



Strengthening Community Engagement

October 2012

Community engagement informs the development of the Strategic Community Plan

This paper provides background information on the community engagement resources published on the Department of Local Government's Integrated Planning and Reporting website, and discusses the alignment of community engagement to the Strategic Community Planning process.

Community engagement is not new to local governments. However, communities are increasingly seeking local governments to move beyond traditional activities towards partnering with the community in making decisions about how to meet their needs.

Across Australia, community engagement is progressively being reframed as core local government business. In Western Australia, community engagement underpins the development of a local government's Strategic Community Plan.

Community engagement and Integrated Planning

All local governments will be required to develop a Strategic Community Plan

The regulatory framework for Integrated Planning has implications for the focus of community engagement in the local government sector. New regulations require all local governments to develop a Strategic Community Plan together with their communities by 1 July 2013. Community engagement practices will underpin this new focus.

Community engagement ensures communities can participate in decisions that affect them, and at a level that meets their expectations. It helps strengthen the relationship between communities and government, enabling stakeholders to become part of the process, while assisting to build consensus.

The community engagement strategy adopted by a local government will aim to capture a community's vision, aspirations and service expectations for inclusion in the Strategic Community Plan. The Strategic Community Plan is supported by other informing strategies such as asset management and long term financial plans. This ensures the local government's resources are best placed to meet community needs.

Engagement improves community participation in decision-making

Local governments need to adopt community engagement practices as a core function. Across the spectrum of local governments there are significant differences in capacity, capability and culture towards community engagement. Some local governments may only meet minimum requirements while others dedicate significant resources towards community engagement.

The community engagement resources on the Integrated Planning and Reporting website have drawn on the expertise of community engagement practitioners in local government, and acknowledge the need for flexible and responsive community engagement strategies.

Meeting key performance measures

Performance measures establish short and long term priorities

Capacity building initiatives, and the associated regulatory framework, are increasing local government awareness of a broader vision of community governance.

The Integrated Planning and Reporting website includes community engagement resources which are intended to be flexible and non-prescriptive. Recognised industry standards are identified and reflect national and international best practice in community engagement. The resources aim to provide practical assistance, rather than high-level concepts and theories.

The Department of Local Government has also released an Advisory Standard to assist local governments in preparing its plan for the future, and comply with the new regulations.

Local government should ensure appropriate community engagement practices are undertaken

The Advisory Standard details how local governments can meet basic standards of Integrated Planning and outlines the concepts that will guide the development of intermediate and advanced standards. The Department has also developed a Performance Measurement Framework to monitor local government performance and identify emerging trends and areas of need within the sector.

Key performance indicators will enable local governments to identify whether they are meeting the baseline level. In time, the performance indicators will provide evidence of the effectiveness of a local government's Strategic Community Plan and the relationship that has with the other components of Integrated Planning.

In order to meet baseline capabilities, local governments will need to demonstrate community input into the Strategic Community Plan and a consideration of the community's aspirations, vision and objectives.

Community input must be demonstrated

To align the local government priorities and resources, local governments must ensure that appropriate community engagement practices are implemented.

Key considerations for local governments

From 1 July 2013, local governments will be required to provide evidence of their community engagement in the Strategic Community Plan. Local governments will develop their community engagement strategy by identifying which tools and techniques will best identify community aspirations and priorities.

Policy

Local governments may need to review their community engagement policies as the regulations take effect. The regulatory framework, associated Advisory Standard and the Performance Measurement Framework have inherent expectations that local governments move beyond basic compliance to improved outcomes for both the community and local government.

Practicality

Information on community engagement varies markedly between the academic, the prescriptive and the practical. The resources on the Department of Local Government's Integrated Planning and Reporting website seek to support the needs of WA local governments.

Methodology

The vision, strategies and actions of the Strategic Community Plan need to be informed by the views of community members. Harnessing their input requires a range of strategies to foster community ownership and improve outcomes.

To engage with all sectors of the community, multiple objectives and opportunities need to underpin the approach. This highlights the need to ensure that local governments develop a sound methodology tailored to their community's needs.

Language and values

The need for shared understanding of the language and values that underpin community engagement is paramount. To this end, the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum and principles have been identified as a guiding framework for community engagement. Local governments should consider using IAP2 or an equivalent framework to guide their community engagement activities.

Resources

There is a wealth of material and resources to assist with community engagement. While further work is being undertaken to apply this information to the Western Australian context, there is value in examining practices from other states.

Challenges and directions

Finding the right blend of community engagement, governance and decision-making processes will be a challenge for many local governments.

The aim of the new Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework is to ensure the outcomes of community engagement inform local government decision making.

This will provide a balance between strong civic leadership and community participation and influence. A culture which acknowledges citizen participation, coupled with an effective community engagement strategy, will create greater accountability and transparency in local government decision-making.

The Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework emphasises community engagement and local democracy. This will lead to clearly articulated community and local government aspirations, while facilitating balanced decision making.

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This guide has been produced by the Department of Local Government to provide a context to the community engagement resources on the Department of Local Government's Integrated Planning and Reporting website and discuss the alignment of community engagement to the Strategic Community Planning process.

