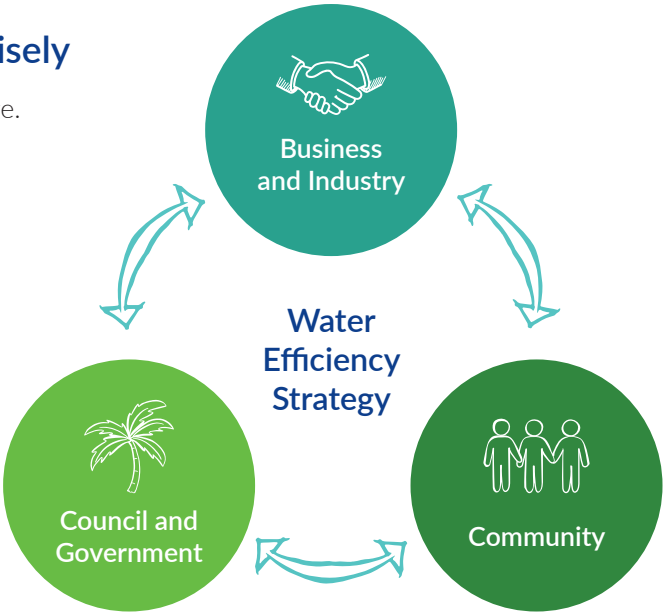
3.1 The big picture: Why water efficiency matters in Cairns

There were some key feedback themes relating to the big picture of water efficiency in Cairns: why it matters and how we can achieve it by working together.

3.1.1 Working together to use water wisely

We know that working together is key to effective change. We heard from Cairns community members, business and industry operators, and people in government that they care about using water wisely.

We heard that many community members and businesses take pride in saving water, and do not want to be wasteful. They can feel disappointed if it feels like their actions have no impact. However, we know that thousands of small household actions add up to meaningful water savings and can turn individual habits into a visible community impact.



3.1.2 Water makes Cairns unique

Water is such a significant part of what makes Cairns unique: our rivers, waterways, waterfalls and beaches.

If every household and business used less water, we would be able to keep more water in our environment which would help to keep our creeks, rivers and waterways healthy.

Water is fundamental for a thriving, liveable city, and responsible water use is a big part of keeping Cairns unique and special. We asked CRG and WEAG members what part water plays when they think about a thriving and liveable Cairns in 10 years. They mentioned:

- climate impacts being managed well, so Cairns can still support the daily life and recreation we love
- more people living in apartments, with bigger parks that are green and full of native plants
- using water wisely by installing rainwater tanks and promoting tropical urban infrastructure and design that uses water well
- new technology and knowledge makes us more aware of how much water we use
- widespread use of alternative water uses (like recycled water or captured rainwater).

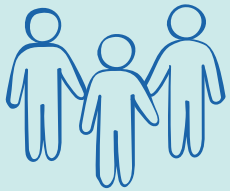
3.1.3 Fair and equitable water use

Clean drinking water is a fundamental human right. We need to know that water in Cairns is safe, affordable, and accessible.

Different households use water differently. It is not always the case that people in the homes that use more water are not acting wisely. For example, older appliances, like dishwashers and washing machines, use more water than modern models.

Staying comfortable and cool is another key factor in how the Cairns community uses water. Many survey respondents and WEAG members said they have two or more showers each day. Playing in water can also be a popular way to keep cool in the summer.

Feedback from the Community Research Survey, CRG, and WEAG shared that affordability is key when it comes to saving water. Every household can save money long-term by wasting less water, even without big upgrades like a new appliance.



"It is important to remember that we are part of the global community and by participating in programs like the one mentioned, you are doing what you can to be responsible community members and reducing wastage of our precious finite resources."

Edmonton resident

3.2 How we use water in Cairns

Planning for the future starts with understanding how much water our community needs. We must work together to protect essential water use and reduce waste that drives the demand for water even higher. Baseline water data and community insights show where we can save water and improve efficiency.

Cairns Regional Council supplies an average of 74 million litres of safe, reliable drinking water every day.

63%

Residential households use around 63% of the daily drinkable water supply in Cairns

Residential households include:

- Houses
- Townhouses
- Apartment buildings
- Student housing or boarding housing
- Social and community housing.

25%

Non-residential users use around 25% of the daily drinkable water supply in Cairns

Non-residential users include:

- Major industries
- Businesses
- Services
- Government.

12%

System losses account for around 12% of the daily drinkable water supply in Cairns

System losses include:

- Leaks in water mains
- Illegal connections to water mains (water theft)
- Legal connections to water mains that are not metered and not charged (e.g., fire hydrants).

3.2.1 Residential users

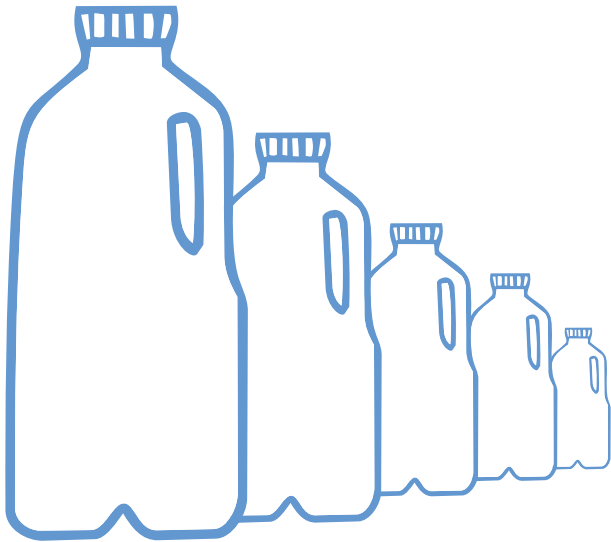
Residential households use more than 46.5 million litres of water per day.

Enough to fill a line of 2L milk bottles from Cairns to Sydney.

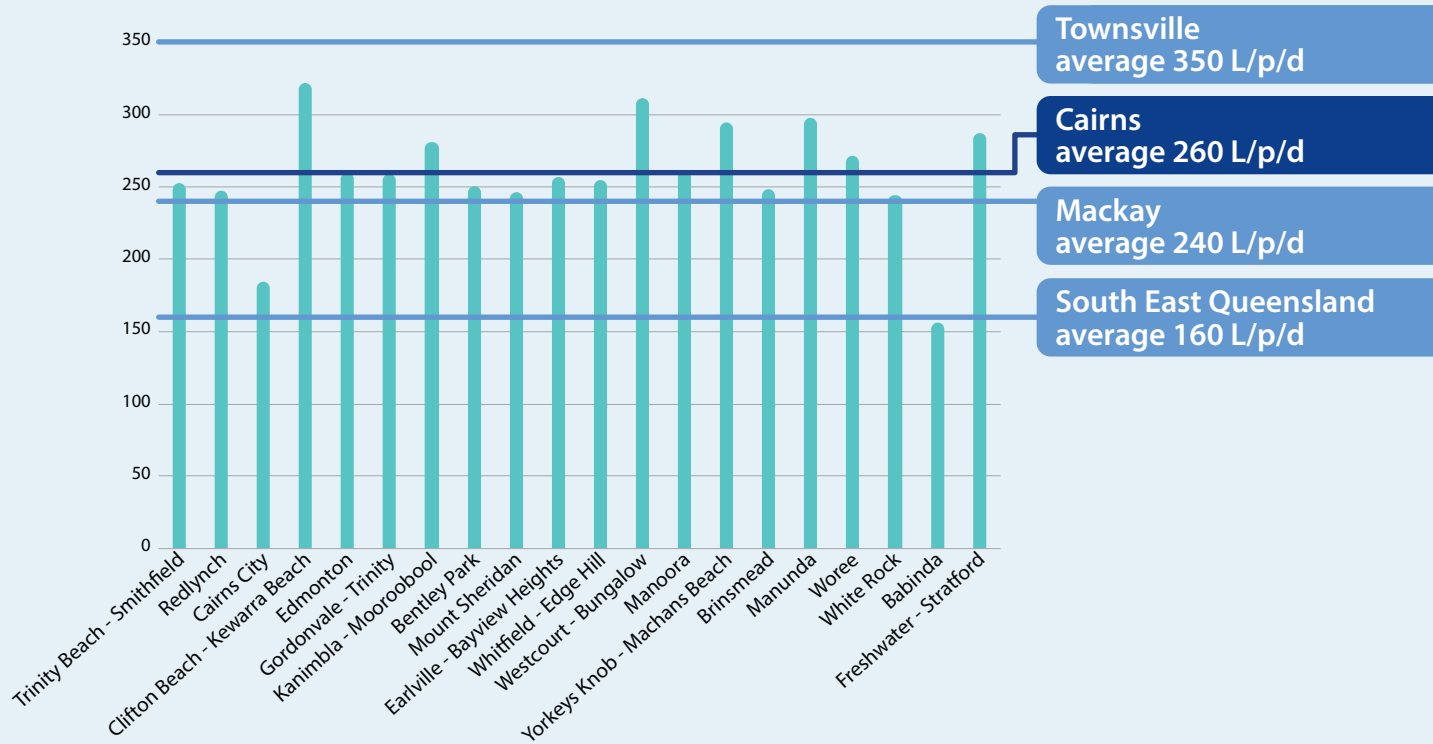
The average water use is around 260 litres per person per day in their household.

While we are not the worst performers when it comes to water use in our households, we have a significant opportunity to do better. There are also many examples of communities who have already achieved outcomes where water is used more efficiently. We can look to the experience of these other communities to understand what opportunities may work in Cairns.

It can often feel like individual actions don't make a difference, but if every person in Cairns used just three less litres of water per day, that would be more than 530,000 litres.



Average daily residential water use per person (L/p/d)



In the Community Research Survey, we asked community members how they use water in their homes.

When it comes to indoor water use and home appliances, survey participants told us:

- There is a wide mix of how people wash up by hand. 31% always fill their sink, 19% usually fill their sink, 16% rarely fill their sink, 16% always use running water, and 17% only use their dishwasher. Also, most people have a dishwasher (77%).
- Most people do their laundry multiple times per week (83%).
- 37% of people shower twice or more per day.
- Most people have multiple toilets (70%) and multiple showers (65%) in their home.
- The average person has around 3 appliances or fittings in their home that are 'water saving' (this includes shower heads, toilets, taps, washing machines, dishwashers, fridges or water systems) and most people always (49%) or sometimes (26%) consider the water save star rating when buying appliances and fittings.

"I believe we are all responsible for our community's health. Using water wisely and responsibly is good for our community and our environment."

Smithfield resident



When it comes to outdoor water habits:

- There is a mix in how often people water their garden, lawn or plants. 30% said once or twice a week, 21% said daily or more than three times a week.
- 37% of people said they usually water their garden for 5 to 15 minutes at a time. 27% said they usually water their garden for more than 15 minutes.
- There is a mix in how people clean their entry way or driveway. 22% use a pressure washer, 12% use a broom and hose, 4% only use a hose.
- There is a mix in how often people wash a vehicle. Most popular responses were once a month (29%) and once every six months (32%). The most popular method was using a hose to rinse and a filled bucket to clean (54%).
- Only 8% of people have a rainwater tank.
- 53% of people have a pool, and only 10% of those have a pool cover.
- 23% of pool owners fill their pool every one or two weeks. 34% fill their pool monthly.

When thinking about using water wisely, we can see that this is important for the community.

96% of survey participants said that conserving water is a responsibility that we all share.

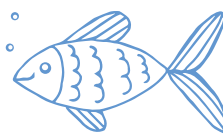
92% of survey participants said they know the impact that would come from everyone using too much water.



3.2.2 Non-residential users

Non-residential users use more than 18.5 million litres of drinking water each day.

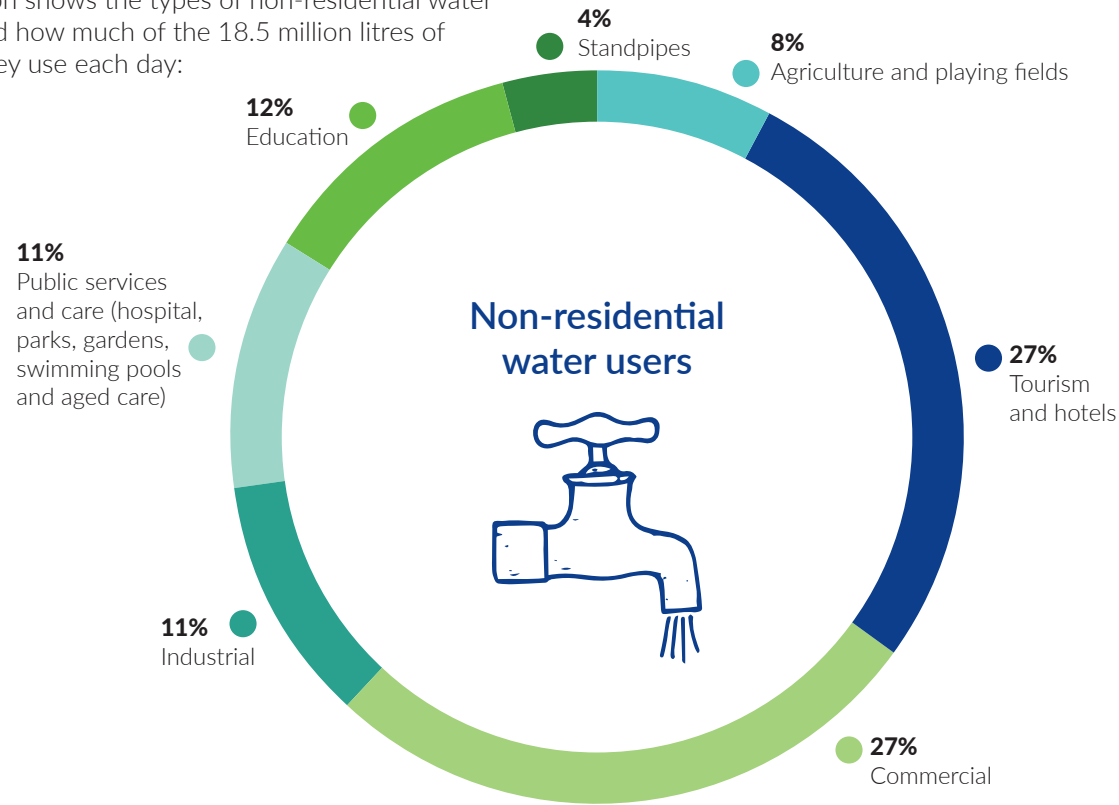
Enough to fill the Esplanade Lagoon 7 times!



The Cairns economy is supported by water use. Non-residential users play a major role in the water future of Cairns.

Businesses, industry, and public facilities use more than 18.5 million litres of drinking water each day. A small number of large users drive much of this demand. Just 4% of non-residential water billing accounts (or 146 users) use around half of all non-residential water. To put this in perspective, every 1% shown in the graph equals the water used by about 875 households.

This graph shows the types of non-residential water users and how much of the 18.5 million litres of water they use each day:



Standpipes are a portable device that provide a short-term, metered and paid connection to a water main. They are often used for construction projects.

Changing the way industries and businesses use water can have a big impact. However, water use is not yet a priority for all organisations.

We heard from some of the bigger water users in the WEAG that their organisations are not discussing their water use, or ways to use water more efficiently. We also heard that other organisations are looking at what high level restrictions would mean for them and their operations, and they are exploring how they can proactively reduce their water use.

We heard from WEAG members that organisations see the benefit of clear information, practical solutions, and support to make changes that work for their operations and the wider community.

We know we have a positive foundation to build. Through the WEAG we have learnt that organisations are willing to work together and they are looking to use water more sustainably.

Reducing non-residential water use will be essential to securing a sustainable and resilient water future for Cairns.

3.2.3 Council

Water and wastewater assets make up about 40% of Council's asset base with a total value of about \$2 billion. Around 4% of all treated drinking water coming from Copperlode Dam – Behana Creek is used by Council assets.

Council is committed to being a leader in delivering the Water Efficiency Strategy and investigating options for using water wisely in our own facilities.

"If there are restrictions, the restrictions are there for a reason. However, I'd expect Council to limit the use of its sprinklers too."
Earlville resident

Council is looking at how to reduce how much drinking water is used in its operations and outdoors. Council already uses recycled water at sewage treatment plants, and for irrigation at golf courses and in the Botanic Gardens precinct.

3.2.4 System losses

When looking at the 12% of drinkable water that is counted as system losses:

- **Around 10% is water losses.** This is water that escapes the distribution system before reaching the customer. It is caused by pipe breaks, leakage from joints, or overflow from reservoirs.
- **Around 2% is financial losses.** This is water that is used but not measured or billed accurately, including unauthorised consumption (theft), inaccurate metering, and data handling errors.

Council is already addressing this water loss by replacing existing mechanical water meters with smart water meters throughout the Cairns region. The aim of the smart water meter project is to improve the community's water network and achieve overall water savings. These new meters will help residents to track and manage their water use and identify hidden water leaks early to minimise water waste.

Phase 1 of the smart water meter project is now complete. Since the smart water meter program started, Council has delivered over 10,000 letters advising residents of a potential leak on their property. Council will continue to install smart water meters with following phases of the project continuing to around 2027.

Council recognises that reducing water demand starts with its own operations. By improving efficiency, reducing losses, and investing in better systems, Council is investing in a more sustainable water future for Cairns.

All of this information and data about water use in Cairns shows us that there are opportunities across all types of water use categories: residential, non-residential and system losses.

3.3 Opportunities for using water well in Cairns

Feedback gathered through the Community Research Survey, and CRG and WEAG meetings highlighted opportunities to move forward with water efficiency measures. We have heard that community members and stakeholders want to play a part in water solutions. They also want to make sure the project team are aware of concerns or potential barriers that the Strategy may need to address.

Community members believe in the issue.

95% of survey participants said conserving water is a shared responsibility. 83% said they follow water restrictions. 82% said water should be conserved to protect the environment, and 81% said it is important for future generations.

Water feels abundant in the Wet Tropics

Ten deserts make up nearly 20% of Australia's landmass and contribute to it being the driest inhabited continent in the world. Unlike most areas in Australia, the regular rainfall in Cairns means that water feels abundant. While this is true, rainfall takes a long journey before it is drinkable and delivered to homes.

More opportunities for recycled water use

Survey participants, CRG members, and WEAG members said they were open to exploring the use of recycled water for outdoor purposes. These purposes include watering parks, gardens, and playing fields. Using recycled water would reduce the reliance on drinking water for these uses.

Fair distribution and payment of water

Community members want to see shared responsibility across households, businesses, and Council. Without this, motivation to act can decline.

Cultural importance of water in Cairns

CRG members shared how much they value when waterways are healthy and flowing. First Peoples also shared that connection to Country is deeply embedded in water in the environment.

These important social and cultural perspectives are not always reflected in how water use is communicated, because it can be hard to measure.

The power of collective action

Survey participants shared that an individual action can feel disheartening in the face of major issues, like sustainability.

WEAG members shared ideas for how their organisations could collaborate with others or Council to make changes.

It can help everyone if we connect our community's intentions and behaviours to build a shared understanding about water efficiency. This includes efficient management and use of water for Council facilities.

Financial incentives are a strong opportunity.

Cost of living challenges are facing most of the community. Survey participants said that credits or rebates for water-saving devices can make a big difference in overcoming upfront cost barriers.

There is uneven access to information.

Renters do not receive their water bills, so they do not see their water use which can impact how they use water. Some large businesses and industries face similar challenges when water use is not closely monitored, and managers do not see water bills.

Providing clearer, more accessible data can help households, renters, and businesses better understand and manage their water use.

Water restrictions are understood as a necessity.

Most people already follow water restrictions and see them as necessary during dry periods. This provides a clear pathway for managing water demand and use during peak times.

Technology and innovation

WEAG and CRG members discussed how much technology has changed in the last few decades when it comes to the community having access to data and information. They shared a hope about new technology helping people to use less water, and having access to up-to-date water use data.

4 How early engagement will inform the Strategy

In early 2026, Council began the conversation with the community to shape our water use future in Cairns. This conversation will continue to be at the heart of developing the Strategy to make sure it reflects the expectations of the Cairns community.

4.1 Emerging focus areas

Based on what we heard, five key themes are emerging to guide the Strategy. These reflect shared values, identified barriers, and opportunities for meaningful change.

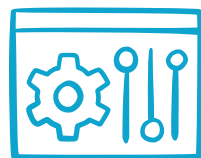


Using water wisely together

When it comes to the shared responsibility of using water wisely, people told us:

- conserving water is a responsibility we all share
- they want to see fairness across households, businesses, and Council
- they are more motivated to act when others are doing the same.

This focus area is about building a shared commitment to water efficiency across the whole community. It includes visible leadership, consistent expectations, and collective action.



Improving system efficiency

When it comes to water network system efficiency, people told us:

- reducing waste is just as important as reducing use
- they expect Council to manage leaks and losses effectively
- they value practical action that improves how the system performs
- they value up-to-date and accurate information, data, and technology in managing water use.

This focus area is about reducing leaks, improving water network infrastructure, and providing better data to minimise water loss across Cairns.



Using the right water for the right purpose

When it comes to using the right water for the right purpose, people told us:

- they would like to see Council explore how to use alternative sources of water when they are available, instead of drinking water
- they support recycled water for outdoor uses
- they want safe and well-communicated alternatives.

This focus area is about expanding the use of recycled and alternative water sources to reduce demand on our drinking water supplies.



Supporting Cairns to act for water efficiency

When it comes to working together to use water wisely, people told us:

- they are willing to save water but need accessible and practical support
- they would like the Strategy to include meaningful interventions for different water users
- cost can be a significant barrier to finding leaks, upgrading appliances, and upgrading fixtures
- they would like to see Council, residents, and business and industry all work towards using water well
- they would like to see Council continue to engage community members and stakeholders in important decisions about water use.

This focus area is about incentives, tools, and targeted programs that make it easier and more affordable for households, businesses and industry to reduce water use.



Building a resilient and water-wise community

When it comes to awareness and water use behaviour, people told us:

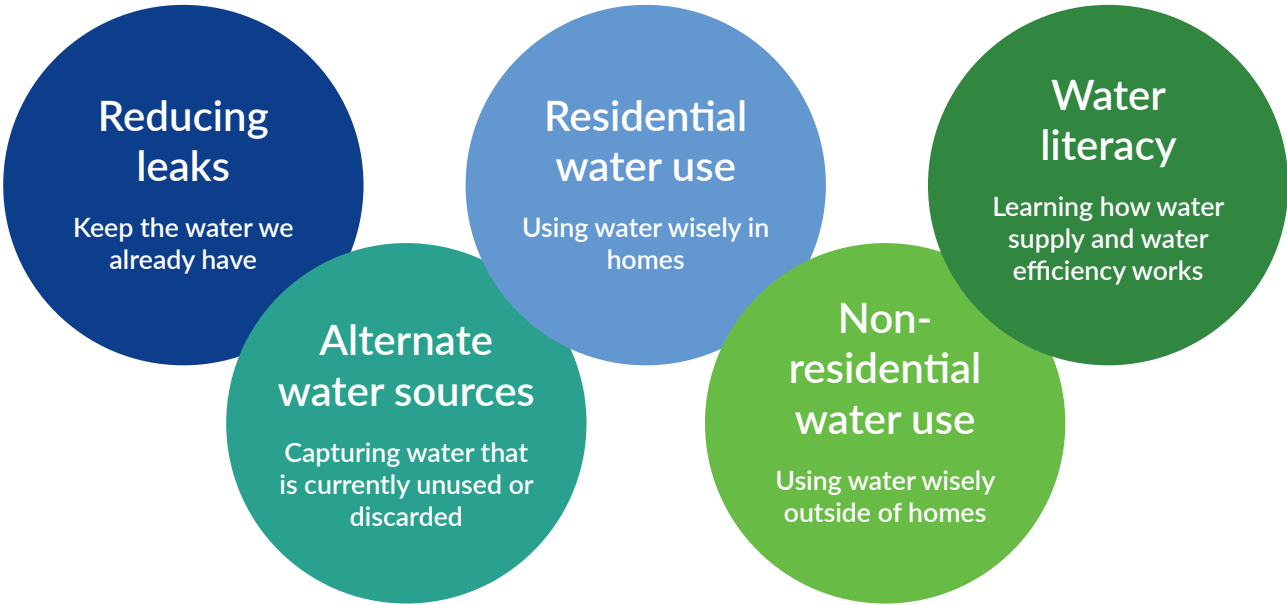
- they want Council to meaningfully consider and share what population growth and climate change means for water use
- they want clear, practical and ongoing information about how to save water, not just one-off updates
- educating children and future generations is important
- understanding the impact will help turn intention into action.

This focus area is about improving water literacy across the community. It includes making support available and accessible, providing clear information, and communicating why water efficiency matters in Cairns.



4.2 Next steps

The project team has taken a structured approach to focus on five key opportunity areas where the greatest impact can be achieved:



These areas reflect both community priorities and technical opportunities to reduce demand and improve efficiency across the Cairns water system.

Council will continue to work with the CRG and WEAG to inform and strengthen the Water Efficiency Strategy, incorporating their insights to support improved water efficiency across Cairns.



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