

# Technical Reference Group (TRG) Advisory Note

 Guidance for TRG agencies,  
proponents and consultants

Version [1.1]



Department  
of Transport  
and Planning



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## 1. Introduction

### About this advisory note

The Department of Transport and Planning (DTP) Impact Assessment Unit (IAU) has implemented **reforms to the EES process**, including a **new model for Technical Reference Groups (TRG)** and associated agency engagement and input during the Environment Effects Statement (EES) process. This new model for establishing and running TRGs, and eliciting advice from agencies helps to improve the flexibility, focus and efficiency of TRGs. This advisory note explains how TRGs are established and managed, and how agency input is sought and incorporated to support the EES process. It assists with operationalising the new TRG model.

A TRG is set up at the commencement of each EES process at the request of the Minister. Each TRG is comprised of agencies, authorities, regulators, councils and Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAPs), with a relevant statutory, policy or technical interest in relation to the project. A TRG is established to enable the coordinated provision of advice and assistance to the proponent and DTP-IAU during the EES. This includes advice on the scope of the EES, whether technical studies are sound and consistent with good practice, the adequacy of project response to key risks and issues, and the consistency of the proposed project with relevant legislation, regulation, and policy.

This Advisory Note explains the **purpose, roles, and responsibilities** of the TRG and agencies on it. It outlines how TRGs work, the expectation of agencies on a TRG and practical aspects of their representatives' contributions during the scoping, preparation, and adequacy stages for an EES. It also clarifies the roles and approaches of DTP-IAU, the proponents and their consultants in engaging with the TRG agencies during the EES. This advisory note should be read in conjunction with the *Ministerial Guidelines for assessment of environmental effects under the Environment Effects Act 1978* (eighth edition, 2023), ([Ministerial Guidelines](#)).

### Who this advisory note is for?

This advisory note is for TRG agencies and their representatives. It explains what a TRG is, how it supports the EES process and what is expected of agencies and their representatives on the TRG. Proponents and their consultant teams should also use this advisory note to understand how to work with the TRG and the agencies providing advice, and what to expect from the process.

## 2. What is a TRG?

### Legislative and policy context

In Victoria, works capable of having a significant effect on the environment are referred and potentially assessed (such as through an EES process) under the *Environment Effects Act 1978*.

DTP-IAU administers the Act on behalf of the Minister for Planning in accordance with the Ministerial Guidelines issued by the Minister under section 10 of the Act. As described within the Ministerial Guidelines and the procedures and requirements the Minister issues for each EES process, DTP-IAU establishes a TRG at the request of the Minister. DTP-IAU and the proponent rely upon the TRG agencies to provide technical, policy and statutory advice and assistance for the preparation of the EES.

### Definition and purpose

Each agency invited to be on the TRG nominates a suitably senior officer to represent that agency and coordinate advice and inputs to the EES process. DTP-IAU establishes the TRG at the start of each EES process in accordance with the terms of reference (TOR) put in place for the TRG.



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The TRG is not a formal entity as such and is not a decision-making or regulatory body. The role of the agencies on the TRG is to provide the necessary technical advice and input on the assessment of key potentially significant environmental effects, relevant to the agency. The agencies that comprise each TRG for an EES are based on the project's potentially significant environmental effects and the relevant key approvals and regulatory requirements for that project.

The primary role of a TRG is to advise:

- **DTP-IAU** on:
  - matters that should be included in the scoping requirements and consultation plan for an EES;
  - the technical adequacy of the EES, as well as the adequacy of its response to priority matters.
- the **proponent** on:
  - the need for, and adequacy of, technical EES studies in terms of their consistency with good practice, standards of method and analysis.

The Ministerial Guidelines outline the specific matters that the TRG provides advice and assistance on.

## When is a TRG established?

The TRG is established by DTP-IAU after the Minister decides that an EES is required for a project and the proponent is ready to begin the EES. This is usually aligned with proponent's submission of EES commencement documentation, which includes:

- a draft EES study program;
- a draft EES schedule;
- a TRG schedule, which includes scheduling of TRG meetings and document submissions;
- a draft EES consultation plan, including preliminary stakeholder issues list.

## Benefits of a TRG and agency advice during the EES process

A TRG is a structured and coordinated forum that enables agencies to provide advice and collaborate during an EES, delivering several benefits for the process and proponents including:

- early identification and resolution of issues, reducing the risk of delays and rework;
- great access to and direct engagement with key agencies and regulators via the TRG;
- coordinated and streamlined communication between agencies and proponents, minimising duplication and conflicting advice;
- clearer regulatory expectations, improving certainty and planning efficiency;
- stronger quality, consistency, and robustness of assessments and documentation; and
- more timely and efficient approvals decision-making directly following an EES, by resolving key issues and requirements beforehand during the EES.

## Role and limitations

In general, TRG agency advice should:

1. relate directly to the agency's statutory, policy or technical interest in relation to that project;
2. focus on material issues relevant to potentially significant environmental effects and related technical and regulatory matters they are responsible for in relation to that project.

DTP-IAU supports and coordinates engagement between the TRG agencies and the proponent to assist in the provision and resolution of agency advice, particularly where it relates to matters relevant to the assessment of potentially significant environmental effects. This support may also extend to other key issues or concerns raised by the proponent and TRG agencies. This may include supporting discussion, clarification of



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expectations, and, where appropriate, documenting unresolved matters for consideration through the assessment process.

### 3. TRG composition and engagement

#### TRG agency representation

Participation in a TRG is determined in the context of the Minister's decision for that EES, in particular the potentially significant environmental effects and key matters for the EES, and key statutory decisions/ approvals for that project that are to be informed by the EES.

DTP-IAU seeks a nomination of a representative from the relevant agencies, to coordinate input on behalf of that agency, during the EES process.

The agency representatives on the TRG should:

- be of sufficient seniority and have the authority to contribute on behalf of their organisation;
- possess the expertise to provide, or facilitate internally, clear, reliable, and well-informed advice;
- have a sound understanding of their agency's legislation, policies, and procedures;
- ensure that any feedback is grounded in relevant experience, either their own or that of a subject matter expert within their agency.

#### Types of engagement with TRG agencies

Following establishment of the TRG, the proponent will complete a TRG interest matrix as part of the draft TRG schedule. The matrix identifies TRG agencies, the EES documents, and the nature of each agency's interest. Initial interests are identified by the proponent and subsequently reviewed by DTP-IAU. The matrix is then circulated to TRG agencies for confirmation and feedback.

The two categories are:

##### 1) Statutory, policy, or technical interest

This will be for organisations that, for the particular technical aspect:

- a. regulate or make statutory decisions and responsible for relevant regulations or policies; and/or
  - b. provide expert technical advice, even if they do not have a formal statutory, regulatory or policy role.
- For example, Parks Victoria or Melbourne Museum may be included for its technical expertise.

##### 2) Stakeholder interest

This will be for organisations that, for the particular technical aspect:

- a. Have an interest in a report because it informs or supports their area of statutory, policy or technical interest without being their specific area of regulatory or policy responsibility.
- b. May be of interest from an integrated assessment or a stakeholder engagement perspective.

While additional input beyond the agency's statutory, policy or technical interest can be provided for consideration, the provision of such advice is not a determining factor in the progress of the EES, and would not be accommodated where it would cause delay/ change to project schedules.

### 4. Roles and responsibilities

This section outlines what is expected of agencies on the TRG, the proponent and DTP-IAU during the EES process.



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## Expectations of agencies and their representatives on the TRG

DTP-IAU will provide the Terms of Reference (TOR) to all TRG agencies and their representatives to clarify their roles and responsibilities. In general, agency representatives on a TRG are expected to understand and carry out the following:

### 1) Coordinate timely review and advice of relevant matter on behalf of the agency

- a) Provide advice on the proponent's draft EES study program and DTP's EES scoping requirements.
- b) Provide advice to DTP-IAU and the proponent, without prejudice, on relevant environmental matters and risks for the project being examined in the EES.
- c) Provide technical reviews and advice to DTP-IAU and the proponent the adequacy of technical EES studies, including methods and responses to relevant matters.

### 2) Systems and protocols

- a) Adhere to the TRG TOR.
- b) Use the Environment Assessment system for downloading and uploading document reviews.
- c) Coordinate the provision of consolidated specialist technical and statutory advice from within their organisation.
- d) Provide authoritative advice within agreed timeframes on matters assigned to the TRG agency.
- e) If the organisation is unable to meet the scheduled timeframes, submit a request for extension to DTP-IAU within 5 business days of receiving the request for advice.

### 3) Confidentiality

- a) Advise DTP-IAU of any potential conflicts of interest.
- b) Treat all provided material as confidential.
- c) Refer all media enquiries about the EES process to DTP-IAU.

### 4) Engage and collaborate

- a) Ensure relevant key issues are identified early, and advice is provided to the proponent.
- b) Attend scheduled TRG meetings and be available to engage with DTP-IAU and the proponent outside of these meetings.
- c) Ensure continuity of involvement and advice in the EES process. If a TRG representative is unable to attend a meeting, they should arrange a suitable replacement to take their place.
- d) Participate in candid, open discussion, and the presentation of any relevant perspectives.
- e) Respect the right of all representatives to make comments and hold respectful differing opinions.

## Expectations of proponents

Proponents are responsible for preparing the EES and are expected to engage with agencies and the TRG forum to elicit advice and inputs for an effective EES. The proponent and their consultant team are required to use the on-line digital Environment Assessment System for uploading document reviews and respond to TRG agency review feedback. Their role also includes the following:

### 1) Prepare EES commencement documentation

- a) Before the first TRG meeting the proponent needs to prepare the EES commencement documentation, including:
  - i) a draft study program;
  - ii) a draft EES project schedule;
  - iii) a TRG schedule, which includes scheduling of TRG meetings and document submissions;
  - iv) a draft EES consultation plan, including preliminary stakeholder issues list.

## 2) Prepare and maintain TRG review and meeting schedule

- a) The TRG schedule should include timeframes for:
  - i) delivery of the draft EES documents, and package summary documentation (e.g. Summary Document, digital content etc.) for DTP-IAU and TRG review;
  - ii) TRG and DTP-IAU review of draft EES documentation (allowing for provision of necessary versions);
  - iii) TRG meetings.

## 3) TRG meetings – inputs and preparation

- a) Prepare effectively to engage meaningfully with agencies through TRG meetings.
- b) Provide project information, consultation updates and discuss relevant issues at TRG meetings.
- c) Work with technical specialists to prepare and present targeted information at TRG meetings, informed by TRG agency feedback and tailored to agency interests and key issues.
- d) Develop, structure and provide content that enables effective engagement and advice from agencies through the TRG meetings.
- e) Be responsible for TRG meeting planning (e.g., venue, catering, reliable audio/visual connection etc) as arranged through coordination meetings with DTP-IAU.
- f) Provide draft TRG meeting agendas to DTP-IAU in advance to review and confirm.

## 4) Engage and collaborate

- a) Work constructively and respectfully with the agencies on the TRG.
- b) Consider advice from the agencies on the TRG.
- c) Provide updates on the progress of the preparation of the EES.
- d) Provide draft documents for review in a timely manner in accordance with the TRG schedule.
- e) Provide considered responses to all written comments from TRG agencies on draft documents.
- f) Respect the right of agencies on the TRG to make comments and provide advice, and in doing so that they may have differing perspectives and opinions.

## 5) Arrange a TRG site visit to the project area

- a) The proponent is responsible for arranging and preparing information for the TRG site visit to the project area in accordance with the requirements described in the Environment Effects Statement preparation advisory note.

## Expectations of DTP-IAU

DTP-IAU is responsible for administering the EES process and is expected to:

### 1) Coordinate and oversee the process

- a) Nominate a team to lead engagement between DTP-IAU and the TRG.
- b) Prepare the TOR for the TRG.
- c) Convene and chair the TRG.
- d) Monitor compliance with the TOR.
- e) Inform TRG representatives about EES process requirements.
- f) Liaise with the proponent through regular coordination meetings.
- g) Document and share TRG and EES schedule updates with the TRG.
- h) Facilitate timely engagement and resolution of issues.

### 2) Support engagement and communication

- a) Coordinate input from TRG representatives on EES documentation.
- b) Ensure timely information flows between the TRG agencies and the proponent.



- c) Assist TRG representatives to provide proportionate feedback that is focussed on potentially significant environmental effects.

### 3) Facilitate review procedures

- a) Support timely resolution of issues by working with the proponent and TRG agencies to ensure feedback is responded to through the review process.
- b) Convene meetings with TRG representatives, where needed, to support further discussion and resolution of outstanding matters.

### 4) Manage TRG meetings

- a) Provide TRG meeting invites and meeting agendas to proponent and TRG representatives.
- b) Chair and facilitate TRG meetings in line with the TRG schedule meeting types.
- c) Apply a targeted approach to TRG meetings where applicable.
- d) Circulate TRG meeting actions, where needed, generally within 5 business days of the meeting.

## 5. TRG input

### How long is the TRG involved in the EES?

The TRG for an EES concludes once the Minister for Planning authorises the EES for public exhibition (**Figure 1, Public review of impact assessment phase**). Organisations that participated in the TRG may choose to lodge a written submission during the public exhibition period to express their views on a project.

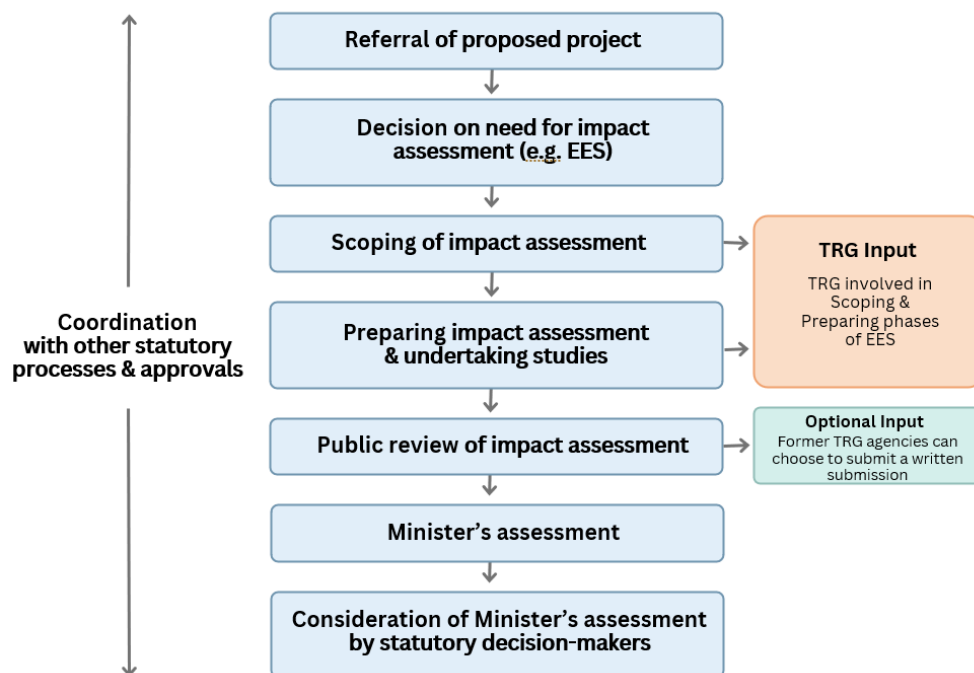


Figure 1. TRG input during the EES process.

### Scoping

Early input from the TRG agencies helps clearly communicate expectations, identify gaps and risks, and build confidence that the proposed studies will be adequate to inform decision-making. It also helps focus the EES on key issues and reduces the risk of delays later in the process.



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DTP-IAU encourages TRG representatives to actively engage during the EES commencement and scoping phase to ensure their input shapes the focus and proportionality of the EES technical studies.

### **The first TRG meeting**

At the first TRG meeting, the proponent will present and discuss the project overview, the proposed EES schedule, and the draft EES consultation plan. The draft EES study program may also be presented at this first meeting.

DTP-IAU will brief the TRG on its roles and responsibilities. This includes how targeted engagement will work throughout the process and the standard timeframes for providing written feedback on draft documents.

### **EES study program**

The first items where advice will be sought from the TRG, is on the proponent's draft EES study program, TRG schedule (including the identification of agency interest for each technical area) and draft scoping requirements. The EES study program describes the initial risk screening and proposed methods for technical studies and informs the draft scoping requirements.

TRG representatives are expected to review the draft EES study program, providing advice on relevant guidelines, methods, and available data. For studies where the organisation is identified as having statutory, policy or technical interest, feedback is expected on:

- methods proposed for assessments;
- latest data and research;
- relevant industry standards, policies, strategies, and guidelines;
- statutory approval considerations, including legislation and regulations.

TRG representatives are encouraged to be clear and direct in their advice. Sharing specific guidance, legislative requirements, and expectations early helps focus the EES scope and ensures the process is proportionate, targeted, and efficient. It is understood that advice may evolve as the project progresses. Offering specific input at this stage does not preclude TRG representatives from revising their views later in the process.

### **Draft EES consultation plan**

The EES consultation plan explains how the proponent will inform the public, engage with stakeholders, and respond to feedback during the EES process.

TRG representatives review the draft plan and provide advice on its scope and approach. This includes:

- identifying key stakeholders;
- recommending consultation methods;
- advising on the timing of engagement activities.

Early input from the TRG helps shape a consultation plan that is inclusive, targeted and aligned with statutory requirements. It also ensures the plan reflects local knowledge and supports meaningful engagement throughout the EES process.

### **Draft scoping requirements**

Scoping requirements set out the matters to be investigated and documented in the EES. Working draft scoping requirements will be provided to the proponent and TRG agencies to review and provide input on topics relevant to their statutory, policy, or technical interest.

When reviewing, TRG agencies should consider:

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- Are the relevant statutory decisions and legislation identified for each theme?
  - Are the key issues for assessment identified clearly?

DTP-IAU will consider the feedback on the working draft scoping requirements in finalising the draft that will be exhibited for public comment for a minimum of 15 business days. Both the proponent and TRG agencies can provide further feedback to DTP-IAU by making a submission during public exhibition.

## Preparing the EES

During the EES preparation phase, TRG representatives provide advice to help shape the technical studies and engagement activities. This includes:

- Reviewing the design and adequacy of technical studies to ensure they respond appropriately to the scoping requirements and reflect good practice in method and analysis.
- Advising on relevant data sets and research to support robust assessments.
- Identifying opportunities to address issues raised during investigations.
- Supporting coordination across statutory assessment and approvals processes.

The following sections outline specific TRG activities during the EES preparation stage.

### Site visit to the project area

At the start of the EES process, the proponent will organise a site visit for TRG representatives to help build understanding of the project area and its context. TRG representatives will be given the opportunity to request agenda items and specific locations of interest for the site visit. This helps ensure that key areas of concern are covered.

### TRG engagement

TRG meetings are a key mechanism for agency representatives to provide advice and input during the EES process. The new model for TRGs encompasses greater flexibility and scalability, to help ensure TRG engagement and meetings are undertaken in a way that is most effective for each EES/project and enable proponents to elicit advice in a timely way.

TRG meetings fall into three categories based on their purpose: **focus, review, and consultation.**

The proponent will develop a TRG schedule that shows proposed dates for the delivery of EES documentation for review. The schedule also outlines planned TRG focus, review and consultation meetings. This includes the proposed timing, number of meetings, and topics to be covered. Providing this information to the TRG early, allows for clear resource planning and creates various opportunities for the TRG to engage with the proponent. Whilst the TRG representatives have the opportunity to review the TRG schedule, proponents and DTP-IAU will continue to consult when confirming specific meeting dates throughout EES preparation.

Meetings may be held online or in a hybrid format. DTP-IAU will confirm preferences with TRG representatives and the proponent.

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## Types of TRG meetings

### 1) TRG Focus Meeting

Used for complex, technical or high-risk topics, issues with significant community interest, or where non-standard assessment methods are proposed.

- a) **Purpose:** Help the proponent clarify or verify methods, modelling, data or analysis to support assessment and EES reports.
- b) **Attendance:** TRG representatives should arrange for relevant subject matter experts from their organisation to attend.
- c) **Requirements:** The proponent needs to submit an agenda and questions to DTP-IAU at least 10 business days before the meeting to allow the relevant TRG representatives to organise attendance and allow for constructive engagement. Focus meetings will not be held without clear, specific requests or objectives for agency input from the proponent.
- d) **A focus meeting is not appropriate:**
  - i) For validating standard methods for non-complex assessments.
  - ii) For presenting findings from large documents (i.e. technical reports) - those go to review meetings.
  - iii) For discussing agenda items ordinarily designated for coordination meetings between DTP-IAU and the proponent.

### 2) TRG Review Meeting

Used to support review of technical reports or major sections of the EES. A TRG review meeting is typically scheduled during a TRG review period for a document (i.e. once a document has been submitted to TRG agencies for review).

- a) **Purpose:**
  - i) For proponent to present methods and key findings from documents circulated for TRG agency review.
  - ii) Help TRG agencies understand the study approach and any challenges, and ask questions to the proponent and specialists.
  - iii) Give proponents and consultants insight into TRG agencies' expectations and focus.
  - iv) Allow TRG representatives to share feedback and advice on document and methods.
- b) **Attendance:** Limited to TRG representatives with relevant statutory/policy/technical or stakeholder interests. Priority will be given to accommodating attendance of statutory/policy/technical TRG representatives.
- c) **Requirements:**
  - i) Documents need to be provided to TRG representatives prior to a meeting occurring.
  - ii) The proponent may group documents with similar agency interest to streamline engagement.
  - iii) The TRG representatives are encouraged to review the documents ahead of time and come prepared with a list of questions and clarifications for the proponent.
  - iv) Proponent provides draft agenda to DTP-IAU to confirm at least 10 business days prior.

A TRG review meeting is not appropriate for validating proponent comment responses to non-complex feedback prior to the provision of the updated documentation in response to reviews by TRG agencies.

### Comment close-out meetings

Sometimes TRG comments cannot be resolved through document review alone. These situations may need further verbal discussion or clarification.

If outstanding comments remain and are of higher risk order, DTP-IAU recommends that the proponent convene a separate comment close-out meeting with the relevant TRG representatives. This provides an opportunity for both the TRG representatives and the proponent to clarify their positions and work



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collaboratively toward resolution. These meetings should be held prior to reissuing documents to the TRG for further review. DTP-IAU should be copied on all meeting invitations and will typically participate in these discussions. In some cases, complete resolution or agreement on how feedback is addressed may not be possible. Under these circumstances, DTP-IAU may adopt a more directive approach and increase facilitation to support resolution, including identifying pathways to address differing views or, where necessary, agreeing to disagree.

### 3) TRG Consultation Meeting

Used for wider engagement with all TRG agencies.

- a) **Purpose:** To inform TRG agencies about project updates and general EES progress and engagement that has occurred, especially for those agencies that have not been involved in TRG focus or review meetings for some time.
- b) **Attendance:** All TRG agencies.
- c) **Requirements:**
  - i) Held every couple of months, if there haven't been any topics that require all TRG attendance (such as project description).
  - ii) Indicative duration: 1 hour
  - iii) Limited agenda which may include:
    - (1) Summary of recent focus and review meetings.
    - (2) Stakeholder engagement updates.
    - (3) General project updates.
    - (4) Updates to the TRG or EES schedule.

### Reviews

TRG representatives need to provide comments from their agency directly in the documentation using the built-in commenting tools in Adobe Acrobat PDF or Microsoft Word. To support this process, a guidance note outlining step-by-step instructions is included as an attachment to the email notifying the TRG representative of the review. This guidance note explains how to prepare, structure, and submit comments using the Environment Assessment system.

TRG representatives are encouraged to structure their comments clearly by identifying:

- Category rating.
- The issue or concern.
- Its relevance or significance.
- The recommended change or improvement.
- Where further discussion may be needed, a meeting suggestion should be included within the comment.

TRG agency reviews need to focus on relevant matters set out in the EES scoping requirements. TRG representatives are encouraged to prioritise substantive issues and constructive technical feedback, and not focus on formatting, styling, or quality assurance concerns, which remain the responsibility of the proponent.

Throughout this process comment close-out meetings may be requested to help resolve issues and comments in a more direct and efficient manner.

To support a targeted approach to TRG agency review, the figures below outline how review responsibilities are assigned across different stages of the EES process. **Figure 2** sets out the approach for assigning reviews for draft EES documentation, based on agency interest and prior engagement in earlier review cycles. **Figure 3** outlines the approach for assigning reviews of assessment chapters, linking agency involvement to their technical input on relevant supporting reports.

Together, these processes are designed to focus TRG representatives' effort on areas of substantive interest and expertise, support timely issue resolution, and avoid unnecessary duplication of review.

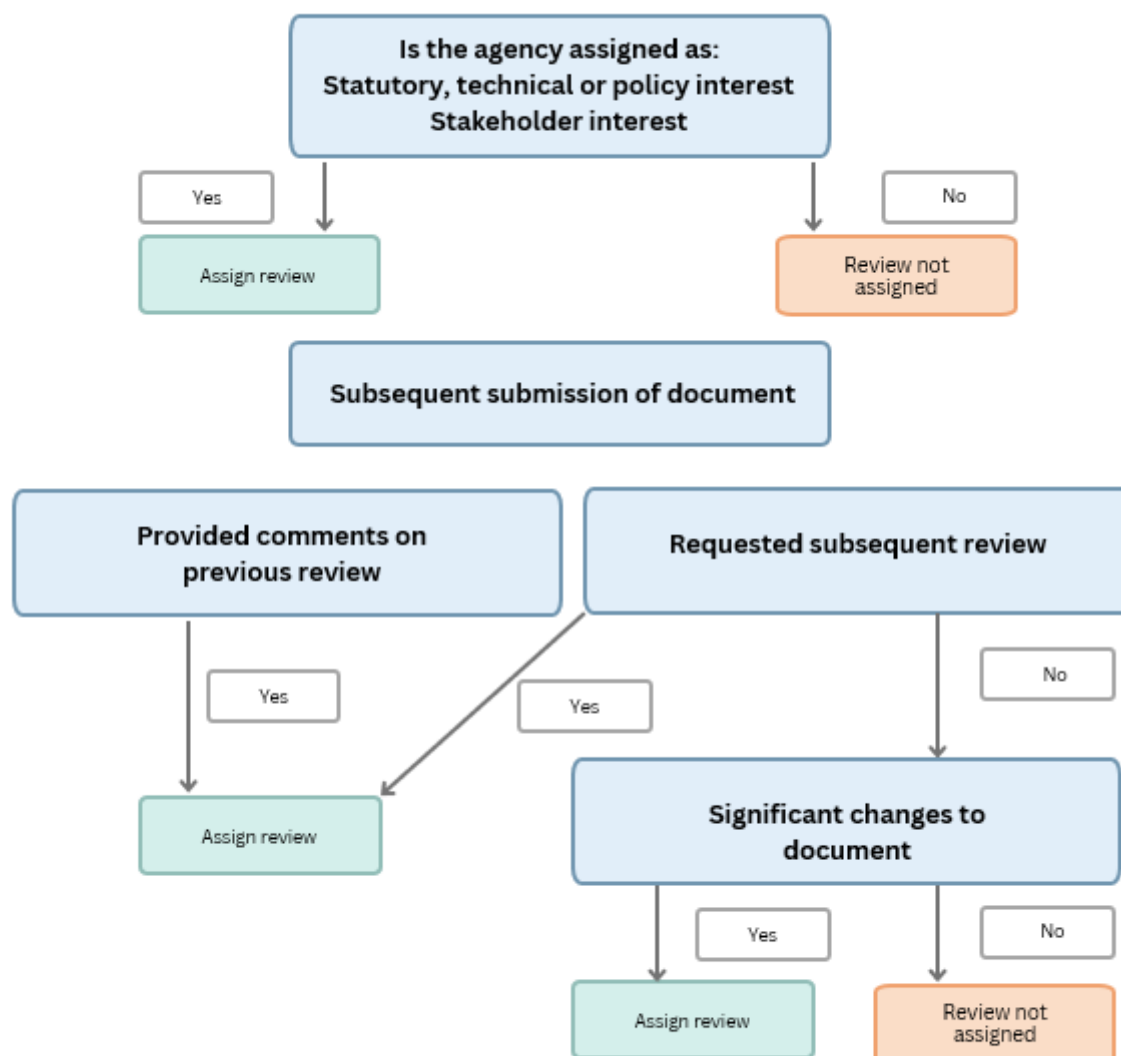


Figure 2. Targeted TRG engagement – assigning reviews for EES technical reports, appendices and attachments.

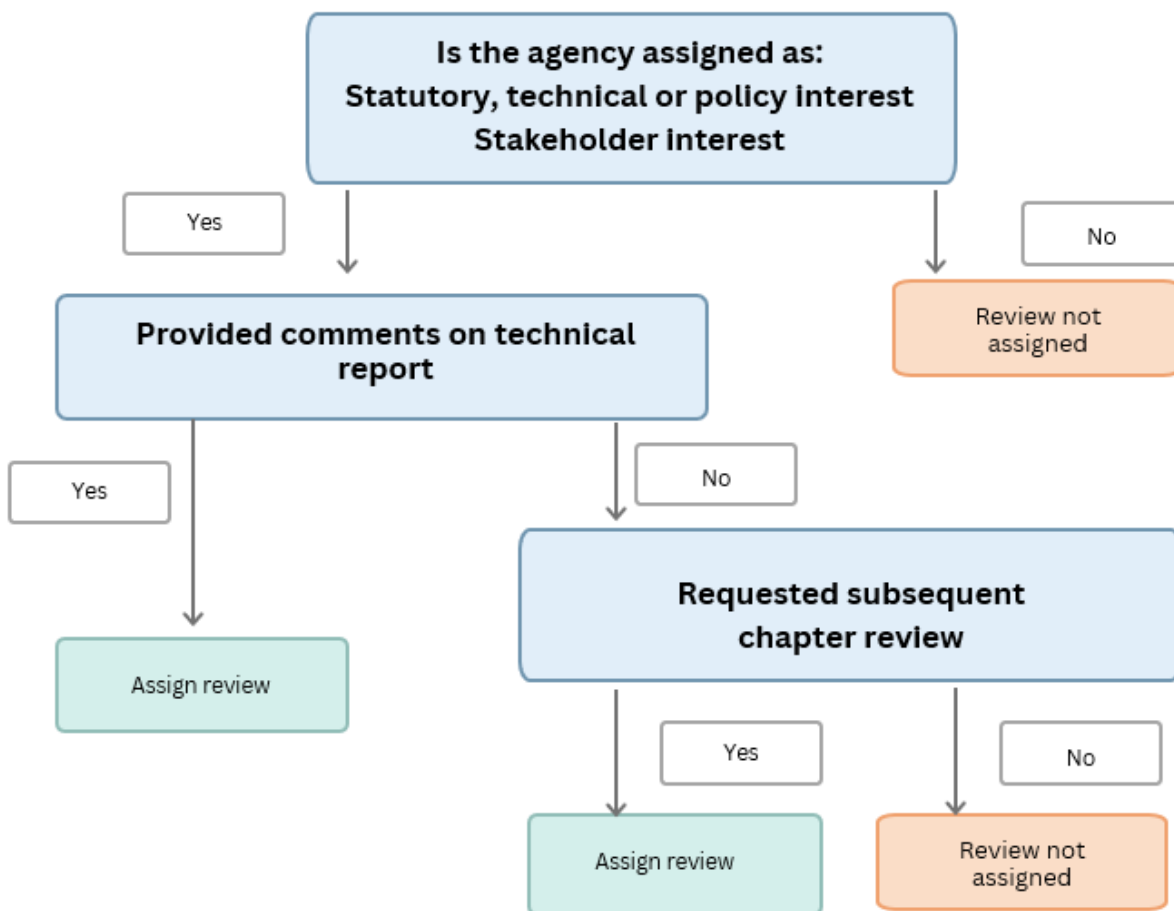


Figure 3. Targeted TRG engagement – assigning reviews for EES assessment chapters.

### Extensions of time

TRG agencies have **15 business days** to coordinate, complete and submit reviews of EES technical reports assigned to them in the online digital Environment Assessment System.

TRG agencies will receive:

- An email notification when a document is assigned for review.
- A reminder email one week before the review is due.

Extension of time requests are only considered if there are exceptional circumstances:

- **TRG agencies with statutory, policy, or technical interest** can request an extension, which will be considered on a case-by-case basis by DTP-IAU in consultation with the proponent. There needs to be exceptional circumstances to justify an extension request.
- **TRG agencies with stakeholder interest** may also request an extension, however it is very unlikely to be granted if it will cause subsequent delays to the project schedule. If an agency with statutory interest has



an extension granted and the stakeholder interest agency's request is within this timeframe, then an extension is more likely to be approved.

- DTP-IAU will discuss extension requests with the proponent, but both parties may choose to continue with the process if a TRG representative is unable to meet the agreed deadlines.
- If a TRG representative misses the review deadline, the system will record the comment status as 'lapsed'.

## **Public review**

### **Submissions**

The TRG formally ends once the Minister for Planning authorises the EES for public exhibition.

Agencies that were on the TRG can make formal submissions on the exhibited EES at their discretion and be involved in any inquiry appointed to consider the EES and submissions.

## **6. Further information**

### **Further guidance**

- [Environment Effects Statement Preparation Advisory Note](#)
- [Study Program Preparation Advisory Note](#)

### **Additional resources and references**

- [Ministerial Guidelines for assessment of environmental effects under the Environment Effects Act 1978 \(eighth edition, 2023\)](#)



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