



Natural
Resources
Commission

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

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1 Overview

This document sets out a strategy for stakeholder engagement for the Natural Resources Commission (the Commission).

The purpose is to provide a well-evidenced approach to plan and manage stakeholder engagement in our work. The Commission has legislative responsibilities to review the effectiveness of complex natural resource management issues and to provide independent advice to the NSW Government – to do this we must effectively engage key stakeholders and be trusted by those we seek to advise. Meaningfully valuing and engaging our stakeholders (including Government) as knowledge holders and natural resource managers will help to enhance the relevance, utility and impact of our recommendations.

An *Aboriginal Engagement Strategy* provides more specific guidance on how to engage with Aboriginal peoples, including protocols for public reports and events. A *Stakeholder Engagement Toolkit* will also supplement the Strategy; to provide step-by-step engagement guides including templates, resources, key questions and examples.

1.1 What is stakeholder engagement?

Stakeholders can include individuals, organisations or groups and are defined as having a specific stake in the outcome of a decision¹. This stake can stem from the potential to influence the decision, and/or be influenced by the decision². Our stakeholders at the Commission include: the Minister for Planning and Public Spaces as our lead Minister, the NSW Premier and relevant Ministers; implementation and partner agencies (e.g. Department of Planning, Industry and Environment); interested parties (e.g. Aboriginal groups, NGOs, industry groups, community groups, private land managers/owners); and experts (e.g. academics, consultants). Our internal stakeholder engagement is also important between staff, executive and commissioners.

Stakeholder engagement is the process by which we work and communicate with our external and internal stakeholders. It can involve informing, listening, gathering feedback, involving, or partnering. Stakeholder engagement at the Commission comprises a range of methods – from simple forms of one-way information provision (e.g. emails, newsletters, submission process), to consultative approaches (e.g. interviews, workshops, listening tours/forums), and highly collaborative efforts (e.g. partnerships, co-design).

1.2 Why do we need to do it?

The Commission's most significant natural resource issues are in policy spaces where the balance between protecting landscapes and how we use and value them is highly contested (e.g. forestry, public land management, water management). We typically deal with 'wicked policy problems' which require holistic thinking and broader, more collaborative approaches.³

The institutional environment is also complex and responsibilities to deliver policies are devolved across three tiers of government, multiple agencies, and are typically characterised by diverse and persistent views on how best to manage these natural resources. Our work is

¹ Greene, Jennifer (2005) "Stakeholders". In *Encyclopedia of Evaluation*, edited by S. Mathison. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 397-8.

² United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) (2017) *Principles for Stakeholder Engagement*. UNEG Working Paper SO2 Use of Evaluation, November.

³ Australian Public Service Commission (2016) *Tackling wicked problems: A public policy perspective*. See: <https://www.apsc.gov.au/tackling-wicked-problems-public-policy-perspective>

increasingly visible in the media and public spheres and can be subject to scepticism due to a history of government action on these issues.

A single focus on rigorous environmental, technological or economic solutions are simply not enough to achieve balance within these contested spaces. Our work can suffer from implementation failure or reduced effectiveness by overlooking the importance of involving the people using and managing these natural resources. Stakeholder understanding, involvement, and ownership is critical to formulating well-balanced advice and ensuring effective solutions are sustainably implemented by those stakeholders with an interest in the outcome.

Effective engagement provides many benefits to our work – understanding these drivers helps us to champion engagement throughout our projects.

- Enhance public confidence in the Commission and its decision-making processes
- Improve public transparency, acceptance and ownership of decisions
- Strengthen the knowledge, confidence, skills and capability of involved stakeholders
- Inform more robust and rigorous advice to government by strengthening scientific findings with local information and stakeholder life experience
- Identify new, alternative and shared ideas
- Help to reduce conflicts through open and transparent communication
- Improve risk management by better understanding the diversity and extent of social, economic and environmental issues
- Increase the equity of impacts across diverse stakeholder groups
- Improve the effectiveness of communication strategies by better understanding and tailoring to stakeholders' values and needs
- Develop long-lasting stakeholder relationships to strengthen the sustainability, effectiveness and efficiency of initiatives.

1.3 How will the Strategy help us?

This Strategy will help in the delivery of our core business – providing rigorous, independent natural resource management advice to government that delivers better outcomes on the ground.

The Strategy aligns with the aims of our [Strategic Plan](#)⁴, community ownership outcomes of the [Performance Standard for Local Land Services](#)⁵, and our [Customer Service Goals](#). It provides a good practice approach to stakeholder engagement in the planning, governance, implementation and evaluation of our work.

⁴ Natural Resources Commission (2018) *Strategic Plan*. Available at: www.nrc.nsw.gov.au/content-update-app/about-nrc-new

⁵ Natural Resources Commission (2015) *Performance Standard for Local Land Services*. Available at: <https://www.nrc.nsw.gov.au/performance-standard-lls>

The Strategy has been developed to:

- Meet increasing public and political expectations to engage
- Strengthen our commitment to meaningful engagement
- Draw together existing engagement skills and experience in the Commission
- Bring our efforts into line with good practice approaches to stakeholder engagement
- Address the challenges and diversity of engagement through a flexible, fit-for-purpose and principled approach
- Minimise dependency on key staff with specialist knowledge and experience
- Promote organisational learning, sharing of knowledge and experience
- Assist engagement practice through integration in governance and project management systems and processes e.g. toolkits, training

1.4 How is it consistent with good practice?

The Strategy draws from well-recognised international approaches to engagement including those set out by the [International Association for Public Participation](#) (IAP2). It will also comprise a *Stakeholder Engagement Toolkit* with more detailed methods of engagement.

Increased levels of public participation are widely recognised as best practice in public policy both internationally and nationally. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) advocates that governments have a key role to play in supporting meaningful public participation through open government⁶. The NSW Government have promoted this approach through a range of frameworks and guidelines including the [Charter for Public Participation \(2018\)](#)⁷, which is integrated in the [Performance Standard for Local Land Services](#).

Alongside these government drivers, there is a movement towards more active public involvement in public policy matters, including through social media and increasing information technology. In natural resources policy, public interest has been fuelled by a much greater understanding of environmental issues and access to information, as well as increasing local community activism. This has raised public expectations of their involvement in natural resource debates and issues.

⁶ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2005) *Modernising Government: The Way Forward*.

⁷ NSW Information and Privacy Commission (2018) *Charter for Public Participation – a guide to assist agencies and promote citizen engagement*. NSW Government, June.

2 A strategic approach to stakeholder engagement

A common commitment, principles and supporting actions are critical to delivering effective stakeholder engagement across the variety and complexity of the Commission's work.

2.1 Why are we doing it?

Our commitment: we value stakeholders as important knowledge holders who have a right to participate in government decisions and help us to design and deliver independent advice. We undertake meaningful engagement to develop effective natural resource management advice for government and build ongoing relationships and outcomes.

Our objectives are to:

- Improve the quality of our advice by understanding stakeholders' values, impacts, experiences, needs and expectations in natural resource management – to build on scientific knowledge and identify alternative approaches
- Generate awareness, knowledge and capability among stakeholders about our projects, changes to policy/legislation, complex ideas or technical information
- Provide opportunities for stakeholders to contribute to the evidence base for government decision-making
- Foster mutual trust and respect between stakeholders, and with the Commission, to reduce conflict and find acceptable solutions

2.2 What are our principles?

The following sets out the key principles for stakeholder engagement in our work. The principles are based on the [IAP2 Quality Assurance Standard \(2015\)](#)⁸. These guide all our engagement activities and are supplemented by further principles specific to Aboriginal engagement in the attached module.



We believe
people play an
important role in
our work

We recognise that those who are potentially affected by our decisions not only have a right to be involved in the decision-making process but can also be important knowledge holders that help us to design and deliver credible and relevant advice.



We know why we
are engaging

We allow the time to consider why we are engaging so that our efforts are meaningful. This involves identifying the rationale and objectives for engagement and communicating this clearly.



We know who to
engage with and
value their input

We seek out and facilitate the engagement of people that have an interest in our work. We set aside the time for good planning to ensure systematic and inclusive representation from a diverse range of stakeholders. We believe in listening to peoples' experience 'on their patch', to understand their values and needs.

⁸ International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) (2015) *Quality Assurance Standard for Community and Stakeholder Engagement*. Available online: www.iap2.org.au



We establish how best to engage and communicate this clearly

We identify best practice ways of engaging tailored to the nature of the project and its stakeholders. We communicate this clearly to everyone who needs to know about it and provide the information required for people to participate in a meaningful way.



We plan well and engage early

We undertake engagement planning as part of the project planning process. This plan is communicated clearly and early on to support engagement across project stages and allow time for discussion and debate before decisions are made.



We seek creative and engaging opportunities to work with people

We engage in creative and innovative ways to enhance participation and harness insight from a range of sources. We are flexible to different stakeholder interests, with a focus on problem solving and shared solutions, rather than 'box ticking'.



We are genuine, ethical and respectful

We are genuine and abide by ethical standards in engaging with stakeholders, ensuring respect and sensitivity to stakeholder's diversity and rights. We work in open and transparent ways to build relationships and trust.






We seek feedback and evaluate our engagement

We communicate with our stakeholders by providing regular updates on the project and engagement process, including the ways in which we have used their input and the reasons for our decisions. We also seek feedback on the effectiveness of our engagement efforts – for accountability and learning.

2.3 How will we implement it?

While the drivers and benefits of engagement are compelling, it is important to acknowledge that the effective use of engagement in government decision-making remains limited. There is much public distrust and cynicism about consultation that has resulted from often tokenistic efforts at community consultation. There are many reasons for this; including that engagement is intensive in time, resource and skill requirements, and capability in engagement is often lacking.

The Commission recognises these challenges and aims to redress limitations in government consultation efforts through implementing a well-evidenced and resourced Strategy. This will be supported through three implementation focus areas within the Commission, to:

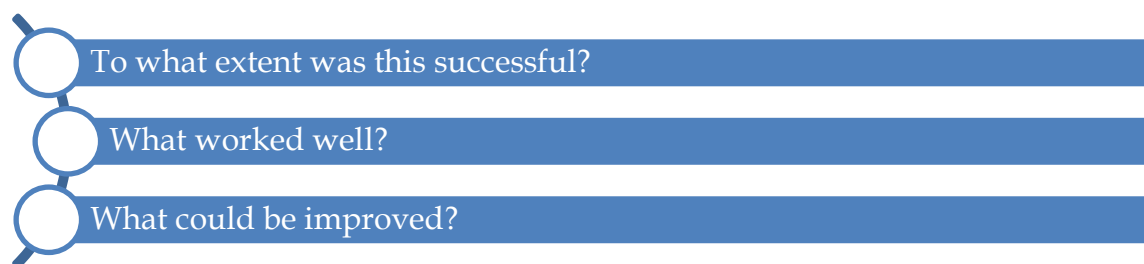
-  Build on organisational commitment
-  Foster and develop good practice
-  Review and improve business systems and processes

An **Action Plan** will be developed to detail specific actions against the Strategy objectives and implementation areas, including for Aboriginal stakeholder engagement and cultural competency – this action plan will be updated annually.

2.4 How will we measure and evaluate?

The delivery of the stakeholder engagement action plan will be monitored and assessed through the annual strategic plan reporting cycle. A combination of qualitative and quantitative measures will be used to assess progress.⁹

A series of evaluation questions will also be included in the annual report for each of the actions as follows:



This will provide an opportunity to reflect on and learn from our stakeholder engagement experiences.

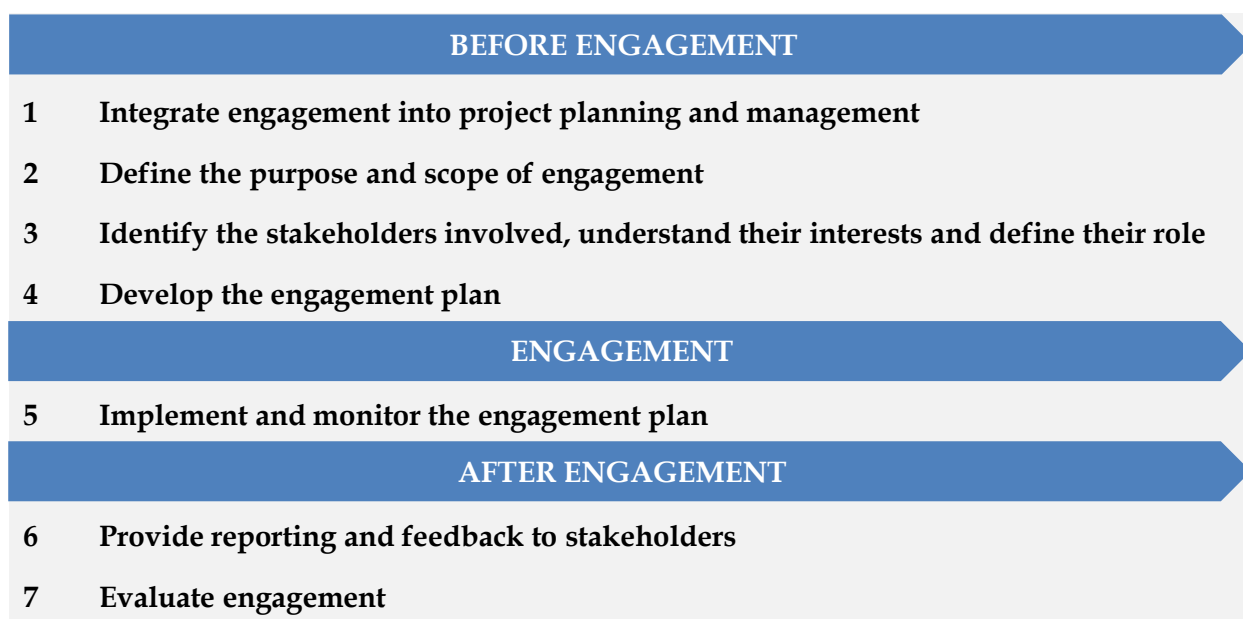
⁹ Examples of measures include:

- stakeholder feedback through projects using feedback forms, online surveys
- one-on-one feedback with stakeholders via email or telephone
- satisfaction surveys and measures via online platforms, website, webinars
- complaints reporting.

3 Practising stakeholder engagement

There are common, best practice elements to any engagement process that can be applied to guide stakeholder engagement across diverse projects.

The seven elements below reflect a best practice approach to engagement. These occur across the project cycle, however much of the effort is comprised in the initial project planning phase. Although these are presented as linear, reflection and adaptation are required throughout as part of an iterative process of learning about, and working with, our stakeholders.



The *Stakeholder Engagement Toolkit* includes supporting templates, resources, key questions and examples. These tools will form a key part of the second action area of the Strategy to 'Foster and develop good practice'.

4 Document control

Date approved	February 2021
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Approving Officer	Executive Director
Changes made during the last revision	Inaugural review of the strategy and updates.

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