Strengthening Australia's Reform 'Muscle' via Social Licence to Operate: Evidence and Practice

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Strengthening Australia's Reform 'Muscle' Via Social Licence to Operate: Evidence & Practice

State of Evidence:
Final Report
(Part 2)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Australian policymaking is at an inflection point. Years of policy gridlock, combined with complex policy needs and politicisation of reform make major reforms infrequent and challenging. As years pass with no or very limited major reforms, pundits, policymakers and scholars question whether Australia is losing its reform muscle.

This research addresses concerns about the inadequate delivery of major policy reform by Australian governments in recent times and our capacity to navigate emerging and complex challenges. This study is the first of its kind to apply the "social licence to operate" (SLO) concept to analyse social enablers and barriers to policy reform and public service capability that contributes to the "reform muscle" required to sustain a social licence for reform.

The SLO concept is today widely used and provides a strong analytical foundation that is identifiable and assessable, although its meaning remains contested. SLO is defined here as the level of acceptance of a policy or initiative within a defined community. This report (Part 2) draws on an initial literature review (Part 1) that analysed international use of the SLO concept in relation to policy. It also draws on seven case studies of policy reform in Australia commissioned for this project from Australian policy experts.

The literature review (Part 1) produced an SLO framework used in the case studies to analyse policy reform with three components:

1. The key framings of SLO used in policy (e.g. trust, acceptance, legitimacy and credibility)
2. Six actions that governments commonly take to build SLO (e.g. participatory processes, advisory bodies)
3. Fifteen factors that influence SLO and the success of reform (e.g. politicisation of reform, use of mass and social media).

The case studies showed that **the concept of acceptance is multi-faceted when applied to policy**. A given reform may involve multiple social licences with potentially competing priorities. Forms of acceptance identified were: Political acceptance of the need for reform (political licence); community acceptance of the need for reform (social licence); and acceptance of specific reform options and their consequences such as financial cost or loss of local amenity.

The main challenges to achieving social licence identified in the research are:
1. Politicisation of decision-making which contributes to a loss of trust in government.
2. The rise of disinformation which is commonly triggered by policy debate and destabilises democratic processes.
3. Reform in response to crisis where participation, transparency and/or evidence are sidelined and government legitimacy is compromised.
4. Sustaining conflicting 'licences' (e.g. appropriate disability support vs reduced expenditure on disability support).
5. Actual or perceived lack of fairness in distribution of benefits or burdens associated with reform.

Actions with demonstrated success (with action numbers corresponding to challenge numbers):
1. Building community acceptance of reform via consistent messaging over the policy cycle that incrementally socialises reform options.
2. Collaboration across agencies to share resources, coordinate actions and normalise reform. Transparent reliance on credible knowledge to inform policy (e.g. via expert advisory groups).
3. Bureaucratic capacity to develop a suite of response options underpinned by evidence and understood by communities and have this available when crises occur.
4. Participatory processes involving key stakeholders at appropriate points in the policy cycle matched with transparent mechanisms for incorporating community input in policy.
5. Communication and engagement in collaboration with credible and trusted third parties. Consideration of fairness in terms of outcomes, processes, and recognition of difference.

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Capacity and Capability required in the public service to build reform muscle and sustain social licences:

1. Commitment to a workforce that has the time and skills to understand and work genuinely with communities to translate their knowledge into reform processes.
2. Professional development in relation to disinformation response as a specific skillset.
3. Communication expertise within agencies that can tailor communications to support clear information sharing and multiple social licences.
4. The knowledge and skills to assess the appropriate actions required to sustain SLO including when it is appropriate for government to act without a social licence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Australian policymaking is at an inflection point. Years of policy gridlock, combined with complex policy needs and politicisation of reform make major reforms infrequent and challenging. As years pass with no or very limited major reforms, pundits, policymakers and scholars question whether Australia is losing its reform muscle. Recent international and national crises have demonstrated that despite anti-government rhetoric and a decline in political trust, citizens expect governments to deal with or avoid crises.[1] This research was motivated by concerns about inadequate delivery of major policy reform by governments in Australia and our capacity to navigate emerging and complex challenges, including climate change and entrenched disadvantage[2]. One contributor to policy stasis is thought to be public opinion[2] which has a well-established influence on public policy.[3] What is less clear is why the influence of public opinion has become stronger in Australia since the major reforms of the 1980s and 1990s.[2]

This study is the first of its kind to comprehensively investigate and apply a "social licence to operate" (SLO) framework to improve understanding of the social drivers of policy reform. At the same time, we seek to identify public service capabilities that contribute to the "reform muscle" required to sustain a social licence for policy reform. **SLO is defined as the level of acceptance of a policy or initiative within a defined community**, for the purposes of this project and report (see, Part 1 of this Report for a comprehensive background on SLO[4]). Recent research into the scale at which social licences operate suggests they originate at a local community scale.[5] The implication for policy is that mandates for reform will not necessarily trickle down. Direct application of the SLO term in international policy scholarship is limited.[4] Application of SLO to the public sector suggests that rather than having a "mandate" via the electoral process, governments govern "via persuasion"[6] where they need to continually make the case for reform to different communities, stakeholders or publics. SLO may be particularly relevant when reforms are contentious or risk dividing communities.[7]

The research questions addressed were:

1. How is SLO defined, understood and operationalised among central and diverse policy actors in Australia? [Section 2]

2. What key lessons can be learned from successful outcomes-oriented major reform, applying a SLO lens? [Section 3]

3. What are the most promising strategies and approaches for strengthening and sustaining social licence for major policy reform? [Section 4]

This report synthesises the findings from a literature review on social licence for policy reform (Part 1) and seven case studies commissioned from policy experts. Complete case studies are referenced throughout, including highlighted snippets in sidebars. We recommend those with an interest in particular policy sectors or strategies for building SLO and policy reform capacity refer to this primary material available on the ANZSOG website.

[1] Dassonneville and McAllister 2021; Lindquist et al. 2011.
[2] ANZSOG 2019; Daley 2021.
[3] Burstein (2003)
[4] O'Connor et al. (2025)
[5] Lesser et al. (2023)
[6] Murphy-Gregory (2018)
[7] Boutilier (2021)

Method

We began the research by conducting a scoping review of social licence scholarship to investigate if or how it has been applied to policy reform. The review examined how SLO for policy reform is currently defined and explained in the academic literature, including the preconditions for SLO based on procedural fairness (i.e., to establish key SLO criteria of legitimacy, credibility and trust) and context (e.g., community, geography, policy sector, politics). Our SLO Framework incorporated current terminology and framings from both policy practice and the SLO academic literature.

The SLO Framework had three key components (see, Appendix 1 for details):

1. **Key proxies or components of a social licence that governments may be aiming to achieve** (e.g., acceptance, trust, etc)
2. **Recognised actions that governments take to build and sustain social licence** (e.g., participatory processes, appointment of advisory bodies, etc)
3. **Key factors influencing the success of reform**, including both internal (i.e., within the control of governments, such as transparency of processes), and external (i.e., largely outside government control, such as crises, etc.).

Importantly, the review established a SLO Framework which shaped the structure and focus of a series of commissioned case studies of reform. Application of the framework allowed us to generate a diverse but complementary series of contemporary case studies that explore SLO for major policy reform. The case studies were written by experts in different policy domains and were designed to deepen understanding of the strategies and characteristics of successful major policy reform and how these relate to capacity or reform muscle and SLO.

Scope of case studies

Commissioned case studies aimed to draw upon a range of existing expertise (particularly within the ANU Crawford School of Public Policy) to analyse contemporary policy reform using a social licence lens. The criteria for case inclusion were a balance between ANZSOG research interests and diversity of reform to draw out contextual differences. They included:

- Reform for significant outcome(s) relating to the priority policy challenge(s) identified by ANZSOG
- Cross-government, cross-agency, cross-jurisdiction and/or multi-level coordination
- A variety of stages of policy development represented from agenda setting to implementation
- Diverse examples (e.g., policy areas, locations, etc.) to show how reform works in different contexts
- Different degrees of policy complexity (e.g., to explore the role of incrementalism in SLO)
- Potential to draw out practicable conclusions.

The final suite of case studies and authors is in Table 1. We provided case authors with a standard set of guidelines for applying the SLO framework with the intent of standardising the level of case detail. We suggested they select up to three of the most critical aims, actions and factors influencing reform. The scope of cases is summarised in Appendix 2. The most commonly discussed elements of the SLO Framework, such as aiming to build trust, employing participatory processes, and the presence of crises as a factor influencing reform success, are discussed first and in most detail in Sections 2 and 3.

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Table 1: SLO and Policy Reform Case Studies that have informed this report

Case Study Title	Authors
Building social licence for contentious policy debates: Local governments and the Australia Day controversy	Mark Chou and Rachel Busbridge
Social licence for a net zero Australia: grappling with decarbonisation of the electricity system	Bec Colvin
Building social licence for monetary policy implementation: public views of the Reserve Bank's credibility	Thuy Hang Duong
Advancing a reform agenda for nature-based flood mitigation	Hayley Henderson, Jason Alexandra, Ana Cordova and Roslyn Prinsley
Urban water sustainability in Greater Sydney	Ruth O'Connor and Jason Alexandra
Disinformation and social licence to operate	Ika Trijsburg
Building a sustainable National Disability Insurance Scheme: Contention, compromise and course correction	Sophie Yates and Sue Olney

2. SOCIAL LICENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF MAJOR POLICY REFORM

This section of the report discusses how SLO is defined, understood and operationalised by diverse policy actors in Australia.

Direct use of the term "a **social licence to operate**" is limited in the scholarly discourse on policy.[8] Both the literature review and case studies (Table 2) demonstrate, however, that all levels of Australian government are interested in reforms being accepted or supported. Without such **acceptance** of reform there can be lack of compliance and even sabotage.[9] Applying the SLO Framework to interpreting reform processes illustrates that acceptance has **multiple components** and it is important for governments to consider **what they are seeking acceptance of and from whom.** This allows them to better assess appropriate citizen-facing activities from communications strategies to initiating advisory groups.

The case studies highlight **the multidimensional nature of acceptance.** In the Urban Water Sustainability case, for example, Sydney Water must build acceptance on several fronts fairly consistently among the community to achieve sustainability: the case for reform, new water supply options such as recycled water, the costs of reform (and who should pay), and the benefits of behaviour change (e.g., reduced consumption lowering both household bills and creating environmental benefits).[10] The impacts and benefits are similar among all Sydney residents, representing **a single social licence.** In this example, where the Sydney community withholds a social licence for technologies like purified recycled water, a **political licence** also comes into play. The political licence is both a mandate for government to govern and also an approval, support or authority granted by government for an organisation to undertake a particular policy or activity.[11] In this case, a withheld social licence may influence the political licence by introducing political risks or voter backlash against parties supporting purified recycled water. Both the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)[12] and Net Zero cases[13] illustrate **multiple and sometimes competing social licences** amongst communities. These cases illustrate how diverse licences are defined by **those who feel disadvantaged by reform** (e.g., taxpayers paying for a disability scheme they do not currently use; regional communities needing to host energy infrastructure that primarily benefit cities) and **those who benefit** (e.g., the disability community; people concerned about climate change).

While governments certainly need to consider acceptance of reform, a primary focus on acceptance may also risk poor or unfair policy outcomes, especially if reform benefits vested interests. Seeking acceptance without transparency can also risk loss of trust if the public suspects governments are not acting in their best interests.[14] The OECD Report on 'Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions in Australia', for instance, suggests that there are persistent and, in some cases, widening disparities in trust in public agencies among certain population groups in Australia (e.g., those who feel represented and those who do not). This disparity highlights ongoing challenges in long-term governance, despite some areas of generalised strong confidence (e.g., emergency response, essential services)[15].

Trust, legitimacy and credibility were the most frequently cited components of a social licence for policy reform in the literature.[8] Building **trust** was also a common aim in reform processes described

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8 O'Connor et al. (2025).
9 Chen and Roberts 2024; Marshal and Lobry De Bruyn 2019.
10 O'Connor and Alexandra (2025).
11 Bice et al. 2017
12 Yates and Olney (2025).
13 Colvin (2025).
14 Houston and Harding (2013).
15 OECD (2025).

in the case studies (Table 2). Trust is a widely used but complex term and in a policy context is primarily related to the institutions undertaking reform and the processes they employ[16].Trust in government may be seen as a panacea for policy reform but an "optimal trust gap" must balance efficiency with blind faith or a lack of engagement by citizens leading to uncritical commitment to suboptimal actions[17]. In relation to policy reform, "trust refers to a willingness to rely on others to act on our behalf based on the belief that they possess the capacity to make effective decisions and take our interests into account"[18]. In other words, the two key components of trust are public belief that governments a) are **acting with integrity in the public interest** and b) have the **competence to deliver reform efficiently**.

The case studies demonstrated that trust is primarily sought in government institutions and their processes (Table 2). For example, the Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) case study demonstrated trust as vital to deliver currency stability, full employment, and economic prosperity and welfare. Public trust is vested in anti-inflationary policy, the accuracy of RBA forecasts, and its institutional integrity.[19] Trust in institutions requires trust that decision-making processes are in the public interest. The Flood Mitigation case discusses a positive link between procedural fairness and greater trust, including the important role of public participation and effective communication. Trust was also an important component of SLO for local government policy in the Australia Day case study.[20] Trust-building in this case took time and commitment which is likely a feature of building trust in institutions generally but particularly in this case with culturally sensitive and contested issues at the core of policy reform. In this case, trust depended on long-term relationship-building, consistency between governments' words and actions, and a willingness to listen. Symbolic gestures without substantive follow-through did more harm than good, and rushed efforts proved fraught, even when they were well-intentioned.

Disinformation emerged as an escalating threat to trust and a social licence for policy reform, as highlighted in the Disinformation case.[21] Disinformation is false information that is *deliberately* created to harm, mislead, or evoke an emotional response within a target audience. It is related but distinct to *mis*information, which is the spreading of false information, usually unwittingly and without malice. The capacity to generate mis- and disinformation has been accelerated by high rates of social media usage and the advent of artificial intelligence that make images easier and cheaper to create and disseminate. Disinformation impacts SLO at every stage of the policy cycle, from early agenda setting to policy development, endorsement and implementation. It operates by calling into question the validity of the democratic process and the integrity of individuals. While particular areas of reform may be more vulnerable to mis- and disinformation, for instance, the polarised domain of energy policy[22], the capacity and capability to respond to disinformation is a clear area requiring new reform muscle across the public sector.

The **legitimacy** of governments and reform was one of the most common components of SLO identified in the literature review.[23] Interestingly, government legitimacy was not commonly identified as a key goal in the cases (Table 2), although it was discussed in most of them. One explanation for this may be semantic. In the public sector, legitimacy can be broadly thought of as acceptance of the right to govern.[24]. While the term 'legitimacy' was used interchangeably with trust in the literature, trust may have been the preferred term in the case studies. It may also be assumed that elected

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[16] Kim and Oh (2008).
[17] Lacey et al. (2018).
[18] Houston and Harding (2013) p.55
[19] Duong (2025).
[20] Chou and Busbridge (2025).
[21] Trijsburg, I. (2025).
[22] Colvin (2025).
[23] O'Connor et al. (2025).
[24] Chen and Roberts 2024; Marshall and Lobry De Bruyn 2019.

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governments have legitimacy by virtue of the electoral process. Thus, 'taken-for-grantedness' results in legitimacy being a concept that is only *implicit* in the case studies.

Credibility was also less commonly explicit across the cases, although it was seen as critical for the RBA's SLO and also for the social licence of the NDIS with the disability community (Table 2). Credibility required decisions to be informed by sources of evidence deemed appropriate by the public, in both of these cases.

Table 2: Summary: How social licence for reform was framed and interpreted in the case studies. Source: Authors.

Case	Aims of government
Local governments and Australia Day	• Building **trust with communities,** especially First Nations. • **Cultural and political mandates:** the 'cultural licence' relating to Indigenous reconciliation can be jeopardised by political mandates, even if they are backed by majority support.
Net Zero Australia	• Public **acceptance** of the need for **reform**/renewables with less acceptance in regional areas. Also, acceptance of **specific projects.** • **Trust** in institutions to take action (public and private). • **Legitimacy** of reforms based on credible knowledge.
Reserve Bank (RBA) and monetary policy	• Maintain **credibility** (shapes inflation expectations). • Maintain **trust** in the Reserve Bank to do its job (stability of currency, employment, economic prosperity).
Nature-based flood mitigation	• Public **acceptance:** multiple licences with affected communities, property sector and state agencies. Tied to perceived benefits and perception of flood risks. • **Mandate** from QLD Commission of Inquiry for local government to apply best practice flood mitigation, including nature-based solutions. • **Consent** depends on who pays for infrastructure and who benefits.
Urban water sustainability	• **Community acceptance** of particular solutions, and also a need for change/reform. **Acceptance from regulator** of cost for change. • **Trust** in agency implementing policy reform.
Disinformation	• Impacts **trust** in institutions and information by exacerbating social fault lines using 'othering' rhetoric • Disinformation threatens **legitimacy** through discrediting leaders, and by extension the institutions they lead.
National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)	• **Trust** and **acceptance** of the **scheme** by people with disability. Trust in Federal government **having best interests of people** with disability at heart that was eroded during implementation. • **Acceptance** of the need for reform, and its cost ($45B for 2.6% of the population) • **Credibility** of decisions based on knowledge of people with lived experience.

Taken together, the literature review and case studies highlight several key aspects of **how SLO is defined, understood and operationalised among policy actors**:

- **Different reforms require different and possibly multiple licences**. Some reforms may involve a single broad "licence" across a community, while others involve multiple licences reflecting distinct stakeholders and potentially opposing agendas. Gaining political licence

may be difficult where withdrawal of a social licence can be exploited for political gain. Reform processes should map stakeholder groups to identify these different licences and anticipate tensions.

- **Trust is relevant to understanding social licence for policy reform**. Reform relies on a public belief that governments act with integrity, competence and in the public interest. Equity and fair distribution of costs and benefits is also important. Long-term relationship-building and credible processes, including public participation, are needed to build trust and legitimacy.

- **Disinformation is an escalating threat**. False or misleading information can erode social licence, raising the need for proactive, transparent communication, among other steps.

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3. SOCIAL LICENCE AND THE SUCCESS OF POLICY REFORM:

KEY LESSONS

This section of the report discusses the actions governments are currently employing to build and sustain SLO, and the key factors determining the success of these actions. For each action and factor we posit key lessons for policymakers and the nature of the reform muscle required for success.

3.1 How governments are currently building a social licence

Participatory processes

Various types of participatory process were the most commonly discussed mechanisms for building a social licence for policy reform in the literature review[25]. Similarly, involving communities and stakeholders at various stages of the policy cycle was a common action linked to achieving SLO across the case studies.

Engaging stakeholders and the public more broadly in policy reform is a common aim across all levels of government in Australia and is a legislative requirement for Councils. The Australia Day case describes how divisive debates required nuanced and iterative engagement. Building relationships and SLO required both understanding community sentiment and transparent processes for acting on that understanding.[26] As described in the Flood Mitigation case (e.g.1 sidebar), participation is partly about building relationships, trust and acceptance but can also be about eliciting information important to policy development and implementation. At the Federal level, an example of participation is the Reserve Bank of Australia's (RBA) Liaison Program targeting businesses, unions, community groups, and local agencies. The program facilitates input of valuable insights into real-time economic conditions.[27]

Key lessons:
- Public participation can generate acceptance when it involves **genuine listening** and **transparent processes for incorporating community input**.

- **Participation should not be viewed as a cure-all.** Tokenism can harm relationships and damage trust.

Definition: participatory processes
Where the public sector involves the public in policy or administrative reform. It includes consulting with key stakeholder groups to identify reform options, eliciting submissions on draft documents, E-government and online forums, and public face-to face. forums such as workshops and town hall meetings.

Example 1: flood mitigation
Ipswich City Council has given a high priority to participatory processes as a mechanism to incorporate local knowledge in policy reform, as well as increase acceptance of flood planning reforms. Community views have informed flood impact analysis and flood management plans. The Council webpage has live sections for public engagement, including community meetings on planning and strategic reviews. These processes also raise awareness of alternative flood mitigation options and allow Council to learn from community experiences. (see Henderson et al., 2025)

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[25] O'Connor et al. (2025).
[26] Chou and Busbridge (2025).
[27] Duong (2025).

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- The reform muscle required includes the time and commitment to **work genuinely with communities** and **translate local knowledge meaningfully** into reform processes. This requires deliberate attention to the policy context, particularly the key stakeholders' or rights-holders' capacity to work with these groups and deliver on promises.

Communication and public education

Communication (as distinct from participation) refers to one-way information flow including, mass media, public education about reform, static online platforms and publications. Governments seeking to gain a social licence communicate to provide information about reform, justify it and build trust through transparency.[28] Communicating with the public about policy reform is becoming more challenging with the increased capacity for messages to be distorted through disinformation that erodes public confidence.[29] For example, misinformation was a key issue impacting reform in the Net Zero case, where the suggested solution was for policymakers and proponents to counter with robust, balanced and credible information.[30]

In both the Urban Water Sustainability (e.g.2 sidebar) and the RBA cases, communication was a key action to achieve SLO. The communication and public education activities aimed to increase water and economic literacy, respectively. The RBA conduct outreach including school programs, public talks, workshops, conferences and online resources.[31] The premise in both cases is that when individuals clearly understand reform goals and constraints, they will accept the offered solutions.

However, whether improved literacy leads to acceptance of reform is an open question. A large body of research, particularly in relation to climate change, shows that better access to information and increased understanding of an issue do not necessarily change attitudes or behaviour. Values and beliefs, ideology, perceived benefits and other social factors are far stronger drivers.[32] Perceived benefits are linked to acceptance in nature-based solutions, for example[33]. Policy decisions are inherently political, involving values-based trade-offs between the economy and environment, for example.[34] Applying an SLO perspective suggests, therefore, that a focus on transparent processes rather than 'objective' communication is a sounder approach for acceptance of reform. Communicating reasons why reform is needed is also fundamental to building meaningful dialogue about reform.

The NDIS case illustrates the complexities of communicating to promote reform where multiple licences need to be maintained. In that case the Federal government used mass media to promote a reduction in growth of the NDIS scheme as a success because it reduced spending[35]. This might

> **Example 2: urban water sustainability**
> Sydney Water is adopting an incremental approach to build "water literacy" and have conversations about specific aspects of implementation as they plan new infrastructure. The focus is on building acceptance of a) the need for reform to underpin water security and b) specific supply options – particularly recycled water. They conduct regular and consistent messaging through social media, traditional media, and public relations as public attitudes change with climatic events such as drought. They also demonstrate transparency via a Discovery Centre where the public can see water purification in action.
> (see O'Connor & Alexandra, 2025)

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[28] O'Connor et al. (2025).
[29] Trijsburg (2025).
[30] Colvin (2025).
[31] Duong (2025).
[32] Moser and Dilling (2011).
[33] Sari et al. (2023).
[34] Nisbet and Scheufele (2009).
[35] Yates and Olney (2025).

have built a social licence with those calling for reduced spending but eroded trust of people with disability.

Key lessons:

- Information provision that creates **transparency** in decision-making can build community trust and capacity for dialogue about reform. But information-provision alone is unlikely to shift the reform dial. Reform must resonate with community values and beliefs.

- Where there are **conflicting policy objectives**, promoting reform can build a licence with one group while undermining it with another.

- Trust can be built through **consistent messaging** that **incrementally make the case for change and reform options.** This takes time across the policy cycle.

- The **reform muscle** required includes communication expertise that can **tailor communications to maintain multiple social licences**, and capacity to build **disinformation response** into communication strategies.

> **Definition: boundary-spanning**
> *Boundary-spanning is work to enable exchange of knowledge and information across sectors to support evidence-informed decision-making in a specific context. It can be done by individuals or institutions (boundary organisations).*

Boundary-spanning

Boundary-spanning by public servants and trusted 3rd parties was identified as a key mechanism to build SLO in four of the case studies. It results in greater access to knowledge and experience which can improve government efficiency and competence. In the Disinformation case, for example, local governments are working together to develop innovative solutions to address disinformation. This collaboration also provides a "heat shield" where reforms are normalised and become more widely acceptable.[36] The cases suggest horizontal boundary-spanning (across departments in one level of government) may be easier than vertical boundary spanning (between levels of government). For example, while the Australian government offers advanced capacities, structures and resources to support disinformation response, there is little collaboration with local government on this issue.[37]

Boundary spanning can also facilitate coordination of policy reform (e.g.3 sidebar) which may be particularly important where governance structures are complex. The RBA case suggests that such coordination can substantively improve reform across portfolios. It appears, at least from the cases informing this study, that coordinated and complementary reform demonstrates competence which may consequently increase public trust. Perceived competence is also directly linked to credibility, which is necessary to 'entry level' SLO.

> **Example 3: RBA monetary policy**
> The RBA has maintained operational independence while demonstrating effective boundary-spanning with Treasury, particularly during periods of economic stress. One mechanism used is embedding. The Secretary to the Treasury is an ex officio member of the Reserve Bank's Monetary Board. This strengthens monetary-fiscal policy alignment and resilience against adverse shocks. Boundary spanning between Treasury and the RBA also occurs through structured and regular high-level engagement, formalised information-sharing protocols, and the joint development of relevant analysis and research.
> (see Duong, 2025)

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[36] Trijsburg (2025).

Governments may also increase their credibility through boundary-spanning practice involving credible, trusted groups. For example, in the Net Zero case, Queensland and NSW peak agricultural bodies acted as boundary-spanners by providing information to rural communities about the energy transition.[37] This was successful given these organisations are trusted by farmers whilst speaking for a net zero transition, making their message more believable, trustworthy and, ultimately, credible.

Finally, there are instances when boundary-spanning becomes formalised through multi-organisational partnerships. Partnerships are formal mechanisms by which public servants work with key stakeholders on policy and administrative reform. They involve longer-term commitments by organisations and can take a variety of forms, including hybrid governance involving the state, private sector and civil society actors. Such partnerships are cornerstones of modern public service delivery.[38] Formalised partnerships tend to have more specified plans and processes (e.g., Accords, MOUs), with defined aims and monitored outputs. Parter organisations can pool resources and bolster legitimacy. For example, the Flood Mitigation case described how in the Bremer catchment (SE QLD), a three-year partnership between the Regional Natural Resource Management group, local councils and the ANU produced practical tools, methodologies and frameworks for assessing floodplain values and designing Nature-based solutions to flooding. In this case, a structured process of collaboration strengthened institutional relations, input legitimacy and trust.[39]

Key lessons:

- Boundary-spanning via individuals or structures such as partnerships can **build input legitimacy and trust**. It is currently less common across different levels of government.

- Boundary-spanning is **a mechanism to build reform muscle** by increasing access to resources and promoting and normalising innovation.

- Boundary-spanning can **improve coordination across agencies in complex areas of reform,** resulting in substantive improvement of reform and demonstrating competence (a core element of trust).

- The credibility of reform can be improved by **governments working with boundary-spanners who have existing credibility** among communities, as long as those actors maintain their independence.

Formal advisory entities

The use of formal advisory entities in policy reform featured more prominently in the literature reviewed than in the case studies. Advisory entities can constitute a form of participation when they involve people from outside of government directly impacted by reform (e.g.4 sidebar). They often serve as a source of information for reform through the elicitation of "expert" or "technical" advice, particularly in novel policy domains.[40] In terms of SLO, reliance on advisory groups can legitimise the policy reform process i.e., use if independent expert advice creates

Example 4: Australia Day
Councils have worked in different ways with First Nations advisory groups regarding their policy toward Australia Day activities. The City of Fremantle (WA) listened to the Walyalup Reconciliation Action Plan (WRAP) Working Group to replace Australia Day with the ultimately award-winning One Day in Fremantle event. In contrast, Greater Shepparton City Council (VIC), reinstated January 26 events without consulting key advisory groups, such as the Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation. First Nations leaders subsequently expressed a loss of trust in Council.
(see Chou & Busbridge, 2025)

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[37] Colvin (2025).
[38] Klindt et al.(2024).
[39] Henderson et al. (2025).
[40] O'Connor et al. (2025).

input legitimacy and potentially output legitimacy if a policy delivers stated benefits. Independent advisory entities can also build trust in the process, and the competence of those making decisions.

As with participatory processes, however, failure to adequately consider or adopt the recommendations of advisory groups can damage trust rather than build it (e.g.4 sidebar). Lack of transparent and well-understood processes to meaningfully and effectively link advisory groups to decision-making was described in the NDIS case. Here, despite a formal advisory group being convened as part of a national Independent Review, decisions on criteria for inclusion and exclusion to the Scheme that had not been canvassed were ultimately embedded in policy[41]. This influenced a loss of trust by those in the disability community towards the reform process, demonstrating that the formation of an advisory entity, in-and-of-itself, is insufficient to build a social licence if it cannot meaningfully inform policy.

Key lessons:

- Advisory groups can **build input legitimacy via credible knowledge to inform policy**.

- Advisory groups can be a **mechanism to build relationships and trust** via individual representatives and their connections to communities.

- To be an effective mechanism to build SLO **there must be transparent, well-understood processes** by which policy recommendations by advisory groups are considered.

- The reform muscle associated with advisory groups relates to **capacity to judge when such groups should be formed** and creating **processes by which their recommendations are considered**.

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[41] Yates and Olney (2025).

3.3 Internal factors determining acceptance of reform

In the literature review, we examined a suite of factors that may influence the social licence for policy reform. We split these broadly into two categories according to whether they related to actions of the government/ public service (internal) or were contextual factors outside of the direct influence of government (external)[42].

Public service capability

The capability of public servants was identified as an important factor in building a social licence for reform in both the literature review and the case studies. Bureaucrats can play an important role in resisting policy reform or championing for it and gaining high level political support.[41] Without their technical expertise and relational skills, reform muscle is weak. However, the importance of a skilled and dedicated workforce for policy reform can be easily overlooked, particularly when reform progresses smoothly. For example, it was not an explicit factor in the Urban Water Sustainability case in Sydney. Yet communication and participatory processes to build acceptance of reform are considered vital and this requires a dedicated and specialised team of communications professionals.[43] The importance of communication expertise to build a social licence was also explicit in the RBA case where a Review recommended establishing a new communications department to craft narratives around Board decisions accessible to a broad audience.[44]

Example 5: disinformation
Effective response to disinformation is key to policy reform with policy debate the most common prompt for targeted disinformation campaigns in cities. This starts with access to supports to promote psychosocial safety as disinformation can take the form of personal attacks. Public servants should also be offered professional development opportunities to understand and confidently enact appropriate responses: 1) General training to recognise disinformation, its drivers and harms 2) Discipline and location- specific training to respond to issues with specific communities and 3) Scenario- based training to collectively develop skills for evolving situations.
(see Trijsburg, 2025)

Specific skills and expertise to work competently and confidently in a particular policy domain requires appropriate resourcing to develop. For example, in the Net Zero case, new schemes to distribute benefits from renewable energy infrastructure require substantial resourcing of the public service, in terms of both capability and personnel.[45] Reform failure or paralysis linked to public service capability issues can reflect a lack of commitment to workforce development and resourcing. For example, implementation of the NDIS was hampered by difficulties participants had communicating with the agency and perceptions that staff lacked disability knowledge and training.[46] The emerging issue of disinformation will also require targeted investment in upskilling at all levels of government (e.g.5 sidebar).

Key lessons:
- Commitment to **investing in a skilled and supported workforce** is a necessary first step to build public service capability and its reform muscle.

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[42] O'Connor et al. (2025).
[43] O'Connor and Alexandra (2025).
[44] Duong (2025).
[45] Colvin (2025).
[46] Yates and Olney (2025).

- **The required skills and competencies to be community-facing and build a social licence are evolving**, with disinformation response being one example.

- **Domain-specific knowledge and expertise can be a vital** component of competence and trust, particularly during policy implementation that involves intensive public interaction.

Political factors

Successful policy reform can only be achieved with political will and support. Actions including partnerships and public participation can play important roles in generating political will. Both the literature review and case studies demonstrate that reform can be delayed and de-railed for political ends. Such situations are detrimental to SLO when associated with a lack of transparency, fairness or accountability. In the Australia Day case, for example, the political firestorm around the issue deepened divisions within communities and fuelled resident frustration toward their councils.[47] Similarly, policy politicisation is starkly apparent in the Net Zero case with energy policy being wound back with changes of government federally, and political control being the main determinant of energy policy (in)action.[48] In contrast, bipartisanship at a state level is starting to achieve results in NSW but renewable energy proponents are needing to work in innovative ways with mistrustful communities.[49]

The benefit of avoiding political interference was exemplified in the RBA case. Here an inflation-targeting regime was formalised in the 1996 *Statement on the Conduct of Monetary Policy* and since then Australian governments have refrained from interfering in the RBA's interest rate decisions. This has enabled the RBA to concentrate on its long-term goals of price stability and full employment.[49]

> **Example 6: urban water sustainability**
> Water reform in Sydney demonstrated four types of political influence:
> 1/ The need for reform to address the different and sometimes competing paradigms of development, economic rationalism and environmentalism.
>
> 2/ Politicians have played on fears of recycled water for electoral advantage in the lead up to elections.
>
> 3/ Knee-jerk decisions during droughts that lack transparency and an evidence base.
>
> 4/ Delaying implementation to delay investment and avoid perceived community fears.
>
> (see O'Connor & Alexandra, 2025)

The cases show that crises (discussed further below) may increase the political will for reform. At these times the relevant policy domain is front of mind in the public and demand for solutions loudest. This was evident in the Urban Water Sustainability case (e.g.6 sidebar) and the Flood Mitigation cases. While being spurred out of policy reform complacency can be a positive, if the policy groundwork has not been laid with communities and if transparent, accountable processes have not been established or maintained, there can be suboptimal outcomes including a loss of SLO.

Key lessons:

- Politicisation of issues addressed by reform **can contribute to social divisions** and **loss of trust** in governments.

- While public servants can't control politicisation, they **can manage for it by having developed options with communities** that can be implemented quickly when a political window opens.

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[47] Chou and Busbridge (2025).
[48] Colvin (2025).
[49] Duong (2025).

- **Socialising reform options and establishing acceptance offers a tool** for public servants to counter politicisation of issues.

Fairness, equity

In broad terms, if reform is perceived to be 'fair' people are more likely to accept or support it. This assessment of fairness can apply to different aspects of policy reform (e.g.7 sidebar). However, the consideration of fairness and equity highlights an issue with the social licence concept if it is represented simply as a *single* licence for the majority. As Overduin and Moore[50] note in relation to SLO, "if majority support suffices, this raises the challenge of how minority, marginalized, and dissenting views can be protected". This issue was evident in the NDIS case where reform is for the minority disability community (2.6% of the Australian population), but a licence is mainly sought from the much larger tax-paying population without disability.[51] Likewise in the Australia Day case, some councils prioritised a social licence from the non-Indigenous citizenry over minority First Nations groups.[52]

Key lessons:

- Reform may be **rejected by communities who feel they bear an unfair proportion of the burden**s involved.

- Policymakers need to consider fairness in terms of **outcomes, processes, recognition of difference** and **interactive justice.**

- In democracies we **need to consider multiple social licences** by sharing benefits and burdens associated with reform.

Example 7: net zero
The Net Zero case highlights the "rural burden" of the transition to renewable energy in Australia. Regional Australia has the resources and space to build the infrastructure, but it is in cities where electricity demand is most concentrated. This situation lends itself to a divisive "us and them" narrative. Four considerations of fairness are highlighted: 1/ Distributional fairness: of benefits such as landholder payments to host infrastructure. 2/ Procedural fairness: meaningful opportunity for affected and interested people to have a say. 3/ Recognition justice: acknowledges that not all groups and people share a common history or experience of the world. 4/ Interactive justice focuses on being heard and respected.
(see Colvin, 2025)

Transparency

Transparent reform processes can engender public trust as they provide greater accountability.[53] This was evident in the NDIS case where the decision on inclusions and exclusions from the Scheme occurred separately from the formal Review process, eroding trust among the disability community.[54] An aim to increase transparency is one of the reasons why participatory processes are commonly deployed to build social licence, although case authors did not explicitly identify transparency as a key internal success factor for sustaining SLO (Appendix 2). An exception was the Disinformation case where transparency across all phases of the policy cycle is a key driver in local government responses to

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[50] Overduin and Moore (2017) p.74.
[51] Yates and Olney (2025).
[52] Chou and Busbridge (2025).
[53] Kim and Oh 2008; Owens 2019.
[54] Yates and Olney (2025).

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disinformation[55]. This includes being transparent about intention, especially because disinformation response is itself highly contested and politicised.

Key lessons:

- Transparent reform processes are required to **underpin public trust**

- **Reform muscle** is required to enable public servants to **make the case for government transparency** to build a social licence.

3.4 External factors determining acceptance of reform
Crises

In the case studies, crises generally galvanised policy reform. For example, natural disasters including fires (Net Zero), droughts (Urban Water Sustainability) and floods (Flood Mitigation), all heightened public awareness and acceptance of the criticality of reform, providing governments a mandate to act.[56] While action on necessary but delayed reform can be viewed positively, limitations to reform as crisis response were discussed.

Policy reform in response to crisis can be seen as a double-edged sword. While crises can galvanise governments, the need to act with haste can compromise good process and favour short term fixes (e.g.8 sidebar). During the millennium drought in Sydney, for example, the State government changed legislation to bypass approval processes and community consultation to build an expensive desalination plant. Not only did this result in a loss of trust, but it is also unclear if this was the most cost-effective or sustainable option.[57] Both the Flood Mitigation and Urban Water Sustainability cases illustrate that political will can wane after crises and reforms can be reversed or left unimplemented.

In contrast, evidence-based, transparent responses to crises that meet community expectations can be an opportunity for governments to build credibility and trust. For example, governance of the RBA was reformed in response to crisis and since then it has generally shown well-managed responses to economic crises which has served to strengthen their social licence.[58] The Disinformation case describes a proactive response to that crisis involving early detection, prevention of spread, de-bunking and recovery.[59]

Key lessons:

> **Example 8: nature-based flood mitigation**
> Recurrent flooding has functioned as a reform trigger, legitimising the need for policy reform. Floods lead to reactive, high-level investment in recovery and, in some instances, have created openings for exploring novel reforms including Nature-based Solutions (NbS). However, once the immediate urgency recedes, policy ambition can wane for long-term resilience planning and other agendas may be prioritised, such as land development to support affordable housing. Responses to floods also tend to prioritise emergency preparedness and recovery (short-term fixes) over long-term adaptation.
> (see Henderson et al., 2025)

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[55] Trijsburg (2025).
[56] Colvin 2025; Henderson et al. 2025; O'Connor and Alexandra 2025.
[57] O'Connor and Alexandra (2025).
[58] Duong (2025).
[59] Trijsburg (2025).

- Where reforms triggered by crises are **reactive, there can be negative consequences for SLO** due to opaque decision making, an inadequate evidence base, and lack of time to engage with communities about reform options.
- **Crises can provide governments with a mandate to act** but crises cause harm to communities that could be mitigated by proactively building a social licence for reform.
- **Different licences can gain prominence during crises** e.g. that of groups most severely impacted.
- **Reform muscle is needed so bureaucracies are prepared when crises occur** with a suite of developed response options that are underpinned by evidence and understood by communities.

Systems of government

Systems of government have a broad range of influences on SLO. These include: determining what mechanisms are available for agenda setting[60], the existence of varied levels of competency and trust in different levels of government[61], and different relationships with the public depending on role and interaction e.g., local governments being more 'embedded'.[62] Australia's three-tiered federal system, means responsibility for social licence does not rest neatly with a single agency or level of government. Government capacity to work collaboratively across jurisdictions and policy sectors is critical to advancing many reform agendas.

In our case studies, there were examples of multiple agencies at the same level of government working effectively together for reform, such as local governments in relation to Flood Mitigation, and state agencies for Urban Water Sustainability (e.g.9 sidebar). Working across levels of government remains problematic, however. For example, in the Flood Mitigation case local government often works in opposition to state economic development agencies.[63] This limited vertical integration can be because of different normative frameworks, stages of reform processes, administration priorities and political agendas. This was illustrated in the NDIS case which is a federal initiative that requires state and territory governments to meet demand for disability support falling outside its scope. State and territory governments have been asked for more funding to deliver the National Foundational Support Strategy but this was unresolved as of mid-2025 fuelling anger and uncertainty in the disability community[64]. Vertical integration can also be hampered by administrative hurdles associated with working across different levels of government (e.g.9 sidebar).

Example 9: urban water sustainability
Responsibilities for urban water management are complex and shared across different levels of government, different agencies and corporations. In Sydney, horizontal integration at a state level is strong with a range of mechanisms supporting deliberate engagement and cooperation. This is enabled by strong governance recommendations in the Greater Sydney Water Strategy. Barriers to reform occur in the integration of stormwater because it is generally under local government control. Additional administrative hurdles and excessive transaction costs associated with vertical integration are restricting the range of water sustainability options considered.
(see O'Connor & Alexandra, 2025)

Key lessons:

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[60] Takao (2019).
[61] Alkon and Urpelainen (2018).
[62] Trijsburg (2025).
[63] Henderson et al. (2025).
[64] Yates and Olney (2025).

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- Reform requiring collaboration over different levels of government can be **supported by formal mechanisms to encourage information sharing and appropriate legislative levers**.

- **Local governments may be more responsive to communities** than other levels of government because they are more directly linked. This means they are well situated to build social licences with communities.

- **Reform muscle** is necessary in the form of willingness and capacity to understand co-dependencies across agencies and **prosecute the case for collaboration.**

Mass and social media

The use of mass and social media by actors outside of governments was one of the three most commonly mentioned external factors influencing SLO for policy reform in the literature review[65]. Media can be used to change the narrative around an issue, increase the profile of an issue, change attitudes, and overcome government resistance to reform. The rise of the digital information environment enables the sharing of information at greater scale, amplified by algorithms that prioritise engagement over accuracy.[66] For example, the Net Zero reforms have been impacted by curated flows of information that confirm people's existing beliefs with primarily negative stories of community outrage.[67] The short-term media cycle has also highlighted short-term fixes over long-term sustainable reform, such as making connections between flooding and climate change, that needs long-term adaptive reforms.[68]

Key lessons:
- Use of social media by non-government actors can **amplify negative messages resulting in rejection of reform** by targeted communities.

- **Reform muscle** consists of capacity within government departments to **provide consistent, balanced and credible information** based on evidence-informed, proactive communication and engagement strategies.

> **Example 10: NDIS**
> Mass media has been used by stakeholders with opposing interests in the NDIS. Stories by some elements of the mass media have focussed on 'waste' and 'rorting' while there has been uproar from disability stakeholders unhappy with both the pace and the content of reforms. Meanwhile the broad-based social movement, Every Australian Counts, has harnessed public support for the NDIS through media campaigns. Combined this has made it difficult for the federal government to implement reform.
> (see Yates & Olney, 2025)

Features of the community

Specific characteristics of communities were commonly linked to capacity to sustain SLO for reform in the literature review[67] but featured less prominently in the case studies. An important feature of communities is their socio-economic status, which can affect capacity to participate in reform processes, their knowledge of individual rights, and attitudes. The Australia Day case for example, noted progressive communities – characterised by robust countercultures, higher education levels,

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[65] O'Connor et al. (2025).
[66] Trijsburg (2025).
[67] Colvin (2025).
[68] Henderson et al. (2025).

and socially progressive values – were more likely to support and accept local initiatives challenging the status quo.[69] The RBA case also linked economic literacy with age, income and employment with those with lower literacy having lower expectations for reform.[70]

Key lessons:

- Characteristics of communities such as socio-economic status **need to be understood and should inform strategies to build a social licence for reform.**

- **Reform muscle** is needed to **understand publics and their attitudes to reform.**

Community action

We refer to community action as the ways communities organise, mobilise and influence change outside of elections and formal policymaking structures, including protest, social movements, lobbying and advocacy. Community action often emerges when reforms are seen to be unfair by individuals or groups (e.g.11 sidebar). Groups who benefit from the policy *status quo* can also take action to prevent changes that might reduce their advantage, for example, in monopoly situations.[71]

In a more constructive sense, lobbying and advocacy can play an important role in policy agenda setting and in modifying the course of reform to be more responsive to community needs and views. For example, the economic and human rights case for creating the NDIS was built by the community outside of government-led deliberative forums.[72]

Key lessons:

- Communities will **mobilise and at times protest where a social licence is absent.**

- Community action can be a **powerful mechanism for setting a reform agenda** or modifying the course of reform to be more responsive to communities.

- **Governments need to avoid embedded opposition to reform** becoming part of the social fabric of a place as it may make granting social licence impossible.

- The required **reform muscle** is the **knowledge and skills to judge when government should act without a social licence.**

> **Example 11: net zero**
> The energy transition to renewables in Australia has faced local place-based opposition including:
>
> - raising objections via the planning approval process
> - creating a hostile social environment in which it may be perceived as unsafe to undertake on-ground activities
> - prompting political action that threatens long-term policy stability
>
> Such opposition to renewables can become embedded in the social fabric and identity of a place.
> (see Colvin, 2025)

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[69] Chou and Busbridge (2025).
[70] Duong (2025).
[71] O'Connor et al. (2025).
[72] Yates and Olney (2025).

Limitations of this research

The depth to which we could explore each of the case inclusion criteria was constrained by available expertise and capacity. Likewise, certain elements of our SLO framework were more commonly identified in cases than others, which may or may not reflect their predominance in practice, e.g. while most cases described participatory processes to build SLO, we cannot infer that participatory processes are common practice. When applying the SLO framework, there was a tendency to focus on barriers to reform rather than enablers. This may be because enabling factors like a competent workforce are taken for granted.

There is also an important question about whether SLO is most useful for reforms where an established mandate for a particular solution already exists. In other words, is further, specific attention for mandated reform necessary?

Finally, it is important to acknowledge two key limitations of the SLO lens itself: 1) SLO originally developed as a means of understanding the level of acceptance of individual, distinct projects. Although scholarship has today advanced to include multiple 'social licences', conceptual limitations of a project-based concept should be acknowledged. 2) Applying a SLO lens means we focus on the *acceptance* of policy reform - the case for reform and the implications arising through implementation. While this is undoubtedly important, we need to ensure that application of the SLO concept does not ignore appropriate public contributions to agenda setting and the implementation processes. We should not expect the public to accept poor reform. Alternative or additional goals beyond policy acceptance, for instance, may enable long-term trust in government and social cohesion.

4. CHECKLIST FOR POLICY REFORM
4.1 Contextual factors in the policy environment to consider

The following points synthesise key questions for policymakers leading major reforms to consider operationalising SLO to support greater likelihood of effective reform processes.

Who we need to build licences with

- Are there **different licences needed for different groups?** These could be within communities, the public service, the political sphere or private sector.
- Are there groups with **different expectations** of reform that need to be balanced?
- What is the **current level of public awareness** and understanding of the issue?
- What capacity exists to have a **public conversation around reform**? Might an incremental approach generate less risk of polarisation?
- What is the **capacity of communities to participate** e.g. time to attend townhalls, cultural diversity considerations, etc?

The social environment

- **Are there known or potential areas of mistrust?** If so, can governments work with trusted boundary spanning individuals or groups (without compromising the third party's credibility)?
- **What is the cultural context?** Are there sensitive and polarising issues? Is a cultural mandate necessary to build SLO?
- Are there perceived or actual issues of **fairness or equity** associated with reform i.e. some benefitting more than others.
- How might **disinformation** be used to erode SLO at each policy phase?

The nature/context of the policy domain

- **What components of reform require acceptance**? Need for reform? Particular solutions and their cost?
- What is the **commitment** to support public service capacity building?
- Is it possible/necessary to **partner** with credible trusted non-government actors? E.g. where there is existing mistrust of reform in the community
- Is **independent expert evidence/advice** needed to inform reform and build legitimacy?
- How much **control over reform is in hands of administrators**? To what extent is the reform politically enacted?

Elements of reform that can be politicised

- Are there **perceived or actual areas of polarisation** related to reform in the community that can be politicised?
- Is their **policy stasis** related to perceived or actual community acceptance of reform? **Could building a social licence support a political licence** for reform?

4.2 Actions to strengthen and maintain reform muscle

The following are a set of rules of thumb for policymakers planning to build social licence(s) for reform to consider.

Setting aims for achieving social licence(s)

- Identify what components of reform require **acceptance** and consider goals beyond acceptance such as trust.
- **Work from the bottom up** with communities to build SLO - electoral mandates don't trickle down.
- Consistent performance of governments in line with community expectations to build and maintain **trust**.
- **Monitor and maintain** social licences – they can be withdrawn with changing circumstances.

Actions to build social licence(s)

- Adopt **participatory processes** for transparency and to build trust only when the available mechanisms for them to inform policy are clearly understood and agreed to by participants.
- Facilitate **boundary-spanning** across government agencies and levels of government via clear governance arrangements and agreed mechanisms of coordination at appropriate levels of seniority.
- Use appropriate, **evidence** that has credibility among stakeholders to inform reform to build trust and legitimacy. This can be developed via advisory groups with transparent mandates.
- Develop long-term **communication strategies** that consider public awareness of reform, potentially conflicting social licences required, and areas of mistrust or polarisation prone to disinformation.
- **Consistent messaging and conversations with communities** that incrementally make the case for change and reform options.

Managing internal factors to achieve social licence(s)

- **Commitment and capacity to work genuinely with communities**.
- **Understand communities**: the level of community knowledge of the policy domain, the different licences required, actual or perceived disparities in benefits and burdens associated with reform, etc.
- **Build/maintain technical competence of public service** to a) work with communities and credible non-government actors and b) make recommendations to governments about how to build SLO.
- **Manage politicisation of reform by demonstrating SLO and processes to maintain it.**

Managing for external factors to achieve social licence(s)

- **Be prepared for crises** by having several reform options that have been socialised and transparent processes to facilitate timely implementation of preferred options.
- **Avoid embedded opposition to reform** that becomes part of the social fabric or identity of a place.
- **Build capacity to manage disinformation** during reform as this is a key mechanism undermining trust.

APPENDIX 1: SLO FRAMEWORK USED IN CASE STUDIES

The SLO Framework developed via the literature review that guided case study development

Aims of government(s) in relation to key components of social licence	
Case elements	**Definition**
Public acceptance	Ongoing acceptance, approval or support of policy/administrative reform by the public/ community or stakeholders.
Public satisfaction	Satisfaction is defined as a person's feelings toward a variety of factors affecting a given policy reform, particularly the fulfilment of one's needs, expectations, and requirements
Public consent	Positive actions that express a citizen's recognition of the state's right to rule and an agreement, at least in general, to be bounded by the decisions that result
Mandate	Mandates may apply at multiple levels. For purposes of the case, mandate applies at the level to which the studied policy reform was understood to have a social, political, economic, environmental or other mandate, or some combination of these.
Legitimacy	Legitimacy is a belief that an entity has "the right to govern" leading to a willingness to obey or voluntarily defer to this authority.
Trust	Trust refers to a willingness to rely on government entities to act on our behalf based on the belief that they possess the capacity to make effective decisions and take our interests into account.
Credibility	The competence and/or reputation that supports citizens' expectation that the reform is reasonable, will achieve articulated goals and will be delivered to a high standard. Credibility may refer to the credibility of government or other organisations involved in the reform, of the reform itself, or of public servants delivering the reform.

Actions to build social licence	
Case elements	**Definition**
Participatory processes/ engagement	Where the public sector involves the public/community/stakeholders in policy or administrative reform. Includes: consulting with key stakeholder groups to identify reform options, eliciting submissions on draft documents, E-government and online forums, public face-to face forums such as workshops and town hall meetings.
Formal advisory entities	Where formal entities are established that include members from outside government tasked to advise on policy or administrative reform. Includes: Expert/ Technical Advisory Groups, Advisory Councils, Taskforces Working Groups, Community Committees, Panels, Commission(er)s, etc.
Communications/ media	Use of one-way communications, including, mass media by the public sector to build SLO for policy or administrative reform. Includes public education about reform, online platforms and publications.
Partnerships	Formal mechanisms by which public servants work with the public/ community / stakeholders on policy and administrative reform, usually with a primary focus on implementation.
Boundary-spanning	Boundary-spanning is work to enable exchange of knowledge and information across sectors to support evidence-informed decision-making in a specific context. It can be done by individuals or be institutionally embedded (boundary organisations).
Integration within the public service	Includes whole-of-government (vertical integration) and horizontal integration of policy domains/government departments to achieve reform. It also includes mechanisms that embed the SLO concept into bureaucratic processes such as charters, guidelines, codes of conduct and performance management.

Internal success factors	
Case elements	**Definition**
Political factors	Politicisation generally has a negative impact on public acceptance of reform. It includes decision-making according to the election cycle (immediate gains vs long -term benefit), ideological polarization and the influence of vested interests.
Fairness, equity	Where the actual or perceived fairness and/or equity of a reform processes was an important factor in its acceptance or otherwise. Includes issues to do with vulnerable and marginalised groups, human rights, gender equality etc.
Capacity of public servants	Where the capacity of individuals within the public service to achieve SLO for policy or administrative reform is a key driver of outcomes. Positive traits include leadership, expertise and capacity to innovate. Lack of these and other issues such as misconduct may have a negative influence on public acceptance of reform.
Efficiency of systems within the public service	Where government systems that support effective coordination between departments, data management, institutional learning etc are an important factor in SLO for policy or administrative reform.
Resource availability for the public service	Where resource availability influences SLO for policy or administrative reform. Resources include funding, numbers of staff and time but not individual qualities of public servants or government systems.
Transparency of processes	Where the transparency of reform processes influences SLO for policy or administrative reform. This includes links between transparency and accountability and can be positive or negative
Opportunities for participation	Where opportunities (or lack thereof) for the public to participate in decision-making processes influences SLO for policy or administrative reform.

External success factors	
Case elements	**Definition**
Community action	Where community actions have been important in the policy or administrative reform process. This includes public protests, lobbying and advocacy, etc.
Features of the community	Where features of citizens and civic organisations/groups are an important factor influencing SLO for policy and administrative reform. E.g. they are highly engaged (in civic activities), levels of social capital, levels of knowledge and awareness, levels of influence, socio-economic factors.
Mass and social media	Where mass and social media has had an important influence on SLO for policy and administrative reform including impacts of mis/disinformation. Does not include use of media by the government/public service.
Intrinsic nature of policy domain	Where the nature of the policy domain itself influences SLO for policy and administrative reform. This could be domains with high levels of support (e.g. education) or contentious/ emotive domains (e.g. immigration policy).
Historical factors	Where events and processes (such as previous policies) from the past are important in influencing SLO for policy and administrative reform.
Culture/country/region	Where features of culture, country or region are important influences on SLO for policy and administrative reform. Does not include "general features of the community" (e.g. level of education).
Crises	Where particular crises have played an important negative or positive role in building SLO for policy and administrative reform. E.g., COVID, climate change.
System of government	Where particular systems of government and governance play an important role in SLO for policy and administrative reform.

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APPENDIX 2: SCOPE OF CASE STUDIES

Case	Aims	Key actions	Key success factors
Australia Day	Mandate Trust	Advisory entities Partnerships Integration	Politicisation Capacity of public servants Opportunities for participation Features of the community Policy domain System of government
Net Zero	Acceptance Legitimacy Trust	Participatory processes Communication Boundary-spanning	Politicisation Fairness, equity Resource availability for the public service Community action Mass and social media Crises
RBA monetary policy	Trust Credibility	Participatory processes Communication Boundary-spanning	Politicisation Capacity of public servants Features of the community Crises System of government
Flood mitigation	Acceptance Mandate	Participatory processes Partnerships Boundary-spanning	Politicisation Capacity of public servants Resource availability for the public service Historical factors Crises
Water sustainability	Acceptance Trust	Participatory processes Communication	Politicisation Crises System of government
Disinformation	Trust	Boundary-spanning	Capacity of public servants Transparency
NDIS	Acceptance Satisfaction Trust	Participatory processes Advisory entities Communication	Politicisation Fairness, equity Transparency Opportunities for participation Community action Features of the community Mass and social media

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