

A New Heart for an Old Soul — Local Government Engagement

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Introduction

The perceptions of local government consultative practices rarely reflect words like participative, empowering, transparent, clear, community-centred or culturally appropriate.

Local government is regularly criticised by its communities for its 'engagement methods'. We underestimate the 'value' of strategic engagement. We have become accustomed to being infamous as opposed to famous for our consultative undertakings.

Local government authorities play a major role in every community through planning, development and service delivery. As local government continues to come to grips with the transformation of the 'citizen' to the 'customer' it is surprising that they do not continue to truly value sound community engagement processes. Authorities enlist the assistance of consultants to actually undertake engagement on their behalf with the community. Who is engaging with whom?

This paper proposes that 'real' community engagement is the most effective method that local government can utilise to support the development of sustainable communities and pursue the goal of becoming a meaningful level of governance in Australia.

Background

In 2003, after a 'major' public relations disaster with the construction of a roundabout on the entry to the city of Wollongong, our division — Community & Cultural Services — was contacted by the Manager of Works to provide advice on their next project, a suburban retail main street refurbishment. Initially we were asked to provide advice to the head engineer on the options for consulting with the community. This became the 'seed' for what is now a significant business function of our division, servicing both internal and external customers.

The retail refurbishment project provided us with the opportunity to demonstrate the expertise and 'craft' that had been developing and evolving within Community & Cultural Services over the past twenty years. Our division, like so many others within local government throughout Australasia, has never been recognised or promoted as an effective and efficient deliverer of 'mainstream' community engagement services.

This project enabled the division to pilot a range of engagement methods relevant to the communities that reside within the particular suburb.

In 2004, based on our learning's from the retail refurbishment project, we developed an ambitious social planning project. The Social Data Research Project was to become the largest social research project ever undertaken by Wollongong City Council, with 24 staff involved. The project had four primary objectives:

- To identify the social issues for each suburb in the community.
- Pilot engagement methods for relevant communities.
- Develop information management systems.
- Establish and develop a rapport with communities.

The project was an unequivocal success in terms of not only meeting its objectives but also being the impetus for the development of an engagement framework and operational model for Wollongong City Council.

Results

When researching the development of a methodology for the project, we identified that much of the existing work focussed on engagement of communities in decision-making. Whilst the importance of this was not debated, we believed that the 'context' being 'decision-making' contaminated the 'engagement experience' for all participating parties. It was our hypothesis that we needed to establish engagement free from the power dynamics directly related to decision-making. Engagement needed to be focussed purely on 'engagement-ironic'.

The engagement approach developed and successfully piloted is comprised of four specific elements:

- Purpose.
- Place.
- People.
- Issue.

The 'purpose' of the engagement is integral to determining the most effective method. Clarity on what the 'means' of the process is crucial. This must be complemented by a 'comprehensive' understanding of 'whom' it is that council plans to engage with. To do this the following elements have been outlined: local profiling of communities based on place (locality), people (demographics) and issues (social, economic and environmental) is the most effective means to 'knowing' who you need to engage with.

The *Oxford Dictionary* defines 'place' as 'a particular part of an area'. In this context the 'place' can relate to:

- locality-specific issues
- geography — natural environment
- built environment
- location — in relation to region
- governance.

The *Oxford Dictionary* defines 'people' as "human beings; persons composing a community". The context of this discussion proposes 'people' can be defined by:

- age
- gender
- family composition
- income
- education
- religion
- cultural or racial heritage.

'Issue' is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary* as "an important topic". The 'issues' in this context can include, but are not limited, to:

- crime and safety
- health
- transport
- access to education
- access to resources, e.g. places, information, democratic processes, etc.
- financial position
- recreation
- employment.

The combination of each of these components provides the profile of the area or locality.

Similarly, the practices applied (how) to consult and engage with communities or individuals must reflect place, people and issue profiles. Council has developed a register of engagement methods that provide the most effective means to engaging particular individual's or collectives based on:

- purpose
- place
- people
- issue.

The Social Data Research Project tested various methods with great success. The project was purely focussed on identifying issues across every suburb of the city. The project purposely did not offer to directly deliver solutions to issues identified in communities. So in this case participants were offered the opportunity to merely log their issues with no 'real' commitment to delivering results. It was thought that this lack of any incentive other than 'telling council' could enable us to measure the effectiveness of our engagement processes.

The project offered a number of challenges including connecting with one of Australia's most culturally diverse local government areas, demographic including children (3-12) that have never really been consulted and a council with a 'poor' reputation for engaging with local communities.

The results in terms of level of participation, feedback on consultative methods and the data itself exceeded our initial goals. The project has become the catalyst for change across the organisation, an improved perception of council, and has provided a tangible opportunity to be able to continue talk with communities about a range of issues — the real goal.

Framework

A Community Engagement Framework for Wollongong City Council has been established. It informs all of council's methods of engagement. It is based on a continuous improvement cycle enabling council to focus on building capacity.

The Framework is comprised of the following elements:

- Philosophy.
- Policy.
- Principles.
- Protocols.
- Process.

The Framework is also supported by a unit that provides a range of services to internal and external customers. Principally, the unit delivers:

- training
- information
- consultative services.

Training

The unit provides a range of workshops to internal/external customers on methods of engaging the community through generic workshops on:

- preparing for consultations
- profiling stakeholders
- appropriate methods of engagement
- evaluation of engagement processes.

Specialist training can also be designed based on a specific request or need.

Information

Information is a key component of council's approach. Access to accurate data and intelligence is recognised as an important element in designing and preparing for engagement processes. We have developed efficient databases (Information Technology) to support individuals who are required to engage with the community.

Information packages outlining the basic content of the training workshops are available. The packages are available in hardcopy or on our intranet. Information on how to contact particular communities is also provided.

Additionally, council has established a Community Engagement Register. Community consultations and engagement undertaken by all divisions of council can be logged with the unit and be available on council's intranet or directly through the unit. Information available includes:

- the nature of the Community Engagement (subject)
- location/community engaged
- method(s) of engagement
- council officer/contact details
- costs
- date the engagement was undertaken
- notes for future reference.

The Community Engagement Register is proposed as a means to:

- promote coordination of engagement
- reduce over engagement
- share existing knowledge and intelligence
- map community engagement
- identify community engagement costs to council.

Consultative services

The unit provides a range of consultative service options to customers:

- Direct delivery — the unit delivers consultative and engagement services on behalf of customers. This includes planning projects, capital projects and community consultations.
- Support services — this is in the form of providing advice or support to a customer throughout an engagement process. A mentoring or coaching role can be delivered.

The Community Engagement Unit promotes and actively implements an evaluation framework. This enables the unit to determine its effectiveness overall, and assist customers to measure their own processes.

Conclusion

Wollongong City Council's approach to engagement reflects the locality. It is a local government area-centric approach that aims to deliver performance improvement and guide any community engagement process undertaken by internal services. However, the Framework is portable and can be applied elsewhere.

Council now has a systemic approach, supported by technology, with a suite of engagement methods that enable a more effective method of engaging individuals and groups living in the Wollongong local government area.