

# Report summary

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Delivering safe drinking water to our taps is a complex process. It requires well-maintained infrastructure (including treatment plants, filters, and pipes), skilled operators, and constant monitoring.

This audit examines how effectively 4 regional and remote councils supply safe drinking water to their communities. It also examines how the Department of Local Government, Water and Volunteers (the department) regulates drinking water quality across the state.

## Providing safe drinking water

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In regional Queensland, councils are mostly responsible for providing drinking water to their communities.

The 4 councils we audited had water quality management plans, but 3 of them were found to be non-compliant with their plans. Independent audits found issues with monitoring programs, maintenance and inspection activities, record keeping, and reporting water incidents to the regulator. Two of the councils we audited had tested their emergency response plans for responding to high-risk events, such as natural disasters and equipment failure. The other 2 had not.

The 4 councils had measures in place to reduce the risks to the quality of their drinking water. But some of these risks are still higher than the councils would like, creating potential for a hazard to occur. Two councils have had improvement actions for high-risk areas 'pending' for up to 4 years. These pending improvements are a mix of items like maintenance, training, standard operating procedures, and larger infrastructure upgrades. These 2 councils could improve their oversight of these risks, improvement actions, and the recommendations identified by independent audits.

Those charged with governance must be satisfied the council has implemented their management plans and is performing the activities to keep their communities safe. Improved longer-term planning would enable councils to ensure access to a capable workforce and to better manage their infrastructure needs.

## Regulating drinking water quality

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The department is the main regulator for drinking water. It registers water service providers (which are mostly councils in regional Queensland), approves their management plans, and monitors their compliance, along with delivering support and education to councils.

The department's regulatory program involves assessing council risk and planning, conducting its monitoring and enforcement activities, and reporting on compliance. It also monitors and responds to water incidents reported by councils. The department is yet to effectively balance its need to respond to incidents, to fully deliver its compliance program, and to be timely with reviewing independent audits and councils' annual reports. It has started workforce planning to enable it to better staff these activities and to assist in identifying and addressing potential problems earlier.

The department is aware of the challenges and associated risks many councils face. It has started projects to improve council capability and identify infrastructure needs. However, it had not formalised how it would collaborate with other agencies and across councils. On 1 November 2024, the government redistributed the water regulation and local government functions into the Department of Local Government, Water and Volunteers. This change provides an opportunity for these 2 functions to work more closely together to help coordinate and prioritise resourcing and infrastructure planning.

The department's guidelines for managing drinking water align with the *Australian Drinking Water Guidelines*. However, the department has not mandated the health-based targets in these guidelines due to the potential costs and the issues some councils are facing with infrastructure and staffing. Some larger councils, who have the necessary resources, are voluntarily adopting these targets, as there are many benefits to doing so.

