

Murrumbidgee Shire Council Community Engagement Strategy



Prepared: August 2011

Due for Review: July 2014

INDEX

	Page No.
What is a Community Engagement Strategy and why do we need one?	3
Murrumbidgee Shire Councils Commitment	4
Map of Murrumbidgee Shire Council local government area	4
The Community Engagement Continuum	5
– Information giving (communication)	5
– Information seeking (data collection/scoping)	5
– Information sharing	5
– Participatory decision making	5
– Responding to community initiated issues	6
– Continuous research into communication methods	6
When will Community Engagement occur?	7
Levels of Community Engagement	7
Developing the Community Strategic Plan – Community Consultation Process	8
APPENDIX A	9
APPENDIX B	

COMMENTS WELCOME and ENCOURAGED

Comments and feedback on this document are welcome and encouraged and should be directed to:

Murrumbidgee Shire Council

Address: 21 Carrington Street DARLINGTON POINT NSW 2706

Postal Address: PO Box 5 DARLINGTON POINT NSW 2706

Telephone: 02 6968 4166

Fax: 02 6968 4252

Email: mail@murrumbidgeeshire.com.au

Office Hours: 8.30 am to 5.00 pm

Web Page: www.murrumbidgeeshire.com.au

What is a Community Engagement Strategy?

A Community Engagement Strategy (CES) is a plan to involve **everyone** in the decision making process for the community in which they live. It is a plan to listen, communicate and value the opinions of the people who make up the community and *actively* give them a voice in the decision making process.

Hopefully the strategy will let people see that their ideas and opinions matter and that they can have a voice and it will give them an opportunity to become actively involved in shaping their own and their community's future.

Engaging the community is required by all NSW Councils under Section 8 of the *Local Government Act, 1993*. But, more specifically, the *Local Government Amendment (Planning and Reporting) Act 2009* requires all Councils in NSW to adopt a Community Engagement Strategy as part of the development of community strategic plans however the CES should address communication between Council and the community in a generic and long term sense rather than merely for the development of the community strategic plan.

The NSW Planning System Handbook (2003) defines "community engagement" as:

" .. the public processes in which the general public 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 a more active exchange of information and viewpoints between the sponsoring organisation and the public ..."

Community engagement can be seen as part of a continuum which includes:

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

Community engagement, therefore, is a way of including the views of the entire Murrumbidgee Shire community in the Council's planning and decision making processes. In other words, the Council will engage the community to identify, understand and develop strategies to address and respond to their needs and concerns for now and in the future.

The Community Engagement Continuum

Information giving (communication)

Council has committed to providing current information to its community in the following ways:

- a) Monthly half page ad in "The Observer"
- b) Quarterly Newsletter posted with Rates Notices to ratepayers
- c) The information from the Quarterly Newsletter will also be distributed to all households in the towns of Darlington Point and Coleambally via a letter box drop so that those renting (not ratepayers) also have access to the same information
- d) For urgent alerts such as a "Boiled Water Alert" will be distributed to every household in the affected area by hand or letter box drop
- e) Council's web page will be constantly updated so that the latest information is readily accessible via the internet
- f) For issues which are strategically important or have created strong public interest Council will hold open community meetings in each town - Darlington Point and Coleambally.
- g) Reporting on Council's performance is provided quarterly – at Council meetings and those reports are always available to the public.
- h) The Business Agendas for Council meetings and the subsequent minutes are available on Councils web page.

Information seeking (data collection/scoping)

- a) When appropriate (for example during the community consultation process to prepare the Community Strategic Plan) Council will engage the services of an independent third party survey company to conduct telephone surveys.
- b) Web based surveys will be conducted by Council from time to time with a link to the survey from the Council web page.
- c) Council may engage an independent third party survey company to conduct on line surveys with a link to the survey from the Council web page.
- d) Council encourages community input from letters or emails to Council
- e) Council encourages members of the community to address Council at their Ordinary Monthly Meetings held on the third Thursday of each month

Information sharing

Any information collected by Council will be collated and shared with the community and any other third party stakeholders. For example:

- a) Detailed survey results in report form available on Councils website
- b) Survey summaries published in Councils monthly ads and quarterly newsletter

Participatory decision making

Council encourages feedback and participation in all decision making. Residents and other stakeholders can:

- a) Address Council meetings to provide their point of view
- b) Directly lobby Councillors
- c) Provide submissions on all decisions, strategies, policies etc which are put on public exhibition

Responding to community initiated issues

Any matter raised by a community member will be responded to in an appropriate manner, depending on the type of issue.

For example a resident makes a complaint – their complaint will be acknowledged, investigated and the outcome reported back.

For matters which have a broader community impact, the issue will be the subject of a report to Council. The person raising the issue (and any other interested persons) will have the opportunity to address the Council meeting to provide detail on the matter. Council may resolve a course of action, or if the matter is considered to be extremely important or contentious decide to seek further information and community input.

Continuous research into communication methods

Council is committed to ALWAYS be in touch with the community. At the moment we have committed to a series of monthly advertisements in the Colypoint Observer (our own local newspaper) which will broadcast Council information to the community. However given that newspapers are no longer necessarily the most effective means of disseminating information Council may consider in the future using Facebook or Twitter or other web based social media to provide information and encourage feedback.

The use of independent experts in conducting surveys will always be considered as their method of collecting information is up to date and generally at the forefront of technology.

When will Community Engagement occur?

Murrumbidgee Shire Council is committed to having a community that is continually engaged, however there are occasions when Council will conduct a Community Engagement campaign. For example, in the following instances:

- Preparing Strategic Plans – such as development of community or land use strategic plans and projects to inform the Delivery Programme and Operating Plan.
- Developing Council Policy - where any internal or external policies having direct impacts on the community.
- Considering Site Changes – where any changes are proposed to a private or public site that may have an impact on the community.
- Planning Council Services – when developing or improving a service.
- Legislation requires - such as prescribed plans and projects under the Local Government Act 1993 and other relevant Acts.

Levels of Community Engagement

Murrumbidgee Shire Council will implement different levels of engagement depending on the issue, and its immediate or long term impact on the community. The levels of engagement 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

Developing the Community Strategic Plan – Community Consultation Process

Murrumbidgee Shire Council is committed to involving as many people as possible in the creation of the Community Strategic Plan. The highest possible involvement is critical in creating ownership of the Community Strategic Plan by the wider community. Council's goal for participation is a minimum of 10% of the community.

Some other Councils in NSW have a much lower level of participation but Murrumbidgee Shire Council believes our community is much more closely knit with a bond between us and therefore expects to be able to achieve this goal of 10% and hopefully exceed it.

Stage 1 Promote the Process

Stage 2 Develop a Discussion Paper

This provides background information and forms the basis of what is to be discussed but does NOT limit the inclusion of other matters or issues raised during the process.

Stage 3 Identify specific demographic and stakeholder groups and invite their participation

Stage 4 Provide opportunities for all to participate using the following methods

- Holding community meetings in both Darlington Point and Coleambally
- Running focus group meetings for specific demographic groups
- Conducting a survey using the following methods:
 - a) Telephone Survey (minimum number of respondents = 200) conducted by independent third party company
 - b) Web based survey accessed from Council's web site
 - c) Paper based survey delivered to every household via Australia Post

Stage 5 Sharing the information collected and collated, by developing a DRAFT Community Strategic Plan and making it available to all and especially those who participated

Stage 6 Inviting feedback on the effectiveness of the consultation process from both the staff who participated/facilitated the process and the community

Sample feedback forms are attached as Appendices A & B – these will be amended as appropriate for each situation.

Stage 7 Encouraging submissions and feedback on the Draft plan

At this point if sufficient interest has been stimulated or there is a wide disparity of views on a specific issue another series of community meetings and focus group meetings may be held.

APPENDIX A:

EVALUATION OF THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT - For Council Employees

QUESTIONS

Objectives	Yes	No
Were the objectives of the Community Engagement exercise clear to all involved?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Was there any legal requirement to consult with the community?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Who was consulted?

Did you get responses from those you most wished to ask?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Were you successful in consulting 'hard to reach' and under represented community groups/sectors/members?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did you provide feedback to those consulted?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did the people you engaged with feel that the consultation was worthwhile?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

How are you aware of this?

Methods

Did different groups respond to the different methods used?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Were the methods used the right ones for your objectives?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did you get the required:		
Quantitative and/or qualitative information?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Response rate?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Representative sample? (Each community needs to be considered)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Timeframe

Was the time frame clear?

Was the time frame kept to?

If not, why not?

Was enough time allowed for responses?

Information Provided

Yes No

Did you succeed in making information available to those you were targeting?

Did the methods you used attract the right audience?

Was the information easy to access?

Was the information available in an appropriate format for the various audiences?

Was the information provided relevant to the engagement/issue?

Resources

Did you budget adequately?

Were there any unexpected expenses?

Did you have appropriately skilled staff for the exercise?

Outcome of the Community Engagement

Do the outcomes correspond with what was being sought?

Has the process been of benefit to stakeholders?

What has changed as a result of the community engagement?

Did you use the views generated by the process?

Follow Through

Who will provide the follow-up?

How will you monitor that agreements made are kept?

Adapted from the Local Government Community Services Association of South Australia, 'Making it Real: a resource for community consultation'.

APPENDIX B:

EVALUATION OF THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT - For Community Members

This checklist can be used to assist residents in the evaluation of Council's community engagement effectiveness. Council should provide you with appropriate information or give a reasonable response to your information or query. Please adapt the following questions to fit your circumstances.

QUESTIONS

Initial Contact	Yes	No
Were you careful to express your ideas or requests clearly?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did the Council representative give you a suitable response?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Were there any legal requirements to consider, and if so, were they followed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Who was Consulted?		
Were you put in contact with the 'right' person?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did he/she give you an appropriate or satisfactory response?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Methods		
Did the Council or its representative use a method of communication with which you were comfortable?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Time Frame		
Was the time frame for Council action made clear to you?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Was the time frame kept to?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If not, was an explanation or a suitable alternative offered?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Were you given enough time to respond, if necessary?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Information Provided		
Were you given the information you sought, or a suitable alternative?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Was the information provided relevant to your needs?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you believe appropriately skilled staff handled the exercise?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Outcome of the Community Engagement

Yes No

Do the outcomes correspond with your expectations?

Has the process been of benefit to you or others affected?

Has the community engagement resulted in better mutual understanding?

Follow Through

Did you receive adequate follow-up, if necessary?

Are you generally satisfied that Council has met its undertakings?

Adapted from the Local Government Community Services Association of South Australia, 'Making it Real: a resource for community consultation'.

COMMENTS WELCOME and ENCOURAGED

Comments and feedback on this document are welcome and encouraged and should be directed to:

Murrumbidgee Shire Council

Address: 21 Carrington Street DARLINGTON POINT NSW 2706

Postal Address: PO Box 5 DARLINGTON POINT NSW 2706

Telephone: 02 6968 4166

Fax: 02 6968 4252

Email: mail@murrumbidgeeshire.com.au

Office Hours: 8.30 am to 5.00 pm

Web Page: www.murrumbidgeeshire.com.au