

# Creating a long-term workforce development strategy for NZ's water services industry



## CASE STUDY

New Zealand's water sector is poised to enter a once-in-a-generation infrastructure transformation to improve water systems throughout the country.

Local government faces significant challenges with managing drinking water, stormwater and wastewater services (the three waters). The Three Waters Reform Programme aims to provide the regulatory framework, governance and resourcing required to address these challenges and secure New Zealand's long-term water needs.



## Situation

New Zealand's water systems are currently managed by 67 local councils. A wide variation in infrastructure, capability and resourcing across these councils has resulted in inconsistent service delivery. A series of water-related problems prompted the government to take a long, hard look at water services and how they were being delivered across New Zealand. As a result, the Three Waters Reform Programme has been developed to shift water management from local government to four regional entities. Regardless of reform, the water sector will see massive change over the next 30 years if it is to address the significant infrastructure deficit facing the sector (\$125-185bn).

To ensure a stable workforce is in place to deliver the required transformation, the water sector needs to identify, recruit, develop and retain an influx of new employees from both traditional pathways and those considering career switches. There is a predicted growth in the water sector workforce of around 80% across the next 30 years; however, changes in immigration policies and rivalry from other industries mean the water sector is competing for a narrowing employee pipeline. This situation has been exacerbated by workforce restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Waihangara Rau Workforce Development Council represents the workforce needs of New Zealand's infrastructure and construction sectors. To develop a viable workforce development strategy for the water sector, Waihangara Rau was granted funding from the Tertiary Education Committee Covid Recovery Fund.

## Solution

Based on his recent positive experience with a similar project for the Electricity Supply Industry (ESI), Mike Grumball, GM Assurance at Waihangara Rau, selected Assurity's Design and Innovation team to create a strategy that accurately reflects the changing needs of the water services industry.

**"I worked with Assurity for the 'Re-energise, Ngā Mahi a Māui' workforce development strategy. There were valuable lessons learned from that project and they brought that knowledge to the three waters tasks."**

Baseline research involved qualitative interviews with iwi and hapū, encompassing environmental consultants, water industry experts, crown-iwi advisors and training providers. It also encompassed an industry scan, including engagement with small suppliers, as well as focus groups with students and school leavers.

The resulting strategy report identifies five insight categories and outlines four strategic goals with 14 recommendations. In addition, Assurity developed a communications system to reflect the industry needs and effectively carry key messages to engage desired audiences.

The activation phase, which is underway, is a combined approach between the ESI and the Water Services industries to implement actionable recommendations from their respective workforce strategies.

## Highlights

To ensure the report captured and addressed the most significant industry challenges, the Assurity three waters team regularly hosted share backs and workshops with industry steering and working groups. These events triggered rich discussion and debate between stakeholders across the industry, which helped Assurity form workforce development goals and recommendations that were targeted and relevant.

Throughout the iwi engagement section of the research, Assurity learned first-hand how Te Ao Māori includes a sophisticated understanding of the holistic and cyclical nature of water that is intrinsically linked to spirituality and whakapapa (genealogy). The team took care to accurately represent what they heard, but refrained from making any specific recommendations on behalf of Māori. In consideration of the articles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (particularly given the significance of water to Māori and the tangata whenua roles required), a separate iwi- and hapū-led workstream was formed to enable workforce development recommendations and solutions to be developed 'by Māori for Māori'.

To assist with refining the project logo, Assurity engaged Graham Tipene, a Tā Moko artist who has been involved as a consultant and key artist on civic and council-led projects throughout Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland. Graham evolved an existing design, featuring a watermark and ripple, in ways that pushed deeper into Māori whakaaro (thought) and incorporated mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge and understanding).

To develop a compelling name for the strategy, Assurity collaborated with three Māori educators. This trio of cultural experts came up with 'Ko Wai tātau/We are water', a name that works on multiple levels: humans are mostly made from water; our cultural identity arises from land and water; our lives are shaped by water; and water is essential for life.



**Gillian Blythe**  
CEO of Water New Zealand

## Results

The website [wearewater.co.nz](http://wearewater.co.nz) has been live since March 2022 and has been widely praised by all audience segments, including Māori and Pasifika.

**“For the Three Waters project, it was important to ensure collaboration with Māori happened right from the start. We didn’t want it to be an add-on at the end. Assurity are great at finding the cultural experts they need and bringing everyone along on the journey.”**



**Mike Grumball**  
GM Assurance, Waihangara Rau

“I presented our report in a government meeting, and it was compared favourably to another recent report that came out from the civil contractors. My audience commented on how it was an industry-driven initiative and clearly had industry support and backing. It wasn’t created in isolation, which was great feedback to receive.”

Mike says the name developed for the strategy - Ko Wai tātau/We are water – was an immediate success. It came with such a great story and so many layers of positive meaning.

Mike and his team were also impressed that Assurity engaged Graham Tipene for logo design. “Involving a highly regarded artist like Graham Tipene was a masterstroke for the logo development.”

Gillian Blythe, CEO of Water New Zealand, was also impressed with the overall result of Assurity’s work.

**“Working with representatives from across the water sector, Assurity has helped the sector focus on four important workforce challenges that will prepare the sector for the task ahead when actioned.”**

Waihangara Rau is treating the Three Waters Workforce Development Strategy as a living document that will be reviewed by the industry on a regular basis.





## At a glance

### Company:

Waihangara Rau Workforce Development Council

### Industry:

Public sector

### Situation:

New Zealand's water sector is going through a once-in-a-generation infrastructure transformation that aims to improve water systems throughout the country. At the moment, about 85% of water systems are managed by councils – with different levels of service delivery. The government's Three Waters Reform Programme will see water services management shifted from New Zealand's 67 councils to four regional entities. To execute the reforms, the water sector needs to identify, recruit, develop and retain a large influx of new employees. Waihangara Rau (construction and infrastructure) Workforce Development Council commissioned Assurity to work alongside the industry to conduct research, analysis and distillation; and to complete a viable workforce development strategy report.

### Services provided:

- Workshop design and facilitation
- Research design and planning
- Research facilitation
- Research analysis
- Unification of research findings
- Authorship and design of strategy report
- Design and build of a website to present findings

### Outcomes achieved:

- Integration of Māori and Pasifika perspectives
- Unanimous acceptance of project name and visual identity
- Strong support for the strategic report
- Robust strategic platform to guide future decision-making
- Full industry backing of strategic report findings
- Extensive coverage and discussion on social and traditional media