A Guide for Engaging Communities

in Environmental Planning and Decision Making

our environment *it's a living thing*

Department of **Environment and Conservation** NSW

Lessons from stormwater management in NSW

From 1998 to 2004, the NSW Government's Urban Stormwater Education Program (USEP) worked in partnership with local councils and other stakeholders to clean up waterways around NSW. One of the main lessons was that community engagement and support is crucial to achieving environmental outcomes.

This brochure has been derived from the content of a USEP training course, and is based on *Community Engagement in the NSW Planning System (DIPNR, 2003)*. It draws on the literature on good practice community engagement, on USEP research and on the Strengthening Rural Communities Resource Kit. It also uses evaluation and case studies to assist those who have responsibilities for environmental management to be more effective.

Why involve your community?

In recent years, there has been a shift in the way that council planners and water managers work with their communities. Councils across the country are realising that the community can play an integral part in maintaining and enhancing the local environment. Information or consultation approaches were once considered sufficient for involving the community. Now, many councils are finding new ways to foster public participation in planning and decision-making. Actively listening to the knowledge and ideas of community members, and facilitating their role in making changes, can improve decisions and results.

This change to deeper levels of public participation is being driven by a number of factors:

- Increased public expectation

  Unsatisfying and often tokenistic 'community consultation' techniques have added to public distrust and cynicism about consultation. The public now has a much greater understanding of environmental issues. As well, there is an increasing tendency for professionals within the community to apply their professional skills to issues affecting their local community. This has generated a movement towards more active involvement in environmental matters.

- Reduced conflict

  Council managers are looking to participative methods as a means of minimising conflict with the public. These methods require more time and patience, but they are seen as being worth the effort because they allow disparate views to be heard and reconciled in a more controlled 'rational space'.

- Risk management and technical competence

  Participative approaches are viewed as minimising the risk of social, economic and environmental damage that can result from complex water management projects. Incorporating diverse perspectives results in a better knowledge base, particularly where they include the life experiences of those affected.

- Good governance

  Increased levels of public participation are widely recognised as representing best practice in governance, both internationally[1], and locally. The NSW Government's benchmark manual, *Community Engagement in the NSW Planning System (DIPNR 2003)*, strongly advocates early engagement of the community in both plan-making, and development assessment[2].

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[1] For instance OECD. 2001. Citizens as Partners: Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-Making – a manual.

[2] It can be viewed at www.iplan.nsw.gov.au/engagement

- **Value for money**

  Participative approaches allow a sense of public ownership of on-ground works. This contributes to more sustained return on investments due to:

  1. decreased management costs: e.g, less vandalism, people respecting and 'adopting' trees, residents maintaining landscaping and other installed infrastructure;

  2. behavioural changes: e.g, reduced stormwater pollution by neighbours; and

  3. ongoing volunteer contributions: e.g, Bushcare groups, Landcare, local neighbourhood associations, etc.

Concepts and tools for managing community engagement

Effective community engagement requires an understanding of the basic concepts of public participation, and of the ways in which communities can influence the ultimate decision.

These are usefully set out in *Community Engagement in the NSW Planning System*. This manual adopts a *Spectrum of Public Participation*[3] as a way of making sense of the broad range of agency-community relationships.

The spectrum is a tool that categorises relationships between an agency and its public, according to the degree of shared control over the process of decision-making.

Virtually every type of community-government relationship can be mapped onto this spectrum. The spectrum (over page) shows the engagement commitment that is expected by those involved in the process. It is critical that councils analyse, and clearly articulate to those involved, the level of power and control they will have over the ultimate decision.

Community engagement is not a magic wand that can be waved to ensure that all parties are happy. Ineffective or tokenistic community consultation can be detrimental to the good faith of the community in the long term. This is why community engagement must be carried out in a clear and transparent manner that provides all participants with an understanding of the process, and the range of possible outcomes. Table 1 should assist you to ensure that you maintain your commitment to the public. It will also provide some suggested methods of engagement.

The spectrum is a valuable tool because it recognises that 'higher' levels of community participation allow for:

- increased potential for conflict resolution;

- increased capacity for critical thinking and innovation; and

- increased capacity for problem-solving.

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3 Developed by the International Association for Public Participation: see www.iap2.org

Table 1: The IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

		Definition	Promise to the public	Examples of methods
Increasing Level of Public Impact	Empower	To place final decision-making power in the hands of the public.	We will implement what you decide.	• Management committees • Referenda
	Collaborate	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision, including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions, and we will incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	• Planning forums • Citizen advisory committees • Joint projects
	Involve	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public issues and concerns are consistently understood and considered.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and issues are directly reflected in the alternatives developed; we will provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	• Workshops • Planning forums
	Consult	To obtain feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	• Exhibition of plans • Focus groups • Surveys • Consultative meetings • Precinct committees
	Inform	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives and/or solutions.	We will keep you informed.	• Media stories • Education campaigns • Websites • Information meetings
	Non-participation	Influencing public support for a product or proposal.	Our product or proposal will perform as promised.	• Public relations • Marketing • Social marketing

Source: www.iplan.nsw.gov.au/engagement

A tool for decision-makers

Matching the right level of participation to the needs of the agency, and the likely expectations of the public, is vital. This process will help to minimise conflict, control project risks and maximise the technical effectiveness of decision-making.
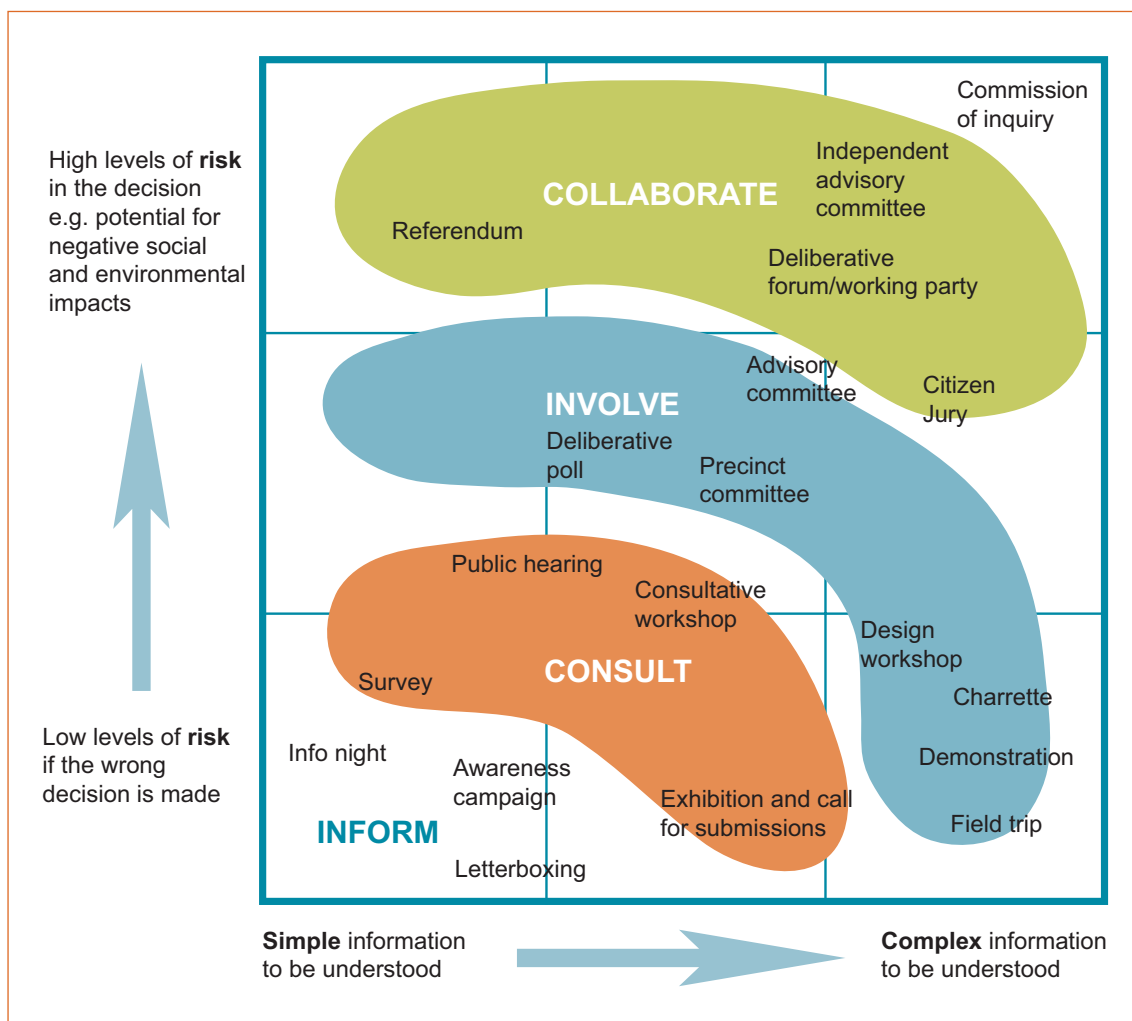
When paired with a decision support tool, such as the *Public Participation Matrix* (below), the spectrum becomes a powerful system to aid decision-makers in selecting the appropriate level of public participation for a given situation.

There are many situations where INFORM-level methods are perfectly appropriate and acceptable to the public – for instance, when introducing a new recycling system.

Equally, there are many situations where COLLABORATE-level methods are more appropriate – when assessing a tender for a controversial industrial facility[4].

Figure 1: The Public Participation Matrix
The full decision tool can be downloaded from the author's website: http://media.socialchange.net.au/people/les

High levels of **risk** in the decision e.g. potential for negative social and environmental impacts

Low levels of **risk** if the wrong decision is made

COLLABORATE

Commission of inquiry

Independent advisory committee

Referendum

Deliberative forum/working party

Advisory committee

Citizen Jury

INVOLVE

Deliberative poll

Precinct committee

Public hearing

Consultative workshop

Design workshop

CONSULT

Survey

Charrette

Info night

Awareness campaign

Demonstration

Exhibition and call for submissions

Field trip

INFORM

Letterboxing

Simple information to be understood

Complex information to be understood

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[4] A good example of COLLABORATIVE methods used to resolve community-agency conflict over the siting of a major waste management facility can be seen at www.mrc.wa.gov.au

Success factors for participative projects

What makes for successful 'high participation' projects?

Here are some interesting examples from councils that have undertaken successful projects that involve high levels of community participation.

- Lake Macquarie Council has mobilised 20 community and school groups to monitor and report on the management of constructed wetlands;

- Gosford City Council partnered with a community advocacy group, the Central Coast Environment Network, to run a planning forum and implement educational initiatives to rehabilitate a degraded urban creek;

- Great Lakes Council invited local builders, developers and contractors to collaboratively create a Development Control Plan for water-sensitive urban design;

- Marrickville Council runs its educational shopfront, The Watershed in King St Newtown, entirely with volunteer labour; the volunteers self-develop and run most of the educational activities; and

- Waverley Council used a 'citizen jury' of 15 lay people to develop its Integrated Stormwater Management Plan. The jury heard expert evidence and made detailed recommendations, which were fully adopted by the Council.

There are many other examples of community involvement by local government across the state.

It is clear that the choice of method (e.g, citizen jury vs stakeholder workshop) is important, but success also depends on the quality of the relationships underpinning the process.

Successful projects are those that build good person-to-person relationships, that treat participants with respect, and are free from perceptions of hidden agendas. It definitely helps if the council or agency is genuinely interested in public collaboration, and is prepared to act on the results - or is at least willing to give reasoned explanations why it is unable to do so.

Perhaps the biggest success factor is honesty. Honesty makes it possible to establish clear ground rules based upon full disclosure of the constraints that affect the decision-making power of the agency.

Clear ground rules, clearly communicated, turn out to be tremendously important. Unclear ground rules almost always result in frustrated expectations and conflict. On the other hand, there is evidence that members of the public will accept adverse decisions, so long as open, respectful processes have been followed.

The following 'Success factor' checklists are based on a review of international literature, plus lessons from NSW Stormwater Trust projects. They are important to consider when you are undertaking community engagement projects.

"It is clear that the choice of method is important, but success depends on the quality of the relationships underpinning the process."

Checklist 1: Qualities of intention

☐ **Agency commitment:** Is the lead agency genuinely committed to public participation?

☐ **Framing:** Does the process focus on issues that the participants believe to be important? Does the process focus on the common good (not simply on the agency's needs)?

☐ **Meaningful:** Is the purpose clear? Is it linked to authoritative decision-making? Can you give a commitment that something will happen as a result?

☐ **Shared decision-making:** Will you start the process early, without set ideas in advance? ('a blank sheet', or as close as possible to one)

☐ **Preliminary research:** Have you had initial discussions with local players and residents to ensure that you understand local issues and perceptions?

☐ **Representation:** Do the participants represent all relevant players, including minority interests (youth, indigenous, non English speaking background [NESB], disabled)?

☐ **A multidisciplinary team:** Is the project supported by all necessary branches of your organisation?

Checklist 2: Qualities of process

☐ **Access:** Is there physical access at times and places that suit the participants?

☐ **Responsiveness:** Can the participants genuinely influence the agenda, process and timeline? Will participants' requests for more information be met; where they will not, will reasons be given? Will minutes be taken? Will people see their words in print?

☐ **Neutrality:** Is there a skilled, neutral facilitator (especially where conflict exists)? Have you considered running the project as a partnership with a local organisation or group? Have you considered an independent chair?

☐ **Relationships:** Will the ground rules facilitate respect, openness, honesty, understanding, listening and trust? Will the process build better personal relationships (an 'extended family')? Will it be fun? Will there be food?

☐ **Depth of analysis:** Will the process go beyond assertions, and try to empirically verify facts? Can the process commission new research? Will the process reflect on the values underlying the discussion? Will participants have to give reasons for their assertions?

☐ **The coordinator:** Is the coordinator enthusiastic and approachable?

☐ **Honouring commitments:** Will you be specific about your commitments, and follow through (or explain why)?

☐ **Visible results:** Will something observable happen as a result of the process?

A step-by-step process for community engagement

There is a natural tendency for project managers to jump to conclusions about the appropriate community engagement methods for a given situation. This is a rather hazardous enterprise – akin to flying blind. Instead, it is recommended that a regular step-by-step development process be followed. Such a process must include formative research to help managers understand how the issues are perceived by the public and other players. This must happen before the project commences.

A process that could be followed is shown in Figure 2. Following such a process will ensure that the critical steps of engagement are not missed.
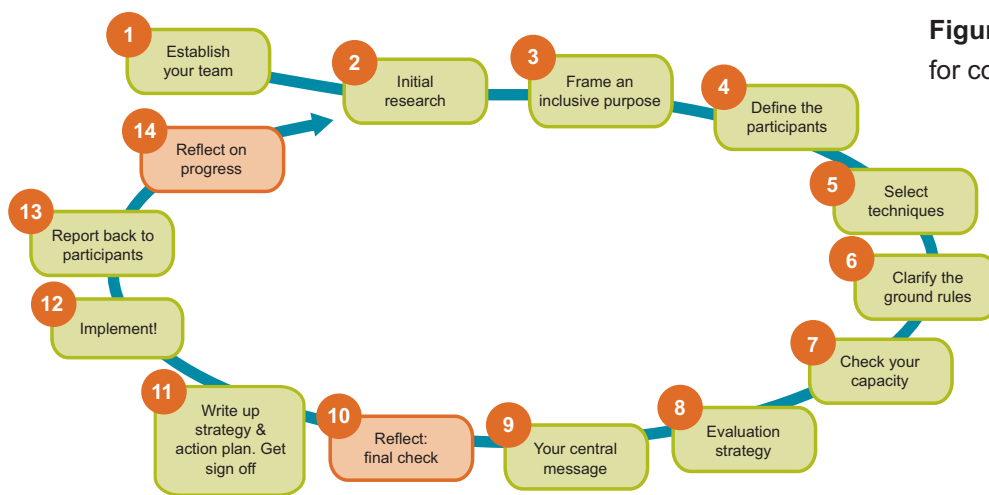

Figure 2: Step-by-step process for community engagement

1. Establish your team
2. Initial research
3. Frame an inclusive purpose
4. Define the participants
5. Select techniques
6. Clarify the ground rules
7. Check your capacity
8. Evaluation strategy
9. Your central message
10. Reflect: final check
11. Write up strategy & action plan. Get sign off
12. Implement!
13. Report back to participants
14. Reflect on progress

Outcomes of effective community engagement

There are five major reasons why you would engage your community

1. More Effective Projects – participants become owners of the outcomes.

2. Trust and Credibility – builds relationships, and allows the community to understand the constraints.

3. Cost Savings – high engagement projects mobilise volunteer energy.

4. Technical Competence – knowledge is captured through engagement; people bring depth, historical knowledge and new ideas to projects.

5. Better Management of Environmental, Social and Political Risks – increase the perception of openness and fairness, and reduce risks of conflict.

There are some real advantages in councils working with their community. Councils need to get the community on board at varying times, and to different degrees, to assist with achieving successful outcomes for environmental projects. The power, willingness and capacity of the community to assist local government with its work on the environment will ensure improved environmental outcomes, and a sustainable future for us all.