

Engaging *Communities* in Community Renewal: Challenges, Success Factors and Critical Questions

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of how the Queensland Government's Community Renewal program engages community in regenerating targeted neighbourhoods across the state.

The paper is broken into five parts:

1. Overview of the Community Renewal program
2. Key community engagement mechanisms in community renewal
3. Community engagement challenges
4. Success factors
5. Critical questions to guide future practice.

Keywords

Community renewal, neighbourhood regeneration, community engagement practice, whole-of-government place strategy, Queensland

Part 1: Overview of the Community Renewal Program

The Queensland Government established the Community Renewal program in 1998 and has since committed \$158.5 million until 2009 for the regeneration of 24 neighbourhoods across the state. These neighbourhoods are among the 10 per cent of communities in Queensland that exhibit the highest levels of concentrated and entrenched social and economic stress.

Since its inception as a centrepiece of the government's crime prevention strategy in 1998, the program has matured into a whole-of-government place-based strategy that works in partnership with government, community and business sectors to develop communities where people feel valued, safe and proud. Through the program, the government engages people living and working in renewal areas to identify and prioritise local issues, and to assist in the development of strategies and actions to address the identified priority issues.

The program has the flexibility to broker funding for issues that span government department portfolios. For example:

- Health and wellbeing; employment of community health workers for a caravan park

- Economic development; business support initiatives and community enterprises
- Neighbourhood amenity; barbecue facilities for parks, renovating community facilities
- Community safety; police beats, safety audits, first aid training
- Cultural development; artists-in-residence in schools, place making, festivals
- Sport and recreation; holiday activities for children, sponsorship of local football team
- Employment and training; homework and Internet centres, traineeships through renewal projects.

The Community Renewal program is administered by the Department of Housing because targeted renewal areas have high concentrations of public or low-cost private rental housing. In many areas, the program has been rolled out in conjunction with the department's Urban Renewal program, which undertakes physical improvements to public housing stock and estates.

The program's three objectives are:

- improved outcomes for renewal areas by stimulating new responses to locally identified priorities
- increased capacity of renewal communities to harness the full resources of government, business and community sectors to develop sustainable responses to local issues and priorities
- improved responsiveness by government to the aspirations and needs of renewal communities through the use of whole-of-government processes and local actions that link government to community.

Effective community engagement is implicit in the achievement of all three program objectives, and as such is central to the Community Renewal planning processes.

In December 2003, the Queensland Government announced a further commitment to Community Renewal, extending the program until 2009 and expanding it into nine new renewal areas. With the extension of the program, the government took the opportunity to make reforms to the design and operational structure of the program. Key changes for implementation in Phase 2 of the program (2004–09) include:

- a shift from neighbourhood-based planning and delivery to a 'zone approach', with renewal zones comprised of designated renewal neighbourhoods and surrounding areas
- greater emphasis on securing ongoing funding from program partners to sustain project outcomes into the future
- broadening of community involvement in renewal planning
- greater emphasis on community capacity building.

Defining community engagement for Community Renewal

Community engagement, as endorsed by the Queensland Government, involves “connections between governments, citizens and communities on a range of policy, program and service issues. It encompasses a wide variety of government-community interactions ranging from information sharing to community consultation, and in some instances, active participation in government decision-making processes” (Queensland Government 2004, p. 5).

The Community Renewal program recognises that for community engagement to be effective both community members and the public sector need skills and capacities to participate in and manage community engagement activities. Program resources are dedicated to building community capacity to participate in renewal planning, with program officers undergoing professional development to increase the program’s community engagement practice.

Part 2: Key community engagement mechanisms in Community Renewal

Part 2 overviews how the Community Renewal program facilitates community engagement in some of the state’s most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, managing input from residents, community groups and non-government organisations.

The key community engagement mechanisms used in Phase 1 of the program (1998–2004) have been built on for Phase 2 delivery (2004–09). Table 1 provides a comparative summary of the key community engagement mechanisms used in Phase 1 and 2. Appendix 1 maps the Phase 2 engagement practices against the Queensland Government’s three levels of community engagement: information, consultation and active participation.

Table 1. Comparative summary of key community engagement mechanisms used by Community Renewal in Phase 1 (1998–2004) and Phase 2 (2004–09) of program delivery

Phase 1: 1998–2004	Phase 2: 2004–09
<i>Community participation in area-based planning</i>	
Community Action Planning (CAP) in discrete renewal neighbourhoods. Planning undertaken in the main by external consultants using a range of engagement methods including surveys, speak-outs, community meetings and planning workshops.	Zone planning across a cluster of renewal neighbourhood/s and surrounding suburbs. Planning undertaken by program staff using a range of community engagement methods including surveys, neighbourhood fun days and film nights, planning stalls, focus groups, meetings with non-government organisations, youth-specific consultations (e.g. Saturday mornings at the Marsden skate park), coffee stands at shopping centres, breakfasts with school principals, storyboarding, multi-stakeholder planning workshops, priority

	issue working groups.
CAP Implementation Steering Committees or Project Coordination Groups (comprised of community representatives, local and state government workers) monitored the implementation of community action plans and specific renewal projects.	Zone Planning and Coordination Committees may be formed in renewal zones to oversee the implementation and review of Renewal Zone Planning and Delivery. Committees are likely to be comprised of residents, state, local and non-government agencies. To date these committees have not been formed in renewal zones.
<i>Project planning</i>	
Project working groups (comprised of residents, representatives of community organisations and state and local government) established to steer the development and implementation of specific projects or themes (e.g. transport).	Continue in Phase 2
<i>Community participation in cross-government forums</i>	
Resident and/or community organisation participation in subcommittees of Regional Managers Forums of state and local government. These forums considered cross-portfolio, area-specific strategies.	Community participation in these forums (now named Regional Managers' Coordination Networks — RMCNs) will depend on champions within each RMNC to establish specific Community Renewal subcommittees that enable community participation.
<i>Community reference/focus groups</i>	
Community Reference Groups (CRGs) established in nearly all areas comprised mainly of residents and community workers with attendance by elected representatives and government workers. CRGs monitored community actions plans (CAPs), reviewed and endorsed all project proposals on behalf of the community and provided the community voice for the program.	No single community reference group to be established or maintained by the program in a renewal area. Rather, outreach to existing community and resident groups where possible and form reference or focus groups from time to time to advise the program on community issues. Emphasis on gaining a broader representation of community views. No single community body to endorse renewal funded projects, however all projects must demonstrate community support.
<i>Ongoing community participation and program feedback</i>	
Community Reference Groups provided an ongoing community input into area planning and project endorsements.	Quarterly Community Forums or Information sessions hosted by Community Renewal in each renewal zone and/or area to provide

	feedback on renewal progress and seek resident input into forward planning.
	Potential of establishing community advisory committees to make recommendations about the allocation of local community capacity building funds by Community Renewal.
Written communication and use of local media, information stalls, events, street BBQs, community festivals, project launches.	Same in Phase 2 with greater emphasis on designing communication and events to engage broader community participation in program activities.

Community experiences of participating in Community Renewal

The summary table above does not reveal the personal and community impacts that have arisen from community participation in the Community Renewal process. People involved in community reference and project working groups are exposed to government planning processes and community problem solving. Many community members have developed skills in active listening, public speaking, negotiating and networking. Through surveys conducted with former community reference group members, residents also commented that “getting to know other people” was one of the best things about being involved in Community Renewal.

The following vignettes are from residents who have been involved in Community Renewal. They share their stories of engagement with the Community Renewal process.

In 1999–2000, residents participated in community action planning in the renewal area of Eagleby on the northern end of the Gold Coast. As a result of the process, a group of local residents formed a community enterprise, Flying Eagles Facilitators, which provides local people with contract work in community consultation activities. Kevin McMillan, a long-term resident of the area, shared his story.

“In September 2000, I was involved in the community speak-out. I joined the Eagleby Residents Action Group in 2001. I’m also a member of several working groups.”

Why did you get involved in Community Renewal?

“I was sitting on my backside, doing nothing due to health problems, when I was invited to come on board as a Flying Eagle Facilitator and saw that I may be able to contribute to what was going on in Eagleby.”

What do you like about being involved in the program?

“My own personal development: I have gone from a lounge lizard to a very active member of the Eagleby community.”

How has Community Renewal impacted on your suburb?

“The program has allowed residents to explore their community and themselves. It has allowed those community members who wish to be involved, a genuine opportunity to enhance the liveability of Eagleby.”

Debbie Bell, resident and former Chair of the Goodna Community Reference Group shared her experience of being involved in the Community Renewal program:

“I could see a lot of stuff was being said about my area that wasn’t true — we’re not all drug addicts with needles hanging out of our arms. So I got heavily involved in Community Renewal.”

In what way have you been involved in Community Renewal?

“The Goodna pool is a prime example of one of the projects. The community got involved, as well as the school, and I was involved in the working group. We worked on the feasibility studies and we invited the local council to be part of the working group. We had consultations with Sport and Recreation Queensland and had the full support of our Local member, Jo-Ann Miller.”

“I have learnt a phenomenal amount by being involved in Community Renewal and I have learnt a lot about myself. I think you’ve got to step outside your comfort zone. I think Community Renewal has given me so many opportunities. I’ve been given the label of ‘community leader’, which doesn’t sit well with me but I’ve just wanted to be involved. I went to Adelaide to speak to 500 people at an Institute of Public Administration Conference. I wouldn’t have thought that I could do that five years ago and it was the first time I had been on a plane! I am still getting positive feedback from people.

If you speak to any of the Community Reference Group members you would hear that every one of them has got something out of it. I was a single Mum receiving benefits and I wanted to put something back into the community...Some people in the meetings haven’t spoken for 18 months, but then they have come up with a real gem. They have absorbed the information and worked up the courage to speak up.”

Neil McCaig, Rasmussen resident in North Queensland:

“I became involved in Community Renewal from day one...I’ve found it a fascinating experience; it sort of gets into your blood.”

Part 3: Challenges

The key challenges to engaging residents and community stakeholders in Community Renewal processes are:

- *Socio-economic circumstances of people living in renewal neighbourhoods*

Community Renewal operates in neighbourhoods that are among the 10 per cent of communities in Queensland that exhibit the highest levels of concentrated and entrenched social and economic stress. Common characteristics of these neighbourhoods include high unemployment, high child protection notifications, low literacy and numeracy rates and low community safety. This has resulted in renewal area residents having relatively high levels of contact with government 'authorities' such as police, child welfare agencies, the justice system, social security and public healthcare.

Residents' negative experiences with government agencies decrease their levels of trust and willingness to get involved in Community Renewal. Social isolation, population transience and community conflict also diminish resident participation.

- *Maintaining engagement over several years across a range of community issues*
Unlike most government agencies which engage the community in one-off or issue specific policy areas, Community Renewal is tasked with engaging the community across all issues that could lead to improved quality of life and well-being. Furthermore, Community Renewal has a five to ten-year presence in targeted renewal areas, which requires intensive engagement to achieve outcomes.
- *Balancing bottom-up with top-down priorities*
Balancing whole-of-government priorities, agency resource limitations and the aspirations of local communities is a continuing challenge for place-based programs like Community Renewal. Managing community expectations and encouraging government agencies to realign their core business and budgeting processes are key strategies adopted by Community Renewal to address this challenge. Securing ongoing funding for successful renewal projects is critical to keeping faith with communities that have invested their time and energy in championing innovative projects. At the same time, negotiating sustainable funding can take more time than the 'quick fixes' that can appease community expectation to 'get stuff done' as outlined below.
- *Imperative to 'get stuff done'*
A further challenge to the program's community engagement success arises from balancing the need to get projects on the ground while taking a systematic approach to ensure the underlying issues of neighbourhood disadvantage are addressed. Extensive periods of planning and analysis can alienate community members who just want to see positive action in their neighbourhoods.
- *Retaining a local focus in a regional approach*
The program's shift from neighbourhood based planning to broader zone or regional planning has created challenges in terms of retaining the participation of renewal area residents from Phase 1 areas, while engaging the interest of community members from the nine new renewal areas and surrounding suburbs.

Part 4: Success factors

There are several factors that have contributed to successful community engagement in the Community Renewal program:

- *Political mandate*

“Engaging communities in Government decisions and processes is one of our key strategies in delivering responsive and effective Government. The Community Renewal program actively supports community participation in local planning and decision making. In fact, community participation is vital to Community Renewal’s success” (Queensland Premier Beattie 2002–03).

As highlighted by the premier’s comments, community engagement in the Community Renewal program has been mandated at the highest level of the state’s political sphere. This is coupled by strong support from local members of parliament who regularly attend Community Renewal planning and project events.

- *Community capacity building*

A crucial factor for enabling community engagement in renewal processes has been the provision of resources and projects to strengthen the capacity of renewal area communities to work with governments to effect meaningful change.

Activities or resources funded by Community Renewal to increase community capacity to engage with government have included:

- support for the Flying Eagles Facilitators community enterprise, which provides training for local residents to take up community consultation and facilitation work
- subsidising community members to participate in a Graduate Certificate in Inter-Professional Leadership at the University of Queensland
- cultural awareness training for community members involved in renewal planning
- community cultural development training for community members
- learning for Life courses in several renewal areas, which provide residents with confidence, new knowledge and networks
- ‘Building a better community’ training
- funding of liaison officer positions to increase participation of people from specific cultural backgrounds
- employment of dedicated renewal officers in all renewal zones to support communities in engagement activities
- partnering with the Queensland Department of Employment and Training to employ 15 local residents in community development traineeships. These trainees gain formal qualifications through TAFE while obtaining on-the-job skills at Community Renewal. Trainees’ local knowledge and experience also improves the program’s connection with the communities in which the trainees live.

- resourcing the publication of *The Art of Renewal: A guide to thinking culturally about strengthening communities*. The guide, developed in partnership with Arts Queensland, local government and the community arts sector, encourages communities to integrate cultural considerations within local area planning and promote the implementation of arts and cultural development projects. The *Art of Renewal* planning pathway sets out creative processes that enable government agencies to connect with people's social and cultural identity so that meaningful engagement can occur.
- encouraging residents from Phase 1 renewal areas to share their skills and experience with residents in adjacent new areas
- subsidising 23 residents and community members from renewal areas to attend the *International Conference on Engaging Communities* hosted by the United Nations and the Queensland Government in Brisbane, August 2005. Participants commented that they gained new understandings of different community engagement theory and practice and could not have afforded to attend without the financial backing of the program
- supporting students and community members to make two presentations at the *International Conference on Engaging Communities* in Brisbane 2005.
- *Personal approach*

Community Renewal officers have specific responsibilities for coordinating community engagement activities and supporting community capacity building projects in all renewal zones. Renewal officers and local residents have noted that personal exchanges and relationships formed at the local level are critical to the long term success of engagement activity.

- *Working with the non-government organisation sector*

Program officers liaise closely with non-government organisations and community groups to broaden the engagement 'reach' of the program. These relationships provide the program with a deeper understanding of community need and aspiration, particularly the views of marginalised population groups (such as newly arrived refugees and young people at risk).

Part 5: Critical questions to guide future practice

To ensure the Community Renewal program is continually improving its community engagement practice, it is critical to regularly ask:

- Are we getting representative community input?
- Are we digging deep enough with our engagement practices to understand the culture and identity of renewal communities?
- Are we coordinating our community engagement with other government agencies?
- Have we tested planning outcomes with the community to check we have got it right?
- Are we measuring whether people are satisfied with the engagement processes?
- Are we supporting renewal staff enough so that best practice is applied in our work?

Conclusion

Engaging residents, community organisations and local stakeholders is fundamental to the long-term success of community regeneration programs because it is the people who live and work in targeted neighbourhoods that will sustain and initiate community regeneration into the future.

The Community Renewal program is committed to building the capacity of local communities and government to undertake effective community engagement. By taking account of the community engagement success factors and challenges faced by the program and by critically assessing its methodologies, the Community Renewal program can continue to improve its community engagement practice. This is vital to ensure that community and government can work together to achieve lasting benefits for renewal communities.

Further information

Further information about the Community Renewal program, including case studies and contact details, is available at <<http://www.communityrenewal.qld.gov.au>>.

References

Engaging Queenslanders: an introduction to community engagement 2004, p. 6.

Queensland Government 2004, *Engaging Queenslanders – an introduction to community engagement*.

Queensland Premier Beattie 2002–03, *Community Renewal Progress Report*, p. 2.

Appendix 1. Community engagement in Community Renewal 2004–09

Community Engagement Continuum (from least to more engaged). All text in yellow is an extract from *Engaging Queenslanders: an introduction to community engagement* 2004, p. 6.

	Information	Consultation	Active participation
Objectives	To ensure citizens/stakeholders have access to information that is accurate, relevant, appropriate, easy to access and easy to understand. While information sharing alone does not constitute public involvement, stakeholders need information in order to contribute to consultation or active participation processes.	To seek and receive the views of citizens/stakeholders on issues that directly affect them or in which they may have a significant interest and provide feedback on how citizen input contributed to the final outcome.	To develop relationships that enable government and citizens to share in agenda-setting, policy dialogue and the development and evaluation of policy, program and service options.
Critical factors	Citizens must have easy, equitable and timely access to information and the method of delivery must be appropriate for the issue and the intended audience.	There must be clarity about the goals of consultation, the roles and responsibilities of government and citizens/stakeholders, and their level of influence. There should be stated mechanisms for feedback.	There must be clarity about the extent to which the views of citizens will be taken into account in decision-making processes. There must be sufficient time and flexibility to allow for emergence of new ideas by citizens.
Desired outcomes	Citizens are better informed about government policies, programs and services, and about how to access information and services.	Greater involvement of citizens and communities in the business of government, greater understanding of government policy and decision-making processes, and better community outcomes. More effective policies, programs and services that represent the diverse needs of citizens and communities. Heightened trust and confidence in government.	Greater involvement of citizens and communities in the business of government, greater understanding of government policy and decision-making processes. Strengthened civic capacity, roles and responsibilities clarified, resources mobilised, and more effective policies, programs and services that represent the diverse needs of citizens and communities. Heightened trust and confidence in government.
Community Renewal methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fact sheets • Website • Community forums • Information stalls and displays • Newspaper articles • Events and project launches • Presentations • Door knocking • Training on how to access information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveys • Issue specific consultations • Workshops and public meetings • Community forums • Coffee in the cul-de-sac and barbecues • Focus groups with target populations • Training to understand consultation methods. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zone planning working groups • Multi-stakeholder workshops • Workshops with residents • Project working groups • Strategies to overcome barriers to participation, e.g. transport, childcare, interpreters • Training to enable active participation.