



Gilgandra Shire Council

Community Engagement Strategy

Adopted 21 June 2010

Introduction

Community consultation and engagement is a critical part of what Council's do on a day to day basis. This interaction with the community and partners of Councils occurs in a number of different ways in a number of different environments.

The Community Engagement Strategy aims to:

- Ensure a consistent approach to Council decision making and communication
- Ensure that these approaches are effectively implemented by Council staff
- Ensure that the community are aware of the outcomes of any community engagement
- Engender an open and accountable environment
- Bolster the relationships between the community's stakeholders
- Encourage and stimulate idea generation and debate amongst Council and the community
- Recognise the importance of the role of communication in Council and community decision making
- Provide a template for community conversations
- Promote improved internal communication
- Enhance the Community Strategic Planning process
- Highlight the importance of local government
- Ensure Council is meeting the requirements of the new Integrated Planning Legislation
- Meet the requirement of the Local Government Act 1993, particularly Section 8 of the Act
- Ensure Council is able to make the most of modern communication methods

Scope

The strategy will impact on many facets of Council's activities. Communication is an essential part of just about all of Council's actions. This strategy will assist Council in providing better services, on an everyday and long-term basis.

Terms used

Community Engagement

The processes through which the community and other interested parties are informed about and/or invited to contribute, through consultation or involvement, to proposals or policy changes relating to Council services, events, strategic plans, issues, projects and the like.

E-Engagement

Community Engagement carried out by electronic means.

Community

People who live, work, visit or invest in the Gilgandra Local Government Area. The community includes residents, ratepayers, State and Federal Government Agencies, non government agencies, the private sector, community organisations and groups, churches, schools and local government partners.

Open Data

Public data not subject to privacy, security or privilege limitations that is made available for re-use in any accessible non-proprietary form.

Strategy

The use of the word "strategy" satisfies the foreshadowed requirements of the Department of Local Government through the proposed amendments to the Local Government Act 1993 which relate to Community Strategic Plans being accompanied by a Community Engagement Strategy.

Social media

Social media are primarily Internet and mobile-based tools for sharing and discussing information among human beings. The term most often refers to activities that integrate technology, telecommunications and social interaction, and the construction of words, pictures, videos and audio. This interaction, and the manner in which information is presented, depends on the varied perspectives and "building" of shared meaning among communities, as people share their stories and experiences. Businesses also refer to social media as user-generated content (UGC) or consumer-generated media (CGM). (Wikipedia)

Social networks

On-line communities of people who share interests and/or activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others.
(Wikipedia)

What do we mean by 'Community Engagement' and 'Consultation'?

- “Community engagement is achieved when the local community is and feels part of the overall governance” (VLGA 2006: 5). The International Association of Public Participation defines community engagement as: “any process that involves the public in problem-solving or decision-making and uses the public input to make more informed decisions”.
- The terms ‘community engagement’ and ‘community consultation’ mean a variety of things to different people. For the purpose of this strategy, **‘community engagement’** is used as a generic, inclusive term to describe the broad and ongoing range of interactions between Council and the whole of the local community. Therefore, by this definition, community engagement is an outcome.
- The term **‘consultation’** is used in this strategy to describe the actual practice and tools used to engage with the community and are part of the overall concept of community engagement. Consultation includes a variety of approaches and/or methods to achieve outcomes, such as information delivery, involvement and collaboration in decision making and empowered action in informal groups or formal partnerships.
- Engagement with the local community is a regular and important part of Council’s everyday services and involves the interaction of Council and stakeholders in a variety of settings and circumstances. Whether it is as simple as a telephone enquiry, an over-the-counter discussion, or a letter regarding a specific policy or project, all of these situations aim to better inform residents and engage with the local community.
- Formal consultation processes are conducted for a variety of projects and Council activities and will take a number of forms depending on the desired outcome of the particular policy, project and/or activity and consideration of any relevant legislative requirements.

The methods of formal consultation can range from the public exhibition of a Council’s strategy, plan or policy; focus groups, online or written surveys; workshops, e-forums, newsletters and media releases. The use of particular consultation methods will depend on the purpose, timing and resources available.

REFERENCES

A number of community engagement strategies from Councils around Australia have been used as a guide of best practice, particularly Maitland Community Engagement Strategy 2009 and Mosman Council Community Engagement Strategy.

Victorian Local Government Association (VLGA) 2006 '**Best Value Victoria Community Consultation Resource Guide**'

Legislation

Council has legislative requirements under the Local Government Act 1993 to ensure that community input is a part of the decision making process.

Council also has responsibilities under the Local Government Amendment (Planning and Reporting) Bill 2009 and Local Government Amendment (Planning and Reporting) Regulation 2009. Responsibilities under this legislation extends to developing a Community Engagement Strategy.

Communication methods

There are a number of ways in which Council can interact with the community. The following methods provide a basis for this interaction.

Strategy details

Method 1: Information provision

Aim

To supply the community with information about Council, its services, projects and events.

Response

- Council will utilise a number of different communication tools to inform the community eg. website, letters, Web 2.0, email, verbal communication
- Information will be provided in a timely manner
- Utilisation of local and regional media
- Internal communication is an important part of this process eg. internal newsletter
- Information supplied will be objective in nature

Output

The community will be appropriately informed

Method 2: Community Feedback

Aim

To ascertain community views on Council/community plans, strategic directions, issues and priorities.

Response

- Council will encourage diversity of representation
- The community will have the opportunity to attend Council meetings
- E-participation methods eg. blogs will be encouraged
- Workshops
- Surveys
- Public meetings

Output

The community will have the opportunity to be actively involved in Council planning and decision making

Method 3: Partnerships

Aim

To work on an ongoing basis with the community to ensure that community ideas, concerns and aspirations are listened to and understood.

Response

Discussion will be held directly with the community, with advice to be included in final decision making made in relation to a solution.

Output

The methodology includes:

- consultative groups
- working groups
- focus groups
- user groups
- volunteer groups
- liaison groups, and
- on-line involvement - Wikis, open data, blogs, social networks etc.

Principles Checklist

The Community Engagement Strategy is underpinned by the following principles which should be heeded throughout engagement processes:

Clarity of Purpose

Clear definition of why the engagement is occurring and its context, in order to plan and resource an effective process.

Commitment

Demonstrated commitment to establish and maintain credibility and accountability.

Hospitality

Friendly, welcoming environment with appropriate refreshments provided.

Respect

Mutual respect for the needs, aspirations and opinions of all within the community.

Accessibility

Ensure that all individuals or groups can access the process.

Be sensitive to the needs of particular individuals or groups to maximise their ability to contribute.

Provide information in a form that is easy to understand and appropriate for all sectors of the community.

Accessibility on-line acknowledges users with a disability as well as those with Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), mobile devices or older browsers. It also takes into account the ability of other machines to read and process Council content and data programmatically for the benefit of users. Practically, this principle requires Council to follow the Web Accessibility Initiative's (WAI) Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0, use open web standards, avoid proprietary technologies

Communication

Establishment of a two way process of providing accurate and timely information, and demonstration that feedback is being valued.

Evidence

Establishment of good engagement practices that are based on sound research and quality information.

Flexibility & Responsiveness

Establishment of engagement plans that are flexible during the process, eg. Time and venue may change due to community feedback.

Timeliness

Ensure that participants know how long an engagement process is expected to last and when feedback is expected at each stage of the process.

Inclusiveness

Ensure that a cross section of the community is invited to the community engagement activity.

Moderation of on-line discussions

A moderation process to ensure the discussion is appropriate, intelligent and lawful.

Editing will only occur to remove a contribution that:

- Is off-topic
 - Is defamatory, abusive, harassing or hateful
 - Includes any abusive, obscene, indecent or offensive language
 - Endorses commercial products or activities or solicits business
 - Violates copyrights or other forms of licences and consents
 - Invades anyone's privacy, reveals the identity of another user or impersonates anyone
 - Encourages conduct that may or would constitute a criminal offence or give rise to civil liability, or that otherwise violates any local, state, national or international law or regulation anywhere in the world
- It will state publicly when and why a contribution has been edited or removed.

Collaboration

Establishment of partnerships with relevant community groups, State and Federal government, local government partners, other stakeholders, and/or with internal sections within Council.

Ethics

Members of various consultative groups, along with Councillors and staff to adhere to relevant Code of Conduct including requirements to address pecuniary and non-pecuniary interests and to allow the views of all members to be heard.

Don't over consult

The community is consulted about a range of issues and by a range of people in a range of ways. It is important to recognise this and not to over consult which can result in residents feeling that their time is being wasted and comments such as "we have already told you what we want, why are you asking us again?" This can be avoided by utilising existing research and findings of other consultations that Council or other agencies have conducted, whilst being mindful that contemporary thinking is important to Council's planning.

Continuous Learning

Establishment of a reporting system to ensure that Council learns from the community engagement activity and is able to monitor and evaluate success to enable improvements.

Resourcing and Timing

Building capacity may take time, particularly in engaging those who are “hard to reach” and disengaged. Council and the local community may require time to develop relationships, and the consultation methods and approach must consider this.

It is important that participants have a realistic idea of how much time consultation is likely to take in the overall preparation and implementation of the specific project. Timing of consultation also ensures quality feedback and engagement with the local community. In terms of gaining maximum participation possible, the local community should be advised of any consultation at the earliest possible stage of the project. It is important that the timing of any consultation process must consider previous, current and future engagement activities of other departments to avoid consultation fatigue by the local community.

The specific financial costs involved in conducting consultation must be understood when planning any consultation process or activity. Where practical, consideration should be given to the coordination between Council departments for the coordination of consultation processes. The sharing of information and resources can provide a reduction in financial costs while still achieving positive outcomes and wide participation.

To achieve this Council will:

- Provide the necessary resources and support to ensure the principles of the Community Engagement Strategy are implemented throughout the various departments of Council engaged in consultation.
- Ensure that the Community Engagement Strategy is regularly reviewed and evaluated to ensure best practise community engagement and consultation methods are being considered
- Ensure each project includes appropriate resource allocation and appropriate timeframes to deliver the stated goals and objectives of its consultation process
- Identify what skills are required to devise and conduct consultation and engagement activities and to provide opportunities for staff training to build organisational capacity and the necessary skills to effectively engage with the local community through the use of best practice community consultation methods.
- Facilitate good governance through the commitment of adequate resources to effective engagement with the local community. These include, but are not limited to financial resources; time; staff experience and expertise; quality information; corporate systems and policies and adequate materials. Once identified, resource requirements should be explored fully as part of Council's consultation processes and engagement activities.