



OFFICE OF THE
Auditor General
of British Columbia

Public Participation

Principles and Best Practices for British Columbia

What is Meant by “Public Participation” and Why Does it Warrant Attention?

When a government reaches out to industry, other organizations or directly to citizens, it is said to be engaging in public participation, sometimes known as consultation or engagement. Typically, those taking part in the process are lobbyists, interest groups and citizens who are most likely to be affected by the matter under consideration.

“Getting public participation right is essential, including striking the right balance amongst competing priorities of government; being clear to the public about what can and what cannot be accomplished in the short term. Getting it wrong simply frustrates all participants — government and the public — and requires time to rebuild the trust required to engage successfully.”

- John Doyle, Auditor General of British Columbia



Where Can Organizations Start in Defining Their Approach to Public Participation?

Organizations that are strong in conducting public participation commonly adopt a set of principles. This ensures that a common set of values characterize any public participation effort, while permitting the flexibility necessary to cater to the range of public participation settings. Outlined below are examples of commonly used principles for engaging in public participation:

Authenticity

The decision has not been made and the decision-maker commits to be influenced to a specific level that will be communicated in advance.

Accountability

The decision-maker will demonstrate that results and outcomes are consistent with the commitment that was made to stakeholder groups and the public at the outset of the initiative.

Inclusiveness

The decision-maker will make every reasonable effort to include the stakeholder groups and the public affected by the pending decision.

Transparency

The decision-maker will ensure that stakeholder groups and the public that are affected understand the scope of the pending decision, the decision process and procedures, and any constraints facing the decision-maker.

Commitment

The decision-maker will provide appropriate time and resources to ensure that those involved can participate in a meaningful way.

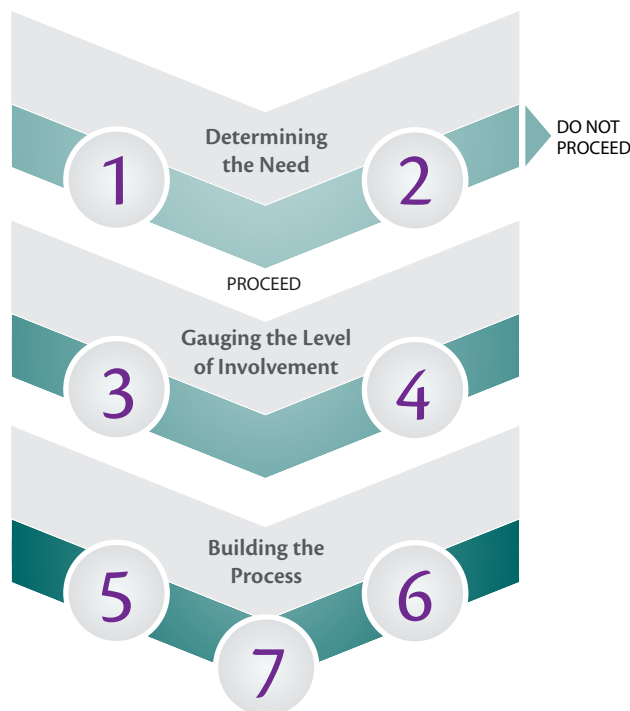
Integrity

The decision-maker will address public and stakeholder group concerns in an honest and forthright way.

Should I be Using Public Participation?

To determine whether public participation should form part of the decision-making process and to what extent, one can use the following seven step process. This approach was derived from existing best practices in the province's public sector, and in governments across Canada and around the world. The steps are contained in three main categories:

- determining the need for public participation, in light of the decision being sought;
- gauging the level of involvement best suited to the decision at hand; and
- building a successful public participation process.



- 1 Determine who the decision-maker is, what the pending decision is and who will be affected.
- 2 Decide if public participation should be used.
- 3 Determine the issues related to the decision for each of the affected parties.
- 4 Determine the level of public participation that the decision-maker needs and what to consult on.
- 5 Determine the public participation methods best suited to the needs of participants.
- 6 Determine how public participation is to support and link to the decision.
- 7 Determine how the results are to be used.

The above steps are described in more detail on the following pages.

Step 1 | Determine who the decision-maker is, what the pending decision is and who will be affected.

Look at who may be affected and identify not only organizations but also groups of people and their appropriate representatives. Consider how and when the general public could be impacted by a decision and be proactive in inviting their input.

There are several steps in doing this:

- identify the ultimate decision-maker;
- draft a statement describing the pending decision and list the intended and unintended effects of the decision;
- identify the people or groups that will be affected by the decision; and
- determine the impacts and the significances of these impacts for each group (positive and negative, direct and indirect).



Step 2 | Decide if public participation should be used.

This step is the deciding factor in determining if public participation is necessary. In some cases, public participation is mandated or court-ordered. While this framework is designed for situations when participation is voluntary, it can still be used as a guide alongside the required steps if you are dealing with mandated or court-ordered participation.

The following are four examples of situations where public participation is voluntary, but recommended:

1) There is potential for the public to be significantly affected.

Citizens and organizations should be consulted if a government decision will considerably affect them. Research shows Canadians increasingly expect to be consulted on decisions that impact them.

2) Government has made a previous commitment to openness and transparency on the issue.

When the government has made a public promise to use its decision-making powers openly, and to involve interested and affected parties before making its decision.

3) Unknown public perceptions and other information gaps exist.

When information about the perceptions and values of citizens and organizations is required prior to making a decision.

4) Controversy around the issue or decision exists.

For decisions involving controversy of sufficient magnitude, or where it is sufficiently valuable to engage in public participation.

Gauging the Level of Involvement

The following illustration, which has particular relevance to step four, shows the range of public participation opportunities that may exist along with the related objectives and the types of commitments that are being made.

Determine the Level of Participation

LEVEL 1
Low level of public participation and influence



Inform or Educate

LEVEL 2



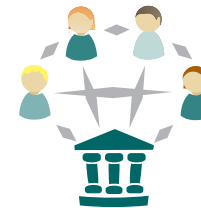
Gather Information

LEVEL 3
Mid level of public participation and influence



Discuss

LEVEL 4



Engage

LEVEL 5
High level of public participation and influence



Partner

Share the Objective of the Public Participation

	Inform	Listen	Discuss	Engage	Partner
OBJECTIVE	To provide balanced and objective information to support understanding by the public	To obtain feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions	To work with the public to ensure that concerns and aspirations are understood and considered	To facilitate discussions and agreements between public parties to identify common ground for action and solutions	To create governance structures to delegate decision-making and/or work directly with the public

Publicize the Commitment Level

	Inform	Listen	Discuss	Engage	Partner
COMMITMENT	To inform the public	To listen to and acknowledge the public's concerns	To work with the public to exchange information, ideas and concerns	To seek advice and innovations from and amongst various public parties	To work with the public to implement agreed-upon decisions

Source: Adapted from Health Canada and International Association of Public Participation

Step 3 | Determine the issues related to the decision for each of the affected parties.

Having established that public participation would be appropriate for the decision at hand, the next step is to determine how issues relating to the decision are viewed by:

- the decision-maker; and
- the public and stakeholder groups.

Understanding the history of issues relating to a particular decision from the perspective of both the decision-maker and interested or affected parties is paramount. One way to determine how each of the affected or interested parties view issues relating to the pending decision is to ask them, using any of a range of methods, including, for example interviews, focus groups and surveys.

Step 4 | Determine the level of public participation that the decision-maker needs and what to consult on.

Assess and document the public participation requirements of the decision-maker. The decision making organization must confirm:

- the type and amount of information needed to support decision-making; and
- the form that information must take in order to be credible and of use in influencing decision-making.

This process involves three stages:

- Determine the level of participation.
- Share the objective of the public participation.
- Publicize the commitment level.



Step 5 | Determine the public participation methods best suited to the needs of participants.

Productive participation depends on the decision-maker's ability to create an environment that allows for meaningful dialogue. Such environments are created by designing participation processes that meet the needs of those involved. Matters to consider include:

- What are the social and cultural considerations for those participating?
- Are there issues of timing for those participating?
- What opportunities or limitations exist for the use of technology?

Step 6 | Determine how public participation is to support and link to the decision.

Public participation efforts support decision-making when they provide timely information at key decision points. Knowing what information should flow to maintain dialogue to the level promised is a significant challenge.

A decision-maker needs to consider:

- the milestones or key decision points of the project;
- the objectives to be achieved for each milestone; and
- the process of participating with the public.

The following table illustrates the links between the steps of a generic decision-making process, the public participation objective for each and possible tools to support each milestone.

Steps in Decision-Making Process	Objectives of Participation	Examples of Participation Tools
Identify the problem and decision needed	To understand background and decision to be made	Press release, website announcement
Undertake research	To receive information about issues to be addressed	Issue paper, presentation
Establish decision parameters/performance objectives	To understand decision parameters and performance objectives	Open house, public meeting
Develop options	To discuss issues along with concerns and contribute to potential solutions	Workshops, online forums
Evaluate options	To receive feedback on options	Survey, telephone interviews
Decide	To communicate decision and how participation inputs were used	Letter, website announcement

Source: International Association of Public Participation

Step 7 | Determine how the results are to be used.

Knowing from the beginning how public participation results will be collected and analyzed, and how the results will be used to show the public their views have been heard, is key to the design of the process.

A decision-maker needs to consider how:

- public input will be recorded and analyzed;
- the decision-maker will consider public input; and
- the public will know they have been heard.

Communicating the impact of participation to stakeholder groups and the public is one of the greatest weaknesses in public participation processes. It is important to manage expectations throughout the public participation process in two ways by explaining:

- what opportunities exist to influence the decision-maker; and
- how the public participation will affect and has affected the final decision.

Confirming that participants were heard and their views were considered is the most effective approach to minimizing public resistance to government decision-making. With a greater degree of public acceptance comes a higher likelihood that the decision will be successful.

For further information on public participation, including an illustrative example, please see the report titled *Public Participation: Principles and Best Practices for British Columbia* available for download from <http://www.bcauditor.com>



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