**Enhancing APS Engagement and Participation and Participation with Citizens, Community and Business.**

The challenges facing the APS are increasingly complex, at a time when trust in government is at all time lows. Inviting more people into a meaningful conversation on complex problems is one way of addressing both complexity and declining trust, but is not an approach readily adopted in the APS. Research undertaken by the DIIS in the development of an APS wide framework to enhance engagement and participation, a process involving over 1000 people inside and outside the APS, provides invaluable insights into the barriers to more meaningful engagement. These insights have direct relevance to the terms of reference of the Review in respect of rethinking the APS operating model and enhancing collaboration with citizens, the community and business on complex problems.

On the basis of the research the OGP framework team in DIIS recommends that the review:

* Consider providing structural support for better engagement and support through the establishment of a centre/office of APS Engagement and Participation that can provide a central capability to support departments to undertake more meaningful engagement through the provision of advice, guidance, methodologies,tools and undertaking joint projects with departments.
* In rethinking the operating model of the APS, consider engagement and participation as a distinct function similar to policy development as opposed to a general skill held by all public servants or as a role for communications teams.
* Review the research underpinning the proposed framework.

***Supporting evidence***

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.

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.

Moreover, the APS needs to undertake its work against a backdrop of declining trust. Recent studies show trust in government at record lows.

These challenges are exacerbated by the rapidity and level of scrutiny that is now brought to bear by the 24-hour news cycle, the increasing influence of social media and the 'hyper-connectivity' of community networks enabled by the internet.

Many of the traditional approaches to public policy are facing diminishing returns in this environment.

Both senior public servants and the academic literature 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. The literature also suggests that engagement processes that deliver outcomes of value to citizens grow their confidence and trust in government.

The research conducted in the design of an APS wide framework to enhance engagement found that in order to better resolve complex public policy issues and build trust in government the APS needs to:

1. Increase its awareness of more meaningful ways of engaging beyond information sharing and consultation and the value in such engagement.

2. Better balance the perception of risk attributed to more meaningful engagements with the potential risk to outcomes from not engaging.

3. Complement public servants’ soft skills with the technical skills to be able to effectively execute more meaningful ways of engaging civil society and embedding these new skills.

4. Undertake a range of more meaningful engagements to demonstrate the value of working with civil society in this way.

***A Centre for Engagement and Participation***

To enhance the level of engagement and participation and deliver outcomes for citizens will require many public servants to think differently. This change will not just happen by itself. Public servants will need help and support, for many they will need to personally experience the benefits of engaging the expertise from the community in more meaningful ways. An APS Centre/Office of Engagement and Participation (the Centre) is one mechanism that could provide that support and guidance.

The establishment of the centre would create this critical capability to support the APS as it meets these challenges. This would be achieved by:

-    supporting the APS to better access to the expertise available in the community.

-    establishing a core capacity for the APS to support more meaningful engagement

-    developing capability across the APS

-    raising awareness of methods and the benefits of tapping expertise outside the APS.

The Centre would bring different engagement methods and approaches to policy development and service delivery. The centre would provide technical support and practical experience to teams across the APS to help them better access the expertise in the community that they need to create better solutions.

The Centre could act as a resource to scaffold the engagement work of APS agencies by providing them with technical support. It could provide an immersive experience for agency staff through a principle of ‘learn by doing’. By partnering with agencies to undertake engagements, the centre would take on some of the perceived risks of more meaningful engagement with civil society, partly removing one of the barriers to better engagement.

The Hub could establish a network for APS staff involved in engaging citizens, the community and business, creating opportunities for peer to peer learning and support.

To shift the way many think and drive the improvements needed to better deal with the increasing complexity in the work of the APS, will require the kind of support a Centre could provide. The Policy Project in New Zealand, PolicyLab in the United Kingdom, the Dutch Centre for Learning and Expertise and the Engagement unit in the South Australian government are but four examples of how a centralised capability and resource has been utilised to drive significant improvements.

***Engagement and Participation as a Core Capability***

The research undertaken to develop the framework found that APS employees do have an understanding of what good practice information sharing and consultation looks like. They know that engagement can help get buy-in for their work. They understand the importance of tailoring messages, framing content, using different mediums for different messages, and using emotional intelligence to empathise with people and to build strong relationships with them. This sophistication comes from personal experience and rules of thumb. It didn’t come from formal stakeholder engagement strategies or frameworks.

It is clear from the research that APS staff generally do not have the technical capability to undertake more meaningful forms of engagement beyond consultation. This is in part because our focus in on consultation and the management of stakeholders rather than their engagement. It is also because stakeholder management is seen as a general skill that APS staff develop in their everyday work, all good policy officers know how to manage stakeholders. Or it is an activity undertaken by communication teams.

Interestingly the recent work by the APSC on job families provided no category for engagement and participation, only stakeholder management.

The continuation of this approach runs the real risk of missing an opportunity to develop the skills required for APS to function effectively in the 21st century.

A outlined above, in order to successfully navigate the ever increasing complexity of the public policy landscape the APS will need to bring more voices into the conversation. In some respects this will need us to adjust our sense of identity. We can no longer perceive ourselves as the experts, rather we need to become connectors, interpreters and navigators. We will need to connect to where the expertise lies, whether in academia, business, civil society or the community. We will need to interpret that expertise into a language that government understands and we will need navigate the system to deliver outcomes.

To do so will require us to shift our thinking about stakeholder management as a general skill that all APS staff pick along the way to engagement and participation as a core competency that needs to be fostered. A first step in this necessary journey is the acknowledgement of engagement and participation as a core function.**Who we are**

The Open Government Partnership Team in the Department of Industry Innovation and Science. The Department has responsibility for implementing Commitment 5.2 under Australia’s first OGP National Action Plan. The objective of Commitment 5.2 is to establish an

Australian Public Service wide framework to improve public participation and engagement to enhance policy and service delivery outcomes for Australians.

**Further information**

The OGP Framework team at DIIS is available to discuss this further. You can reach us at [ogp@industry.gov.au](mailto:ogp@industry.gov.au). You can also Review the research underpinning the proposed framework on our website, here: <https://www.industry.gov.au/data-and-publications/open-government-national-action-plan-2016-18-commitment-52>.