



Community Engagement

For Local Government Councillors

It is the business of council to involve the public in the business of government

Presentation prepared by the Australian Centre of
Excellence for Local Government



Community engagement: What is it?

Reaching out to communities to -

- Provide or ask for information
- Identify interest in an issue
- Seek ideas on what can be done
- Test proposals

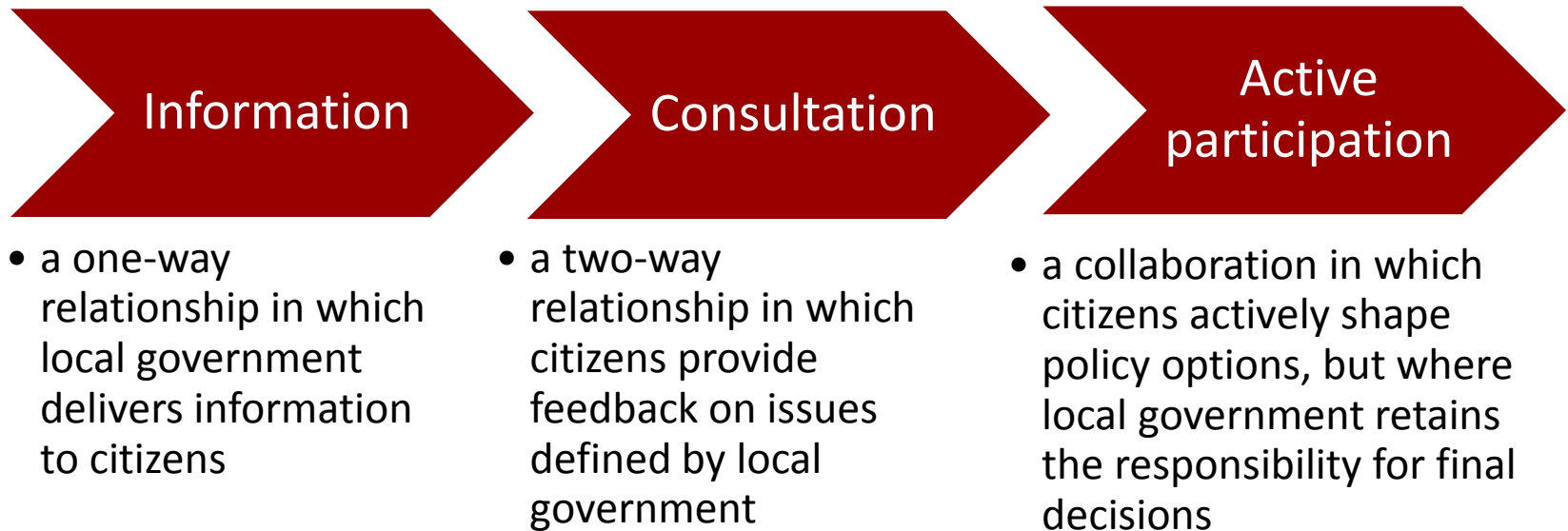


Its value is in both getting the **result** and **how** you get it

What is it?

It can be a little engagement or it can be a lot of engagement

The community engagement spectrum:



Why do it?

- ✓ Make better decisions
- ✓ Be transparent & accountable
- ✓ Empower the community



Make better decisions

Good Decisions are based on information and views from many sources

- Councillors are elected based on their knowledge, experience and views
- But they are also required to make decisions collectively and to listen to all stakeholders
- This can mean putting aside strong personal views for the sake of good governance



Be accountable and transparent

Transparency is at the heart of democratic governance -

- Local government legislation requires you to consult with residents when making local laws and in planning
- Democratic principles require you to engage broadly in carrying out all functions
- Legal rights to information + judicial review of decisions + an active media = your actions are open to scrutiny



Empower the community

Involving citizens is rewarding for them because -

- They get to have a say
- They feel included and valued
- They form social networks that connects them to others in the community
- They build understanding about public affairs

All this builds a strong and resilient community

Why is it good for council?

- Engagement reduces criticism of decision-making processes
- Helps achieve consensus
- Leads to more defensible decisions
- Council earns respect for enabling people to have a say and get involved
- Builds a better relationship between council and community
- Helps council understand the political pressures faced in dealing with an issue

What happens if you don't do it well?

TOY LUNCH
Blackfish Pub gives back to the community
PAGE 36

CAROL BOOK
Look for it in this week's paper
FULL OUT

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Public blasts 'sham' engagement

BC Ferries

Local residents, business owners and local government bodies blasted the province's planned rail to BC Ferries during a contentious-rivalling public engagement session in Glenora last Sunday that drew about 200 people.

Looking up to the city of Esquimalt secondary school on Nov. 30, speakers delivered scathingly the same message last year when the same panel of provincial officials appeared to BC Ferries engineers and staff to consult on the future of the ferry service.

"The firm, however the information was intended to get out to the various passenger domains, the allocation of some \$200 million to build a new bridge to Esquimalt to Ferries Bay and the proposed project itself," one speaker said. "So all these \$200 million of public money will change as a result of us standing here."

"We are engaged in this diagnostic and lateral engagement process," said BC Ferries' chief of customer relations, James Campbell. "We are not here today to engage in a discussion as to how we build the transportation system. We are here to tell the political community about the plan."

In contrast, he planned to announce the plan to the public, Campbell's group called for him to be replaced by BC Ferries.

"I've had your speakers around that the current business model is an essential part of the highway system, making consultation with high taxes and limited mobility that change their economic and social reality."

"The future of our community is at stake," said Jan Clough, past president of the North and District Chamber of Commerce, which is advocating an alternative route through the Strait of Juan de Fuca. "In 10 years time, how have you gone through the Strait? (Clough's firm is not a sustainable model.)"

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Newcastle council under fire for lack of consultation

Posted Mon 21 Oct 2013, 9:40am AEST

Newcastle Council's management style and a perceived lack of community consultation tonight.

The main issues to be discussed include the Newcastle Art Gallery, Beresfield Pool, the former Loft youth venue and lifeguards at the city's beaches.

Meeting spokesman and Newcastle Art Gallery Society committee member, Peter Frost says it appears too many decisions are being made behind closed doors without adequate consultation.

Mr Frost says ultimately the city is losing out.

"What we are seeing here is the councillors are being gagged from speaking with the public after council meetings and the whole management style is something the residents of Newcastle are not at all happy with," he said.

"This sort of management is like a done deal kind of thing between some councillors and the new general manager."

Mr Frost says community consultation does not appear to be high on Council's agenda.

"This idea of closing down councillors by not being able to discuss issues with their constituents is not a good look for this council."

"We just believe in the spirit of openness and transparency we are not getting that from this council."

PHOTO: A public meeting called to discuss concerns over a lack of consultation within Newcastle Council.
(ABC News: Dan Cox)

MAP: Newcastle 2300

What do councils tend to engage about?

Common topics for engagement by councils are:

- Corporate planning, community planning and land use planning
- The design and location of new infrastructure including roads and other developments
- Specific programs, e.g. sport, recreation, employment, training, crime prevention, flood mitigation, tourism
- Youth Issues
- Local government service levels and standards
- Input into state/federal issues, e.g. alcohol management, housing, health

What is the role of councillors?

Councillors represent their community by:

- Understanding needs, aspirations and priorities
- Considering all relevant information and options
- Making decisions about what to do and how
- Communicating council's decisions
- Implementing council's decisions
- Being accountable and transparent

Which of these require community engagement?

When do councillors need to engage?

Role of councillors	Community Engagement
<i>When a councillor is:</i>	<i>They might need to:</i>
Getting to know community needs, aspirations and priorities	Consult about new plans and laws Listen to people during everyday contact (conversations, letters, emails)
Considering options for action	Consult affected people or groups Involve people & experts in assessing the options
Making decisions	
Communicating decisions	Provide information to the public
Implementing decisions	Consult affected groups about the details of where and how Provide progress reports to the public
Being accountable and transparent	Provide information to the public Be available to answer questions

How to create an engagement culture?

Councillors are leaders and ‘set the tone’ for a council – they can create an engagement culture by:

- Believing it is important
- Taking time to improve engagement skills
- Ensuring frontline staff receive training in community engagement and communications
- Ensuring staff have adequate resources for engagement
- Building ‘engagement thinking’ into everyday practices
 - How can staff use interactions with residents to better inform or interest them in council affairs?
 - Do staff reports to council include information on how the community was engaged?

What is the role of council staff?

Staff manage engagement exercises by:

- Identifying needs and advising council
- Devising approaches in consultation with councillors
- Considering the broader context (e.g. other activity in the area) and seeking to coordinate with similar activities

How councillors can work with staff?

- Councillors and staff have mutual responsibilities in supporting a council's community engagement effort

Councillors ➡ make a community engagement policy

➡ ensure training and development for staff

➡ allocate budget for engagement

➡ create an engagement culture

Staff ➡ manage community engagement processes

➡ advise and assist councillors

➡ report to council on engagement outcomes

Why a policy may be a good start?

- A Community Engagement Policy:
 - states council's commitment to engaging the community
 - sets out the principles that guide council's approach
- Developing a policy:
 - is a process for council to discuss how it wants to do this (gets everyone 'on the same page')
 - demonstrates to the public that council is serious
 - gives guidance to staff and individual councillors

How to engage for a specific project

- 
- 1 • Decide whether community engagement is required
 - 2 • Define the objectives and scope of the engagement
 - 3 • Identify who will be engaged
 - 4 • Choose the right tools to engage
 - 5 • Engage
 - 6 • Report back to council
 - 7 • Close the loop (report back to stakeholders)

Tips on Engagement - Process

- Involve key people and groups in planning the exercise
- Define the issue precisely and be clear about what can be achieved
- Make sure everyone knows the limits to the process (non-negotiables)
- It's about listening first; explaining and defending a decision comes later
- Don't assume you 'get it' all after one meeting – keep listening
- Expect conflict and have a strategy for dealing with it
- Ensure there are at least small outcomes along the way
- Have a communications plan for regular feedback, to let people know their input is valued and to get more people on board

Tips on Engagement - Culture

- Token consultation efforts will annoy and alienate people
- Acknowledge any divisive history which could be an obstacle
- People often just want to actually be heard
- Celebrate achievements and thank contributors
- Don't get disheartened – focus on strengths not weaknesses
- Council staff have a big role to play – ensure they have resources and training

Take Home Messages

- It's about **better decisions** and **happier residents**
- The skills of effective engagement may come more easily to some, but a good councillor knows to:
 - L**isten more than they talk
 - E**ngage early and often
 - A**lways give feedback and reasons for decisions
 - R**einforce engagement culture
 - N**eed advice from, and give support to, staff