Public Engagement Guidebook

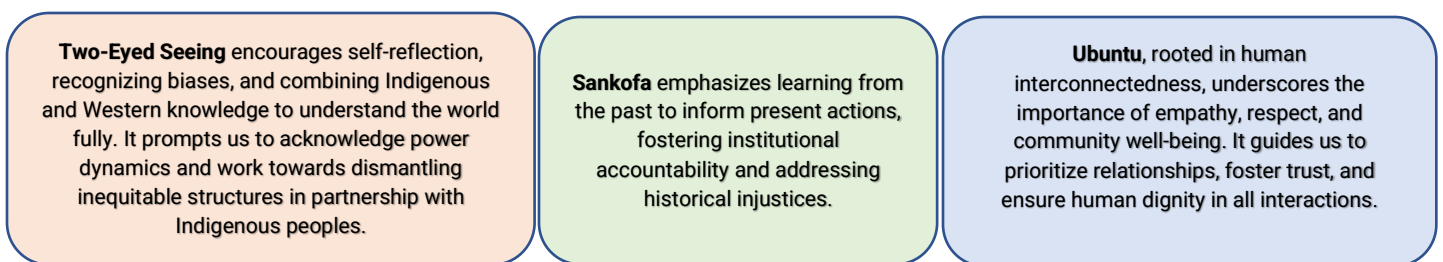## Office of Equity and Anti-Racism

NOVA SCOTIA

INTRODUCTION

The Office of Equity and Anti-Racism (OEA), in collaboration with partners and communities, is creating a whole of government approach to address systemic racism and inequity, promote diversity and achieve anti-racist and equitable outcomes that improve the social and economic wellbeing of everyone in Nova Scotia.

Public engagement on policies and programs is an important part of OEA's work. Government's commitment to equity and anti-racism informed engagement is enshrined in the *Dismantling Racism and Hate Act*, and OEA has a mandate under the Act to enable and facilitate meaningful government engagement with underrepresented and underserved communities. In general, public engagement can significantly increase awareness about important issues, ensure a diversity of voices are heard, and empower communities to have greater ability to participate in informing policies and programs that may impact their lives.

OEA's Engagement Philosophy is described in the [Equity and Anti-Racism Strategy](). OEA's approach to engagement incorporates three key concepts: Two-Eyed Seeing, Sankofa, and Ubuntu. These concepts collectively shape a framework for engagement that values diversity, acknowledges history, and centers on building meaningful, respectful relationships within communities.

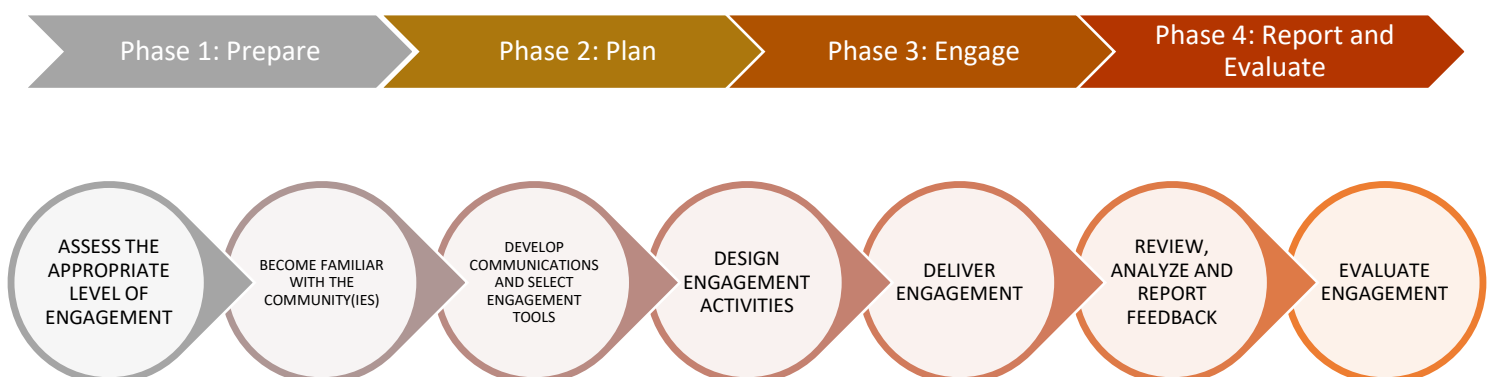|		
Two-Eyed Seeing encourages self-reflection, recognizing biases, and combining Indigenous and Western knowledge to understand the world fully. It prompts us to acknowledge power dynamics and work towards dismantling inequitable structures in partnership with Indigenous peoples.	**Sankofa** emphasizes learning from the past to inform present actions, fostering institutional accountability and addressing historical injustices.	**Ubuntu**, rooted in human interconnectedness, underscores the importance of empathy, respect, and community well-being. It guides us to prioritize relationships, foster trust, and ensure human dignity in all interactions.

This **Public Engagement Guidebook** has been created as a tool to help ensure government engagement initiatives are developed with an equity and anti-racism focus throughout planning and delivery. It provides an overview of the basic steps in any engagement process with additional guidance to support departments in considering equity and anti-racism.

Complementing the guidebook is a **Public Engagement Planning Template**, a dynamic tool designed to support implementation of the guidebook. The template offers a structured framework for developing tailored engagement plans, enabling staff to: assess community needs; set objectives; identify interested parties and/or affected communities; and select appropriate engagement methods.

Together, the guidebook and template can help to empower employees build authentic, collaborative relationships with partners, interested parties or affected communities and drive equitable and anti-racist policy and program development.

Government departments are encouraged to use the Public Engagement Guidebook and Planning Template when contemplating whether to engage on a policy or program and/or when determining how to design and conduct engagements. The Guidebook sets out a four phase, seven step public engagement process outlined below.

Phase 1: Prepare	Phase 2: Plan	Phase 3: Engage	Phase 4: Report and Evaluate

ASSESS THE APPROPRIATE LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT	BECOME FAMILIAR WITH THE COMMUNITY(IES)	DEVELOP COMMUNICATIONS AND SELECT ENGAGEMENT TOOLS	DESIGN ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES	DELIVER ENGAGEMENT	REVIEW, ANALYZE AND REPORT FEEDBACK	EVALUATE ENGAGEMENT

Underrepresented and Underserved Communities in Nova Scotia

In this guidebook and accompanying template, when we speak of underrepresented and underserved communities, we are referring to those groups who experience discrimination and exclusion because of unequal power relationships across economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions.

This includes systemic inequity and/or racism towards people based on one or more protected characteristics as identified in the *Human Rights Act*, which includes: age, race, colour, religion, creed, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, physical or mental disability, ethnicity, national or Indigenous origin, family status, marital status, source of income, and political belief, affiliation or activity. Below are examples of underrepresented and underserved groups in Nova Scotia. Each of these groups has their own unique story, historical setting and history of discrimination and marginalization (this list is not exhaustive and may not include all groups):

- Mi'kmaw and Persons of Indigenous descent;
- African Nova Scotians and Persons of African descent;
- Persons of Colour;
- Newcomers (immigrants and refugees);
- 2SLGBTQIA+--2 Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual/Biromantic, Transgender, Queer and/or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Aromantic and others whose identities are not reflected;
- Persons with disabilities (physical and mental);
- Persons who are neurodivergent;
- Seniors; and
- In some contexts, women.
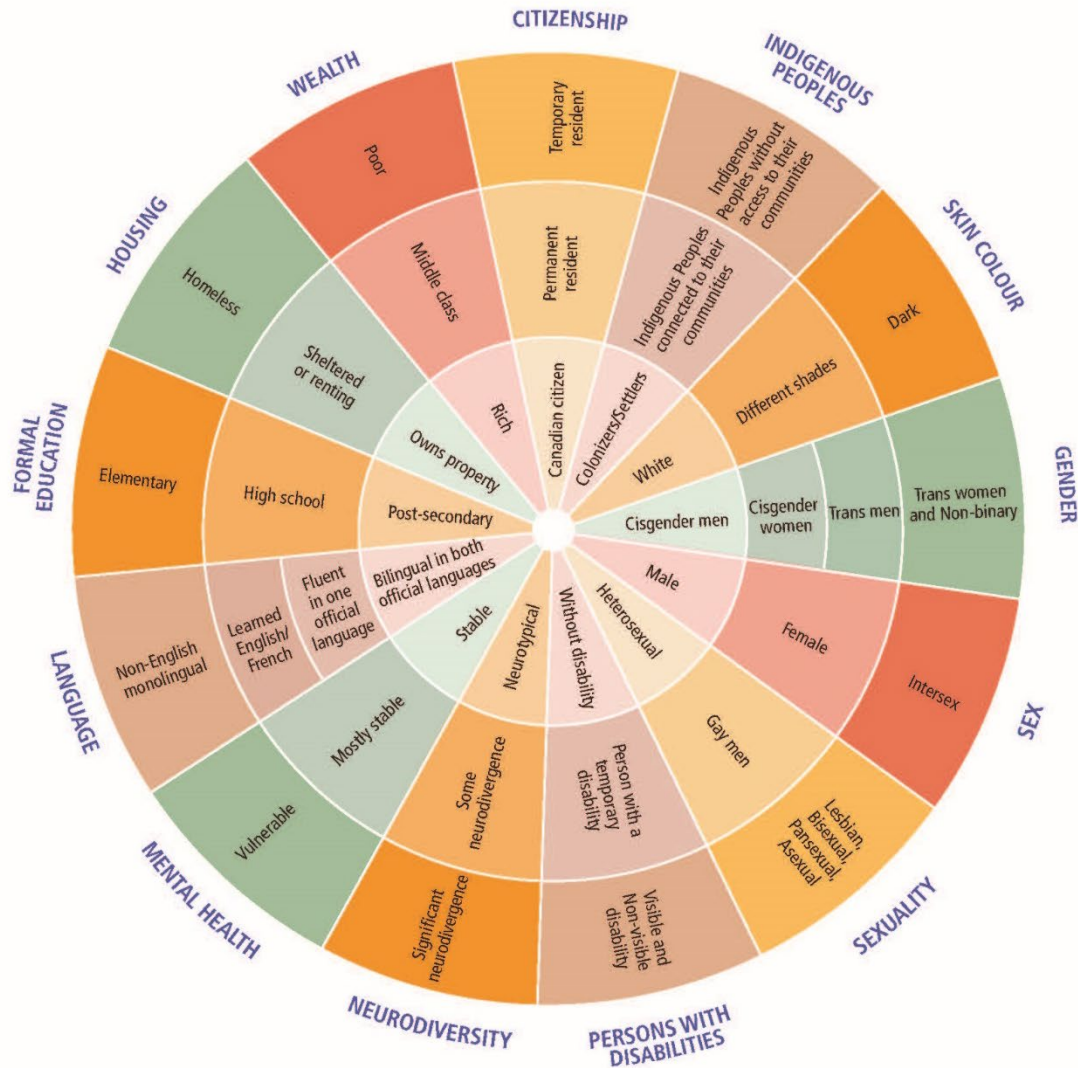
Intersectionality

Intersectionality is defined as the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (for example, racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect, especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups. Many government policies and legislation impact individuals in multiple ways as a result of their intersecting identities. The wheel of power and privilege can be used as a visual tool for promoting awareness and understanding of interconnected systems of privilege, oppression, and power dynamics within society. It provides examples within the Canadian context to illustrate how intersectionality of thirteen categories of social identity uphold power and privilege and shape our interactions and experiences. Mapping out these complex dynamics can help to recognize personal positions of privilege as well as understand how systemic inequalities impact different groups within society. This understanding is essential for:

- identifying and addressing barriers to participation;
- guiding efforts to ensure inclusive, meaningful, equitable and accessible engagement initiatives for all members of the community;
- navigating conversations around inequities, ensuring diverse perspectives are heard and valued; and
- developing strategies to address power imbalances and create more equitable outcomes in projects, programs, polices, and decision-making processes.

WHEEL OF PRIVILEGE AND POWER
(the closer you are to the centre, the more privilege you have)

Image adapted from Sylvia Duckworth (2020).

Note: the categories within this wheel are only examples in the Canadian context, and we should not limit ourselves to them. Intersectionality is a broad concept, and this tool is only a beginning point.

STEP ONE: ASSESS THE APPROPRIATE LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT

In this first step we reflect on why we are considering engagement for this policy or program and what level of engagement is appropriate. It is important to understand why we want to engage as this allows us to assess alignment with project, policy or program goals and the needs of partners, interested parties or affected communities. Assessing the appropriate level of engagement helps tailor strategies to match the community's expectations, resources, and the complexity of the issues at hand. Use the corresponding section of the guidebook to determine whether you will engage and what level is appropriate.

Why are we considering public engagement?

Most public engagement initiatives are designed to achieve one or more goals found within the IAP2 Spectrum. The IAP2 Spectrum was developed by the IAP2 Federation[1] to help groups define the public's role in any public participation process. It walks through five stages, each with increasing levels of engagement and influence on decision-making. The diagram below outlines the description of each goal to determine the best fit for the engagement being planned. It is important to keep in mind that the goal of the engagement may change throughout the engagement and that the goals are not mutually exclusive. For example, there may be a need to inform communities about a policy or program prior to requesting them to collaborate with government to develop changes to it.

IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and it is found in public participation plans around the world.

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION →

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

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[1] The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Federation is a global organization dedicated to advancing the practice of public participation. It provides resources, training, and networking opportunities for professionals and organizations involved in engaging the public in decision-making processes.

If you determine that engagement is required and/or feasible, it's important to assess how to best assess the level of engagement that's appropriate for what we're trying to achieve.

What level of engagement is appropriate?

Choosing the appropriate level of public engagement for any given goal should be based in part on an assessment of how actions and decisions on a particular policy or program will impact individuals and communities. The greater the impact, the deeper the engagement recommended with those who are affected. This applies particularly to impacts on individuals or groups who face barriers to participation and whose views and interests are historically underrepresented and underserved.

> *Equity and Inclusion Guidance* - **Reconciliation and Conflict Resolution**
>
> When working with underrepresented and underserved communities, there may be a desire to consider additional outcomes such as reconciliation and conflict resolution. For example, if the policy has historically had disproportionately negative impacts on underrepresented and underserved communities, in addition to engaging for ideas on how to change the policy, it may be important to use the engagement as part of a reconciliation process with the harmed communities.

Determining the level of engagement needed will help in selecting activities and tools to be used (Step 3). For example, if the issue is sensitive to a community, sending a letter (typically associated with the 'inform' level of engagement) may be perceived as insufficient or superficial. It could increase community angst and damage trust and relationships, as these groups may feel they have not been meaningfully involved.

The factors listed below are important to consider when determining the appropriate level of engagement and are useful for helping to set clear and realistic objectives for the engagement plan:
- The size and scope of the known or potential impacts of the policy or program
- Any previous interest communities have expressed in the policy or program
- Any pre-existing expectations that communities have in relation to engagement on the policy or program

These factors and others are further examined in the following Public Engagement Matrix (PEM).

The Public Engagement Matrix (PEM)

Using the IAP2 Spectrum as a guide, the Public Engagement Matrix (PEM) has been developed as a methodology to consider when choosing a level of engagement.

The horizontal axis on the PEM indicates "community influence" which refers to the extent to which community members have the ability to shape decisions, policies, and outcomes that directly affect their lives within a given engagement process.

The vertical axis indicates "potential community impact" which refers to the anticipated effects, both positive and negative, that a proposed policy or program may have on the individuals, groups, and environment within a specific community. Characteristics for the measures of "low", "medium" and "high" influence and impact are set out in the table below to provide further definition.

POTENTIAL COMMUNITY IMPACT			
High	Involve/Collaborate		Collaborate/ Empower
Medium	Consult		Involve/ Collaborate
Low	Inform	Consult	
	Low	Medium	High
	COMMUNITY INFLUENCE		

Please note that not all issues will fit neatly into "high," "medium," and "low" categories and the assessment of where a policy or program falls within the matrix will be fluid over the life of its development and implementation. The matrix and IAP2 spectrum should be used flexibly, in a nonlinear way, to adapt and match the changing needs of public engagement efforts.

Determining Factors to Help Assess Level of Community Influence

	Government Direction	Regulatory Obligation	Technical Factors[2]	Internal capacity (budget, staff)
High	Government direction or desire to have community define the policy or program.	Legislation, policy, or regulations requiring engagement on policy or program.	Not many technical constraints/ strong ability to affect technical constraints.	Internal capacity exists to implement changes to policy or program communities may want.
Medium	Government direction allows for some ability to affect the policy or program.	Legislative or policy requirements suggestive of or permit engagement on policy or program.	Some technical constraints that limit policy or program options.	Some ability to enable moderate changes to policy or program.
Low	Government direction does not allow for ability to influence the policy or program.	No legislative or policy direction to require engagement on policy or program.	Limited ability to affect policy or program due to technical standards or constraints.	Minimal or no internal capacity to enable changes to policy or program.

Assessment Criteria to Help Assess Level of Community Impact

	Assessment Criteria	Examples
High	• High impact across the province, including significant changes to the built, natural or living environments[3], lifestyles, or habits or the general health and safety of all residents. • High degree of interest across the province or a particular area of the province. • High impact on the province, or a particular area in the province. • Strong possibility of conflicting perspectives on the policy or program. • High public discourse. • Significant implications to provincial government departments.	• Approvals of large industrial projects. • Proposed increases to taxes and/or fees. • Changes to policies or programs that directly impact underrepresented and underserved groups. • Closure of rural health facilities.
Medium	• Moderate impact on a neighborhood area, community group(s) or specific facility or services. • Moderate impact across the province, including notable changes to the built, natural or living environments, lifestyles, or habits or the general health and safety of all residents. • Moderate degree of interest across the province or a particular area of the province. • Moderate possibility of conflicting perspectives on the policy or program. • Moderate public discourse. • Moderate implications to provincial government departments.	• New or replacement schools. • Provincial Park Designation. • Relocation/replacement of Access Nova Scotia site.
Low	• Little to no impact on a neighborhood area, community group(s) or specific facility or services. • Little to no impact across the province, including minor changes to the built, natural or living environments, lifestyles, or habits or the general health and safety of all residents. • Little to no degree of interest across the province or a particular area of the province. • Little to no possibility of conflicting perspectives on the policy or program. • Little to no public discourse. • Little to no implications to provincial government departments.	• Modest expansion or creation of a pilot project. • Proposed changes to regulatory/internal processes.

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[2] "Technical Factors" includes technical complexity associated with specific fields and subject matters (e.g., Engineering or Medicine) which may prove a barrier to public understanding and engagement due to specialized knowledge requirements or lack of expertise OR areas where adherence to standards set by professional organizations or regulatory bodies limit flexibility in decision-making.
[3] "Living environment" refers to the conditions and elements that directly affect the quality of life and well-being of individuals within a specific area or community. It encompasses various aspects of the physical, social, and cultural surroundings in which people live and interact.

***Equity and Inclusion Guidance* – Appropriate Levels of Engagement**

The PEM is a conceptual approach that incorporates basic engagement principles. When working with underrepresented and underserved communities, it is important to also consider the following:

- Selection of a level of public engagement may be driven by the expectations of internal and external partners, interested parties or affected communities.
- Where possible, negotiate the level of engagement with the project team/working group to suit the inclusion of underrepresented and underserved groups.
- Aim to set realistic expectations for public engagement goals and exceed those expectations in actual engagement outcomes.
- When deciding between involve and collaborate levels of engagement, it is recommended the degree of complexity be revisited. The more complex the policy or program, the more likely we should collaborate rather than simply informing.

STEP TWO: BECOME FAMILIAR WITH THE COMMUNITY(IES)

It is important to become familiar with the community or communities that will or may be impacted by the policies or programs that are under consideration. This will allow you to develop a better understanding of how best to engage as your decisions will consider cultures, social networks, economic conditions, unique characteristics, demographics, histories, experiences, particular dynamics, and diversity within the community or communities involved.

Preliminary Research and Engagement (Pre-engagement)
Preliminary research and engagement or "Pre-engagement" provides opportunities for informal networking, individual introductions, and improved communication. It enables government to build trust between communities and staff, to fill knowledge gaps, leverage lived experiences, community leadership, knowledge, networks, and connections for guidance in the design and delivery of an engagement process to ensure relevance and appropriateness. Additionally, it allows for the thoughtful consideration of community's capacity and readiness to be engaged.

Community Context Information
Understanding community context is vital for staff to grasp the unique community dynamics and needs of those they seek to engage. It aids in crafting culturally sensitive strategies aligned with community priorities. Sources include secondary resources such as census reports, surveys, interviews, historical records, previous engagement reports from community-based organizations, and government agencies. The process of gathering and analyzing relevant information can foster trust, build relationships, and enhance engagement processes.

Collaboration and Coordination within Government
Where possible, consult with other relevant government departments and partners before finalizing decisions to engage. This can provide an opportunity to discuss ongoing or upcoming engagement activities, share information, and explore opportunities for coordination and collaboration. This proactive approach can help prevent duplication, and ensure that efforts are coordinated, strategic and inclusive. It will also help ensure government is being mindful of community time, energy, and expectations and does not contribute to engagement fatigue within the community.

Equity and Inclusion Guidance **– Diversity within Diversity and Intersectionality**

In this step, it is important to gather information that speaks to the diversity within communities. Underrepresented and underserved communities are not all the same. There is significant diversity within communities, and this can impact how to engage and what tools to use. And as mentioned above, communities are not mutually exclusive. It is important to learn about the intersecting identities of community members and how this should be incorporated into engagement planning, design and implementation.

Equity and Inclusion Guidance **– Communities may not Distinguish Government Departments**

The actions of one government department or office within a department can impact all our relationships with communities. This is especially important when working with underrepresented and underserved communities. One department may plan a very culturally competent, community responsive and appropriate engagement on a policy or program, which can be completely discounted because of the actions of another department—current or past. When planning engagements with underrepresented and underserved communities, government must be mindful of legacies of harm, current harmful events, policies, or programs and current or past engagements that have not been received well by communities.

Equity and Inclusion Guidance – **Tailored or Focused Engagement**

Please assess whether the following screening conditions require a deeper or more focused level of engagement.
- ❑ The project, policy, or program decision may impact the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia. Provincial and federal governments have a duty to consult with Indigenous peoples, and accommodate their interests, where appropriate, when contemplating conduct that may adversely impact established and asserted Indigenous or treaty rights – Contact L'nu Affairs for advice as needed.
- ❑ The project, policy or program may disproportionately impact historically underrepresented and underserved communities.
- ❑ The project or issue is unique/challenging (i.e. it is difficult to understand, will likely have social impacts, may be heavily values-based or may be controversial, politically sensitive and/or have significant financial impacts).
- ❑ There may be a language barrier.
- ❑ There are cultural norms customs on which staff lack expertise.
- ❑ A significant number of people or groups have expressed strong interest and/or opposing opinions or concerns about the issue or project.
- ❑ There has been significant political interest and media coverage.
- ❑ The project or issue has the potential to impact sensitive government-community relationships as they relate to issues of trust.

If <u>any</u> of these criteria have been selected, **reassess** the approach before proceeding further.

STEP THREE: DEVELOP COMMUNICATIONS AND SELECT ENGAGEMENT TOOLS

This next step involves developing communications and selecting engagement tools and methodology for your public engagement.

Communications Plan

The success of the engagement process hinges on the active participation of the intended audiences. Policies and programs that involve extensive engagement, necessitate broad outreach, or entail sensitive topics may benefit from a structured communications plan and/or may require a Submission to Executive Council. Please contact your department policy team or your Executive Council Office Cabinet Advisor to determine if this is needed. If you do need to submit a request for approval to Executive Council, Communications Nova Scotia (CNS) will create a communications plan to accompany your submission.

In cases where a full communications plan may not be necessary but where substantial public and media interest is anticipated, it's advisable to inform your CNS representative about the policy or program and any engagement plans. This proactive step ensures they are prepared to address any requests for information that may arise.

Please NOTE: All engagement materials and communications MUST be reviewed by your respective CNS representatives. Consult communications early in the planning process.

> ***Equity and Inclusion Guidance* - Diverse, Equitable and Inclusive Representation**
>
> Ensuring diverse, equitable, and inclusive media representation across all communication materials, channels, and platforms is essential. This entails a deliberate effort to authentically reflect the diversity of voices, perspectives, identities, and experiences within the community. Efforts should be made to:
> - actively seek out, make space for and amplify voices from individuals from historically underrepresented and underserved groups;
> - be mindful of language, imagery, and messaging, ensuring that they reflect the diversity of perspectives, identities, and experiences within the community;
> - integrate cultural norms and sensitivities into the engagement process and avoid stereotypes and biases that perpetuate inequities;
> - provide equitable access to media platforms and opportunities for participation, fostering an environment where all voices are heard, valued, and respected; and
> - prioritize accessibility considerations to ensure that communication channels are accessible to all individuals, including those with disabilities or language barriers.
>
> By prioritizing diverse and inclusive representation in communications, public engagement initiatives can foster greater trust, understanding, empathy, and solidarity among participants. Ultimately this will lead to more empowering and equitable outcomes for all interested parties or affected communities.

Engagement Tools

Selecting suitable tools for the engagement process is crucial to achieving the established engagement goals. All engagement should proceed using methods which are culturally appropriate and relevant to each distinct group involved.

Engagement activities have traditionally focused on in-person meetings and activities, mailouts and print advertising. However, social media and formal online engagement platforms have become more common and user friendly. Online engagement allows public participation to take place on an ongoing basis with a broader geographic reach. Before incorporating online engagement, there are equity and inclusion considerations in the guidance below to ensure the approach is equitable and accessible. Be open to learning and adapting approaches. Try new methods and tools, to determine the right fit for the context.

Engagement plans should include multiple (low- and higher-tech) approaches and tools to ensure residents can participate, regardless of their ability or comfort attending meetings or accessing online engagement platforms.

Once the level of engagement has been determined, review the engagement tools and techniques table in the Engagement Planning Template to identify appropriate engagement tools and techniques. Select engagement tools

based on the identified level of engagement (Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate or Empower) for the policy or program in question. The various levels of engagement should not be considered in isolation of the others. Tools from lighter levels of public participation should also be included to support the tools identified for more intense levels of public participation.

Additional information on how to design engagement activities using these tools is provided in Step 4.

Equity and Inclusion Guidance – **Choosing Between Online and In-person Engagement Tools and Methods**

- Many policies or programs are built on personal relationships and the trust that comes with being face-to-face. Are staff able to recreate that same experience in an online setting? Is there enough of a trust reservoir to effectively bring these relationships and connections online? If the answer is 'no' to either or both questions, staff should consider a hybrid approach or focus on fostering genuine connections, active listening, and empathy through online interactions, emphasizing transparency and responsiveness to community needs and concerns.
- Online only engagement can create a 'digital divide,' an uneven distribution in the access to, use of, or impact of information for many people who do not have access to e-devices and/or the internet. Be mindful of the Digital Divide 5 'A's of Technology Access:
    1. Availability – To whom is the technology available to?
    2. Affordability – To whom is the technology (un)affordable?
    3. Awareness – Who is (un)aware of the technology?
    4. Abilities – Who has the digital literacy to use the technology?
    5. Agency – Who has the self-efficacy to make use of the technology?
- What approaches and outreach will help to ensure all those who need to be engaged can fully participate?
- How can staff create opportunities for the people least likely to be heard to participate?

Equity and Inclusion Guidance - **Co-Creation**

It is important wherever possible to acknowledge and amplify the skills, knowledge, agency, and expertise of community participants when creating and implementing public engagement processes. They have firsthand experience of living in the community and are best equipped to provide their thoughts, opinions, ideas, and visions for the policy or program being discussed. Involving community participants has the potential to benefit engagement efforts by:

- Creating opportunities for a diversity of voices to be heard and ensuring that their perspectives are considered.
- Creating specific strategies and opportunities to address power dynamics and inequity.
- Facilitating skill-building and leadership opportunities for participants to increase experience and knowledge regarding engagement, government services and processes empowering them to become active participants in shaping their communities.
- Increasing the sense of ownership and pride community members may feel by being involved in decision-making processes.
- Enhancing trust and credibility as community members who feel their voices are heard and valued, they are more likely to trust the process and the outcomes.
- Fostering a sense of collaboration and collective responsibility for community well-being leading to sustainable solutions.

In considering co-creation, it is important to note sometimes intended partners may be reluctant to be involved in this way. It is important that we go at the pace of community and meet them where they are.

Barriers to Participation
Before finalizing the engagement plan, review it to ensure any barriers to participation are identified and addressed. Barriers to participation include anything that prevents a person or group/community from fully participating because of their race, age, language, ability, creed, etc., and may include barriers that are physical, informational, or communicative, attitudinal, technological/digital, cultural, geographical, literacy-based, or procedural in nature. Some common barriers are

identified below.

Communication and Information Dissemination:
- Inadequate dissemination of information and unclear or inaccessible communication.
- Engagement materials not being provided in a community's preferred language.

Accessibility and Inclusivity:
- Insufficient opportunities to participate due to failure to adequately consider busy schedules related to multiple jobs or caregiving responsibilities.
- Failure to adequately recognize or accommodate the unique perspectives, values, and communication styles that come with cultural differences.
- Inaccessible meeting locations, lack of transportation options, or venues not equipped to accommodate individuals with disabilities, all of which may limit or prevent individuals from attending and engaging in activities.

Trust and Past Experiences:
- Trust issues, stemming from past negative experiences or perceived insincerity can act as barriers to participation in community engagement by creating skepticism or apprehension among potential participants, leading them to hesitate or refrain from engaging due to concerns about transparency, sincerity, or previous disappointments.

Socioeconomic Factors:
- Socioeconomic factors such as limited access to transportation or technology, may hinder participation in community engagement activities due to financial constraints or time commitments related to work or caregiving responsibilities.

Digital Engagement Concerns:
- Digital privacy or cybersecurity risk concerns whereby participants may hesitate to join virtual meetings due to concerns about their personal information being compromised or privacy breaches during online interactions, especially if they involve sensitive topics or confidential discussions.
- Concerns about online harassment or abusive behaviour from other participants, undermining senses of safety and well-being.

By proactively addressing participation barriers, we can create an environment where everyone's voice is heard and valued. Below, we outline specific strategies to overcome common barriers to participation:

Accessibility and Inclusivity:
- Engage in a variety of locations, considering the accessibility of meeting venues and utilize various communication channels such as social media, community gatherings or public forums, and newsletters.
- Provide materials in different languages, employ translators, or use multilingual volunteers.
- Use clear and straightforward language, maintaining consistency across different communication mediums.
- Use and encourage descriptive language when sharing visual content to accommodate those with visual impairments.
- Provide materials in accessible formats, such as large print or electronic versions, if needed.
- If appropriate, consider using microphones for those who may have difficulty speaking loudly, and offering alternative formats for materials.
- Be prepared to direct participants to a list of mental health resources and service providers should they require additional support during or after the session.

Community Collaboration and Trust Building:
- Collaborate with local businesses, community-based, community serving individuals and organizations.
- Cultivate trust through genuine, ongoing engagement and reciprocal relationships.
- Adopt culturally sensitive approaches to engagement, recognizing and honouring cultural norms and values.

Communication and Engagement Practices:
- Encourage participation from individuals or groups who may have concerns about privacy and confidentiality or feel marginalized, unsafe, or vulnerable. Offer channels for participants to communicate concerns privately or provide anonymous feedback.
- When appropriate, implement clear and enforceable community guidelines for respectful behaviour and designate moderators to monitor the chat and intervene if inappropriate behaviour occurs.

Respect and Autonomy:

- Offer participants the option to opt out of certain discussion topics. Respect their autonomy and decisions throughout the process.
- Provide multiple options for participation, such as audio-only or chat-based contributions, to accommodate different accessibility needs. Some participants may feel more comfortable expressing themselves through non-verbal means such as writing or drawing. Provide opportunities for non-verbal communication to ensure all voices are heard.

STEP FOUR: DESIGN ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Once you have established engagement communications and tools, the focus shifts to designing engagement activities that effectively align with the objectives outlined in the plan and resonate with the community. It is important to carefully design engagement activities to ensure they are tailored to the needs, preferences, and dynamics of the community. This section offers insights, tips, and practical guidance to help enhance community participation, promote inclusivity, and build trust. From leveraging digital tools to maximizing the potential of in-person gatherings, this section will help staff explore promising practices that resonate with communities, enhance accessibility, and cultivate an environment where every voice is not only heard but valued.

When designing engagement activities, think about combining online with lower-tech options. Larger engagements can benefit from a wide range of tools, while smaller engagements may only need one or two. In most instances it will be important to include more low-tech methods such as phone and mail to support online tools and ensure access for individuals without computer access.

Online Engagement

This section explores promising practices for online engagement, offering insights and strategies to maximize the effectiveness and inclusivity of virtual interactions. From leveraging innovative digital platforms to ensuring accessibility and participation for all, this section aims to equip staff with the tools and knowledge needed to navigate the ever-changing landscape of online engagement.

Best Practices for Online Engagement
- Consider pre-engagement and connection with community (Step 2) to determine if online engagement aligns most effectively with community preferences and needs.
- Choose a virtual meeting platform that prioritizes security and privacy and familiarize yourself with its features.
- When planning virtual public engagement events, it is crucial to select the right platform to facilitate meaningful interactions and ensure a smooth experience for participants. Consider factors such as your team's familiarity with the virtual meeting platform's features, participant preferences, security requirements, and the nature of the engagement event. Leverage the accessibility features of the platforms to create inclusive environments where all participants can fully engage and participate in virtual meetings and events. Two popular options to consider are Microsoft Teams and Zoom, both of which offer accessibility features.
- Ensure that participants feel confident that their personal information and identities are protected.
- Include a combination of self-directed and one-to-one engagement.
- To create meaningful connections with interested parties or affected communities, consider offering breakout groups to break participants into smaller groups to facilitate smaller group discussions. This can help create a safer space for sharing personal experiences and foster deeper connections among participants.
- When creating a schedule for online engagement, consider the need to factor in enough time to enable information sharing and active participation. Following the initial engagement, additional time will be needed to compile information on what was heard in the engagements, reshare it with participants, and time for participants to validate that we've captured their thoughts and feedback effectively.
- Ensure careful moderation to remove or hide comments that are inappropriate.
- Make use of online engagement tools that have embedded features for accessibility, such as text display of spoken words and sounds that accompany audiovisual content. In addition, please refer to this resource for guidance on planning accessible meetings: Guide to Planning Accessible Online Meetings and Events.

Online Engagement Resource – OEA Engagement Website
OEA's engagement website provides details about the engagement work led by OEA. Government departments can request to utilize the website to share information about engagements they are leading or to conduct online engagement activities. The site provides a variety of online engagement tools including surveys, quick polls, invitation for ideas/submissions, etc. To discuss using the OEA Engagement Website for your engagement activities, email oeaengagement@novascotia.ca or by reaching out to a member of the OEA Engagement Team.

Social Media
Social media is primarily effective when used at the Inform level of public participation. These channels can be an effective way to share messages, links to reference documents and advertisements for upcoming engagement activities. Content can include short messages, images, and videos (including some live broadcasting). OEA currently operates the following social media accounts that can be used to share information about engagement activities.

X: @NSEquity
Facebook: @Officeofequityandantiracism

To request posting on OEA social media about engagement activities, email oeaengagement@novascotia.ca or reach out to a member of the OEA Engagement Team.

In-Person Engagement

This section explores promising practices for in-person engagement, highlighting strategies and principles to enhance the quality, inclusivity, and impact of face-to-face interactions. From organizing inclusive community meetings to facilitating dynamic workshops and forums, in-person engagement allows for the cultivation of trust, empathy, and collaboration within diverse communities. This section provides practical insights and best practices to help navigate the complexities and nuances of in-person engagement with confidence and effectiveness. These events are useful for all levels of engagement and enable real-time communication between staff and participants. These events are not mutually exclusive and can be combined with one another. For example, an engagement event that has a panel discussion may be followed by workshops and seminars and focus groups.

In-person engagement events can take many forms, including:

- **Public Information Meetings/Sessions** are gatherings where organizers provide information to the public about a policy or program. They typically involve presentations, displays, and provide opportunities for attendees to ask questions or seek clarification.
- **Public Hearings** are formal meetings held by government bodies or organizations to allow members of the public to express their opinions, concerns, or support for specific policies or programs. Participants may provide testimony or statements on the record.
- **Open Houses** are informal events where organizers invite the public to drop in and learn more about a policy or program. They often feature informational displays, presentations, and opportunities for one-on-one conversations with government representatives.
- **Focus groups** involve small, carefully selected groups of individuals who share their opinions, experiences, and perspectives on specific topics or issues in a structured discussion format. These sessions are typically moderated by a facilitator.
- **Workshops/ Seminars** are interactive sessions designed to educate participants, facilitate discussions, and gather input on specific policies or programs. They often feature presentations, group activities, and opportunities for collaborative problem-solving.
- **Pop-Up Engagements** are temporary, ad-hoc events held in public spaces such as parks, markets, or street corners. They aim to reach a broad cross-section of the community and often feature interactive displays, activities, or surveys to gather feedback on various issues.
- **Engagement Storefronts** are physical spaces, often located in community centers or downtown areas, where members of the public can drop in to learn about policies or programs, provide feedback, and engage with staff in a relaxed environment.
- **Crowdsourcing** involves soliciting ideas, feedback, or contributions from a large group of people, typically through online platforms or social media channels. It allows organizations to harness the collective intelligence and creativity of the community.
- **Working Groups** are small teams or committees formed to address specific issues, develop recommendations, or work on policies or programs collaboratively. They often involve representatives from diverse interest or community groups working together towards a common goal.
- **Speakers/ Panels** are events featuring one or more speakers or panelists who share expertise, insights, or perspectives on a particular topic or issue. They are used to provide information, provoke discussion, and offer diverse viewpoints to inform and engage participants.

Tips for In-Person Engagements:
Regardless of the type(s) of engagement events employed, below are helpful tips to make them successful, especially when working with underrepresented and underserved communities.

When preparing for Engagement:

> *Equity and Inclusion Guidance* - **Event Scheduling Checklist**
>
> When scheduling an in-person engagement event, selecting appropriate locations, dates and timing is vital to its success and inclusivity.
> For guidance, refer to the **Event Scheduling Checklist** in the **Engagement Planning Template**.

- Consider community-led collaboration opportunities whereby community representatives are provided the opportunity to both collaborate in the planning process and share in the presenting of components of the strategy, such as information and question/answer sessions, etc. This is especially important for in-person engagement and/or forums where expected levels of impact, participant influence, and participation fall into the medium/high categories under Step One.
- Consider the use of a skilled facilitator, who is external to government but connected to the community, to help design and deliver the engagement. This is especially important if an interactive component is designed to encourage dialogue among attendees, or between staff and the public. Recognize the importance of their contribution as experts and compensate them accordingly.
- Provide a feedback mechanism, such as an e-mail address or phone number, to all participants at the start of the event or in the engagement materials.

During Engagement:

- Create a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere to encourage participation and build trust among attendees.
- Share information about your recording policy, whether you will be recording any of the discussions or participant contributions. Indicate if there will be notetakers present during the session and be clear about their roles i.e. to accurately capture the key points and themes discussed, ensuring that contributions are properly documented solely for transcription purposes.
- The facilitator should maintain a respectful and inclusive tone, valuing diverse perspectives and fostering constructive dialogue. They should ensure that everyone has an opportunity to speak and intervene to navigate any power dynamics or if disrespectful behavior occurs.
- For longer sessions, include regular health breaks in the agenda and identify when they will be taking place at the beginning of the meeting or provide opportunities for them to step away or take breaks as needed.
- Ensure that staff are easy to identify at events and are visually distinguishable from participants, consultants, any observers by using name tags, lanyards, or other identifiers.

Resources:
- [Engaging Questions for Public Engagement](#)
- [100 Great Community Engagement Ideas](#)
- [Diversity Through Inclusive Practices Toolkit](#)

Event Set Up
The setup of the event space will largely depend on the plan for interacting with event attendees. The set-up should be reflective of the work completed in Step 2. It is recommended staff arrive well in advance of any event to set up and address any technical issues before members of the public begin to arrive. Consider:

- Audience members should have a clear view of any presentation screens
- Microphones for providing comments should be placed to the side of any space so participants lining up do not disrupt audience views.
- If attendees are intended to cycle through the space, station staff to greet attendees and explain the process, as well as at key locations in the room to answer any questions. Ensure seating for members of the public is placed in areas where it won't obstruct or interfere with the movement of people walking or passing through.
- If the meeting room is physically large, make sure an audio system is installed and all participants use the microphones provided.
- Plan the meeting space to ensure there is room for participants who use mobility aids to move around freely.

- Keep in mind the needs of various participants and their service providers, such as clear view of ASL interpreter, language interpreter, transcription, and captioning if applicable.

Presentations

Presentations are a common and effective way to provide information to audiences and establish a base level of understanding of the policy or program prior to beginning to have conversations. When planning a presentation:

- Begin the presentation by welcoming participants and introducing the facilitators. Go over the goals and agenda for the session, background information on the policy or program, and the parameters and limitations of the engagement.
- Use plain language and ensure slides and other materials are clear, to the point and concise.
- Speak clearly and at a moderate pace.
- Incorporate images, graphs, charts, and/or videos to complement verbal communication and enhance audience understanding.
- Outline how community input will be captured and managed and how we will report back to the community (e.g. "What We Heard" reports).
- Where appropriate, encourage audience participation through Q&A sessions, polls, or small group discussions to foster engagement and dialogue.
- Advise participants to minimize interruptions and outline when question and answer periods are scheduled. During question-and-answer periods, remind people to speak slowly and clearly and to state their name before beginning. Thank participants after they finish their remarks and consider summarizing what has been heard from each speaker (verbally, on chart paper, on screen, etc.). Staff can also ask clarifying or follow-up questions to ensure what was heard is accurate.
- Manage the speaking time of participants to ensure fair and time-conscious opportunities for all who wish to participate.
- Maintain a respectful and inclusive tone throughout the presentation, acknowledging diverse perspectives and experiences.
- Ensure presentation materials are considerate of all literacy levels and is free of government jargon or acronyms.
- Advise participants of the note takers and if notes or recordings of any kind will be taken during the session.

Establishing Evaluation Indicators

It is important to consider how you will collect data and information that will help you evaluate your engagement efforts. This could be both from a perspective of primary engagement goals (i.e., to demonstrate you have achieved the intended level of engagement) and from demonstrating you have effectively taken steps to support equitable engagement with underserved and underrepresented communities. At a minimum, all engagement efforts should capture metrics such as number and types of engagement events, and participation levels. A detailed Evaluation Indicator Bank is appended to the Public Engagement Planning Template that can be used to identify qualitative and quantitative indicators to assess your engagement outcomes. Depth and detail of evaluation will vary depending on complexity of the engagement, and the capacity and skillset of staff supporting engagement.

Once you have designed your proposed engagement, ensure that any required approvals are received. The Engagement Readiness Checklist appended to the Public Engagement Planning Template can be used to document your planning and to seek approvals.

Equity & Inclusion Guidance – **Accessibility Features**

To ensure that all members of the community have the chance to participate fully, accessibility and inclusivity should be priorities when organizing any public engagement.

- Venues should be fully accessible to all members of the public. Persons with disabilities should be provided with necessary amenities, such as wheelchair-accessible pathways and ramps at entrances, exits, meeting rooms, and accessible washrooms, as well as information on parking and accessible parking spaces available to them.
- For people with visual and/or hearing impairments, it is essential to hold meetings in venues that have good acoustics so that they can hear what is being said. Thoughtful supports should be provided for those who are hearing impaired, such as, CART (Communication Access Realtime Translation) Captioning service online, hearing loops, and American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters.
- An emphasis should be placed on making material content and presentations as visually appealing and accessible as possible to meet visual needs. Any materials provided should be high contrast.
- Coordinate with local community groups and service providers to distribute accessible communication materials to their members ahead of meetings. Ensure that signs and printed materials used for displays are available in relevant languages.
- Events should be scent free.
- Provide clear information about where accessible and gender-neutral washrooms are located.
- Provide a quiet room/ calm sensory space, where possible.
- Consider providing fidget toys available in all meeting spaces.
- Use name tags and invite participants to add pronouns.

In addition, when necessary, there are many services that can be provided, and should be advertised in advance, to help remove barriers that may prevent residents from attending, including:

- Childcare at the event.
- Transportation to and/ or from the event.
- Food and beverages.
- Language interpretation and translation services.
- Attendant care workers.
- Counselling and mental health supports

Refer to these resources for guidance on accessible engagement with persons with disabilities:

- Engaging with Persons with Disabilities – Webinar, Slides and Workbook
- Guide to Planning Accessible Meetings and Events

STEP FIVE: DELIVER ENGAGEMENT

After the engagement activities have been designed, the next critical step involves delivering them in a manner that ensures inclusivity, transparency, and accessibility throughout the process. In this section we'll explore practical strategies and approaches to effectively deliver engagement activities, foster meaningful interactions, and cultivate inclusive dialogue within diverse communities.

Delivering Engagement

While delivering an engagement consider the following:

- Provide participants with a welcoming, accessible, and inclusive experience where all participants feel valued and heard.
- To build trust, center underrepresented and underserved voices within the engagement by:
  - Recognizing privileges of those in government and taking proactive steps to mitigate power imbalances.
  - Understanding the existing level of trust with government.
  - Taking the time to invest in relationship-building – "move at the speed of trust".
  - Looking for opportunities where the engagement can serve community as well as having it meet government's goals, for example, are there existing initiatives led by communities that government can support (if they want that support), are there services we can provide at engagement events that support community?
  - Supporting volunteer leadership with honourariums.
  - Being flexible enough to adapt and change with the community issues and needs.
- Resources for facilitating meetings include:
  - Tips for Inclusive Communication
  - Accessibility Guidelines for Organizers and Facilitators
  - Facilitation for Healthy Communities Toolkit

> *Equity & Inclusion Guidance* – **Inclusive and Appropriate Language**
>
> For ready-made Equity, Diversity, Inclusion & Accessibility tools, and resources consult the MyHR library:
> - Land Acknowledgement Guidelines
> - Inclusive Language Guidelines
> - Understanding Pronouns and Putting Them in Practice

Monitoring Engagement

Monitoring a public engagement process is essential for tracking progress, identifying challenges, and ensuring that the initiative remains responsive to the evolving needs and dynamics of the community involved.

- Engagement activities should be monitored to ensure they are reflective of the key questions and considerations identified in Steps 1-4.
- Establish clear monitoring objectives or key performance indicators (KPIs) aligned with engagement goals.
- Where appropriate, implement regular assessments to evaluate progress towards engagement goals and identify areas for improvement.
- Where appropriate, collect relevant data through surveys, feedback forms, participant observations, and interviews (a Comment Template is contained in the Engagement Planning Template to support collection of feedback and input). And analyze that data to identify trends, patterns, and areas for improvement in engagement activities.
- Keep organized records of engagement activities, including meeting notes, reports, and communications with participants.
- Keep participants informed through regular updates and reports on the progress of the engagement process.
- Solicit feedback from participants, partners, interested parties or affected communities to assess satisfaction, identify challenges, and gather suggestions for improvement.
- Use insights gained from monitoring your engagement to make well-informed decisions, adapt strategies, and improve engagement approaches as necessary.

Policy and Program Updates

To maintain a relationship with the community, it's important to keep them up to date on the process and progress of the policy or program development—and how we are incorporating their feedback. We also want to include upcoming opportunities to stay engaged and, where appropriate, provide further feedback or input.

STEP SIX: REVIEW, ANALYZE AND REPORT FEEDBACK

Following the completion of engagement activities, we move into reviewing, analyzing, and reporting feedback obtained from the public engagement efforts. Remember that these steps are not linear and there may be multiple points within the development of a policy or program where we review and analyze feedback before moving forward.

Reporting back to community on feedback and input received at multiple points in the development of a policy or program helps:
- demonstrate a commitment to inclusivity and responsiveness to community input, and
- build trust and credibility with interested parties or affected communities, as they can see their input being taken seriously and influencing outcomes.

A **Reporting Back Table** is provided in the **Engagement Planning Template** that can be used to complete this step.

What We Heard Reports Guidance
'What We Heard' reports can be effective ways to capture feedback received through engagement. Furthermore, when these documents are published, communities have an opportunity to review and validate the report's findings or bring forward concerns that may not have been addressed.

While the format of a What We Heard Report can vary, they generally include the following sections:

What We Did and Why We Did It	This introductory section provides some background on the objectives of the engagement and the public engagement process used.
Who Was Involved and How They Were Involved	This section typically provides an engagement overview summarizing: • the participants and partners who took part in engagement activities; • the various methods used to engage the community; • details on the number of participants, demographics, dates, and the duration of the engagement process; • any gaps in the engagement (e.g., groups that government had hoped to reach through the engagement that weren't included).
What We Heard/What We Are Hearing Summary	This section presents a comprehensive summary of the feedback including key themes, concerns, and opinions expressed by participants during the engagement process.
Analysis and Interpretation	This section offers an analysis and interpretation of the feedback or responses received, exploring patterns, trends, and areas of consensus or divergence among participants. It provides context and insight into the meaning behind the feedback.
Recommendations and Next Steps	This section provides recommendations or proposed actions based on the findings and analysis. These recommendations may include potential solutions, policy changes, program improvements, or further areas of exploration. It also outlines the next steps to be taken based on the feedback received. Be sure to include contact information.
Conclusion	This section summarizes the key findings and conclusions of the report. It may also address any challenges or limitations encountered during the engagement process.
Appendices	This is a place to include, where appropriate, additional supporting materials if applicable, such as detailed survey results, transcripts of interviews or focus groups, participant demographics, or other relevant documentation.

Equity & Inclusion Guidance – Equity Analysis

Consider the following questions to ensure the findings and reporting are reflective of and sensitive to all members of the community:

❑ How will the proposed policy or program decision affect underrepresented and underserved groups?
❑ How does the policy or program decision address, worsen or ignore existing disparities?
❑ How well are the insights from groups who face systemic barriers and inequities reflected in the report, recommendations, actions, or outcomes?
❑ How will we consider and mitigate the impact of biased data analysis and interpretation?

STEP SEVEN: EVALUATE ENGAGEMENT

With feedback analyzed and reported, the final recommended step entails evaluating the overall effectiveness and impact of the engagement efforts. The Engagement Planning Template contains guidance and tools to support an evaluation of the engagement. The depth of the evaluation will vary depending on the magnitude of the engagement.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Public Engagement Guidebook and Template can provide a solid foundation for meaningful public engagement. While this guidebook provides structured steps for public engagement, it's essential to acknowledge that it's not prescriptive. Each community is unique, and engagement approaches must be tailored accordingly. It is crucial to view engagement through an equity and anti-racism lens, prioritizing culturally relevant and appropriate methods. Embracing diversity and inclusion supports all voices being heard and respected throughout the engagement process.