

### 1. BACKGROUND

Community engagement is the action that agencies take to enable them to consult, involve, listen, and respond to communities through ongoing relationships. The NSW Planning System Handbook (2003) defines 'community engagement' as:

*"... the community processes in which the general community and other interested parties are invited to contribute to particular proposals or policy changes. Community engagement has the potential to go beyond merely making information available or gathering opinions and attitudes. It entails more active exchange of information and viewpoints between the sponsoring organisation and the community..."*

Community engagement is a way of including the views of the community in planning and decision-making processes and in the development of policies and strategic documents. It can be seen as part of a continuum which includes:

- Information giving (communications);
- Information seeking (data collection/scoping);
- Information sharing;
- Participatory decision making;
- Responding to community initiated issues;
- Continuous research into communication methods.

### 2. PURPOSE

The purpose of the Community Engagement Policy is to:

- 2.1 Outline Coonamble Shire Council's (Council) commitment and approach to engaging community in decision-making processes.
- 2.2 Promote inclusive community engagement, recognising the rich knowledge and experience of our diverse community.
- 2.3 Provide guidance to Councillors, Council Staff and the community on our engagement principles, methods, and available resources.
- 2.4 Enable a consistent, transparent, and high-quality approach to the design and delivery of community engagement.
- 2.5 Meet requirements of the *Local Government Act 1993* (the Act) as they apply to community engagement.

### **3 POLICY**

#### **3.1 Policy Objectives**

Council recognises that engagement leads to well-informed decisions at a strategic and operational level, achieves effective and transparent governance, and is fundamental to inclusive, vibrant, and thriving communities.

The Community Engagement Policy has three (3) primary objectives:

- 3.1.1 To ensure that the knowledge, experiences, needs and aspirations of the community are considered in Council decision-making processes.
- 3.1.2 To provide a strong foundation for understanding and working with our community – promoting shared responsibility for decisions and trust in the decision-making process.
- 3.1.3 To strengthen collaboration and partnerships between Council and the community.

#### **3.2 Our Approach and Principles**

Community engagement requirements are guided by legislation including the Act and frameworks such as International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum of Engagement. Council will make decisions based on legislative requirements, the expert advice of Council Staff and / or consultants, and community inputs gathered through formal and informal engagement.

This Policy recognises that engagement should be well-planned, fit for purpose, tailored to circumstances and consider factors such as complexity of the decision to be made, community values, sensitivity, timing, and opportunity.

Each instance of community engagement should be undertaken with reference to the following principals:

- 3.2.1 The community will be enabled to provide meaningful and relevant input into decision-making.
- 3.2.2 The objectives and scope of the engagement and the opportunities to influence decision-making will be well articulated.
- 3.2.3 Processes and interactions will be respectful of all community members, Councillors, Council Staff, and consultants / agencies.
- 3.2.4 Accurate, timely and accessible information will be provided to community to inform their input.
- 3.2.5 Participation in community engagement will be sought from those people and groups who are most affected by the matter that subject to engagement.

- 3.2.6 A wide variety of engagement opportunities will be available to enable access for all community members, and effort will be made to involve people and groups that face challenges to engagement.
- 3.2.7 Community will be informed of the final decision and how their input was considered.
- 3.2.8 The effectiveness of community engagement processes will be reviewed and evaluated.
- 3.2.9 Engagement process will be planned, resourced, and reported on appropriately.

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) has developed the Public Participation Spectrum to demonstrate the possible types of engagement with stakeholders and communities.

Council's approach to community engagement is guided by the IAP2 Spectrum of Engagement which describes five levels of engagement from 'inform' through to 'empower'. It matches the purpose of the community engagement with the level of influence that community input will have on decision-making.

Many engagement processes will operate on more than one level of engagement as community will be involved and have different levels of influence at different stages of a project or program. Likewise, different engagement levels may be used for different groups within the community that are more, or less, directly impacted than others.

Engagement practices can be described as either participatory or deliberative engagement.

**Participatory engagement** aims to get feedback from a wide variety of participants and usually involves a transactional interaction between Council and community where information is shared either one or both ways. This type of engagement typically occurs where Council informs community about works occurring or invites feedback on ideas, alternatives, or draft documents. This is the type of engagement that occurs at the 'inform' and 'consult' levels of the IAP2 Engagement Spectrum.

**Deliberative engagement** is a form of high influence community engagement where a select group of participants are provided with information, support, and time to deliberate over perspectives, inputs, and evidence to support their decision-making or recommendations. Participants are selected to form a group that is representative of those who will be impacted by the decision. Deliberative engagement is a time and resource-intensive process and is more likely to occur at the 'involve', 'collaborate' and 'empower' levels of the IAP2 spectrum.

The spectrum following has been amended from IAP2 and shows the increasing level of community and Council involvement from the 'inform' end of the spectrum through to the 'empower' end of the spectrum.

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
<b>Goal</b>	One way communication to provide balanced and objective information to assist understanding about something that is going to happen or has already happened. To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	Two-way communication process aimed at obtaining feedback on ideas, alternatives and proposals to inform our decision making. To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	Participatory process designed to help identify issues and views to ensure that concerns and aspirations are understood and considered. To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	Working together to develop an understanding of all issues and interests to work out alternatives and identify preferred collective solutions. To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To build the capacity of the community to lead their own plans for change. To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.
<b>Promise to the public</b>	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.
<b>Role of community / stakeholders</b>	Listen	Contribute	Participate	Partner	Lead
<b>Examples of when this engagement level may be appropriate</b>	In the event of an emergency	Undertaking a survey on a playground redevelopment	Seeking input on initiatives and plans	Stakeholder led discussion on developing community vision key directions	Building capacity skills of small business employee through skills-based training
<b>Possible methods</b>	Fact sheets, websites	Public comment, focus groups, surveys, public meetings.	Workshops, deliberative polling.	Citizen advisory committees, consensus-building, participatory decision-making.	Citizen juries, ballots, delegated decision



### **3.3 Engagement process planning**

Quality community engagement is well-planned and resourced. Engagement planning should commence with four key questions:

#### **3.3.1 Why are we engaging?**

Effective engagement strengthens Council's decision-making by connecting community and stakeholders to the policies, projects and services that impact their lives. A clearly defined purpose and scope for the engagement process helps to ensure that people participate in a meaningful way – where they understand what they are being asked and how they are influencing decision-making.

#### **3.3.2 When will we engage?**

Decisions about when to engage are directly impacted by the purpose and scope of the engagement process. Council will conduct engagement at a time that community input can influence decisions as outlined in the purpose and scope of the process.

#### **3.3.3 Who do we engage?**

The Coonamble Shire Council's projects, policies, service provision and operations intersect in the day-to-day lives of community members and stakeholders across the whole municipality. Engagement should seek to connect with a broad range of community members to create fair and inclusive engagement processes. A stakeholder analysis should be undertaken to identify those who are most impacted by the decision. Stakeholders may include business and industry, not-for-profit and community organisations, emergency services, environmental groups, children, families, young people, older people, Indigenous community members, people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people who identify as LGBTIQ+, people with a disability, carers, older residents, and visitors.

#### **3.3.4 How do we engage?**

With a clear purpose and understanding of the target for engagement, engagement methods and the tools to be used to undertake and record engagement feedback can be selected. These will vary dependent on the type of engagement process to be undertaken and some examples are reflected in the table above.

An Engagement Plan should be developed for any individual project or process where community engagement will be undertaken and should include the following as a minimum:

### Engagement Plan Inclusions

1. Project description:  
What is the project that involves decision making?
2. Background:  
What is the background to the project?
3. Engagement purpose and scope:  
What do we need to find out from the community?  
How much influence will community have on the decision?  
What are the negotiables and non-negotiables when it comes to decision-making?
4. Timing:  
When do we need to engage in order to facilitate that influence on decision-making?  
Will there be multiple phases on engagement?
5. Engagement stakeholder analysis:  
Who are the people and groups most impacted by this decision?
6. Engagement methods and tools:  
What methods and engagement tools are we going to use to engage with the target group?  
Are there a variety of ways people can engage?  
Have we thought about accessibility for groups that face barriers to engagement?
7. Data collection and analysis:  
How will we collect and analyse data?  
How will it be stored securely?  
What are the privacy implications?
8. Evaluation planning:  
How will we know if we were successful in our engagement?  
Are we collecting information to respond to the Key Response Areas and Indicators required for evaluation (Figure 2)?
9. Communications:  
How will we communicate the engagement process and follow up with participants?
10. Collateral required:  
What do we need to develop to undertake the process?  
What human and other resources are required?

### 3.4 Evaluation of community engagement processes and feedback to participants

Coonamble Shire Council is committed to continuous improvement of our community engagement practice. Engagement participants can select to be contacted to receive feedback about how their input was considered, and to provide feedback to Council about the engagement process.

All engagement processes should provide feedback to participants. Planning for this occurs during the development of the Engagement Plan. Where a decision is to be raised at a Council meeting, the date of the Council meeting will be published online. The agenda for said meeting is also published online. Following the relevant decision, a summary of feedback will also be made available online for public viewing and sent directly to those who elected to leave contact details.

Each community engagement process will be evaluated by those responsible for the engagement. Key Result Areas and Indicators shown in Figure 2 are to be used when evaluating individual community engagement processes.

### 3.5 Roles and Responsibilities

Everyone with a relationship with Coonamble Shire Council has a role in the successful implementation of the Community Engagement Policy.

Role	Responsibilities
<b>Councillors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Good level of understanding of the Community Engagement Policy and Resources.</li><li>• Adhere to engagement principles in their day-to-day interactions with the community.</li><li>• Be respectful of engagement processes, Council staff, community members and stakeholders.</li><li>• Consider engagement outcomes in decision making.</li></ul>
<b>Executive Leadership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Good level of understanding of the Community Engagement Policy and Resources.</li><li>• Advocate for the consistent implementation of the Policy.</li><li>• Resource staff to deliver community engagement.</li><li>• Advocate to Councillors about the role of community engagement.</li><li>• Consider engagement outcomes in decision making.</li></ul>
<b>Engagement Specialists</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• High level of understanding of the Community Engagement Policy and Resources.</li><li>• Support Officers to design and deliver community engagement. Identify opportunities to strengthen and improve engagement processes.</li><li>• Lead review and evaluation process with a focus on continuous improvement.</li></ul>

<b>Council Staff</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good level of understanding of the Community Engagement Policy and Resources.</li> <li>• Use Policy and Resources to design and deliver engagement processes.</li> <li>• Coordinate engagement activities across departments and groups.</li> <li>• Seek out engagement specialists when requiring support and guidance.</li> <li>• Create appropriate and relatable communications on large scale projects that have either a community impact or would generate community interest.</li> <li>• Consider engagement outcomes in decision making.</li> </ul>
<b>Community Members</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respectful of engagement processes, Councillors, Council staff and other community members and stakeholders.</li> <li>• Constructively participate in engagement processes.</li> <li>• Share local knowledge, values and expertise.</li> </ul>
<b>Representative Bodies and Advisory Committees</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bring a representative voice to Council processes.</li> <li>• Strengthen relationships between Council and community members.</li> <li>• Advocate for minority groups.</li> <li>• Encourage and promote community engagement opportunities among networks.</li> </ul>

#### **4. RELEVANT LEGISLATION**

- Local Government Act 1993
- Local Government (General) Regulation 2005

##### **4.1 Legislative requirements**

The Office of Local Government requires each council to create a strategy for how they will engage the community in creating and reviewing their Community Strategic Plan. This strategy must:

- be based on the social justice principles of access, equity, participation and rights.
- identify relevant stakeholder groups in the community.
- outline the methods that the council will use to engage each of these groups.
- allow sufficient time to effectively undertake the engagement.

It is important to understand the difference between informing the community about what the council is proposing and empowering the community to play an integral role in determining the goals, strategies, and actions to be undertaken.

##### **4.2 Community Participation Plan**



The Policy does not apply to statutory processes prescribed in other Acts, such as planning matters covered by the *Planning and Environment Act 1997*, nor does it apply to unplanned interactions with Council such as service requests or complaints.

Council's Community Participation Plan (CPP) has been created to outline how and when Council's Planning department engages with the community across their planning functions.

The Community Participation Plan meets the requirements of the Environmental Planning & Assessment Act 1979 (EP&A Act). The CPP provides a single location that the community can access that sets out all of Council's community participation requirements under planning legislation, including all minimum mandatory exhibition timeframes.

## **5. APPLICATION/SCOPE**

This Policy applies to all areas of Council and provides a framework for Councillors, Council Staff and consultants / agencies acting on behalf of Council.

This Policy applies to community engagement process to be undertaken as directed by Council, recommended by Council Staff or required by legislation including but not limited to:

- The Community Strategic Plan;
- Council's Delivery Plan;
- Council's Operational Plan and Budget, including written objectives.

The Policy should be implemented in line with individual project communication and marketing plans, which should support internal and external engagement through appropriate corporate communication and marketing activities.

### **5.1 Digital focus**

Australians are more mobile, more connected and more reliant on technology than ever before. A digital transformation is taking place in almost all industries as people increasingly look to get and receive their information online. Coonamble is no different, with almost 60% of households in the Local Government Area (LGA) regularly accessing the internet. This number will only increase, and it is critical that Council takes steps to ensure it is well positioned to meet the needs of the community as the reliance on digital communication inevitably increases.

It is important that communication and engagement methods align with this approach. Council can maintain a digital focus when approaching communications and engagement by continuing to:

- Embrace digital solutions to communication and engagement challenges.
- Monitor the latest advancements in the digital space.
- Maintain and upgrade existing digital communication methods.
- Upskill staff to use digital mediums to engage with the community.
- Ensure communication and engagement methods align with relevant strategies.
- Make Council staff, services, and information accessible by digital media platforms.

There are instances where Council may not seek feedback prior to decisions being made. At these times, Council's level of engagement with the community and key stakeholders will be limited. In certain circumstances, Council may only be able to inform the community and stakeholders of Council's decisions and actions. Examples include when:

- an immediate resolution is required
- technical or other expertise is required
- an initiative involves confidential or commercial information
- there are clear and defined legislative responsibilities that must be met
- developing or reviewing internal policies and procedures
- Council is responding to an emergency or there is a risk to public safety  
These may include time-sensitive decisions about emergency management or public risk issues.

## 6. DEFINITIONS

**Community Engagement:** Community engagement involves a two-way exchange between Council and community. Community engagement strengthens relationships, shapes decisions, and enables us to learn from each other.

**Community:** A group of people, the members of which reside in the same geographical area or have a shared background, interest, affiliation, or membership.


**Stakeholder:** Any individual or group of people with a specific stake in the outcome of a decision.

**Communication:** Imparting or exchanging information or ideas, utilising a range of channels and activities.

**Participation:** Participation by communities in activities to help achieve desired outcomes.

**Deliberation:** An engagement process with a select group of community members. The process focusses on a defined issue, weighs up options and provides recommendations to decision-makers.

**Partnerships:** Occurs when two (2) or more people or organisations work together to realise or achieve a common goal.

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