



Public Sector  
Commission

# Agency Capability

## Department of Fire and Emergency Services

### Executive summary



November 2024

## Introduction

The Department of Fire and Emergency Services was reviewed under the [Agency Capability Review Program](#) from March 2024 to October 2024.

As Western Australia's leading emergency management agency, the agency plays a critical role in coordinating emergency services for natural disasters and emergency incidents that threaten lives and properties. This remit requires it to work with local governments, volunteers and other hazard management agencies to prepare for disasters and protect the community.

The agency operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week on land, in the air and at sea across 2.5 million square kilometres and 10,200 kilometres of coastline.

The agency and its leaders are well regarded by public sector agencies and stakeholders, delivering vital services during crises and building trust and confidence when most needed. The agency's complex workforce model, with a small proportion of paid staff and a heavy reliance on volunteers, is unique in the public sector. Reliance on this discretionary effort presents risks for the agency's future workforce capability and state finances.

This Agency Capability Review explores the potential for the agency to strengthen its leadership role to deliver an integrated approach to emergency management and enhance sector capability and efficiency. It also explores the future of the agency's workforce model, its reliance on volunteers, and the importance of having a workforce plan that responds to declining volunteer numbers.

## About the Agency Capability Review Program

The Agency Capability Review Program takes a comprehensive whole of sector approach to improvement. It sets standards based on a clear understanding of what constitutes a high performing public sector agency in Western Australia.

The program was trialled over 2 years (2021-22 and 2022-23) in 8 government agencies before being made a permanent function of the Public Sector Commission in July 2023. Reviews provide valuable insight into how agencies can improve and deliver the quality of services expected of them. Reviews also contribute to the development and improvement of the sector.

Reviews are conducted by independent lead reviewers who have public administration expertise and experience. Lead reviewers are supported by senior executives from the government sector who are co-opted for each review as well as the Agency Capability Review team at the Commission.

Each review is conducted against a standardised [Agency Capability Framework](#) of the 5 most significant areas of public sector management and administration. The framework is relevant and applicable to all agencies regardless of remit, purpose, functions and services.

The framework supports agencies to ask 4 key questions:

- What are we meant to achieve?
- How well are we currently doing it?
- How do we know?
- Where can we do better?

## Agency background

The agency was established on 1 November 2012 following a recommendation from the [Perth Hills Bushfire Review](#) to transition from the Fire and Emergency Services Authority.

The agency is led by Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner Darren Klemm AFSM who was appointed in September 2017. He is supported by 4 executive leaders and the Chief Finance Officer.

The agency's structure is:

- Office of the Commissioner
- Operations
- Strategy and Emergency Management
- Corporate Services
- Rural Fire Division.

The Rural Fire Division was established in response to the [Special Inquiry into the January 2016 Waroona Fire](#). The Office of Bushfire Risk Management and Office of Emergency Management were incorporated into the agency in 2018.

The agency delivers services through the following career and volunteer services:

- Career Fire and Rescue Service
- Bush Fire Service
- Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service
- Volunteer Fire and Emergency Service
- State Emergency Service
- Volunteer Marine Rescue WA.

While the agency is a prescribed Hazard Management Agency for fire, and in some instances is the controlling agency for bushfire, individual local governments are responsible for the volunteers in their bushfire brigades.

More than 95% of the agency's emergency services personnel are volunteers. Outside the Perth metropolitan area only 4 towns have 24/7 career firefighter workforces. The rest of the state is serviced by volunteers.

## Ministers

The agency reports to the Hon Stephen Dawson MLC, Minister for Emergency Services, also holding the Innovation and the Digital Economy; Science; Medical Research portfolios and Minister Assisting the Minister for State and Industry Development, Jobs and Trade.

## Boards and/or committees

The agency does not have responsibility or reporting requirements for statutory boards but Commissioner Klemm is President of the National Council for Fire and Emergency Services in Australia and New Zealand. The council supports both countries' emergency services sector to create safer, more resilient communities and drive national consistency through collaboration, innovation and partnerships.

The State Emergency Management Committee (SEMC) is the peak emergency management body in WA. It approves the state's emergency management framework and coordination structure through management of the *Emergency Management Act 2005* which assigns the Commissioner of Police to hold the office of the State Emergency Coordinator. The agency supports the SEMC, its subcommittees and reference groups to manage the state's emergency management framework.

## Future operating environment

The frequency, intensity and impact of natural disasters have increased in WA over the past decade. Recent natural hazards such as severe tropical cyclone Seroja and flooding in the Kimberley show that major climate events are no longer unprecedented. [Climate change projections](#) indicate this trend continuing, resulting in higher likelihood and consequences of catastrophic risk events leading to significant disruption according to the [Bureau of Meteorology](#).

There has been an increase in extreme fire and weather since the 1950s and by 2050 WA can expect longer fire seasons with an anticipated 40% increase in very high fire danger days. A greater proportion of tropical cyclones is projected to be of high intensity, with larger variations from year to year despite a projection of fewer occurrences. These trends are likely to lead to greater community expectations to prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover from major emergencies.

The increasing number and scale of natural disasters is amplifying the importance of an effective recovery function for WA. A significant component of the agency's remit is to coordinate recovery operations and set policy and guidelines including administering recovery funding for the state. Local governments are responsible for coordinating initial recovery efforts although many do not have the capability or resources to do so effectively.

Evolving technologies have brought new hazards that the agency needs to plan for. There has been a significant increase in fires related to lithium-ion batteries contained in many modern portable devices including phones, tablets, power banks, computers and toys as well as electric vehicles, bikes and scooters.



Decarbonisation and the transition to alternative fuels in the shipping industry bring new hazards. Maritime spillages require a coordinated hazardous materials response, and the need to store alternative fuels on shore poses new risks to surrounding communities.

Emergencies are evolving beyond traditional fires, floods and natural disasters to include unpredictable threats. Cyber disruptions, whether caused by malicious actors or accidents like the recent CrowdStrike event, can lead to significant disturbances. The state will increasingly rely on the agency to prepare emergency management agencies to lead coordinated responses to digital disruptions and other new threats.

## The review process

The review was undertaken by Carmel McGregor PSM as the independent lead reviewer with support from James Jegasothy as senior reviewer co-opted from the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries.

Carmel is an Adjunct Professor at the University of Canberra and a private consultant. She has previously held positions of Vice President of the Institute of Public Administration Australia, Chair of the Australian Human Resources Institute Public Sector Advisory Council and Deputy Australian Public Service Commissioner.

Carmel led a review of the Victorian Leadership Development Centre for the Victorian Public Service in 2016 and an independent review of the WA Public Sector Commission in 2018.

She has led the reviews of the [Department of Finance and Department of Communities](#) for the Agency Capability Review Program and reviewed the Department of Veterans' Affairs for the Australian Public Service Commission.

The review looked at all 21 capabilities and identified 2 lines of inquiry for in-depth investigation. This involved further engagement and investigation with the agency, and research into how practices may be improved and capability gaps addressed.

The review also identified areas of strength that the agency and sector can build on and share.

The process involved 6 months of exploration, research and collection of information:

- A comprehensive review was undertaken of a large number of published and unpublished documents.
- 52 external stakeholder meetings were held and submissions received.
- A corporate executive self assessment was conducted against the framework.
- A full day corporate executive workshop was held.
- Interviews were conducted with each corporate executive member.
- Meetings and workshops were held with staff, management tiers and internal committees.
- A comprehensive capability questionnaire was used to gauge staff perceptions of the agency's capabilities.
- Staff were invited to share what the agency does well, what can be improved and ideas for improvement through a 'Have Your Say' tool.

## Key observations

- The agency performs a critical role protecting the WA community during disasters and emergency incidents. The agency and its leaders are well regarded by public sector agencies and stakeholders, delivering vital services during crises and building trust and confidence when most needed. The leadership group has strong relationships with other public sector leaders and jurisdictions, helping it secure resources for WA during emergencies and improve local responses.
- Operating 24/7 on land, in the air and at sea, the agency handles emergency responses for 8 of 28 prescribed hazards where it excels at swift decision making and proactive leadership. It also has a role in building the state's capability to prepare for, prevent and recover from all 28 hazards. Despite the agency's increased focus on this broader role, more needs to be done especially with the rise in the number and scale of natural disasters and emergencies across the state.
- There is some confusion around roles and responsibilities assigned to agencies when they respond to emergencies despite there being a State Emergency Management Framework. While the State Emergency Management Committee has a vision of a coordinated response to emergencies by hazard management agencies, there is no one agency leading proactive forward planning. The agency is well placed to provide leadership, deliver an integrated approach to emergency management, and enhance sector capability and efficiency.
- New and unpredictable threats, including malicious and accidental cyber disruptions, see the state increasingly relying on the agency to lead coordinated responses to these incidents. The agency has the skills and expertise to proactively plan for potential impacts on WA.
- The agency has a complex workforce model with a small proportion of paid staff and a heavy reliance on volunteers. This is unique in the public sector. Reliance on volunteers means the agency depends on discretionary effort and availability which is a significant risk as there is uncertainty about workforce capacity at each event. This is compounded by a declining number of volunteers in the community due to an ageing population, rural depopulation, a growing preference for flexible commitments and increased work demands.
- The agency takes staff from corporate functions to work in operations centres and incident management teams during emergencies. Given the increase in emergency events, this is a more regular occurrence and an increasing risk to back office business as usual activities as well as critical forward planning, forecasting and day to day agency performance monitoring. Alternative models for staffing during emergencies should be considered.
- There is a disconnection between the agency's model of centralised control and its need to meet regional needs. This disconnection is reducing operational flexibility and impacting staff morale. The agency needs to reconsider where decision making occurs so service delivery can be improved, staff satisfaction enhanced and decisions brought closer to the regions affected.

- While systems and relationships support data collection to inform planning and preparedness for emergencies, the agency has insufficient capability to predict the impact of certain hazards such as those related to climate change. Predictive analysis capabilities should be prioritised to improve preparedness and response strategies.
- The agency is upgrading its financial system to enhance financial management and operational efficiency. However, there is still a large number of legacy systems and applications that are neither fit for purpose nor integrated. While the agency is working on digital transformation, defining clear deliverables and milestones would help track progress and ensure timely implementation.
- The agency has a comprehensive lessons management framework that systematically and consistently incorporates findings from evaluations and reviews into operational activities. This is an important mechanism to contribute to continuous improvement and alignment with strategic goals.

## Lines of inquiry

The review identified 2 lines of inquiry to inform areas of focus for the agency and direct performance improvement efforts.

### Line of inquiry 1: Leading emergency management in WA proactively

The agency's purpose is to achieve a safer WA by protecting the community before, during and after emergencies. The agency excels in swift decision making and responsive leadership during the emergencies it manages. As emergencies in WA continue to evolve, a cross sector and whole of government approach is essential. This line of inquiry explores how the agency can play a critical role in providing strategic leadership and guidance to all hazard management agencies to foster a unified approach to managing emergencies effectively.

The state's overarching [emergency management framework](#) comprises legislation, policy, plans, procedures, guidelines and a governance structure to effectively manage emergencies. The *Emergency Management Act 2005* and associated regulations define and prescribe hazards identified as the greatest risks to the state.

There are 4 aspects of emergency management – prevention, preparation, response and recovery – and there are 28 prescribed hazards. A 'hazard management agency' is responsible for overall emergency management of a prescribed hazard. A 'controlling agency' controls only the response activities to the specified types of hazards.

The SEMC is the peak emergency management body in WA and plays a central role in setting the strategic emergency policy framework for WA. The SEMC provides guidance for all phases of emergency management through its State Emergency Management Framework. The SEMC's vision for the future of emergency management in WA is to adopt a systemic approach to emergency risk management, focusing on the combined attributes of risk instead of on a hazard by hazard basis.

The agency is the hazard management agency for 8 prescribed hazards: fire, flood, cyclone, collapse, earthquake, HAZMAT, storm and tsunami. Other public sector agencies are hazard management agencies for the other 20 hazards.

There are other public sector agencies that are not hazard management agencies or controlling agencies but are designated combat agencies and support organisations. For example, the Department of Communities is the prescribed support organisation responsible for providing and coordinating welfare services for all 28 [prescribed hazards](#).

All local governments are required to prepare and maintain local emergency management arrangements, covering the emergency management aspects of prevention, preparation, response and recovery for their district. They must also have [a recovery plan and a local recovery coordinator](#).

As well as being the hazard management agency for its 8 hazards, the agency is involved to varying degrees in building the capability of the state to manage prevention of, preparation for and recovery from all 28 hazards.

While other agencies focus on responding to the prescribed hazards they are responsible for, the agency is seen as the expert in overall emergency management and providing valued guidance. No one agency has the mandate to lead proactive forward planning and provide overall guidance and leadership to hazard management or controlling agencies before or after they are required to respond to emergencies. The SEMC broadly has this function, however, emergency management in WA has matured past control by committee alone.

As a large number of agencies are involved across the state in all 4 aspects of emergency management, it would be beneficial for a consistent and comprehensive emergency management approach to be adopted sectorwide. There is an opportunity to establish the agency as the state's premier agency for emergency management leadership and learning.

While roles and responsibilities of emergency management agencies are defined in the State Emergency Management Framework, stakeholders and post incident evaluations have identified that in practice there is confusion around roles and responsibilities during emergency incidents. To bridge this gap, the agency is well placed to take a leadership role and support the strategic vision of the SEMC.

A sector leadership role would not replace or duplicate the functions of the SEMC, the State Emergency Coordinator role prescribed to the Commissioner of Police or any other roles set out in the state emergency management framework.

During the recovery phase of an eligible disaster, the agency administers the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements WA (DRFAWA), a joint initiative between the Australian and WA Governments. The agency works with applicants to guide their submission of evidence to demonstrate eligibility for DRFAWA funding. The agency submits evidence to the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and is reimbursed if approved. This process is complex and challenging for applicants who deal with these matters intermittently and reimbursements can be rejected either by the agency or later by NEMA. During this process, the financial risk



that the reimbursement is rejected first sits with the applicant and then the WA Government.

The agency acknowledges the complexity of the DRFAWA process and is committed to continue supporting recovery funding across WA. Given its expertise and strong relationships in this area, the agency could play a more coordinating role to ensure WA's collective interests are better served.

## **Line of inquiry 2: Strengthening the emergency workforce and volunteer network**

For the sustainability and effectiveness of its operations, the agency needs to adopt a strategic approach to managing its workforce with a model that enables emergency response as well as continued business functions. Volunteers are an essential feature of the workforce and the agency must balance increasing demand for its services with declining volunteer numbers. This line of inquiry explores how the agency can engage its workforce through training, diversity, supporting volunteers and improving regional service delivery.

### *State duty rosters, pre-formed teams and operational response*

The increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters is posing unprecedented challenges to all emergency management agencies. For this agency, these challenges are compounded by an operating model which limits the backfilling of corporate staff positions when these staff are called up from the state duty rosters and deployed in the State Operations Centre and other locations.

State duty rosters are a system of rolling rosters that draw appropriately qualified staff to cover shift rotations in the state, regional and metropolitan operations centres and pre-formed incident management teams.

Central office staff called up to operations centres or pre-formed incident management teams are not backfilled and this reduces the agency's capacity to plan and deliver business as usual, project and improvement work. Local offices often struggle to backfill senior officers who are compulsorily on the roster, compounding delays on important work progressing. When paired with a lack of delegation down the chain of command, the state duty rosters mean that as senior leaders are deployed the decision making pipeline is impacted.

### *Decision making and capability*

Giving decision making authority to the agency's leaders is necessary to foster a culture of innovation and continuous improvement. Given the dispersed nature of the workforce, there are many staff in leadership and supervisory roles without decision making authority to solve local problems.

Local leaders understand regional issues better. Delegating to them appropriate authority would allow regional services to promptly and efficiently address their unique challenges, improving overall service delivery and enhancing staff satisfaction.

Effective consultation and communication are fundamental to successful policy implementation and resource allocation. The agency's approach to rolling out new

ideas, policies and resources has at times lacked adequate consultation with operational staff.

Without adequate consultation, new policies may overlook critical operational challenges and fail to leverage the expertise and insights of frontline staff. Policies can therefore be difficult to implement or do not resonate and respond to local community needs.

### *Training and skills development*

The agency faces challenges in training, skills development and succession planning which are critical for a capable workforce. A common issue is the process for recognising nationally accredited training attained in other jurisdictions and industries. The lengthy and complex process for recognising prior learning sometimes fails to result in full qualifications, leading to underused workforce capabilities and financial implications.

Training issues are more pronounced for volunteers in regional areas. Experienced volunteers want advanced training. Lack of online training, centralised training and limited availability of in-person training in regional areas impacts their access to skills enhancement in a geographically dispersed volunteer workforce.

Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive strategy that aligns training requirements with national standards, streamlines the recognition of prior learning, and improves training and support for District and Area Officers.

### *Diversity*

The Career Fire and Rescue Service faces hurdles promoting diversity in its ranks. The agency needs to embrace a broad cultural and communications strategy to work in concert with existing diversity drives to ensure the benefits of a diverse workforce are understood and embraced by all members of the service.

The agency made history in 2023 by appointing its first female deputy and assistant commissioners. It also graduated the most diverse trainee firefighter class ever. These are landmark achievements and significant steps forward for equity in emergency services.

### *Volunteer workforce*

The agency has developed a new and well structured plan which captures the permanent workforce context and challenges. While the agency has the Volunteer Sustainability Strategy 2023-2026 and corresponding action plan, incorporating the strategy into the whole of agency strategic workforce plan could help build a complete strategy for the future.

With approximately 26,000 of its 28,000 workers being volunteers, the agency depends on volunteers to deliver services especially in regional areas. To maintain an effective volunteer service, the agency must continue adopting a strategic approach that includes prioritising volunteer recruitment, retention and satisfaction to address the needs of remote and underserved regions.

Volunteering numbers in Australia are declining due to changing work and family dynamics, an ageing population, rural depopulation and a preference for flexible

commitments. This decline poses a threat to organisations like emergency services that rely on volunteers.

Only 4 regional towns have a 24 hour career fire and rescue service. Elsewhere the response is provided by volunteers. This is concerning given the increasing frequency and severity of emergencies due to climate change and population growth. Volunteers provide their time and skills without financial compensation, reducing the need for paid staff. If volunteer numbers continue to decline, paid staff will be needed to fill the gaps and lead to higher operational costs.

The agency needs to develop strategies for volunteers to feel valued and respected. Recognition programs are not enough on their own. Regular communications, feedback and opportunities for professional development are needed.

The vast geography of WA requires different types of equipment. Volunteers want to be involved in selecting some equipment and have visibility over rollout timeframes. While there are common equipment needs, allowance for limited bespoke procurement would help cater for specific local requirements.

#### *Regional service delivery*

Given the dispersed nature of the agency's business, harnessing the wisdom and experience of on the ground local expertise is critical. Currently this seems to be limited although there is an appetite locally for greater engagement and contribution to the problems facing local regions.

Targeted service contracts with regional businesses could improve service delivery in prevention, mitigation, maintenance and cleaning. Supporting regional businesses could stimulate local economies, foster community ties and enhance regional capability.

## Areas of strength

Highlighting and sharing areas of good practice are important elements of the Agency Capability Review Program.

Sharing good practice contributes to the development of the WA public sector. The body of knowledge and data collected through reviews will be used to create a bank of valuable learnings and resources which can be used to develop solutions to common problems and shared across the public sector.

The following 3 are examples of where the agency has demonstrated areas of strength that can contribute to learnings for other agencies:

### Area of strength 1: Karla Katitjin Bushfire Centre of Excellence

The Karla Katitjin Bushfire Centre of Excellence is a knowledge hub and leading provider of training and research in bushfire prevention and management located on the ancestral home of the Bindjareb people whose language is Nyungar. The name Karla Katitjin means 'fire knowledge' and symbolises learning in a way that brings understanding.

The centre's development took a co-design and community centred approach, genuinely engaging the bushfire sector and local community. Selecting Pinjarra brought some challenges as it was the location of the tragic massacre of Bindjareb Nyungar people on 28 October 1834. While the massacre site is some 15 kilometres from Karla Katitjin, the planning team engaged with the Bindjareb community very early in the site selection process.

Karla Katitjin respects the natural environment and local Aboriginal culture and traditions, evident throughout the building's design, landscaping and artwork.

Visitors are welcomed by a static Welcome to Country from Karrie Anne Kearing Salmon, Traditional Owner of Bindjareb Nyungar Boodja, at the entrance.

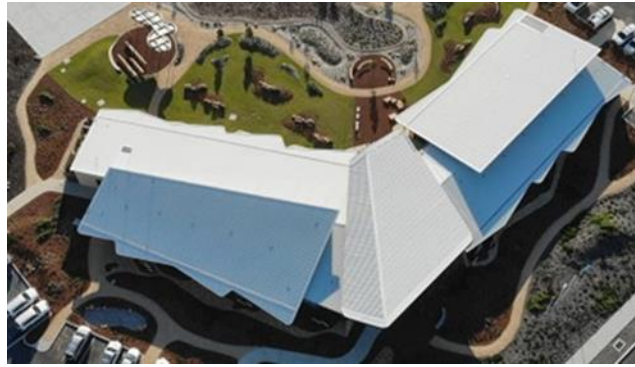
Cultural burn considerations summarised as 'right people, right time, right way' ensures cultural burning knowledge stays relevant to WA's changing landscape.

For Bindjareb and Nyungar people, freshwater rivers are spirit homes for Ancestors and the Waugul. Karla Katitjin includes a traditional water blessing stone feature at its entrance, allowing visitors to connect with Ancestors and spirit beings.

Karla Katitjin supports the Bindjareb community by helping manage their reserve with annual maintenance activities like weed control, firebreak maintenance and fire management plan. In exchange, Karla Katitjin uses the area for training programs for first nations rangers, volunteers and career firefighters.



Achieving the right design was crucial for supporting cultural fire practices. The final building design includes an entrance foyer, administration and training spaces all connected in the shape of a boomerang.



As the first of its kind in Australia, Karla Katitjin should by no means be the last. Establishing productive and respectful relationships with local Aboriginal people and effective fire management are issues which continue to plague Australia. The co-design model could inspire other agencies to develop facilities respectful of Aboriginal heritage and knowledge. Karla Katitjin continues to share the best bushfire management and research practices globally.

### **Area of strength 2: Clear, engaging and lifesaving communications**

The agency delivers high quality community communications to keep Western Australians and their properties safe. Well defined principles and processes are used for clear and consistent messaging that considers the context of each message, whether during an emergency or a non-incident period.

A cornerstone of the communications strategy is the Emergency WA platform which publishes warnings and alerts during emergencies. This platform includes guidance to those potentially affected, with messaging constantly reviewed and tailored to specific incidents.

For messaging during an emergency, the agency adheres to the principle: what does it want people to know and what does it want people to do. By keeping to this principle, messages are relatable for the intended audiences and tailored to the circumstances.

Beyond Emergency WA, the agency uses a variety of communications channels – including email, text and social media – each tailored to the audience and channel. The agency has a good engagement record with social media, one of the highest among public sector agencies in WA.

The agency invests in developing engaging non-incident related posts so when there is an emergency there is more engagement and messages are seen by as many people as possible. By using social media trends and an engaging feel with the messaging, engagement does not dip when there are no incidents.

Messaging is flexible and agile, using as many channels as possible. In significant emergencies, all channels are used to reach the widest audience. As the agency operates 24/7 so does its communications. Staff respond with quick, tailored messages at any time of the day or night using a standardised process. This comprehensive and adaptive approach to communication underscores why the agency's external communications are highly regarded and effective.



### **Area of strength 3: Collaborating to support emergency management**

The agency is highly regarded for its collaborative approach and unwavering support to other agencies. Its leadership and support of the SEMC and other public sector agencies are widely appreciated.

Agencies commend its effective coordination and clear communications during emergencies. Its leadership and support during crises are crucial, providing expert advice and resources which help agencies navigate complex situations with confidence. The agency's role in recovery phases is also particularly valued as is its commitment to training and emergency management planning to enhance the preparedness of other agencies.

Agencies value joint training and exercises conducted with the agency as they enhance their preparedness and build strong relationships and mutual trust. Sessions have been incredibly beneficial and have helped agencies understand each other's processes and improve coordinated responses during emergencies. Increasing the frequency of joint training could further strengthen these benefits.

The agency's leadership in recovery efforts is deeply appreciated by various agencies. Its involvement in recovery planning and the ability to mobilise resources quickly are highly valued as they help communities rebuild and recover more effectively, demonstrating a commitment to long term resilience. Efforts in building resilience and preparedness ensure infrastructure and services are restored as quickly as possible.



We are proud to deliver our services from Whadjuk Noongar boodja. We acknowledge and pay respects to Elders, Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Western Australia and their continuing connection to land, sky, waters and community.

Copies are available in different formats on request.

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