



Community Engagement Strategy & Policy

May 2013



A joint initiative of the WBC Alliance

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Introduction

Council is committed to improving quality of life in Blayney Shire through the involvement of the community in development of policies, programs and services. Council is also committed to ensuring that all views are considered through inclusive deliberation and active involvement of the community.

Engaging the community is required by all Councils under Council's Charter Section 8 of the NSW Local Government Act 1993. The charter comprises a set of principles, where eleven out of fourteen principles directly reflect why Council should engage the community. These principles include:

- to provide directly or on behalf of other levels of government, after due consultation, adequate, equitable and appropriate services and facilities for the community and to ensure that those services and facilities are managed efficiently and effectively
- to exercise community leadership
- to exercise its functions in a manner that is consistent with and actively promotes the principles of multiculturalism
- to promote and to provide and plan for the needs of children
- to properly manage, develop, protect, restore, enhance and conserve the environment of the area for which it is responsible, in a manner that is consistent with and promotes the principles of ecologically sustainable development
- to have regard to the long term and cumulative effects of its decisions
- to bear in mind that it is the custodian and trustee of public assets and to account for and manage the assets for which it is responsible
- to engage in long-term strategic planning on behalf of the local community
- to exercise its functions in a manner that is consistent with and promotes social justice principles of equity, access, participation and rights
- to facilitate the involvement of councillors, members of the public, users of facilities and services and council staff in the development, improvement and co-ordination of local government
- to keep the local community and the State government (and through it the wider community) informed about its activities

For our Council to meet these principles, it needs to ensure that effective levels of engagement are implemented depending on the project's current impact on the community and into the future. This means that the Council needs to be open and accountable to the community and provide ample opportunity for feedback. Council also acknowledges that by involving a cross section of the community in a consultative process, it can make better decisions. Council also knows that strong relationships with the community is integral and is built on trust, goodwill and respect with the community. It is intended that this Community Engagement Strategy and Policy framework will give the community a clear understanding of:

- Council's commitment to Community Engagement
- when Community Engagement will occur
- what level of engagement will occur
- how Community Engagement process will be managed.

Language and meaning

- **Community Engagement**

Community Engagement is a term that covers all the ways a Council and its Community come together to improve decision-making, build relationships and partnerships, raising awareness and complementing representative democracy. It is a way of working side-by-side and building support for the shared goal of making the community a better place to live. Community engagement is an outcome. Engagement covers a wide variety of Council / Community connections, ranging from information sharing through community consultation to active participation in government policy development and its decision making processes.

Engagement acknowledges the right of citizens to have a say and to get involved in the business of Council. It is not about public relations or marketing a particular viewpoint or issue, rather it involves assisting Council to fulfil its obligations to the community having regard to the long term and cumulative effects of decisions. Effective community engagement allows Council to tap into diverse perspectives and potential solutions to improve the quality of its decision making.

- **Consultation**

The process of developing understanding of the issues and boundaries around a particular topic or issue before decisions are made. We consult with one another when the boundaries around a decision are not understood.

- **Communication**

The exchange of information. We communicate when the boundaries around a decision are understood.

- **Capacity building**

The development of knowledge, skills and attitudes to achieve a purpose.

- **Communities of interest**

All those who influence or are influenced by a particular proposed project, programme, issue or action

What are the benefits of Community Engagement?

- **It is central to participatory democracy**

Communities rightfully expect to have input into matters that affect them and seek involvement and engagement beyond the election of their political representatives. Community engagement complements the official electoral process and is a key method of participatory democracy.

- **Decision making is improved**

Better decisions are made when information and all points of view are heard and understood. Where feasible and desirable, Council's decisions need to match the needs and aspirations of the community.

- **It builds trust**

Trust and understanding are likely to grow in an environment where engagement and involvement is taken seriously and is well done.

- **It builds networks**

When we work together we build relationships and have the opportunity to form purposeful networks and partnerships. In this environment collaboration, occurs more easily.

- **It helps build resilience and stronger communities**

Trusting, confident and involved communities tend to be stronger and able to respond to change and circumstances 'together', combining expertise, experience and resources.

What are the risks associated with community engagement?

- **The costs of poor engagement processes and tools**

Communities recognise poor engagement processes and tools. Poorly managed community engagement will lead to scepticism and loss of trust. You need to use the right process in the right way.

- **Managing expectations**

Engagement does not give decision-making powers to non-elected representatives. Sometimes engagement can raise unrealistic expectations of both Council and Community. Again, this is usually a product of poor practices.

- **Balancing the act**

More is not necessarily better. The most appropriate form of engagement needs to be understood and well undertaken.

- **Budget and project management**

Community engagement is 'part of' not an 'add on' to any project or programme.

- **The cost of not collaborating or sharing resources**

Working on things that matter to the community without engagement can lead to conflict and costly rework.

What are the guiding principles for community engagement?

The design and development of engagement activities in Blayney Shire will be guided by the following principles. We will strive to make all engagement – communication, consultation, involvement, collaboration and partnerships:

- Inclusive and accessible
- Productive and enterprising
- Approachable and welcoming
- Consistent so we know where we stand
- Engaging, exciting and inspiring

What are the characteristics of successful community engagement in our Shire?

These ‘characteristics of success’ will guide and inform how we design, implement and provide feedback on the outputs and outcomes of our community engagement activities:

- **The purpose of the engagement and how the input of the engagement will be used is clearly stated:**

The purpose of the engagement is to be stated clearly from the outset. Checking the understanding of the purpose should also be undertaken at the beginning of any interaction so there is no confusion or unrealistic expectations. Similarly how the engagement input will be used should also be stated from the outset.

- **Activities are timely, held at the right time and given enough time.**

Input is sought before decisions are made. Engagement activities are held so they do not clash with other events or activities; at a convenient time for those participating and enough time is given to discussion, comment capture and agreeing outcomes and actions.

- **Include all groups and organisations that have an interest in the engagement topic or issue**
This will include demographic groupings, different cultural backgrounds, social economic-groups and geographic representation.

- **Create safe space and a positive atmosphere**

Engagement should be seen as part of community life where people come together to discuss issues, opportunities and challenges. The atmosphere needs to be positive and welcoming, not combative. It should be a space where all alternatives can be explored in safety. Respect for one another and actively listening to understand the different points of view will help create ‘safe space’. Just as community views and priorities are heard, so too are Council’s views and priorities. It is a two-way activity.

- **Information is accessible**
Information is written in plain English so it is easily understood. The implications of the information are also explained.
- **Existing networks are used**
Communities are made up of different networks. Geographically based networks and communities of interested need to be understood and motivated to support engagement activities. Using this approach you are building and working from what already exists.
- **The capacity and capabilities of community leaders is developed and strengthened**
The capacity of community leaders within these networks is developed and strengthened. Each community engagement activity is an opportunity to learn more about our community and the things that affect the Shire. Engagement knowledge, skills and attitudes can be built both within Council and also with community leaders.
- **It is not a 'one size fits all'**
Different processes and mediums are used to engage different groups in the community.

What level to use.

- The level of engagement is directly related to the complexity of the information needed and the degree of impact a project, programme or action could have on the community. The higher the impact, the more complex the information, the greater the potential risk within the decision and therefore the more engagement is needed.
- The following Impact/Complexity Matrix links the likely impact and complexity of information with the types of community engagement that might be considered.

How will we implement the Community Engagement Strategy?

This strategy aims to be a resource for Council to ensure that its engagement processes are appropriate, accessible, well-planned and integrated, and adequately resourced.

- **Objectives**

This Strategy strives to:

1. Provide a process for co-ordination of a strategic plan for Blayney that takes account of the broad community desires and expectations
2. Ensure that the views of a wide cross section of the community are incorporated into the process, by selecting engagement methods that are flexible, inclusive and appropriate to the people being consulted

3. Enable the development of a community “vision” for Blayney that will help guide subsequent Council strategic plans; and support ongoing opportunities for involvement in and shared “ownership” of Council’s decision making and strategy development
4. Keep the Blayney community well informed about issues, strategies or plans that may affect them
5. Assist Council in meeting its legislative requirements regarding community engagement
6. Provide staff with the support and training to conduct effective community engagement processes
7. Improve Council’s internal systems and procedures to ensure a co-ordinated and comprehensive approach to engagement.

- **Principles of Engagement**

The following principles underpin Blayney Shire Council’s approach to community engagement:

1. Integrity – where there is openness and honesty about the scope and purpose of engagement
2. Inclusion – where there is an opportunity for a diverse range of values and perspectives to be freely expressed and heard
3. Deliberation – where there is sufficient and credible information for dialogue, choice and decisions, and where there is space to weigh options, develop common understanding and to appreciate respective roles and responsibilities
4. Influence – where people have input in designing how they participate, when policies and services reflect their involvement and when their impact is apparent.

- **Levels of Community Engagement**

The level of community engagement will depend on the particular circumstances of the issue:

1. **Inform**

Information processes are “one-way” methods of engagement, often used to explain “why” a decision has been made or the processes used for making a decision. Used in isolation, they do not provide the community with the opportunity to express their views. Common methods for providing information are media releases, fact sheets, newsletters, websites and notification letters.

2. Consult

Consulting involves the exchange of information between the Council and the community. These processes are “two-way” methods of engagement, allowing community members the opportunity to express their opinions on a particular issue or proposal. Common methods for consulting include surveys, focus groups, staffed public displays and meetings.

3. Involve

This type of engagement requires Council to actively seek the involvement of the affected community as part of the planning and decision making process. Community members have the opportunity to be involved in discussion and debate and to influence Council’s decision-making. Common methods of involving the community include advisory committees, community workshops and site meetings.

4. Collaborate

Engagement at a collaborative level provides the community with a high level of involvement in Council’s decision-making. This type of community engagement encourages community members to be involved in identifying solutions to local issues. Collaboration encourages community involvement up front and is focussed on finding the best possible result for the community as a whole. Common collaboration methods include community reference groups, community design teams, and forums.

5. Empower

This places the final decision-making in the hands of the public. Common methods include ballots, constitutional referenda, and delegated decisions.

When to Engage?

Council **must** consult when:

- It is required by legislation
- It wants to identify community issues, needs and priorities

Council **should** consult when:

- Any proposed changes will impact on current users or customers of a Council service or facility
- Any proposed changes which will affect the rights or entitlements of community members, including minority groups
- There is potential impact on surrounding neighbours
- It wants to monitor customer satisfaction with Council’s services facilities

- There is a level of controversy or sensitivity about a particular issue
- There is conflict among community members about an issue.

Factors affecting Engagement

A number of factors impact the effectiveness of community engagement, such as access, resources and timeframe.

1. Access

Community members should have equal opportunity to participate in community engagement processes. Therefore, access is a critical issue to consider when planning community engagement. In this instance, access refers to any barriers that may impede a person's ability to participate. Specific areas to consider include:

- Selecting a venue and engagement technique appropriate to the people involved in the community engagement (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds; people with disabilities; older and young people)
- Ensuring venues are accessible to wheelchairs and have appropriate facilities (e.g. Disabled toilets)
- Ensuring community education and information is easily understood
- Being aware of and supporting any potential language, sight or hearing impairments
- Promoting the engagement in a manner that reaches a wide cross-section of the community (e.g. Newspapers, schools, local radio, etc)

2. Resources

Another key component in community engagement is adequate resourcing. Effective community engagement requires sufficient resourcing in terms of finance, staff time and materials.

3. Timeframe

Sufficient timeframes are critical to give participants time to provide feedback or attend consultation displays/meetings and to incorporate feedback into Council's processes. Time constraints should not compromise Council's engagement with the community.

When and how will we engage – what are the triggers?

Various factors influence the need to engage with the community on a specific issue. On an overall basis community engagement has two principal components for these purposes.

- The first is at an overarching Strategy Planning level. This is the process adopted by Council to support development of a Community Strategic Plan that will determine priorities and community vision for the future. This Plan will also consider the varying strategies that both the community, and the Council, may adopt to give effect to the vision.
- The second component to community engagement surrounds the body of techniques and approaches that develop and sustain working relationships between Blayney Shire Council and the wider community. The triggers for the level and type of engagement will be determined by Council's assessment of the likely impact on the community, and on the complexity of the issue to be addressed. These levels of engagement will follow four of the stages outlined previously (viz: Inform; Consult; involve; and/or collaborate).

Assessment criteria

The examples provided below are indicative, not prescriptive: each issue should be considered on its merits.

Level of Impact	Criteria (one or more of the following)	Examples
<p>Level A High Impact - Blayney Shire</p> <p>High level of impact or risk, perceived or real, on the whole or a large part of Blayney Shire</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential high impact on State or regional strategies or directions • High level of real or perceived impact or risk across Blayney Shire • Any significant impact on attributes that are considered to be of high value to the whole of Blayney Shire, such as the natural environment or heritage • Any impact on the health, safety or well-being of the Blayney Shire community • Potential high degree of controversy or conflict • Likely high level interest across Blayney Shire 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shire wide or regional plans • A change to land categorisation i.e. selling land • Disability action plan • Strategies, plans or policies, e.g. Culture, Youth, Aged • Removal of a facility or service catering across Blayney Shire, e.g. Library Services • Provision of a district or regional facility, e.g. skate park, indoor sports centre • Key changes to a Blayney Shire wide service, e.g. waste management • Changes to or impact on natural bushland or waterway (where the natural values could be affected)
<p>Level B High Impact – Local</p> <p>High level of impact or risk, perceived or real, of a local nature, e.g. a local area, specific community or user group</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High level of real or perceived impact or risk on a local area, small community or user group(s) of a specific facility or service • The loss or significant change to any facility or service to a local community • Potential high degree of controversy or conflict at the local level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removal or relocation of a local playground • Change to or loss of valued activity or program, e.g. local youth activity • Re-development of a sportsground • Major development or redevelopment of non-regional parks • Local street road closure • Increase or removal of car parking in local shopping centre
<p>Level C Lower Impact – Blayney Shire</p> <p>Lower level of impact on the whole or a large part of Blayney Shire</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower, although still some real or perceived impact of risk across Blayney Shire • Potential for some controversy or conflict • Potential for some although not significant impact on State or regional strategies or directions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvements to a Blayney Shire wide service, e.g. Library Services • Upgrade of a district or regional facility • Changes to Customer Services processes, e.g. payment of rates • Most changes to fees and charges (unless contentious) • Provision of a community wide event • Review of community needs, e.g. recreational needs assessment
<p>Level D Lower Impact - Local</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower level of real or perceived impact or risk on a local area, small community or user group(s) of a specific facility or service • Only a small change or improvement to a facility/ service at the local level • Low or no risk of controversy or conflict at the local level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upgrade of a local playground • Local street or streetscape upgrade • Changes to a local activity program, e.g. timing or venue/location

Four tier community engagement guide

A four tier level of community engagement is used to guide Council's approach to conducting consultation.

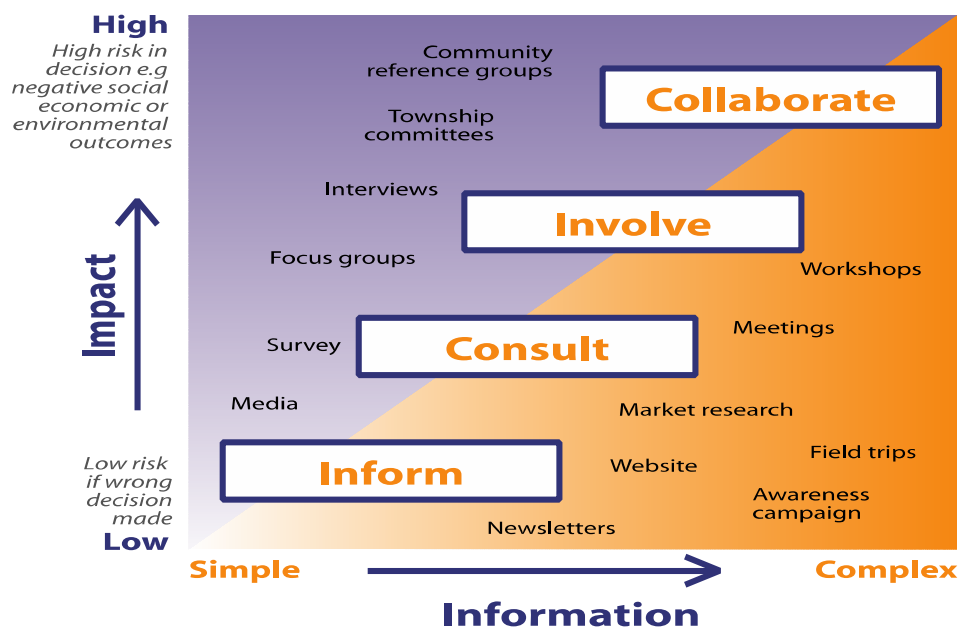
Typical Level of Engagement	Definition	Typical highest level of impact
1. Informing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advising the community of a situation or proposal • Informing on a decision or direction • Providing advice on an issue • No response is required, although people are free to seek a further level of participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level A • Level B • Level C • Level D
2. Consulting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertaking market research to identify needs or issues • Seeking comment on a proposal, action or issue • Seeking feedback on a service or facility • Requiring a response, but limited opportunity for dialogue • Option for people to seek a further level of participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level A • Level B • Level C • Level D
3. Involving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involving the community in discussion and debate • Ensuring informed input through briefings and information • Adopting a more personal and innovative approach through personal contact meetings/sessions that encourage participation • Involving at different times in the planning process, i.e. keeping informed and enabling further comment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level A • Level B
4. Collaborating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing a structure for involvement in decision-making, e.g. committee • Enabling ongoing involvement and keeping informed • Allocating responsibility in achieving initiatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level A • Level B

The engagement approach applied in each instance will be influenced by the assessed impact level. The impact and complexity level for any given matter will tend to reflect the engagement. The higher the impact, the greater the level of engagement.

Engagement matrix

The level of engagement that may be required is illustrated in the following diagram, giving an indication of the relationship between the degree of impact and the complexity of the information.

Impact/Complexity Diagram



This decision diagram is based on:

- Likely risk, and
- Complexity of the information which needs to be understood for a sound decision.

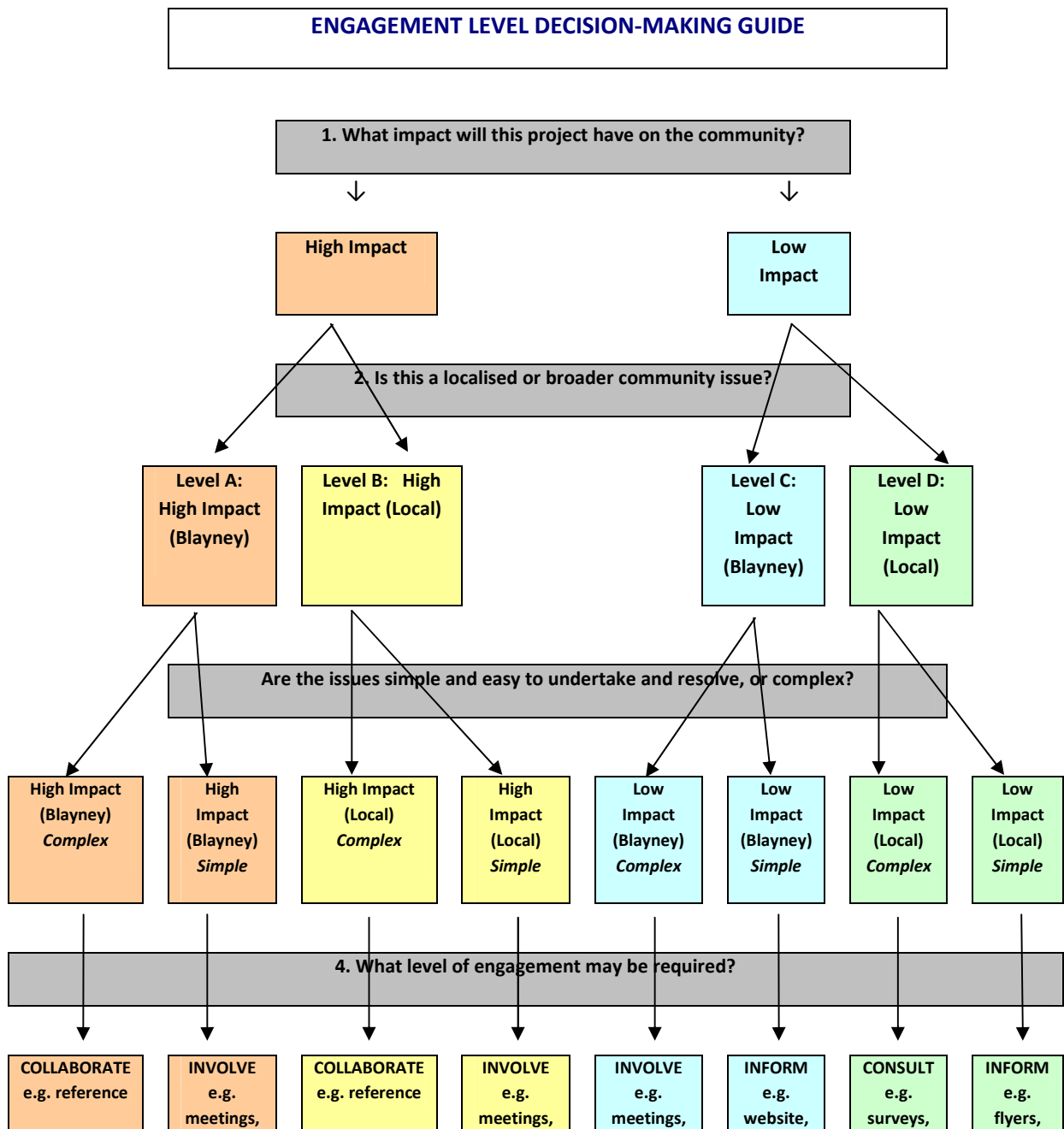
The example methodologies are indicative only of some of the numerous types of community engagement tools that Council may utilise.

Selection methodologies will depend on the outcomes of research that will include demographic, technical, legal and financial data. Recommendations and information provided by Council will, in all cases, be evidence based.

Engagement decision making guide

How the assessment of impact, locality or scope, and complexity works in practice is illustrated in the Engagement Level Decision-Making Guide below.

Council first evaluates the likely impact of the issue or project on the community and Council, and then asks whether it is a local issue or one with ramifications across the entire Shire. Council then considers whether the issue is easily understood or more complex before deciding on the methodologies of engagement. For many issues, it's typical that multiple types of engagement will occur, for example, letter box drops, surveys, focus groups, information sessions and one-on-one conversations.





When will Community Engagement Occur?

Council will engage the community in the following areas:

- **Strategy Planning**

This refers to the development of strategic plans and projects that inform the Management Plan and Business Plans

- **Policy Development and Implementation**

This includes any policy development that has a direct impact on the community

- **Site Specific**

This refers to any changes to a site that may have impact on the community

- **Service Planning**

This includes the development and/or improvement to a service

- **Areas of improvement**

This refers to any improvement required to increase the quality of lifestyle for the community e.g. shopping areas, open spaces, etc

- **Legislative Requirements, including planning issues**

This refers to all prescribed plans and projects under the Local Government Act (1993) and other relevant Acts

What level of Engagement will occur?

Council will call for different levels of engagement depending on the issue, and it’s immediate or long term impact on the community. The levels of engagement with the community may include:

Level 1	Inform	Giving information to the community
Level 2	Consult	Obtaining community feedback
Level 3	Involve	Participating directly with the community
Level 4	Collaborate	Partnering with the community to create solutions

How will Community Engagement Activities be managed?

Community engagement activities will include the following elements:

- **Management of the Community Engagement Activity**

Each community engagement activity will be the responsibility of the Manager within the lead unit

When planning community engagement, Managers need to ensure that resources (staff and finance) for engagement activities across Council are effectively allocated and managed. Where possible combine engagement activities with other activities that target similar communities

- **Community Representation**

In planning community engagement, Council will ensure that every effort is made to:

Attract and reach a cross section of the community by using a wide range of communications methods

Invite specific targeted community groups as identified in the project

Accommodate participants' cultural, language and special needs

Involve community groups who are sometimes hard to reach i.e. young people, people with disabilities, women, and people from ATSI backgrounds

- **Reporting back to Participants and the Community**

Upon completion of a community engagement activity, outcomes from the activity will be communicated to all participants and the community

A report will be developed outlining the community engagement outcomes, considerations, and recommendations made by Council

- **Evaluation of Community Engagement**

Upon completion of a community engagement activity, an evaluation will be conducted to assess:

Community representation

Type of communications publicity methods most suitable

Methods utilised for engaging the community

Timing i.e. promotion time and time of the actual activity

Qualitative and quantitative information gained and gathered

These assessment results will be used to improve future engagement plans and processes.

Steps in planning community engagement and questions to ask

When undertaking community engagement, Council will follow six steps and ask a series of associated questions:

Establish the level of impact and complexity of the project, programme or action***Council will ask:***

- What is the likely impact of the project, programme, issue or action on the community? High? Low? Or somewhere In-between?
- Is it localised or does it involve the broader community?
- Is the issue or project straightforward and easy to understand or is it and the implications, complex?
- Where does it sit on the Risk/Complexity matrix?

Identify all those communities of interest who have an interest around the issue***Council will ask:***

- Who has an interest in this project, program, issue or action?
- List all the individuals, groups and organisations.
- Make sure those who engage are 'representative' of all these relevant communities of interest

Plan the engagement process and gather or develop relevant information and resources***Council will ask:***

- What is the purpose of the engagement?
- What processes will we use?
- What information do people need to engage well?
- If there is an engagement event, what are the logistics of the event we have to organise e.g. venue, catering, materials, technology

Engage the relevant and identified communities of interest***Council will ask:***

- Have we given people enough notice?
- Does it clash with another event or priority in the community?
- Have we considered the convenience of participants?
- Am I fully prepared for the engagement?
- How we made it clear what the purpose of the engagement is?
- Does everyone know how their input will be used?

Feedback results of engagement and decision making if relevant***Council will ask:***

- Have we let participants know and got agreement over how their input will be used?
- Have we let people know the outcome of their input?

Evaluate the process***Council will ask:***

- What would we do differently next time to improve the process?

	Date	Minute No.
First Adopted:	11/02/2013	1301/006
	10/05/2013	1305/006
Last Reviewed:	01/04/2017	