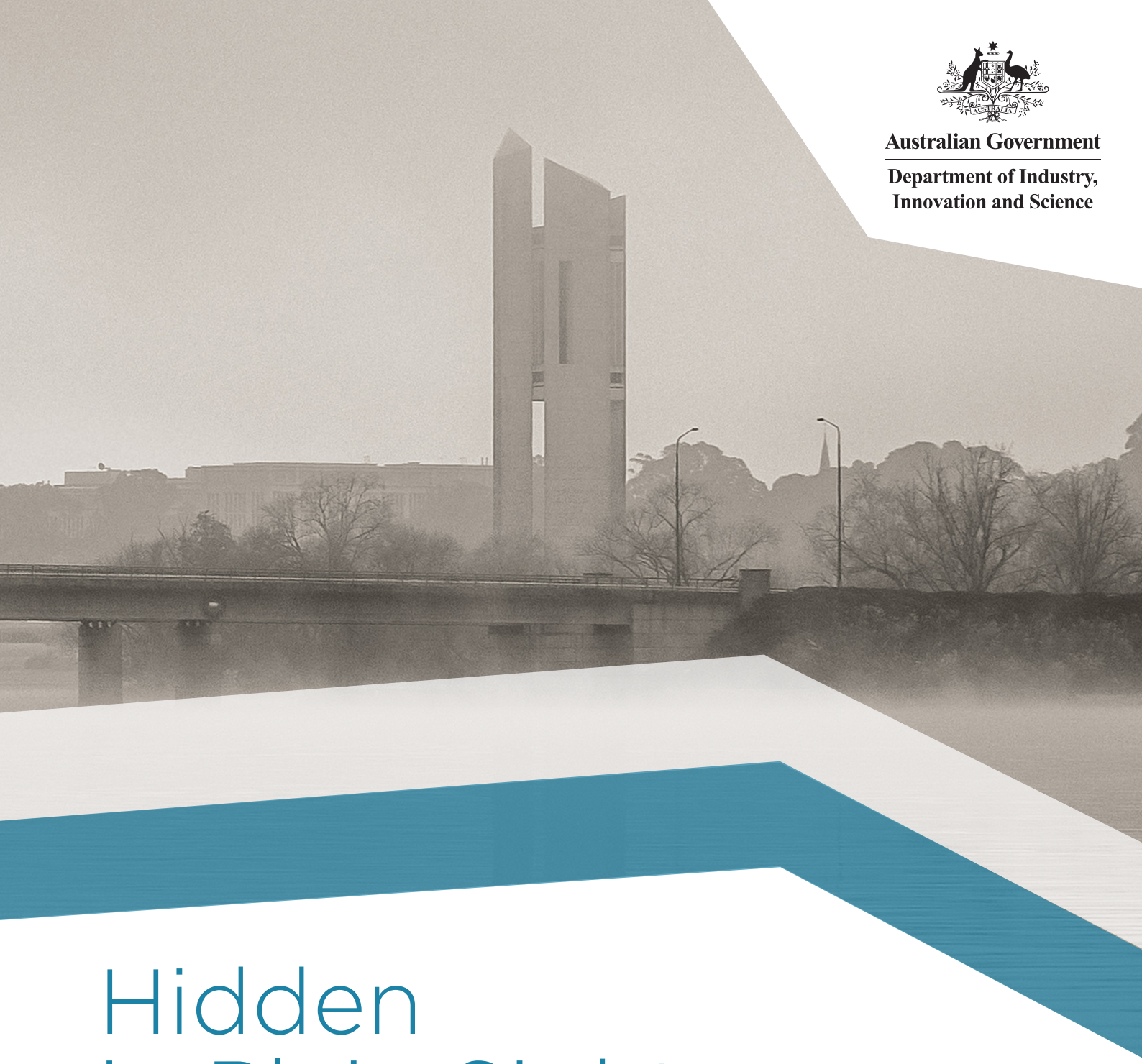

Australian Government
Department of Industry, Innovation and Science

Hidden in Plain Sight:

Building an understanding of how the Australian Public Service can unlock community expertise to improve policy, programmes and service delivery.

Open Government Partnership

AUSTRALIA'S FIRST OPEN GOVERNMENT NATIONAL ACTION PLAN 2016–18

Discover phase summary report
Commitment 5.2 of Australia's first
Open Government National Action Plan

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Executive Summary

Better use of the expertise in the broader community can help address complexity in public policy and enhance confidence in government. The expertise is there and the holders want to contribute. There is a real opportunity to develop more creative and innovative solutions which is not being grasped. It is as if it is right in front of us – hidden in plain sight.

The Australian Public Service (APS) is missing opportunities to develop more innovative and valued solutions to complex public policy problems due to a lack of effective engagement with the expertise available in business, academia and the general community.

For the APS to seize the opportunity, it will require a significant shift in its current thinking and a willingness on the behalf of civil society to set aside some of their scepticism. The building of greater trust and confidence in the relationships between the APS and civil society will be essential. The implementation of an APS wide framework for engagement and participation can raise the awareness of the methods and benefits of engagement, support the fundamentals, and help the APS to think differently.

To understand why the APS does not engage the expertise in the community more readily, the project team conducted user research. We undertook ethnographic user interviews with 38 APS employees from 13 departments/ agencies and 37 people from the community across 29 organisations, including business, industry associations/peak bodies, engagement practitioners, not for profits and academia.

The APS interviews showed that awareness and practical experience of how to engage the community beyond traditional information sharing and consultation approaches is patchy across the APS. Consultation often has an emphasis on obtaining buy-in rather than accessing expertise. There is hesitation in applying more deliberative and collaborative approaches, in part due to a perception of risk and a lack of value for the effort required. Sometimes external constraints such as legal or parliamentary processes exclude more open dialogue.

The non-APS interviews showed that those in civil society see themselves as having specific expertise with unique and useful perspectives to bring to the table on matters of public policy and that it is in the public interest for them to do so. There is a level of scepticism with the motivations of government engagement. The community is pragmatic and realistic, they are aware of and appreciate some of the constraints that public servants face.

The insights from the user research were supported by the findings of a stocktake of current engagement practices across 13 APS departments. While the APS engages the public in a wide variety of ways, the majority of engagement practices focus on information sharing and consultation. Many of the practices, such as submissions processes and feedback mechanisms, were transactional in nature and did not engender a sense of valuing an ongoing relationship with the community. The majority of the respondents cited the 'authorising environment' as a recurring barrier, which prevented more meaningful consultation with the public. Respondents also identified a number of areas of improvement in order to build ongoing relationship with the public.

The research suggests that the potential rewards from more effective engagement with the community are significant. It is also clear that an APS wide framework can support better engagement if it is designed in a way that addresses: the different methods and tools of good engagement; the value of meaningful engagement with the public, helps public servants choose the right way to engage for the issue they

have; helps them navigate internal processes and think differently about their role and the role of community expertise. To this end a number of design questions have been developed in response to the challenges identified in the research. These questions will be launch pads for ideas in the create phase.

Technology has the potential to remove some of the barriers to better engagement. The research in this report has and will continue to inform the Business Research and Innovation Initiative (BRII) challenge to develop a platform that digitally enables community engagement in policy, programme and service design.

Every agency in the APS has key stakeholders and different ways of engaging those stakeholders. The research has shown that these relationships can be transactional, made up of a series of single issue interactions. This does not necessarily need to be the case. A quick win from this research could be for departments to assess the nature of the relationship with key stakeholders, and to the extent possible move to a partnership model.

Introduction

In December 2016, the Australian Government announced the first Open Government Partnership National Action Plan. The report forms part of the work under Commitment 5.2 of the action plan which is focussed on enhancing public participation in policy development and service delivery.

Australia's first Open Government National Action Plan

The Open Government Partnership (OGP) is a multi-lateral initiative that aims to secure concrete commitments from governments to advance open government efforts. In November 2015, the Commonwealth Government reaffirmed Australia's commitment to join the OGP. Every two years, OGP members must work with the public to transparently and publicly co-create a National Action Plan. In December 2016, the Commonwealth Government released Australia's first Open Government National Action Plan and its 15 commitments.

Implement National Action Plan Commitment 5.2

This project is to implement National Action Plan Commitment 5.2: Enhancing public participation. Commitment 5.2's ambition is for the APS to design and adopt a whole-of-government framework that embeds meaningful, open, public and multi-stakeholder participation into policy development and service delivery.

Milestones and Methodology

The Commitment has three key milestones, each with its own outputs. This is a summary report of the output of the first milestone. Milestone two is to release the framework itself; and milestone three is to undertake pilot public participation initiatives. User Centred Design (UCD) is the methodology for this project.

What is the problem we're trying to solve?

Public policy problems are increasingly complex and this complexity is occurring in an environment of declining trust in government. The literature suggests that tapping the expertise from the community can assist with this complexity and also build greater confidence in the decisions of government.

Relative to state and local government jurisdictions the APS is missing opportunities to develop more innovative and valued solutions to complex public policy problems due to a lack of effective engagement with the expertise available in business, academia and the general community.

> "If data and information are the primary resources in a knowledge society, dialogue is the refinery that allows governments, businesses, and civil society to find and extract the value."
>
> **Don Lenihan, Canada 20/20**

The APS's work has always been challenging, and is becoming more complex. The APS is frequently confronted with 'wicked problems'— complex policy issues that are highly resistant to resolution.

> *"...The work of government is hard. Its challenges are wicked. Problems do not always have defined boundaries, solutions can (and should) be contested and authority is ambiguous....."*
>
> **Peter Shergold's 'Learning from Failure' stresses that the APS's already challenging work is getting more difficult.**

Compounding this complexity, the APS is often not in a position to exert direct control over how the policy environment operates and needs the help of non-government actors. The world in which public policy is made and implemented is an adaptive system with multiple public and private stakeholders. These stakeholders have differing goals and are constantly both acting and reacting to others within overlapping networks.

Moreover, the APS needs to undertake its work against a backdrop of declining trust. Recent studies show trust in government at record lows. For example, a 2016 survey of 1444 Australians reported:

- Satisfaction with democracy at its lowest since 1996; and
- Levels of trust in government and politicians in Australia are at their lowest level since 1993, with only 5% of Australians trusting government.

Similarly, the Edelman Trust Barometer's Australian Trust findings showed a dip in trust in government in 2016, falling from 45% to 37% among the general population.

Bringing the public into our work can help

Senior public servants and academics argue that the APS can reduce the complexity and build trust by bringing more people and expertise into its work when they are needed. Their view is that there is a great deal of untapped information the APS misses using current approaches to involving the public in its work. Better approaches might allow the APS to translate the best technical, academic and practical advice into accessible, policy and programme relevant conclusions.

A number of current and past senior public servants have highlighted the need to bring more people and expertise into the work of the APS. Martin Parkinson, Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, has advocated using more community expertise in the APS' work through the adoption of policy communities.

Peter Shergold's 'Learning from Failure' review also supports more citizen involvement in policy and programmes. It found that '...real solutions to complex issues not only require that stakeholders, citizens and communities be fully involved in the policy process; they require genuine collaboration between governments and the public.'[1]

Gordon de Brouwer, former Secretary of the Department of the Environment and Energy, believes better engagement is essential to positioning the APS for the future. In his Secretary Valedictory speech, he argues that the APS serves the public best when, among other things, it 'work[s] through solutions together and with key people outside the public service'.[2]

Professor Beth Noveck's *'Smart Citizens, Smarter State'* argues that the public's supply of expertise is not being matched to demand for it in government.

"Governing institutions make far too little of the skills and experience of those inside and outside of government with scientific credentials, practical skills, and ground-level street smarts. More flexible and responsive approaches that tap into an array of expertise are needed."[3]

Technology makes involving the public easier than ever

One clear barrier to involving the public is the cost and time required to engage broadly, but new technology is reducing the cost. It is making it easier to match the right experts to the right opportunities in the right way, leading to faster and better decision making.

Technology can remove some of the barriers to bringing the public into APS work. This is where the Business Research and Innovation Initiative (BRII) may be able to assist.

The BRII is a pilot series of 'challenges' where the Commonwealth Government is encouraging businesses to develop more innovative solutions to government policy and service delivery problems. One of the five pilot challenges is to develop a platform that digitally enables community engagement in policy, programme and service design.

[1] Peter Shergold 'Learning from failure: Why large government policy initiative have gone so badly wrong in the past and how the chances of success can be improved' http://www.apsc.gov.au/publications-and-media/current-publications/learning-from-failure.
[2] Gordon de Brouwer 'Secretary Valedictory', Institute of Public Administration Australia, ACT Division, 2017.
[3] Beth Noveck 'Smart citizens, smarter state' Harvard University Press, 2015. A similar publication is John Seely Brown, Lang Davison 'The power of pull: How small moves, smartly made, can set big things in motion' Basic Books, 2012.

The BRII challengers will try and combine the new methods and tools for collaboration and co-design, including social media, into a platform that consistently engages community stakeholders. As part of Commitment 5.2, we are working with them to increase their chances of success.

So what is public participation?

There are no universal public participation definitions and approaches, nor any universal framework we could take 'off the shelf' and apply in the APS. Rather, the APS must develop tailored and shared public participation definitions and frameworks adapted to its own needs.

Some engagements in the range of public participation tools are familiar and business as usual to public servants. These include consultations through issues papers, roundtables and advisory panels, as well as communications and information sharing on agency websites.

However, more innovative engagements are less familiar. These include deliberation and collaboration engagements, where the public is invited into the conversation to identify, solve, implement and in some circumstances, decide.

There are many existing public participation definitions and frameworks. The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) provides one of the world's most used definitions of public participation, fleshed out by its Public Participation Spectrum. IAP2 defines public participation as 'any process that involves the public in problem solving or decision making and that uses public input to make better decisions'.

In the project's Create phase, and as the Open Government National Action Plan's Milestone 2, we will design an original and tailored public participation framework for the APS and its users. However, for the purposes of the Discover phase, it is useful to start with a working framework and the report adopts the Ontario Provincial Government's framework. While all of the frameworks and approaches to public participation offer inspiration, our expert consultations and literature review indicate the Ontario Framework is well suited to the APS.

The Ontario Provincial Government has adopted a 'star-like' framework/participation toolbox with four ways to engage:[4]

- **Share** - Does government need to tell the public about a government initiative? People receive information about a government program or decision in an accessible way. Communication is one-way from the government to the public.
- **Consult** - Does government need to gather feedback from the public about a problem? People have an opportunity to weigh-in and provide their input. Participants advocate for their views on a subject.
- **Deliberate** - Does government need help from the public to frame or solve a problem? People help identify the issue and/or develop a strategy that the government commits to deliver. Participants take part in varying degrees to find common ground and collectively arrive at an agreement.
- **Collaborate** - Does government need help from the public to find and implement a solution? People work with government to define an issue, develop and deliver solutions. Participants share decision-making and implementation of solutions.

The Ontario framework is used in the report as a lens upon which to analyse and understand the different approaches and attitudes to engagement and participation.

[4] Government of Ontario 'Public Engagement', last accessed August 2017. Link: https://www.ontario.ca/page/public-fengagement.

Innovative approaches to participation are being adopted at local, state and international jurisdictions

Participedia, an online global project that documents democratic innovations, notes there are hundreds of thousands of participatory processes occurring each year in almost every country in the world.[5]

Participedia includes hundreds of participation case studies, including many from Australia. Public participation academic Lucy Parry notes in Participedia that South Australia, in particular, has wholeheartedly embraced the notion of deliberative democracy and has embarked on an ambitious raft of citizen engagement processes including several Citizens' Juries. Other examples include the Noosa Community Juries, Darebin Participatory Budgeting, City of Melbourne People's Panel, Geraldton 2029 and Beyond the Western Australian Freight Network Review. It is noteworthy that the Australian case studies recorded on Participedia are overwhelmingly from local and state governments.

While public participation, in one form or another, has long been a feature of public services in Australia, systematic applications of public participation, including frameworks, are starting to gain hold. Most of the states and territories already have public participation frameworks, or in the case of Victoria, are looking to establish one.

The full report provides a number of case studies of innovative approaches across Australia and internationally.

It is clear from the literature that Australia does engage in a multitude of participative engagement process with the community but that most of these innovative approaches are occurring at the local and state government levels and not at the Commonwealth.

So what is the problem?

Adoption of deliberative process at the Commonwealth level has been relatively low when compared with local and state government. If greater engagement and participation with the community have been shown to improve both government decision making and the level of confidence in those decisions, why haven't we adopted it more at the Commonwealth level?

[5] Participedia. See: http://participedia.net/en/about

Why does the problem occur?

We conducted user research: ethnographic interviews of 75 'users' of APS public participation – public servants and members of the public – to explore why the problem occurs from their point of view.

There are many reasons why our users are often not aware of public participation, and why they often lack the confidence and capability to try it. The APS interviews showed that awareness and practical experience of how to engage the community beyond traditional information sharing and consultation approaches is patchy across the APS. Consultation often has an emphasis on obtaining buy-in rather than accessing expertise. There is hesitation in applying more deliberative and collaborative approaches, in part due to a perception of risk and a lack of value for the effort required. Sometimes external constraints such as legal or parliamentary processes exclude more open dialogue.

From the perspective of the community, they see themselves as having specific expertise with unique and useful perspectives to bring to the table on matters of public policy and that it is in the public interest for them to do so. There is a level of scepticism with the motivations of government engagement. The community is pragmatic and realistic, they are aware of and appreciate some of the constraints that public servants face.

The insights from the user research were supported by the findings of a stocktake of current engagement practices across 13 APS departments. While the APS engages the public in a wide variety of ways, the majority of engagement practices focus on information sharing and consultation. Many of the practices, such as submissions processes and feedback mechanisms, were transactional in nature and did not engender a sense of valuing an ongoing relationship with the community.

Themes and implications from user interviews with APS staff

Demographic breakdown of ethnographic user interviews of APS employees:

- 38 people
- 13 organisations
- Range of levels
- Range of roles, including:
  - Policy
  - Programmes
  - Service delivery
  - Communications

APS Theme 1:

Awareness and practical experience of how to engage the community beyond traditional information sharing and consultation is patchy. There are good examples of more collaborative approaches, but this is not the norm.

Implications:

The vast majority of participants had only ever been involved in consultation and information sharing processes.

Prior to engaging the public, we are not necessarily analysing the nature of the challenges before us and applying the most appropriate approach to engage the community. More often we are simply doing what we have traditionally done and as such missing potential opportunities to bring a wider view and broader expertise into our work that can lead to better outcomes and broader support for those outcomes.

Since traditional modes of engagement like consultation through issues papers are static, they also result in stakeholder engagement being more transactional by nature than an ongoing relationship or partnership.

APS Theme 2:

Consultation often has an emphasis on obtaining buy-in rather than accessing expertise.

Implications:

The emphasis by participants on obtaining buy-in and managing stakeholders, and doing so through the more traditional forms of information sharing and consultation, limits the ability to create shared understanding and commitment. Buy-in is all about obtaining agreement or acceptance, not about working together to produce a better outcome.

As much of the consultation is transactional and only opinion is being sought, it can foster entrenched views. It limits the opportunities for people with differing views to consider the opposing views in the context of the challenge or problem.

It also means that we are not accessing all the expertise available.

It can make key stakeholders spectators rather than active participants which, with more complex issues, can hinder the development of the best solution as well as reducing commitment to the end outcome, making it harder to gain and maintain buy-in. In broad terms, people are very supportive of what they design and less so when only their opinion is polled.

APS Theme 3:

There's a knowing/doing gap between what the participants know about best practice information sharing and consultation, and what often occurs. This is in part due to a perception that best practice approaches can carry risk, take too long and add little value.

Implications:

Consultation is our main way of engaging stakeholders and it is more often than not used to obtain agreement or acceptance, rather than access expertise. The gap between what we understand is best practice consultation and what we undertake can undermine the objective of the consultation. A lack of transparency and the inability to close the loop leads to a level of frustration with stakeholders. This can lead to a degree of cynicism that can eat away at good will, creating a credibility gap and making it harder to keep stakeholders positively engaged.

In some circumstances we undervalue the role effective engagement can play in developing and delivering better outcomes. In turn, there is a tendency to undervalue the skills required for good engagement. This can lead to selecting the wrong tool for the job - a mismatch between the form of engagement we undertake and the problem to solve. Whether the appropriate engagement tool is selected or not, its application is often suboptimal. This results in engagement processes that do not achieve their purpose: they do not make the most of the public's expertise, and obtain less buy-in.

APS Theme 4:

In many instances our internal processes, including parliamentary and legal, can act as a barrier/constraint to achieving best practice engagement.

Implications:

The valid constraints of the operating environment mean that some processes cannot be as open as would be ideal. These restraints should be clearly conveyed to stakeholders at the outset of any engagement and not used as an excuse not to engage.

These constraints underline the importance of establishing ongoing meaningful relationships with key stakeholders that go beyond transactions. If we engage effectively when we can, stakeholders will be more understanding of the occasions when we can't.

APS Theme 5:

Traditional consultation processes have helped develop the base skills needed to engage in more deliberative or collaborative processes.

Implications:

Consultation remains the main way in which the APS engages, but there is a good base of the soft skills required to engage in more deliberative and collaborative ways. But a framework in and of itself will not drive a significant change in the way in which the APS engages the expertise within the community.

Themes and implications from non-APS user interviews

Demographic breakdown of ethnographic user interviews with the public:

- 37 people
- 5 states and territories
- 29 organisations, including from:
  - Business
  - Industry associations/peak bodies
  - Engagement practitioners
  - Not-for-profits
  - Academia

Non-APS Theme 1:

Participants are often subject matter experts. They also have unique and useful perspectives. They influence the opinions of the community. They believe that it's in the public interest for public servants to engage with them.

Implications:

There is significant expertise in the public. In principle, the holders of this expertise are willing and able to help make better policy and programmes.

More meaningful engagement has the potential to increase the legitimacy of policy and programmes. Stakeholders can influence their constituents and the community, and are more likely to support work they co-design.

Further, as a general rule, public servants should not hesitate to engage on the grounds that the community is polarised and will demand that government agree with all of their views. The community understands that compromise is necessary.

Non-APS Theme 2:

In the main, participants are sceptical about government engagement. They often doubt its quality, and wonder if it is genuine. This can leave them frustrated and more adversarial.

Implications:

There is a high level of mistrust with much of current government engagement. Mistrust means engagements often fail to make the most of the public's expertise. It also fuels adversarial and positional bargaining, at the expense of higher value add partnerships and co-creation.

Some well-intentioned engagements have gone awry and undermined trust. As such, public servants may need help selecting the right engagement tool for the job, and not rely on 'one size fits all'. They should also consider whether they have the capability to execute advanced engagement before implementation. Bad or mismatched engagement can be worse than no engagement. It causes frustration that can lead stakeholders to criticise policy and programmes to their constituents and to the media. There may also be a vicious cycle at play, due to how this theme interplays with APS themes above. For example, community mistrust of current government engagement might be fuelling behaviours from the community that contributed to comments from APS employees (noted in the APS insights above) that described some stakeholders as 'too passionate' and 'difficult to manage' rather than as useful partners. In turn, if APS employees subsequently react to such behaviours by treating the community as 'stakeholders to be managed' rather than as useful partners, this would further contribute to mistrust in government engagement.

Non-APS Theme 3:

Participants are pragmatic and realistic. They understand that the APS has legitimate constraints on its engagement, and can't always do best practice.

Implications:

The APS should not hesitate to engage due to fears that the public will demand an impractical process.

When engaging, public servants should be clear about what is and is not 'on the table'. The public has a high tolerance for justified parameters. For example, if there is no room to move on a policy, public servants could still make clear that the public can influence its implementation.

Of course, this might lead to some disappointment. The public would like to influence every aspect of policy and programmes. But it would still be preferable to being silent or unclear about what is actually in scope, and letting that ambiguity be an 'elephant in the room' during engagement. It will make the public more motivated to contribute.

Non-APS Theme 4:

Participants are interested in more advanced collaborative and deliberative engagements. They are also hopeful of building ongoing relationships with the APS.

Insights:

The public are willing to provide more expertise. And, as one participant noted, if public servants really want to co-design with the public, 'they need to take a leap of faith and relinquish control'.

Finally, there is scope for the APS to invite participants into the design of its engagements. This would improve the chances of both parties having their needs met.

Non-APS Theme 5:

There are some universal basics that help make an engagement effective and genuine. Participants made useful suggestions on how to get them right.

Implications:

Getting the basics right is crucial to build trust. Simple things like improved customer service, up to standards provided by big companies, would go a long way. This includes being more reciprocal with the public, and talking like normal people with ordinary and everyday language.

Personas of typical public participation users in the APS and the public

In the full report, to further build empathy, we segmented our users into personas.

Personas are a design tool used in many professions as 'hypothetical archetypes of actual users'. In our project, they are a composite of real users who we interviewed. They summarise their most relevant characteristics in respect of public participation. They show that different users will require different and tailored strategies to encourage better public participation.

The personas show that our users and their needs are also nuanced and myriad. They demonstrate that APS staff have different risk appetites for adopting more public participation, and they should form the basis of any strategy to encourage adoption. They also show that the members of the public are, in principle, quite motivated to get more involved in the APS' work. But they have differing motivations, constraints and expertise to bring. This should be factored into messaging and targeting of our public participation to make the most of it. See the full report for more detail.

How does the APS engage the community?

We conducted a survey to stocktake current approaches to public participation across APS departments.

For the most part the findings from the survey support the insights from the user research. The APS engages the community in a wide variety of ways, with the majority of approaches focussed on information sharing and consultations. Respondents identified the "authorising environment" as a key barrier to more open engagement. This was followed by a lack of trust in the ability of stakeholders to engage in a constructive way and a lack of awareness amongst public servants of different approaches and their value.

The survey asked departments three questions:

- What does your organisation do to engage with the public? Respondents were also asked to categorise their engagements using the Ontario framework (i.e. into information sharing, consultation, deliberation and collaboration).
- Do you perceive any barriers to your organisation co-designing with the public? If so, what are they, and how can your organisation overcome them?
- How could you improve on your current engagement approach?

The responses indicate:

- The APS engages the public in a wide variety of ways.
- The majority of APS engagement is information sharing and consultation.
- Many engagements are transactional in nature, rather than ongoing.
- Although it has many legitimate barriers to undertaking more meaningful engagement, the APS believes that its engagement could improve.

These responses are consistent with most of the user interview themes, and support the hypothesis that there is an opportunity for departments to better access the expertise in the community to deliver better policies and programmes.

In particular, the responses to the first question suggest awareness and practical experience of collaboration and deliberation are patchy (APS Theme 1). In addition, the transactional nature of engagements suggest APS engagement emphasises obtaining buy-in rather than gathering expertise (APS Theme 2).

But many of the information sharing and consultation engagements employed by the APS, as well as the variety of practices cited within these categories, suggest good engagement capability and potential. Similarly, the opportunities for improvement cited by respondents (Question 3) were thoughtful, and also indicate that the APS has more potential in engagement than they are able to apply in reality. This is consistent with there being a gap between what the APS knows, and what it actually does in respect of engaging the public (APS Theme 3); as well as that traditional consultation processes providing the base skills needed to engage in more deliberate or collaborative engagements (APS Theme 5).

The responses also indicate that the APS could be interested in public participation that responds to non-APS theme 4 (undertaking more advanced collaborative and deliberate engagements and building ongoing relationships with the public) and non-APS theme 5 (improving the basics in engagement).

However, respondents also noted many barriers to engagement in response to question 2. This is consistent with APS Theme 4 (internal processes, including parliamentary and legal, can act as a barrier/constraint to achieving best practice engagement). These barriers should be taken into account in designing ways to improve public participation.

What are the opportunities for solutions in the Create phase?

An APS wide framework could build trust and confidence by assisting public servants to: diagnose the nature of the challenge before them and apply the right approach for engaging the community that matches the problem; get the basics right from the start when they engage; better understand the benefits of accessing expertise in the community; and better navigate internal processes. Importantly making better use of the expertise in the community will require many public servants to think differently about their roles and the role of the community in the work of government.

To this end, we have design questions to form the platform on which we can develop interesting and innovative ways to improve APS public participation, as well as develop a framework that our users value.

Analysing the problem identification and empathise stages

The aim of the research conducted for the report was twofold. Firstly to test the proposition that the APS was missing out on opportunities to solve complex problems and build trust in decisions by not effectively accessing the available expertise within the community. Secondly, if this was true, to understand why this was the case.

The analysis shows that the APS does engage with the community in a variety of ways. More deliberative or collaborative practices are very patchy across the APS with the more common approaches being information sharing and consultation. The research clearly shows that the APS is missing out on opportunities to better engage the community and the expertise they hold. This was reflected in the user research and acknowledged by departments in the survey of current practice as an area for improvement.

Why these opportunities are not being seized is a little more interesting. It is fair to say that the research does suggest that opportunities are being missed due to a lack of awareness, trust and capability, but there is more to it.

The research has shown that for many in the APS, engaging the community is about gaining buy-in for decisions that may have already been made. For some in the APS the perceived risks involved and resources required in engaging the community in more meaningful ways outweighs the return. Moreover, many do not trust the community to be able to engage with issues in a constructive way to deliver a sensible and considered outcome.

The user research and the survey showed that the APS is rightly constrained on occasion by legal and parliamentary requirements, a point that was understood and appreciated by those outside the APS.

From the perspective of the community, they see that they do have expertise to offer and that it is in the interest of everyone for that expertise to be used. They can be sceptical of the motivations of government and frustrated when the basics of good engagement are not followed (time, scope, closing the loop, clarity of purpose and authority).

Interestingly the issue of intent and the fundamentals are connected. Sometimes the basics are not followed due to outside constraints, other times because people are unaware and on some occasions because the intention was not to engage in a meaningful way. This can also reflect a recurring issue across the research, of a knowing doing gap. Many public servants are aware of what is involved in good engagement but this is not reflected in their practice.

Two key themes have emerged through the research, trust and confidence. If the APS is to take better advantage of the opportunities presented by greater utilisation of the expertise available in the community they will need to build greater trust and confidence in the relationship with the community. The APS will also need to build trust and confidence in the many varied processes for engaging the community in a meaningful way. Civil society members also have their part to play, and will need to set aside some of their cynicism and find the common ground.

An APS wide framework could build trust and confidence by assisting public servants to: diagnose the nature of the challenge before them and apply the right approach for engaging the community; get the basics right from the start; better understand the benefits of accessing expertise in the community; and better navigate internal processes. Importantly making better use of the expertise in the community will require many public servants to think differently about their roles and the role of the community in the work of government.

BRII

As outlined in the report, technology has the potential to make a significant impact on the way the community is engaged. In this context there is cause for optimism in what may be achieved through the BRII challenge. It will be important that if the technological solution that is developed through the BRII challenge is shown to be beneficial, that it is widely adopted by the APS.

Quick Wins

Every agency in the APS has key stakeholders and different ways of engaging those stakeholders. The research has shown that these relationships can be transactional, made up of a series of single issue interactions. This does not necessarily need to be the case. A quick win from this research could be for departments to assess the nature of the relationship with key stakeholders and to the extent possible move to a partnership model. To see the extent to which the nature of the engagement could move from a transactional footing to more on an ongoing dialogue. WA Partnerships presents one viable model for such a relationship.

Design Questions

The insights generated from the research have identified a number of challenges faced by people involved in participation and engagement activities. The “How might we...” design questions transfer the challenges into opportunities for design. The questions will become the launch pads for ideas in the Create phase. The following design questions all relate to challenges identified through the research and should, in some way address the two key themes of trust and confidence.

How might we help public servants to select the right way to engage the public for the challenge before them?

How can we assist the APS to see the benefits from engaging the expertise of the community?

How can we help the APS to get the basics of engagement right?

How might we re-think critical business processes to better reflect the importance of community expertise?

How might we re-imagine public servant roles such as policy officer to make better use of community expertise?

How might we shift incentives to better encourage the development of the skills needed to tap community expertise?

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