Strathbogie Shire Council

Community Engagement Strategy

Contents

Introduction

Background

Increasingly, local governments are developing and utilizing community engagement frameworks and policies to articulate their vision, system and processes for public participation. These policies and frameworks outline the agreed steps to be taken when seeking community input and also clearly stipulate the levels of engagement expected dependent on the type of project or initiative.

Community Satisfaction Survey results from 2013 indicated there had been a slight (but not significant) overall decline on Community Consultation and Customer Service (down one point) for the Shire of Strathbogie.

It was also found that Strathbogie scored significantly lower than the State-wide and Small Rural Shires average for Consultation and Engagement performance with some variations with rating feedback dependent on age and gender.

With this emphasis on community engagement and the need for a clear defined approach growing increasingly, the Shire of Strathbogie agreed to commence the development of a community engagement strategy. This document was prepared using information gained through environmental scans of current literature and practices in addition to feedback from Councillors, Officers and the general public via surveys and workshops.

Purpose

Facilitating engagement with all facets of our community is arguably an integral role for local government. In fact the *Local Government Act 1989* clearly states that Councils' role includes 'fostering community cohesion and encouraging active participation in civic life'[1]. Further to this the Act also specifies that 'a Council must develop a program of regular consultation with its community in relation to the services it provides'[2].

The purpose of this document is to enhance community engagement in the Shire of Strathbogie. This will be achieved by providing a guide for involving key stakeholders so that their interests are more likely to be reflected in council decisions.

This document also aims to provide a consistent approach to community engagement across all areas of Council and encourage a wider range of participation from various areas of our community by providing an overview of different types of engagement and when they may occur.

Definitions

Any given municipality consists of many communities that may be reflective of geography, interests, culture, demographics and several other factors and thus despite frequent referral to 'the

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[1] Local Government Act 1989, Section 3D (2) (f)
[2] Local Government Act 1989 Section 208B (e)

community' it is important to note that there is no one community with the probability of having any single interest, demand or need for the community as a whole very unlikely.

Community can also be described as 'the public' and defined as:

> *"any individual or group of individuals, organisation or political entity with an interest in the outcome of a decision. They are often referred to as stakeholders. Internal stakeholders (individuals who work for or with the decision making organisation) are also part of the public.[3]*

'Community engagement' or 'public participation' as it is sometimes referred to can be defined as:

> *"any process that involves the public in solving problems or making decisions, and uses public input to make decisions[4]*

When developing this framework, participants described community engagement as listening to the community, being actively involved, contributing and sharing information.

"Having the opportunity to contribute to and be involved in the community eg projects, social and sporting events, community group committees, etc.

From the other perspective, it means organisations such as the shire, local business, schools, etc, looking for community opportunities to contribute to and participate in.

It's about creating seamless relationships between the shire, community, schools, etc, to ensure everyone knows what's going on in the community at any given time." – Strathbogie Resident

Our Commitment

Strathbogie Shire Council is committed to encouraging greater participation in Council decision making processes and activities. We recognise that civic participation and understanding the interests of our community is important and can ultimately enhance outcomes.

 In developing this Community Engagement Strategy we sought input from a range of stakeholders including residents, visitors, businesses, Councillors and staff.

We are committed to providing training and support to all stakeholders in the application of this strategy and will continually review the way we work with our community.

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[3] International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Retrieved 3 September 2013 from www.iap2.org.au
[4] International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Retrieved 3 September 2013 from www.iap2.org.au

Our Community Engagement Framework

The Community Engagement framework aims to provide an overarching guide to increase participation in decision making and activities. It provides advice to identify who should be involved, and what communication methods can be used to optimise engagement.

A supporting checklist can be found as an appendix to this framework.

Process

The following image depicts the overall process that is recommended when engaging with the Strathbogie community.
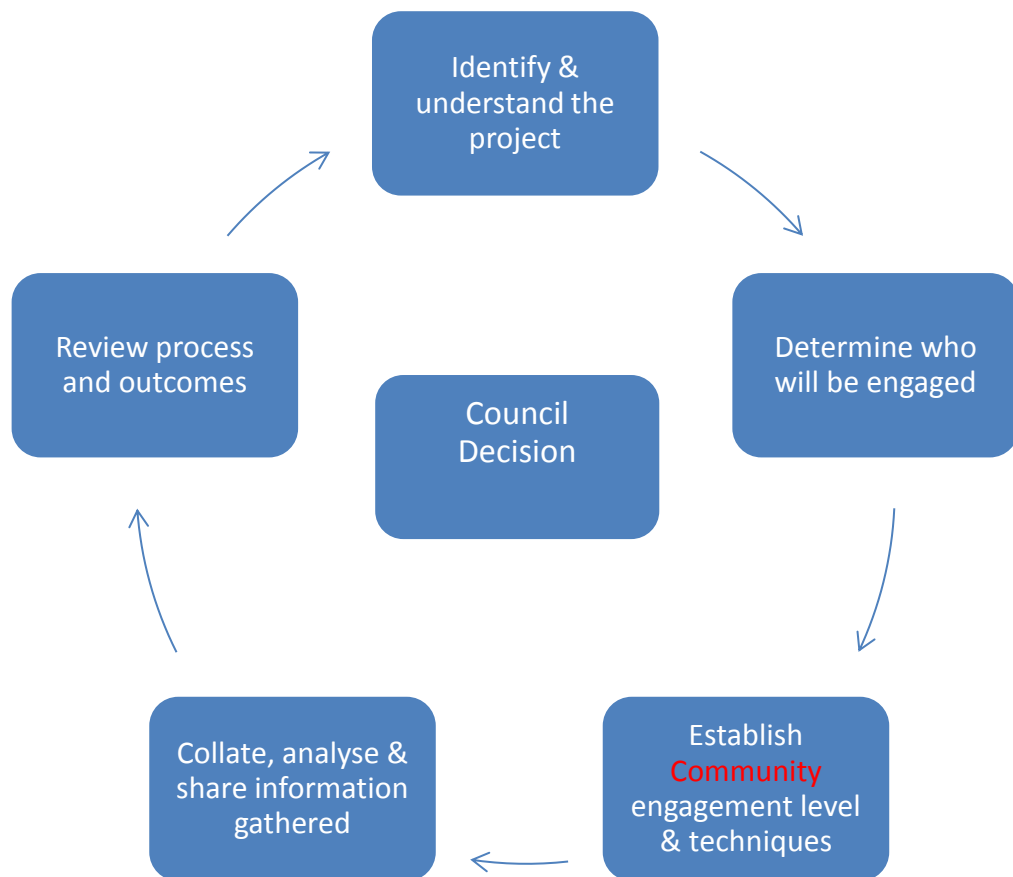
Who is involved

An important first step in community engagement is identifying who may be directly affected or may have an interest in the topic of interest. Dependent on the topic, the targeted audience may be a geographical region, specific service users or municipality wide. Once the target audience is determined, appropriate methods for engagement can then be developed.
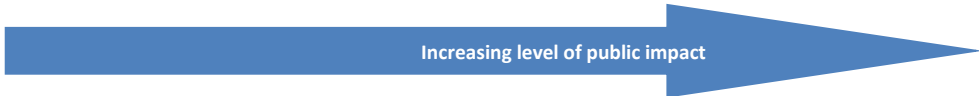
Above all it is important to remember that it is rare to have a totally homogenous community so identifying the various stakeholders and their interests is crucial to capturing a true reflection of the overall community's interests.

Levels of engagement

The term *engagement* is often used interchangeably with other terms such as *consultation* and *collaboration*. Whilst on the surface these terms may appear fairly synonymous they can be quite different in meaning and associated expectations.

The International Association for Public Participation's (IAP2) distinguishes the difference between varying levels of participation using what is known as the 'Public Participation Spectrum'. The Spectrum shows that differing levels of participation are legitimate depending on the goals, time frames, resources and levels of concern in the decision to be made and can assist with roles and intentions in a community engagement program.

The image below depicts the various levels of engagement, the promise of what this means to the public.

Increasing level of public impact →

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Public participation goal	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternative opportunities and/or solutions	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or directions	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution	Whilst Community will be consulted, involved and collaborated with, the final decision will always rest with Council
Promise to the public	We will keep you informed	We will keep you informed, listen and acknowledge concerns & aspirations and provide feedback on how public input influenced decision	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible	Whilst Community will be consulted, involved and collaborated with, the final decision will always rest with Council

Engagement Methods

There are various methods that can be used for engaging with our community dependent on the audience and topic with the use of several methods is advised to maximise input. Below is a summary of different engagement techniques categories and associated examples. [5]

One to one

Interviews| Vox pops | Telephone | Semi structured conversations

One to one engagement techniques can be conducted either informally or formally through structured interviews. This technique can be used to discuss sensitive topics, share information anonymously, involve time limited participants, validate or test information, address geographical barriers and provide an opportunity to build long lasting relationships. Importantly, this technique allows flexibility to best suit the needs of the interviewee.

Small Group

Focus group | Site tour | Field Trip | 'Kitchen table' discussions

Small group activities can be facilitated or semi structured and can incorporate creative engagement methods such as visioning, mapping and site visits. This method is designed to encourage group discussions around focused topics.

Large Group

Meetings | Briefings| Workshops| Forums

Large group activities are structured activities that encourage sharing of ideas, experiences and debate. They can also be structured to include smaller group discussions during the session.

Drop in

Festival | SpeakOut! | Information session| Display | Listening post

This technique is often used to engage during informal activities such as festivals. Engaging in these environments can be less confronting, flexible, encourage new participants and do not require previous interest or knowledge from participants. These events are suitable for a range of audiences and can be effective in generating interest & enthusiasm for projects.

Surveys

Online | Phone | Hard copy | Intercept surveys | Polling

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[5] Engagement categories and examples drawn from Capire Consulting Group's Inclusive Community Engagement Toolkit http://www.capire.com.au/capire%E2%80%99s-inclusive-community-engagement-toolkit

Surveys can be conducted using a range of formats including phone, hard copy or online and provide a structured way for gaining feedback. This technique is seen as beneficial as they are inexpensive, provide choice of online or hard copy, be completed in participants' own time and responses can be anonymous.

Online

Online forums | Website | Facebook | Twitter | Blog | Youtube

This technique uses a variety of web based activities to both engage discussion and also promote other engagement activities. Online activities are convenient and accessible with more people becoming confident to use technology.

Visual Arts

Murals | Sculptures| Photos | Multimedia | Performance

Creative tools and activities can be used to promote community engagement and also discuss topics. Arts activities can provide a creative form of expression for participants and also address barriers such as literacy and language.

Community Education

Training | Mentor programs | Leadership | Skill development

Engagement through training and education can positively influence behavioural change and build capacity. This technique can also test ideas or seek feedback.

Communication Material

Media releases | Advertisements | Public notices | Signs | Reports | Brochures | Fact Sheets | Newsletters |Letters | Displays

Communication material comes in a range of formats including electronic, online and hard copy and can be used to promote and provide information. Printed communication is a familiar and traditional method for sharing information, can be easily adapted and if distributed widely can reach large audiences.

Below is a summary of frequently used methods and what level of engagement they can be used for.

Method	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
One-to-one	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Small Group	✓	✓	✓		
Large Group	✓	✓	✓		
Drop in	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Surveys	✓	✓			
Online	✓	✓			
Arts	✓	✓			
Community Education	✓	✓	✓		✓
Communication Materials	✓				

It is worth noting that participants in the surveys conducted to assist with the development of this framework indicated a preference to be *informed* and *consulted* using communication materials such as local papers, Council newsletters and providing feedback through public meetings, emails and surveys.

Evaluation

The effectiveness of Council's Community Engagement Strategy will be continuously reviewed through individual project analysis and evaluation of the overall strategy at regular intervals.

Supporting documents

2013-2017 Strathbogie Shire Council Plan
Customer Service Charter
Healthy Communities Plan 2013-2017
Inclusive Communities Plan 2010-2014

Appendix – Strathbogie Shire Council Community Engagement Check List

Project Name:

Project Lead:

Lead Department:

Is this a funded project? (insert dollar amount and funding source)) (yes/no) does a project proposal form need to be completed? Yes/No

Timeframes: Start date, Key Milestones and completion Date

Identify and understand the project

Describe the issue that people will be engaged about: (Have there been similar projects take place in Council)

Which Council departments have been contacted to be involved with the project?
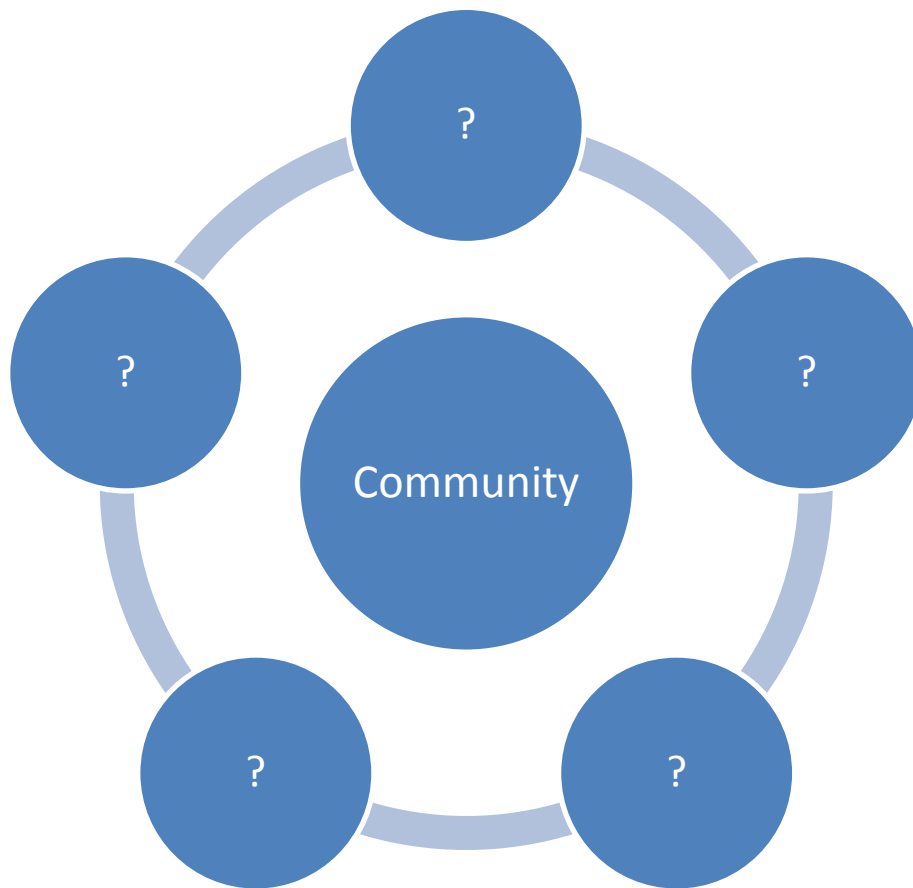*Include departmental contacts.*

What information are you seeking? What questions will be asked?

Determine who will be engaged

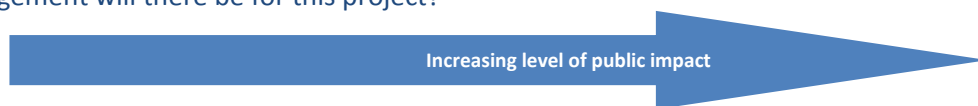List agencies and stakeholders directly affected by this issue:

List any other people that may have an interest in this issue:

Does this project have regulatory guidelines? (funded projects sometimes have this)

Establish engagement level and techniques

What level of engagement will there be for this project?

Increasing level of public impact

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
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		influenced decision	provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible	

Remember that differing levels of participation are legitimate depending on the goals, time frames, resources and levels of concern in the decision to be made. However it is strongly encouraged that reasoning behind the level of engagement and Council's promise to the Strathbogie community is clearly communicated.

Tip: There may be varying levels of engagement for each stakeholder identified and stages of the project.

What engagement techniques will be used for each identified stakeholder?

Tip: remember that multiple techniques relevant to specific audiences can assist with gathering a greater variety information and ease communication for participants.

Agency / Stakeholder	Visual Arts	Community Education	Communication materials	Drop in	Large group	One to one	Online	Small group	Surveys

Collate, analyse and share information gathered

Have you collated and summarised all the information gained and saved it to a central, accessible location?

❑ Yes   ❑ No

Have you provided feedback or a summary of the information and key messages gained to relevant stakeholders & Council departments?

❑ Yes   ❑ No

Review process and outcomes

Did you reach a broad representation of Strathbogie Shire communities? If not, please expand.

Were the engagement techniques used appropriate, accessible and easy to use?

Can processes and approaches used be improved? If yes, please expand.

How did information gained and shared impact on any associated decisions or outcomes?