

2020

# **Public Engagement at Veterans Affairs Canada: Departmental Framework**

Stakeholder Engagement and Outreach

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## Background and Context

In December 2019, the mandate letter for the Minister of Veterans Affairs named public engagement as a priority. The mandate letter<sup>1</sup> notes that it is the responsibility of the Minister to “substantively engage with Canadians, civil society and stakeholders...You must be proactive in ensuring that a broad array of voices provides you with advice, in both official languages, from every region of the country.” Further, one of the central roles of Veterans Affairs Canada is to “listen to the suggestions of Veterans, their representatives and stakeholders to guide work and research, and strive to design and deliver programs that meet the modern and changing needs of Veterans and their families.”<sup>2</sup>

Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) has had an increased emphasis on engagement and consultation with stakeholders since 2015. At that time, the Government of Canada established a commitment to create open government with greater transparency and accountability, including and encouraging constructive dialogue.

## Purpose

The Departmental Framework for Public Engagement aims to strengthen engagement and outreach at VAC by providing guidance that promotes effectiveness and best practices, and allows for flexibility to address varying needs for conducting engagement.

The Framework serves to foster a culture of public engagement across the organization as VAC continues to enhance engagement practices and leverage new technologies and innovative opportunities (in line with the Government of Canada Digital Standards<sup>3</sup>) to engage with the stakeholder community and Canadians at large. The Framework also provides a foundation to build a coordinated approach to sharing intelligence gained from engagement opportunities across the department.

## Scope

Under the Open Government initiative<sup>4</sup>, there is a commitment to support greater inclusion and diversity in public engagement processes. VAC recognizes that Veterans are a unique and diverse population with different needs, experiences and perspectives, and understands that different aspects of a person’s identity can interact to affect their experience of VAC initiatives. These perspectives, needs and interests should be included in decision-making processes to promote sustainable decision-making. VAC’s Gender Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) Action Plan will help inform this work.

VAC’s public engagement must be aware of biases at both the individual and institutional level, and underscore the importance of engaging early and throughout an initiative’s lifecycle which in turn will enable to reflect the diversity and complexity of all stakeholders.

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<sup>1</sup> Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence Mandate Letter, 2019. [2019 Mandate letter](#)

<sup>2</sup> Veterans Affairs Canada Mandate and Role. [Mandate and Role](#)

<sup>3</sup> Government of Canada Digital Standards. [Digital Standards](#)

<sup>4</sup> Government of Canada Open Government: [Open Dialogue | Open Government, Government of Canada](#)

## Defining Public Engagement

Facilitating the involvement of the public can inform and improve public policy. Obtaining such involvement allows government to make decisions that are responsive to the needs and will of the public. Effective public engagement ensures that the public is involved in the appropriate way at the correct time.

Generally, public engagement includes planned two-way discussions with individuals, organizations or groups, external to the Government of Canada, designed to gather input, clarify information and foster understanding among those interested and affected by an issue, decision or action to better inform the VAC decision-making process. Public engagement may consist of a wide array of activities that range from consulting the public to empowering the public to make decisions on issues that affect them. Public opinion research (POR) is an environmental analysis activity whereby the objective is one-way data collection of opinions, attitudes, perceptions, judgements, feelings, ideas, reactions or views.

If the activity that is to be undertaken is POR, the approach is different than that of public engagement as per the [\*Directive on the Management of Communication\*](#). Additionally, if the input that is being sought to inform decision-making is through an established external advisory group<sup>5</sup>, the advisory group mandate applies.

Note that the term “stakeholder” is used throughout this document as this has been generally accepted as the language used to define this group within public engagement. However, in recent years, there has been a move to shift away from this term as it is linked to a history of colonization<sup>6</sup>. As we move forward, we will adapt to use language that is inclusive and reflects best practices in the public engagement field.

## The Continuum of Public Engagement

The spectrum of engagement is wide and is directly related to the overall intent of the engagement. The scope and breadth of public engagement are determined through a careful analysis of the project.

Public engagement is based on three foundations: decision-oriented, values-based, and goal-driven<sup>7</sup>:

**Decision-oriented:** Engagement should be oriented toward making a decision, and a decision statement should be clearly defined at the outset of the process. This will help define the scope of issues under discussion and help reach a conclusion.

**Values-based:** Engagement should be meaningful, and focused on talking to the public about what matters most to them and what matters most to the organization.

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<sup>5</sup> An advisory group is established by the Minister of Veterans Affairs Canada to provide advice on specific matters within the scope of its mandate. All members, with the exception of a VAC co-chair, are external to the federal government and provide advice as a group, and not as individuals or representatives of an organization.

<sup>6</sup> International Association for Public Participation (2020). *Planning for Effective Public Participation Course*. Toronto, Ontario. November 25-27, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> International Association for Public Participation (2016). “Planning for Effective Public Participation.”

**Goal-driven:** Engagement should clearly communicate the scope of the public's role and ability to influence the decision, while outlining clear objectives of what will be accomplished.

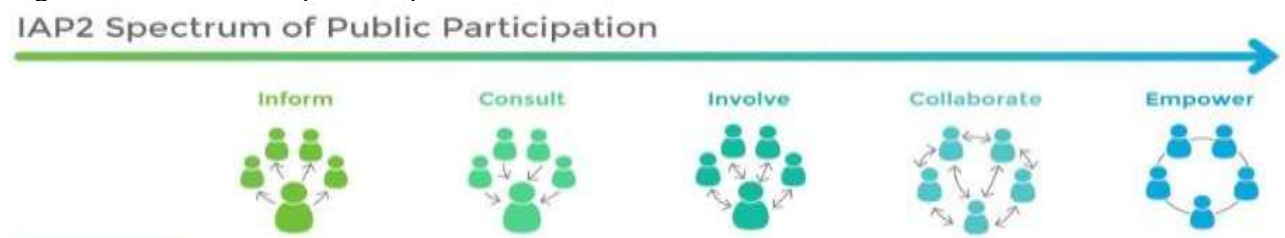
## The Public Engagement Spectrum

The public engagement process begins with a decision statement, which is used to focus and sum up the intent of the project with a tangible timeframe, decision-maker, and intent. From this decision statement, objectives and outcomes can be determined defining where the project falls on the spectrum of public engagement. Once objectives and outcomes are defined, the tools and techniques for public engagement can be explored with the project lead.

### Public Engagement Path

The spectrum of public participation outlines the commitment the organization is making to the public<sup>8</sup>.

Figure 1: Public Participation Spectrum



**Inform** -To provide the public with balanced and objective information.

**Consult**- To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.

**Involve**- To work directly with the public throughout the process.

**Collaborate**- To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision.

**Empower**- To place final decision making in the hands of the public.

<sup>8</sup> A 'Spectrum of Public Participation' is outlined below which demonstrates what is involved at each level. Permission obtained from International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) to reproduce information.

## Guiding Principles of Public Engagement

The following principles<sup>9</sup> guide VAC engagement activities, ensuring that they are meaningful, effective, and consistent.

**Open and Inclusive:** Engagement activities are designed and promoted to provide the opportunity for all interested participants to express their views and have their input considered. Considerations should be given to ensure that the voices of under-represented groups is also heard. Engagement activities are available to participants through a variety of channels and formats to ensure there are no barriers to participation.

**Timely and Transparent:** The purpose, scope and objective(s) of engagement activities should be clearly communicated and planned with adequate timelines to provide participants with sufficient time to participate. The results of engagement activities, and how input was considered in decision-making, is made available to participants through different channels, in easy to access formats, and in a timely manner to ensure accountability.

**Relevant, Responsive and Adaptable:** Engagement activities are topic and participant-focused. The materials developed to facilitate engagement activities are appropriate to meet the objectives and is respectful of participant diversity. This may involve adapting the approach based on feedback from participants in the early stages of engagement activities, and regularly applying best practices and lessons learned to public engagement planning and implementation.

## Successful Public Engagement at VAC

Successful public engagement at Veterans Affairs Canada includes:

- Defining the purpose with clear objectives and expected results that support and promote productive relationships with all partners and stakeholders;
- Increased communication with and between stakeholders on all aspects of well-being;
- Bringing together VAC's internal and external stakeholders for ongoing public engagement to inform evidence-based decision making that supports VAC priorities;
- Engagement of diverse community partners and stakeholders, including the general public;
- Engagement activities conducted by all areas of the department are shared collectively to continuously foster a culture of collaboration;
- Effective and modern communication technologies, innovative tools and practices are supported and applied by all sectors of the department;
- Processes and tools used for public engagement are consistently evaluated;
- Improved alignment of VAC's engagement activities with stakeholder issues and interests, creating opportunities to involve and empower stakeholders to influence and contribute to overall well-being of Veterans and their families; and

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<sup>9</sup> Adapted from Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada – Guidelines on Public Engagement. [Public Health Agency-Guidelines for Public Engagement](#)

- Results and recommendations from public engagement inform and contribute to evidence-based decision making in accordance with departmental priorities.

## Stakeholder Engagement and Outreach: VAC's Public Engagement Hub

Stakeholder Engagement and Outreach team will act as a Public Engagement Hub to support engagement processes across the department. This role would include determining best practices for planning and executing engagements, offering expert advice and guidance, and supporting the project lead through the use of tools and templates.

The central priorities are outlined below:

### Public Engagement Hub Priorities

- Share and leverage best practices in consultations and Public Opinion Research
- Enhance opportunities to include public input in departmental initiatives and projects
- Foster collaboration and innovation in public engagement
- Promote consistency in reporting and communicating internally and externally
- Enhance departmental capacity to conduct consultations

### Collaborative Internal Partnerships Collaboration: Everyone Has a Role to Play

Stakeholder Engagement and Outreach (Public Engagement Hub) supports the whole Department, collaborating with various areas of the Department, each of whom have a role to play in outreach and engagement.

**Communications**  
**Policy**  
**Field Operations**  
**Service Delivery**  
**CAF/RCMP**  
**OMVAC**

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<sup>10</sup> Adapted from Department of Fisheries and Oceans 2019 Deck "Public Engagement: Consultations and Public Opinion Research"

## Conclusion

Public engagement at VAC will provide a stronger understanding of Veterans' and families' needs and perspectives while ensuring that departmental priorities are aligned to support Veteran and family well-being.

By offering opportunities for increased and more efficient engagement with stakeholders, VAC will help foster a better-informed Veteran community.

Stronger public engagement with the Veteran community will also support the Government of Canada's Open Government commitment to greater transparency, accountability, and stakeholder engagement.



# Appendices

## Appendix A – Public Engagement Glossary

### Consultation

An open, planned, two-way engagement process that seeks direct participation from the public or specific stakeholders to inform departmental decisions about policies, programs, services, and legislative and regulatory initiatives.

Consultations can take place through one or more platforms. Some collection techniques are as follows:

- online surveys or questionnaires, open/public requests for comment and feedback forms
- discussion papers or calls for submissions
- discussion groups, in-person meetings, or interactive tools

### Public Opinion Research

Public opinion research (POR)<sup>11</sup> is the planned, one-way systematic collection of opinion-based information from the public, private individuals, and representatives of businesses or other entities by or for the Government of Canada.

POR uses quantitative or qualitative methods and techniques to provide insight and support decision making. Some collection techniques are as follows:

- online research panels
- virtual or in-person focus groups or mini-groups
- in-depth or intercept interviews
- telephone, mail, online or electronic surveys, and surveys that use other means

POR activities include designing and testing methods to collect data; data collection itself including sampling, data entry, coding; primary data analysis; and convening and managing online panels.

### Public Engagement

Public engagement is a process that invites the public to be involved in problem solving or decision making and uses public input to make sustainable decisions. Public engagement occurs across a spectrum with different levels of engagement corresponding to the involvement of the public in the decision making process.

Public engagement enables the government to take into account the public's views, concerns, ideas and proposals in the development or assessment of government policies, programs, services and initiatives.

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<sup>11</sup> What is Public Opinion Research? [Treasury Board Secretariat Services-Public Opinion Research](#)

## **Outreach**

Outreach is predominantly “information out” in that it is more closely identified with the first level of engagement. It is not a two-way exchange of information and ideas. Often, people use the term “consultation” when they really mean “outreach” or vice versa.<sup>12</sup>

## **Stakeholder/Impacted Parties/Public**

Individuals, groups or organizations external to the Government of Canada who have a specific interest in, have some influence on, or are affected by, a given policy, program, initiative or service of a specific Government of Canada department/agency, namely VAC.