

# Case Studies Series 2021

Core Values Awards 2021 Entry

## Case Study 1: Wilcannia Weir Replacement Project – throwing out the rule book for genuine partnerships



Wilcannia and the Darling Baaka River (above) and the new weir location (below)

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## Highlights at a glance

- WaterNSW is designing a consultation program with the Aboriginal community for the Aboriginal community - one that is unique, inclusive, respectful, and targeted for the specific cultural practices of the Barkandji nation.
- WaterNSW is the state's bulk water supplier and river operator and supplies two-thirds of water used in the state to regional towns, irrigators, Sydney Water and local water utilities
- The key objectives of the Wilcannia Weir engagement are to re-establish trust with the Wilcannia community and co-design effective consultation during the planning phase of the project, prior to environmental approvals being sought and construction commencing. The aim is to achieve better social, economic, environmental, and cultural outcomes for the community of Wilcannia and to enhance WaterNSW engagement benchmarks and project delivery.
- IAP2 spectrum level - Collaborate
- State engagement method/s and sequence –public meetings, targeted community sessions and meetings, workshops, training course implementation and delivery, participatory decision making.
- Three key outcomes showing impact of engagement: 1) Partnerships established with local and peak Aboriginal groups in Wilcannia 2) Training in construction to maximise local participation and 3) A model being recognised by other agencies for delivering outcomes at a local level.
- Three key engagement takeaways: 1) Think outside of the square to create alternative approaches and solutions. We can't achieve meaningful outcomes if communities aren't at the centre, identifying the benefits that will mean the most. 2) Listen, learn, adapt, deliver together and 3) Acknowledgement and ownership of past failures and wrongs and has allowed us to embark on an ambitious program to engage with the community in meaningful and genuine ways. Fundamental to the success of this is an acknowledgement that standard engagement approaches and techniques may not be culturally appropriate.

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**Key search words: Aboriginal engagement, participatory decision making, training partnership**

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## 1.0 Introduction



WaterNSW is designing and constructing a new weir for Wilcannia on behalf of the New South Wales and Australian Governments under the Sustainable Rural Water Use and Infrastructure program. A dedicated project team is undertaking the environmental assessment for the new weir so the project can progress to the construction phase by the end of 2021.

This case study presents the outcomes of the initial phase of WaterNSW's Wilcannia Weir Replacement Project and seeks to share with the engagement sector the significant and transformative outcomes that can be achieved by working with Aboriginal communities in genuinely collaborative ways.

Through this case study we will demonstrate the importance of codesigning engagement approaches with Aboriginal communities and forming partnerships to deliver engagement initiatives together on the ground. Fundamental to the success is an acknowledgement that standard engagement approaches and techniques may not be culturally appropriate and a high degree of adaptability, agility, and desire to listen and learn from our First Nations peoples is required to achieve genuine outcomes.

Our team is leading robust and wholistic engagement with the Barkandji nation and Wilcannia community to achieve better outcomes for the community and enhance WaterNSW project delivery. At the heart of this are the social, cultural, environmental, and economic benefits and outcomes being supported through the delivery of the project. This includes building a strong framework that has positioned the project to maximise these community benefits in subsequent delivery phases.

The project includes an integrated training and employment program that is a first of its kind as well as innovative engagement of the youth sector and partnerships with cultural facilitators from the community to support on ground delivery. These are explored in more detail throughout this case study.

Underpinning all our engagement activities is a bold commitment to building lasting relationships with the Wilcannia community rather than a focus on tokenistic metrics. We are positioning the Wilcannia community at the centre and maintaining a consistency of connection. The hope is that this connection continues beyond the completion of the physical asset, as it creates a better model for government infrastructure projects moving forward that are based on relationships of trust and cultural respect.

**“We pay our respects to the Barkandji Nation and elders past, present and emerging. They hold the memories, traditions, cultures and hopes of the First Nations of this country.”**

## 2.0 Background



The township of Wilcannia is approximately 950 kilometres northwest of Sydney and approximately 200 kilometres northeast of the nearest city, Broken Hill. The township of Wilcannia is located on the Darling Baaka River in western NSW within the Central Darling Shire local government area and comprises the principal township of Wilcannia with a population of approximately 800 and several smaller communities.

Wilcannia has a relatively young population and there will be a growing need for housing and jobs in the future. Wilcannia's Aboriginal incomes are significantly lower compared to the NSW average, with the median Aboriginal income around a half that of the non-Aboriginal median in NSW. The unemployment rate in 2011 was 24 percent compared to 6 percent among non-Aboriginal adults in NSW, which is often stated as one of the major challenges facing the community. The community of Wilcannia experiences a significant social disadvantage and scores in the 2nd percentile under the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Socio Economic Indices for Areas (SEIFA) for communities in New South Wales.

Wilcannia has a large Aboriginal community, within the traditional tribal home of the Barkandji people who sustain a continuing spiritual relationship to the river (Barkandji meaning "people of the river"). The community experiences severe social and economic disadvantage.

WaterNSW, as the state's bulk water supplier and river operator, was asked by the NSW Government to design and construct a new weir for Wilcannia on behalf of the NSW and Federal governments. The WaterNSW project includes three phases as outlined below, with the project currently concluded major Phase 1 milestones:

## Engaging with the community on Wilcannia Weir



## The project

The Wilcannia Weir was constructed in 1942 for the purpose of providing a more reliable town water supply for Wilcannia. Water levels have decreased as a result of development activities since the weir was built, causing the river to be altered and removed from the community of Wilcannia.

The new weir will provide long-term town water supplies to preserve and enhance the social, economic and environmental benefits for Wilcannia, its people and its surrounds.

The new weir aims to deliver a range of benefits including:

- Improved water security for Wilcannia
- Enhanced cultural connection to the river
- Improved water management of the weir pool
- Increased tourism opportunities and investment
- Better recreational amenity to walk, swim, picnic and fish
- Improved native fish migration

## Consultation history and challenges

As river people, any asset or operations that impacts the Baaka (Darling) River always has been, and will always be, of key importance to this community. The WaterNSW Wilcannia Weir project is being delivered in the context of a long history of government inaction on the weir, with feedback from the community that they have experienced 30 years of poor consultation, indecisiveness, report writing and delays. Previous consultation targeted certain family groups within the community and excluded others leading to anger and mistrust.

Thorough research and a discovery period with those other agencies who had previous interactions with the Wilcannia community on the weir was important, as was detailed introductory discussions with key Wilcannia stakeholders to hear first-hand of their frustrations.

Key challenges include a long legacy of government consultation where the community were not involved in the codesign and as a result did not see tangible outcomes. Meaningful engagement on this project is a long journey that requires a deconstruction of existing communication methods and modes of delivery and must be grounded in a commitment to engage in meaningful and genuine ways. This approach takes time and is better not rushed. It also requires the WaterNSW team to be innovative, flexible, creative, and organic and this is not always easy to plan and prepare for.

It is also important to note that community members are often dealing with the legacy of multi-generational systemic failure, and social and economic stress and trauma. This means the project team need to have a level of empathy and skill to negotiate people's frustration, pain, and anger. It also means acknowledgement and ownership of past failures and wrongs, coupled with a willingness and open heartedness to change, and make new pathways.

At the initial meetings with Wilcannia stakeholders there was considerable emotion and anger. After listening to this, and acknowledging this, our response was to ask the community and elders how they would like us to engage with them and invite them to work with us to develop our engagement approach. The message was very clear that we need to listen and continue to check in and adapt and revise our plans, to make sure engagement stays culturally targeted and appropriate. The team understand that collaboration and buy-in is needed with elders and key community groups to inform the project planning and delivery. We can't achieve meaningful outcomes if communities aren't at the centre, identifying the benefits that will mean the most.

[A Wilcannia Weir Project video](#) that was made at the end of 2020 captures the Wilcannia community sentiment on the importance of their ongoing and spiritual connection to the river, and the engagement approach developed together with WaterNSW.

## Codesigning for Wilcannia community

It was clear after the first public information session there was a strong need for our engagement to be inclusive and targeted. We asked the advice of Wilcannia elders on how best to achieve this, and they told us we needed to knock on the door of every house in Wilcannia and explain the project and what it will mean for Wilcannia. We fleshed this idea out further and delivered our first set of consultation by employing Barkandji cultural facilitators to work with the team to run four community BBQs in key locations around town. These locations were selected to ensure that every family group was consulted.

We set up outdoors and provided information in large visual maps, cooked good food on a portable BBQ, including the traditional damper called 'Johnny Cakes' and arranged seating in a circle to promote informal and relaxed talking and 'yarning'. At these sessions we heard people's concerns and fears, as well as their hopes and ideas, which resulted in the following outcomes. These now lie at the core of our codesign, as they maximise participation and engagement:

- Community sessions that are culturally appropriate to build trust and respect and establish confidence in WaterNSW.
- Aboriginal cultural facilitators employed to assist plan and deliver community sessions and activities on the project.
- A focus on relationships rather than metrics.
- Ongoing adaptation of our engagement approach. We keep checking in with the Wilcannia community asking how they want us to work with them, we listen and design the plans together.
- Consultation delivered in a way that is fair, accessible, inclusive, extensive and involves each family clan grouping.
- Acknowledgement and respect of Barkandji Cultural protocols and inclusion of these in engagement processes.
- Creation of partnerships and initiatives to maximise on training and employment opportunities and participation in the project.
- Relationships and trust as the primary drivers for engagement and consultation.

We know we need consistency of connection to make lasting relationships and that means having the same people show up and follow up.

- A willingness and readiness to take on the challenges of cross-cultural work and think outside of the square to create alternative approaches and solutions.
- Consistency of a value driven approach across all project activities. This includes alignment of the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Study and consultation that is being undertaken as part of the project Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).
- Provide targeted and broader community sessions in culturally inclusive locations, with cultural facilitators.
- Communicate in accessible plain English using visual posters and collateral, provide healthy and culturally significant food and allow time for listening, talking and 'yarning'.





**Brendan O'Neill, Lead Project Manager WaterNSW playing soccer at the WINGS Drop in Centre**



**Community consultation at the hall**



**Smoking ceremony during a site visit with community**



**Community member Uncle Colin King cooking at the community BBQ**



**Community BBQ in 'the Malley'**



**Advertising the sessions**

## 3.0 Implementation

### Training Partnership

WaterNSW has forged a partnership program with TAFE NSW, and Aboriginal organisations Regional Enterprise Development Institute (REDI.E) and Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly (MPRA) to develop and implement a training program to equip local Aboriginal people with job-ready skills in construction. This program has been described by the partners as a first of its kind because of the holistic and adaptive approach that allows for comprehensive support services for students and on ground delivery by Aboriginal people.

The training program that started in Wilcannia in October 2020, is continuing into 2021. 11 students have graduated from the Certificate in Construction 1 and/or 2. Certificates in Hospitality and Tourism Certificate 2 are rolling out, with 8 expected to graduate from Hospitality in May 2021 and the Tourism course currently enrolling with strong numbers. Enrolment and graduation numbers far exceed any previously seen by TAFE NSW for the Wilcannia campus, a testament to the innovative approach.

This initiative demonstrates how community engagement and stakeholder collaboration can set new benchmarks in delivering government infrastructure projects in communities.

MPRA is the peak representative structure that represents the interest of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in 16 communities across Western NSW and the Wilcannia Community Working Party Chairperson is the elected local representative for MPRA. REDI.E are an Indigenous owned and managed organisation, delivering on employment, training and community services within Wilcannia, the Murdi Paaki region and other parts of NSW. TAFE NSW is the leading skills provider in the state and has a campus in Wilcannia.

The partnership was first formed following WaterNSW engagement with MPRA to establish a pilot project using the APIC policy to invest in the local community of Wilcannia, rather than outsourcing to other regions. This is seen as a preferred model for NSW government infrastructure projects, where project focus is invested back into the local communities, to deliver on training and employment opportunities that are designed to address underlying issues in these remote communities. A memorandum of understanding was developed with the partners with Barkandji cultural protocols embedded.

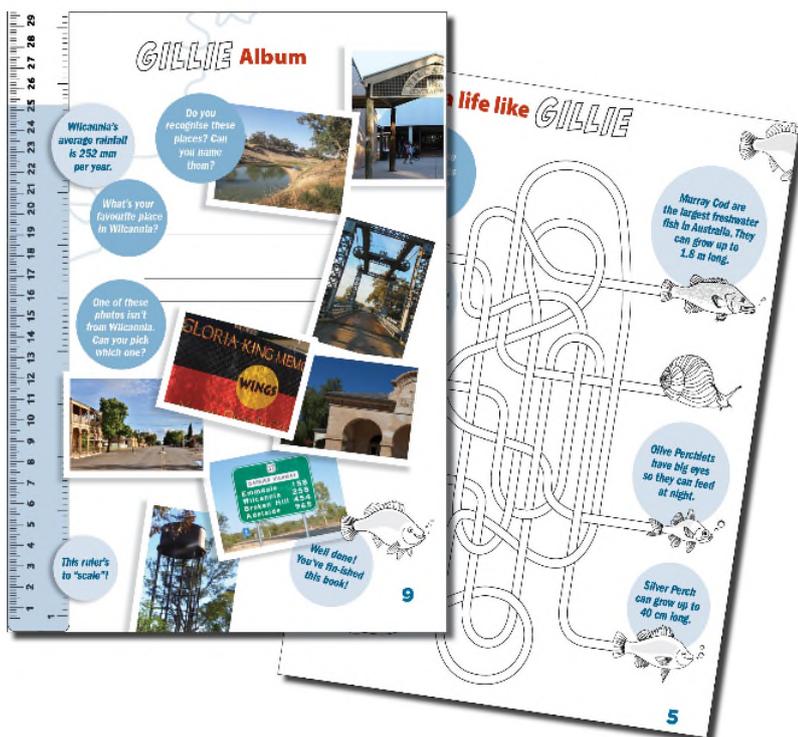
Essential to the success of these training programs is **the support services embedded to employ locals and allow for a greater chance of success for participants. These include a fit for work training program, an education support officer position, uniform and PPE provision, bus transport and catering.** The partnership was integral to the success of these support services, as Wilcannia locals worked hard on the ground to make it happen. The TAFE NSW Wilcannia campus has not seen these numbers of participation before, and the feedback from the TAFE and the community is that these courses have reinvigorated the campus as previous attempts to run courses have failed due to the lack of support services included. The training initiatives have been designed to build local capacity to improve future employment opportunities on the Weir project and other projects and industries in the region.



Training milestones would not have been reached if it wasn't for the teamwork shown by partners and those working to deliver the courses. [A Graduation day video](#) has been made showing the highlights of the ceremony and showcasing the key support people who gave speeches at the event. Representatives from across the project came together in recognising the value of collaboration and teamwork across the multiple stakeholders involved.

### School and education program

Much time has been spent developing strong rapport and connection with the young people of Wilcannia, particularly in the context of their safe place – Wings Youth Drop-in Centre. The delivery of education and key messages pertains to both the project and the business, and it builds on personal connection and consistency with the same project team members turning up each time.



A school education program has been designed to specifically engage with the young people in the community about the project and build on education about what the new weir will mean for the town, how it will operate and the lasting benefits.

Each phase of interaction has been well thought out, planned, and scaffolded to best meet the needs of the learners. At times, it has been developed in response to student questions and identified interests. Prior learning is consistently recognised, and related resource material is clearly linked.

A spectrum of learning activities, from passively creating a line drawing, to learning a rap with dance moves, to working together to construct a weir, has resulted in a range of instructional approaches, which again, meet the preferred learning styles of diverse learners. To appreciate the impact and input that young people can have on/in their community, we must see them as stakeholders too. They already have buy-in. It's their home, town, and community.

Informed young people are the future knowledge holders, who can share their understanding of the project, its progress and infrastructure specifics, with their families and friends. This is invaluable if it's difficult to reach the broader adult community.

Time spent engaging with the youth is looked favourably upon by community. It is a more genuine and inclusive approach to community consultation and engagement. The community and its youth take "WaterNSW" home, be it in the form of an Activity Book, a yo-yo, temporary tattoo, an artwork or just a recount of an interaction with the "water" lady.



**School art drawing workshop**



**Tracey Willingham from WaterNSW delivering a lesson on the new Weir**



**Aunty Sissy King teaching culture at the art workshops**



**Building the new Wilcannia Weir in a school lesson**



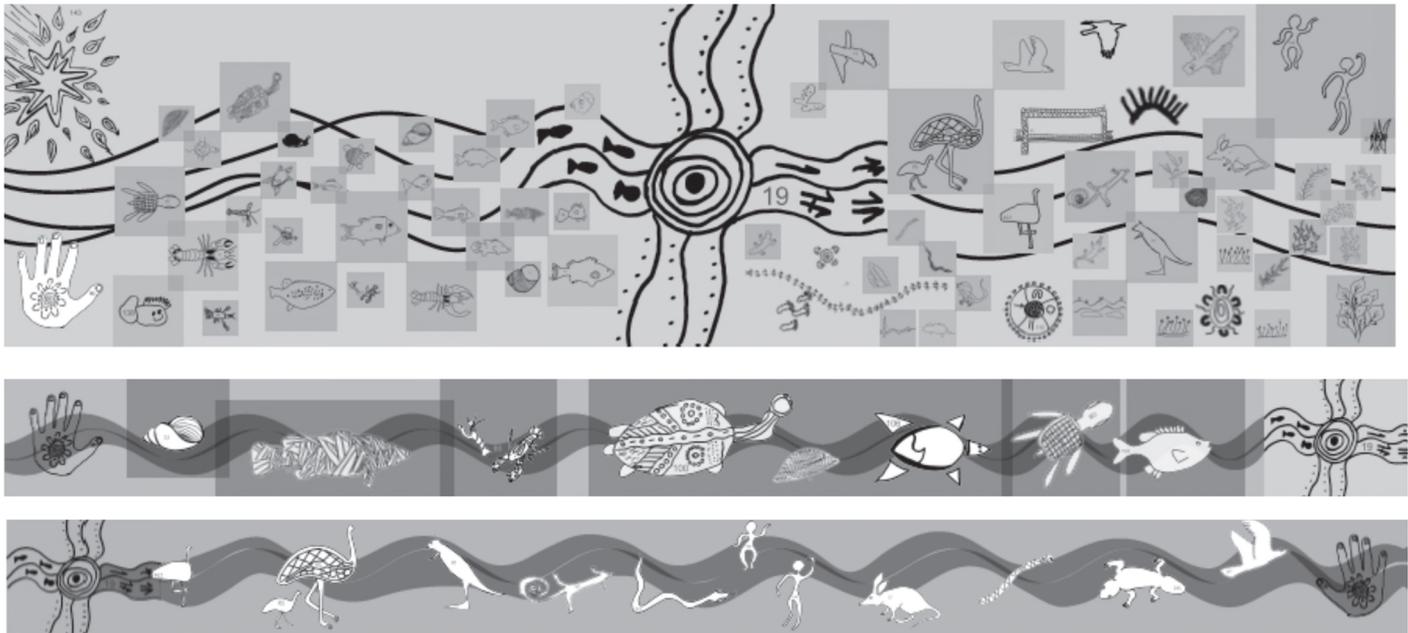
**Gillie tatoos were a big hit with the school kids**

### **School and community art workshops**

School and community art workshop have been facilitated since 2019 with over 150 artworks drawn by school students and community during workshops. These workshops were facilitated by a local art teacher, and a year 12 student artist who became a mentor for the younger students.

Art curation workshops followed the drawing workshops and were led by a Barkandji elder who also told cultural stories. A concept design show below has been brought back to the community and put on display for feedback. There is a large encompassing design that shows many of the artworks curated symbolically with the river life on one side and the land life on the other. The second design would appear on the weir itself, subject to further engineering advice and applicability. A final design will also go on display before it is to be used at the weir site.

The final concept designs and artwork are also to be used at the recreation area and used for cultural interpretive signage.



Concept design only of the curated artwork

WaterNSW thanks and acknowledges the artist for their artwork drawn during the November 2020 workshops that feature in this document - Bama Johnson (emu, fish, goanna).





### Video documentation and mentoring

Media training and mentoring opportunities have been developed with the team leader and staff from the local media station Wilcannia River Radio. Skills in interviewing, videoing, sound recording, and digital editing are being developed as part of a community led documentation and promotion strategy. Two story telling videos have been made that use footage and interviews made by three trainees from the radio station. These can be viewed on the project website page at [www.waternsw.com.au/wilcanniaweir](http://www.waternsw.com.au/wilcanniaweir)



**Wilcannia River Radio staff being mentored in video production**



**Hospitality Students preparing lunch for 50 people in the mobile TAFE NSW van**

**Construction Certificate 2 students at work in the Wilcannia shed**

**Graduation of the Certificate 1 and 2 in Construction (above)**

**Felicity Rooney - WaterNSW, Aunty Monica Wyman - Wilcannia Community Working Party Chairperson and Aunty Colleen Wilson - Hospitality course**

**“WaterNSW has listened to the community and consulted in a way no Government agency has before” – Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council CEO**

**“Great outcome and uplifting graduation for students and the community “**

**– Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly Chairperson**

## 4.0 Outcomes, impact and insights

The Wilcannia community are proactively engaged and participating in the initiatives outlined already, as we prepare for the environmental approval and construction phase by the end of 2021. Feedback from the community has been very positive – ‘never been done like this before’ ‘transparent and has enabled access for all who want to have a say’ and ‘they listen’.

Other government agencies are acknowledging the successes of this engagement in Wilcannia and the project team is setting new benchmarks for our own business and for the sector at large.

Interagency collaboration is key to the project and the team proactively share information, advocate and collaborate to maximise on opportunities and synergies to reduce overlap and consultation fatigue.

An Aboriginal Participation plan is being developed for the construction phase of the project, with feedback from key Aboriginal stakeholders to ensure we provide maximum benefit to the Wilcannia community. The plan is to include Barkandji cultural protocols and is to be endorsed by the peak groups supporting its delivery. Tenderers will have to clearly demonstrate how they will meet the requirements of this participation plan.

Project partners and local media including Wilcannia News Committee and Wilcannia River Radio are extensively promoting the project with the local newspaper independently publishing articles, flyers, photos, and publicising events. ABC Broken Hill is also following the development of the project and has sent journalists out to gather stories in this first phase. The Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council and Maarima Health Service have been very supportive advocates of the project.

These training initiatives are continuing to build local capacity to improve future employment opportunities on the Weir project and other projects and industries in the region.

A public exhibition currently being planned for the ‘Environment Impact Statement’ by the middle of this year will ensure that processes are put in place for the local community to be able to understand the complex and technical document. A visual summary is to be provided to support the larger EIS and support provided with options to enable responses and feedback in forms other than just writing being explored with the relevant agency.

WaterNSW are aware that there are challenges from the legacy of government consultation where the community are not involved in the codesign and as a result do not see tangible outcomes. We are also prepared that this is a long journey that requires a deconstruction of existing communication methods and modes of delivery and must be grounded in a commitment to engage in meaningful and genuine ways.

On reflection the main learning and outcome has been for us to listen and continue to check in and adapt and revise our plans, to make sure engagement stays culturally targeted and appropriate. We can’t achieve meaningful outcomes if communities aren’t at the centre, identifying the benefits, implementing, and reviewing them. Further to this is our willingness to **listen, learn, adapt, and deliver together**.

### Wilcannia Weir community partners

WaterNSW acknowledges the following for their partnership and support of the project:

- Wilcannia Community Working Party
- Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly
- TAFE NSW Wilcannia
- Regional Enterprise Development Institute
- Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council
- Wilcannia River Radio
- Maarima Health Service
- Wilcannia News Committee
- WINGS Youth Drop in Centre
- Wilcannia Central School
- St Therese’s Catholic School
- Barkandji Native Title Aboriginal Corporation

## Alignment with IAP2 Core Values for the practice of public participation

IAP2 Core Values	Example or evidence from this project
1. Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process	The whole engagement approach for the project is based on this and other IAP2 core values. One example is the training partnership developed with local Aboriginal organisations in Wilcannia to develop outcomes in training and employment, at the request of the community during consultation
2. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision	This is evidenced by the tangible outcomes that are already being implemented as a result of the community's contribution. WaterNSW is including in its APIC policy for the next construction phase a commitment to employing local people on the project.
3. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognising and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers	WaterNSW has worked hard to be inclusive and culturally appropriate with engagement and consultation. The community has told us how to consult to make sure that it is fair, accessible and equitable. This is leading to tangible outcomes being delivered in training, education and employment for the future.
4. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision	WaterNSW has engaged the Wilcannia community including key elders and the community in general, but also the following groups and schools: Wilcannia Community Working Party Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly TAFE NSW Wilcannia Regional Enterprise Development Institute Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council Wilcannia River Radio Maarima Health Service Wilcannia News Committee WINGS Youth Drop in Centre Wilcannia Central School St Therese's Catholic School Barkandji Native Title Aboriginal Corporation
5. Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate	Key representatives from the organisations above have been involved in the design from

	the outset and are fundamental to the implementation of the project initiatives.
6. Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way	Information provided at face to face sessions is plain English, visual and accessible. The same project team have been working with the community since 2019 and continue to engage to build on these relationships of trust.
7. Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision	Project information and updates are continually shared and reviewed with the community and local agencies via emails, meetings, project updates and local media. The community are also proactively sharing, documenting, and producing media on the project such is evident in regular Wilcannia News articles and social media postings.

## Acknowledgements and to find out more

We would like to thank WaterNSW for agreeing to share this case study and insights to advance engagement practice. This case study was co-authored by Community Engagement and Education Manager Debbie Low and Lead Community Engagement Officer Felicity Rooney and peer reviewed by Lead Project Manager Brendan O'Neill and Aboriginal Engagement Manager Russell Hill.

For more information about this project see:

- [www.waternsw.com.au/wilcanniaweir](http://www.waternsw.com.au/wilcanniaweir)
- <https://youtu.be/znKXwj1DvCgxxx>
- <https://youtu.be/niSNBUBZ7cw?t=3>

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