RICHMOND VALLEY COUNCIL POLICY REGISTER

Policy No: 1.1.16

Reference: Community Relations - Community Consultation

POLICY:	**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**
FUNCTION:	Governance
OBJECTIVE:	To provide a direction for the conduct of community engagement including how Council engages, ranging from providing information to empowerment, planning and implementing community engagement, and the criteria to support decisions about when to engage the community
DIRECTORATE:	**CORPORATE SERVICES**

POLICY

STATEMENT OF INTENT

1. To encourage practices within Council that can result in effective and efficient community engagement that delivers quality decision making in the Richmond Valley Council, specifically:

    *   To provide a meaningful framework that encourages a positive and productive relationship with the whole operation of Council. This policy should be read in conjunction with the Community Engagement Strategy.

    *   To establish the community engagement principles that will be applied in Council decision making.

    *   To encourage community engagement practices that draw on the skills, experience and interests of its community in order to benefit Council's decision making processes.

    *   To ensure that Council's community engagement activities are clearly linked to the goals and objectives of the Community Strategic Plan.

    *   To ensure that Council's community engagement activities are inclusive of all members of the community.

    *   To foster collaboration and co-operation between Council and the community, including all levels of government, in the planning and implementation of strategies, programs, plans and services.

    *   To enhance our community's understanding and trust of Council and its various activities through improved relationships and communication.

2. This policy confirms the commitment of Richmond Valley Council to ensuring that community engagement forms an integral component of informed decision making and as such, aims to ensure that as many people as possible who may be affected by decisions of Council have the opportunity to be consulted about their opinions and needs and concerns prior to decisions being made.

3. Community engagement does not replace the decision making functions of Council and it must be recognised that legislative/statutory requirements in relation to the public exhibition/publication of information is a part of community engagement.

4. Community engagement is a process that involves the community in problem solving, decision making and uses public input to make decisions. Participants need to recognise that their involvement is about informing decision making, not making the decision.

5. Whilst it is not possible to consult with the community on every issue, Council would like to ensure that the community is as well informed as it can be on major issues, plans and projects, and has opportunities through community consultations to enhance Council's decision making.

DEFINITIONS

Definition of Community Engagement

Community engagement refers to connections between government, citizens and communities on a wide range of policy, program and service issues. It can be formal or informal. Richmond Valley Council understands community engagement to contain the following three elements:

- *Information*: To provide the community and key stakeholders with balanced and objective information on issues, decisions, policies, plans and strategies. Examples include:

  - articles in Council publications such as newsletters
  - newspapers and print media
  - web based information
  - community radio feedback

- *Consultation:* To obtain feedback from the community and key stakeholders on analysis and alternatives to inform a decision. Examples include:

  - surveys/questionnaires
  - focus groups
  - community workshops and documented conversations
  - resident or community interest groups
  - online comment via social media

- *Participation*: Responsibility for the final decision rests with Council but may, in some instances be shared with the community and key stakeholders. Participation is made up of several parts as follows:

  - *Involvement:* To work directly with the community and key stakeholders so that their concerns/issues are consistently understood and considered. Examples include:

    - working groups, residents groups or reference groups
    - consultative workshops
    - online comment via social media

- *Collaboration:* To partner with the community and key stakeholders in each aspect of the decision process - including the development of alternatives and identification of a solution. Examples include:

  - community panels that make recommendations to Council
  - advisory committees

- *Empowerment:* All final decisions rest with Council or a delegated officer of Council; Council may adopt recommendations from the community, unchanged (should the circumstances warrant such an approach), or authorise a community entity to proceed with a task that requires the entity to exercise a degree of decision making in dealing with matters contained within the task. Examples include:

  - community panels that participate in the decision forming process

PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT

The following principles will be utilised by Council to guide its community engagement processes:

1. **Flexibility;** techniques used will vary depending on the issues.

2. **Timing;** where possible, consultation/engagement will commence early in the planning or decision making process. A decision on the need for engagement will be made as part of the development of projects; accordingly, if engagement is to be undertaken, it will need to be built into the project timetable/decision making framework.

3. **Resources;** in determining levels and types of engagement the availability of resources will need to be considered.

4. **Transparency;** proposed engagement processes for each project should be clearly identified at the outset and there is openness and honesty about the scope and purpose of engagement.

5. **Representative;** in determining techniques/processes to be applied, efforts should be made to identify all interested parties and stakeholders (to ensure there is an opportunity for a diverse range of values and perspectives to be freely and fairly expressed and heard).

6. **Practicality/Effectiveness;** community engagement should be undertaken with a view to obtaining constructive input on issues so that the input received can be effective and practical to the situation.

7. **Enhancement;** engagement should focus on enhancing (not frustrating) the decision making processes.

8. **Deliberation;** there is sufficient and credible information for dialogue, choice and decisions, and the development of common understanding to appreciate the respective roles and responsibilities.

FRAMEWORK

As a guide, the following instances would involve consultation by Council (however, Council will determine the need for, and techniques to be used, for each project):

- the formation of long term strategic plans.

- medium term planning (between three to seven years, such as Facilities Needs Study/Heritage Studies, etc).

- short term planning of less than three years such as Development Control Plans, Plans of Management, Section 94 Contribution Plans, etc.

- immediate planning such as significant decisions not included in strategic planning documents, policy/strategic/development decisions that will have a significant impact on the community/or sections of the community.

- for any proposed changes that will impact on current users or customers of a Council service or facility.

- when Council wants to identify community issues, needs and priorities.

- when Council wants to monitor customer satisfaction with Council services and facilities.

- when there is a level of controversy or sensitivity about a particular issue.

The implementation of the above framework and other Community Engagement processes will involve the following:

(a) Council undertaking Engagement Processes as required by the statutory provisions of legislation and regulations.

(b) As part of the processes (e.g. reports to Council Meetings), consideration being given to the need for and extent of community engagement on the issues/ projects to which the report relates. Those considerations will be undertaken with reference to this policy and a determination made by Council/staff on engagement to be undertaken.

(c) When engagement has been identified as part of Council processes action will be taken to scope the engagement to be undertaken. The scoping process will identify "how" the engagement will be done.

(d) Community Engagement Committees/Groups will be established by Council with a view to the exchange of input and information (and also assisting in progressing actions).

(e) Community Groups and Organisations will be able to register their interest in receiving identified community engagement information on an ongoing basis.

(f) Business/Industry Sector Groups will be able to establish regular meetings with Senior Staff of Council.

(g) A Community Engagement Stakeholder List will be established for purposes of reviewing information on Council issues.

(h)   Locality Focus Groups will be established for interested community members who wish to have communications with Council via regular face-to-face meetings.

(i)   Social Media and other communication processes will be developed to focus on the exchange of information between Council and the community.

PROCESS OF CONSULTATION

Co-ordination of all community engagement will occur via a Community Engagement Panel of Council. All staff who are required to consult with, collaborate with the community of Richmond Valley must arrange to meet with the Panel prior to commencing any consultative activities. Consultation with children and young people will also be organised in co-ordination with the Community Engagement Panel.

The responsibility for effective community engagement remains with the Section of Council undertaking the process. The Community Engagement Panel is a resource available to assist the Section but does not abrogate any Section's responsibility for effective community engagement.

The Community Engagement Panel will establish and maintain a register of all consultations and other community engagement activities undertaken by Council. The Panel will also monitor Community Engagement processes.

Process Steps to be generally used as part of Council engagement processes are outlined in Appendix 1. It is intended that the term 'stakeholder' in this Policy represent a broader definition than a group with a special or particular interest in an issue and is extended to also incorporate both the broader community as well as Council staff as Council stakeholders.

MEETING PROTOCOLS

Council may also determine to conduct Public Meetings/Forums/Information Sessions. In these cases, the following protocols will apply:
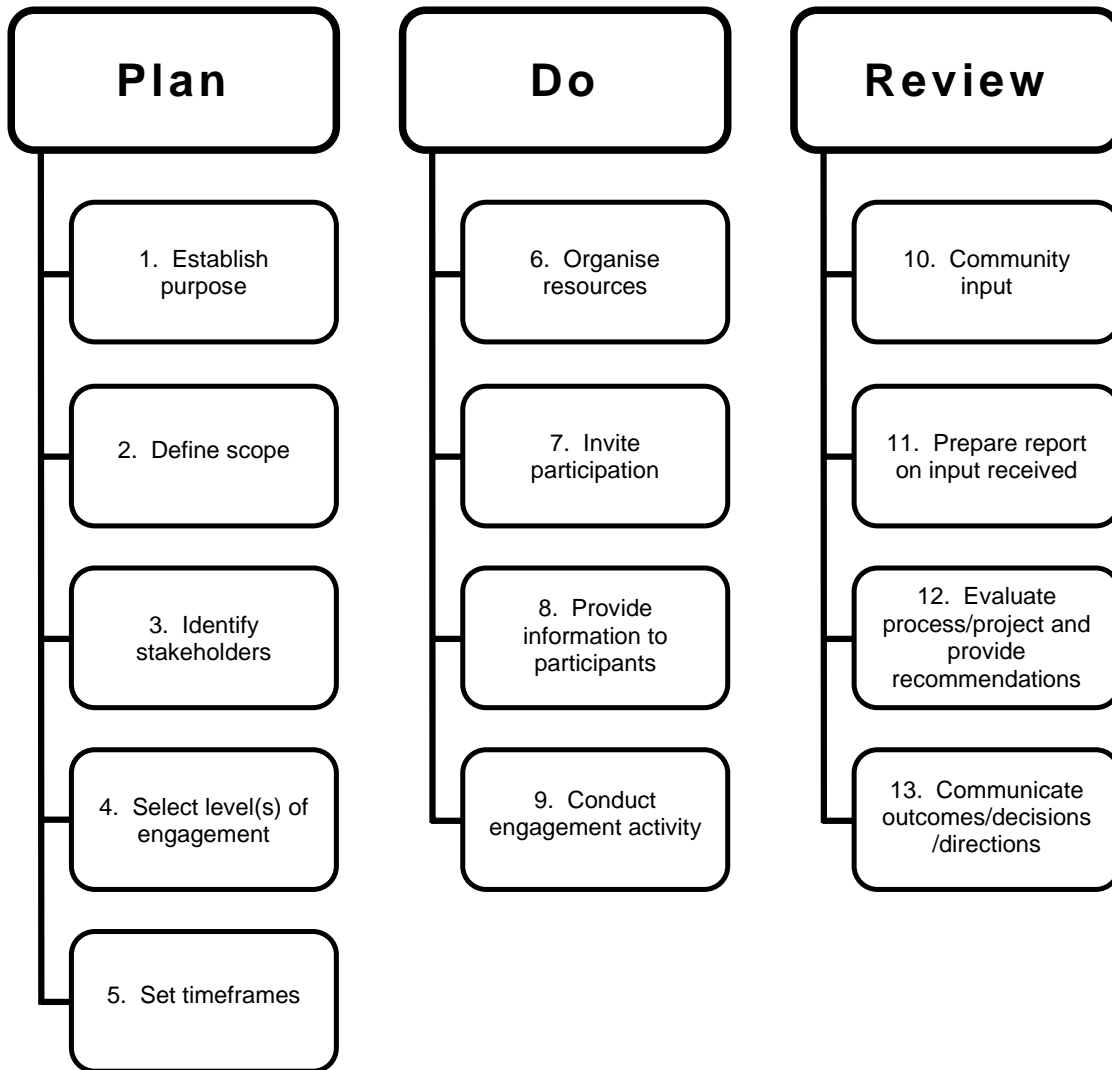
- The scope/subject matter/range of the meeting will be determined and advised as part of any invitation/advertisement. It will be made clear at the commencement of the meeting that participants are to remain within the parameters of the meeting "topic".

- It is Council's expectation that attendees at public meetings/information sessions will:
    - respect the Chair at all times
    - direct all questions/comments through the Chair
    - refrain from personal allegations, etc
    - leave the meeting room if requested by the Chair.

- Should these protocols not be met, Council reserves the right to terminate the Meeting/Forum/Information Session.

It is further expected by Council that the same protocols will apply to the attendance at public forums by staff/councillors and for the conduct of community engagement forums, etc.

VARIATION

Council reserves the right to amend this Policy from time to time.

PROCESS STEPS - RICHMOND VALLEY COUNCIL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Plan	Do	Review
1. Establish purpose	6. Organise resources	10. Community input
2. Define scope	7. Invite participation	11. Prepare report on input received
3. Identify stakeholders	8. Provide information to participants	12. Evaluate process/project and provide recommendations
4. Select level(s) of engagement	9. Conduct engagement activity	13. Communicate outcomes/decisions /directions
5. Set timeframes		

Setting out the process steps as part of the Policy is intended to promote a consistent approach to community engagement for whoever is the relevant 'community'.

Setting out a generic process allows the community to be clear about what they can expect from Council; however it is acknowledged that community engagement is not a 'one size fits all' process and application of the Policy needs to be flexible depending on the issues involved.