



LEETON
SHIRE COUNCIL

Community Engagement Strategy

February 2017

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REVIEW OF THIS POLICY

This Policy will be reviewed every 4 years or as required in the event of legislative changes. The Policy may also be changed as a result of other amendments that are to the advantage of Council and in the spirit of this Policy. Any amendment to the Policy must be by way of a Council Resolution or the approval of the General Manager.

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1. Introduction

Council is committed to actively seeking and considering the views of the community when planning or deliberating on important policies or projects.

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 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.

2. What is Community Engagement

Community engagement refers to the many ways that Council connects with citizens in the development and implementation of policies, programs and services.

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.

3. What are the benefits of Community Engagement?

- **It compliments representative democracy**

The choices that people make at election time do not necessarily guarantee that they will agree with everything their representatives may do in the future. Systematic and regular consultation is necessary to complement the electoral process by informing governments of the ongoing issues within the community.

- **It leads to better decision making**

Good decision making is likely to occur when decisions are based on good information, when Councillors have the opportunity to put forward their point of view, and where there has been community input. Community engagement means keeping the community informed and involved in ongoing consultation; so that Council can make better decisions that more closely match the needs and aspirations of the community.

- **It fosters networks and new relationships**

Close relationships between Council and the community foster networks and new relationships that can lead to increased opportunity for co- operation and coordination of projects and services to improve the community.

- **Creates a strong community**

A community that is informed about, and engaged in, local issues creates an involved and therefore strong community. Local government has an important role to play in building stronger communities. Engaging the community should be highly valued and a goal which influences all activities of local government.

- **Trust and confidence in Local Government**

A community is more likely to feel trust and confidence in its local government if the community is engaged in and involved with its governance. That is, the community participates, is consulted, is informed, and generally feels part of the governance process.

- **Community leadership**

Community engagement is also beneficial to Council's role as a community leader. Council leadership needs to be characterised by processes of providing information and explanation, consultation, and checking of its position through appropriate means.

- **In addition, community engagement can:**
 - Increase involvement in the processes contributing to decision making, strengthening peoples feeling of political effectiveness, creating more accessible government
 - Through appropriate methods increase the involvement of those who tend to be less involved in decision making processes
 - Help Council rationally address competing priorities
 - Raise awareness and foster positive attitudinal and behaviour change.

4. What are some of the challenges of Community Engagement?

- **Meeting expectations**

Community Engagement is a commitment by Council to use a number of forms of interaction to inform, consult, and involve citizens. These forms of engagement will vary depending on the issues involved. However, Community Engagement is not a process whereby every citizen is necessarily consulted on every issue. Nor is it a process where consensus will be achieved on every matter under consideration. Competing expectations need to be recognised and managed such that stakeholders are provided with information that explains outcome decisions.

- **Community Plans v/s Council Plans**

Empowerment of communities to achieve desired goals is frequently an outcome of Community Engagement. Council's may be able to provide assistance in some part of a community aspiration; however one of the challenges is to balance desire with capacity, and clarity of understanding about the concept of communities building communities, as opposed to citizens identifying a "problem" that Council needs to "fix".

- **Adequate Resourcing Levels**

Effective Community Engagement requires a strong commitment to be successful. This commitment needs to be both a genuine desire by Council to engage and then listen to the views of the community; but it also requires a commensurate commitment of adequate resources (cash and people) to ensure that the engagement process can be properly conducted.

- **Broad Community Participation**

One of the key challenges is in engaging the broader community, and not just the same interested community members all of the time. There is a need to ensure that a variety of engagement tools are utilised, not simply approaches such as public meetings (which are not always productive). There is also a need to ensure that strategies consider ways to engage a representative segment of the entire community (age, gender, geographic location, ethnicity, occupation and interest). Considerations such as the time of the day (and the week) that engagement strategies are scheduled, physical access to venues, and the presentation of material in an understandable form are all important elements.

5. Implementation of 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 Leeton 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 Leeton 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 Leeton 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 Leeton 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 focused 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.

6. 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.

7. 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)
- "Have Your Say Leeton" is a web-based engagement portal that has been introduced to improve the opportunity for community to participate as active and engaged citizens of the Shire at a time and from a location that best suits them.

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.

8. Triggers for Engagement

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 Leeton 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).

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

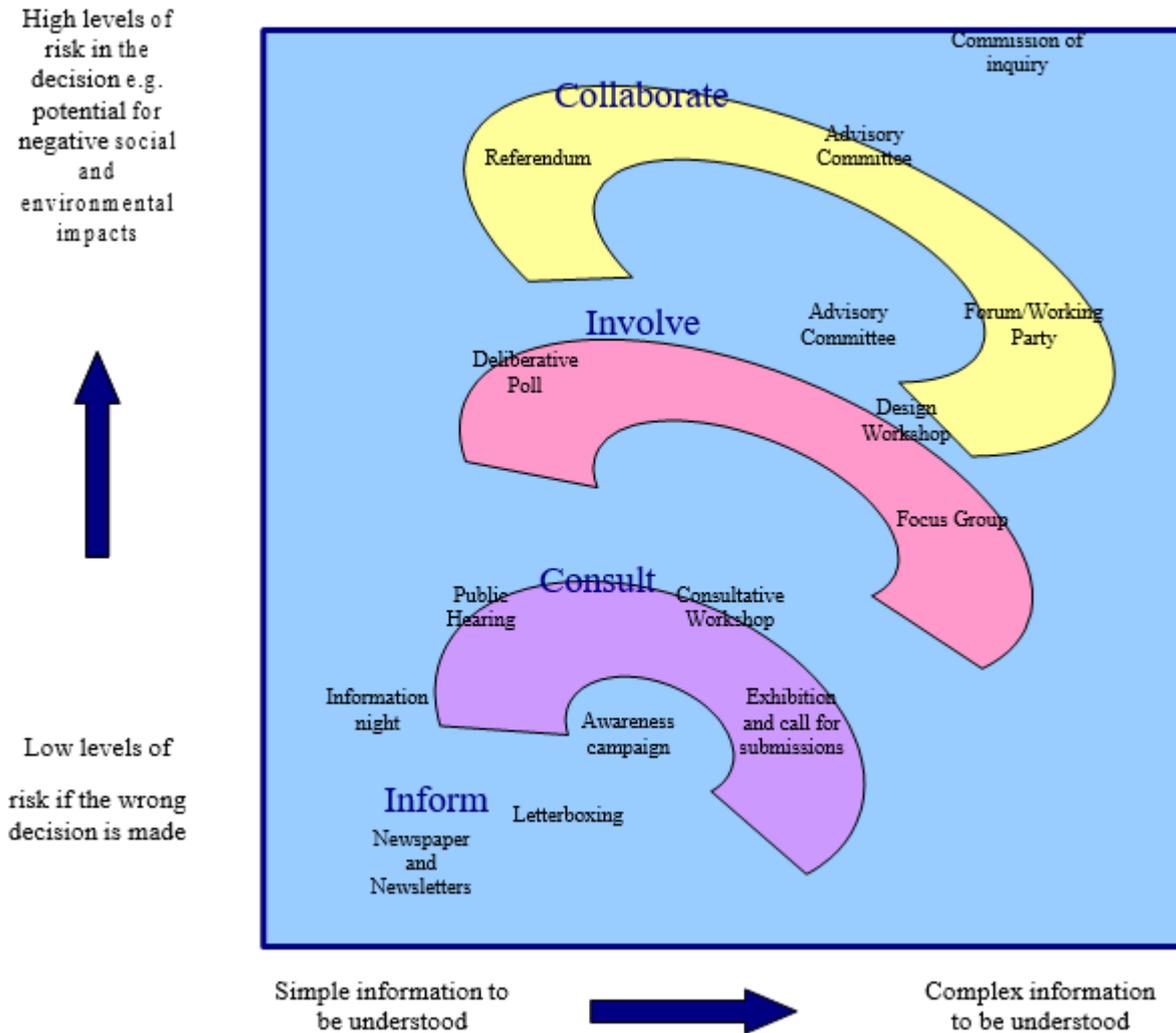
Level of Impact	Criteria (one or more of the following)	Examples
<p>Level A High Impact - Leeton Shire High level of impact or risk, perceived or real, on the whole or a large part of Leeton Shire</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential high impact on State or regional strategies or directions • High level of real or perceived impact or risk across Leeton Shire • Any significant impact on attributes that are considered to be of high value to the whole of Leeton Shire, such as the natural environment or heritage • Any impact on the health, safety or well-being of the Leeton Shire community • Potential high degree of controversy or conflict • Likely high level interest across Leeton 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 Leeton Shire, e.g. Library Services • Provision of a district or regional facility, e.g. skate park, indoor sports centre • Key changes to a Leeton 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 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 – Leeton Shire Lower level of impact on the whole or a large part of Leeton Shire</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower, although still some real or perceived impact of risk across Leeton 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 Leeton 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

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 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.

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.



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.

9. Areas or Activities Requiring Engagement

Council will engage the community for:

Strategy Planning

This refers to the development of strategic plans and projects that inform the Delivery Program, Annual Operations Plan and Resourcing Strategy.

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

10. 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
Level 5	Empower	Placing the final decision-making in the hands of the community

11. Management of Community Engagement Activities

Management of the Community Engagement Activity

- Each community engagement activity will be the responsibility of the Manager within the lead unit, in collaboration with the Corporate Communications Coordinator.
- 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, including "Have Your Say"
- 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, a report will be developed outlining the community engagement outcomes, considerations, and recommendations made to Council

Submitters will be informed of the upcoming Council meeting where their views will be tabled and considered, with advice on how the information can be accessed on Council's website. They will also be invited to present their views verbally to Council (subject to time limits in place for the occasion).

In some circumstances, submitters may receive individual responses. In other circumstances, submitters will be provided with general responses. Each situation will be decided on merit and with consideration of Council resourcing at the time.

Evaluation of Community Engagement

Upon completion of a community engagement activity, an evaluation may 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.