

KEMPSEY SHIRE COUNCIL WATER INDUSTRY OPERATIONS TRAINEESHIP PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the experiences and struggles of a small rural Council maintaining a competitive workforce within the water industry.

Kempsey Shire Council (KSC) operates seven sewage treatment plants, nine water treatment facilities, all independent with diverse treatment processes within the large geographical area of the Macleay Valley. Maintenance and operations of the related infrastructure includes:

- 78 sewer pump wells, 100 pressure sewer pump stations, 1 vacuum sewer reticulation system as well as 370kms of sewer pipelines.
- Water infrastructure including booster and chlorine dosing systems, borefield collection systems, 1 major dam with catchment of 73,543 hectares as well as 600kms of water mains.

As well as maintaining the existing infrastructure, Water Services construction team also replaces aging infrastructure and constructs new systems to allow for future growth.

The diversity needed to operate, maintain and construct these systems meant Council, being in a rural area struggled to attract and keep the specialised operators required.

In 2011, after Council recognised the skills gap and wanting to help school leavers in the Macleay Valley develop careers without having to leave the area, commenced a traineeship partnership with NSW TAFE and HVTC Mid Coast training group. Since this time the program has evolved into an extremely reliable and valuable source of qualified and suitably experienced operators.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Historically rural Council's such as Kempsey has had trouble attracting skilled technicians/operators particularly within the water industry. Skill markets are very unstable due to our geographical area and other higher paying industries such as mining poaching employees.

The following discusses the pitfalls and success of *growing your own* within a local government industry.

Photo 1: Water Industry Operators from *Grow Your Own*



2.0 DISCUSSION

In 2011 Kempsey Shire Council commenced its Water Operations Trainee Program with eight eager trainees. The background work to get to this day, was not without careful consideration and planning.

Council prior to 2011 had previously updated its operators with Certification II and III within water operations. This showed some flaws within the training system that had resulted in inconsistent results and unsatisfactory certification of operators.

Although not all the issues are discussed in the paper, the main problems were the following:

- Training modules not considered to be acceptable to Kempsey Shire Council or adaptable to suit its infrastructure and treatment processes.
- Trainers not familiar with the module content to KSC satisfaction.
- Support and backup for students not consistent.
- Incentive for upgrading or obtaining further qualifications not clearly communicated to staff.
- No trainees coming through the system, highlighting the skill shortage in the water industry.

2.1 Overcoming previous issues

- With the introduction of the National Training Package (NWP07) and its increased quality of training material, Council was confident the content could be adapted to suit its individual needs.
- The introduction of a highly respected water industry innovator as the TAFE teacher was considered a game changer, with Council only too willing to sign up.
- The recruitment of potential trainees was handled by an external training provider. They commenced communication with school leavers and discussed the advantages of a career within the water industry. This resulted in plenty of interest from candidates who wanted to stay and work within their local community.
- Trainee support was considered a high priority with “study days” and additional training implemented with a mentor. This was the extra “push” needed for the trainees to complete modules and understand Council’s own water industry systems.
- Trainees also needed the support and guidance of the onsite operators within each area of operations. Initially the acceptance of the trainees by some operators was poor, however with support and training this improved, especially when they realised the trainees could support their daily duties. The harshest critic has now mellowed and is a good reference point to gauge how a trainee is performing in the field.

2.2 Training both on- site and classroom

The importance of a balance between classroom-based theory and onsite practical training cannot be overstated. The trainees have a theory class once per month and a study day incorporating theory and sometimes practical, a half day per month.

Photo 2: Practical locations training



Photo 3: Inhouse GIS training



Photo 4: Maintenance: repairs of water and sewer infrastructure



Photo 5: Construction: replacement of aging infrastructure and construction for future growth



Photo 6: Water Process: responsible for all water treatment plants, dams and reservoirs



Photo 7: Sewer Process: responsible for the treatment of sewer plants and operations of pump wells



Photo 8: KSC combined class with Port Macquarie Council, helps to keep class sizes viable



- KSC Trainee program intake numbers have varied from 3 to 4 each year
- 4 is the ideal number to allow on-site work rotation success

In 2021 NSW TAFE made a business decision not to deliver the Water Industry training package. After lobbying NSW TAFE executives and State Ministers it was decided we needed to find a new training provider, in consultation with Midcoast and Port Macquarie Hastings Council's. The Council's assessed the capabilities and suitability's of the training providers course. A new provider was found in Fusion Training Services. The new provider has added extra flexibility to

the package and this has enabled council to deliver a more focused qualification. Council has four areas of Water Operations with Trainees specialising in areas of interest/skills which is determined at time of appointment. Trainees will rotate through the 4 Water Operations areas during the course of their traineeship.

3.0 CONCLUSION

To date 57 trainees have come through the Water Industry Traineeship Scheme at Kempsey including 6 school-based trainees.

16 trainees have been able to obtain full time employment with Council. The majority of the positions obtained by the trainees were within our Water Section, however some work in other departments including road crews. Some trainees, when a position was not available in Kempsey have taken their skills to other towns.

Council was able to upskill over 14 existing Water Services staff by joining TAFE Trainee classes, helping them obtain their Certificate 111 in Water Operations.

4.0 ACCOLADES

Photo 9: As a trainee within Kempsey Shire Council the opportunity to fulfil career goals is high as seen with the success of a former trainee Stephen Smailes who was awarded the 2014 NSW and ACT Group Training Association Trainee of the Year Award.



Photo 10: Elissa Burgin awarded the NSW Group Training Australia Trainee of the year 2016. KSC'S support of young women in non-traditional career paths. Elissa worked for Council as a sewer operator until last year to broaden her horizon. Council was also the winner of the

Programme Innovation Category for its trainee program “Grow Your Own”, awarded by IPWEA NSW in 2014



5.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- Murray Thompson for his dedication in ensuring our industry flourishes
- Council’s four Water Services Team Leaders, who continue to support the trainee programme with their professional on-site guidance.
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- John Nelson for picking up and growing the program after Peter Anderson’s retirement
- Gabrielle Putland for her recent work in liaising with the potential training organisations
- Midcoast and Port Macquarie Hastings Council’s for their collaborative approach in dealing with the regions Water Industry skills shortage.