

# Occasional paper no. 22

Citizen and Stakeholder Participation: Strategies and Challenges for the Australian Public Sector

Dr Dahle Suggett

states**services**authority



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## Citizen and Stakeholder Participation: Strategies and Challenges for the Australian Public Sector

Dr Dahle Suggett

### Introduction

Stakeholder or citizen engagement is far from new in the public sector but it is now moving from the margin to a universal requirement for good public administration. The terms are not precise and some contest the motives – is this really authentic democratic involvement or persuasion? – but the expectations for citizen or stakeholder engagement continue to grow.

All policy development and service design is now expected to have robust citizen or stakeholder engagement as a foundation – from securing buy-in to influencing the shape of a policy or service. The accusation '*they didn't consult*' typically triggers an about turn in a policy announcement. Even when there has been a consultation program, a challenge to its legitimacy can be strident – the burning of a report of consultation for the management of the Murray Darling Basin graphically illustrated the nature of this relentlessly demanding era.

The positive side is that innovators see great potential for engagement or participation processes to improve the fundamental quality of public policies and services. It is now a familiar argument that the complexities of the 21st century mean governments cannot solve problems alone. 'Democratic innovations' (Smith 2009) or the 'new synthesis' (Bourgon 2011) see the role of citizen and stakeholder engagement as critical to a new governance model. Citizen engagement taps into the collective intelligence of the community; promotes social innovation; and ensures ongoing collaboration across private, not-for-profit and public sectors or 'co-production' of public goods. This promises major returns to the government and community.

This paper discusses current and emerging practices in the Australian public sector. Departments are eager to learn from each other; they are seeking to advance understanding of the political and administrative dynamics in this new environment and to develop the skills needed to meet the increasing expectations. The paper summarises a 2011 collaborative study by the Allen Consulting Group, conducted with 22 government departments (see Appendix 1). The study explored the drivers, practices and challenges for stakeholder and citizen participation in the public sector in Australia.<sup>1</sup>

The paper also draws on earlier studies of stakeholder engagement conducted in 1999 and 2006 and discusses the findings of the 2011 study in the context of more than a decade of trends.

### From modest aspirations to core business: trends in stakeholder engagement

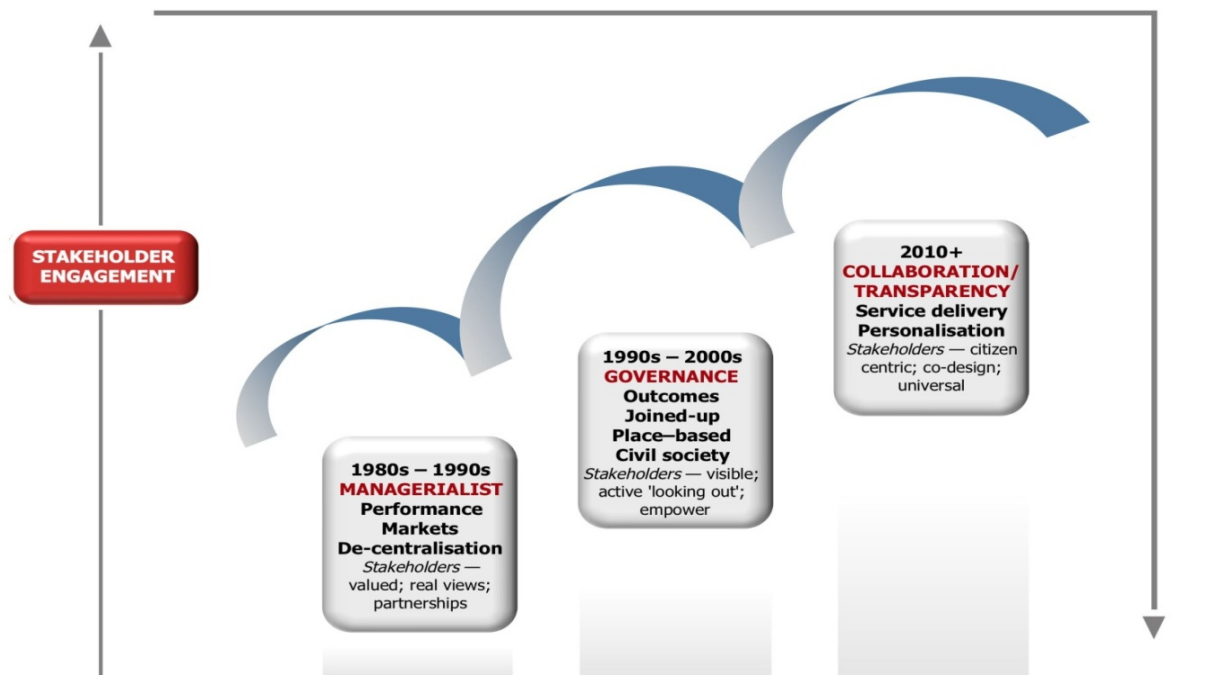
The public sector environment of the second decade of the 21st century is a complex mix of structural, governance and transactional features. Governments are promising greater transparency, wider public engagement and multi-level collaborations to deliver on commitments.

The 2011 study of stakeholder engagement convincingly points to the considerable progress made in the scope and depth of practices in this new reform era but it also shows the persistence of some impediments and the emergence of a new set of problematic issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Dahle Suggett was an author of *Towards participation 3.0, Stakeholder Engagement in the Public Sector*, The Allen Consulting Group, 2011. The collaborative study was commissioned by the departments to better understand Australian and international practices.

Figure 1. Growth of stakeholder engagement intensity



As stakeholder engagement and citizen consultation has become more pervasive in public sector processes – more like ‘core business’– with expectations that it will intensify, a new set of questions is being canvassed.

The options for engagement models are now extensive. A key question is how to make the right choices and how to manage the new architecture of engagement? Another is who to involve in dialogue or consultation? The definitions of ‘stakeholders’ and ‘citizens’ are ever expanding; the barriers are down – whoever is needed is brought in for ‘consultation’, whether they be customers or clients of a service, non-government groups as new collaborative partners in delivering services, or experts and advocates.

While significant but quiet progress is being made by departments in new collaborations for service delivery (e.g. whole of government, cross-sector, and with ‘clients’ or citizens as in co-design models), the far more fraught environment of policy negotiation is now typified by heightened political stakes. Participants in the study were asking questions like what level of transparency is productive and yet politically acceptable; does social media support or hinder; what is the capacity for citizen engagement to solve politically charged questions? And there are the questions about the capacity for extensive engagement by some in the community – are some groups simply exhausted by the endless rounds of ‘engagement’ and consultation, such as indigenous communities?

### Making reasonable progress in 2011: departments’ self-assessment

Departments in the study were asked to self-assess their performance in managing and using effective stakeholder or citizen engagement.

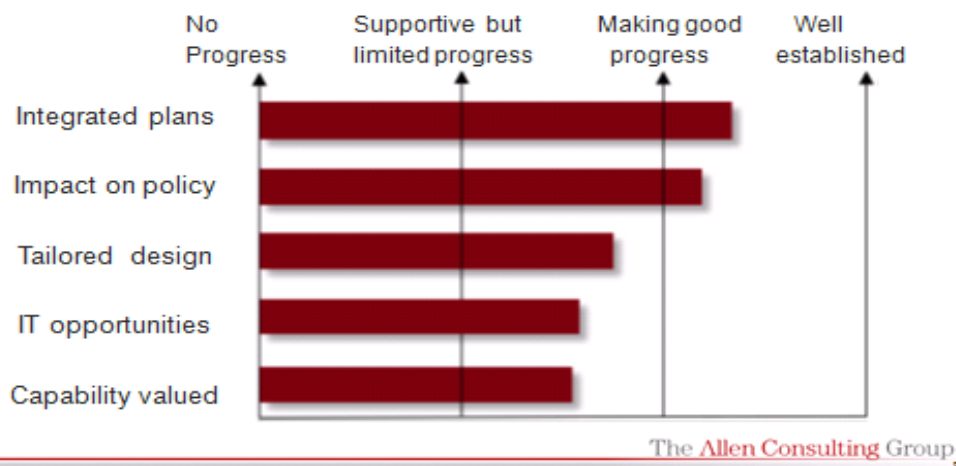
The responses show strengths in the level of integration of planning for stakeholder engagement into the central business plans of the department; in other words mainstreaming what has sometimes been

ad hoc and marginal to core business. This step is essential to deepening public engagement and is a very positive and important finding.

The results also show good progress being made in the analysis and assessment of stakeholder input and the subsequent impact of stakeholder views on the content of policy and service design. This is significant as one of the enduring criticisms of stakeholder engagement over the past fifteen years has been the 'window dressing' factor, where engagement is purely public relations driven, or stakeholders remain sceptical because an initial intent to incorporate stakeholder views has proven too difficult to achieve.

Figure 2.

## Self assessment: making progress



Other features, however, show only moderate progress. Even if the aspirations for stakeholder engagement are well integrated into business planning, quality input from stakeholders largely depends on tailoring the design of engagement according to the stakeholders' characteristics, the purpose of engagement and the nature of the outcomes being sought. Fit for purpose engagement is not yet sufficiently developed in most organisations.

Similarly, capability to design and conduct engagement strategies is limited by not being strongly valued throughout the organisations and not consistently followed through in performance appraisals and professional learning. Stakeholder engagement has extended well beyond being simply a communications exercise; it now calls for a raft of capabilities in relationship management, needs analysis, and negotiation, as well as deep knowledge of the substantive policy or service area, but there is not yet evidence of definitive plans for developing this capability.

Finally, Information Technology is seen as a key to the future, but organisations are currently poised between knowing that the future will require substantial commitments and making progress now. The present caution is driven by a combination of issues concerned with protecting privacy, choice of the right technology, operational concerns like the capacity to manage and follow through and the potential cost of doing this well. However, most indicated that more intense action is just a matter of time.

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## Key strategies and challenges: what departments told us

The directions being adopted by departments and the associated challenges can be grouped into six areas.

### *Issue 1. Managing new architecture and tools for engagement for new purposes*

The goal of moving to a more 'citizen-centric' mode of government is a political commitment made by many leaders in Australia and elsewhere. The literature on engagement strategies covers theories such as *participatory democracy* that values the educative and developmental impact of participation itself, *deliberative democracy* where those who will be impacted by a decision should have access to engage fully in the decision-making process, and *direct democracy* where citizens are empowered to make a collective decision. Indeed these concepts have already made inroads into how some in the public sector describe their citizen engagement approaches. A set of relatively new engagement structures in Australia and advice on achieving good outcomes is summarised in Box 1 below.

### Box 1. New stakeholder engagement architecture

<p><b>Compacts</b> between non-government bodies and governments – formal and long term agreements on mutual expectations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Department of Human Services ACT, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Victoria, Department of Human Services, Federal Government.</li><li>• <i>Good practice advice includes:</i> taking the time to agree shared vision and mutual expectations; involve leaders and sustain their role; support capacity building if needed; celebrate the collaboration but also make the agreement concrete - show the actions to be pursued; make sure the actions count and improve performance; keep testing the framework and report on outcomes.</li></ul>
<p><b>Deliberative forums</b> – extended and expert-led representative citizens' panels on technical or complex questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Relatively few initiatives and often sensitive: climate change, water reforms, infrastructure planning, and refugees.</li><li>• <i>Good practice advice includes:</i> attend to composition (random? sample? influencers?); the need for outstanding facilitation; carefully plan expert input; agree participant conduct rules up front; plan large and small group formats; explain role re subsequent decision making.</li></ul>
<p><b>Interactive media forums</b> – blogs, Facebook, SMS, wikis used for information and open interaction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Department of Premier and Cabinet, South Australia, Department of Primary Industry, Victoria; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria.</li><li>• <i>Good practice advice includes:</i> the purpose must drive the media - know what will it add and when it will not value-add; look ahead and avoid the 'so what now' question after people contribute; put in the resources to respond at a fast rate; information flows two ways so can't be risk averse; ensure rapid information flow and response - provides a new tool in emergency management, where else?</li></ul>
<p><b>Citizens forums/ summits/ extended community forums</b> – mix of interested and expert people engaging around in an extended and structured way to deliver advice or opinions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Port of Melbourne Authority, Bushfire enquiry forums, Victoria, various departments Federal Government.</li><li>• <i>Good practice advice includes:</i> rigorous clarity about objectives and purpose; people know why they are there; full transparency and honesty; rigorous attention to building and sustaining trust; treat with respect; documentation appropriate to time sequence.</li></ul>

Source: Interviews for The Allen Consulting Group study 2011

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## *Issue 2. Selecting frameworks and models*

There is a strong demand for departments to have frameworks or models for engagement that guide their policies and practices. There are some common models that provide a good basis for development of department-specific approaches.

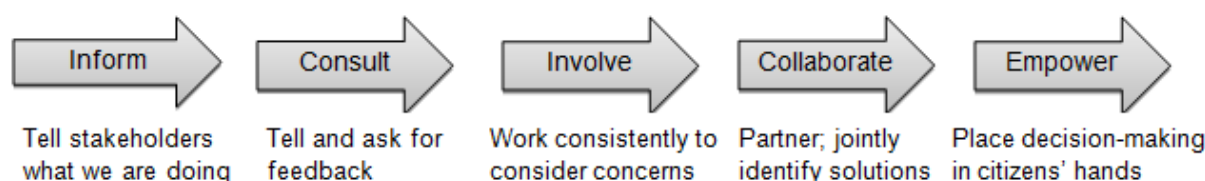
Principles developed by the OECD (2007), for example, are intended to maximise the benefits of engagement, consistent with sound public processes and delivering public value. A number of departments have adapted these principles as a checklist for their own context and for professional learning. They include the following elements:

- Commitment – leadership and strong commitment needed by all levels.
- Rights – citizens' right to information should be grounded in law and/or policies.
- Clarity – objectives for and limits to consultation well-defined.
- Time – engagement undertaken early and with adequate time.
- Inclusion – all citizens should have equal opportunity and multiple channels to engage.
- Resources – adequate resources needed to do this well.
- Co-ordination – initiatives to engage need to be co-ordinated across levels of government.
- Accountability – obligation to inform the public how their inputs will be used.
- Evaluation – need tools and skills to evaluate engagement effectiveness.
- Active citizenship – governments need to explore new roles to promote problem-solving by citizens.

When considering the choice of community engagement models, a popular tool used by many government departments and agencies in Australia is the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) continuum.

This involves a continuum from simply providing information to stakeholders, ramping up to conducting consultations, and escalating then to engagement in shared decision-making or action, to advanced levels of 'collaboration' and 'empowerment'. Choosing points along a continuum implies a fit for purpose approach.

**Figure 3. IAP2 continuum**



## *Issue 3. Understanding different policy and service domains: different engagement*

While generic models like the IAP2 continuum are very useful at the outset, the maturing of engagement and participation means it is no longer sufficient to have a tool kit of optional models. For engagement strategies to deliver significant outcomes in improved policy – particularly for intractable and complex problems – as well as better services for citizens, the task is now to deeply understand the nexus between citizens, stakeholders and the policy or service.

Different design questions apply in health or education, from those found in agriculture, tourism, transport, the environment or defence. The demands of different policy and service arenas vary in the logistics and content of stakeholder engagement and the range of geographical and political or institutional situations. Social policy for instance has generally been seen as open to the influence of



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many players, whereas defence policy and technology policy have tended to be the preserve of much tighter circles of stakeholders (Head 2007).

*Human services domains* such as health, welfare, education and indigenous affairs have long run reform timeframes. Extensive stakeholder and client engagement has become an essential tool in complex social policy reform but these areas have numerous and highly diverse stakeholders and employees, who are often geographically widespread.

Box 3 below summarises the views of a number of departments in the wider human services and social policy domains in Australia.

### Box 3. Design challenges in human services

*Expanding stakeholder groups* – The number of advisory boards and similar entities continue to proliferate and multiple advocacy groups are funded, often for the same issue. What is the lifecycle of a stakeholder advisory group?

*Transparency* – Demand for transparency is clear but a high level of experience and maturity is needed to do this well. The Productivity Commission can ask stakeholders to respond to policy questions and their responses will be received in a reflective way. This is often not the case with other ‘issues’ that government departments may handle.

*Principles for engagement* – We need a better framework to enable decision making around questions of when and to what extent we should consult and engage. This should comprise *principles* that apply to all target groups and then tailored strategies.

*Influencing front line workers* – The front line workers hold in their hands the day-to-day mechanisms for developing positive relations and for gaining feedback and input into better service design. They need to be a core part of the planning.

*Getting to the perimeter* – When dealing with disadvantaged groups there is the issue of identifying and engaging with people not traditionally heard. Will social media assist?

*Citizen centred services* – The next era will most likely comprise engagement with large NGOs operating in a competitive market. Clients may purchase services from whomever best suits their circumstances. This will significantly change engagement between government and the NGOs.

Source: Interviews for The Allen Consulting Group study 2011

One method of tackling these challenges in human services and other areas is ‘co-design’ – a process of explicitly designing policy and services with citizens. The Danish organisation MindLab has been given prominence internationally for their co-design methodology, and the newly amalgamated Australian Department of Human Services is a local example of a major commitment to a co-design methodology. They are re-shaping the extensive services to the Australian community offered through agencies such as Centrelink and Medicare.

Box 4 summarises the features of co-design, drawing on MindLab and Australian examples.

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#### Box 4. Outside-in: embarking on co-design

Some key features of co-design are:

- Assists innovation in service design through a methodology based on deep engagement with citizens' experience.
- The traditional 'inside-out' consultation approach is replaced by an 'outside-in' approach; stakeholders' input is incorporated at all stages of the design process.
- Adopts an ethnographic methodology – e.g. MindLab employs the skills of anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, technologists as well as policy experts to observe, question, conceptualise and propose new models.
- Based on rich user insights to support stronger problem identification, through to early conception, prototyping, planning and finally implementation.
- Training people to adopt a co-design methodology is crucial - Mind lab involves a structured approach to learning about service users- observation, analysis, idea and concept development and testing.

Source: Interviews for The Allen Consulting Group study 2011

**Environmental and infrastructure domains** differ significantly from the engagement strategies employed in social policy reforms. They have a more concentrated technical bias that often calls for expert led engagement processes as well as frequent geographic specific processes where the assumptions are that local people have extensive and relevant knowledge. They are often complex multi-faceted strategies. There are successes particularly in designing geographic-specific engagement – noting that national issues necessarily have a different character and further complexities. Indeed Australian bodies in the public and private sectors have devoted considerable resources to skill development for local area engagement and many believe this is now showing results.

The WA Department of Environment and Conservation has for instance embedded a deliberative approach to securing community consensus around a range of at times controversial issues, including land use. The department sees itself as a 'policy broker' with a methodology that includes extensive gathering of local knowledge, expert input and evidence on sciences and technology, town-hall meetings, close engagement with peak bodies, excellent communication with other government agencies, and monitoring, feedback and review.

**Economic reform and environmental sustainability** are stimulating government to use stakeholder engagement and public consultation to educate about development dilemmas as well as the more traditional objective to seek community opinion and support.

Conventional community engagement around development projects and local amenity is mostly conducted very well. Lessons have been learned over two decades about what the community expects to hear and where it can have a say. Tools such as 'the ladder of participation' are now familiar and powerful.

There is though a new context emerging where information and education is needed about the major choices and trade-offs now required in these key areas of public policy. This goes beyond gaining consent for a particular development to engaging the community in the deeper questions of balancing short-term gains against longer-term costs. This may call for innovative community engagement structures including bodies designed to educate as well as improve advice to government. Again

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though, a key question concerns the appetite in the wider community for sustained engagement around the complex issues that could be assumed to be the major responsibility of government.

#### *Issue 4. Managing new partnerships and collaborations*

A central tenet of the new modes of public sector governance is the pursuit of partnerships and collaboration in how government decisions are made and services delivered. While the commercial partnership structures in government developed from the 1990s for infrastructure continue to adapt to the current economic environment, other areas of government are also turning to partnership and collaborative modes.

All partnerships are structured to specify outcomes, clarify roles and responsibilities and so on, but they are now increasingly infused with the more complex notions of collaboration and sharing, relationship building, honesty and transparency.

A collaborative partnership sets up expectations of being more than a clean cut agreement on who does what; it conveys aspirations of a deeper set of personal relationships. But there are questions concerned with preserving an independent and arms-length focus on serving the public good while at the same building closer relationships with some parties.

A comment illustrates these new dilemmas:

*'I am asked to get to know the partners but how can I tell if that is giving some an unfair advantage for a future contract?'*

Collaborations also call for more skilled employees on all sides, more time and resources allocated to the relationship building, and different modes of performance monitoring.

Box 6 details one example of a structure for both a contractual arrangement and a collaborative partnership.

#### **Box 6. From purchaser-provider to partnership**

The relationship between human service providers and the community sector has shifted from a purely purchaser-provider relationship, to one that embraces more complex collaborations. By adopting a whole-of-government framework, the ACT government shifted its service delivery platform to focus on: improving outcomes for clients; engaging and involving clients; and building better community partnerships.

- ACT Purchasing Framework will streamline *contracting* arrangements and will provide improved information on outcomes achieved for specific population groups in the ACT.
- Within that, the relationship with the community sector has broadened under a Social Compact.
- The Compact is a statement about the *relationship* between the ACT Government and the community sector- a long-term mutual understanding as a foundation for shared activities.
- It promotes dialogue, explains how each sector manages relationships, how problems in the relationship might be solved, and how to evaluate whether the relationships are working.
- It mandates regular collaboration and reporting between the Directorate executives and community representatives.

Source: Interviews and documents, ACT Communities Service Directorate

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### *Issue 5. Securing consistency in whole of department or portfolio plans*

A consequence of the heightened aspirations for stakeholder engagement is that it can no longer be delivered by a sole communications division, but needs to be in whole of department plans.

Engagement plans also need to be aligned so that stakeholders are not bombarded. Moreover, the same principles apply to central agencies in their cross-government and leadership role to ensure consistent messages about engagement and collaboration are sent from government as a whole.

Participants in the study highlighted their key issues for building capability for the new era of stakeholder engagement:

- Top level leadership and accountability for stakeholder engagement is crucial and needs to be incorporated into management systems.
- Engagement is often substantial but can be an add-on or a supplement rather than deeply incorporated into the policy process and drawing carefully on past lessons.
- Information gained may not be shared- i.e. poor knowledge management.
- Provision is often not made for public consultation and stakeholder engagement actually having a substantive impact on the shape of a policy or service. Engagement outcomes may have an indirect impact, but are there methodologies to carefully check inputs against final decisions?

Box 7 is an example of one department's effort to secure cross department consistency and quality.

#### **Box 7. Aiming for a whole of department approach to our stakeholder strategy**

Department of Treasury and Finance (Vic) hopes to gain consistency in their stakeholder strategy through:

- inclusion in the department's key corporate improvement themes;
- measurement against the KPIs established each year via:
  - Biennial Stakeholder Research Survey
  - progress reports for Quarterly Stakeholder discussions by Department Board
  - case studies and anecdotes
  - DTF Organisational Culture Inventory (biennial);
- tying directly into department's leadership and culture strategy- training available;
- establishing a stakeholder contact management system;
- an awareness program of opportunities and strategies; and
- communication about successes and lessons.

Source: interviews and Stakeholder Relationship Strategy 2008-2011, Department of Treasury and Finance, Victoria

### *Issue 6. Online engagement: anticipated, but risks remain for many*

Any discussion of how the public sector reaches out to involve stakeholders and citizens to support its decision-making and delivery of services has to take into consideration the emergence of new technologies, mainly through the participative web and social media.

Three primary considerations are currently challenging departments and agencies:

- What is the entity's license to operate in how it engages with social media channels, and what governance arrangements are needed?

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- ◆ How can information garnered from social media interaction be best understood, acted upon and disseminated?
  - ◆ What are the human resourcing implications of monitoring and participating in social media, including keeping abreast with trends, developments and innovation in social media and its use?

An example of online engagement that attempted to tackle these questions was South Australia's engagement process for its most recent Strategic Plan. The Plan was driven by extensive state-wide consultation and encouraged individuals to spell out fresh ideas and thoughts on where the state should be by 2020. The current update of the Plan incorporated new social media approaches to engage the public online:

*'We created a post moderated, government-supported engagement space where everyone could post comments, images and video.'*

*'Why did we do this? We wanted to make sure we made the consultation as accessible as possible to the broadest possible audience state-wide. We wanted to get as many people involved and hear as many diverse views as possible. We also felt that it was important to go to people, not make people come to us, to operate in spaces where they are comfortable and familiar.'*

*'Information about the Plan was even "re-tweeted" to a considerable degree (the most desirable outcome!) hence information about the engagement process found its way into circles it has never previously been part of.'*

Other departments are far more cautious, although most are poised to take action.

The Australian public sector is moving towards a more citizen-centric paradigm in policy, management and service delivery. The study calls it Participation 3.0. The drive for stakeholder and citizen engagement is more than 'having a say', and now embraces complex forces around greater transparency, accountability, personalised services and generally a tougher scrutiny of what governments do to add value and when and how they need to partner with others. This is no longer a marginal requirement but part of the shift from government to governance and central to delivering public value now and in the era ahead.

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## Appendix 1

Participating government departments and agencies in the Allen Consulting Group 2011 study.

Jurisdiction	Department /Agency
ACT	Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services
AUST	Australian Bureau of Statistics Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency Department of Human Services Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research Department of Veterans' Affairs
NSW	Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) Sydney Water Corporation Department of Human Services
NT	Department of the Chief Minister
SA	Attorney-General's Department Department of the Premier and Cabinet
TAS	Department of Premier and Cabinet
VIC	Consumer Affairs Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Department of Planning and Community Development Department of Premier and Cabinet Department of Primary Industries Department of Treasury and Finance Victoria Police
WA	Department of Environment and Conservation Department of Housing

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