

**Submission
No 35**

**PROPOSALS TO INCREASE VOTER ENGAGEMENT, PARTICIPATION AND
CONFIDENCE**

Organisation: NSW Electoral Commission

Date Received: 30 August 2024

BY EMAIL

30 August 2024

The Hon. Peter Primrose, MLC
Chair Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament of New South Wales
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Chair,

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into Proposals to increase voter engagement, participation and confidence

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters' inquiry into *Proposals to increase voter engagement, participation and confidence*.

The attached submission addresses the issues on which the Committee seeks comment relevant to the NSW Electoral Commission.

I welcome the Inquiry and look forward to engaging with this Committee, and stakeholders, on the matters raised.

If you have any queries, please contact Michelle Dawson, Corporate Communications Lead

[REDACTED]

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Matthew Phillips
NSW Electoral Commissioner (Acting)

NSW Electoral Commission submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

Proposals to increase voter
engagement, participation and
confidence

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The NSW Electoral Commission acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout New South Wales and their continuing connection to the land, sea and community. Our head office is located on Gadigal land. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

About the NSW Electoral Commission

Purpose

The purpose of the NSW Electoral Commission is to deliver trusted and independent systems, processes, oversight and engagement that support democracy in New South Wales.

Vision

The vision of the NSW Electoral Commission is to maintain confidence in the integrity of the democratic process and make it easy for people to understand and participate.

What we do

The NSW Electoral Commission's staff work across four divisions: Elections; Information Services; Funding, Disclosure, Compliance and General Counsel; and Corporate.

Our work includes:

- conducting general elections and by-elections for the NSW Parliament
- conducting elections and by-elections for local councils (if engaged to do so)
- conducting elections for the NSW Aboriginal Land Council
- conducting elections for registered clubs, statutory boards and State registered industrial organisations (if requested or required to do so)
- supporting the redistribution of electoral districts
- providing processes and guidance to assist political participants (including candidates, parties, elected members, political donors, third-party campaigners, associated entities and lobbyists) to comply with their obligations
- administering electoral funding legislation, including maintaining a scheme of public funding
- publishing political donation and expenditure disclosures and registers of political parties, candidates' agents, third-party campaigners and political lobbyists
- engaging with the public to make it easier for people to understand and participate in the democratic process
- investigating possible offences and enforcing breaches of electoral, funding and disclosure, and lobbying laws
- preparing and maintaining the Electoral Information Register (in conjunction with the Australian Electoral Commission).

Our legislative framework

We are governed by various pieces of New South Wales legislation that set out how we conduct and regulate elections, and the entitlements and obligations of electors and political participants. This legislation includes:

- *Constitution Act 1902*
- *Electoral Act 2017*
- *Electoral Regulation 2017*
- *Electoral Funding Act 2018*
- *Electoral Funding Regulation 2018*
- *Local Government Act 1993*
- *Local Government (General) Regulation 2021*
- *City of Sydney Act 1988*
- *Registered Clubs Act 1976*
- *Industrial Relations Act 1996*
- *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983*
- *Aboriginal Land Rights Regulation 2020*
- *Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998*
- *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009*
- *Government Sector Finance Act 2018*
- *Government Sector Employment Act 2013*
- *Lobbying of Government Officials Act 2011*
- *Lobbying of Government Official (Lobbyist Code of Conduct) Regulation 2014.*

Relationship to Parliament

In the exercise of their functions, neither the Electoral Commission nor the Electoral Commissioner are subject to the direction of any minister administering New South Wales electoral legislation. This independence from executive government is set out in sections 10(4) and 12(4), respectively, of the Electoral Act.

Executive summary

The NSW Electoral Commission's purpose is to deliver trusted and independent systems, processes, oversight and engagement that support democracy in New South Wales. Our vision is to maintain confidence in the integrity of the democratic process and make it easy for people to understand and participate.

Right now, we can say we are delivering on that vision and purpose. New South Wales enjoys the highest enrolment rate of any jurisdiction in Australia, at 99 per cent; has consistently high turnout rates at elections (90 per cent for the 2023 NSW State election); and formality, trust and confidence rates are also consistently high.

But the future is not assured. The NSW Electoral Commission faces a rapidly changing and dynamic electoral landscape. We face challenges in relation to staffing, IT systems and cyber security – likely to lead to election failure. Challenges to election integrity such as security, artificial intelligence, market concentration of suppliers, and the undermining of democracy through ongoing propagation of disinformation are exacerbated by a continuing fragile workforce structure, and fragile and unsupported IT systems.

The risks to the Electoral Commission from external and internal threats are such that action is urgently required if the agency is to maintain public confidence in elections and continue to deliver its core services into the future. Our ability to respond and adapt to these issues is extremely limited, and our existing capacity is rapidly declining as experienced staff exit the agency without ongoing funding for critical roles.

The agency is faced with reducing its workforce by more than 40 per cent by the end of this year and the agency's out-of-date core election systems continue to fail during elections and remain vulnerable to cyber and insider threats.

These challenges and others have the potential to adversely impact the NSW Electoral Commission's ability to carry out its statutory functions. If unaddressed, they also threaten to undermine public trust and confidence in the NSW Electoral Commission and democratic processes in New South Wales.

Scope of this submission

This submission outlines the NSW Electoral Commission's current activities to deliver elections, regulatory and compliance activities to ensure engagement, participation, and confidence in electoral processes in New South Wales. It outlines the challenges facing the NSW Electoral Commission and how it proposes to respond. It concludes with several proposals for the Joint Standing Committee to consider which, if implemented, would support democracy and voter confidence in New South Wales.

In essence, this can only be achieved through sustained investment in the fundamentals of democracy and democratic institutions, including IT systems, staffing, cyber security, stakeholder engagement, improving customer experience, inter-jurisdictional engagement on shared resources and a national electoral platform and regulatory reform.

Under section 271 of the *Electoral Act 2017* (Electoral Act), the Electoral Commissioner for New South Wales (Electoral Commissioner) must conduct a review of the administration of each state general election and provide a report on the outcome of that review to the Minister (the *Election report*). The *Election report* for the 2023 NSW state election was provided to the Minister and tabled in the Legislative Council on 21 November 2023.

The three-member NSW Electoral Commission also submitted a report under section 154(3) of the *Electoral Funding Act 2018* (Electoral Funding Act) which provided an overview of the activities relating to electoral funding and the regulation of the 2023 NSW state election (the *Funding and regulation report*), which is available on the Parliament website. The *Funding and regulation report* was also tabled in the Legislative Council on 21 November 2023.

The proposals for legislative and process reform contained in the *Election report* and the *Funding and regulation report* may be considered part of this submission of the Electoral Commission.

The *Election report* contains an update on the status of the Electoral Commission's implementation of the recommendations of the report of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters' Administration of the 2019 NSW State election. Some of these recommendations relate to the themes and elector cohorts applicable to this current Inquiry.

This submission also addresses the specific Terms of Reference of the Inquiry.

The three-member Electoral Commission and Electoral Commissioner appreciate the opportunity to make this submission to the Inquiry. References to the NSW Electoral Commission in this submission may be to either the three-member statutory body or the Public Service staff agency, as the context requires. "NSW Electoral Commission" is used generally for ease of reading.

Maintaining public confidence, trust and participation

Maintaining public confidence, trust and participation in elections requires significant investment in the NSW Electoral Commission as an institution. Years of underinvestment by successive governments has degraded its systems for election delivery creating unacceptable delivery risk to elections beyond the Local Government elections in September 2024.

Deliberate and sustained investment is also required to combat disinformation undermining democracy and democratic institutions. This can be achieved through uplifted and ongoing public education programs about the value of democracy, targeted community outreach, ongoing social media campaigns and through an enhanced civics and citizenship curriculum in New South Wales schools.

To support voter enrolment, participation and confidence, the NSW Electoral Commission implements an integrated communications strategy, including advertising campaigns, media and social media engagement, direct communications and a stakeholder engagement program to widely promote elections. This helps to ensure a transparent and trustworthy electoral process and supports people across New South Wales to participate in the elections and fulfil their obligations. Our aim is to improve information, communication and awareness by building on the work delivered at each election.

In New South Wales, these valuable activities are only funded during election periods. Election management bodies in other jurisdictions, such as the Victorian Electoral Commission and Australian Electoral Commission, are resourced to deliver an 'always on' approach to voter education and engagement work. Maintaining ongoing conversations and education about the value of democracy are critical to maintaining confidence in our electoral system and inoculating the electorate against disinformation.

We also publish a set of annual regulatory priorities, which outline our strategic regulatory focus for the year. The priorities support compliance and transparency to uphold the integrity of electoral processes and safe elections.

The urgent requirement for an update to the technology and systems underpinning our election operations (and corporate systems) is compounded by the need to be able to respond to changes to the legislative framework with which we must comply, as well as increasing customer expectations and governance obligations, and a rapidly changing technological and cyber-threat landscape.

While public confidence and participation rates in New South Wales are outstanding compared to many other jurisdictions in Australia, and certainly when compared globally, we acknowledge they are fragile. Voter turnout in Western democracies has been declining over the past 20 years and New South Wales is no exception. Improving on the already high rates of engagement and participation would be difficult for any electoral management body; the challenge for the NSW Electoral Commission is to maintain these levels.

Ongoing activity is required, across a range of government agencies and in the community to build knowledge and reduce barriers to participation.

To support this, the agency needs investment in its fundamental pillars. Without these pillars being put in place, and funded in an ongoing way, the agency faces an uncertain future.

These pillars include:

- A stable and secure funding base – this requires a move from cyclical event-based funding to ongoing funding to match our ongoing remit.
- Adequate staff to deliver on core legislative requirements as well as a workforce able to anticipate and proactively respond to emerging threats and opportunities.
- Stable, supported and robust IT systems to support election and regulatory delivery.
- Resourcing to support stakeholder engagement, voter education and outreach to build trust in democracy.
- Cyber security – upgrade ongoing funding for staff, maintenance and licensing.

Any additional functions ascribed to the agency through the Joint Standing Committee process without addressing the funding of our fundamental pillars cannot be delivered. The agency is already not resourced to deliver on its existing legislative responsibilities (for example, including logos on ballot papers).

Without funding, the NSW Electoral Commission's ability to ensure compliance with a range of legislative requirements and government policies such as (but not limited to) work health and safety, asset management, privacy, records management, and Essential 8 cyber security maturity (and mandatory requirements) among other requirements is significantly affected. The application of additional functions is simply not possible under existing funding and resourcing.

Once we are adequately funded to deliver our core services, there are other proposals that could be implemented, subject to funding, to increase voter engagement, participation and confidence:

1. Need to establish a sustainable funding model for the NSW Electoral Commission, including adequate funding for the fundamental pillars of democracy.
 2. Establishment of a national election platform.
 3. Implement an internet-based technology assisted voting solution for voters who are blind or have low vision.
 4. Resource stakeholder engagement to address barriers to participation in democracy.
 5. Resource ongoing measures to combat disinformation including civics education and ongoing social media listening and monitoring.
-

Current state – voter engagement, participation and confidence

New South Wales enjoys the highest enrolment rate of any jurisdiction in Australia, has consistently high turnout rates at elections, and formality rates are also consistently high.

Enrolment in New South Wales

New South Wales enjoys the highest enrolment rate of any jurisdiction in Australia¹:

- The latest “*State of the Roll*” report (June 2024) from the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) shows NSW has the highest enrolment rate of any jurisdiction in Australia at 99 per cent.
- 5,619,131 enrolled electors from an estimated eligible population of 5,667,961 - leaving 48,830 (estimated) people who are eligible but not enrolled.

Voter turnout in New South Wales

New South Wales has consistently high turnout rates at elections.

The *Electoral Act 2017* provides several sufficient reasons for not voting in the context of penalty notices for the offence of failing to vote (see Appendix 1). These include if a person is out of New South Wales on election day, they are ineligible to vote, they have a lack of mental capacity or they are unable to vote for any reason acceptable to the Electoral Commissioner. This may include, but is not limited to, reasons such as working during the hours of voting or an inability to vote due to a natural disaster. As a result, 100 per cent voter turnout is very unlikely under the legislation.

2023 NSW State election voter turnout data

The following data is correct at 13 May 2024, noting there is a long tail of responses with electors paying their penalty or providing excuses after referral to Revenue NSW.

- 5,521,688 people were enrolled to vote for the 2023 NSW State election
- 4,895,335 votes were cast for the NSW Legislative Council and 4,861,148 votes were cast for the NSW Legislative Assembly
- 481,290 Apparent Failure to Vote notices were issued following the initial exclusion of all electors who were able to be identified by the NSW Electoral Commission as having a valid reason for not voting
- 68,811 of those who received an Apparent Failure to Vote notice paid a fine
- 233,688 notices were referred to Revenue NSW for further follow up
- 45 recipients of an apparent failure to vote notice requested court proceedings.

¹ The AEC's “*Reporting on the Electoral Roll*” includes the following notes to support the enrolment data:

- Enrolment rates above 99.0% are not reported due to error associated with calculating Estimated Eligible Population, which may overstate the actual enrolment rate. As the population figures provided by the ABS lag current enrolment figures by several quarters due to data availability and processing-related reasons, the AEC projects the ABS populations forward to the same point in time as the enrolments.
- Estimated Eligible Population is calculated using ABS citizen population figures based on the most recent Census, projected forward to the relevant date. Adjustments are then made for British Subjects, those of unsound mind, overseas electors and new citizens since the Census.
- Estimated Eligible Population is calculated using ABS citizen population figures for 30 June based on most recent Census, projected forward to the relevant date using ABS citizen population trends between. Adjustments are then made for British Subjects, those of unsound mind, overseas electors and new citizens since the Census.

- 4,943 responses were pending or rejected
- 173,803 electors who received a notice were excused from paying a fine.

See Appendix 2 for accepted reasons provided by non-voters for the 2023 NSW State election.

Formality rates in New South Wales

Formality rates are consistently high in New South Wales. The optional preferential voting method used at elections in New South Wales means that voters do not have to number a preference for every candidate on the ballot paper. A ballot paper requires only a first preference to be formal, which reduces informality. All further preferences are optional. In the Australian Capital territory, where formality rates are standout, most votes are cast via computer kiosk, which does not allow an informal vote to be cast, other than a blank vote. iVote (the NSW Electoral Commission's internet voting platform, now decommissioned) enabled a blank vote to be submitted, but voters had to acknowledge they were making an informal vote before submitting their vote.

2023 NSW State election formality rates

Formality rates for the NSW Legislative Assembly compare favourably with formality rates in the lower houses of other jurisdictions.

- 4,895,335 votes were cast for the NSW Legislative Council at the 2023 NSW State General election and 4,861,148 votes were cast for the NSW Legislative Assembly.
 - 159,218 of the votes cast for the Legislative Assembly were informal. Of these, 136,400 (86 per cent) were informal because they were left blank. The state-wide average informality rate for the Legislative Assembly is 3.28 per cent.
 - 278,477 of the votes cast for the Legislative Council were informal. Of these, 188,191 (68 per cent) were informal because they were left blank. The state-wide average informality rate for the Legislative Council is **5.68 per cent**.

Informal ballot papers, whether blank or incorrectly completed, could be intentional by the elector, or be due to insufficient knowledge or understanding of the voting process. Electors in the latter category could be supported by investment in civics and citizenship education and community outreach.

Informality and turnout rates by jurisdiction

Table 1: Early voting criteria, informality and turnout rates by jurisdiction

Jurisdiction	Election year	Turnout	Informality (Lower House)	Early voting eligibility criteria*
New South Wales	2023	90%	3.28%	Yes
Federal	2022	90%	5.19%	Yes
Queensland	2020	88%	3.40%	No
Northern Territory	2020	75%	3.40%	No
Western Australia	2021	86%	3.76%	No
South Australia	2022	89%	3.20%	Yes
Victoria	2022	87%	5.54%	No
Tasmania	2024	91%	6.31%	Yes

Jurisdiction	Election year	Turnout	Informality (Lower House)	Early voting eligibility criteria*
Australian Capital Territory**	2020	89%	1.42%	No

*The requirement to satisfy early voting criteria does not appear to negatively impact turnout.

**Voting in Australian Capital Territory elections is supported by computer kiosks.

Community satisfaction and confidence in the conduct of elections in New South Wales

Satisfaction with, and confidence in, the conduct of election in New South Wales is high.

The NSW Electoral Commission engages an independent social research consultancy to conduct an evaluation after each New South Wales state and local government general election. This independent research aims to evaluate the election services provided by the NSW Electoral Commission; identify opportunities for service improvement; understand the information needs and election experience for a range of election stakeholders; and develop actionable insights for future election communications, services and experiences to increase understanding, confidence and trust in democratic processes and ultimately support participation in democracy.

The survey sample is representative of eligible voters across New South Wales. The research questions are tailored to the various election stakeholder groups, but four key metrics are measured across all elector and political participant audiences:

1. the election was conducted fairly and impartially
2. trust in the voting process (asked to electors)/trust in the election process (asked to political participants)
3. confidence in the accuracy of the election results
4. satisfaction with overall process/experience.

For the 2023 NSW State election, 1,200 eligible voters were surveyed using computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI).

- Eighty-five (85) per cent of the survey participants were very satisfied that the 2023 NSW State election was conducted fairly and impartially, statistically higher than reported in 2019 at 82 per cent.
- Eighty-one (81) per cent of survey respondents trusted the voting process for the 2023 NSW State election.
- Confidence in the election results was the highest performing metric, with 90 per cent of participants being very or fairly confident that the election results were accurate, an increase compared with levels of confidence reported for the 2019 NSW State election at 84 per cent.
- Overall satisfaction with the voting experience among survey participants was high, with 90 per cent being satisfied, an increase compared with the 2019 NSW State election survey of 84 per cent.

Table 2: Trends for voter experience in NSW Electoral Commission run elections²

Metrics	2019 NSW State election	2021 Local Government elections	2023 NSW State election
The election was conducted fairly and impartially	82%	82%	85%
Trust in the voting process	*Not asked	77%	81%
Confidence in the accuracy of the election results	84%	84%	90%
Satisfaction with overall voting experience	84%	89%	90%

*Trust was introduced to the surveys at the 2021 Local Government elections.

The independent research reports are published on the NSW Electoral Commission's [website](#).

The risks to our position

While public confidence and participation rates in New South Wales are outstanding compared to many other jurisdictions in Australia, and certainly when compared globally, we acknowledge they are fragile. Voter turnout in Western democracies has been declining over the past 20 years and New South Wales is no exception. Improving on the already high rates of engagement, participation and confidence mentioned above would be difficult for any electoral management body; the challenge for the NSW Electoral Commission is to maintain these levels of elector engagement and trust.

² [NSW Electoral Commission, Annual report 2022-23](#)

How the NSW Electoral Commission encourages voter engagement, participation and confidence

A range of voting options

If an elector's circumstances make it difficult to attend a voting centre on election day, they may be eligible to use an alternative voting option.

- Early voting – vote in person before election day.
- Postal voting – vote by postal vote for a particular election or apply to register as a postal voter for every election.
- Technology assisted voting (currently, telephone voting) – telephone assisted voting is available to electors who are blind or have low vision. The service is available during the early voting period and on election day.
- Declared facility voting – election staff visit nursing homes, convalescent homes, hospitals and similar institutions to allow residents to vote onsite before election day.

Voter engagement

To support voter enrolment, participation and confidence, the NSW Electoral Commission implements an integrated communications strategy, including advertising campaigns, media and social media engagement, direct communications and a stakeholder engagement program to widely promote elections. This helps ensure a transparent and trustworthy electoral process and supports people across New South Wales to participate in elections and fulfil their obligations. Our aim is to improve information, communication and awareness by building on the work delivered at each election.

The integrity of democracy and representative government in New South Wales depends on high levels of participation by eligible voters. The NSW Electoral Commission has the function of promoting public awareness of electoral matters that are in the public interest by means of education, information programs and research.

We aim to inform and engage all eligible electors to participate in elections and understand the democratic process. The approach is broad-based, to reach as many electors as possible, over a variety of channels and a range of formats, while focussing on targeted key audiences to improve voter turnout and formality and reduce barriers to voting.

The targeted audiences for our voter awareness campaign include:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities
- people living with disability
- voters in low voter turnout districts
- youth
- overseas and interstate voters.

In addition to the voter awareness campaign, the NSW Electoral Commission is resourced to undertake some education and outreach work in the run-up to general elections, but not at other times. Our priority cohorts are people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, people living with disability and non-voters. We are in the process of developing our first Reconciliation Action Plan which will inform opportunities to better serve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in New South Wales. Homelessness is an area where we piloted outreach with homelessness services for the 2023 NSW State election, but resourcing is not available for ongoing outreach activity.

Voter awareness campaign for the 2023 NSW State election

The campaign for the 2023 NSW State election used a clear, informative, brand-focused approach to inform electors in New South Wales, interstate and overseas of their obligation to participate in the election, key dates and their voting options. The campaign, called *Get ready, Get set, Go!*, focused on ensuring voters knew when the election was on; how to check/update their enrolment; and when, where and how they could vote. The campaign was delivered over three phases:

- Phase 1: “Get ready” – Check your enrolment, changes to state electoral boundaries, save the date.
- Phase 2: “Get set” – Know your voting options, plan your vote.
- Phase 3: “Go!” – Go and Vote.

A similar campaign is in market for the 2024 Local Government elections in September.

Voter awareness campaign objectives and outcomes for 2023 NSW State election

The following table outlines the key campaign goals and corresponding outcomes.

Table 3: Campaign goals and outcomes for 2023 NSW State election³

Campaign goal	Outcome
Voter turnout in the enrolled population to be maintained.	Voter turnout was 90 per cent as compared to 90.16 per cent for the 2019 NSW State election.
Increase voter turnout in areas with higher levels of non-voting and in populations with barriers to participation including people with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) populations and among younger people, as against the 2019 NSW State general election.	Fifteen low voter turnout districts were targeted in the voter awareness campaign and turnout was maintained or improved in 10 of those districts. Of 13 districts identified with high CALD populations voter turnout was improved or maintained in seven districts (however, some of those districts were impacted by electoral boundary redistribution).
Stakeholders and electors are aware of the 2023 NSW State election.	Voter turnout was maintained and only 22 per cent of non-voters surveyed said they didn't vote because they didn't know or didn't care about the election.
Electors know to update their details on the electoral roll or to enrol if not on the electoral roll.	60 per cent felt informed about how to check and update their enrolment details.
The people of NSW maintain trust and confidence in the democratic process.	81 per cent of surveyed voters had trust in the voting process, and 90 per cent had confidence in the election results.

³ [Fiftyfive5, 2023, Evaluation of NSW Electoral Commission services at the 2023 NSW State election](#)

Voter turnout data among people living with disability and from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is not easy to obtain as this data is not captured on the electoral roll. As such, voter awareness outcomes for these groups rely on commissioned research to target these groups for interviews and surveys. Further exploration of effective methods for researching engagement with these groups is required.

General resources and communications

The NSW Electoral Commission produced five core community awareness videos for the 2023 NSW State election (published 9 January 2023 during the “Get set” phase of our awareness campaign).

- [Voting at the 2023 NSW State election](#) (including enrolment, key dates, voting options)
- [How to vote by post at the 2023 NSW State election](#) (applying for and completing a postal vote)
- [How to fill out your ballot papers](#) (Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council ballot papers)
- [Enrolling and voting with no fixed address](#) (information for people experiencing homelessness)
- [The 2021 redistribution of electoral districts boundaries](#) (the redistribution process and impacts).

These videos were supported by factsheets about voting at the 2023 NSW State election, the 2021 redistribution of electoral districts boundaries, and enrolling and voting with no fixed address. Based on advice from Vision Australia, audio description opening messages were included on all five videos. These were published on YouTube and the Electoral Commission’s community resources web page.

Stop and consider campaign

False information about elections circulating in the community, including through different forms of media, can undermine confidence in the integrity of democratic processes and have broader consequences for society.

Misinformation is false information that is spread due to ignorance, or by error or mistake, without the intent to deceive. Disinformation is knowingly false information designed to deliberately mislead and influence public opinion or obscure the truth for malicious or deceptive purposes.

To counter the rise in misinformation and disinformation, we ran an awareness campaign encouraging voters to consider the information they saw and heard that may have sought to influence their vote at the 2023 NSW State election. The campaign, called ‘Stop and consider’ provided voters with information to help assess potential misinformation and disinformation. The campaign was based on the Australian Electoral Commission’s (Stop and consider) campaign for its 2019 and 2022 federal elections. The Victorian Electoral Commission ran a similar campaign (Fact or fiction) for its 2022 State election. The messaging encouraged voters to consider three aspects of any election-related information they received in any format on any communication channel:

- **Reliable:** Is the information from a reliable and credible source?
- **Current:** When was it published?
- **Safe:** Could it be a scam?

The campaign linked to the NSW Electoral Commission’s [Disinformation register](#), which tracks and rebuts prominent false and misleading statements about electoral processes in our state. It also notes any action taken by the NSW Electoral Commission.

The 2023 *Stop and consider* campaign was funded by a special purpose grant from the then Department of Premier and Cabinet. The NSW Electoral Commission has secured funding from the Premier’s Department to run the campaign for the Local Government elections in September 2024.

Election reminder service

Electors are encouraged to sign up to our free election reminder service to receive SMS and email reminders about state and local government elections relevant to their enrolled address in New South Wales. Reminders are sent at the start of early voting and just before election day.

Identify, mitigate and eliminate barriers to participation

The integrity of democracy and representative government in New South Wales depends on high levels of participation by eligible voters. The Electoral Commission recognises some members of the New South Wales community face additional barriers to participation in democracy, including:

- people living with disability
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- people experiencing homelessness.

The Electoral Commission works closely with voters, communities and community organisations, peak bodies and advocacy groups to identify, mitigate and – where possible – eliminate these barriers. This work is vital to ensure all people have fair and equal access to the democratic and electoral process. Election-related resources for these target audiences are created in consultation with the NSW Electoral Commission's reference groups and informed by post-election research.

Reference groups

At the time of the 2023 NSW State election, the NSW Electoral Commission had established two reference groups:

- Equal Access to Democracy (Disability) Reference Group
- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Reference Group.

The reference groups are made up of peak bodies and advocacy groups across New South Wales. The reference groups are established as a mechanism to provide guidance, information and feedback to the NSW Electoral Commission in relation to services for electors and to ensure that accessibility barriers to these services are identified and solutions to these barriers are reflected in the Commission's programs and services. This includes ensuring that an appropriate range of communication formats and channels are used to inform people about enrolment, elections and voting. Before each state-wide election the reference groups are consulted about their member needs and briefed about any changes to legislation, regulations and voting that may need to be communicated to their members and networks.

Culturally and linguistically diverse communities – tailored resources and support

The NSW Electoral Commission creates, shares and promotes in-language communications and resources targeted at people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. For the 2023 NSW State election (and for the 2024 Local Government elections), language analysis was conducted based on 2016 and 2021 Census data for languages spoken at home other than English – indexed with low English proficiency.

Information in-language

For the 2023 NSW State election and 2024 Local Government elections the NSW Electoral Commission published translated information about voting in the top 26 languages in New South Wales: Chinese Traditional, Vietnamese, Arabic, Chinese Simplified, Greek, Korean, Italian, Spanish, Macedonian, Turkish, Serbian, Khmer, Assyrian Neo-Aramaic, Croatian, Persian, Thai, Portuguese, Russian, Lao, Dari, Hindi, Indonesian, Bengali, Tagalog, Maltese and Polish.

Translation of election awareness videos

The five general awareness videos were translated into seven languages: Arabic, Cantonese, Greek, Italian, Korean, Mandarin and Vietnamese. The videos included in-language voice over and on-screen text and captions.

Vote Talk – produced in partnership with the Ethnic Communities Council of NSW

The Ethnic Communities Council of NSW (ECCNSW) is the peak body for culturally and linguistically diverse communities in New South Wales. For the 2023 NSW State election, the NSW Electoral Commission partnered with ECCNSW to deliver the [Vote Talk program](#). Vote Talk is a series of community-led education, engagement and communication initiatives about voting and elections. The aim is to provide targeted education, public podcasts and community conversations to raise the awareness of electoral processes and improve the voting practices and participation of CALD Australian citizens over 18 years of age. For the 2023 NSW State election, the Vote Talk program included:

- 24 in-language podcasts (across the top seven spoken languages in New South Wales with low English proficiency)
- community engagement sessions run by ECCNSW bilingual facilitators (505 participants over 30 sessions in six languages)
- pre-recorded in-language messages on how to fill out ballot papers played on community radio.

“Vote here” in-language banner trial

Based on a Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters recommendation out of its Inquiry into the Administration of the 2019 NSW election, the NSW Electoral Commission piloted in-language *Vote here* banners at selected voting centres. Five languages in addition to English were selected for the in-language banners: Arabic, Traditional Chinese, Simplified Chinese, Vietnamese and Greek. The pilot was conducted at 10 voting centres in identified areas based on NSW Electoral Commission language analysis in the electoral districts of Bankstown, Cabramatta, Auburn, Fairfield, Canterbury, Liverpool, Granville, Kogarah, Strathfield and Rockdale.

Translated stakeholder packs

The NSW Electoral Commission produced translated stakeholder packs in the top seven languages, collating all in-language resources, key messages and assistance available to voters. These stakeholder packs were distributed to community organisations.

Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) National

The NSW Electoral Commission provides interpreter and language support to people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds through the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National).

People with disability – tailored resources and support

Auslan video series

NSW Electoral Commission collaborated with Deaf Connect to develop an Auslan election video series. These videos were published on the Commission’s website and shared with Deaf Connect’s network. These videos covered key information about the election:

- [general information about the 2023 NSW State election](#)
- [postal voting](#)
- [voting in person](#)
- [filling out Legislative Assembly](#) and [Legislative Council ballot papers](#).

Deaf Connect also developed a reminder video in Auslan about election day, including information about the Auslan interpreting service.

Auslan interpreting service

For the 2023 NSW State election, the NSW Electoral Commission provided an Auslan interpreting service through Skype, for early voting Saturday, 18 March and election day Saturday, 25 March 2023. Auslan interpreters were booked for each day, covering the opening hours of voting centres.

Easy-read guides

Two easy-read guides were produced for the 2023 NSW State election by the Council for Intellectual Disability: (1) Your right to vote – 2023 NSW State election and (2) Homelessness and voting.

Your right to vote video

The Council for Intellectual Disability [produced a video tailored for people with intellectual disability](#) about enrolling and voting at the 2023 NSW State election.

National Relay Service

Electors who are deaf, hard of hearing and/or have a speech impairment can contact the NSW electoral Commission through the National Relay Service (NRS) during standard office hours: Monday to Friday, 9am–5pm.

Assistance at voting centres

- Electors voting in person who need help to cast their vote can take a friend or relative with them or can seek assistance from an election official at the voting centre (polling place). Election officials can help an elector to mark their ballot papers or to put a completed ballot paper into the ballot box.
- Venue accessibility – voting centre locations are published on the NSW Electoral Commission website before every election. Voting centres are rated according to wheelchair accessibility, including whether the venue:
 - is fully wheelchair accessible
 - has assisted wheelchair access
 - is not wheelchair accessible.

If a venue is partially accessible, a description of the accessibility is listed. This enables people with disability to assess the venue most suitable for them. There is also a wheelchair accessible voting screen set up in each voting centre.

- Certain cardboard items, such as the ballot box, have bright contrast markings to assist voters with depth perception.
- All voting centres offer magnifying sheets and maxi pens.

For the 2024 NSW Local Government elections:

- 28 per cent of polling places are fully accessible – an increase on previous election events, 2023 NSW State election (26 per cent), 2021 Local Government elections (9 per cent) and the 2019 NSW State election (19 per cent).
- 57 per cent of pre-polling venues are fully accessible – an increase on previous election events, 2023 NSW State election (48 per cent), 2021 Local Government elections (47 per cent) and 2019 NSW State election (50 per cent).
- 59 per cent of Returning Officer's offices are fully accessible – an increase on previous election events, 2023 NSW State election (41 per cent), 2021 Local Government elections (44 per cent) and 2019 NSW State election (34 per cent).

Recruitment of staff

The Electoral Commission embraces diversity and inclusion and is committed to creating a workplace that reflects the population of New South Wales. At all elections the Electoral Commission seeks to recruit staff reflective of the communities they are working in, and actively seeks to recruit staff with language skills reflecting the community they will serve. Staff at voting venues wear badges indicating the language(s) they speak in addition to English.

We are committed to providing an accessible, inclusive work environment to enable people with a disability to participate fully in all aspects of employment. Applicants are encouraged to request reasonable adjustment as required.

For the 2023 NSW State election, more than 21,000 staff were engaged to work on election day. Of this number:

- 6,684 staff spoke a language other than English (a 48 per cent increase from the 2019 NSW State election)
- the five most prevalent languages spoken by staff (other than English) were Hindi, Cantonese, Mandarin, Arabic and Tagalog
- 650 staff identified as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background (a 31 per cent increase from the 2019 NSW State election)
- 742 staff identified as living with disability (a 27 per cent increase from the 2019 NSW State election), 141 of whom required reasonable adjustments to the workplace.

People experiencing homelessness

The NSW Electoral Commission developed several resources for people experiencing homelessness ahead of the 2023 NSW State election. These include resources on enrolling and voting with no fixed address: an [animated video](#) (also translated into seven languages), a factsheet, easy-read guide.

These resources were published on the Electoral Commission's website. For the 2023 NSW State election, the NSW Electoral Commission worked with Newtown Neighbourhood Centre for community engagement. This included weekly in-person engagement at Newtown Neighbourhood Centre's 'One-stop-shop'. The One-stop-shop program connects people experiencing homelessness or at risk of experiencing homelessness with government services.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

First Nations targeted factsheets covered the topics of voting at 2023 NSW State election, enrolling and voting with no fixed address and the redistribution of electoral districts.

These resources were shared with community organisations and Indigenous centres. The NSW Electoral Commission conducted an information session on 20 March 2023 with Dharriwaa Elders Group in Walgett NSW about how to complete ballot papers.

Community resources hub

The NSW Electoral Commission developed a community resources online hub for the 2023 NSW State election. This included all resources available to organisations and community members to use and share with their networks, including the awareness videos, easy read guides, fact sheets, and in-language information. It also highlighted key messages, key dates, and how community organisations could help share information about the elections. These resources were distributed by the reference group members and identified target organisations to their respective members and networks.

A [similar range of resources](#) has been developed and distributed for the 2024 Local Government elections in September.

Ballot paper monitoring

BallotTrack is used to ensure the transparency and security of ballot papers throughout the election process. BallotTrack is a centralised ‘track and trace’ online application that uses scanning devices to monitor and record the movement of ballot papers and cartons throughout the entire life cycle of ballot papers. It has been used by the NSW Electoral Commission since the 2017 Local Government elections and is reconfigured for each local government and state general election.

Collaboration with other agencies

The preparation and delivery of an election requires a high level of coordination and planning. To ensure access to specialist advice, relevant information and resources, the NSW Electoral Commission collaborates with key government agencies, including:

- NSW Health
- Department of Premier and Cabinet
- NSW Police Force
- Office of Local Government NSW
- NSW Department of Customer Service
- NSW Department of Education
- NSW Reconstruction Authority
- Australian Electoral Commission.

The main objectives of this inter-agency collaboration are to:

- raise awareness with relevant agencies of the scope, scale and timeline of the election in order to anticipate risks and issues that could impact the successful delivery of the election
- consult with those agencies to implement appropriate and responsive measures to those risks
- receive specialist advice from those agencies regarding public safety, current health advice, intelligence and response actions to natural disasters and implement that advice into our processes and delivery planning.

The Electoral Commission also works with Cyber Security NSW and the Australian Cyber Security Centre and is supported during major elections events by the Commonwealth’s Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce.

Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce

Protecting the integrity of our electoral processes is critical to maintaining public trust and confidence in our democratic processes. The Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce provides assurance to the NSW Electoral Commission that election events are unaffected by interference (where interference in this context refers to an intended to affect or disrupt electoral processes or outcomes).

Interference can come in the form of cyber or physical security incidents, misinformation or disinformation campaigns, and through perceived or actual interference in electoral processes. Public trust in the integrity of an electoral event can be undermined by the realisation or perceived realisation of such threats. The Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce ensures that information about these threats is efficiently referred to the relevant agencies, facilitates cooperation and coordination between these agencies, and enables them to work together to take any appropriate action.

Regulatory priorities

The NSW Electoral Commission has a statutory function of promoting public awareness of electoral matters that are in the public interest by means of education and information programs. The *Electoral Funding Act 2018* provides that the NSW Electoral Commission may undertake education and information programs to inform parties, elected members, candidates, groups, third-party campaigners, party agents, official agents, donors, and associated entities of their obligations under the Act.

The regulatory priorities outline the Electoral Commission's strategic regulatory focus for the year. The 2024-25 priorities focus on the 2024 Local Government elections including education to support compliance by political participants in the elections, greater transparency by publishing information about enforcement activities, and upholding the integrity of electoral processes and safe elections.

This is the NSW Electoral Commission's third annual set of regulatory priorities. They highlight where strategic regulatory efforts of the Commission will, subject to its budgetary constraints, be directed during the year ahead to optimise the efficiency and value of the Electoral Commission's legislated regulatory function and ensure responses to non-compliance are targeted and proportionate. The regulatory priorities for 2024-25 are:

1. Deliver focused education initiatives for election participants and provide relevant and timely information to support their compliance.
 2. Support privacy by educating authorised recipients of enrolment information about managing personal data securely.
 3. Improve the transparency of our enforcement activities to raise awareness among political participants about their obligations and to reduce future non-compliance.
 4. Uphold the integrity of elections by responding in a timely manner to material that may mislead the community about electoral processes in New South Wales.
 5. Support voting in person at elections in New South Wales to be safe and free of interference, including for election officials working at polling places.
-

Challenges to electoral integrity and confidence

While participation rates in New South Wales are outstanding and confidence in our democratic processes is high compared with many other Australian and international jurisdictions, these levels are fragile and could be impacted or undermined by many internal and external factors. The NSW Electoral Commission, as with election management bodies globally, is faced with many challenges.

Election delivery and regulation is more complex now than ever before. Electoral commissions throughout Australia are meeting the challenges of the electoral environment by operating in ways beyond the traditional expectations of an electoral administrator, with a key focus on actively promoting the positive, trusted reputation of the Australian electoral system and democratic processes.

Delivering accurate election results from operationally excellent election events is no longer enough to maintain trust and confidence in democratic processes. The NSW Electoral Commission continues to scan the electoral environment and proactively engage with stakeholders to establish ways to combat current and emerging threats to democracy and electoral integrity. There is no single solution to this, and we must continue to evolve and adapt, including through the evolution of our [Regulatory priorities](#).

Foreign and domestic interference

The electoral process has been identified by national security agencies as a high-profile, high-value target for cyber interference by nation state sponsored and other attackers.

The age and complexity of our systems (and limited budget) do not allow us to perform proper cyber security remediation which increases risks to electoral integrity.

The UK Parliament commissioned a briefing on the cyber security risks associated with the conduct of elections as part of preparations for the UK's recent general election. This briefing highlights the potential risks to the integrity of an election that cyber-attacks could cause. We refer the Joint Standing Committee to this important, and timely, research paper⁴.

The United Kingdom's electoral commission announced in August 2023 that it had been subject to a complex cyber-attack. The incident was identified in October 2022 after suspicious activity was detected in their systems. It became clear that hostile actors had first accessed their systems in August 2021.⁵

Misinformation and disinformation and artificial intelligence

In the immediate future political campaigns are likely to use artificial intelligence (AI) for everything from targeted advertising to election forecasting and the Electoral Commission will need to consider how to respond. AI may also increase the threat of cyber-attacks especially through higher-quality phishing attempts, and we should consider strengthening existing cyber security protocols to defend against these capabilities.

⁴ <https://post.parliament.uk/cyber-security-of-elections>

⁵ <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/privacy-policy/public-notification-cyber-attack-electoral-commission-systems/information-about-cyber-attack>

False information circulating in the community about elections, including through different forms of media, has the capacity to negatively impact confidence in the electoral process and the results of elections; and can undermine confidence in the integrity of democratic processes and have broader negative impacts for social cohesion. Participants in elections globally, including voters, have embraced social media to generate, source and share information about political issues and elections. This brings with it great benefit but also real risk, sometimes unreasonable expectations, and increased responsibilities, both for online platforms and electoral commissions.

Australians receive information from multiple sources across a variety of platforms. Not all the information presented to electors through social media regarding Australia's electoral processes is factual, and electoral commissions continue to face the challenges of managing mis- and disinformation, while still respecting people's right to express themselves freely. The rise in misinformation and disinformation during election events is well documented, as well as broader trends in Australia and internationally towards apathy of democracy.

Misinformation is false information that is spread due to ignorance, or by error or mistake, without the intent to deceive. Disinformation is knowingly false information designed to deliberately mislead and influence public opinion or obscure the truth for malicious or deceptive purposes.

The NSW Electoral Commission, alongside other electoral management bodies such as the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) and the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), publish disinformation registers to track and rebut significant false and misleading statements about electoral processes.

In NSW, [common topics of disinformation](#) about elections and electoral processes that are disseminated through social media include: vote counting, ballot and ballot box tampering and electoral roll corruption. Disinformation in relation to elections will be a continuing issue, particularly as its creation and distribution becomes more sophisticated, but we can help reduce its impact and support voters to recognise it when they see it.

Electoral content generated by artificial intelligence

We note that (Sydney Morning Herald, 13 May 2024) the Special Minister of State the Hon. John Graham, MLC asked that the parliamentary inquiry to look at artificial intelligence-generated electoral content, including deepfake technology. Artificial intelligence is not mentioned in the Inquiry's media release or in the terms of reference, but we take the opportunity to note the following points.

Weaponising artificial intelligence, and misinformation more generally, continue to present challenges for the administration and integrity of elections. We watch elections overseas with interest as we know that whatever we see, particularly in US, is often recycled locally.

Although the powers of the Electoral Commission are limited in relation to AI (effectively restricted to ensuring electoral material is appropriately authorised during regulated periods only), we remain committed to actions that counter the risks of disinformation and misinformation about electoral processes during election events. We are not resourced to do so outside of election events.

We are also aware of industry initiatives to address the issue of AI and that of the pioneering legislative work of other electoral management bodies worldwide in this emerging area. Here we direct the Joint Standing Committee to the work of Adobe on Content Authenticity⁶ and the International IDEA.⁷

⁶ <https://blog.adobe.com/en/topics/content-authenticity>

⁷ <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/artificial-intelligence-electoral-management>

The role of the NSW Electoral Commission regarding electoral material

As per its governing legislation, the NSW Electoral Commission must ensure that electoral material generated by artificial intelligence, whether physical or online, complies with the requirements that apply to all electoral material, including:

- it must contain the name and address of the person who authorised it, and
- it cannot be misleading in relation to the electoral process (for example, incorrect date for the election, incorrect names of the candidates, instructions that would result in an informal vote).

As the Committee is aware, there is no provision currently in place in relation to truth in political advertising, meaning “deepfake” material may not necessarily be unlawful. Political participants who choose to use generative AI for campaigning may find themselves in a situation where they could breach current New South Wales electoral laws if, for example, the message generated contains incorrect information about the electoral process (for example, directing electors to voting centres or candidates that do not exist).

We understand that in some overseas jurisdictions, material generated by artificial intelligence must be clearly identified as such. This requirement is not in place in New South Wales.

The NSW Electoral Commission must rely on election-specific funding to address this emerging risk. This is limited to the election period itself and no proactive work will be done by the Commission to address these matters in the lead-up to or following an election event.

Maintaining confidence in our democratic framework requires an integrated approach by electoral commissions, governments and community structures across Australia.

Global events

The United Kingdom general election was held in June 2024. Sitting Members of Parliament and election candidates reported being abused at polling stations and while canvassing. They also reported receiving extensive defamatory material via social media algorithms. During the election campaign, candidates were offered additional safeguarding measures, including full-time protection officers, extra security at hustings and advice regarding online protections. These were made available on a case-by-case basis and paid for via a government package.

The US election will be held November 2024. The past four years has seen a rise in political rhetoric, intimidation and, in some cases, violence. ‘Bad actors’ (a person, group or organisation responsible for actions that are harmful, illegal or morally wrong) are flooding the information landscape with false and misleading information about candidates and electoral processes. Threats to democracy are amplified by the rise of artificial intelligence, used to produce realistic mis- and disinformation quickly and cheaply, and target certain demographics with precision.

We monitor activities and threats at overseas elections as we know that themes and concerns are often recycled locally.

In Australia, federal and state laws are clear: intimidation of voters, people assisting voters, and election workers is illegal. And these protections apply throughout the election lifecycle — including registering to vote, assisting voters, casting a ballot, counting ballots, and certifying results.

Fiscal constraints

The NSW Electoral Commission’s funding issues are such that we are now undertaking a process to reduce our headcount to operate in the leanest funding environment the agency has experienced since 2013.

As part of our process to reduce staff numbers we are undertaking a review of our corporate and election systems to determine which systems can be maintained after the September 2024 NSW Local Government elections, those that must be retired due to a high risk of failure and those that can be replaced by reverting to (higher cost, time consuming) manual processes. Along with structure and systems assessments, we are determining which of our legislative obligations cannot or can no longer be met within our resource allocation. Government and the Committee will be advised as these become known.

The NSW Electoral Commission supports the goals of the Committee regarding increased participation, formality and confidence in the electoral process. Due to the Electoral Commission's diminishing capacity to deliver its core functions we note proposals arising from this Inquiry will not be able to be executed until the fundamentals underpinning the sustainability of the agency are addressed.

Ongoing staff make up just 38 per cent of the Electoral Commission's workforce, well below the NSW public sector average of 73.2 per cent⁸, forcing the organisation to rely on a high-cost contractor model to deliver elections. The Electoral Commission will have to terminate the employment of more than one-third of its staff, both temporary and ongoing, by December 2024. These (approximately 150) staff perform critical ongoing functions in areas such as (but not limited to): cyber security, IT, election delivery, election event integrity, compliance and regulatory operations, stakeholder engagement, communications, records management, project management and governance.

As a result, the Electoral Commission will no longer be able to offer the service levels and support currently enjoyed by political participants and its capacity to regulate compliance with electoral laws, which underpins the integrity of elections in New South Wales, will inevitably be undermined.

The loss of staff, and corporate knowledge, have also heightened the risk profile of successfully delivering the Local Government elections in September 2024 and introduce heightened work health and safety risks for remaining staff at subsequent elections.

Market conditions

A state-wide general election is one of the largest events in New South Wales, involving millions of electors, tens of thousands of staff, thousands of venues and a complex logistics and safety framework. The Electoral Commission relies on many third-party providers to deliver these elections. However, in recent years the market providing many of our common products and services has been subject to further concentration, a few of these areas are discussed below.

Printing

For the 2023 NSW State election, a total of 30.58 million ballot papers were printed and packed into 29,642 cartons for secure delivery. There are a limited number of specialist printers that have the capability to meet these requirements within the legislative timelines.

Paper stock

Prior to the ordering of paper for printing ballot papers for the 2023 NSW State election, forestry-related legal proceedings in Victoria meant that suitable paper stock was unable to be sourced in Australia. The Electoral Commission's requirement for this paper was subsequently met by Indonesian supply (PEFC Chain of custody certified, ISO 14001:2015). The stock was received on time and in quantities required (approximately 240 tonnes). While the Electoral Commission only incurred a minor increase to costs, the overseas procurement increased the risk to lead times and freight forward shipping.

⁸ State of the NSW public sector report 2023, NSW Public Service Commission <https://www.psc.nsw.gov.au/reports-and-data/state-of-the-nsw-public-sector/state-of-the-nsw-public-sector-report-2023/our-structure>

Voting venues

The venue review and selection process begins more than a year before a general election is held. Most venues are required for only one day (election day voting centres), others for a period of up to 10 days (early voting centres), and election manager's offices for three months, with extended leases on the centralised operations and count centres. While the Electoral Commission aims to maintain consistency of venues between election events (general and by-elections), the short-term nature of most of the leases means that repeat hire is not always possible, and the available venue supply is not always of an optimal standard. The Electoral Commission selects the most suitable premises from those available. Venue considerations are extensive and include size, location, accessibility, amenities, street frontage, access for deliveries, internet connectivity and workplace health and safety. The ability to secure premises that meet functional requirements presents challenges, particularly in negotiating agreements to enter short-term leases when the supply of premises is limited.

IT capability

The Electoral Commission continues to rely on legacy technology to deliver and regulate elections and carry out day-to-day corporate functions. Key corporate and election systems are past their end of life and require high levels of investment and risk tolerance. Historical under-investment, a result of our complicated funding arrangements, has left these aging systems and our electoral processes in an exposed state. Continuing to deliver and regulate elections with our current IT infrastructure and systems arrangements is becoming increasingly costly and impacts overall operational efficiency due to the need for operational workarounds, tactical technical fixes and significant testing to keep them running.

Emergency IT maintenance costs alone for aged elections systems are projected to increase from \$13 million pa in FY24 to \$36 million pa in FY39, which is currently unfunded. The urgent requirement for an update to the technology underpinning our election operations is compounded by the need to be able to respond to changes to the legislative framework with which we must comply, as well as increasing customer expectations and governance obligations, and a rapidly changing technological and cyber-threat landscape.

Staffing and work health and safety

The Electoral Commission is not funded to be efficient. We have no option but to continue to operate election events on a high-cost and inefficient service delivery model due to an over-reliance on temporary staff, third-party providers and expensive contract staff to deliver core services (for example, privacy, corporate governance, HR, finance, cyber security and IT).

We have staff fragility – more than half (57.4 per cent) of staff are contractors or temporary, including the senior executive. The continuous development of the temporary workforce and the costs of recruitment are considerable expenses to the organisation.

The remuneration disparity between ongoing and temporary staff paid in line with Public Service pay grades compared with contractors at (much higher) market rates creates morale issues as does the uncertainty of temporary contract extensions. This can impact productivity and further compounds resource contention.

We have key person risk, with an over-reliance on key subject matter experts and limited capacity for succession planning and knowledge transfer/capability building. This leads to workplace health and safety risks – due to excessive hours, overtime, fatigue and wellbeing impacts – and an inability for key staff to reduce already very high recreation leave balances.

Our over-reliance on temporary staff and contract staff presents turnover and retention issues – at 16.9 per cent compared with the public sector average of 8 per cent.

One-third (approximately 150 personnel) of the current staff cohort will cease to be funded by December 2024 and will leave the Electoral Commission in the absence of the existing funding model being addressed.

This presents serious risks to the successful delivery of projects aimed at delivering core election services and improvements to election systems, and puts the delivery of 2024 NSW Local Government election and subsequent by-elections at risk as staff seek secure employment elsewhere.

Stakeholder engagement

The Electoral Commission is resourced to undertake voter awareness campaigns and (limited) community engagement work as part of an election event.

The Electoral Commission recognises that some people continue to face barriers to participation in democratic processes and works closely with voters, communities and community organisations, peak bodies and advocacy groups to identify, mitigate and – where possible – eliminate these barriers. This work is vital to ensure all people have fair and equal access to the democratic and electoral process. The targeted audiences include:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- people living with disability
- culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities
- voters in low voter turnout districts
- youth.

The NSW Electoral Commission is resourced to undertake some education and outreach work with our target audiences in the run-up to general elections but not at other times. The Electoral Commission has one full time equivalent (FTE) stakeholder engagement resource, supported during election events by one temporary event-funded position, with a focus on election-period communications and support. With only these two roles there is insufficient capacity to undertake additional requirements. The NSW Electoral Commission expects additional requirements to be identified from the Reconciliation Action Plan process currently underway.

Customer experience and expectations

To quote the [Digital NSW, Beyond Digital Strategy](#) "...digital...is no longer an end goal in itself, but a means to go further and deliver even better services...to ensure we are meeting the needs and expectations of our customers."

There is an ongoing expectation and stated preference from electors that a form of online voting should be available. The independent research commissioned to evaluate services for the 2023 NSW State election reveals: "although not offered for the 2023 NSW State election, around three quarters (74 per cent) of survey participants considered an online voting service as important and around two in five (44 per cent) would prefer to vote by online methods for future elections." There was a generally stated appetite for online voting among survey respondents living with disability and culturally and linguistically diverse survey participants. Respondents who claimed to not have voted said they would consider voting in the future of an online service was available.

The urgent requirement for an update to the technology underpinning our election operations is compounded by the need to be able to respond to changes to the legislative framework with which we must comply, as well as increasing customer expectations and governance obligations, and a rapidly changing technological and cyber-threat landscape.

Regulatory environment

Electoral legislation should be reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure that it remains fair, effective and responsive to the operational context in which elections are conducted. It should be amended well ahead of any election event, wherever practicable, to ensure there is sufficient time for the Electoral Commission to design, test and implement any changes to its systems and processes. It is difficult for an electoral commission to maintain operational excellence and trust in the integrity of its systems if changes are made late and/or are not resourced realistically.

For example, the legislated reduction in early voting period was introduced for the 2023 NSW State election. In addition to process and systems changes to implement this change, to accommodate the expected increase in early voting demand the number of early voting venues needed to increase by more than 40 per cent compared with the 2019 NSW State election and 1,500 additional staff were engaged.

Responding adequately to legislative change or to changes takes time and resources. For example, in 2017 the Electoral Act replaced the *Parliamentary Electorates and Elections Act 1912*. The introduction of the new Act changed many processes for delivering an election and introduced new concepts such as an Electoral Information Register.

Electoral integrity measures and external uncontrollable factors driving up costs

Election delivery continues to grow in complexity and cost due to a range of factors including staffing and venue costs, increasing work health and safety obligations, security requirements, cyber threats, population growth and rising customer and stakeholder service expectations. The NSW Electoral Commission is expected to conduct council elections on a cost-recovery basis. For councils, increasing election costs (driven by forces outside the control of the Electoral Commission) may become unsustainable in the future without continued State Government subsidies.

The scope of responsibilities of the NSW Electoral Commission has increased substantially over the past decade with more and more complex elections as well as expanding regulatory, compliance and education functions and customer service expectations. Not only has the organisation been conferred with a range of additional election, electoral funding, and lobbying-related functions, it is expected to meet more mature standards in the areas of regulation, public and stakeholder education, compliance, system maintenance, continuous improvement, workforce management and process and technology transformation. This includes delivery of new approaches for stakeholder digital transactions, identity management and cyber security requirements.

The compression of planning and preparation time between elections has also placed increased pressure on the capacity for delivery by the NSW Electoral Commission. These activities are critical to maintaining confidence in the integrity of elections, and to be successful need to be planned and delivered in the gap between major elections.

Since 2015 the election cycle for local government elections has been disrupted, first by council amalgamations in 2016/17 and then by COVID in 2020/21 reducing the gaps available for this work. This has increased the cost of delivery over this period. It is now critical that improvements are made in the gap between the 2024 Local Government elections and the 2027 NSW State election.

The essential, but less visible, business-as-usual workload between elections, including continuous improvement, continues to increase and relies upon non-election funded staff. The continued growth in the NSW Electoral Commission's obligations requires consolidated review and changes to resource availability, skillsets, operational process and associated funding.

Protecting the integrity of electoral processes

During election events we make significant efforts to maintain public trust and confidence in the integrity of elections by:

- actively countering mis- and disinformation via the Disinformation register and via public commentary
- educating the public – for example, the *Stop and consider* campaign
- regulating electoral material
- working with social media companies and platforms to remove non-compliant content and material that raises the safety and wellbeing concerns of our election officials
- working with other jurisdictions to combat mis- and disinformation through the Electoral Council of Australia and New Zealand.

Risks to our leading position

These challenges (and others) have the potential to adversely impact the NSW Electoral Commission's ability to carry out its statutory functions. If unaddressed, they also threaten to undermine public trust and confidence in the NSW Electoral Commission and democratic processes in New South Wales.

Funding and resources

Unsustainable, inefficient and fragile structure

Our current model of cyclical funding means that we are only provided with sufficient funds to address systematic and emerging risks for a specific election event; however, the risks to electoral integrity are such that they require full-time attention and sustained investment.

The staff funding model for the Electoral Commission is unsustainable due to its narrow focus on the costs of delivering major elections in specific calendar years, rather than focusing on the ongoing business as usual functions and legislated requirements of the whole agency. The funding does not reflect our extensive statutory responsibilities and expanding remit of operations outside of election events, including funding, disclosure and lobbyists; or the considerable number of by-elections, countback elections and elections for registered clubs, statutory boards and State registered industrial organisations conducted between general elections; nor sound public sector governance practice.

With the funding model failing to keep pace with reform, the Electoral Commission has been forced to engage high numbers of contingent staff and contractors to assist in easing the heavy workload. Ongoing staff constitute less than 40 per cent of the Electoral Commission's workforce, well below the public sector average and that of other electoral commissions in Australia.

The current funding model means that the Electoral Commission's workforce is fragile – that is, there is a misalignment of workforce permanency and ongoing funding, increasing concerns regarding staff fragility indicators, high key person dependency risk, high turnover, low staff morale (due to job uncertainty) and a high employment cost model (a reliance on contractors).

For several years, via Budget submissions and Parliamentary reviews and inquiries, we have raised concerns about the sustainability and suitability of our current funding model and our ability to discharge our legislative responsibilities under it.

An externally commissioned review of our funding and its implications for our workforce noted the fragility of our workforce, and that this fragility "...drives inefficiencies: in salaries and wages spend, in work and initiative discontinuities, in hiring and engagement processes and in the lack of investment in training and upskilling. This fragility presents a risk management issue for the NSW Electoral Commission and calls into question the sustainability of the organisation over the longer term."

In 2020 and again in 2021, NSW Treasury accepted that the NSW Electoral Commission's staffing structure was unstable, and subsequently approved temporary Labour Expense Cap (LEC) funding for 41 critical roles in 2020-21 budget and 44 critical roles in 2021-22 budget, however each approval was only for a single financial year.

In the 2022-23 budget, the Electoral Commission made a further funding submission to fund 60 identified positions on an ongoing basis. The purpose of this request was to address the Commission's fragile staffing structure, and to propose a more stable and sustainable staffing structure to ensure the delivery of the Commission's core functions and expanding remit in elections management, engagement oversight and regulatory services. The Electoral Commission's submission was funded in full in the 2022-23 budget. However, this did not end the resourcing issues facing the Electoral Commission:

- Funding was provided to secure critical staff currently working in the organisation on an ongoing basis and represented no new staff positions, just a conversion of critical staff members from temporary to ongoing. In addition, none of the funded positions were in emerging priority areas such as election systems modernisation, or in areas requiring significant uplift to meet Government requirements and good public service governance and community engagement.
- Government recommended that we meet our efficiency savings targets through reductions in staffing.

In November 2022, this Committee released its report of its inquiry into the *Adequacy of the funding allocation of the NSW Electoral Commission for the 2023 State general election*. In the report, the Committee, having noted the key role played by the Electoral Commission in enabling democracy in state and local government elections, and commenting that adequate funding for the Electoral Commission is important to ensure that elections in New South Wales are conducted to the highest standard and with the utmost integrity.

Following approval by NSW Treasury in its 2022-23 budget of the Electoral Commission's funding submission, this Committee considered that the funding allocated to the Electoral Commission for the 2023 State general election appeared to be adequate for the proper conduct of the election, but noted that the current funding levels remained inadequate to address longer-term issues: in particular, the Electoral Commission's ageing technology systems and cyber security vulnerabilities. This Committee found that, in non-election years, funding shortfalls have impacted the Electoral Commission's capacity to keep its systems current. This has resulted in non-compliance with NSW Government standards, particularly in relation to cyber security. To address this, this Committee recommended that the Electoral Commission be provided with additional funding in upcoming budgets to address long-term systemic issues.

This Committee accepted that it is challenging to maintain and update systems with the current funding arrangements and recommended that additional funding be provided to the Electoral Commission, particularly in those years where there is not a major state-wide election event (a state parliamentary or local government general election). This would allow for systems upgrade and other projects while there is more capacity across the organisation.

This Committee also noted the ongoing concerns from stakeholders about the iVote electronic voting system that was, until recently, used in NSW elections. This Committee supported the decision not to use iVote in the 2023 NSW State election, noting that it was, however, important that NSW electors have alternative, accessible and secure voting platforms and tools available to them for future elections, particularly people living with disability.

In response to an invitation from the then Government, the NSW Electoral Commission submitted a Rebaseline – Phase 1 funding submission as part of the 2023-24 budget process. This submission was partially funded with a limited number of resources being funded for 18 months (up to 31 December 2024) with the expectation that the Electoral Commission would submit another workforce-related submission for long-term funding as part of the 2024-25 budget process. The Electoral Commission did submit a Rebaseline – Phase 2 budget proposal as part of the 2024-25 budget process which, although receiving support from NSW Treasury, was in the end unsuccessful.

Similarly, the Electoral Commission submitted a proposal to stand up a Digital Modernisation programme in the 2023-24 budget process. This proposal was funded for 12 months only, with the follow-up submission included in the 2024-25 budget process again unsuccessful. The Electoral Commission has closed down this programme in response to the Government's decision.

The Electoral Commission has communicated to Government in clear terms the risks and implications on the future operations of the Commission as a result of these recent decisions. The Commission as part of the Budget process has advised Government that a decision not to fund the workforce and digital modernisation funding requests would push these risks outside the Commission's risk appetite.

The impact of whole-of-government savings measures and efficiency dividends

In correspondence to the Chair of the NSW Electoral Commission on 14 February 2022, the then Premier stated that “The Government will agree not to impose any post-Appropriation Act efficiency dividends on the integrity agencies.” This measure was part of the Government’s proposed new funding model for the integrity agencies announced earlier this year.

We report that in the 2024-25 budget, the Government did not impose any new efficiency dividends or whole-of-government savings targets on the NSW Electoral Commission. However, the efficiency dividends and whole-of-government savings targets that had already been applied to the NSW Electoral Commission in the 2019-20 budget remain in place. The total amount the Electoral Commission is expected to save to 2028-29, through the existing efficiency dividends and the additional budget savings measure is \$25.9m (and indexed for inflation from 2023-24 onwards)

In a funding submission for the 2024-25 budget, the Electoral Commission sought to remove all efficiency dividends. However, the Government did not support the unwinding of the existing efficiency dividends (that is, \$2.721m in 2024-25, and then indexed to 2028-29). The cuts equate to an average reduction of 7.8 per cent if applied across all the NSW Electoral Commission’s non-protected funding, that is, employee and other operating expenses.

The savings measures will lead to an even greater reliance on contractors and temporary staff. This is neither efficient nor effective and will have major cost implications for Government and local councils.

These saving measures mean that future funding bids (particularly for election events) will need to be increased to engage more staff for longer periods because of the diminished subject matter expertise within the NSW Electoral Commission. This approach will also lead to an increased risk of failure for such events. The savings target cannot be achieved by the NSW Electoral Commission without impacting the delivery of its core functions.

The NSW Electoral Commission is still feeling the impacts of historical efficiency dividends in the current budget. This impact has been exacerbated by the Government decision not to rebaseline the agency. The result is that the Electoral Commission will still need to find savings or operate under a lower Labour Expense Cap. This is not achievable for a small organisation such as the NSW Electoral Commission and will impact the delivery of elections and regulatory matters in the future. The NSW Electoral Commission will be targeting procurement savings to assist with the other operating expenses, however previous years efficiency dividends have eroded much of the savings available in these expenses. These savings targets are not sustainable and will result in job losses to our permanent workforce.

Addressing our challenges

To address our operational challenges and the risks to engagement, participation and confidence in electoral integrity, the NSW Electoral Commission requires sustained investment during election events and in non-election years. In the 2024-25 budget, the NSW Electoral Commission proposed a comprehensive package of measures to Government to address the most pressing issues facing electoral integrity in New South Wales.

2024-25 budget bids

The current and former state Governments (informed by reviews by Parliamentary Committees and the Auditor-General) in-principle accepted that our historical structure and funding arrangements are not fit to enable us to effectively discharge our functions and have agreed to a new funding model.

As part of new budget management processes being implemented for NSW independent integrity agencies, the NSW Electoral Commission conducted a rebaseline exercise to provide advice to the Government on the future funding needs of the organisation. This rebaselining was a foundational piece of work that enabled us to develop a comprehensive business case in support of our future funding needs.

Phase one of this project was set out in an interim business case that was submitted in March 2023 and included a request for funding for a range of ongoing positions, many of which had received temporary funding in previous budgets. The second phase included a full organisational structure review and a review of our fundamental funding framework.

This funding would have provided the opportunity to (i) build the best structure to deliver on our current obligations, (ii) plan for future change and growth and (iii) ensure we have the necessary people and resources to carry out our work.

Many of our election systems are past their end of life and require high levels of investment and acceptance of risk. Historical under-investment, a result of our complicated funding arrangements, has left these aging systems and our electoral processes in an exposed state. Continuing to deliver elections with our current IT infrastructure and systems arrangements is becoming increasingly costly and impacts overall operational efficiency due to the need for multiple fixes and workarounds.

At the same time, we must respond to changes to our legislative framework coupled with increasing customer expectations and governance obligations, in a rapidly evolving technological and cyber-threat landscape. This has resulted in the need to fund, and commence, a comprehensive systems upgrade and digital modernisation programme ahead of the 2027 NSW State general election.

During 2022-23, we developed an organisational strategy and implementation plan for the digital modernisation programme. The strategy and implementation plan supported an initial business case submitted in March 2023 covering the first 12 months of the programme, including establishment of the programme team and initial planning.

In the 2024-25 budget, the NSW Electoral Commission proposed a comprehensive package of measures to Government to address these matters, but funding was not provided:

1. Rebaseline (Phase 2)
2. Digital Modernisation (Horizon 2)
3. Technology assisted voting
4. Cyber uplift.

The three proposals of Rebaseline, Digital Modernisation and Cyber uplift were inextricably linked. They represented a comprehensive strategy to address the extreme risks for NSW elections arising from many years of underinvestment in election integrity.

Rebaselining – addressing loss of critical staff and corporate knowledge

The Rebaselining submission sought to provide a sustainable resourcing structure for the NSW Electoral Commission, which is currently funded on an event basis without regard to our ongoing statutory responsibilities outside election events.

Ongoing staff make up just 38 per cent of the Electoral Commission's workforce, well below the NSW public sector average of 73.2 per cent, forcing the organisation to rely on a high-cost contractor model to deliver elections.

The Electoral Commission will have to terminate the employment of more than one-third of its staff, both temporary and ongoing, by December 2024. These (approximately 150) staff perform critical ongoing functions in areas such as (but not limited to): cyber security, IT, election delivery, election event integrity, compliance and regulatory operations, stakeholder engagement, communications, records management, project management and governance.

As a result, the Electoral Commission will no longer be able to offer the service levels and support currently enjoyed by political participants and its capacity to regulate compliance with electoral laws, which underpins the integrity of elections in New South Wales, will inevitably be undermined.

The loss of staff, and corporate knowledge, has heightened the risk profile of successfully delivering the Local Government elections in September 2024 and subsequent elections anticipated in October and November 2024. It puts at risk preparation for the 2027 NSW State election and heightens work health and safety risks for remaining staff at subsequent elections.

Digital Modernisation – addressing imminent and current technology failures

Ongoing demands to make systems changes in response to legislative amendments do not consider our vulnerable systems. Our systems failures will increase with fewer staff available to ameliorate them. This is not an issue for the future, it is reality for the Commission now.

The Electoral Commission's core IT electoral systems have experienced repeated failures at every election since 2015 due to our reliance on outdated, unsupported, and non-upgradable systems. In the past several elections, the following critical systems have had outages, or failed, or partly failed during election periods:

- NSW Electoral Commission corporate website
- Election reminder service
- iVote
- Nominations Online Management System
- Funding and Disclosure Online
- Election management application (EMA), the system underpinning the total election management process and pre-poll elector mark-off
- PRCC – Proportional representation computer count, used for distribution of preferences for the Legislative Council.

An independent risk assessment was undertaken on our aged elections systems, which identified a high likelihood of a systems failure at the 2027 State election.

The Digital Modernisation programme sought to address the extreme information technology risk carried by the NSW Electoral Commission in its reliance on out-of-date and unsecured technology.

The Digital Modernisation programme commenced with 12 months of establishment funding in FY23 with a team assembled to identify and address the key risks prior to the 2027 NSW State election. Due to the failure of the 2024-25 funding bid, work ceased, and the team exited the Electoral Commission on 30 June 2024.

Cyber security – addressing vulnerable systems and combatting threats

Without funding, the Electoral Commission is not currently and will not in the future be able to maintain an information security capability commensurate with information security vulnerabilities and threats. The age and complexity of these systems do not allow us to perform proper cyber security remediation in preparation for the 2027 State election. This in combination with escalation of the number of cyber security incidents makes such incident(s) highly probable in the lead up to and delivery of the next State general election, which in its own turn will raise questions about integrity of the event.

Funding was granted for the Cyber uplift programme proposed by the NSW Electoral Commission, however without funding to retain staff to do the work and for licensing, as proposed in the Rebaseline budget bid, or the upgrade and replacement of failing systems planned for the Digital Modernisation programme, progress against these goals is anticipated to be limited.

Technology assisted voting – an internet voting solution for voters who are blind or have low vision

In November 2023, the [NSW Electoral Commissioner's Review of technology assisted voting](#) was delivered, recommending Government consider an internet voting solution for voters who are blind or have low vision. To make delivery of a solution in time for the 2027 NSW State election, the NSW Electoral Commission sought funding as part of the 2024-25 budget process. As funding was not provided, it will now not be possible to provide a solution at the 2027 State election.

The funding proposal related to the future use of technology assisted voting in NSW, particularly internet voting, and was to support recommendations in the NSW Electoral Commissioner's 2023 *'Technology Assisted Voting – Final review report'* published on the NSW Electoral Commission website.

Although the NSW Government is still considering the report's recommendations (including for legislative change), the NSW Electoral Commission required funding at the time of the 2024-25 budget to preserve the chance that internet voting could be made available at the 2027 NSW State election for electors who are blind or have low vision. Such funding was required at the beginning of the 2024 financial year if the NSW Electoral Commission was to finalise market testing and collaborate with disability reference group stakeholders in the co-design of a new system. Stakeholder collaboration will be critical to any new voting system's success and its acceptance by the community.

The threshold question of whether internet voting should be reintroduced in New South Wales is a policy matter for the NSW Government.

Cyber uplift submission

The NSW Electoral Commission has legislated responsibility for significant high value assets with substantial cyber security requirements. These systems are currently vulnerable to cyber security breaches with unsupported and legacy systems.

The NSW Electoral Commission has implemented specific cyber security uplifts through support from the Digital Restart Fund (DRF) and further capability building was planned, as part of Digital Modernisation, in accordance with mandatory public sector cyber security policies and strategy. Cyber uplift funding was approved via the Digital Restart Fund. However, this funding does not cover system maintenance, licensing and staff.

Unsuccessful funding bids

No new funding was received for Rebaseline, Digital Modernisation or Technology assisted voting in the 2024-25 budget.

Impact of funding issues

The NSW Electoral Commission's funding issues are such that we are now undertaking a process to reduce our headcount to operate in the leanest funding environment the agency has experienced since 2013.

As part of our process to reduce staff numbers we are undertaking a review of our corporate and elections systems to determine which systems can be maintained after the September Local Government elections, which must be retired due to a high risk of failure and which can be replaced by reverting to (higher cost, time consuming) manual processes. Along with structure and systems assessments, we are determining which of our legislative obligations cannot – or can no longer – be appropriately met within our resource allocation. Government and the Committee will be advised as these become known.

What we are doing now

The NSW Electoral Commission is prioritising the delivery of the Local Government elections being held on 14 September 2024 while working through the impacts of the Government's decisions. It is expected that the workforce will reduce from 377 people (as at end of 30 June 2024) down to a core workforce of approximately 160 people by 30 June 2025. The intent is for the agency to consult with staff on the proposed organisation structure in late October 2024.

At the same time, the NSW Electoral Commission is reviewing its current systems to identify which systems it will no longer be able to support/use due to the reduction in resourcing and/or to the increase in support and maintenance costs. This will result in the retirement of non-critical election and corporate IT systems (non-critical to service delivery) and the rationalisation of functions, services and service levels.

This review is likely to identify some targeted IT investments for inclusion in the 2025-26 budget process to reduce some of the technology risks introduced by this process in the lead-up to the 2027 NSW State election. The manual processes that will be introduced because of the removal of systems will also increase the cost of delivery of future elections and potential impact the overall integrity because the manual processes are unlikely to be able to replicate the data and status validation that can be provided by an automated system.

The loss of staff, and subsequent corporate knowledge, have also heightened the risk profile of successfully delivering the Local Government elections in September 2024 and introduce key person dependencies and heightened work health and safety risks for remaining staff at subsequent elections.

The consequences of the decision not to fund staffing and IT systems means that the risks to electoral integrity, particularly from service delivery failure, have increased exponentially. This has been verified by independent consultants.

Any additional functions ascribed to the agency through the Committee process without addressing the fundamentals pillars (sustainable funding, staffing [including stakeholder engagement], IT systems and capability, cyber security) cannot be delivered. The agency is already not resourced to deliver on its existing legislative responsibilities (for example, including logos on ballot papers – see below). Without funding, the NSW Electoral Commission's ability to ensure compliance with a range of legislative requirements and government policies such as (but not limited to) work health and safety, asset management, privacy, records management, and Essential 8 cyber security maturity among other requirements is significantly affected.

Along with structure and systems assessments, we are determining which of our legislative obligations cannot or can no longer be appropriately met within our resource allocation. Government and the Committee will be advised as these become known.

Electoral Act amendment – Logo provisions

On 26 October 2023, the *Electoral Legislation Amendment Act 2022 No 57* was passed, enabling from 1 October 2024 inclusion of logos on ballot papers for State elections. Specifically:

- Parties registered for State elections can provide a party logo to be included on the Register of Parties maintained by the Electoral Commissioner as a 'registered logo', and the logo must be included in the register on the website. A Registered Officer can request a registered logo be included on a ballot paper against the name of candidate/s nominated by the RO.
- Independent candidates can provide a logo for inclusion on a ballot paper for an election.
- Link to the amendment: <https://legislation.nsw.gov.au/view/pdf/asmade/act-2022-57>

The NSW Electoral Commission will not be able to publish logos on ballot papers for State elections due to funding constraints. This includes the two state by-elections on 19 October 2024.

To implement this amendment the NSW Electoral Commission is required to enhance IT systems to enable logos to be included on ballot papers. The funding required to enable the *totality* of those enhancements was included in recent budget requests. Unfortunately, with the Government's recent decision not to fund the Digital Modernisation programme in 2024-25 budget, it is not possible for the NSW Electoral Commission to deliver logos on ballot papers for State elections from 1 October 2024.

Proposals to protect electoral integrity and support participation – what is needed going forward

The NSW Electoral Commission welcomes the Committee's Inquiry into *Proposals to increase voter engagement, participation and confidence*. We believe safeguarding democracy and maintaining public confidence in the integrity of electoral events is the responsibility of all electoral management bodies.

As mentioned previously, any additional functions ascribed to the agency through the Committee process without addressing the Electoral Commission's fundamental pillars (sustainable funding, staffing [including stakeholder engagement], IT systems and capability, cyber security) cannot be delivered. The agency is already not resourced to deliver on some of its existing legislative responsibilities. Without funding, the NSW Electoral Commission's ability ensure compliance with a range of legislative requirements and government policies including, but not limited to, work health and safety, asset management, privacy, records management, and Essential 8 cyber security maturity among other requirements is significantly affected.

Following is a series of proposals that, if funded, the NSW Electoral Commission believes could enhance, or at least maintain, voter engagement, participation and confidence in electoral integrity.

The NSW Electoral Commission supports the goals of the Committee regarding increased participation, formality and confidence in the electoral process. Due to the Electoral Commission's diminishing capacity to deliver its core functions we note proposals arising from this enquiry will not be able to be executed until the following fundamentals underpinning the robustness of the agency are addressed:

- A stable and secure funding base – this requires a move from cyclical event-based funding to ongoing funding to match our ongoing remit.
- Adequate staff to deliver on core legislative requirements as well as a workforce able to anticipate and proactively respond to emerging threats and opportunities and engage with stakeholders.
- Stable, supported and robust IT systems to support election and regulatory delivery.
- Cyber security – upgrade ongoing funding for staff, maintenance and licensing.

Proposals

The main proposals to increase voter engagement, participation and confidence are:

- Need to establish a sustainable funding model for the NSW Electoral Commission, including adequate funding for the fundamental pillars of democracy.
- Establishment of a national election platform.
- Implement an internet-based technology assisted voting solution for voters who are blind or have low vision.
- Resource stakeholder engagement to address barriers to participation in democracy.
- Resource ongoing measures to combat disinformation including civics education and ongoing social media listening and monitoring.

We expand on these proposals below.

Need to establish a sustainable funding model for the NSW Electoral Commission

As outlined in this submission, maintaining public confidence, trust and participation in elections and electoral process requires significant investment in the NSW Electoral Commission as an institution. Deliberate and sustained investment is required during election events and in non-election years to enable the Commission to deliver the expanding remit of statutory functions. Without the required funding, the Electoral Commission faces the prospect of election failure.

The Commission's preferred funding model, and the level of sustained funding required to ensure electoral integrity in the future, has been outlined in previous submissions to JSCem and in its 2024-25 budget submission.

Establishment of a national election platform

In July 2017 all Australian Electoral Commissioners wrote to Commonwealth, State and Territory First Ministers requesting that the issue of cyber security for Australia's election systems be placed on the COAG agenda.

This matter was considered at COAG meetings in February and December 2018. At that latter meeting, COAG agreed to establish and support a Commonwealth-State working group of electoral commissions, electoral policy leads, the National Counter Foreign Interference Coordinator, and the National Cyber Security Adviser to strengthen the security of Australia's electoral systems, data and processes.

Pursuant to the COAG agreement, the Inter-Jurisdictional Working Group on Electoral Security and Integrity (IWEgis) was formed and its first meeting was held on 28 February 2019. Standing membership of IWEgis comprised of all Australian Electoral Commissioners, representatives from Commonwealth/State/Territory central agencies and the Australian Cyber Security Centre.

Through IWEgis, all jurisdictions agreed to explore the establishment of a National Electoral Platform (NEP) to deliver electoral systems. The NEP was envisaged as a secure information technology hosting environment which provides a shared services capability for EMBs. This platform could, in the long term, provide access to any number of electoral systems.

IWEgis established a National Electoral Platform Working Party to investigate possible IT systems, costings and governance arrangements for the NEP. Electoral systems which were identified for initial consideration for hosting on the NEP include:

- electoral roll
- temporary workforce management
- device management
- data analytics and reporting
- venue management
- electronic mark-off
- learning management.

Core features of the NEP's operating model would include:

- maintenance of compliance with Australian cyber security standards
- capacity to respond to multiple jurisdictional demands, including the running of concurrent electoral events
- scalability, with the ability to progressively incorporate additional electoral systems

- flexibility to enable individual election management bodies (EMBs) to begin using individual services provided through the national platform over time, for example, as their current systems reach end-of-life
- sufficient adaptability to accommodate legislative differences between jurisdictions.

The following threshold issues were also identified as requiring resolution as part of the development of a NEP.

Governance: An inter-jurisdictionally acceptable governance arrangement needs to be established to oversee the NEP's operations. A fundamental requirement of any such arrangement is that the independence of EMBs, and their electoral operations and associated legislative responsibilities, is recognised and maintained.

Funding: The NEP will need funding, including the provision of upfront capital, for its establishment and operation. Having in mind the ongoing costs of maintaining, upgrading and replacing election systems in nine separate jurisdictions, operation of the NEP should lead to financial and resource efficiencies. Having said this, the introduction of the NEP should not be viewed as a cost savings exercise. Developing the platform, and purchasing and maintaining the systems it will host, will require the commitment of significant resources by governments. When fully functioning, ongoing operational costs could be met on a 'pay for play' basis by jurisdictions using systems hosted on the NEP.

Timing: This was not a 'big bang' proposal. Leaving aside the time required to establish the platform and its governance arrangements, it would not be feasible to migrate all relevant electoral systems into the NEP in a single step. An iterative approach will be needed to gradually feed electoral systems into the NEP. Depending on their replacement program for individual systems, each jurisdiction will have their own views (and needs) regarding usage of systems hosted on the NEP.

Unfortunately, in November 2021 IWEGIS work was suspended because of forthcoming Federal and State elections. Work on a National Platform has not restarted since this time.

Support could be provided by NSW Government to restart the discussions between Federal, State and Territory governments regarding the establishment of a National Platform.

Establishment of a National Platform can only be seen as a long-term fix as it cannot address the short-term issues associated with our current aging systems.

While a National Platform is being discussed there may still be opportunities to leverage work being done in other jurisdictions. For example, the Australian Electoral Commission has invested in the development of mechanisms for safeguarding electoral integrity and maintaining public confidence in the AEC and its processes. It would make economic sense to share these processes and mechanisms wherever possible.

- It may be possible to upgrade the Australian Electoral Commission's new staffing platform (EmployMe) to enable use by other Electoral Commissions. This system could greatly assist the hiring of the 20,000-plus staff required for NSW state-wide elections and reduce the risks associated with the current system used in NSW.
- Greater collaboration with the AEC and leveraging of the Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce, the Interjurisdiction Forum on Electoral Integrity and other relevant security, intelligence and policy agencies. This would help to manage the complex and evolving electoral environment and build security and integrity capabilities to enable the NSW Electoral Commission to respond in a coordinated and consistent manner to threats to electoral integrity and democracy.
- Leverage the AEC's Reputation Management System to promote an ongoing and increased focus on electoral integrity and ensuring public trust in electoral management processes.

- Leverage the AEC's Transformation Strategy (launched April 2024), which outlines how the AEC will continue to maintain public trust in electoral outcomes into the future as a trusted agency committed to electoral integrity. The AEC's education and engagement programs are a key component.

Implement an internet-based technology assisted voting solution for voters who are blind or have low vision

The NSW Electoral Commissioner's 2023 *'Technology Assisted Voting – Final review report'* (published on the NSW Electoral Commission [website](#)) recommends the reintroduction of internet-based technology assisted voting (internet voting) for electors who are blind or have low vision. Internet voting is a voting channel that is provided for in Division 11, Part 7 of the *Electoral Act 2017*.

Below are extracts from the *Final review report* of submissions to the technology assisted voting review made by public interest groups, including advocacy organisations for electors who are blind, have low vision or have other accessibility needs.

Multiple voting channels to meet accessibility needs

Vision Australia and Blind Citizens Australia supported our proposal to pursue an internet voting solution for blind and low vision electors for the 2027 NSW State election, subject to resourcing and availability of a market solution. Moreover, there was a recognition among stakeholders that a range of voting channels is required to support varying accessibility needs for electors. Blind Citizens Australia endorsed a "multifaceted approach to accessible voting". This includes operator-assisted telephone voting, which "remains a useful mechanism for many people who are blind or vision impaired", noting the potential for both IVR using keypad response and voice response software.

Vision Australia endorsed the approach for several technology assisted voting options, stating:

"We remain firm in our belief that a multi-channel implementation of technology assisted voting is the only way of ensuring that people who are blind or have low vision have an independent, secret and verifiable vote on an equal basis with the rest of the community".

Vision Australia believes internet and kiosk voting can be woven into the suite of co-designed solutions, without foregoing low-tech, low-cost options such as tactile stencils to enhance paper ballot voting.

Accessibility NSW is in favour of a range of options for voting that individuals can self-select based on their own needs. It notes that all technology assisted voting options in the interim review report (telephone, internet and kiosk) can present both accessibility benefits and barriers, depending on the needs of an individual elector.

In regard to kiosk voting, Vision Australia states that there are significant accessibility barriers that prevent kiosks from becoming an acceptable voting option for the majority of electors who are blind or have low vision. Accordingly, most people who were blind or low vision would choose to use operator-assisted telephone voting system in preference to a kiosk, notwithstanding the limitations around telephone voting concerning a secret and independent vote.

While recognising the historical integrity of the paper ballot voting system. Vision Australia considers paper ballots represent the least trusted and least accessible form of voting for electors who are blind and low vision as it is a barrier to a secret vote which cannot be independently verified.

National coordination of technology assisted voting design and operation

Submissions identified benefits from greater coordination of technology assisted voting design, procurement and operations between Australian jurisdictions.

Vision Australia states that a national approach to the implementation of technology assisted voting would likely lead to economies of scale, shared best practices for security and risk management, a uniform approach to accessibility and a predictable experience for electors. It does, however, urge each Australian jurisdiction to proceed with technology assisted voting as soon as it is ready to maximise inclusive voting.

Blind Citizens Australia supports inter-governmental efforts to develop a national consistent technology assisted voting system that provides multiple options for electors who are blind or vision impaired to support an independent, secret and verifiable vote, provided it does not affect existing options in New South Wales.

The Victorian Electoral Commission supports the inclusion of local government and fee-for-service elections in any nationally coordinated technology assisted voting initiatives.

Legislative reform to support technology assisted voting

The threshold question of whether internet voting should be reintroduced in New South Wales is a policy matter for the NSW Government.

The Law Society of New South Wales supports the approach where savings provisions are applied differently for multi-member proportional representation elections (such as the Legislative Council or local government councillor elections) and other contests (such as Legislative Assembly elections, local government mayoral elections and local government by-elections), to reflect the respective scale of public interest and costs of holding elections again.

Blind Citizens Australia also supports the savings provisions, noting however that it may give rise to perceptions among blind and low vision electors that their collective vote can be disregarded in an election if there is a technical issue with TAV.

The Law Society supported legislative reform proposals concerning longer pre-election time frames, replacing the ballot sampling system for preference distribution in the Legislative Council and rationalising the way parties, groups and candidates are displayed on the Legislative Council ballot paper. Overall, it advocated for technologically neutral expression in legislation.

Information about our (declined) funding request to support technology assisted voting is included in this submission document under the section headed *Technology assisted voting – an internet voting solution for voters who are blind or have low vision*.

Community support for technology assisted voting

Our independent research of electors following the 2023 NSW State election reports that survey participants living with disability felt it was important to continue to have a variety of voting methods available as well as information to enable them to make informed decisions about which voting method would be best for their circumstances. There was a strong desire expressed by survey participants for online voting to be made available for future elections, specifically for voters who require greater support due to living with disability, low English proficiency, or who face other barriers to voting. Non-voters also reported that an online voting method would hold appeal in enabling them to vote in the future.

Resource stakeholder engagement to address barriers to participation in democracy

In alignment with discrimination laws in Australia, the NSW Electoral Commission has a responsibility to provide equitable access to electoral services in an accessible and inclusive manner.⁹

Further to this, the NSW Electoral Commission has a statutory function of promoting public awareness of electoral matters that are in the public interest by means of education and information programs¹⁰. As legislative requirements increase for the NSW Electoral Commission, so too does the need to communicate with them through reporting, media, advertising, outreach, education, and stakeholder engagement.

We recognise that some people continue to face barriers to participation in democratic processes. We work closely with voters, communities and community organisations, peak bodies, and advocacy groups to identify, mitigate and – where possible – eliminate these barriers. This work is vital to ensure all people have fair and equal access to the democratic and electoral process.

The NSW Electoral Commission needs increased resources in stakeholder engagement, voter education and outreach to build trust in democracy, maintain voter confidence and engage people facing additional barriers to participation.

The Electoral Commission has piloted a model of community-led partnerships for engagement and education activities during election periods. This model aims to address barriers for these voters by leveraging community organisations' expertise, knowledge, and networks to disseminate voter awareness information and education.

The model sees the NSW Electoral Commission enter commercial partnerships with community organisations to partner in outreach activities with target communities. In the lead up to general elections, the NSW Electoral Commission trains community groups to deliver voter education in language in areas of lower English proficiency and lower voter turnout. The Electoral Commission partnered with the Ethnic Communities Council of NSW (ECCNSW) and the Australian Electoral Commission in 2019, partnered directly with the ECCNSW for the 2021 Local Government elections and 2023 NSW State election. For the 2024 NSW Local Government elections we called for expressions of interest from community groups to participate in this program of work. The ECCNSW and Metro Assist were appointed to and deliver the program.

The NSW Electoral Commission works with Deaf Connect to develop an Auslan election video series for each general election (covering key information on the election, how and where to vote, postal voting and instructions on how to fill out ballot papers) and the Council for Intellectual Disability to develop easy read guides and videos.

Increased engagement to improve satisfaction and trust among people living with disability

As mentioned earlier in this submission document, the NSW Electoral Commission commissions an independent evaluation after each state and local government general election.

⁹ Federal laws that offer these protections include the *Age Discrimination Act 2004*, *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*, and the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*. The work of the NSW Electoral Commission is governed the following legislation: *Electoral Act 2017*, *Electoral Regulation 2017*, *Electoral Funding Act 2018*, *Electoral Funding Regulation 2018*, *Local Government Act 1993*, and *Local Government (General) Regulation 2021*.

¹⁰ The *Electoral Funding Act 2018* provides that the NSW Electoral Commission may undertake education and information programs to inform parties, elected members, candidates, groups, third-party campaigners, party agents, official agents, donors, and associated entities of their obligations under the Act.

A subset of the 'core' survey participants (whose responses to the survey following the 2023 NSW state election were reported earlier in this submission document) included respondents who self-identify as living with disability. Voters self-identified against visual, cognitive, hearing or mobility disability. This cohort reported slightly lower levels of satisfaction and trust compared with the 'core' results:

- Seventy-seven (77) per cent of survey participants living with disability reported they were satisfied the election was conducted fairly and impartially.
- A lower level of trust in the voting process was observed among survey participants living with disability, at 71 per cent.
- Seventy-nine (79) per cent of survey participants living with disability reported that they were confident with the accuracy of the election results.
- Eight-one (81) per cent of survey participants living with disability reported being satisfied with their overall voting experience.

Among the survey respondents who identified as living with disability, factors noted that could increase their satisfaction included communication on details of voting centres with respect to aspects of parking, accessibility, walking distances, seating availability, presence of stairs; more details on processes relating to alternative voting methods; greater notice on election timing and more information on candidates. Feedback from research participants highlighted that more communication about the voting processes would assist them to confidently, safely, and independently cast a vote.

Survey participants living with disability felt that it was important to continue to have a variety of voting methods available as well as being guided to clear information about each method in advance of the election period. It was felt this would allow them to make informed decisions about which voting method would be best for their circumstances and assist them to set expectations around the process for their chosen method.

Increased engagement for to improve trust among people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

We see the opportunity to improve the levels of trust in culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Independent research following the 2023 NSW State election showed variation in four key metrics surveyed with Mandarin-speaking, Arabic-speaking and Cantonese-speaking participants.

Among Mandarin-speaking participants, 94 per cent trusted the voting process (94%) had confidence in the election results - significantly higher than Arabic-speaking and Cantonese-speaking participants.

Significantly fewer Arabic-speaking participants trusted the voting process (at 20 per cent, with a high proportion of these participants answering "don't know") and had confidence in the election results (38 per cent) in contrast to both Mandarin-speaking and Cantonese-speaking participants. While Cantonese-speaking participants reported slightly lower levels of satisfaction in the fairness and impartiality of the election (at 76 per cent) and overall satisfaction with the voting experience (79 per cent) than Mandarin-speaking (96 per cent) and Arabic-speaking participants (86 per cent).

Resourcing our stakeholder engagement function

To support our Rebaseline funding proposal with regards to resourcing our stakeholder engagement function (to engage with our target elector audiences), we commissioned an external review of engagement, outreach and community education strategies and staffing models used by other organisations to address the needs of their (target) community stakeholders.

Specific staffing details for some organisations included in the review have been redacted from the findings report (see redacted report at Annexure A), however, the review highlights that all organisations, including other electoral commissions and the Australian Bureau of Statistics, are more mature in their approach to community engagement and have substantially more resources, enabling partnership leverage and strategic and tactical approaches to engagement. The number of staff in

stakeholder engagement roles at similar organisations ranges from eight to 11 (full time equivalent) permanent roles.

The NSW Electoral Commission currently has two full time equivalent (FTE) roles: these are one ongoing resource, supported by one temporary election event-funded resource (with funding ceasing for this temporary role after the delivery of the 2024 Local Government elections).

The significantly greater resources available to the electoral commissions reviewed, compared with the NSW Electoral Commission, enable them to undertake community engagement, education and outreach during and between election events.

The existing two FTE resources are currently fully deployed on stakeholder engagement, with a focus on election-period communications and support. With only these two roles there is insufficient capacity to undertake additional requirements. The NSW Electoral Commission expects additional requirements to be identified from the Reconciliation Action Plan process currently underway at the Electoral Commission.

The review recommended that a team of six to eight FTE permanent staff would provide the resource capacity required to deliver the commitments of the NSW Electoral Commission and ensure that the target audiences are able to be individually addressed from a strategic approach with the aim of reducing barriers to engagement in electoral processes. The employment of eight FTE in total would allow for additional capacity to develop partner relationships, deliver actions specific to the various Plans and ensure delivery of education components beyond what is feasible by a team of six FTE.

A further recommendation is a hybrid approach, whereby the core team and community engagement framework leverage external resources as required to deliver specific tactical initiatives around election periods. This may involve engaging additional resources in a casual, part-time or contract manner or partnering with other entities or communities.

Ongoing activity is required, across a range of government agencies and in the community to build knowledge and reduce barriers to participation.

Resource ongoing measures to combat disinformation including civics education and ongoing social media listening and monitoring

Civics measures to combat mis- and disinformation

Deliberate and progressive investment is required to combat disinformation undermining democracy and democratic institutions. This can be achieved through uplifted and ongoing broad-based civics and citizenship education programs about the value of democracy, targeted community outreach targeted community outreach education and engagement across Australian jurisdictions, and ongoing social media campaigns.

The spread of disinformation may be enabled by a lack of coordinated counter-measures such as ongoing, broad-based civics education and targeted community outreach education and engagement across Australian jurisdictions.

Continue to liaise with online media platforms

Update as necessary the December 2022 *Statement of Intent* by the Electoral Council of Australia and New Zealand (ECANZ). The statement supports Australian electoral management bodies and online platform collaboration to address breaches of federal, state and territory electoral related laws, as well as breaches of online platforms' terms of service related to electoral integrity.

Continue to fund the *Stop and consider* campaign

To further combat the spread of false information about electoral processes, we support the continued funding of the 'Stop and consider' campaign, and propose it is extended to every federal, state/territory and local government electoral event. The campaign encourages electors to think about sources of

electoral information, to avoid being deceived or misled by mis- and disinformation and to support public understanding of electoral processes. Along with the AEC, we support any effort to invest in a national digital literacy campaign.

Continued environmental scanning

In the lead-up to the NSW State general election in March 2023, we worked with our Electoral Council of Australia and New Zealand (ECANZ) colleagues and the Commonwealth's Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce to mitigate the risks of online misinformation and disinformation that is deliberately created with the intent to disrupt electoral processes.

The strategies implemented at the March 2023 State election to mitigate the risks and preserve high levels of trust in our electoral system will be built on for the upcoming NSW Local Government elections in September 2024.

Our preferred approach would be to have an 'always on' environmental scanning function, not just during election events, to enable us to detect and rebut misinformation at all times to help defend our electoral processes.

Legislative reform to respond to AI

Weaponising artificial intelligence (AI), and misinformation more generally, continue to present challenges for the administration and integrity of elections. We watch elections overseas with interest as we know that whatever we see, particularly in US, is often recycled locally.

The rise in misinformation and disinformation during election events is well documented, as well as broader trends in Australian and internationally towards apathy of democracy. Although the powers of the Electoral Commission are limited, we remain committed to actions that counter the risks of disinformation and misinformation about electoral processes during election events. We are not resourced to do so outside of election events.

What is the role of the NSW Electoral Commission?

The NSW Electoral Commission must ensure that electoral material generated by artificial intelligence, whether physical or online, complies with the requirements that apply to all electoral material, including:

- It has to contain the name and address of the person who authorised it, and
- It cannot be misleading in relation to the electoral process (e.g., incorrect date for the election, incorrect names of the candidates, instructions that would result in an informal vote).

As the Committee is aware, there is no provision currently in place in relation to truth in political advertising, meaning "deepfake" material may not necessarily be unlawful. Political participants who choose to use generative AI for campaigning may find themselves in a situation where they could breach current NSW electoral laws if, for example, the message generated contains incorrect information about the electoral process (e.g., points electors to voting centres that do not exist).

We understand that in some overseas jurisdictions, material generated by artificial intelligence must be clearly identified as such. This is not a requirement that is in place in NSW.

Regulatory reform

Legislative reforms arising from the administration of NSW state elections

Electoral legislation should be reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure that it remains fair, effective and responsive to the operational context in which elections are conducted. It should be amended well-ahead of any election event, wherever practicable, to ensure there is sufficient time for the Electoral Commission to design, test and implement any changes to its systems and processes. It is difficult for an electoral commission to maintain operational excellence and trust in the integrity of its systems if changes are made late and/or are not resourced realistically.

As the independent returning officer for NSW parliamentary elections, the Electoral Commissioner generally only comments on the operational impact of legislation on administering an election successfully.

A number of potential improvements to electoral practice were identified arising from the State election in March 2023 that would require legislative amendment. The key proposals for change are set out in the Electoral Commissioner's *Report on the administration of the 2023 NSW State election*. The report also contains the status (at the date of publication of the election report) of the recommendations of the report of the *Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, Administration of the 2019 NSW State election*. Many of the proposals and recommendations require funding and have as such been suspended. We also note that the *Local Government (General) Amendment (Elections) Regulation 2024* makes provisions for the health and safety of election officials and electors.

The election report is published on the NSW Electoral Commission [website](#) and was tabled in NSW Parliament in accordance with legislation. Proposals for reform were also included in the NSW Electoral Commission's submission to the Committee's inquiry into the *Administration of the 2023 NSW state election and other matters*.

Reforms to improve systems for political donations, electoral funding and party governance, including as recommended in the Independent Commission Against Corruption's report on political donations facilitated by Chinese Friends of Labor in 2015 (Operation Aero)

The NSW Electoral Commission makes the following comments in relation to the policy recommendations made by the [ICAC in its Operation Aero report](#).

Recommendation 1

Making the offences in relation to accepting or making cash donations penalty notice offences by amending the *Electoral Funding Regulation 2018*.

NSW Electoral Commission comment

This is a matter of policy for the NSW Government, however, the NSW Electoral Commission notes that a broader suite of enforcement options provides more flexibility, especially in the enforcement of less severe breaches.

Recommendations 2 to 5

Establish standards of party governance and internal controls through a working group of which the NSW Electoral Commission would be part. Give powers for the NSW Electoral Commission to assess, audit and enforce non-compliance with these standards, publish its finding and make public funding payments to political parties conditional on the achievement of acceptable standards.

NSW Electoral Commission comment

These are matters of policy for the NSW Government and the NSW Electoral Commission will work with the Government if it chooses to implement these changes. The NSW Electoral Commission would need to be appropriately funded to implement any changes of this nature and scope.

Any governance standards and internal controls established would need to be sufficiently objective for the NSW Electoral Commission to conduct assessments and audits.

Recommendation 6

Amending the requirement for Senior Office Holders (SOH) of political parties to report “reasonably suspected contraventions” of the Electoral Funding Act (EF Act) instead of conduct that the SOH “knows or reasonably believes constitutes a contravention”. It is also recommended to increase the current maximum penalty of \$5,500 for that offence in line with the other offences under Division 1 of Part 10 of the EF Act (mostly \$22,000-\$44,000 or 2 years imprisonment or both).

NSW Electoral Commission comment

This is a matter of policy for the NSW Government.

Recommendation 7

Amending the EF Act to give the NSW Electoral Commission power to publish the result of its compliance audits, investigations and regulatory actions.

NSW Electoral Commission comment

Since the ICAC’s Operation Aero report, s 268 of the *Electoral Act 2017* has been amended by the *Electoral Legislation Amendment Act 2022* to allow the Electoral Commission or Electoral Commissioner to disclose information about the progress or outcome of an investigation into possible contraventions of the *Electoral Act 2017* or the *Electoral Funding Act 2018* if satisfied the disclosure is in the public interest. It does not, however, allow the disclosure of information about investigations into possible contraventions of the *Local Government Act 1993* (for election offences) or the *Lobbying of Government Officials Act 2011* that the NSW Electoral Commission is responsible to investigate.

It is acknowledged that this power involves some risks, for example, that the publication of investigation details around the time of an election could be misused, manipulated or misinterpreted. For further information about how the NSW Electoral Commission takes into account these sorts of risks when assessing whether disclosure is in the public interest for the purposes of s 268, see the NSW Electoral Commission’s Compliance and Enforcement Publication Policy.

Reforms to amend electoral laws in relation to electoral funding and political parties, including in relation to:

- Allowable Administrative Fund expenditure under section 84 of the *Electoral Funding Act 2018*.
- Residence requirements for political party officials.
- Expenditure of the Election Campaigns Fund within New South Wales.

The Hon. Mark Latham MLC forwarded to the NSW Electoral Commission a copy of a letter he wrote to the Special Minister of State in August 2023 containing proposed legislative reforms in relation to the above items. The proposed reforms and comments by the NSW Electoral Commission are summarised as follows.

Proposed reform 1

The outlawing of expenditure of NSW Administration Funds on merchandise. Currently under section 84(1)(b) of the *Electoral Funding Act 2018* (the EF Act) a number of expenditure purposes are outlawed but not merchandise.

NSW Electoral Commission comment

Section 84(1)(b)(i) of the EF Act excludes electoral expenditure from the definition of administrative expenditure. The definition of electoral expenditure includes, at section 7(1)(b) of the EF Act, expenditure on the production and distribution of election material.

Promotional merchandising that includes the name or logo of a political party would generally be considered electoral expenditure by the NSW Electoral Commission. The NSW Electoral Commission has previously disallowed expenditure on promotional merchandising from Administration Fund claims.

At this time, the NSW Electoral Commission cannot identify any operational need connected to its administration of public funding for such a change to be made. Existing legislation already appears to achieve the policy outcome sought through the proposed change.

Proposed reform 2

All officials and executive members of a registered political party should live in NSW.

NSW Electoral Commission comment

Section 102(1)(b) of the EF Act disqualifies a person from being appointed as party agent if the person is not enrolled to vote at NSW State elections. The party agent is the person responsible for the lodgement of disclosures and claims on behalf of political parties.

The legislation does not specify that other duty holders of the party, such as the Registered Officer, Deputy Registered Officer and the Party Secretary under the *Electoral Act 2017*, and the other senior office holders defined under section 100 of the EF Act, are required to be enrolled or reside in NSW and/or Australia. The NSW Electoral Commission is aware of situations where party officials, such as registered officers, deputy registered officers or the party secretary have resided interstate or overseas. We also note that in circumstances where a party does not have an appointed party agent, the registered officer is deemed to be the party agent and must fulfil the relevant obligations of a party agent.

A party headquarters must be an address in NSW, and party members must be enrolled in NSW. However, the current legislation does not prevent an application for registration of a party to be made by a party secretary with an address outside NSW and/or Australia.

Whether this was intended, and whether an enrolment and/or residence requirement ought be imposed is a matter of policy for the NSW Government. However, the NSW Electoral Commission makes the following comments in relation to the practical implications of this.

The NSW Electoral Commission has not identified any challenges with the day-to-day administration of the electoral funding and disclosure schemes, party registration or the nominations process arising from a party officer residing outside of NSW or overseas. NSW Electoral Commission generally corresponds with party officials via email, and party registration related forms and lodgements can be made electronically, via email, so location is not a practical impediment to communication and meeting key obligations that may be conducted online.

However, the NSW Electoral Commission is concerned about the effectiveness of the exercise of its regulatory functions and enforcement powers outside NSW (although a notice requiring documents or information may be given to a person outside of the State in certain circumstances: s 138(9), EF Act).

Proposed reform 3

All funds paid to registered parties by the NSW Electoral Commission should be deposited directly with NSW party units, in NSW-held bank accounts and only ever spent in NSW.

NSW Electoral Commission comment

As with payments from the Administration Fund, payments from the Election Campaigns Fund (ECF) are made into the account nominated by the party agent. The EF Act mandates that payments from the ECF be made into the State campaign account of the party. Section 37 of the EF Act requires a campaign account to be a separate account with an authorised deposit-taking institution (DPIs) denominated in Australian dollars. It does not, however, mandate that the account be held in a NSW branch of the institution.

A party account held interstate is unlikely to impede an audit or investigation conducted by the NSW Electoral Commission because:

- Accounting records of a party must be kept at the party's headquarters in NSW, unless another address is approved by the NSW Electoral Commission (clause 12 of the *Electoral Funding Regulation 2018*),
- Parties have an obligation to assist the Electoral Commission in the conduct of their audit (sections 59 and 74 of the EF Act), and
- The power to require the provision of documents or information extends to persons outside of NSW if the matter affects the EF Act (section 138(9) of the EF Act).

It is not uncommon for expenditure claimed from the statutory funds established under the EF Act to be incurred with vendors located interstate or even overseas. For example, a platform used to maintain the database and website of many parties and candidates is provided by a vendor based in North America.

At this time, the NSW Electoral Commission has not identified any operational need connected to its public funding or enforcement functions for legislation to specify that only NSW branches of authorised DPIs may be used by parties or that the expenditure of public funding must occur in NSW. Whether these changes might be made for other policy reasons, is a matter of policy for the NSW Government and Parliament.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Sufficient reasons for not voting as per legislation

If it appears that someone on the electoral roll did not vote, they are issued with an 'Apparent failure to vote' notice. This follows a process of filtering out people who shouldn't receive the notice, such as people with prior known reasons, such as they are absent from NSW (overseas or interstate), that they are on armed forces or Antarctic deployments and exclude people who die after close of rolls.

The *Electoral Act 2017* includes the following as sufficient reasons for not voting at a NSW State election:

- It is a sufficient reason for the failure of an elector to vote at an election if the Electoral Commissioner is satisfied that the elector:
 - was absent from New South Wales on election day, or
 - was ineligible to vote at the election, or
 - had an honest belief that abstention from voting was part of his or her religious duty, or
 - had a lack of mental capacity (as certified by a registered medical practitioner), or
 - was unable, for any reason acceptable to the Electoral Commissioner, to vote at the election.
- It is not a sufficient reason for an elector's failure to vote at an election that they did not know it was being conducted.

The *Local Government Act 1993* includes the following as sufficient reasons for not voting at a NSW Local Government election:

For the purposes of this section, it is a sufficient reason for a failure by a resident to vote if the Electoral Commissioner is satisfied that the resident:

- a) is dead, or
- b) was absent from the area on polling day, or
- c) was ineligible to vote, or
- d) had an honest belief that he or she had a religious duty to abstain from voting, or
- e) was unable to vote for any other reason acceptable to the Electoral Commissioner.

Appendix 2: Accepted reasons provided by non-voters for the 2023 NSW State election

The Electoral Commissioner or their delegate decides whether “sufficient reason” for failing to vote has been provided. Section 259(9) of the *Electoral Act 2017* (for a state election) and section 314(6) of the *Local Government Act 1993* (for a local government election) lists what is a sufficient reason for failing to vote in an election. Not knowing that an election was being conducted is not a sufficient reason for the failure to vote at an election.

For the 2023 NSW State election, accepted reasons provided by non-voters (aggregated into categories) to be excused from paying a non-voter fine included:

Table 4: Reasons provided for not voting at the 2023 NSW State election

Reason provided for not voting	Number excused
Absent from NSW on election day	40,687
Aged/Infirm/Dementia/Physical or Mental inability	3,638
Correctional Centre/Gaol	678
COVID-19	8,964
Deceased	1,237
Disability	1,466
Distance (8km or more from polling place)	886
Impacted by flood	74
Living overseas	5,144
Moved out of NSW	3,152
No fixed address	196
Not an Australian Citizen	84
Religious objector	21,172
Notice was return to sender	29,797
Sick/caring duties	18,598
Tried to vote – Other	1,286
Tried to vote – Postal	377
Working during the hours of voting	4,669

Annexure A: Community Engagement for the NSW Electoral Commission

Following on the next page.

Community Engagement for the NSW Electoral Commission

Fiftyfive5 contact:

Amanda Hodge, Director, Social & Community



Sydney, New South Wales

19 December 2023

Singapore

The Working Capitol
1 Keong Saik Road
Singapore, 089109
+65 8722 1373

New Zealand

Level 10, 3-13 Shortland Street
Auckland 1010
+64 9 600 1115

Canberra

Level 2, 1-7 Neptune Street
Woden ACT 2606
T: +61 412 162 653

Melbourne

Level 2, 45 Wangaratta Street
Richmond VIC 3121
+61 402 272 044

Sydney

44 Bay Street
Ultimo NSW 2007
+61 2 9211 3595

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Executive Summary

Background

The NSW Electoral Commission is legislated to conduct elections and by-elections for the Parliament of New South Wales. It also provides electoral services for local councils (if engaged to do so). Its purpose is to deliver trusted and independent systems, processes, oversight and engagement that support democracy in New South Wales.

The NSW Electoral Commission also has the function of promoting public awareness of electoral matters that are in the general public interest by means of education, information programs and research.

For the purposes of this analysis and report, community engagement, education and outreach, and any associated frameworks and staffing models, refer only to supporting voters (and non-voters) to participate in the electoral process; it does not include political participant audiences.

The NSW Electoral Commission is aware that some voters continue to face barriers to participating in the democratic processes of New South Wales.

The NSW Electoral Commission engages with the public and enhances service provision to reduce barriers to voting.

Fiftyfive5 has undertaken a review of engagement, outreach and community education strategies and staffing models used by other organisations to address the needs of their (target) community stakeholders.

Approach

A multi-stage approach was used to identify, understand and review industry-leading strategies. The final approach included:

1. An inception workshop: with both project teams from the NSW Electoral Commission and Fiftyfive5 to confirm the scope, approach and objectives of the review.
2. A rapid assessment: of publicly available information to examine what similar or adjacent organisations are doing to communicate to target communities, focusing on the public sector organisations.
3. 8 in-depth interviews: with identified organisations and key stakeholders within these organisations to further explore the nature of their approach to engaging with their target communities.
4. A workshop of findings: with both project teams from the NSW Electoral Commission and Fiftyfive5 in order to review all findings and identify appropriate strategies, governance and engagement models relevant for the NSW Electoral Commission to consider with respect to each target audience.
5. Consolidation of findings and recommendations: as documented in this white paper.

The target communities of focus have been identified from electoral participation data from both the 2023 NSW State Election and the 2021 NSW Local Government elections; and from research commissioned by the NSW Electoral Commission with respect to both of these election events. The data identifies the following communities face additional barriers when voting and as such should be a focus of the NSW Electoral Commission community engagement strategies:

- People with disability
- People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

- People experiencing homelessness
- Young people.

Key findings

Community engagement is defined by the International Association of Public Participation as:

Engagement is an intentional process with the specific purpose of working across organisations, stakeholders, and communities to shape the decisions or actions of members of the community, stakeholders, or organisation in relation to a problem, opportunity, or outcome¹.

Community engagement is commonly recognised as a separate concept to communication and marketing efforts although there is substantial overlap between activities that can deliver to each outcome. The review of other organisations via secondary resources, case studies and stakeholder interviews highlights that there is no one correct path for community engagement; however, the path needs to be strategically directed and appropriately resourced specific to both the community engagement activities and to the key target audiences.

While the NSW Electoral Commission engages widely with NSW voters and has a substantial approach to measuring voters' participation, satisfaction and perceptions of elections and campaign activities there is additional directed community engagement that could be undertaken. The NSW Electoral Commission is aware of this resource gap.

A review and understanding of similar organisations engaging with similar target audiences highlights that organisations such as [REDACTED] the Australian Bureau of Statistics are all more mature in their approach to community engagement with substantially more resources, enabling partnership leverage and strategic and tactical approaches to engagement. For example, the [REDACTED] have community engagement resources equivalent to [REDACTED] (full time equivalent) permanent roles.

Consistently across organisations engaging with similar target audiences a number of principles underpin successful community engagement. These principles are to:

- **Involve individuals with a lived experience:** from many aspects and to assist at multiple levels. Ranging from utilising of internal understanding from staff with lived experiences through to co-design practices when ideating and piloting engagement approaches.
- **Leverage other organisations:** relationships with large and small entities engaging with the target audiences is a consistent aspect of appropriate engagement and networks. Furthermore, these initial relationships can be leveraged to the wider network building a referral pathway to other relationships and partners.
- **Collaborate and train:** use third parties' expertise along with internal knowledge, supported by training (e.g. cultural training, IAP2 frameworks).
- **Be developed for both strategy vs. operation:** it is important to separate out the strategy vs operational requirements of community engagement approaches to the target audiences. Strategy sets the direction through understanding and the operations are tied to metrics (qual and quant).
- **Measuring through metrics:** engagement projects and initiatives should be planned with clear goals and an ability to measure the outcomes of the activity. Measurement can take many forms; however, it is important to understand that measurement will allow for a test, retest approach to ongoing improvements in the community engagement process.

¹ <https://iap2.org.au/about-us/about-iap2-australasia>

- **Establish and allow for realistic timelines:** it takes time to get the right resources and partnerships in place to engage effectively and then deliver initiatives for the target audiences. Realistic expectations must be had with respect to making major gains in engagement of target audiences.

Implications and conclusions

Reflecting upon the approach of both the

REDACTED

and the scope of internal resource capability, the findings of this review and evaluation serve to endorse that the NSW Electoral Commission needs expanded resourcing to support a formalised internal framework and model for sustainable community engagement.

The existing 2FTE resources (one ongoing resource and one temporary event-funded resource) that the NSW Electoral Commission employs are currently fully deployed on stakeholder engagement, with a focus on election period communications and support. With these roles there is insufficient capacity to undertake additional requirements. The NSW Electoral Commission expects additional requirements from the soon-to-be-developed Reconciliation Action Plan, and Multicultural Action Plan and Disability Inclusion Action Plan.

Based upon this review it is recommended that a team of 6-8FTE permanent staff would provide the resource capacity required to deliver the commitments of the NSW Electoral Commission and ensure that the five target audiences are able to be individually addressed from a strategic approach with the aim of reducing barriers to engagement in electoral processes. The employment of 8FTE in total would allow for additional capacity to develop partner relationships, deliver actions specific to the various Plans and ensure delivery of education components beyond what is feasible by a team of 6FTE. However, if funding is only available for 6FTE it is recommended that this resourcing level is further assessed once a detailed community engagement plan is developed; this plan may provide additional evidence towards increasing of resource capacity directly aligned with achieving the strategic and tactical initiatives and outcomes.

This recommendation primarily considers the full-time resourcing requirement. A further recommendation is this model seeks to use a hybrid approach whereby the core team and community engagement framework leverages external resources as required to deliver specific tactical initiatives or around election periods. This may involve engaging additional resources in a casual, part-time or contract manner or partnering with other entities or communities.

It should be noted that the NSW Electoral Commission has a statutory function of promoting public awareness of electoral matters that are in the general public interest by means of education and information programs. The *Electoral Funding Act 2018* provides that the NSW Electoral Commission may undertake education and information programs to inform parties, elected members, candidates, groups, third-party campaigners, party agents, official agents, donors, and associated entities of their obligations under the Act.

For the purposes of this specific research commission, community engagement, education and outreach, and any associated frameworks and staffing models, refer only to supporting voters (and non-voters) participate in the electoral process. It does not include the audiences prescribed in the Electoral Funding Act, resourcing for which is being considered under a separate submission.

List of abbreviations

COMPONENT	DESCRIPTION
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
REDACTED	
CALD	Culturally and linguistically diverse
IAP2	International Association of Public Participation
IEPP	Indigenous Electoral Participation Program
FTE	Full time equivalent
LGA	Local Government Area
NSW	New South Wales
NSW Electoral Commission	New South Wales Electoral Commission
PTE	Part time equivalent
REDACTED	
RAP	Reconciliation Action Plan
REDACTED	



1. Introduction

1. Introduction

This white paper presents the findings of the investigation and review undertaken by Fiftyfive5 on behalf of the NSW Electoral Commission to identify approaches to addressing the needs of voters facing additional barriers to participating in democracy. It should be noted that the focus of this paper is on community (citizen) engagement, as opposed to stakeholders in general.

1.1 Background

The NSW Electoral Commission is legislated to conduct, regulate, and report on elections and by-elections for the Parliament of New South Wales (NSW) and local councils (if engaged to do so). Its purpose is to deliver trusted and independent systems, processes, oversight and engagement that support democracy in New South Wales.

One of the NSW Electoral Commission's highest priority goals is to build trust and confidence in the electoral and democratic systems and processes. The NSW Electoral Commission seeks to ensure that voters and political participants understand what they need to do to play their part in the democratic process and can simply and seamlessly navigate NSW Electoral Commission services to meet their obligations. Particular attention is given to ensuring inclusion and accessibility via different voting mechanisms and with a range of audiences including people who may experience additional barriers to participation in democracy.

The work of the NSW Electoral Commission includes (but is not limited to):

- Running independent, fair and accessible elections.
- Providing transparent processes and guidance to assist political participants (including candidates, parties, elected members, donors, third-party campaigners and lobbyists) to comply with their legal obligations.
- Publishing political donation and expenditure disclosures and registers of political parties, candidates' agents, third-party campaigners and political lobbyists.
- Engaging with the public to make it easier for people to understand and participate in the democratic process.
- Investigating possible offences and enforcing breaches of electoral, funding and disclosure, and lobbying laws.

1.2 Objectives

The primary objective for the investigation and review undertaken by Fiftyfive5 was:

To gather evidence for community and stakeholder engagement as an effective tool to reach and impact targeted voter communities.

Fiftyfive5 designed and delivered an investigation process that aimed to specifically:

- Provide evidence for community and stakeholder engagement as an effective tool to reach and impact targeted communities.
- Identify effective models implemented in other organisations (focused on the public sector) targeting similar cohorts in the community and identify which of these are top-level industry leading practice strategies.
- Gather real examples of organisations and how they structure this work and what type of capabilities are within their teams.
- Report back to the NSW Electoral Commission on different models (or a single optimal model) for stakeholder engagement, community education and outreach.

Market research data collected for the evaluation of the 2023 NSW State election by Fiftyfive5 on behalf of the NSW Electoral Commission provides insight into the additional barriers faced by people with disability and those who identify as being culturally and linguistically diverse. This data is summarised below.

Table 1 – Summary of target audience barriers (people with disability & CALD)

	ALL VOTERS	PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY	CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE
2023 NSW State election ease of voting % (very/fairly easy)	92%	83%	73%
2023 NSW State election overall satisfaction (very/fairly satisfied)	90%	81%	87%
Key concerns raised	Not Applicable	Voting process is less private Not as easy to vote Lower ratings on COVID safety Less informed on how to fill in voter paper Interested in reminders to vote	Lower trust and confidence in the voting process Higher information needs and in-language supports Not enough specific in-language supports or information Interested in reminders to vote, voting options, polling place information and more information on candidates 43% have a high belief they are provided with misinformation around elections
Supports required	Not Applicable	17% used postal vote service 20% of those who used postal vote could have voted in person but would have needed assistance 37% used NSW Electoral Commission website Functional needs include accessibility, assistance, ease/stress-free voting experience, ability to vote independently, knowledge around phone voting process	24% received assistance at polling place 48% to understand how to vote 41% to understand process 43% in-language assistance Leaning more heavily on external sources of information e.g. word of mouth about election, candidate posters, outdoor posters 51% used NSW Electoral Commission website

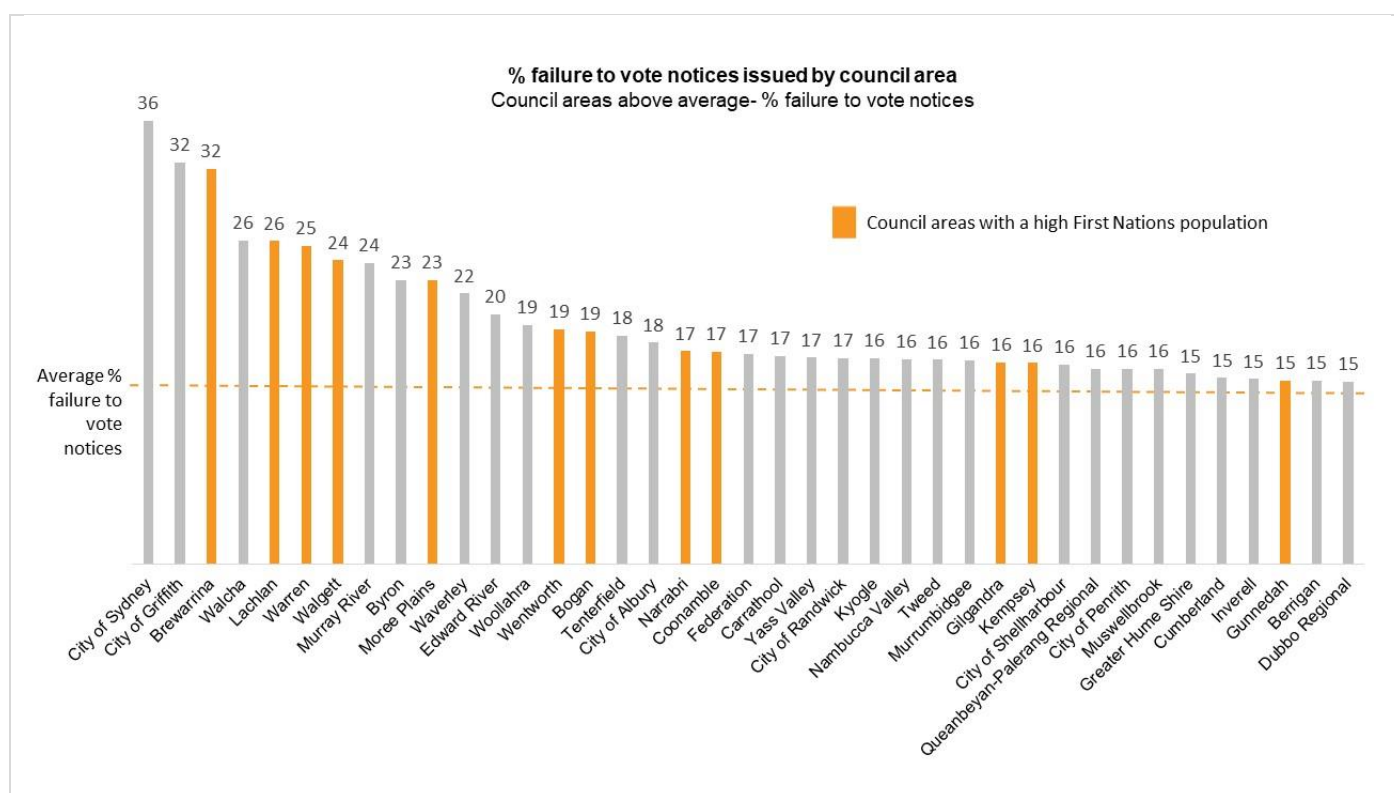
Sources:

Evaluation research of the 2023 NSW State Election Core Survey and In-Language Survey
Stop and Consider Campaign Evaluation 2023

The target audiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and people experiencing homelessness did not have similarly sourced data available; however, data is available from other electoral commissions in Australia to support concern around these audiences.

The NSW Election Commission data on the number of 'Apparent Failure to Vote' notices issued to Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the 2021 Local government election indicated a greater propensity for LGAs with higher populations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be over represented on the average number of 'Apparent Failure to Vote' notices issued.

Figure 2 – ‘Failure to Vote’ notices issued by local government area



Source:

Data supplied by NSW Electoral Commission on 20/9/2023

In NSW, 35,011 people were experiencing homelessness at the time of the 2021 ABS Census. A study of 164 participants experiencing homelessness in Adelaide over the 2019 federal election² period revealed the obstacles faced by this group in voting, with only 22% of respondents turning out to vote. This study identified that significant barriers for people experiencing homelessness included not having much knowledge or interest in elections/politics, believing voting was pointless and disillusionment with the process, seeing politicians as untrustworthy and self-interested, not knowing where to vote, being unable to access a polling place, not wanting their name on the electoral roll and finding voting too complicated or burdensome.

1.5 Rapid Evidence Assessment process

A rapid evidence assessment of publicly available materials was used as a starting point to identify organisations and potential models of relevance for further evaluation. A review was conducted of:

1. Key documents supplied by the NSW Electoral Commission
2. Publicly available information from different government or NGO capabilities/structures
3. Journal articles on crisis communication (e.g. flood/fire) or public health communications to target audiences.

The focus of this review was to further understand four factors as outlined below and provide evidence in the form of case studies on real application of engagement models and governance approaches.

² Source: An Exploration of Homelessness and Electoral Participation – A report prepared for the Australian Electoral Commission, 2019

Figure 3 - Information objectives of the Rapid Evidence Assessment

-  Identify key organisations, industry-leading practices, and stakeholders for recruitment and interviews
-  Define and understand the difference between communication and engagement and current best practices
-  Explore successful models of engagement with hard-to-reach audiences: people living with disability, CALD, First nations people and people experiencing homelessness
-  Identify case studies and industry-leading examples for structuring recommendations

A full list of sources of relevance to the outcomes outlined in this white paper are included in Appendix A. In summary the Rapid Evidence Assessment incorporated:

Figure 4 – Summary of approaches and sources used in the Rapid Evidence Assessment



1.6 In-depth interviews with stakeholders

A series of 8 in-depth interviews with stakeholders of organisations using varying engagement models and governance were conducted by Fiftyfive5. Appropriate organisations were identified via the Rapid Evidence Assessment phase and confirmed as relevant for inclusion by the NSW Electoral Commission.

In-depth interviews were conducted by a senior researcher from Fiftyfive5 over a video conference platform. Interviews ran for approximately 45 minutes and used a semi-structured discussion guide instrument detailed in Appendix B. Representatives from the following organisations took part in these interviews.

Table 2 – Organisations interviewed

LIST OF ORGANISATIONS
REDACTED

1.7 Interpreting the data

Qualitative data

The qualitative findings from the 8 semi-structured interviews have been analysed using a combination of narrative and thematic analysis. Both analytical approaches are rigorous techniques that have been employed by Fiftyfive5’s experienced qualitative research team. This data was incorporated with publicly available data on the organisations.

Narrative analysis considers the way the insights are shared from other organisations for the learnings of the NSW Electoral Commission. This includes their experience, the pathway and the language used to describe their processes and approaches. By studying this language and dialogue we better understand the aspects that have the greatest impact on successful engagement.

Thematic analysis identifies the patterns that appear repeatedly in terms of the knowledge, experiences and behaviours. Themes are supported by direct quotations using the language of participants to provide further evidence for specific points.

With this combination of techniques, the purpose of the qualitative findings is to bring understanding to the range of different approaches engaged with to undertake targeted community engagement and the underlying justifications and outcomes of these. The qualitative findings should not be used to attribute the size of an issue, solution or approach, it tells us more about the impact that different approaches to community engagement have.

A background image consisting of numerous colorful sticky notes in shades of blue, yellow, pink, orange, and purple, scattered across a white surface. A dark grey rectangular box is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing the section header.

2. Contextual factors

2. Contextual factors

2.1 Aim of the NSW Electoral Commission

One of the NSW Electoral Commission's key goals is to build trust and confidence in the electoral and democratic systems and processes. The NSW Electoral Commission seeks to ensure that voters and political participants understand what they need to do to play their part in the democratic process and can simply and seamlessly navigate NSW Electoral Commission services to meet their obligations. It should be noted that the recommendations in this paper are for engagement/outreach/education of voters (and non-voters) and does not include resourcing for the engagement of political participant stakeholders.

NSW Electoral Commission has a responsibility to provide electoral services that are relevant, accessible and inclusive to help all eligible voters understand and participate in the democratic process, including community groups who have specific barriers to voting. Particular attention is given to ensuring inclusion and accessibility to all via different voting mechanisms and with those audiences facing additional barriers to participation.

It is recognised that not all communities and audiences are the same when it comes to participating in elections. Voters who have greater difficulties in participating in elections have a range of barriers they need to overcome, and these barriers differ for each audience. The NSW Electoral Commission works to address barriers for all voters (and satisfaction and trust at a whole-of-community level is high).

2.2 Existing capability

The NSW Electoral Commission is led by the NSW Electoral Commissioner and is comprised of five divisions:

- Elections: including business units of Elections Support, Elections Operations, Customer Service and Relationship Management, and Election Innovation.
- Funding, Disclosure and Compliance & General Council: responsible for registration of political parties, participants and the regulation of the funding, expenditure and disclosure scheme for participants.
- Corporate: including business units of Human Resources, Finance, Communications and Enterprise Portfolio Management Office & Corporate Governance.
- Information Services: including business units of Business Systems, Security and Infrastructure.
- Digital Modernisation: a newly created division responsible for service design and improvement, digital modernisation strategy and programme delivery, enterprise and application architecture.

Communication activities for voter awareness and education sits within the Communication business unit. There are 2FTE roles allocated to Stakeholder engagement during elections. One role is ongoing and the other is a temporary event funded role, ie: for the duration of the election preparation and delivery period. There is no dedicated community engagement team.

Existing community engagement

The NSW Electoral Commission undertakes community engagement with a specific focus on elections (i.e. election specific campaigns and implementation supports).

The NSW Electoral Commission currently supports two priority communities of the five target audiences identified in this paper: culturally and linguistically diverse people and people with disability.

The NSW Electoral Commission approaches community engagement with reference to the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) widely adopted by Australian government entities (reference Section 2.3). An assessment of current activities and initiatives against the IAP2 Core Values and spectrum of engagement indicates that the NSW Electoral Commission currently sits at “inform”.

There is minimal activity to engage specifically with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people experiencing homelessness due to resourcing constraints - a gap that is to be closed by the strategies being considered by the NSW Electoral Commission in this process subject to resource availability. The final target audience around youth engagement and education is not yet an active strategy with limited efforts being undertaken within existing communication support to encourage young people to understand the democratic process, register on the electoral roll and understand mis- or disinformation.

Finally, the NSW Electoral Commission acknowledged that its current resourcing capability is insufficient to meet the requirements under the intended Reconciliation Action Plan and the refreshed Multicultural Action Plan and Disability Inclusion Action Plan.

The challenge

To deliver an extension of integrated communications and stakeholder engagement strategies between elections and to best support people from under-represented groups to better participate in the democratic process requires a more deliberate strategy and funding.

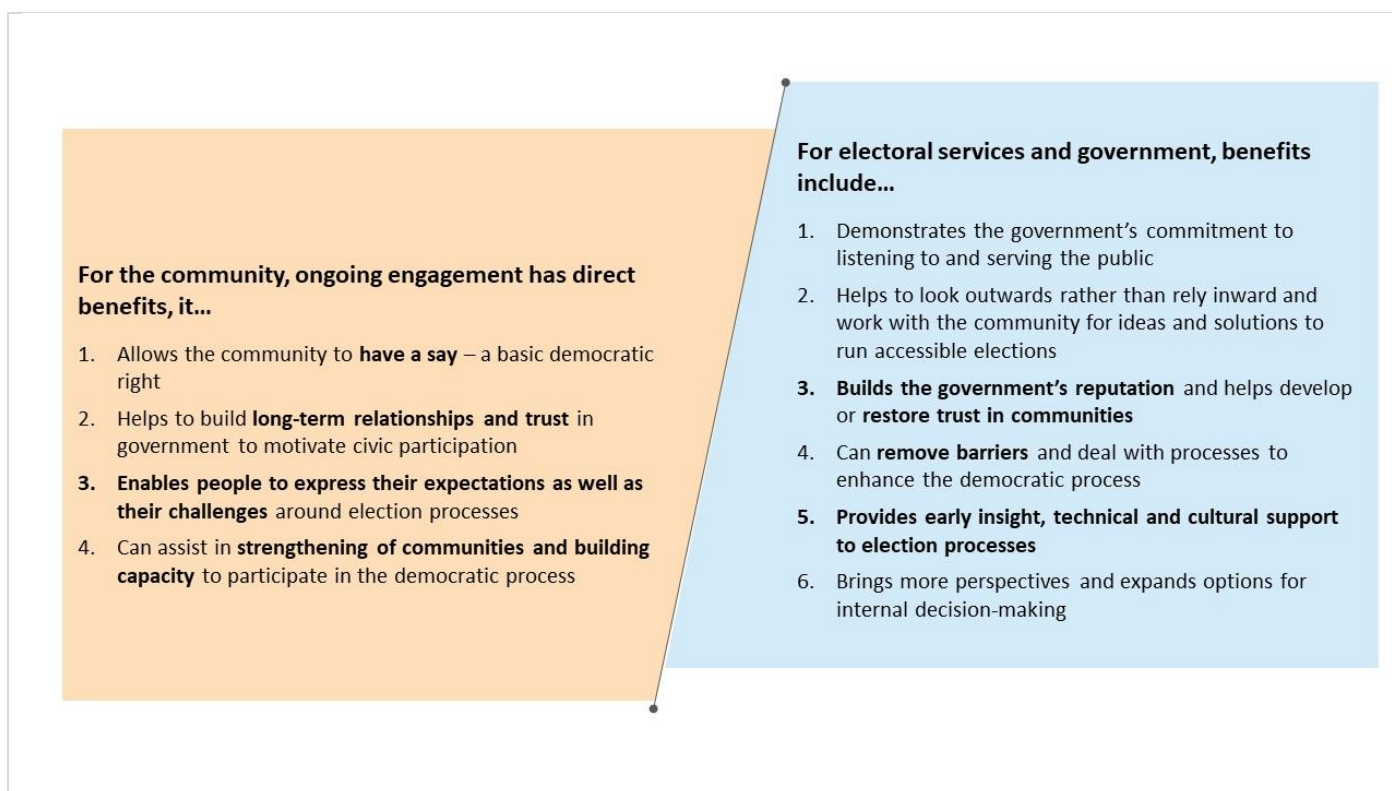
Internally within the NSW Electoral Commission there are no dedicated roles for target audience specificity and the role of understanding and addressing the barriers for the target audiences falls across multiple facets of the workforce. There are 2 FTE roles for community engagement subject to resource availability and education activities that are non-audience specific. There is just one ongoing role outside election periods.

This level of internal resourcing falls well below that of the scope of resourcing for other electoral commissions in Australia with comparative scope. For example, [REDACTED] FTE community engagement roles, [REDACTED] FTE education roles and [REDACTED] reference Section 3.3 for an overview of different organisation resourcing).

Proven outcomes from community engagement

Community engagement offers benefits both for organisations and stakeholders (in this case electoral services and government) and community. It can build long-term relationships, creates trust in the process and towards government, demonstrates a commitment to listening to and serving the public, removes barriers and expands options for internal decision-making.

Figure 5: Community engagement benefits (adapted from IAP2 Australasia)



Sources: [Adapted from IAP2 Australasia, *Essential of Engagement Course Manual* (IAP2 Australasia Website)
https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/cfca39-community-engagement_0.pdf

Community engagement around, and at the time of, elections help to gather public input and support; however, ongoing community engagement offers a range of benefits to governments such as strengthening and empowering communities long-term by building capacity and lowering barriers for sustained civic participation. Specifically:

- **Inclusive and builds trust:** involves a diverse range of voices in the process, ensuring that the needs, concerns, and perspectives of various audiences of the population are considered. When people feel heard and see their input reflected continuously, it builds trust between the government and the public, and confidence.
- **Education & behavior change:** continuous engagement allows opportunities for education and awareness to help people understand important issues, rationale for policies, and is critical to influencing behavior and attitudes over time.
- **Effective implementation:** provides valuable insights of feasibility of implementing engagement activities, strategies, and policies which can lead to more effective and efficient execution.
- **Adaptation to change:** societal, economic, political and environmental conditions change over time. Ongoing engagement allows rapid understanding of community sentiment around key issues and events, and respond as needed to ensure activities, strategies and policies remain relevant and effective for target audiences.
- **Improved outcomes:** ongoing engagement allows for gathering data that can identify potential barriers, unintended consequences, emerging issues and concerns before they escalate into larger problems. It is a proactive approach helps identify what may need adjustment for better outcomes.
- **Long term planning:** sustained engagement gathers input for comprehensive and sustainable strategies that address both short and long-term goals. It also fosters collaboration between government and the public which can lead to innovative solutions to complex challenges.

Community engagement is especially vital for vulnerable and hard to reach audiences including the target audiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait people, people with disability, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and people experiencing homelessness³:

- **Sustained presence and influence:** ongoing engagement ensures that regardless of people's abilities, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc. their voices and concerns can be represented in the decision-making processes that affect their lives throughout the electoral cycle and beyond.
- **Comprehensive understanding:** people who have diverse experiences and perspectives can add diverse perspectives to societal issues. Their ongoing lived experience can help shape policies in a timelier way that are more inclusive and responsive to the changing needs of the community.
- **Accessible voting and human rights:** ensuring that the electoral process is accessible to the changing needs of different audiences helps promote equal participation. This includes providing accessible polling stations, translated voting materials, and technologies that accommodate different abilities.
- **Consistency and impact:** real-time feedback and understanding of emerging issues to prevent regression from initial engagements and continuity of progress. It helps build relationships, trust, and credibility with decision-makers, enhancing the impact of initiatives.
- **Empowerment and social inclusion:** when engaged continuously, people from marginalised communities are more likely to become active participants in the community beyond just voting which helps normalise their participation in civic processes, fostering a culture of inclusivity.

³ https://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/research/files/an-exploration-of-homelessness-and-electoral-participation.pdf
<https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/overcoming-political-exclusion-strategies-marginalized-groups>
<https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/691801464199875908-0050022016/original/Chapter5Evidenceontheimpactofpoliticalengagement.pdf>
<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/voting-matters-disability-community/>



3. Key findings from organisations

3. Key findings from organisations with strong community engagement processes

The organisations reviewed and interviewed during this process provide various examples as to how engagement can occur with various communities and stakeholders, including audiences of priority to the NSW Electoral Commission. This section outlines the macro learnings from other organisations on effective community engagement approaches as well as the various resource models and capabilities being used.

3.1 Strategically driving community engagement

Community engagement must be driven both strategically and operationally. An organisations' strategic emphasis and endorsement to community engagement has subsequent impacts on the tactical approaches developed.

Community engagement needs to be an organisational prerogative

All stakeholders interviewed as a part of this review acknowledge there is no 'one' approach to community engagement and developing a strategy around community engagement. Each approach needs to be fit for purpose both with respect to the challenge at hand and the resources available to the organisation.

Broadly, the decision to engage with target audiences more specifically needs to be directed from senior leadership and endorsed at an organisational level. Additionally, there are often one or two key focus target audiences that form the emphasis of engagement efforts and resources. It is difficult to service all target audiences in the same manner and with the same level of focus and resources.

The need to drive community engagement is often identified from multiple sources most commonly including internal demand for inclusion and/or diversity, external pressure or legislation and identified demands or needs from the community and individuals within the community.

The NSW Electoral Commission organisational prerogative stems from legislative requirements as well as an internal understanding of the challenges and barriers experienced by the identified target audiences. The NSW Electoral Commission currently is fulfilling the goals of its **Democracy Delivered: Strategic Plan 2021-2024**⁴ and the initiatives under it.

Within this document there is a key initiative related to extending integrated communications and stakeholder engagement strategies between elections with an objective of supporting people from under-represented groups to better participate in the democratic process. Another key initiative is to assess and address education gaps and needs of current and future voters (and political participants).

The aim of the engagement drives activity type

The IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum outlines community engagement as a broad range of participation types and that the appropriateness of activities is dependent upon the goals, time frames, resources and levels of concern in the decision to be made. Across all rapid evidence assessment review of secondary sources and the stakeholder interviews this was clearly evidenced by an array of different models of engagement (and underlying activities) that different organisations have adopted as their community engagement approach.

Across the Public Participation Spectrum a range of different activities and support the nature of the community engagement required. Broadly speaking, the range of varying activities used by organisations fall into six types of activities: DIY resources, internal processes and policies, reference groups, mediated relationships, co-design/partnering with external providers and internal outreach. These each have a role to play across the spectrum.

⁴ <https://elections.nsw.gov.au/about-us/governance/strategy-and-initiatives>

Figure 6: Map of different engagement activities on the Public Participation Spectrum

MODELS		INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
DIY resources	Information and questions provided, usually on a website in order to allow those who are looking for information to self service					
Reconciliation/disability action plan	Part of the organisations internal processes: review of current 'assets' understanding organisation and establishing formal Acts or policies					
Reference group	This is a first step in getting to know and familiarises yourself with the audience, their journey and concerns This may include market research with the audience too					
Mediated relationships	Interact with reference groups, support organisations on a small scale Permanent person in role, usually as part of wider comms team					
Co-design/Partnering with external providers	Engagement with the audience through existing partners, who already have connections with the audience. Providing resources to help inform and educate May have research partnerships too					
Internal outreach	The most resource intensive option- used when the organisation wants direct, on going connections to the community. Potential use of flexible resourcing to scale up for surges in activities					

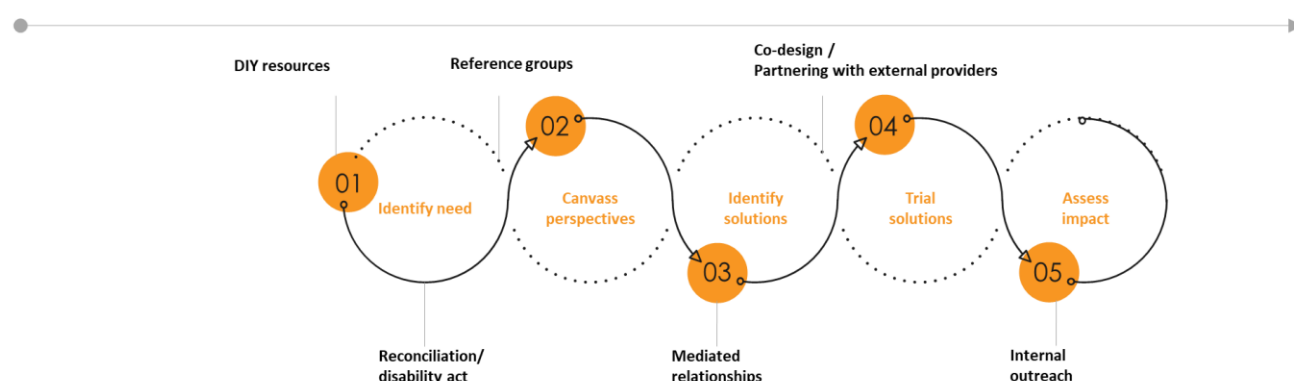
Internal resources have a key role to play in delivering across all types of engagement activities especially if the NSW Electoral Commission wishes to engage in a consultative manner or one that invites involvement or collaboration in the process of understanding needs and identifying solutions.

Community engagement is an evolutionary process

There is an understanding, of both organisations and those individuals directly involved in their engagement programs, that the process of building internal capability and successful strategies is an evolutionary process. For example, internal resources need to be established, potential approaches are trialled (and potentially trialled with unsuccessful results) before being more firmly adopted ongoing, and relationships need to be forged in order to work together. The whole process needs time to be explored and work towards maturity. There is also an acknowledgement from organisations that even a mature community engagement program has the ability to be further strengthened and improved.

There are many different approaches to community engagement. Most approaches are not linear but rather a test, retest iterative model along a pathway aiming to identify the need, identify solutions, test and then adopt approaches. Along this pathway an array of different activities may or may not be employed as demonstrated in the figure below.

Figure 7 – Overview of the varying pathways to mature community engagement



AGENCIES CAN LEARN FROM WHAT HAS WORKED WITH ONE AUDIENCE TO PILOT INITIATIVES FOR ANOTHER, ACKNOWLEDGING THAT ENGAGEMENT SUCCESS USING ONE APPROACH FOR ONE AUDIENCE DOES NOT GUARANTEE SUCCESS WITH ANOTHER.

Stakeholders in organisations interviewed consider that it is important to be continually engaged at some level with target audiences, both due to the test, retest approach to community engagement and the importance of building relationships externally. While specific campaigns or higher-intensity periods of activity are relevant, ongoing activities ensure that relationships continue to be built allowing for more effective ramping up of point-in-time activities. This is considered even more pivotally important for organisations such as the NSW Electoral Commission where the time between specific elections spans many years.

The REDACTED NSW Electoral Commission all endorse and undertake community engagement activity in between elections. Between elections they ideally would assess past engagement, renew their focus on their activities and on building relationships and education programs.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics takes the time between the Census to engage with their target audiences in order to continually improve the census data collection, items to collect data on and classification approaches. These aspects can take years to reassess and redesign.

Key challenges

Organisations interviewed who currently have strong community engagement programs in place raise a number of key challenges that a government organisation faces when it comes to community engagement:

- **Restrictions from statutory requirements:** statutory requirements mandate what is in scope and what cannot be done. Funding is directly associated only for the purpose of the agency's remit.
- **Target audiences are seen as a cohort:** due to funding and to work within statutory requirements most target audiences are populations in aggregate rather than nuanced cohorts under one audience heading. This makes it difficult for the strategy to be flexible to deal with different sub-groups or cultures who may have fundamentally different needs and requirements.
- **Volumes of responses can be overwhelming:** community engagement opportunities can lead to an influx of different perspectives from the same target audience (or across the range of target audiences). It can be hard to find themes and identify the best way forward. This is even more complex where different communities, sub-groups or cultures within each target audience cohort have different needs and requirements.

- **Lack of resourcing:** can lead to a fragmented and single dimensional approach to engaging with community. Simply not having the ability to focus upon different target audiences with a concerted effort means that resources cannot understand the barriers, challenges nor needs of a niche audience.

3.2 Outcomes of community engagement

Government organisations and organisations guided by legislation are often required to provide evidence of program delivery, outcomes and impact. Both qualitative and quantitative measurement tools and assessments are utilised to gauge the potential effectiveness of community engagement activities. These may include surveys with the target audience, participation data or program data, assessment of established relationships and partnerships with the target audience, scope of activities delivered, download data of published materials, post-evaluation of targeted campaigns and direct feedback from individuals and stakeholders. Organisations that have a more mature engagement program are more likely to formally assess the impact of their engagement activities.

Some examples of how different organisations measure the outcomes of their engagement programs are highlighted below:

Table 3: Examples of community engagement outcome measurement

Organisation	Overview of measurement approach	Detail on measurement from organization interviews (qualitative) and indicators of success
REDACTED	Range of qualitative and quantitative measures	<p>Meaningful relationships- that empowers people to vote, as well as feedback on the process.</p> <p>Quantitative measures. REDACTED</p> <p>Connections with working groups to enable understanding and help to build understanding, resources and tools.</p> <p>First nations – REDACTED. Also looking at service delivery – the number of remote communities visited was an indicator of enabling people to vote. Increased services offering- Increased locations and time in very remote locations increased</p> <p>Living with disability - Number of downloads on easy reads- when accessed and how many.</p>
	Participation rates	<p>Increasing youth education in elections in order to increase long term participation.</p> <p>REDACTED</p> <p>Schools program has a focus on providing support to teachers with resources</p>
Australian Bureau of Statistics	Participation rates, activities implemented + external validation	<p>Census participation rates rose to >96% of Australian dwellings⁵. An increase from 2016 and above target.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Census staff were a crucial workforce that helped people throughout Australia to participate. • 2021 Census website won the 'Government Website of the Year' at the Australian Access Awards organised by the Centre for Accessibility. • Range of supports and resources to help migrants, refugees, and international visitors to complete the Census. • For first nations people [we] ran pop up centers to help people participate, extended time periods, and over phone completion plus in language radio ads. • Census staff visited areas over a week-long period where people were known to sleep rough.
REDACTED	Participation rates	<p>Increased REDACTED in CALD areas, by using a mobile bus to go into high CALD areas, with interpreters to increase REDACTED</p>

⁵ [Participation in the 2021 Census | Australian Bureau of Statistics \(abs.gov.au\)](https://abs.gov.au)

In line with a test, retest approach to establishing a community engagement program it is useful for expectations and evaluation metrics to be established from the outset of any tactical action or campaign with target audiences.

For example, the [REDACTED] conduct a program logic before any new engagement occurs with people from a culturally and linguistically diverse background. Each team member identifies the goals they that they are seeking to achieve, what activity they will undertake, and the outcomes they anticipate. The success of the activity is judged against the anticipated outcomes. The benefit of this approach is that it allows the team working on CALD citizen engagement to be involved in setting the expectations for engagement.

3.3 Capacity and capability






Community engagement must not only fit with the best alignment to the needs and requirements of the engagement but also the internal and external resources available. Currently the NSW Electoral Commission has available 2 FTE (Stakeholder engagement and communications lead (GRD 9/10, a LEC01 role) to encompass all community engagement and education requirements.

Internal perspectives on the capacity and capability of existing resources available to the NSW Electoral Commission were discussed during an internal workshop with the NSW Electoral Commission staff with the following outcome perspectives:

- Resources are insufficient to appropriately deploy dedicated engagement programs aimed at removing barriers to participation for target audiences. Current resources have capacity to attempt to address barriers only at a holistic level for all voters or based upon the obviousness of the barrier or size of the audience impacted e.g. accessibility issues e.g. predominant other-language supports only.
- Current resourcing is insufficient to address all the requirements under the NSW Electoral Commission's Multicultural Action Plan, the Disability Inclusion Action Plan and the under-development Reconciliation Plan.
- The internal resource provision lacks the lived experience or identification with target audiences of interest. In many examples of other organisations, internal staff backgrounds are aligned with the target audience or there are hiring policies or internal working groups representative of the audiences of interest.
- Other similar sized entities such as [REDACTED] have more substantive resource allocation equivalent to [REDACTED] FTE in contrast to 2 FTE in the NSW Electoral Commission.

To demonstrate the scope of work that can be done at an audience level, the diagram below outlines an example of community engagement activities beyond the existing activities for the NSW Electoral Commission. Additional community engagement development will not be attempted without additional resources.

Figure 8: Example of activities to drive community engagement with target audiences

		CURRENT	POTENTIAL STEP 01	POTENTIAL STEP 02	POTENTIAL STEP 03
	CALD	Vote Talk Program Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Reference Group (sometimes called Multicultural Action Group)	Vote talk program + amplifying through NSW government organisations+ AEC	Staff to engage with communities	Employ CALD engagement officers- potential hub and spoke model
	Disability	Equal Access to Democracy Disability Reference Group (sometimes called Disability Inclusion Action Group) Disability Inclusion Action Plan	Capacity building within team to collect feedback from the target audience	Starting to partner with other organisation Continued research to map pain points along the journey and try to address barriers	Deeper partnerships with other organisation
	First nations	Appointed consultant to help with RAP	Set up Aboriginal advisory committee Development of RAP	Organisational Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) in place	Amplifying through NSW government organisations+ AEC
	Homeless	Ad hoc connections with homeless organisations			
	Education		Gather needs and gaps for education	DIY resources to enable schools to in house education	Expanded partnership with organisations like Young Mayors program

Capacity and capability approaches

There are a number of different approaches to ensuring that there is the capacity and capability internally to best engage with discrete target audiences. These models vary in scope and size dependent upon the organisation, the scope of the community engagement program and funding availability. The use of a flexible model in many instances serves to provide both a core internal team of resources and additional capacity through part-time use of Part time equivalents (PTE), contract and volunteer team members. These flexible models adopt a hub and spoke framework with the core team forming the central “hub” and the “spokes” delivering as required.

Currently the NSW Electoral Commission uses an internal resourcing approach with 2FTE roles (non-audience specific). The NSW Electoral Commission’s resourcing for community engagement is substantially lower than that noted in similar organisations.

Table 4: Organisation specific approaches

Organisations	Total numbers FTE staff	Community Engagement FTE & ratio	Audience specific roles
REDACTED			
NSW Electoral Commission	300	1 (0.3%)	Nil One ongoing resource and one short term temporary event- funded resource.

REDACTED			
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4. Recommended approach

4. Recommended approach

4.1 Key summary

The review of other organisations via secondary resources, case studies and stakeholder interviews highlights that there is no one correct path for community engagement; however, the path needs to be strategically directed and appropriately resourced specific to both the community engagement activities and key target audiences.

While the NSW Electoral Commission engages widely with NSW voters and has a substantial approach to measuring voters' participation, satisfaction and perceptions of elections and campaign activities, this does not necessarily equate to a mature or sustainable approach to directed community engagement. The NSW Electoral Commission is aware of this capability gap in being able to sufficiently address the barriers of five identified target audiences and puts these target audiences at risk of not having equitable access and ability to participate in the electoral process.

Reflecting upon the breadth of the [REDACTED] in audience specific community engagement, and the scope of internal resource capability, the findings of this review and evaluation serve to endorse that the NSW Electoral Commission needs to more formally implement an internal framework and model for targeted community engagement.

It is further recommended that regardless of the internal framework, strategy and resourcing model implemented that the NSW Electoral Commission continues to utilise IAP2 as a guiding approach to community engagement including use of the Participation Spectrum, Core Values of Engagement and assessing the nature of the engagement challenge at hand. Additionally, that community engagement should:

- **Involve individuals with a lived experience:** from many aspects and to assist at multiple levels. Ranging from utilising of internal understanding from staff with lived experiences through to co-design practices when ideating and piloting engagement approaches.
- **Leverage other organisations:** relationships with large and small entities engaging with the target audiences is a consistent aspect of appropriate engagement and networks. Furthermore, these initial relationships can be leveraged to the wider network building a referral pathway to other relationships and partners.
- **Collaborate and train:** use third parties' expertise along with internal knowledge. Paired with training on both sides (e.g. cultural training, IAP2, election regulations).
- **Be developed for both strategy v. operation:** it is important to separate out the strategy vs operational requirements of community engagement approaches to the target audiences. Strategy sets the direction through understanding and the operations are tied to metrics (qualitative and quantitative).
- **Measuring through metrics:** engagement projects and initiatives should be planned with clear goals and an ability to measure the outcomes of the activity. Measurement can take many forms; however, it is important to understand that measurement will allow for a test, retest approach to ongoing improvements in the community engagement process.
- **Establish and allow for realistic timelines:** it takes time to get the right resources and partnerships in place to engage effectively and then deliver initiatives for the target audiences. Realistic expectations must be had with respect to making major gains in engagement of target audiences.

4.2 Recommended approach

It is recommended that the NSW Electoral Commission increase its internal capability and resources who are a) community engagement focused and b) able to take on audience-specific areas of focus either permanently, as a part of a working team or on a project level. The 2 FTE staff members (one ongoing role, one temporary event-funded role) currently employed is considered insufficient to be able to cover community engagement with the five target audiences and deliver upon actions contained in the pending Reconciliation Action Plan, and current Disability Inclusion Action Plan and Multicultural Action Plan. Current funding only allows for these 2 FTE roles (one ongoing resource and one temporary event-funded resource) and additional funding would be required in order to increase internal capacity and capability to reduce barriers to participation in democratic processes and to fulfil the remit to provide education to future and current voters and non-voters.

Based upon the evidence from other organisations, including other electoral commissions, it is recommended by Fiftyfive5 that a total of 6-8FTE staff embedded in a community engagement team would be highly appropriate to consider. This could then be supplemented by a flexible model of external engagement or non-permanent workforce to bolster engagement at key times surrounding election periods or for targeted campaigns. If possible, we further recommend that some of these resources are employed with an audience-specific focus.

Hybrid model approach

The post-investigation workshop conducted by Fiftyfive5 with the NSW Electoral Commission identified an approach to resourcing in-line with the hybrid model adopted by [REDACTED] and with an increase in resource capacity to a total 8FTE (which would then equate to 2% of the NSW Electoral Commission workforce). This would require funding for an additional 6FTE roles beyond current funding provision.

The proposed model would establish a core team of internal staff who would be responsible for managing relationships with peak bodies and would deliver some engagement and education directly. The team would be responsible for consulting stakeholders, developing resources to be shared across the community and the contract management of community-based delivery partners and information partners across NSW. This is consistent with the SGE19 JSCem recommendation (37⁶) that the NSW Government continue to fund programs to partner with community organisations to provide information to target communities.

It is also anticipated that the hybrid model would provide the flexibility to increase capacity as identified on a part-time or casual basis around election periods to engage with target audiences facing barriers to participation (as required). Entities such as the ABS engage in resource upweighting of this nature around key activities such as the Census with dedicated field teams on the ground for key target audiences. With respect to the NSW Electoral Commission this may be short-term contract positions, part-time roles, additional partnering with target audience entities or a casual pool of employees.

The newly formed team would be required to establish a framework for the NSW Electoral Commission community engagement approach and develop the specific strategies, initiatives and requirements of the team.

⁶ Government Response - Administration of the 2019 NSW State election.pdf

Reduced approach

Should funding be unavailable to engage a team of 8 FTE focused on community engagement and education programs; the alternative recommendation is to establish a team of 6 FTE staff who will commence the establishment and develop appropriate strategic engagement goals relevant to the target audiences. This would require funding for an additional 5 ongoing FTE roles beyond current funding provision.

The difference between engaging a total of 8 FTE against 6 FTE would limit capacity to drive extended components of community engagement. Specifically, it is anticipated that this would result in less capacity available to establish and manage partner relationships, less capability to drive actions within the Reconciliation Action Plan and a reduced focus on democratic education. It would also reduce the ability to designate roles in an audience-specific manner as team members would be required to work across multiple audiences and focuses.

This team may provide further evidence of additional resource requirements and alternative solutions to delivering these resources at a future date for consideration.



Appendices

Appendices

Appendix A: References

Source Title	Link
Essential Energy: Empowering Communities	https://ehq-production-australia.s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/56be89b787677ab36dfd93468a24b177a7f750d3/documents/attachments/000/101/460/original/00_Stakeholder_Engagement_Framework_FI_NAL_April_2018.pdf?X-Amz-Algorithm=AWS4-HMAC-SHA256&X-Amz-Credential=AKIA4KKNQAKIOR7VAOP4%2F20230814%2Fap-southeast-2%2Fs3%2Faws4_request&X-Amz-Date=20230814T150958Z&X-Amz-Expires=300&X-Amz-SignedHeaders=host&X-Amz-Signature=eb93337e4c9192f868ff7a4431c121e576038855de8ef8b6eb8236c145a5e5d9
United Nations ESCAP: Effective Stakeholder Engagement 2030 Agenda	https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Final.Effective%20Stakeholder%20Engagement%20for%20the%202030%20Agenda%20rev.pdf
Glenorchy City: Community Engagement Procedure	https://iap2.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/GlenorchyCC_Community_Engagement_Procedure.pdf
Guest Article: Communication vs Engagement: the same thing, right...	https://www.consultationinstitute.org/guest-article-communication-vs-engagement-the-same-thing-right/
A guide to engaging in disaster recovery	https://iap2content.s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/marketing/Resources/IAP2+Published+Resources/IAP2_Guide_to_Engaging_in_Disaster_Recovery_2015_v2.pdf
Australasia Community Engagement Model	https://iap2content.s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/marketing/Resources/IAP2+Published+Resources/IAP2+Australasia+Community+Engagement+Model+2014.pdf
Tasmanian Government Framework for Community Engagement	https://iap2content.s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/marketing/Resources/Policies+-+Strategies+-+Frameworks/Tasmanian+Government+Framework+for+Community+Engagement.pdf
Hume City Council: Community Engagement Framework and Planning Guide	https://iap2content.s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/marketing/Resources/Policies+-+Strategies+-+Frameworks/Hume+City+Council+Community+Engagement+Framework.pdf
NZ Dept Prime Minister: Community Engagement	https://www.dPMC.govt.nz/our-programmes/policy-project/policy-methods-toolbox/community-engagement
Cultural Competency in Health	https://www.mhahs.org.au/images/cald/CulturalCompetencyInHealth.pdf
HIV Diversity	https://www.mhahs.org.au/images/cald/HIVDiversityAndCulturalCompetence.pdf
Aboriginal Quitline Enhancement Project	https://www.cancer.nsw.gov.au/getattachment/19488ebd-ecab-4fba-93eb-7bd4028b2991/aboriginal-quitline-enhancement-project-qualitativ.pdf
IAP2 Quality Assurance Standard	https://iap2.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/IAP2_Quality_Assurance_Standard_2015.pdf
Essentials of Engagement Course	https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/cfca39-community-engagement_0.pdf
The ATRAC Framework: A Strategic Framework for Aboriginal Tobacco Resistance and Control in NSW	https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/tobacco/Pages/atrac-framework.aspx
The Benefit of Community participation activities for people living with disability	A Guide to Community Engagement with People with Disabilities
Disability Services NSW: Walking the Talk	https://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/DSARI_5.pdf

Engagement and consultation with people living with disability	https://inclusive.sa.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/124636/Engagement-and-consultation-with-people-living-with-disability-toolkit.pdf
Strengthening Community Participation by People With Disabilities in Community-Based Group Homes Through Innovative Action research	https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9099021/
Targeted Communication: The Key to Effective Stakeholder Engagement	https://pdf.sciencedirectassets.com/277811/1-s2.0-S1877042816X00110/1-s2.0-S1877042816308941/main.pdf?X-Amz-Security-Token=IQoJb3JpZ2luX2VlEj%2F%2F%2F%2F%2F%2F%2F%2F%2F%2F%2F%2FwEaCXVzLWVhc3QtMSIHMUEUCIE5FO5P3UpQOXNuhQMPCCD1i59o6SbiQ2k7O65%2BILZjrAIEA7oMOXISOAnUmqemF9xZG84TbatNW95jWDDoqlAdURacqsGUIvxAfggwNTkwMDM1NDY4NjUiDhvUz4Anr1xTDFhx%2ByqPBRwx7axR0en1vf7V9biRQBKbH06h7VcH%2FVPuvf3gqzBTmxFV93zl4DVxEhh2jq3%2BNfiBNb9tiEmD6bPwrBaHWrfMHgE3YkgkodDRkzAVxr2Ewgqyx5GCsCdIlZzwP6cz48z9qTg2FQo6jIA8OJlfvBwKOD5Rzbji46NSZgNQI48KROov7x2BJRWObNAocqj%2B%2Fy5bQUPOsKrXmRcYkRY3SQXawJUOmrb2oLMghNUXRwp5Yu0mHHENUIF3kZuoUKSSa%2BN9Y0IRGBgfHuCy8Mfwrn5adLRFJvwvb4LrEEA86SvbgRkyixz0mauT4U4Yh9ODFBOSNCIR%2Fs27749ZwxqxPMc3YxusvBP9yFdubJgiDEoSIBUI%2BXxy29XiinyOec9YhLA4fUIRerAlTeqYXe1yc7tOm777AmrhCLJz7ZBRz%2B%2BxWIqw7Pi5OGjoOVIMSRSGfqP5d1FYpk4INhnOnatbgX4kEm7Yicx%2FD0QQRWibnSaPkCw63HmOrg9IHBCjcjp1SVUmaMWI3qyV6uvLZv9ExhW9DVzKuLJRtIORxfGOVy9NFAM7lbSlxCcTP5nOmVsZ78OPrwXYxa829eHk8%2FT1T9SZqa4EZChGP6i3gkz7WiFFHWMMyWi1zxY4KL8q48NEoyySqGkcuoMxlvt4wmlybyxyYYOQL66pzAAZPBKLASGnfmwUoMFHCu81gZkHipMsR8Unaz9qc%2FCPCB3ZNPa%2FyFPXKGpq1VPXCunyjK%2FSXAq7Wr5QPImMSVCxdXJHaQ5ta4H1wsvyUijhonGRjfkh6b1dfyrGYI2OW6stsQuARE9HFgK%2FDSHBQNllw1OUZ%2FWTA7JwcBpl2%2BRanbgw95kkij%2BcShxePGLNKpDrO9AhkWYWwis%2FXpgY6sQFfrKMBeMX4sQSVMf7lnktucJD0XdO2himZ6SfgtYUdulMMMoTEhmWR2iKNuqvfv1FR82e3ogO58MUzcPf1Ey240Q4Mt9pLXXKi9ggjR9YehXP%2Fa0y%2B6afngyKgveNV4y0WiNUftGDh90jUPnr79CDXS5C9jAXbKnLuli5jNu%2B13B4Jn3C42OkuVTDLQlboYA4TORPa01luc1eJEVSPR5Kc%2BbQxhS8ZX388kgS1HE1nkaOE%3D&X-Amz-Algorithm=AWS4-HMAC-SHA256&X-Amz-Date=20230816T070028Z&X-Amz-SignedHeaders=host&X-Amz-Expires=300&X-Amz-Credential=ASIAQ3PHCVTY6PLNXOGR%2F20230816%2Fus-east-1%2Fs3%2Faws4_request&X-Amz-Signature=51b62d3dfe3d64618fe674041081edbc0fc187cb169fde5499e008cdfaea0c12&hash=b1cacabb3c92e90562feee0a8234de915256bb6452c02af2b933d6394cdabdc0&host=68042c943591013ac2b2430a89b270f6af2c76d8dfd086a07176afe7c76c2c61&pii=S1877042816308941&t看id=spdf-9ae42f28-3323-46ec-b76b-4a52c8544e83&sid=8946f52e2439d947e90850b289c5a715ce69gxrbq&type=client&tsoh=d3d3LnNjaWVuY2VkaXJlY3QuY29t&ua=1e0a550655540406060e&r=7f77cceca29ae10bd&cc=dk
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Youth off the street annual report 2022	https://youthoffthestreets.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Youth-Off-The-Streets-Annual-Report-2022_web.pdf
Participate Melbourne Annual Plan 2023-2024	https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/annual-report-2021-22.pdf
Engaging with Indigenous Australia	https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/7d54eac8-4c95-4de1-91bb-0d6b1cf348e2/ctgc-ip05.pdf.aspx?inline=true
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Community Engagement Matters Now More than Ever	https://ssir.org/articles/entry/community_engagement_matters_now_more_than_ever
Community engagement - A key strategy for improving outcomes for Australian families	Child community family Australia. cfca39-community-engagement_0.pdf
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City of Parramatta Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2022 – 2026	https://iap2.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Case-Study-City-of-Parramatta-Disability-Inclusion-Action-Plan-2022-%E2%80%93-2026-2-1.pdf
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Beyond Inclusion: Equity in Public Participation	https://www.sfu.ca/content/dam/sfu/dialogue/ImagesAndFiles/ProgramsPage/EDI/BeyondInclusion/Beyond%20Inclusion%20-%20Equity%20in%20Public%20Engagement.pdf
2019 IPA2 Inclusion Discussion Paper	https://drive.google.com/file/d/17Z9hL1GAsnPAJhHKtaaMDf48WcWz7s_l/view
WHO: Community Engagement	https://apps.who.int/iris/rest/bitstreams/1304287/retrieve
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Community engagement and vulnerability in infectious diseases: A systematic review	https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277953621005785
Exploring the role of community engagement in improving the health of disadvantaged populations: a systematic review	https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4685976/
Community Engagement with Vulnerable Populations	https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7306723/#:~:text=Current%20evidence%20and%20our%20experience,standing%20structural%20and%20societal%20inequities.
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Electoral Insight – Aboriginal Participation in Elections	https://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=eim/issue9&document=p6&lang=e
Integrated Voter Engagement	https://funderscommittee.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/fccp_integrated_voter_engagement_case_studies_2009_final.pdf
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ABCD Toolkit	https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/resources/Documents/WhatIsAssetBasedCommunityDevelopment.pdf
Appreciative Inquiry Approach	https://organizingengagement.org/models/appreciative-inquiry/
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NSW State Government Elections In-language Banner Trial Survey 2023	Fiftyfive5 - part of Accenture Song
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Strategy and Initiatives	https://elections.nsw.gov.au/about-us/governance/strategy-and-initiatives
Core Values	https://iap2.org.au/about-us/about-iap2-australasia/core-values
IAP2 Spectrum	https://iap2.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/2018_IAP2_Spectrum.pdf

Code of Ethics	https://iap2.org.au/about-us/about-iap2-australasia/code-of-ethics
Who Int	https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240010529
IAP2 Spectrum	https://iap2.org.au/resources/spectrum
Overcoming Political Exclusion Strategies	https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/overcoming-political-exclusion-strategies-marginalized-groups
Impact of Political Engagement	https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/691801464199875908-0050022016/original/Chapter5Evidenceontheimpactofpoliticalengagement.pdf
Participation in the 2021 Census	https://www.abs.gov.au/census/about-census/2021-census-overview/participation-2021-census
VEC Annual Report 2022-23	https://www.vec.vic.gov.au/about-us/publications
ABS purpose	https://www.transparency.gov.au/publications/treasury/australian-bureau-of-statistics/australian-bureau-of-statistics-annual-report-2022-23/chapter-4---annual-performance-statement-2022%E2%80%9323/abs-purpose-
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Asset-Based Community Development Institute	http://www.abcdinstitute.org
ABC Institute	https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/Pages/default.aspx
Ensuring Relevant and High-Quality Data	https://www.abs.gov.au/census/about-census/delivering-2021-census/story-6-ensuring-relevant-and-high-quality-data
Government Response	Government Response - Administration of the 2019 NSW State election.pdf

Appendix B: Discussion guide

DISCUSSION GUIDE

PROJECT NAME:	Stakeholder research
CLIENT:	NSW Electoral Commission
DATE:	AUGUST, 2023

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

5 MINS

Aim: Introduction and build rapport

- Introduce purpose of conversation
- Thank them for making the time available to meet
- We are working with the NSW Electoral Commission to understand different models of engagement/education/outreach with CALD, First Nations, people experiencing homelessness and people living with disability.
- Fiftyfive5 are leading this engagement and are holding discussions with organisations (government and private sector) to explore the different models for community engagement/education/outreach and how effective these strategies are at uplifting support for organisational objectives and to effect behaviour change.
- In this stage of our work we're undertaking interviews with a range of stakeholders at organisations identified as having delivered effective engagement programmes. We'll be collating the perspectives from all interviews, and combining this with a review of key documents to inform our client on options of how they could structure their team.
- In this conversation we are aiming to cover a range of areas including: rationale for engagement approach, impact of the engagement process, resourcing model and overall costs incurred (employee costs and costs of any external partnerships).
- The discussion today is confidential, we are bound by a strict code of conduct under the Australian Market and Social Research Society to ensure your privacy is maintained. We can discuss your level of comfort around how much you would be willing to share what we discussed. (This will be used internally first to inform the rebaseline program, it may shared as part of a business case but this is not confirmed)

SECTION 2: UNDERSTANDING THE TEAM

20 MINS

Aim: Understand the team and how they work together

Stimulus: N/A

- Can you please tell me a bit about your organisation?
 - How large is the organisation?
 - What are the goals of the organisation?
 - How many people work there?
- How long have you been in your current role at the organisation?
 - What is your level of interaction with the engagement team?
 - What is your personal background and experience with community engagement?
- What are some of the challenges you see across the public and private sector with regards to community education and stakeholder engagement?

- Probe specifically on: CALD, First Nations and people living with disability.
- Are there any organisations globally, locally and across public and private that are doing great things in this area?
 - What are they doing specifically?
 - Are there any specific key learnings that you would take (or have taken) from this?

SECTION 3: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

25 MINS

Aim: Understand what they do for the target audiences, and what their aims are with these audiences

- What is your organisation's approach to community engagement and education?
 - What are the purpose and objectives of the community engagement?
 - What skills and expertise do you have in the team?
 - Can you walk me through the structure of the team? *Probe: headcount, levels*
 - What are the roles of different individuals?
- How was the rationale for this approach? How was this set up initially?
 - Has this changed recently? What was behind that change?
- To what extent does this approach deliver to the outcomes expected?
 - Would you make further changes or adjustments?
 - What would you do if funding wasn't a barrier?
- Can we now discuss the specific activities that you are doing?
 - What does that look like?
 - How much is done by the organisation vs outsourced/contracted to other organisations (NGOs etc)
 - What is the benefit/risk of outsourcing community engagement
 - How do you manage these outsourced arrangements
 - Does that include education (**ELECTORAL COMMISSION ONLY**)
 - How did the company choose to target those particular groups?
- Which of the following community groups do you engage with?
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
 - People with disability
 - People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
 - People experiencing homelessness

GOING THROUGH ONE AUDIENCE AT A TIME

- What does the engagement with the <group> look like?
- What is the purpose of this engagement? *Probe: change behaviour, grow support, include in decision making*
- Is this internally managed and facilitated?
- Is this externally facilitated?
- Do you know how this was set up? What does that look like?
- How does the organisation assess if the engagement is effective?

SECTION 5: VIEWPOINT ON NSW ELECTORAL COMMISSION

10 MINS

Aim: Understand experts view on the optimal model for an organisation like the NSW Electoral Commission

NSW Electoral Commission aims to improvement education and engagement with the audiences we have been discussing. Engagement in local and state elections, improving access to information and ultimately improving rates of voting are part of the considerations. NSW Electoral Commission is reviewing the current resourcing models available.

- Given what we discussed and your knowledge of the NSW Electoral Commission, where would you recommend they invest in community engagement? What type of resourcing model do you think would work best?
- How effective do you think an outsourced model is vs insourcing engagement? What are the benefits of each approach?

SECTION 6: THANK AND CLOSE

5 MINS

Aim: Sum up, thank and close

We would like to include your organisation as a case study to include in our final report which will be shared with the NSW Electoral Commission. This would cover your approach, objectives and resourcing. We can share this with you prior to publishing. Would you be open to this?

Appendix C: Community engagement with target audiences

This section outlines specific community engagement approaches and learnings as relevant to the target audiences of interest to the NSW Electoral Commission.

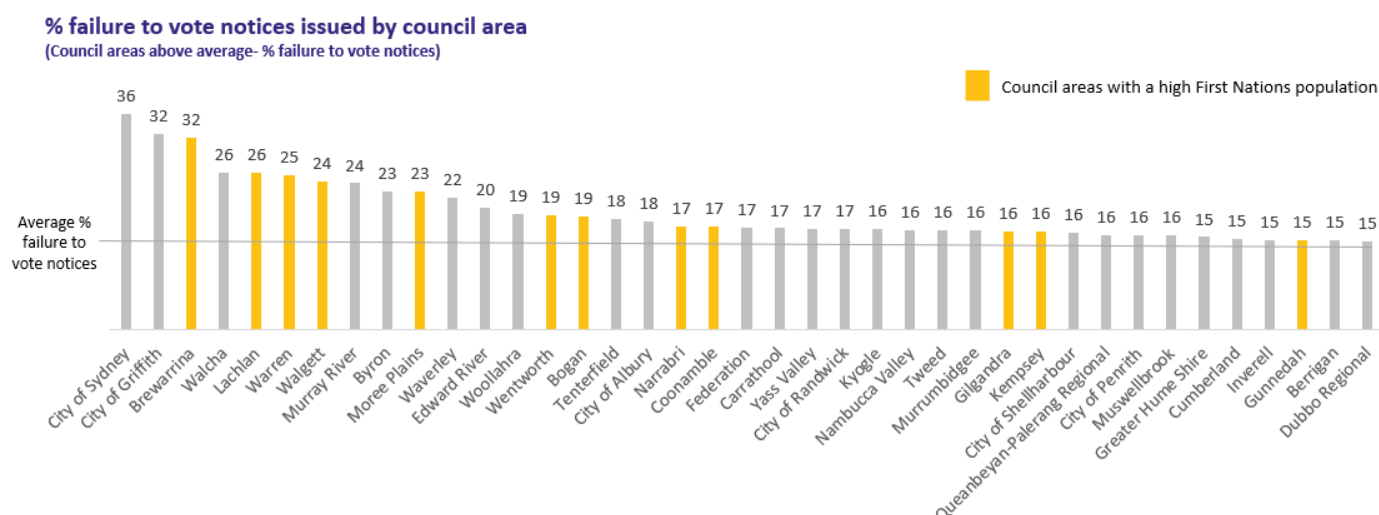
Reducing barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

In NSW, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are registered to vote has improved significantly since 2017 (representation on the Roll was 85.9% increasing to 97.5% in June 2023) according to the Australian Electoral Commission. This is also a higher registration rate in NSW than noted for the Australian average of 94.1%.

The NSW Electoral Commission does not have primary data related to actual voting participation nor the ease or difficulty Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities may experience in participating in the democratic process in a fair and transparent manner. However, based upon data from other state jurisdictions and stakeholder feedback there is concern that a number of barriers to participation impact upon these communities.

NSW Election Commission data on the number of 'Failure to Vote' notices issued to Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the 2021 Local Government election indicated a greater propensity for local council areas with higher populations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be over represented on the average number of 'Failure to Vote' notices issued.

Figure 9 – Failure to Vote notices issued by local government area



Source:

Data supplied by NSW Electoral Commission on 20/9/2023

Key learnings

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are often a nominated target audience for many organisations. There is a multitude of different approaches, for different purposes and to different specific communities.

The issue of community engagement is somewhat more complex due to differences in these approaches, difference in whether community engagement refers to all peoples identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander or whether it refers to engagement with specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Additionally, these audiences have been called upon to be researched, included in trial initiatives and programs and as a focal point for government services placing the burden on these communities to engage and participate.

It is considered by stakeholders interviewed that pivotal to all types of engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is building trust, relationships and understanding each individual community. This is a key point articulated by all participants currently engaging with this audience and in recognition of the historical context of how First Nations peoples have been treated and the subsequent scepticism towards government affiliated programs, services and education approaches.

Key aspects consistent across the manner in which organisations approach engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and which are considered effective are summarised here:

- **Community embedded:** whether directly embedded in the community, using relationships or partners in the community or supports for a specific community. Engagement approaches require dedicated resources who can work directly with communities or who can engage in turn with each community.
- **Partnering formally and informally:** in recognition that services and programs are often best delivered by those who identify as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entity or person to their own; there is a high utility of partnering with entities to communicate, educate and deliver services.
- **Internal capability:** by ensuring that individuals or teams responsible for community engagement either identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, having local field teams or ensuring representation within the workforce.
- **Built over time:** as engagement needs to be built on trust and relationships this process takes time before progress is made.
- **Reconciliation plans are an opportunity to embed within strategy:** the importance of engaging effectively with First Nations peoples is important for many organisations. A Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) presents an opportunity to discuss engagement with senior leaders, and consider the support that might be required to deliver this engagement effectively. Once agreed, a RAP provides impetus to follow-through plans with action.

Evidence of effective engagement

A variety of engagement practices are adopted by organisations seeking to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Some examples of these engagement approaches are outlined here:

Table 5: Engagement activities undertaken with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and peoples by organisation

Activity type	Examples of engagement activities	Example application
DIY resources	Printed resources e.g. First Nations easy read magazine, booklets, fact sheets	REDACTED
	Video content (First Nations targeted)	
	Online content e.g. online-learning module e.g. social media content (First Nations targeted)	
Internal strategy/policy	Strategic directive e.g. Reconciliation Action Plan	
	Dedicated engagement resources, First Nations employment, Teams/working groups, employment policies, First Nation networks, First Nations capability or cultural training (internal)	

		REDACTED
	Establishment of Advisory, Reference Groups or Ambassadors (external)	
	Community engagement meetings and workshops	
Reference groups		
	Data collection / feedback processes from First Nation audience	
	Direct engagement with communities	
Mediated relationships		
	Sponsorship, partnerships or engagement with service providers or organisations, Reconciliation organisations (entity or sector)	
Co-design/partnering with external organisations	Establishing First Nations programs or services within community	
	Funding or grants for specific use with First Nations audience	
Internal outreach	First Nations specific campaigns or initiatives e.g. Aboriginal Quitline e.g. Medicare identification	

Reducing barriers for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse peoples

Members of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities within NSW experience greater difficulty in participating in elections. For the 2023 NSW State election as measured by the post-election In-Language survey, 73% of survey respondents from Mandarin, Arabic and Cantonese heritage found it 'very or fairly easy' to participate in the voting process in contrast to 90% of all voters.

Evaluation research with CALD peoples consistently highlight that language related issues impede democratic participation. For example in this survey, 54% of CALD participants couldn't find information on the voting process in their language spoken, 54% agreed that not being able to vote in the language spoken was a barrier and 53% considered that there was not enough information on candidates in the language spoken.

Additional in-language support on all aspects (e.g. candidates, party information, early voting, filling in a ballot paper, voting centre hours) is consistently highlighted by CALD voters as necessary in order to reduce language barriers in verbal, written and online formats.

These difficulties not only impede the ease and overall participation in elections but also their ability to have trust and confidence in the overall process. A 2023 evaluation of the Stop and Consider campaign run by the NSW Electoral Commission highlighted that individuals identifying as speaking a language other than English had a significantly higher belief that the NSW Electoral Commission engaged in misleading or illegal behaviours in processing and managing the voting process e.g. using pencils to change votes, processing postal votes for deceased Australians, tampering with processing.

Whether through concern about the validity of results when they personally felt uninformed or cultural associations to democratic processes and fair and impartial elections this perception of distrust in the behaviour of the NSW Electoral Commission exists. By working with CALD communities and providing supports there is the potential of not only improving the reputation of democratic election processes but also the way in which the broader local, state and federal governments are received by CALD communities.

Key Learnings

The extent to which the CALD community is referenced in community engagement approaches depends on the underlying extent to which CALD communities are a discrete or more widely dispersed cohort within the community and with respect to the issue or project at hand. However, it is one of the target audiences more specifically engaged with by a range of organisations and there are many examples of appropriate engagement approaches.

Within CALD engagement, stakeholders in organisations often reflect upon cultural specificity with regards to cultural norms and values, religious beliefs, language, health factors, a spectrum from established communities to new migrants and refugees; acknowledging that while all individual voters in these communities are Australians that there is cultural heritage to acknowledge and a subsystem of micro-cultures.

Key aspects that are consistent across the way in which organisations approach engagement with CALD communities and which are considered effective are summarised here:

- **Engaging internally is a good first step:** within each organisation there is likely to be representation of the specific communities of relevance to the engagement challenge. These resources can be well utilised to provide input into needs, materials developed and translation of materials.
- **Community embedded:** where possible engagement involves someone within the community or culture. To the highest degree this might be an internal team member of the same culture working to engage with the community. However, where this is not possible due to resourcing, partnering with community specific groups or individuals to consult and work alongside the organisation seeking to engage.

- **In-language supports are essential:** in-language translated materials and interpreter supports are all used widely to ensure that communication and information provision is elevated. This is more easily undertaken when only a few cultures or communities require in-language support; however, where the CALD audience is wide there is a focus on the more prominent languages being used and other avenues to support minority languages including channels to seek specific language supports or website content that is accessible to apps such as Google Translate.
- **Partnering formally and informally:** partnering with advocacy and representative entities is acknowledged as an appropriate mechanism to ensure the approach is community embedded however not all engagement practices have these formal entities available to them. In these instances, informal partnering with smaller, more local, groups such as churches and religious groups, women's or community support groups have proven to provide a direct line of engagement with the community.

Evidence of effective engagement

A variety of engagement practices are adopted by organisations seeking to engage with people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Some examples of these engagement approaches are outlined here:

Table 6: Engagement activities undertaken with people with a culturally and linguistically diverse background by organisation

Activity type	Examples of engagement activities	Example application
DIY resources	Printed resource kits (CALD targeted)	REDACTED
	Video content (CALD targeted)	
	Online content e.g. online-learning module (CALD targeted)	
	In-language supports e.g. real-time interpreter services trial, in-language resources	
	In-language media e.g. Chinese language newspapers, local radio, information stalls at local venues and social media e.g. community pages and groups	
Internal strategy/policy	Strategic directive e.g. Inclusion and Cultural Competency Development Plan e.g. Language Services Guide	
	CALD Teams/working groups, employment policies, CALD networks, CALD capability training (internal)	
Reference group	Establishment of CALD Advisory or Reference Groups (external)	

	Community engagement meetings and workshops	REDACTED
	Data collection / tracking of CALD audience	
Mediated relationships	Direct engagement e.g. doorknocking communities, pop-ups in communities	
	Sponsorship or engagement with CALD service providers or organisations, Multicultural Week (entity or sector)	
Co-design/partnering with external providers	Partnerships with community leaders, local churches, social groups (local community)	
	Sponsorship or engagement with CALD service providers or organisations, Multicultural Week (entity or sector)	
Internal outreach	Active Leadership Program (workshop and outreach education) or establishing CALD programs within community	
	CALD specific campaigns e.g. Chinese HIV testing campaign, Real-time interpreter trial	

Reducing barriers for people with disability

People with disability experience face additional barriers to participating in elections conducted in NSW due to aspects such as accessibility, low vision or legal blindness, and cognitive impairment. Individuals range from being able to vote independently to requiring substantial assistance to participate in the voting process.

For the 2023 NSW State election, 81% of people with disability who responded to the Core evaluation survey were 'very or fairly satisfied' compared to 90% among all respondents. While the majority (83%) of people with disability found it 'very or fairly easy' to vote in the 2023 NSW State election, one in six (17%) did not find it easy to vote and the use of postal voting, telephone voting and early voting were significantly more pronounced. A key barrier to voting in the 2023 NSW State election was the absence of a digital voting method, which was previously experienced and positively received by people with disability in the 2021 NSW Local government elections.

Key concerns raised in the 2023 NSW State election post-election qualitative research with people with disability also highlights that often they as a voter feel less informed on how to vote and the voting process is less private and independent. The inability to vote independently and feel that their vote matters not only impedes on their overall ease of participation but their feelings of contributing in a worthwhile manner to the democratic process. This in turn has an impact on the trust placed in the voting process being undertaken fairly and impartially (71% trust

compared to 81% trust among the general population) and confidence in the accuracy of the election results (79% confidence compared to 90% confidence among the general population).

Key Summary

The extent to which people with disabilities are referenced in community engagement approaches depends upon the nature of which the organisation and a person with disability needs to interact. For example, for some entities it relates to their physical site delivery of services while for other organisations the challenge is ensuring that information provision is accessible.

Organisations report being relatively active internally in having a strategic plan to guide their activities with respect to this audience and either establishing internal representative groups or channels to engage. They are also widely engaging directly with the community of people with disability via community forums, workshops and formal market research.

Key aspects that are consistent across the way in which organisations approach engagement with people with disability and which are considered effective are summarised here:

- **Leveraging all perspectives:** not just engaging with people with disability (essential) but also utilising staff, advocacy and disability service providers and the general population in order to plan, design and build outputs that best cater to people with disability. Within this space there is a range of well established advocacy and representative bodies who are willing to engage on behalf of the individuals they represent.
- **Identifying difficulties in the experience:** engagement seeks to identify problems being experienced by people with disability in order to directly address these problems. Complaints present a useful starting point to hear directly from those who feel they have experienced barriers. The [REDACTED] did this effectively as a starting point to engagement and this enabled the [REDACTED] to feed real experiences into their internal discussions for potential enhancements to be piloted.
- **Inclusion starts here:** working environments that consider the needs of their own staff with disabilities helps not only to reduce barriers to participation internally but builds confidence in the organisation to engage and deliver effectively to people with disability.

Evidence of effective engagement

A variety of engagement practices are adopted by organisations seeking to engage with people with disability. Some examples of these engagement approaches are outlined here:

Table 7: Engagement activities undertaken with people with disability by organisation

Activity type	Examples of engagement activities	Example application
DIY resources	Printed resource kits (Disability targeted)	[REDACTED]
	Video content (Disability targeted)	
	Telephone channel e.g. National Relay Service	
	Web Content Accessibility Guidelines Version 2.0 / Easy Read information / Plain English information	
Internal strategy/policy	Strategic directive e.g. Disability Inclusion Action Plan development	
	Inclusion Teams/working groups, employment policies, Inclusion networks, Ambassadors, Inclusion capability training (internal)	

	Review of current assets and sites for accessibility and disability supports	REDACTED
Reference group	Establishment of Disability Advisory or Reference Groups (external)	
	Community engagement meetings and workshops and virtual forums	
	Research with /data collection / tracking of disability audience including customer journey mapping	
Mediated relationship	Public exhibitions/ pop-ups	
Co-design/partnering	Engaging with disability service providers or advocacy entities	
Internal outreach	Direct engagement e.g. education sessions	REDACTED
	Communication campaign to support and target engagement projects/actions	

Reducing barriers for people experiencing homelessness

In contrast to the other target audiences, there is less common acknowledgement of the challenges faced by people experiencing homelessness as a cohort in general as well as with respect to their participation in the democratic process. In NSW, at the time of the 2021 ABS Census a total of 35,011 people were experiencing homelessness.

There is limited research and evidence on this audience and their participation in election processes. Much of the concern identified is from internal NSW Electoral Commission stakeholders and other electorate jurisdictions as well as advocacy groups for people experiencing homelessness.

A post-election study was conducted in Adelaide with 164 people experiencing homelessness following the 2019 Federal election. Key barriers identified in this research were identified as:

- Low enrolment rates: 56% were enrolled to vote
- Lack of interest: in politics and not seeing any reason to bother engaging
- Lack of knowledge: in the political process, in politicians and where/how to vote
- Disillusionment and lack of trust: considering that it was not worth the effort to vote because of views related to politicians not listening, not caring, and being untrustworthy. Additionally, there were concerns expressed about not wanting their name on electoral roles and that they did not care to engage until they personally were engaged with.

In contrast to the other target audiences, people experiencing homelessness are less often acknowledged as a cohort or community, and one that experiences disadvantage to participate in contrast to the general population.

Key Summary

There are generally fewer examples of community engagement and working with people experiencing homelessness among the organisations investigated. This is in part due to the niche and fragmented nature of the cohort; as well as people experiencing homelessness being a less obvious concern when it comes to providing services.

The more common key learnings from organisations who are directly engaging with people experiencing homelessness are summarised here:

- **Stakeholder and network engagement:** being a part of other efforts to understand the system and contribute to a system and nation-wide approach to supporting people experiencing homelessness (e.g. being a part of the strategic conversation) is widely used to understand the needs and challenges.
- **Leveraging relationships with agencies serving the community:** building relationships with organisations such as local shelters and other organisations providing services to people experiencing homelessness is pivotal.
- **Using individual voices rather than community voices:** given the more fragmented nature of this cohort there appears to be greater reliance on getting an individual experience (either a lived experience or individuals being integrated into part of a workforce) in sharing stories and experiences rather than receiving a community voice or collective narrative.
- **Lived experienced focused:** actions and ideas are trialled with those with a lived experience.
- **Sector workers are also a sub-set of this audience:** sector workers are pivotal to ensuring success of an initiative as they are the ones who will sit and assist a person experiencing homelessness. Consider their lived experience as a sector worker, their needs and their capability when designing solutions.

Unlike other target audiences less evidence of strategic plans, widespread audience or community engagement (much more targeted), less research or data able to be gathered so less activity on that aspect.

Evidence of effective engagement

A variety of engagement practices are adopted by organisations seeking to engage with people experiencing homelessness. Some examples of these engagement approaches are outlined here:

Table 8: Engagement activities undertaken with people experiencing homelessness by organisation

Activity type	Examples of engagement activities	Example application
DIY resources	Online resources (working with homelessness targeted)	REDACTED
Internal strategy/policy	<i>Less evidenced in case studies</i>	
Reference groups	Establishment of Disability Advisory or Reference Groups (external)	
	Ambassadors, engaging staff who have prior experience working with or have been homeless (internal)	
	Attendance and support of other activities related to homelessness e.g. National Housing Conference e.g. sponsorship with StreetSmart e.g. partnering with Homes Melbourne	
	Active feedback from individuals experiencing homelessness	
Mediated relationships	Site specific activities and engagement e.g. at shelters, rough sleeping areas	Australian Bureau of Statistics
Co-design/partnering with external organisations	Engaging with stakeholders working to address homelessness	Australian Bureau of Statistics
	Engaging with schools targeting youth homeless audience	Australian Bureau of Statistics

Internal outreach	Direct engagement e.g. education sessions, mythbusting campaign	REDACTED
	Targeted communication campaign or materials to support and target engagement projects/actions (including direct, traditional media, fact sheets, online and social media activities)	
	Tailoring of service delivery e.g. Adjustment of forms to allow for participation among those without a fixed address	

Appendix D: Engagement models, strategies and methods

Overview

There are a number of community engagement models used by governments and organisations that are used as a consistent process to engagement. The benefit of adhering to a specific engagement model is that these are developed based on theoretical premises and have been repeatable by organisations to order to validate the models. Here we outline a set of engagement models deemed relevant for the NSW Electoral Commission to consider when establishing a detailed approach to community engagement.

Key Model Summary

In summary, the models identified through the rapid evidence assessment and review and stakeholder engagement process that are deemed relevant for further consideration are outlined in the table below. They are subsequently outlined in greater detail on the following pages.

Table 9: Community Engagement models

Engagement model	Summary of approach	Benefits or strengths
IAP2 Community Engagement Model (CEM)	5 domains are identified that assist an organisation to activate appropriate engagement depending upon the requirements of the engagement and public. These domains are: Shared Leadership and Action, Community Advocacy, Community Lead and Act, Organisation Implementation and Behaviour Change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Widely utilised in Australian and InternationallyValidated approachAllows engagement to be tailored depending upon the needCommon languageBacked by community and stakeholder sector authority
Stakeholder Circle® Methodology	A proprietary model supported by software to manage the stakeholder engagement process needed for a change initiative, project or program. 5 key steps to: Identify all stakeholders and understand needs, Prioritise stakeholder groups, Visualise the key stakeholders, Engage with stakeholders with effective communication plans and Monitor changes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Supporting tools and templatesReview and re-assessment processes are built into the methodology acknowledging engagement needs shift over timeInternationally appliedProcess/step driven
Appreciative Inquiry (AI)	An asset-based approach to engagement that uses questions and dialogue to uncover existing strengths, advantages or opportunities (positive idea generation). 5 steps to this approach include: Defining the scope and goals in a positively framed way, Discovery of what's already working, Dream to envision a desired future or outcome, Design and co-construct practical elements of a plan, Destiny by implementing the collective design and building competencies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Use of positive-framing throughout to build upon existing strengths and identify positive solutions – as opposed to negative problem identification and thinking.Momentum is best generated through positive-framing.Embed an approach to thinking and language utilised.Seeks win-win solutions.
Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)	An approach to sustainable community-driven development that seeks to empower communities to drive development or change processes by identifying and mobilising existing assets. It is concerned with linking the micro-assets available to the macro-environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Shifts power to individuals, community and the publicDoing 'with' not doing 'for' othersAcknowledges that government and organisations are a part of the community

3 core components: **Relationship oriented** (identify, create and mobilise them), **Assets based** (individuals, associations, institutions, place-based assets and connections/community), and its **Community-Driven**.

- Strong identification of both needs and assets

IAP2 Community Engagement Model (CEM)

IAP2 uses a number of different models and frameworks that can be used against the Participation Spectrum and Core Values outlined by the organisation. The Community Engagement Model (CEM) is one model that holds relevancy to a flexible approach to engagement.

The model

The IAP2's Community Engagement Model (CEM) consists of five domains that allow organisations to shift their emphasis of activities and engagement approach depending upon the nature of the outcome required, the audience and the current state of public involvement and interest.

Figure 10: IAP2 Community Engagement Model 5 Domains



Developed by Anne Pattillo, Amanda Newbery, and Michelle Feenan (2014) for IAP2 Australasia.

Table 10: IAP2 CEM Domains explained

Domain	Work here when	Critical requirements for success
Organisation Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The engagement leader is responsible for decision making and implementation • Required under legislation • You are expected to by the community • Your organisation has the legitimacy to lead and implement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A robust process to engage with the community and stakeholders • Communicate how community and stakeholder input has influenced the decision-making or implementation
Behaviour Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The engagement leader is responsible for identifying the problem and potential contributions for behaviour change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify which audiences need to change behaviour

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Often the engagement scope is focussed on changing the population's social, environmental and economic and wellbeing outcomes Pursuit and achievement of the object of engagement cannot be achieved without the action of stakeholder, partners, communities or individuals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify evidence-based motivations and barriers for change Target populations must participate in developing behaviour change programs / materials, implementing and actively monitoring and adjusting Testing is a key component
Shared Leadership and Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The project scope and purpose requires insights, commitment and action of community and stakeholders and organisation by working in partnership through the problem / opportunity definition to solution and implementation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a shared governance model, ensure participants are representative, monitor the health of the partnership, and find a genuine voice of community
Community Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The primary focus is building relationships with, responding to community communication, identifying key issues and opportunities for action, and managing reputational risk The community has identified problems, opportunities or outcomes which could realistically be implemented Advocates have a transparent and genuine process to represent the needs and interest drawn from a diverse range of community members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proactively communicate with advocates to understand their positions and processes Be open to grassroots opinions outside of an official, organisation-led engagement process
Community Lead and Act	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community is already taking leadership and action, and where they are working within legal, ethical and sustainable expectations of community You could support, fund, develop or harvest insights from the contribution of communities, businesses and entrepreneurs You could support community responses to key community environmental, economic or social problems or opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be a stakeholder in the community's process Provide support if asked and is appropriate Could offer support including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reward and recognition Logistics such as space Access to data and information Capability training to encourage Guidance on where effort may need to change to meet legal, ethical or sustainable expectations

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Australasia is the peak body for the community and stakeholder engagement sector. It is an affiliate of the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2). The purpose of IAP2 is to champion engagement that improves environmental, social and governance outcomes and increases trust in the democratic process.⁷ IAP2 is widely acknowledged by both Australian and International organisations as a comprehensive source of information on public engagement practices and its principals and frameworks are widely used by entities including the World Health Organisation, the NSW Government, Transport for NSW, Multicultural NSW, NSW Public Works Advisory, the City of Sydney, Wollongong City Council, the City of Paramatta, the Institute for Public Policy and Governance at University of Technology Sydney.

IAP2 has developed tools that are widely used and acknowledged by Australian organisations engaging in public or community engagement including:

⁷ <https://iap2.org.au/about-us/about-iap2-australasia>

- Core Values for Public Participation: values that define the expectations and aspirations of the public participation process⁸.
- IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum: a spectrum that distinguishes the different levels of public participation and engagement and can assist with the level of participation that defines the public's role in any community engagement program⁹.
- IAP2 Code of Ethics: guiding the actions of those who advocate and are involved in public decision-making processes¹⁰.
- Quality Assurance Standard for Community and Stakeholder Engagement: the international standard for public participation practice¹¹.

The NSW Electoral Commission aligns its perspective of community engagement against the IAP2 approach.

⁸ <https://iap2.org.au/about-us/about-iap2-australasia/core-values>

⁹ https://iap2.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/2018_IAP2_Spectrum.pdf

¹⁰ <https://iap2.org.au/about-us/about-iap2-australasia/code-of-ethics>

¹¹ https://iap2.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/IAP2_Quality_Assurance_Standard_2015.pdf

Engaging with community

Defining engagement

The definition of engagement as noted by IAP2 is ...

Engagement is an intentional process with the specific purpose of working across organisations, stakeholders, and communities to shape the decisions or actions of members of the community, stakeholders, or organisation in relation to a problem, opportunity, or outcome¹².

The World Health Organization defines engagement as ...

a process of developing relationships that enable stakeholders to work together to address health-related issues and promote well-being to achieve positive health impact and outcomes¹³.

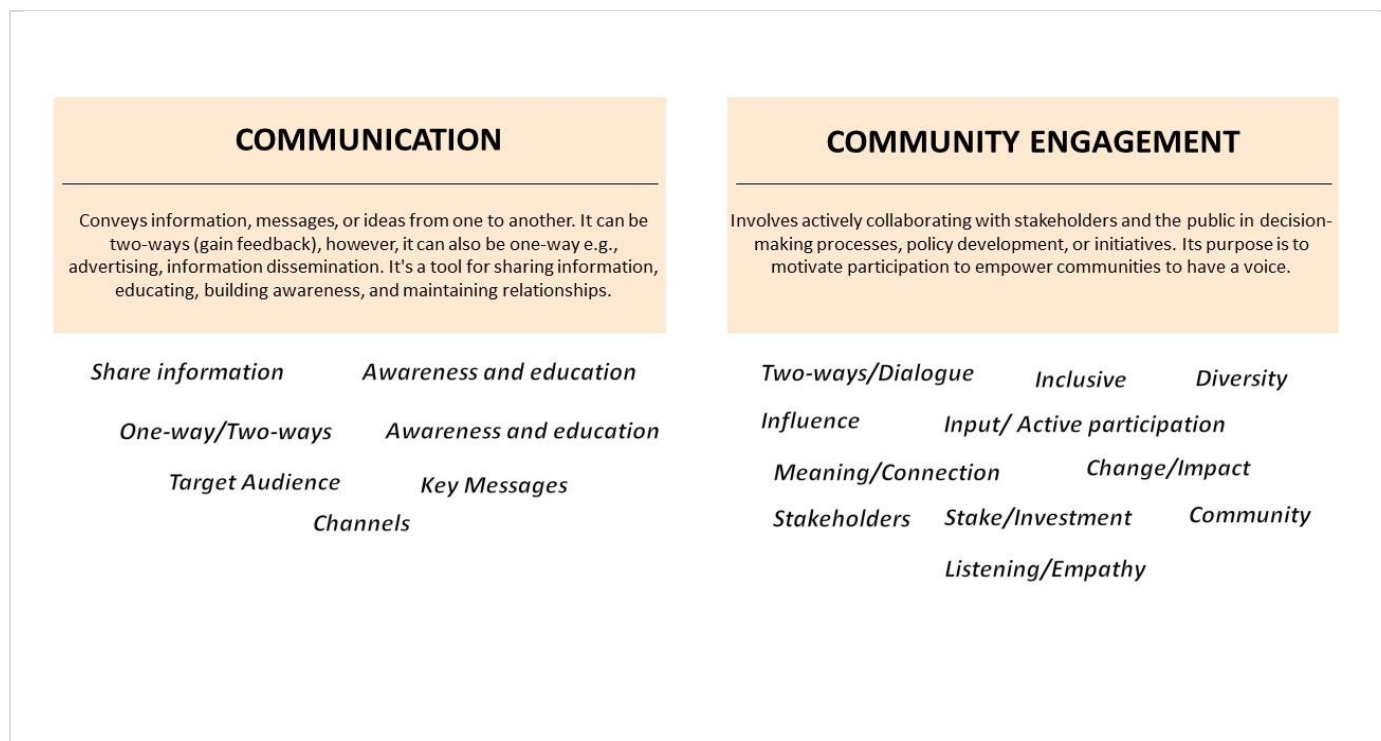
It further considers community engagement as both an outcome and a dynamic process which should result in trust, mobilised resources, and facilitation of sustainable collaborations to achieve better health and well-being outcomes.

Community engagement purpose

Community engagement involves actively collaborating with stakeholders and the public in decision-making processes, policy development or initiatives. Its purpose is to motivate participation, and to empower communities to have a voice.

Community engagement is not just communication with the community and varying audiences. Community focused communication conveys information, messages or ideas from one to another. It is a tool for sharing information, educating, building awareness and maintaining relationships. Community engagement is more comprehensive and interactive, but effective communication is a fundamental component of community engagement.

Figure 11: Community engagement v. communication



¹² <https://iap2.org.au/about-us/about-iap2-australasia>

¹³ <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240010529>

Successful ongoing community engagement leads to ongoing relationships and trust between communities and government, and sustained impact. This in turn creates lasting change and positive outcomes for the community and government as a whole.

Engagement spectrum

The IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum shows the differing levels of participation/community engagement¹⁴. The appropriateness and legitimacy of the nature of the engagement is deemed to be dependent upon the goals, time frames, resources and levels of concern in the decision to be made. In essence, community engagement practices can differ project to project and organisation to organisation; it is fit-for-purpose.

The Public Participation Spectrum ranges from engagement that seeks to 'inform' through to the highest level of engagement that seeks to actively involve the community in the decision-making process and 'empower' the community with the final decision. The spectrum acknowledges that 'empowering' the community is not necessarily the goal of every community engagement process.

Figure 12: IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	Providing the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the problem alternatives opportunities solutions (new programs/services) reasons for choosing the solutions. 	Obtaining public feedback on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> analysis alternatives, or decisions related to new programs/services. 	Working directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that their concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	Partnering with the public in each aspect of the decision-making for new programs/services, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the development of alternatives, and the identification of the preferred solution. 	Placing final decision-making in the hands of the public. <p>Allowing professionals to serve only in consultative and supportive roles.</p>
PROMISES TO THE PUBLIC	Providing updates during implementation.	Proactively informing, listening to and acknowledging concerns and aspirations. <p>Providing updates that how your feedback has influenced decisions.</p>	Ensuring your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternative developed. <p>Providing updates that how your feedback has influenced decisions.</p>	Looking to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions. <p>Incorporating your advice and recommendations into the decision to maximum extent possible.</p>	Implementing what you decide.
FINAL DECISIONS	Made by the professionals	Made by the professionals	Made by the professionals	Made by both the professionals and the public	Made by the public

The only level with a genuine sharing of decision power; Collaborative partnerships established at this level also entail empowerment.

It is not the goal of every engagement to get to the 'empower' stage

The IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum is widely used and commonly quoted in community engagement models in order to formally document the problem definition, scope and goals of a community engagement process.

Stakeholder Circle Methodology

The *Stakeholder Circle*[®] methodology¹⁵ was developed by Mosaic Project Services a specialist project management company also offering training, software tools and governance planning. It has developed a five-step methodology

¹⁴ <https://iap2.org.au/resources/spectrum>

¹⁵ <https://www.stakeholdermapping.com/stakeholder-circle-methodology>

supported by proprietary software to ensure that all stakeholders are considered when planning and managing a project. This methodology provides an approach for defining the stakeholder community, applying the right level of engagement and identifying the information and communication needed to influence each stakeholder's perception, expectations and actions.

The model

The model consists of five steps:

Step	Overview	Process specifics
Identify	Identify all stakeholders (defining their stake and expectations around the project).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing a list of those impacted positively or negatively Incorporates internal stakeholders, core team members and others Stakeholders are categories into 'upwards', 'downwards', 'outwards' and 'sideways' All stakeholders identified are entered into the Stakeholder Circle
Prioritise	Prioritise to determine who is important based on power, proximity and urgency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All stakeholders are assessed and indexed in terms of priority based upon three factors: Power: the power an individual or group may have to permanently change or stop the project Proximity: the degree of involvement that the individual or group has in the work of the team Urgency: the importance of the work or its outcomes, whether positive or negative, to certain stakeholders (their stake), and how prepared they are to act to achieve these outcomes
Visualise	Visualise to understand the overall stakeholder community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ranked list of stakeholders is used to develop a communication plan. The top 15 stakeholders are mapped into a visual diagram to assist in understanding the stakeholder community for that phase of the project.
Engage	Engagement through communications (depending on their level of support and level of receptiveness).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engagement strategies are developed for each stakeholder according to both their prioritisation allocation and their identity allocation. Engagement strategies match back to stakeholder needs and expectations. Development of tailored strategies including messages, audience identification, timing and mechanism.
Monitor	Monitoring the effect of the engagement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reporting on the delivery of the communication plan. Ongoing review of the stakeholder assessment process through the lifecycle of the project and re-assessment of next steps to engagement and communication.

Source: Stakeholder Circle methodology by Mosaic <https://www.stakeholdermapping.com/stakeholder-circle-methodology>

The *Stakeholder Circle*® methodology focuses more on communication strategies rather than community engagement that encompasses two-way dialogue and relationships. It emphasizes three specific types of communication:

- Reporting – Standard communication to report information about the project/engagement to key stakeholders.

- Project Relations e.g., PR, branding, marketing and communicate information about the project/engagement to the wider stakeholder community.
- Directed Comms (specific and delivers on a need) – focused and targeted information to build relationships between the project and the stakeholder community to engage them.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) Approach

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is based upon a framework established by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva¹⁶ in 1987 for use in the fields of organizational management, development and action research. It has since evolved into a process that is widely used and adapted by engagement professionals and facilitators.

It is commonly called a ‘asset-based’ or ‘strengths-based’ approach because it emphasizes positive idea generation over negative problem identification. The model utilizes questions and dialogue to help participants uncover existing assets, strengths, advantages, or opportunities in their communities, organizations, or teams, and then collectively work toward developing and implementing strategies for improvement.

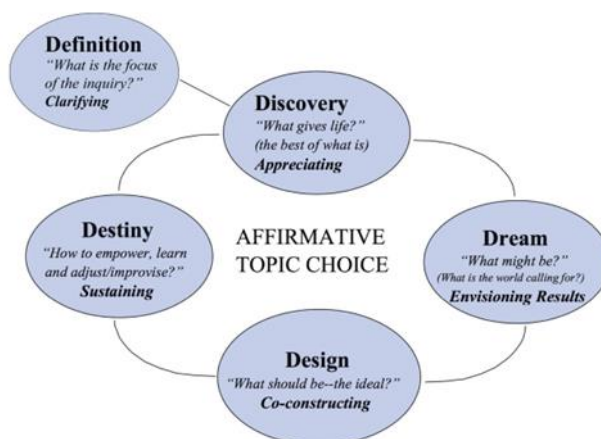
The model

The AI model utilises five steps:

1. **Step 1 - Defining:** Defining the central question or topic of the inquiry, dialogue, or engagement process. It establishes the scope and goals of the inquiry through positive, solutions-oriented approach to defining the process. It starts with positive, asset-based framing questions to determine what’s already working in a community, organization, or team.
2. **Step 2 – Discovery (Appreciating):** Dialogue designed to surface the most positive features of a community. By beginning with positively framed questions, participants discuss and come to appreciate what’s already working.
3. **Step 3 – Dream (Envisioning):** Collaboratively envision a desired future for their community. Asks participants to consciously envision a preferred future that is grounded in past successes but imaginatively and creatively unrestrained.
4. **Step 4 – Design (Co-Constructing):** Start to assemble the practical elements of a plan in the Design stage.
5. **Step 5 – Destiny (Innovating):** Implementation of the collective design. During this phase communities “innovate and improvise ways to create the preferred future by continuously improvising and building AI competencies into the culture,” which includes “noticing and celebrating successes that are moving the system toward the preferred future the organization or group co-created.”

¹⁶ Cooperrider, D. L. & Srivastva, S. (1987). Appreciative inquiry in organizational life. In Woodman, R. W. and Pasmore, W.A. (Eds.), *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, 129–169. Stamford, CT: JAI Press.

Figure 13: Appreciative Inquiry (AI)



Source: <https://organizingengagement.org/models/appreciative-inquiry/>

It is based upon five principles underlying these steps to emphasis the ‘assets-based’ approach:

1. **Constructionist Principle (Words Create Worlds):** Reality, as we know it, is a subjective vs. objective state and is socially created through language and conversations.
2. **Simultaneity Principle (Inquiry Creates Change):** The moment we ask a question, we begin to create a change. The questions we ask are fateful.
3. **Poetic Principle (We Can Choose What We Study):** Teams and organizations, like open books, are endless sources of study and learning. What we choose to study makes a difference. It describes—even creates—the world as we know it.
4. **Anticipatory Principle (Images Inspire Action):** Human systems move in the direction of their images of the future. The more positive and hopeful the image of the future, the more positive the present-day action.
5. **Positive Principle (Positive Questions Lead to Positive Change):** Momentum for small- or large-scale change requires large amounts of positive affect and social bonding. This momentum is best generated through positive questions that amplify the positive core.

ABCD – Asset Based Community Development Approach

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is a place-based framework based upon the work of John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann, founders of the ABCD Institute at Northwestern University¹⁷. It emerged as a critique of deficit-based approaches (negative problem identification) that aim to fill the gaps and fix problems but which can lead to a community feeling disempowered and dependent. Thus ABCD was developed as an ‘assets-based’ or ‘strength-based’ framework that acknowledges that community must be valued as co-producers and feel empowered to participate in the process.

¹⁷ Asset-Based Community Development Institute, <http://www.abcdinstitute.org>

The model

The approach encompasses five steps for gaining Whole Community Mobilisation¹⁸:

1. **Mapping Assets:** identifying and locating assets of the community including the gifts and capacities of individuals, citizen association, local institutions and others attached to the community. The purpose is to identify resources.
2. **Building Relationships:** connecting and building a web of relationships between the community and all identified assets.
3. **Mobilising for Economic Development and Information Sharing:** locating and mobilising all of the skills that can be used for economic development purposes and encouraging other entities and organisations to make their own contributions to the community economy.
4. **Convening the Community to Develop a Vision and a Plan:** establishing a common identity, vision and progressing specific community planning activities.
5. **Leveraging Outside Resources to Support Locally Driven Development:** obtaining additional funding and support from other entities that sit outside of the community to add to the community specific contributions.

The model is less specific about the methodology to implement (as outlined by the steps) and is largely based upon the guiding principles. While the framework has steps associated to it these are provided to assist in guiding the process. The guiding principles of ABCD are:

- **Everyone Has Gifts** with rare exception; people can contribute and want to contribute. Gifts must be discovered.
- **Relationships Build a Community** see them, make them, and utilize them. An intentional effort to build and nourish relationships is the core of ABCD and of all community building.
- **Citizens at the Center**, it is essential to engage the wider community as actors (citizens) not just as recipients of services (clients).
- **Leaders Involve Others as Active Members of the Community.** Leaders from the wider community of voluntary associations, congregations, neighborhoods, and local business, can engage others from their sector. This “following” is based on trust, influence, and relationship.
- **People Care About Something** agencies and neighborhood groups often complain about apathy. Apathy is a sign of bad listening. People in communities are motivated to act. The challenge is to discover what their motivation is.
- **Motivation to Act** must be identified. People act on certain themes they feel strongly about, such as; concerns to address, dreams to realize, and personal talents to contribute. Every community is filled with invisible “motivation for action”. Listen for it.
- **Listening Conversation** – one-on-one dialogue or small group conversations are ways of discovering motivation and invite participation. Forms, surveys and asset maps can be useful to guide intentional listening and relationship building.

¹⁸ <https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/Pages/default.aspx>

- **Ask, Ask, Ask** – asking and inviting are key community-building actions. “Join us. We need you.” This is the song of community.
- **Asking Questions Rather Than Giving Answers Invites Stronger Participation.** People in communities are usually asked to follow outside expert’s answers for their community problems. A more powerful way to engage people is to invite communities to address ‘questions’ and finding their own answer-- with agencies following up to help.
- **A Citizen-Centered “Inside-Out” Organization is the Key to Community Engagement** A “citizen-centered” organization is one where local people control the organization and set the organization’s agenda.
- **Institutions Have Reached Their Limits in Problem-Solving** all institutions such as government, non-profits, and businesses are stretched thin in their ability to solve community problems. They can not be successful without engaging the rest of the community in solutions.
- **Institutions as Servants** people are better than programs in engaging the wider community. Leaders in institutions have an essential role in community-building as they lead by “step by step”.

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Case study – Australian Bureau of Statistics

Organisation overview

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) is Australia's national statistical agency and an official source of independent, reliable information. Its purpose is to inform Australia's important decisions by delivering relevant, trusted and objective data, statistics and insights²⁰. High quality statistics are underpinned by high participation in ABS survey processes and as such it is essential that barriers to participation are removed.

The Census is the most comprehensive snapshot of the country and tells the story of how Australia and its people are changing. In 2021, it included almost 11 million households and over 25 million people. It had a response rate of 96.1% up from 95.1% at the 2016 Census. To make sure everyone who is in Australia on Census day is counted for the 2021 Census, inclusive strategies were designed for groups who faced barriers to taking part in the Census, focusing on (1) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across urban, regional and remote areas of Australia, (2) people from CALD communities, including international students, (3) people experiencing homelessness, and (4) people who prefer to get Census assistance in person.

The ABS employs around 3,500 permanent staff and has a flexible workforce pool engaged around key activities such as Census.

²⁰ [ABS purpose \(transparency.gov.au\)](https://www.abs.gov.au/abspurpose)

Resource model

Given the size and scope of varying activities being undertaken by the ABS across all programs, there is no single model being applied for community engagement.

The range of community engagement approaches used by the ABS include:

- Having a dedicated community engagement division for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- A community engagement team with multiple audience focus areas.
- Partnering with cultural and target audience organisations.
- Large-scale event specific employment of staff to engage around key initiatives and events. For example, the 2021 Census incorporated over 35,000 staff of all types.

Strategic approach to community engagement

For the 2021 Census, the ABS adopted a user-centered approach for all interactions with the Australian public. The ABS adapted the approach in accordance to public needs and sought to address many barriers to completing the Census.

There was clear acknowledgement that there are parts of Australia and smaller population groups that are harder to reach and motivate to engage in the Census. Additional supports and special strategies were built in to ensure an inclusive and accessible Census. A dedicated user-experience team developed these strategies through a combination of lessons learned from past Census experiences, information gathered from engaging with stakeholders and user-centred design activities.

This team developed specific community engagement strategies for the audiences of:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across urban, regional and remote areas of Australia
- people from CALD communities, including international students
- people experiencing homelessness
- people who prefer to get Census assistance in person.

Each strategy provided different types of support for each community, depending on their needs. The support could include tailored communication, extra engagement within the community and direct support, including providing multilingual staff where needed. In early 2021, 60 Census Engagement Managers were employed by the ABS who were assigned one of these population groups for a specific region. Their role was to enact the strategy for that population through extensive engagement with the respective communities. They included establishing contacts for the Census Collection period, promoting inclusion in the Census, emphasising its importance and providing guidance on where to find help for these communities.

Target audience activities

Key activities being undertaken by the ABS for the 2021 Census are outlined in the table below:

Table 13: Audience specific action undertaken by the ABS

Approach	Audience specific actions
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples	<p>Direct engagement with 1,826 organisations.</p> <p>Training of 24 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff members as media spokespeople.</p> <p>Recruitment of Census engagement staff directly from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.</p> <p>Recruitment of 1,530 community field staff to conduct interviews to fill in especially designed forms.</p> <p>Partnered with Tangentyere Aboriginal Corporation which provided valuable insights to the 2021 Census 'remote expert' advisory group, and ultimately led and collected information from all the Alice Springs town camps.</p> <p>Partnered with Nyamba Buru Yawuru organisation in Broome, Western Australia, to support local residents. They reached out to their network of elders to offer assistance, and directly supported Census field officers in walking the beat of Broome streets during the Follow-Up phase, thus ensuring a more accurate count.</p>
People from CALD backgrounds	<p>Direct engagement with 900 CALD organisations.</p> <p>Identification and establishment of 15 ABS media spokespeople speaking 17 different languages</p> <p>340 CALD fill in the form sessions. More than 100 fill in the form sessions were offered at community centres like libraries to support participants one-on-one to complete the Census, attracting members of the CALD community.</p> <p>400 Census engagement staff recruited from diverse communities with a representation of 25% of field staff self-identifying as speaking a language other than English.</p> <p>Development of social media tiles in 29 languages shared directly with communities.</p> <p>Establishment of the Translating and Interpreting Service who received over 17,000 calls.</p> <p>Development of an Easy Read Guide to the Census which received over 4,000 views.</p> <p>Targeted initiatives such as an Arabic virtual information session was conducted in conjunction with the SydWest Multicultural Services, with a great question and answer session.</p> <p>The Census Lesson Guides for CALD communities were distributed to educational institutions in all states and territories to be integrated into their curriculum</p>
People experiencing homelessness	<p>Created strong relationships with a range of stakeholders through the Homelessness Strategy, involving all levels of government, peak homelessness bodies and a wide range of service providers.</p> <p>Employed 600 engagement and field staff for the Homelessness Strategy. Many of these were from the homelessness sector or had previous experience working in the homelessness sector.</p> <p>Reached people experiencing homelessness depending on where they were staying, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> employed workers in homelessness shelters to help their residents to participate had roving teams offering interviews to rough sleepers on a special short form worked with targeted accommodation providers such as hotels, motels and caravan parks had a youth ambassador program that targeted schools to explain to students experiencing homelessness why they should participate in the Census and how. <p>Produced a range of homelessness communications materials, such as posters, fact sheets, videos and social media tiles to educate them on how to accurately fill in the 'usual address' question so that their situation was accurately recorded.</p>

Source: <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/about-census/delivering-2021-census>

[Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement | Australian Bureau of Statistics \(abs.gov.au https://www.abs.gov.au/census/about-census/delivering-2021-census/story-3-inclusive-census\)](https://www.abs.gov.au/census/about-census/delivering-2021-census/story-3-inclusive-census)

Key summary of outcomes and learnings

The dedicated effort to reducing barriers to participation led to an increase in participation rates of +1.0% upon the 2016 Census with an overall response rate in 2021 of 96.1% of the Australian population. Additionally, other accolades recognise the improved outcomes of engagement including winning the 'Government Website of the Year 2021' in the Australian Access Awards in acknowledgement of being the most accessible Census to date. Furthermore, the Census Digital Service was heralded as 'world class' for its support of accessibility for people with disabilities through its thorough application of the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\) 2.0 AA](#).

Some key learnings and observations of the ABS Census approach highlight success factors of:

- **Engagement needs dedicated consideration and planning.** The ABS had a team to design inclusive strategies, which were developed through a combination of: (1) lessons learned from past Census experiences, (2) information gathered from engaging with stakeholders, and (3) user-centred design activities.
- **Engagement strategy implementation requires dedicated management.** The ABS employed nearly 60 Census Engagement Managers in early 2021, who were assigned one of these population groups for a specific region.
- **Tailoring is essential.** This team developed special strategies to ensure an inclusive and accessible Census included tailored communication and targeted engagement, such as providing multilingual staff where needed.
- **Boots-on-the ground is important.** The ABS undertook 300 pop-up hubs across the country to provide accessible, face-to-face support to members of the public as well as ensuring representation in the army of field staff attending communities.
- **Engagement was continual.** There is an ongoing effort between Census periods to focus on improvement including the nature of the topics to be included. For example, there were more than 450 submissions received through the ABS Consultation Hub ²¹from all levels of government, academia, community and advocacy groups, industry bodies, businesses and individuals on new topics. The consultation hub includes the feedback on what was asked, to who, the feedback and the resulting action. It also included testing. This included focus groups and cognitive testing including with special forms for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities people experiencing homelessness.

²¹ Story 6: Ensuring relevant and high-quality data | Australian Bureau of Statistics (abs.gov.au)