Australian Government
Productivity Commission

Community engagement

Supporting Paper J

National Water Reform 2020
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GUIDE TO THE SUPPORTING PAPERS *(AND DESCRIPTOR)*

SP A Water entitlements and planning (*Entitlements and planning*)

SP B Water trading and markets (*Trading*)

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Key points

- Effective, thorough, well-informed community engagement is needed to support reform in all aspects of water resource management and water services provision.
- The National Water Initiative (NWI) commits Australian governments to ensuring that community engagement happens, but provides little guidance on how they should go about it.
- Significant evolution has been observed since the NWI was agreed in 2004 in:
  - community engagement principles and practices
  - community expectations as to how, when and for what matters they should be consulted by their governments.
- Practice has improved since 2004, however its quality remains inconsistent.
- In redesigning the Community Partnership element of the NWI, Australian governments should consider developing an organising framework based on the following objectives:
  - continuously improving and sustaining government engagement effort across all aspects of water resource management and service provision
  - coordinating engagement actions between all levels of government, particularly in multi-jurisdictional activities
  - ensuring that engagement effort and resourcing is fit for purpose, taking into account the scale of the proposed change or reform, its sensitivities and its impacts
  - ensuring that governments are clear about the purpose of their engagement and the role of communities in decision making
  - ensuring that all stakeholders have the opportunity to meaningfully input to the engagement process, and are proactively encouraged to do so
  - improving the effectiveness of community engagement through enhancing:
    - water information accessibility and comprehensibility (SP E *Integrity*)
    - community water literacy (SP E *Integrity*)
- Characteristics of effective community engagement include inclusiveness, timeliness, partnership, respect, access to information, transparency, responsiveness and continuous improvement. These represent a foundation for guidance on best practice in a renewed NWI.

Community engagement is an important foundation for successful water reform. With renewal of the National Water Initiative (NWI) pending, it is timely to assess whether current NWI settings for the conduct of community engagement are fit for purpose. Recent Murray–Darling Basin (MDB) experience contains important lessons for national policy in this regard, and recent government responses to this experience also offer insights on best practice.

This paper sets out the Commission's views on:

- the uses and benefits of effective engagement practice, and the outcomes sought through the NWI (section 1)
- recent performance and key issues for governments to address (section 2)
- the characteristics of effective engagement practice (section 3)
- a best-practice approach to support effective engagement practice within a renewed NWI (section 4).

1 Effective community engagement matters

Water reform can be contentious. At its heart, there will be 'a series of trade-off decisions, all with real-life implications for individuals, water users, industries, communities, their local environments and their regional economies' (Doolan 2016, p. 18).

Effective engagement plays a crucial role in ensuring that all stakeholders understand why decisions have been taken (even if they do not agree with the outcomes), and that their views are seriously considered. As the National Farmers' Federation (NFF) reflected:

> Genuine and meaningful consultation processes are required to address complex, interdependent and often contentious water reform processes. The trade-off of poor consultation is often the erosion of trust and confidence from communities which has long-term implications for achieving further reform processes. (sub. 42, p. 7)

Effective engagement practice enables:

- differing community views to be heard and understood
- facts and evidence to be disseminated to all participants
- innovative local solutions and preferred options to be explored
- a shared understanding of management options and their benefits and costs to evolve
- buy-in of parties to the recommended solution
- longevity for that solution, to which all parties have contributed (Doolan 2016, p. 16).

Australian governments have successfully implemented a wide range of water reform initiatives over the past half century. Community engagement mechanisms that enabled informed and transparent community participation in these reform processes have been essential to these successes. Future conduct of water reform in Australia will rely heavily on Australian governments sustaining their efforts to effectively engage communities within structured processes.

The Community Partnerships subsection of the NWI (box 1) commits Australian governments to engage water users and other stakeholders in achieving its objectives through consultation and information provision. However, there is little guidance on how they should go about this task.

Whilst the intended NWI outcome remains relevant, its associated actions have arguably become dated and no longer fully fit for purpose. These actions have a very specific focus on issues relating to overallocation, water planning, entitlement security and water use sustainability. These aspects were key reform priorities in 2004; however, with the passage of time, the range and nature of water management reform priorities has broadened considerably, such that community engagement is now highly relevant to all aspects of water resource management and to water service provision.

Box 1 **Governments committed to engagement with all stakeholders through consultation and information provision**

Parties to the National Water Initiative agreed that the outcome of the community partnership subsection of the agreement is to:

> … engage water users and other stakeholders in achieving the objectives of this Agreement by:
>
> i) improving certainty and building confidence in reform processes;
>
> ii) transparency in decision making; and
>
> iii) ensuring sound information is available to all sectors at key decision points.

And that governments would undertake actions to:

> … ensure open and timely consultation with all stakeholders in relation to:
>
> i) pathways for returning overdrawn surface and groundwater systems to environmentally sustainable extraction levels … ;
>
> ii) the periodic review of *water plans* … ; and
>
> iii) other significant decisions that may affect the security of *water access entitlements* or the sustainability of water use.

And also, would:

> … provide accurate and timely information to all relevant stakeholders regarding:
>
> i) progress with the implementation of water plans, including the achievement of objectives and likely future trends regarding the size of the consumptive pool; and
>
> ii) other issues relevant to the security of water access entitlements and the sustainability of water use, including the science underpinning the identification and implementation of environmental and other public benefit outcomes.

Source: NWI paragraphs 93, 95 and 96.

2 The NWI has facilitated improved engagement practice

Looking back on the NWI journey since 2004, there has been significant evolution in community engagement best practice. The narrow scope of the current NWI provisions has not constrained governments and water agencies from innovating or experimenting with their approaches to community engagement.

What can be observed is a growth in effort towards, and discipline in the conduct of, consultation and engagement efforts. In many cases, this has been driven by a failed approach in the first instance, that encouraged the search for alternatives and a willingness to try these out. Over recent years, the Murray-Darling Basin Plan (Basin Plan), particularly in New South Wales, offers good examples in this regard.

This process of evolution by circumstance has been encouraged along the way by ongoing development of conceptual best-practice community engagement frameworks. A good example of this being the evolution of the International Association for Public Participation's spectrum (IAP2). There has also been regular updating of best-practice guidance from

international organisations such as the OECD, as well as Australian Government agencies such as the former Murray-Darling Basin Commission, the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) and the Office of Best Practice Regulation.

Prior to 2017, the former National Water Commission (NWC) made a number of observations on the evolution of community engagement best practice. For instance, in its 2014 assessment of NWI progress, the NWC commented that:

> Water reform has also supported people and communities. Consultation requirements for the development of water planning arrangements have now been incorporated into state and territory legislation or policies, and applied in practice in most cases. (NWC 2014, p. 83)

The NWC further noted that:

> In the urban context, the capacity for customers to provide input to service preferences and pricing structures has been improved, although it has a way to go; and that while evidence suggests that the urban sector is in the early stages of the implementation of customer choice options, there is still significant scope to improve the degree to which customers are able to influence customer service offerings, pricing outcomes, setting of strategic objectives and ensuring customer protection arrangements are in place. (NWC 2014, p. 124)

In its 2017 assessment of NWI progress, the Productivity Commission found that jurisdictions were largely meeting their commitments. Specifically, the Commission noted that:

> … State and Territory Governments had delivered improved decision making through open and timely consultation with stakeholders on water planning. This had been supported by the publication of relevant supporting information for consultation at key decision points.
>
> State and Territory Governments had taken steps to document the outcomes from water plans and whether plan objectives had been achieved. (PC 2017, p. 484)

Since 2017, jurisdictions have continued to largely meet their NWI commitments (*Assessment*) with respect to consultation. That said, some inquiry participants have raised instances of poor consultation practice (box 2) in New South Wales and in the MDB. An overall synthesis of MDB concerns is captured in Sefton et al:

> Across the [Murray-Darling] Basin trust in governments — particularly federal and state — to deliver good long-term policy and support rural and regional communities has been severely diminished. This fall in trust has resulted from a failure to adequately include people in conversations about government policy and their future, especially those who have not been on the upside of change. (2020, p. 1)

Box 2 Evidence on engagement practice is mixed

Inquiry participants and the Commission identified instances of inadequate and ineffective engagement processes over the past three years, generally within the NSW portion of the Murray–Darling Basin (MDB).

Review of NSW Water Sharing Plans

The Commission was advised by the office of the Interim Inspector-General of MDB Water Resources of a significant number of complaints regarding the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment's consultation process in developing the next iteration of NSW Water Sharing Plans (Interim Inspector-General of MDB Water Resources, pers. comm, 30 June 2020). This position has also been confirmed by other inquiry participants.

> Government processes have failed to sufficiently consult with, engage and/or empower community members and stakeholders to contribute to and participate in water reform. This has resulted in a significant erosion of trust and confidence in water reform decisions and processes. The recent NSW water sharing plan review process is a good example of this. This can be contrasted with the previous Land and Water Management Plan program, which are often described as the leading example of effective community water reform process and decision making. Nevertheless, a commitment by all governments to improved community engagement in water reform is required. (SunRice and RGA, sub. 82, p. 3)

NSW Water Rural Water Infrastructure engagement

The Murray Valley Private Diverters expressed a view that:

> A combined MDBA/Water NSW 20-year Infrastructure Options Plan is a good example of poor processes and failure to acknowledge the need for collaboration and involvement in early planning for stakeholder involvement and consultation … Consultation was subsequently described by NSW Government – Water NSW as being comprehensive, yet stakeholder feedback was limited to one meeting with little or no details provided. (sub. 101, pp. 22–23)

In response, the NSW Government advised that:

> WaterNSW undertook 101 meetings with customers and stakeholders through the three iterations of the 20-year Infrastructure Options Plan project (2016 to 2019). (sub. DR138, p. 13)

The Commission notes that WaterNSW did not confirm how many of its 101 meetings involved the Murray Valley Private Diverters group.

Environmental Watering

In its submission, the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations noted that:

> There is still a strong need for the [Commonwealth Environmental Water Office] to develop a more transparent and structured engagement approach so that all Nations are informed of options to participate and influence planning. (sub. 105, p. 6)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's engagement

The NSW Aboriginal Land Council stated that 'there are limited opportunities for Aboriginal people to influence water management' (sub. 96, p. 2). The Council similarly observed in a submission to the Commission's 2018 assessment of the Basin Plan that land councils in NSW had not been properly engaged in processes to develop water resource plans, and that engagement generally occurred 'at very short notice and not on the basis of free, prior and informed consent' (PC 2018, pp. 207–8).

(continued next page)

Box 2 (continued)

The Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations said that:

> There remains urgent concerns and deep suspicion regarding the development of [MDB] Supply Measure infrastructure projects. Current engagement and planning processes are grossly inadequate to address these concerns. …
>
> In NSW a series of new dam projects has highlighted deficiencies in First Nations consultation. Despite an announcement that pre-construction works on the Wyangala Dam wall-raising project will commence in October 2020, the NSW Government has not undertaken any meaningful consultation with Wiradjuri and other First Nations. (sub. 105, p. 12).

The Northern Land Council said that:

> In the NT over recent years, we have seen the continued erosion of the ability for community and stakeholders to be involved in water management decisions made by government which affect their rights and interests. (sub. DR134, p. 6)

In addition, the Council also expressed the view that:

> As highlighted in Part A of this submission, community engagement arrangements associated with water planning, licensing and management in the NT need to be significantly improved. (sub. DR134, p. 29)

Of particular note in this regard, the Council advised that:

> Based on information available through the water advisory committee minutes online, in 2017 there were a total of 80 people appointed to water advisory committees. As at 1 March 2021 there are 12.
>
> As there are no other formal mechanisms for the NT Government to involve community and stakeholders in water allocation planning, the substantial diminishing of water advisory committees since 2017 is of concern to the NLC. (sub,DR134, pp. 13-14)

Inquiry participants and the Commission also identified instances of innovative engagement practice — in the areas of water resource management and service provision.

- Sydney Water and Hunter Water, as part of preparing their most recent pricing submissions to the NSW Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal, used willingness-to-pay research to inform benefit-cost analysis of service options, supported by subsequent validation of survey findings at deliberative forums (Gillespie Economics 2020; The CIE 2020).
- Yarra Valley Water, as part of preparing its 2018–2023 pricing submission to the Victorian Essential Services Commission (ESC), used a Citizens Jury to help the organisation to understand and describe the services and outcomes that its customers expect (YVW 2017).
- The ESC implemented the PREMO water pricing framework on 1 July 2018 to encourage Victorian water businesses to deliver better value to their customers through the PREMO incentive mechanism, which focuses on five elements: performance, risk, engagement, management and outcomes. An independent performance review of PREMO released by the ESC in March 2019 found that it was successful in giving stronger emphasis to customer engagement, leading to price submissions that better reflected customer views (ESC 2019).
- The then Queensland Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy (now the Department of Regional Development, Manufacturing and Water) continued to operate its standing Water Engagement Forum across this period, which has enabled the Department to maintain regular monthly contact with its major stakeholders with a policy interest in water resource management and water service provision matters.

As a case study of contentious water reform, implementation of the Basin Plan illustrates very clearly the consequences of poorly executed community engagement. Despite many

engagement efforts, there are significant sections of the MDB community who remain highly dissatisfied with aspects of the Basin Plan.

This sentiment was reflected by a number of inquiry participants. For instance, Southern Riverina Irrigators expressed a view that:

> Water management in the Murray-Darling Basin is in absolute disarray as a result of consecutive governments not fully implementing the now largely mandated NWI 2004. (sub. 77, p. 2)

The Victorian Farmers Federation also commented that:

> Farmers remain confused about the inconsistencies in the NWI and conflicting policies in the National Water Initiative and the Commonwealth Water Act/Basin Plan Act. (sub. 99, p. 4)

And the MDBA (sub. 23, p. 12) added that:

> despite recent commitments by government to improve transparency and information sharing, stakeholder consultation continues to find that the needs of water users, communities and the broader public [in the MDB] are not being met.

This offers lessons for NWI renewal in particular highlighting the importance of clearer guidance on what would constitute contemporary best practice in this field.

Improvements in practice are needed. Apart from evidence of a need to address recent failings, communities increasingly expect to be actively engaged by governments when reform proposals are presented for their consideration. As the Victorian Water Industry Association observed:

> Communities must be more deeply involved in setting the overall direction for water resource management, which subsequently influences the choice and adoption of such policy instruments. (sub. 66, p. 1)

To improve the conduct of engagement practice, there are a number of issues for Australian governments to address.

2.1 Engagement processes are not always sufficient or effective

The Commission has heard a range of views on the sufficiency and effectiveness of community engagement processes conducted by some Australian governments during the past three years on water matters, particularly some of those conducted within the MDB. These, in turn, offer important learnings for national policy guidance in this field.

Engagement practice for MDB water matters was a particular focus for criticism from some inquiry participants. For instance, the Interim Inspector-General of MDB Water Resources found that:

> Many of the concerns that the inquiry heard *might have been redundant if individuals were able to readily see and understand the way available water has been shared over time*. (2020, p. 14) [emphasis added]

The Environmental Defenders Office also commented that:

> … many clients tell us that they do not think that they are able to influence outcomes through consultation processes (as they perceive outcomes as being largely pre-determined). Put differently, for many people the process itself lacks legitimacy which in turn means that they are suspicious of, and unwilling to accept, outcomes. (sub. 54, p. 20)

The Australian Water Association noted that:

> … the conduct of community partnership and engagement practice can be made more effective by enabling community input into water governance arrangements and enhancing the level of communication with community representatives. This gives a community greater confidence in the sustainable management of water resources. And stronger communications and near real-time reporting of information to community members enhances their level of trust. (sub. 89, p. 11)

Drawing from these comments, dissatisfaction about engagement practice will usually arise when:

- all impacted stakeholders are not heard, or when they are, they do not hear back anything in the discussion that indicates that they have been heard
- stakeholders could not understand why decisions were taken in the way that they were.

Differing stakeholders and issues may warrant different engagement approaches. Water users may have different needs from other stakeholders. The needs of rural and urban communities might likewise be different. Approaches to engaging during water planning might need to be different from those adopted in determining community preferences for water services provision. Governments need to ensure that their engagement efforts are fit for purpose, taking into account the scale of proposed change or reform, its sensitivities and its impacts. They also need to ensure that all stakeholders are provided with a real opportunity to meaningfully participate in the engagement process, and are proactively encouraged to do so.

2.2 Community engagement lacks constancy

While discrete, issue-based consultation is suitable for some water matters, many of the water management challenges now facing communities require ongoing engagement. A more effective approach in such instances would be a genuine and meaningful ongoing conversation with communities, particularly those seen to be at highest risk of rapid and significant impact from these challenges. Enduring and effective ongoing engagement will be particularly important for Traditional Owners.

As an example of this approach being put into action, the Commission notes that the MDBA has started to regionalise a presence across the MDB. While time will be needed to assess

the full benefit of this initiative, such proximity may allow more regular contact and conversation to occur. As the MDBA recognised in its submission:

> … audiences and stakeholder needs change both spatially and temporally in response to complex, interacting factors such as market forces, urbanisation, drought and water reform progress. Governments need to recognise this and continually evolve their approaches to meet the changing needs of stakeholders. (sub. 23, p. 12)

Reflecting this, the NFF observed that:

> While significant progress has been made in jurisdictions to improve consultation processes, many elements of the Basin Plan are complex, interdependent and contentious (particularly the implementation of the supply measures) and require committed and extensive consultation with communities, and other relevant stakeholders, over a reasonable timeframe. (sub. 42, p. 17)

The message for governments and NWI renewal is that conduct of genuine and meaningful engagement with communities on water management matters (particularly in any future rebalancing processes) should be more frequent; in effect, shifting from a case-by-case approach to one of ongoing business as usual. Greater frequency in engagement also needs to be supported by better coordination of these efforts between all levels of government including local government (LGNSW, sub. DR140, pp. 4,9), and particularly in multi-jurisdictional activities (as observed above by the NFF with respect to the Basin Plan).

Recognising the value of continuity in engagement practice in a renewed NWI will, as the Water Services Association of Australia observed, help to:

> … provide a transparent approach for Australians to engage on how water is managed, the effectiveness of the various institutions, and to a certain extent de-politicise direction setting and decision making by enabling customer and community views to be the lead voice. (sub. 88, p. 52)

2.3 Engagement is more effective where there is an informed community but there is a lack of consistent access to accurate and comprehensible water information

Since 2017, the Commission has observed evidence of growing public mistrust and a lack of confidence in aspects of Australian water management practice, particularly in the MDB (SP E *Integrity*). This is reflected in on-going concern from MDB stakeholders and communities about: a perceived lack of available water information; poor communication of water information that is available; difficulties faced by stakeholders in accessing and navigating public water data collections; and a perception of recent poor partnership and engagement performance across the MDB.

While Australian governments publish a wide range of water information products for use by different customer groups, these products can be difficult to access, navigate and understand. Again, recent MDB experience offers important lessons to all Australian governments in resetting NWI policy guidance on information provision. For instance, the Interim Inspector-General of MDB Water Resources found that the MDBA's management

of the River Murray system was not well understood by the community, and its processes and outcomes were not clearly set out in an easily accessible and readily available format (IIGMDB 2020, p. 29).

Where governments have information, they should endeavour to make it consistently available to water users and other water sector participants in:

- a public, and easily accessible manner
- as timely a manner as possible
- a form that is comprehensible, yet understandable and cost-effective without diminishing its accuracy.

In working towards this outcome, the MDBA (sub. 23, p. 12) has suggested shifting focus from providing more information about 'what Governments are doing' to providing better information addressing 'what water users need' to navigate the system, run their businesses and have confidence in management arrangements. A shift of this type would work towards creating an effective operating environment in which water users and communities have information that is accessible, understandable, timely, relevant and credible.

Water users and the broader community would benefit from having a greater understanding of water system management (SP E *Integrity*). In this vein, the Victorian Water Industry Association observed that:

> The new NWI will have great effect if it enables and empowers a new community-values narrative for water reform … Resilient decision-making requires communities to understand the water management risks and challenges so as to choose a collective destiny and a productive legacy. (sub. 66, p. 4)

To facilitate this, Australian governments should update the NWI's Community Partnership actions relating to information provision to include principles covering relevance to water sector participants' needs, public accessibility, accuracy and comprehensibility, timeliness and cost effectiveness. This will assist in creating an informed community who will be better able to engage in some of the potentially difficult water management decisions in the future. Having well-informed participation by all parties in the engagement processes leading up to such decisions will be crucial in achieving a broadly accepted and enduring agreement on the appropriate step(s) to be taken in responding to the particular water management challenge in question.

2.4 Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Principles specifically for future engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on water matters should be developed by the newly created national Committee on Aboriginal Water Interests. Effective engagement of Traditional Owners in key areas, including water planning, natural resource management and environmental water planning,

will need long-term relationships with local agencies working on Country. This is likely to require the provision of government funding support.

3 Embedding effective practice in a renewed NWI

As previously stated, recent MDB experiences offer lessons for NWI renewal. Foremost among these is the potential value of including a principles-based framework within the NWI to provide guidance on how to conduct effective engagement practice on water matters. As the NFF (sub. 42, p. 7) observed, 'more can be done by governments to clarify the principles of effective consultation processes in the NWI'. These principles should be based on the characteristics of effective engagement practice.

3.1 Developing a principles-based framework for effective practice

Engagement practice is an area not short on advice about what constitutes 'best practice'. There are many guidelines and leading-practice examples of community engagement. For instance, the Australian Government's Best Practice Consultation guidance note issued by the Office of Best Practice Regulation suggests that policy makers should consult:

> … in a genuine and timely way with affected businesses, community organisations and individuals; and with each other to avoid creating cumulative or overlapping regulatory burdens. (OBPR 2016, p. 1)

The same guidance note also suggests that consultation processes should be: continuous, broad-based, accessible, not burdensome, transparent, consistent and flexible, subject to evaluation and review, not rushed and not a means to an end (OBPR 2016).

Bassler et al. (2008) emphasised the following features of effective engagement: inclusivity, diversity, equality, transparency, legitimacy, deliberation, substance, influence, ongoing and accommodating.

Other leading practice examples include guidelines from:

- Australian Government agencies and the then Council of Australian Governments (COAG) (Australian Government 2016; COAG Energy Council 2016; MCMPR 2005)
- State and Territory Government departments (for example, NSW DPE 2017; NT EPA 2020; Vic DJPR 2019)
- international organisations, such as the OECD (OECD 2017a; OECD 2017b), the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2 2014), the US Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA 2008) and the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD 2009).

No description of best practice is markedly superior to the others. They cover similar ground, suggesting to the Commission that the characteristics of inclusiveness, timeliness, partnership,

respect, access to information, transparency, responsiveness and continuous improvement should be used by Australian governments as the building blocks for national guidance on effective community engagement and information provision practice in water resource management and water service provision.

Frameworks are a useful tool for crafting a principles-based approach to the conduct of community engagement and information provision practice. A commonly cited engagement framework is the IAP2 public participation spectrum, which posits that effective engagement:

- enables those affected by a decision to be involved in the decision-making process
- promises that the public's contribution will influence the decision
- recognises and communicates the needs and interests of all participants
- seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by, or interested in, a decision
- seeks input from participants in designing how they participate
- provides participants with the information they need to participate meaningfully
- enables participants to see how their input affected the decision (International Association for Public Participation 2019a).

Using the IAP2 spectrum would enable governments to adopt a fit-for-purpose approach to designing engagement processes taking into account, the goals, timeframes, resources and levels of impact of the decision to be made (figure 1). In addition, governments must be honest and transparent with communities about the purpose of their consultation and their role in that instance of decision making, and ensure that all stakeholders are provided with a real opportunity to meaningfully participate in the engagement process, and are proactively encouraged to do so.

Drawing on the above, the Commission considers that a useful starting point for Australian governments in redesigning the community partnership element of the NWI would be to develop an organising framework based around objectives of:

- continuously improving and sustaining government engagement effort across all aspects of water resource management and water service provision
- coordinating engagement actions between all levels of government, particularly in multi-jurisdictional activities
- ensuring that engagement effort and its resourcing are fit for purpose taking into account the scale of proposed change or reform, its sensitivities and its impacts
- ensuring that governments are clear about purpose of their engagement and the role of communities in decision making
- ensuring that all stakeholders have the opportunity to meaningfully input to the engagement process, and are proactively encouraged to do so
- improving the effectiveness of community engagement through enhancing:

– water information accessibility and comprehensibility (SP E *Integrity*)

– community water literacy (SP E *Integrity*).

Figure 1 **The IAP2 community engagement spectrum[a]**

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Participation goal:	To provide the public with information to help them understand issues and opportunities	To obtain feedback	To work with the public to ensure that concerns are understood and considered	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision	To place final decision making in the hands of the public
Participation promise:	We will keep you informed	We will keep you informed, listen to concerns and seek feedback	We will work with you to ensure your concerns and aspirations are reflected in the alternative options developed	We will look to you for advice and incorporate your advice to the maximum extent possible	We will implement what you decide

a IAP2 is the International Association for Public Participation's framework for community engagement.

Source: International Association for Public Participation (2019b).

Development of best-practice principles to support achievement of these objectives should aim to establish a platform enabling:

- effective consideration of diverse interests and expectations through processes that offer all participants genuine opportunities to influence decisions
- design of engagement processes that are fit for purpose
  - processes should be in line with the IAP2 spectrum; and the participation promise, or planned level of engagement, should be clear at the outset of any process
- participants to access the information for analysis; and time for participants to contribute
- building of an engagement culture, where all stakeholders' views are valued
- communication of decisions in an open, transparent and accessible manner
- regular review and reporting by governments of their engagement efforts to ensure ongoing effectiveness.

4 NWI renewal advice

Effective, thorough, well-informed community engagement practice is needed to support reform in all aspects of water resource management and service provision. The Commission's advice aims to contemporise guidance on effective community engagement practice and information provision in a renewed NWI.

NWI RENEWAL ADVICE 15.1: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

Australian governments should recommit to best-practice, cost-effective engagement with their communities on all water matters. To achieve this, a renewed National Water Initiative should develop a community engagement framework focused on:

- continuously improving and sustaining government engagement effort across all aspects of water resource management and water service provision
- coordinating engagement actions between all levels of government, particularly in multi-jurisdictional activities
- ensuring that engagement effort and its resourcing are fit for purpose taking into account the scale of proposed change or reform, its sensitivities and its impacts
- ensuring that governments are clear about the purpose of their engagement and the role of communities in decision making
- ensuring that all stakeholders have the opportunity to meaningfully input to the engagement process, and are proactively encouraged to do so
- improving the effectiveness of community engagement through enhancing:
  - water information accessibility and comprehensibility
  - community water literacy

This framework should adopt the characteristics of inclusiveness, timeliness, partnership, respect, access to information, transparency, responsiveness and continuous improvement as a best-practice foundation for effective community engagement and information provision practice in water resource management and water service provision.

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