COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

APRIL 2017

Introduction

Snowy Valleys Council comprises many diverse communities in townships, villages, rural and semi-remote locations.

It is important that Council listens to and understands the aspirations, values and needs of these communities in order to ensure that we can make informed decisions and continue to support these communities into the future.

This Community Engagement Framework reflects our commitment to engaging with the community, and other local and regional stakeholders, to ensure that all voices are heard, including those that are harder to reach.

We believe that fostering transparent, inclusive and meaningful engagement is fundamental to the delivery of high quality services and infrastructure.

By working more closely with the community and stakeholders, we aim to facilitate a cultural shift, both inside our organisation and within the community, to make decisions that are more informed and reflect the broad views and ideas of the people of Snowy Valleys Council.

We believe that effective community engagement will lead to better outcomes and decision making, and will help up live up to our vision of "leading, engaging and supporting strong and vibrant communities".

What is Community Engagement?

Our definition of community engagement has been adapted from the International Association of Public Participation model (IAP2):

> ## "Any process that involves the community in problem solving or decision making and uses community input to make better decisions".

Community engagement are those activities that we use to gather and share knowledge, and interact with relevant stakeholders and the community, so that we can:

- Include community knowledge in the design and implementation of our strategies, programs and initiatives
- Seek feedback from the community on proposed services, strategies, programs and initiatives
- Involve the community in the implementation and monitoring of identified programs and projects
- Develop enduring partnerships with key stakeholders that enable the sharing of ideas, resources and responsibilities for our strategies, programs and initiatives
- Better inform the community about our services, strategies, programs and initiatives

Effective and consistent community engagement:

- Assists us in our decision making and helps to strengthen our relationship with the community.
- Covers a wide variety of Council-community connections and interactions, ranging from simple information sharing to active participation in government policy development and its decision-making processes
- Is the process of purposeful and timely information exchange between the Council and the community
- Relies on active, constructive participation from the community and positive, proactive participation from Council
- Utilises a range of methods such as surveys, media releases, meetings, listening posts, traditional advertising, public meetings, social media etc.
- Is meaningful, respectful and recognises diversity within the community
- Is constantly evolving and changing
- Is a statutory requirement in some instances, such as planning permits
- Does not replace the final decision-making power of Councillors, however it is invaluable in the way it enhances our capacity to make well-informed, acceptable and sustainable decisions.

The Community Engagement Framework

There are three key documents and a toolkit which underpin our consistent approach to Community Engagement practice at Snowy Valleys Council:

Community Engagement Policy
The policy is our overarching statement of intent that defines our commitment to, and the principles of, Community Engagement.

Community Engagement Strategy
The strategy sets out our Community Engagement objectives and the guidelines for successful engagement.

Community Engagement Action Plan
The action plan details our key commitments and actions to continually improve our engagement practices over the next XX years.

Community Engagement Tool Kit
The toolkit provides the relevant tools and templates for our staff to utilise when planning for and undertaking community engagement.

Why do we need a Community Engagement Framework?

Our Community Engagement Framework allows us to:

1. Inform the community about our approach to community engagement and encourage the community to become involved.
2. Improve the nature of our decision making and help to build and strengthen the relationship that we have with the community, as well as other stakeholders.
3. Recognise diversity within the community and incorporate this into our planning of engagement activities.
4. Enable a consistent, transparent and high quality approach to the planning and undertaking of community engagement.
5. Foster a culture of community engagement among our council staff, management and Councillors.
6. Provide guidance to our council staff, project managers, Councillors and community on our consultation principles, methods and resources.

What are the objectives of this Strategy?

The Community Engagement Strategy aims to provide a best practice approach in all community engagement activities, and guides us on how to build our capacity to plan, deliver, and evaluate effective community engagement practices across the Snowy Valleys Council.

The Community Engagement Strategy ensures both stakeholders and the community have the opportunity to provide feedback and inform the decisions made by Council.

Objectives of our Community Engagement Strategy include:

- To ensure a commitment by Councillors and Council staff (including external contractors and consultants) to engage with the community in a meaningful and appropriate way about decisions that affect them
- To set the strategic direction for community engagement practice for Snowy Valleys Council
- To provide a consistent and flexible process for staff to guide the selection of the most appropriate method and level of engagement for any project or decision to be made
- To develop a level of trust and confidence with our community and stakeholders to engender a long term sustainable relationship and commitment to a shared vision for Snowy Valleys Council
- To complement, interact with and enhance all existing Council initiatives that are working towards community and stakeholder partnerships, and the realisation of the Snowy Valleys Council vision

Our Community Engagement Principles

Effective community engagement is built on trust, respect and goodwill. Our commitment to community engagement is governed by the following set of principles that underpin our engagement processes and practices:

1. **Integrity and transparency**
   Engagement involves trust and transparency. The levels of community influence will be clearly communicated. Consultation and higher forms of engagement must be genuinely purposeful and not tokenistic. We will carefully consider and accurately portray the community's role in the decision making process and provide feedback on how the community has influenced its decisions.

2. **Respect**
   We will value contributions made by way of experience, skills and knowledge and respect any time given to the engagement process. Timely feedback on the results and the influence of specific consultation and active engagement to the community is a critical part of the process. This information needs to be given directly to those who contributed as well as made widely available so those who may have an interest can access it.

3. **Inclusivity**
   We will use a range of opportunities and techniques to encourage participation and awareness of all people who may be affected by or interested in the outcome. It will ensure that a diverse and representative range of stakeholders are engaged (e.g. geographical location, age, gender, disability, culture, language, literacy and interest the in project).

4. **Informative**
   Effective engagement requires all parties to understand the relevant legal, statutory, strategic and local context. We will encourage the disclosure of all information relevant to the public's understanding and evaluation of a decision. We will use appropriate language.

5. **Shared learnings**
   We will establish ongoing internal partnerships and communications with each other inside the organisation to share our skills, knowledge and community engagement evaluation findings to better inform future engagement initiatives, making sure we learn from our mistakes.

6. **Well planned**
   Community engagement requires informed judgement and planning in its approach and implementation in order to be effective, practical and suitably resourced. We will take the time required to consider and design effective engagement plans as part of our project delivery planning, and we will resource is appropriately.

7. **Meaningful**
   Our community will have multiple opportunities to participate in community engagement processes that are clearly articulated in relation to project constraints, the scope of community influence, and Council's decision making process. Community members will understand their role within this process.

8. **Feedback**

   Closing the loop on engagement is important in maintaining an open and transparent process. We will ensure that the community understands how their input was considered and the reasons for the final decision. We will also inform the community of the expected timeframes for providing feedback.

9. **Part of our culture**

   We will, through our commitment to internal capacity building and organisational culture, foster a proactive, positive attitude towards community engagement. Community engagement will be built into our decision making processes and project plans, and adequately resourced in budgets and timeframes.

10. **Efficiency and value for money**

    Community engagement planning and implementation will optimise internal and external linkages, resources and systems to minimise duplication and cost, and to reinforce public perceptions of effectiveness and good value for money.

11. **Innovation and continuous improvement**

    We will explore new and innovative ways to listen to and engage with members of our community. We will continue to improve our community engagement practices and capacity through regular review and improvement mechanisms.

12. **Privacy**

    We will take all reasonable and appropriate steps to protect the privacy of individuals as required by relevant legislation. Project teams will ensure they use correct collection notices and privacy statements on all online and hardcopy consultation materials that capture any identifying personal information. The way information is collected, stored and used will also comply with legislative requirements.

The Community Engagement Process

Why do we engage?

Community engagement fosters a sense of belonging and community ownership of project outcomes.

It engages a higher level of responsibility around creating a community-centred council, both internally within the organisation and externally through the community.

Asking for the views of the community will help us make sustainable decisions and better understand local issues and needs.

Stakeholder and community input improves the quality of policy and strategy,at the time it is being developed , ensuring the end result is relevant to the needs of the community.

Well planned engagement provides ideas and an opportunity for a diverse range of voices to be heard on any issue, promotes a higher standard of customer service, a better understanding of the 'decisions to be made,' and more opportunity for meaningful feedback.

Who do we engage?

Community

A community can be defined as a group of people united by at least one common characteristic such as geography, shared interests, values, experiences, or traditions.

Stakeholders

A stakeholder is anyone who has the ability to influence a project's outcomes (either positively or negatively) and may comprise individuals and/or organisations from across the community that are directly involved in, or significantly affected by the project.

Harder to Reach

There are some people and groups who may find it more difficult to participate in engagement activities and are often referred to as 'hard to reach'. For example, those from minority groups or with limited personal resources such as homeless people, teenagers, people who are new to the Snowy Valleys Council area, people from different cultural backgrounds and people with a disability.

The circumstances of each individual within these groups will vary and engagement approaches should be adapted accordingly.

When do we engage?

Each time there is a project to be developed or a decision to be made there is an opportunity for a community engagement process.

Early notice of emerging issues puts us in a better position to respond in a proactive way. In the engagement planning process, consideration is given to the complexity of the decision and the optimal time needed for people to respond.

Whilst our community engagement activities can take place at any time of the year, the planning for community engagement will take into account key dates, notably the Christmas and New Year period, other public holidays, school holidays and any special events that may impact on the community's availability.

The timing and planning for community engagement activities may also depend upon our program of work.

Whilst the Local Government Act sets out minimum requirements for some specific consultations, each engagement process is considered on its individual basis and merit.

To ensure a successful consultation, careful consideration is given to the appropriate tools and timing for the project or decision.

As a general rule, we will engage:

- To help make decisions on current and emerging issues
- When the community has raised an issue
- Where the community could be impacted by a project, initiative, service or decision
- On all major Council Plans, Strategies and Policies
- When it is a statutory, legislative or regulatory requirement, such as planning permit applications

However, there are time when we may not be able to engage widely:

- When time frames and methodology have been predetermined by other levels of government
- Where other levels of government are leading the consultation.
- When an immediate response is required, such as in response to an emergency

In Council-led projects and initiatives, community engagement does not replace the final power of Council as decision maker, but it is an invaluable process in enhancing our capacity to make well-informed, defensible and sustainable decisions on behalf of our community.

How do we engage?

In any decision-making process, the level of engagement will vary depending on the nature and complexity of the project or decision.

Consideration is given to things like community and stakeholder interest, political sensitivity, opportunities for partnerships, the level of social, economic and environmental impact, legislative requirements, time, resource and financial constraints.

Council is guided by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) when determining the most appropriate level of engagement for each situation or project.

LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT

The table below shows five levels of engagement and outlines the amount of involvement from both the Council and community within each level. The process of engagement is a dynamic one; there is likely to be movement back and forth through the different levels as the engagement is implemented throughout the project/process.

While the final decision rests with Council, open and responsible governance is based on a belief that those impacted by a decision have important contributions to make in the decision-making process.

Before beginning any engagement process it is important for us as decision makers to establish how much influence we will give to the community, so that the objectives for the engagement and the expectations are known and clear from the outset.

Increasing level of public impact →

Level of community influence over decisions →

Increasing amount of resourcing required →

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Goal	One way communication to provide balanced and objective information to assist in understanding something that is going to happen or is about to happen	Two way communications designed to obtain feedback on ideas, alternatives and proposals to inform our decision making	Participatory process where we work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that concerns, aspirations are understood and considered prior to decision making	Working together in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of a preferred solution for joint decision making	To place final decision making and/or devolved budgets in the hands of the public
The SVC promise	We will openly share information about a decision, direction, event, activity or program.	We will explore options, gain feedback and an understanding of your concerns and preferences	We will work with you in the process so that your ideas, concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed	We will collaborate with you so that your advice, innovation and recommendations are included in the final decision we make together	We will implement what you decide
Community/ stakeholder role	To listen	To contribute	To participate	To partner	To decide
Engagement technique examples	Advertisement Community noticeboards Community events Website Fact sheets Brochures Information	Briefings Comment/feedback forms Drop in sessions/pop ups Focus groups Forum Interviews	Community reference panel Focus group Personal briefings Stakeholder meetings Tours and field trips	Chambers of Commerce Community progress associations Reference group S355 committees Strategic	Citizen jury Elected councillors Placemaking Community progress associations Youth Council

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
	sessions Displays Letters Newsletters Newspaper Media releases Community radio Report Signage/posters Social media Stakeholder briefing	Online discussions Public exhibition call for submissions Public meeting Surveys Workshop	Workshops	Advisory committees Steering/project committees Working party	S355 committees

Inform

In this area of the spectrum, we are sharing information with the community through awareness, education or information campaigns and feedback mechanisms.

There are situations when stakeholders and the community need to receive information to gain a better understanding of an issue or to understand why a decision has been made.

'Inform' is the appropriate level of engagement when the aim is to provide information about a decision or outcome, who it was made by and what the consequential impact on stakeholders and the community will be.

We will also use 'Inform' to communicate information such as events, programs and activities.

We may also use 'Inform' at the conclusion of an engagement activity to impart feedback and outcomes.

For example, a fact sheet or letter is sent to stakeholders and the community, an advertisement is put in the local newspaper.

Consult

In this area of the spectrum, we will ask for input from, and listen to, the community.

Consult is the appropriate level of engagement when input, views or feedback are sought from the community to better inform a decision-making process, or to help inform the direction of a proposed plan or project.

'Consult' is selected when Council asks and listens to the community about ideas to improve something, to obtain views on a particular proposal, understand what would happen if Council made a certain decision, or when a number of possible options are provided and which option is preferred.

Consultation should not be restricted to controversial or wide-ranging matters. The following are offered as examples of initiatives and projects that should include a consultative component:

- Matters that directly and significantly affect a large number of people;
- Involve significant numbers of people with strong views on the subject;
- Affect the rights, entitlements or social wellbeing of the community;
- Council policy development, improvement or implementation;
- Council service development, improvement, planning or implementation;
- Localised community improvement;
- Major projects, strategic issues or resourcing plans that impact on the entire Snowy Valleys Council area;

- Site specific matters or events.

For example, a local community are invited to provide feedback on a draft plan to upgrade a nearby playground.

Involve

In this area of the spectrum, Council utilises local expertise and knowledge in planning and implementation.

'Involve' is the appropriate level of engagement when local input is required to identify issues early and inform our planning process. This level of engagement is selected when we want to include the community early in the planning process to ensure all concerns and aspirations are both heard and understood.

Meaningful engagement in the 'Involve' area of the spectrum helps us to better tailor our services to local needs, resources are allocated in an effective and targeted way and the community takes greater responsibility for the outcomes of the decision.

For example, local residents, businesses and cyclists are engaged to help prepare a Cycling Strategy for Snowy Valleys Council. Their initial input and local knowledge is used to inform the development of a draft Plan, which is then given back to the wider Snowy Valleys community for further feedback and comments before being finalised.

Collaborate

In this area of the spectrum, government agencies, local networks, organisations, businesses and community work together with us to find solutions.

'Collaborate' is the appropriate level of engagement when Council or staff mutually share the decision-making with various levels of government, community groups, key stakeholders or members of the public.

'Collaborate' is usually selected where issues and solutions are unclear and Council works with equal power and partnership to find solutions that lead to an agreed outcome.

Effective 'Collaboration' requires significant time and resources from all parties.

For example, Council works closely with and supports a local progress association to identify local safety issues. We work together to gather local knowledge, evidence and statistics to better understand the issues and together develop an Action Plan to address our shared responsibility for local safety.

Empower

In this area of the spectrum, community members are empowered to build their own future.

'Empower' is Council's promise is to 'implement what you decide'. Empower is selected when our community and stakeholders are provided with the skills, information, authority and resources in order to make the final decision.

'Empower' has limited application in Local Government, as the elected Council is responsible for making policy, strategic and budget decisions.

Under the Local Government Act, the only decision-making power which is entirely placed in the hands of the public is that of electing Council Members every four years.

OUR ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

Quality engagement is well planned and executed, inclusive and accessible to a cross-section of the community.

The Snowy Valleys Council engagement process outlines three stages to ensure we deliver a consistent and robust approach to our engagement activities.

This includes a process of **planning** (developing a plan), **doing** (preparing and engaging) and **reporting** (providing feedback) on the engagement.

Step	Key Phase	Description
1	Scope the project, engagement needed and method	Determine the need for a Community Engagement Plan and specify how the engagement will influence the project/initiative/decision. Understand the needs and expectations of the decision makers and gain clarity of the scope of the work including what aspects are negotiable.
2	Identify and assess stakeholders/participants	Identify and assess the relevant participants and stakeholders and consider what role they will play in the engagement process
3	Determine level of influence/participation by stakeholders and participants	Determine the appropriate level of engagement and clarify the specific engagement process.
4	Choose techniques, evaluation strategies and design the engagement process including resources	Determine which methods will be used along with communication activities required. Determine the resources needed to support the engagement activity.
5	Implement the engagement activities	Undertake the engagement activities as part of the integrated project plan.
6	Conduct review and feedback processes	Review and then provide feedback to decision makers, participants, stakeholders and community on progress of engagement activities, outcomes and impacts
7	Develop final evaluation	Complete evaluation process. Prepare final report for decision makers.

Our vision for community engagement – what does success look like?

Successful community engagement for Snowy Valleys Council will be characterised by:

- Good planning of the engagement processes
- A clear purpose that is communicated to all
- Relevant target audiences are identified
- Effective two-way communication with clear and relevant information
- Transparency of both the engagement and decision making processes
- Shared values
- Multiple options to participate in the engagement processes
- Feedback is given on the outcomes of the engagement processes and on how these influenced the decision making process
- Timely engagement that enables fair and reasonable opportunity for the community to give input to the engagement processes

The Strategy outlines a number of directions to help achieve this vision for successful engagement:

Strategic Direction 1: **Accessible and transparent engagement practice**

Strategic Direction 2: **Effective communication and feedback**

Strategic Direction 3: **Enabling community involvement**

Strategic Direction 4: **Improved understanding, capacity and skill in community engagement practice**

Strategic Direction 5: **A coordinated approach to engagement practice**

Superseding Policy No. and Title:

Community Engagement Strategy RP.13 – Tumut Shire Council

Policy prepared by: Communications Officer

History table:

Version Control No	Development /Amendment Date	Approval Date	Resolution Number	Activity log
0				To be presented to Policy Review Committee
1		22/6/2017		Presented to Council for Public Exhibition
1		24/8/2017	M135/17	Adopted Ordinary Council Meeting