



Gunnedah Shire Council

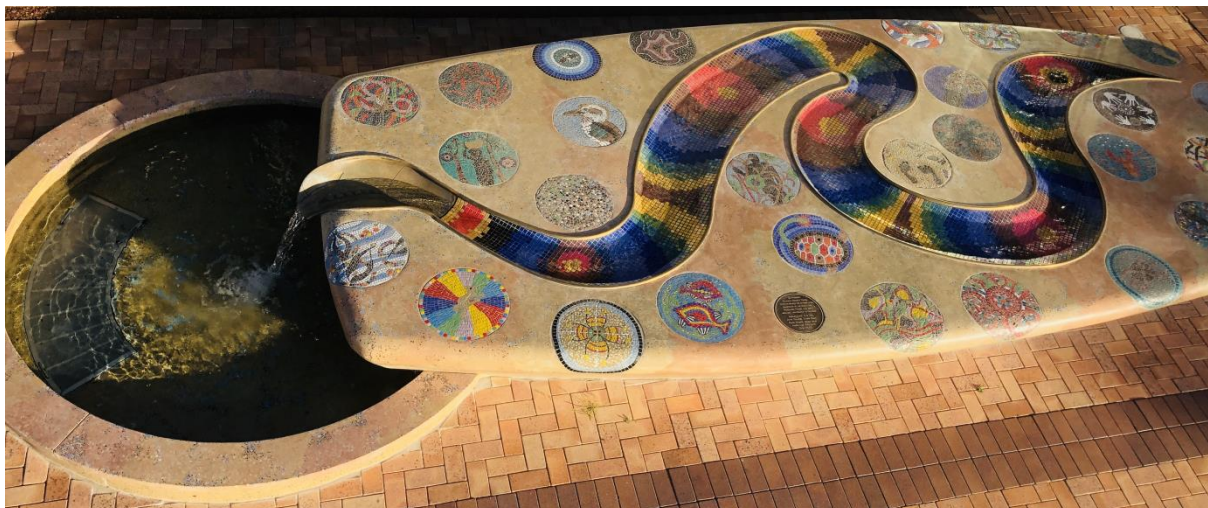
Community Engagement Strategy



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Acknowledgement of Country

In presenting this document to the community, Gunnedah Shire Council acknowledges the Kamilaroi people as the Traditional Custodians of the Land on which we live and work. In doing so, Council pays its respect to all Elders both past and present as well as to the young Indigenous leaders of tomorrow.

Introduction

The Community Engagement Strategy outlines the process for involving the Gunnedah Shire community in Council's strategic planning and decision-making processes, ranging from the development of Council's Ten-Year Community Strategic Plan to day-to-day activities. Council supports the right of citizens to participate in decision making that affects their future.

The strategy:

1. Defines community engagement and identifies the methods of engagement Council uses for the key stages of engagement – inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower.
2. Identifies the broad categories of Council projects which require engagement; and
3. Provides an Engagement Matrix to align the methods of engagement with the category of Council projects.

Gunnedah Shire has a population just over 13,000 people spread across a diverse area of 4,992 square kilometres that encompasses the main township of Gunnedah along with the villages including Curlewis, Mullaley, Tambar Springs, Breeza, Piallaway, Kelvin and Emerald Hill. With a population density of approximately 2.66 people per square kilometre, Gunnedah Shire has the challenge of reaching and truly engaging with the entire community on a regular basis.

One of Council's core responsibilities and goals is to engage with the community through a variety of different forms, and from shire-wide high impact projects to locality-based lower impact projects. This strategy will outline Council's commitment to keeping the community informed, consulted and engaged.

The strategy will result in representation from a broad cross section of the Gunnedah Shire area including its citizens, ratepayers, businesses, employees, visitors, community groups, and interest groups - a hallmark of a healthy community.

Consultation is important and Council takes this responsibility very seriously, however, it must be noted that we will see many scenarios where the community has different views about Council decisions.

As a result, Council will engage with the community, but consultation does not always mean automatic agreement. Council's role is to engage with the community and then undertake an achievable and practical solution that considers sustainable solutions that address our needs now and into the future.

Council also has its legislated "public consultation" obligations under the *NSW Local Government Act NSW*, which Council will achieve and seek to exceed through our community consultation program.

The strategy aims to give all stakeholders opportunities to participate, so no sector of the community is disadvantaged. It includes measures to involve groups that are at risk of absence from public debate, such as older people, youth, indigenous people, people with a disability, low socio-economic groups, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Scope

This Community Engagement Strategy relates to most activities undertaken by Council, except for notifications of development applications and other related statutory notifications. If legislative requirements or other council policies exist which address specific information/consultation processes, they take precedence, but the implementation of that legislation and those policies should be cognisant of the Community Engagement Strategy.

There are many external factors that sometimes limit the level of engagement possible. For example, state or federal legislation may prescribe specific activities, or project characteristics may determine what can or should be done. Community members also have opportunities to participate beyond the Community Engagement Strategy by addressing Council at its ordinary meetings, which generally occur monthly, and any extraordinary meetings.

Objectives

- Involve the local community in the development, implementation, and review of Council's strategic planning and decision-making processes, within its legislative abilities.
- Provide a framework for a coordinated well-planned approach to engagement that is genuine and inclusive and meets the needs of each stakeholder group (not one size fits all)
- Monitor and evaluate Council's engagement activities and incorporate feedback to improve and enhance Council's community engagement activities and capabilities into the future.
- Build a positive reputation for Gunnedah Shire Council by demonstrating that Council is listening, informing and being informed by a broad cross section of the community.
- Ensure Council and Councillors receive quality information representative of the views of a broad cross-section of the community, sourced from a range of methods to assist in effective decision making.

Benefits

Effective engagement makes communities feel more connected with their councils, strengthening trust, goodwill, and respect. There are several benefits from the Community Engagement Strategy including:

- committing Council to be open and accountable,
- helping Council plan services better to meet community needs and aspirations,
- helping Council prioritise services and optimise resources,
- allows a broader range of views to be expressed,
- allows for more information to be assembled, and more possible solutions to be considered before making decisions,
- enables Council and the community to work together to achieve balanced decisions (noting they won't always be unanimous),
- offers opportunities for residents to contribute to and influence outcomes which directly affect their lives, and
- encourages greater community ownership and acceptance of Council decisions.

Social Justice Principles

The Community Strategic Plan is designed to reflect the principles of Social Justice and that these social considerations are adequately addressed in the planning and development process. The principles for social justice are:

Equity There should be fairness in decision making, prioritising and allocation of resources, particularly for those in need. Everyone should have a fair opportunity to participate in the future of the community.

The planning process should take particular care to involve and protect the interests of people in vulnerable circumstances.

Access All people should have fair access to services, resources and opportunities to improve their quality of life.

Participation Everyone should have the maximum opportunity to genuinely participate in decisions which affect their lives.

Rights Equal rights should be established and promoted, with opportunities provided for people from diverse linguistic, cultural, and religious backgrounds to participate in community life.

Community Inclusivity

Council, in its engagement activities, will make every effort to ensure that all perspectives are considered, by:

- Engaging a cross-section of the community and using a wide range of information and engagement methods.
- Involving targeted groups as identified in particular projects.
- Accommodating participants' cultural, linguistic, religious, and other special needs in engagement activities.
- Endeavouring to involve community groups and individuals who are sometimes hard to reach such as young people, people with disabilities, the socially disadvantaged, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

Gunnedah Shire Council is committed to being an inclusive and accessible place for everyone, now and in the future.

The Council strives to meet the commitments of our Disability and Inclusion Action Plan that is designed to meet the state legislative obligations and provide equitable opportunities for participation for everyone on the Island.

What is Community Engagement?

For the purposes of this strategy, community engagement is defined as the processes and structures in which Council:

1. Communicates information to the community; and
2. Seeks information, involvement, and collaboration from the community with the primary aim of informing Council's decision making.

Best practice community engagement as prescribed by the International Association for the Public Participation (IAP2) defines community engagement as *"Any process that involves the public in problem solving or decision making and uses public input to make decisions"*.

In general terms it is an inclusive process to ensure the community has the opportunity to participate in decisions that impact them.

The process of community engagement can extend from a phone call or letter to a program of major community workshops. The initiative for community engagement may come from within or outside the Gunnedah Shire area.

Community Stakeholders

The community has a range of diverse groups with overlapping roles. Community members are part of many different community groups and live within a community of interest that is not defined by local government boundaries but their individual lifestyle and choices. A broad summary of the types of groups and roles of the groups within our community include:

| ROLE | FUNCTION |
|---------------------------|---|
| Residents | Citizens, parents, children, brothers and sisters, business owners, workers, voters, leaders |
| Business owners | Employers, drivers of the economy, providers |
| Not-for profits | Generators of economic output, enablers |
| Service groups | Service providers, community wellbeing promoter, advocates |
| Sporting clubs | Community health and wellbeing facilitator; contributor to vibrancy |
| Tourists/visitors | Contributor to the economy and vibrancy |
| Interest groups | Advocates of a specific cause or outcome; culture influencer |
| Federal Government | The federal government raises money to run the country by collecting taxes on incomes, goods and services, and company profits, and spends it on national matters. Includes: post, telecommunications; trade and commerce; international trade; immigration; defence |
| State Government | State and territory governments also raise money from taxes but receive more than half their money from the federal government and spend it on state and territory matters. Includes: public transport, roads, schools, hospitals, public housing |
| Council | Local councils collect taxes - rates - from all local property owners and receive grants from federal, state and territory governments, and spend this on local matters. Includes: asset management, waste collection and recycling, parks, sports fields and swimming pools, pet control, parking, libraries, development regulation, transport infrastructure |

How we will engage

Levels of Participation

The Public Participation Spectrum developed by IPA2 identifies five different stages of consultation relative to the level of impact the community should have on decision making. The stages are:

1. Inform
2. Consult
3. Involve
4. Collaborate
5. Empower

For Gunnedah Shire Council purposes the key stages can be described as:

- Inform
- Consult
- Involve/Collaborate

Inform

| Promise to the Community | We will keep you informed. |
|--------------------------|--|
| Council's Role | Give stakeholders balanced, accurate and relevant information on decisions, policies, plans, and strategies. |
| Community's Role | Actively seek information and listen |

The inform stage is for day-to-day use, often when Council has already made a decision, to communicate the outcome or status of projects, or when there is only one way that Council believes it can progress a project. The methods include any combination of the below.

Customer Contact Centre: Council's administration office provides a 'one-stop-shop' for Council services using customer service, visual displays, and printed materials for Council-related business.

Council's website: One of Council's primary communication tools, the website should be a comprehensive source of information for all Council services and programs.

Advertising & features: Council will consider the use of advertising/features with local media servicing the area.

Media releases: Regular media releases ensure Council provides reliable, timely and accurate information to all media servicing the Local Government Area, including print and broadcast.

Publications/information material: Council publications about Council specific programs, services and initiatives are a valuable source of information.

Council-facilitated community events: Council-hosted events which provide opportunities for Councillors and staff to provide information to the community. Council also strongly supports and participates in other community events.

Letterbox drop: Non-addressed letter/flyer that advises citizens of an outcome/ works to be undertaken and informs how feedback can be provided.

Targeted direct mail: Electronic and/or Addressed letters sent directly to the customer. This is usually specific to a project, geographic location or members of a particular group or demographic.

Presentation/public speaking: Councillors and staff speak at relevant meetings or events.

Community notice boards: At Council facilities, libraries, and areas relevant to audience.

Site specific signage: Erected temporarily or permanently to inform the public of the project and relevant project details.

Consult

| | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Promise to the Community | We will listen to you, consider your ideas and concerns and keep you informed. |
| Council's Role | Generate active two-way communication between Council and the community. At this level, Council seeks feedback to identify important community issues and perspectives that can influence and assist decision making. Informing is a prerequisite for consultation |
| Community's Role | Contribute |

The consult stage is for input into services, plans and projects that can then be considered in future decision making. The services, plans and projects can be shire-wide (for example, Council's Community Strategic Plan), a specific project (for example a park in one of the villages) and anything in between. The methods include any combination of the below.

Community forums: These provide an opportunity for members of the community to attend a structured two-way information session hosted by Council, usually about specific projects and topics.

Public exhibitions and submissions: Required by legislation for certain types of issues, items on exhibition and development applications are open to submissions from the public. The information is made available for the public to comment on within a certain timeframe, while informing citizens how they can make their submissions/comments to Council.

Community displays/stalls: Councillors and Council officers are available at a nominated venue and for a specific period of time, encouraging citizens to attend and discuss the topic/s.

Surveys: Target audience surveys should be integrated with broader consultation for larger projects, using independent market research companies or survey specialists where possible.

Site meeting/tour: Interaction at specific locations, usually facilitated by Council for invited participants.

Personal briefings: Inform relevant community groups/ ratepayer associations, businesses, and individuals that they may request a personal briefing with Councillors or Council staff to discuss a particular issue.



Involve / Collaborate

| | |
|--|--|
| Promise to the Community | We will work with you on an ongoing basis to ensure your ideas, concerns and aspirations are considered. We will provide feedback on Council's decisions. |
| Council's Role | Create a collaborative relationship/partnership between Council and the community, facilitating involvement in shaping decisions that affect community life. Informing and consulting are components of involving/collaborating. |
| Community's Role | Participate |
| <p>The involve and collaborates stages take the consult stage further and look for input and inclusion into specific projects and goals to assist in future decision making. Examples where involve and collaboration would be used include special working groups. The methods used include the below.</p> <p>Meetings by invitation: Community leaders, stakeholders and representatives meet with Councillors and Council staff for discussion, debate, and exchange of views on a specific issue.</p> <p>Meetings with Council advisory groups: Formal consultation between Councillors and Council staff with members of advisory groups with expertise in particular areas. Engagement will be governed by the groups' terms of reference.</p> <p>Large Group/Stakeholder Collaboration: As forums to address a strategic issue or plan these collaborations bring together Councillors, Council staff, stakeholder groups and individuals with relevant expertise and knowledge to formulate a response.</p> | |

Empower

| | |
|---|---|
| Promise to the Community | We will give the community greater opportunity to participate in a transparent flow of information and feedback to Councillors, who have been empowered as the community representatives to make decisions in accordance with the NSW Local Government Act 1999. |
| Council's Role | Engagement activities conducted at the Empower level will be unusual, however, engagement with Councillors is encouraged and facilitated. |
| Community's Role | Decide |
| <p>The empowerment stage takes the above stages even further and looks for the community to take actions and make decisions. Examples where empowerment would be used include progress associations and any groups given direct decision-making authority (for example, deciding where grant funds may be spent). Empowerment methods used include:</p> <p>Elections: Vote for Councillors that you believe will make decisions in the best interests of the broad community.</p> <p>Special purpose groups: Empower stakeholder groups as appropriate.</p> | |

Council Projects for Engagement

Consultation methods vary according to the type of project/issue. The strategy sets guidelines for engagement on project/issues which are classified into four categories:

1. Council-wide / High Impact: Strategic plans, major projects and resource issues. For example, Community Strategic Plan, Local Environment Plans, Shire-wide Development Control Plans.

2. Council-wide / Low Impact: Management Plans and Policy Development, minor projects and major projects with limited impact. For example, major festivals and events.

3. Locality Based / High Impact: Locality improvement and site-specific matters and events. For example, development applications in accordance with statutory requirements, construction of Council facilities, and works in central business districts.

4. Locality Based / Low Impact: Council service / program planning and delivery. For example, local road works, operational services such as traffic management and general maintenance of public areas or upgrade of parks and recreational areas (minor works level).

This strategy relates to many activities undertaken by Council, however, legislative requirements and other council policies regulate the procedures and outcomes of some Council activities, limiting the opportunities for public input and the scope for community engagement.

Evaluation & Feedback

Following the implementation of an involve/consult engagement project, Council will evaluate the effectiveness of the program in reaching the desired audience and achieving the required outcomes.

Council will then provide feedback for the people who participated in the program, in order to increase their understanding of how the input gathered during the program was considered/utilized in the decision-making process, and what direction was ultimately taken.

By providing open and timely feedback to participants, Council will enhance the transparency of its decision making and further strengthen its relationship with the broad community. Feedback will also improve future engagement programs through a greater understanding of the engagement process.

Stakeholder Matrix

The below matrix outlines the methods that Council endeavours to use in the varying types of situations in which we undertake public consultation.

There will be times, often due to time and resource constraints, where Council does not use all the methods identified, however, in these scenarios Council works hard to ensure it uses the methods it believes will provide the greatest opportunity for the community to be included.

It is also very important that Council and the community work together and while Council has a responsibility and wants to actively engage with the community, for engagement to be successful, it requires both itself and the community to be involved in a genuine manner to provide input that will ultimately lead to the Gunnedah Shire being an even better place to live, work and play.

| WHAT TO DO? | WHEN YOU'RE DEALING WITH | | | |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 = EVERY TIME | Council wide/ high impact | Council wide/ low impact | locality based/ high impact | locality based/ low impact |
| 2 = IN MOST CIRCUMSTANCES | | | | |
| 3 = ON SPECIFIC OCCASIONS | | | | |
| 4 = ON RARE OCCASIONS | | | | |
| Customer Service Centre | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Council Website/s | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Newspaper/advertising/features | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Media Release | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Publications/Information Material | 1 | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| Council Facilitated Events | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Targeted Direct Mail | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| Your Local News | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Presentation/Public Speaking | 2 | 3 | 3 | 4 |
| Community Notice Boards | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Site Specific Signage | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Community Forum | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 |
| Public Exhibitions Submissions | 1 | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| Community displays/Information Sessions | 2 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Surveys | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Site Meeting/Tour | 2 | 3 | 2 | 4 |
| Briefing | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Meeting By Invitation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Council Committees/advisory groups | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Large Group/Stakeholder Collaboration | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

Engagement Tools in the involve/collaborate stage will vary depending on the nature of the project.

Legislative Requirements

Local Councils in NSW are required to undertake their planning and reporting activities in accordance with the *NSW Local Government Act 1993* (the Act).

Section 402A of the Act requires the following:

- A Community Engagement Strategy must be prepared, adopted, and implemented, based on social justice principles, for engagement with the local community to support council in developing its plans and determining key activities. This includes development of the Community Strategic Plan, and all relevant council plans, policies, and programs.
- As a minimum, the Community Engagement Strategy must identify relevant stakeholder groups within the community and outline methods that will be used to engage each group.
- The Strategy must be reviewed within 3 months of the local government elections, as part of the broader review of the Community Strategic Plan (or Business Activity Strategic Plan for county councils) (see Essential Element 1.12).
- In the case of a county council, an Engagement Strategy is to be prepared, adopted, and implemented for engagement with constituent councils and other relevant stakeholders.
- Where a council has community engagement requirements under other legislation or regulations, these should, wherever practical, be integrated into the Community Engagement Strategy.

Gunnedah Shire Council's Community Engagement Strategy has been developed in accordance with this legislation.

Risks and Opportunities

There are several challenges we may face when trying to engage the community. Council will seek to minimise the risks and turn them into opportunities through awareness and planning. Some of the key risks and opportunities are identified in the table below.

| Risk | Opportunity |
|--|---|
| Limited Participation | Broadly promote engagement activities to ensure all community members have the opportunity to participate. |
| Accessibility | Ensure engagement takes places at times and in places that are accessible and that a broad range of engagement methods are utilised. |
| Failure to engage hard to reach groups | Planning of the best times and locations that give these groups the best chance to be involved. |
| Lack of time and resources | Early planning and engaging internal stakeholders to ensure ample time and resources are allocated to the community engagement project. |
| Out of scope expectations | Set clear and realistic expectations with the community from the start by communicating project scope and potential of scope creep, as well as negotiables and non-negotiables. |
| Lack of internal consultation | Inform and engage with staff as the first stage of engagements to create an internal baseline of knowledge and awareness. |
| Engagement fatigue | Where possible, schedule engagement activities to allow the community to have the maximum opportunity to participate without requiring attendance at more sessions than is necessary. |

Contact Council



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This strategy has been developed to work hand in hand with:

Council's Community Engagement Policy, and Council's Community Participation Plan.

Public Exhibition dates: TBC

ENDORSED: TBC

Acknowledgements

The following acknowledgements are made, recognising institutions and documents that informed and influenced the development of this Community Engagement Strategy:

- International Association for Public Participation 'Foundations of public participation'.
- The Uralla Shire and Tenterfield Shire Councils' 'Community Engagement Strategy'.