



Community Engagement Strategy 2016-2020

Part A
Strategic directions to
enhance community
engagement practice

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Introduction

Golden Plains Shire is committed to enhancing the opportunities it provides to the community to be involved in Council's decision making processes. This commitment was reinforced in 2015 as a result of community feedback that the Council needed to improve the way it engages with the community.

After taking stock of the results from recent community engagement activities the Community Engagement Strategy 2016 - 2020 has been developed to guide Council's capacity to more effectively plan, deliver and evaluate engagement processes for the future.

Local government has a mandate to provide a range of infrastructure, programs and services to meet the needs of the residents and visitors of their area. Integral to good governance is a comprehensive and effective stakeholder and community engagement framework that contributes to robust decision making and delivery of the facilities, programs and services.

Purpose

The purpose of this Strategy is to guide Council on how to build its capacity to plan, deliver, and evaluate effective community engagement practices in the Golden Plains Shire.

The Community Engagement Strategy 2016-2020:

- Provides a context for community engagement in the Golden Plains Shire
- Highlights key factors that have influenced the development of the Strategy
- Outlines a vision for community engagement practice in the future
- Sets out the strategic direction to enable the enhancement of community engagement practice for community and Council

Who will use the Strategy?

The Strategy demonstrates Golden Plains Shire Council's commitment to the community about enhancing community engagement practice and provides a strategic direction on how this is going to be achieved.

The Strategy will be used by the Golden Plains Council staff and Councillors. It will also be promoted to the community for transparency and shared responsibility on relevant actions.

At a strategic and operational level, the Strategy will provide a framework for senior managers and key staff to implement a change management process that guides the continuing improvement of community engagement practice.



What do we mean by ‘community engagement’?

The term ‘community engagement’ can mean different things to different organisations and community members. Here the terms ‘community’ and ‘community engagement’ have been defined to provide clarity.

Defining community

The term ‘community’ is defined as individuals or organisations who may have an interest or potential interest in the outcome of a project and/or who may have some influence over the outcome of the project. The definition can be expanded to include those people who are impacted by a decision.

‘Community’ includes individual rate payers, community members and groups, government agencies, industry bodies, authorities and funders. Community can also be described in terms of a geographical area or by a shared interest or issue.

Defining community engagement

Community engagement is the activities that Golden Plains Shire Council use to gather and share knowledge, and interact with relevant stakeholders and the community, in order to:

- Include community knowledge in the design and implementation of Golden Plains Shire 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 the Golden Plain Shire Council’s strategies, programs and initiatives.
- Better inform the community about Golden Plains Shire Council’s services, strategies, programs and initiatives.

There is often a misconception that organisations should engage with each of its stakeholders to a high level of influence on every program or project. This is not necessary. What is appropriate is discerning the appropriate level of influence that any stakeholder will have on the program or project at hand and creating a more tailored approach about who to engage and how. Enhanced knowledge and skill in applying a robust community engagement framework can help with this process.



Relationship to Council Plan

The Community Engagement Strategy 2016-2020 is closely aligned to the Council Plan. In particular, the Vision of the Council Plan signifies the importance of community to Council's decision making and delivery of services.

Council recognises that partnering with the community and providing residents with opportunities to be involved in Council's decision making processes is crucial to this Vision.

Vision of Golden Plains Shire Council:

"Golden Plains offers a lifestyle and opportunities that foster social, economic and environmental wellbeing.

In partnership with the community we will provide strong leadership, encourage sustainable development and ensure quality services, to continue to improve the quality of life of residents"

Similarly the Council Plan recognises the following values:

Integrity in Leadership

We will strive to lead the community with integrity, reason and accountability whilst acknowledging Council's statutory obligations.

Commitment

We are committed to excellence in management, and teamwork comprising the community, Council and staff.

Innovation

We are open to new ideas and will grasp opportunities with a vision to succeed.

Equity and Access

We will treat our community, residents and ratepayers equitably by being fair in decision making and ensure that we are approachable by the community.

Community

We recognise the uniqueness of our individual communities, and will seek to work in partnership with them to enhance their sense of community spirit. We recognise the efforts and value the contributions of our volunteers.



A number of other Council Strategies and in particular the Events, Marketing and Communications Strategy 2015-2018 also hold some key links with the Community Engagement Strategy.

What informed our Strategy

The development of the Community Engagement Strategy 2016-2020 builds on the research and engagement activities undertaken during 2014-2016 and considers the existing policy and practice framework used by the Council (see Figure 1).

Input from the community and staff was also gathered through a range of briefings and workshops. Further details of the background research can be found in the Golden Plains Shire Council Community Engagement Practice - Background Research Summary Report 2016.



Figure 1: Community Engagement Strategy Development Pathway

Who did we consider as part of our Strategy?

The Strategy has been developed with the key stakeholders in mind. A wide representation of the Golden Plains Shire communities, Councillors, Council staff, and senior management, have contributed views and ideas that have been considered in the development of this Strategy.

The input from all stakeholder groups has been instrumental in developing the Strategy and has helped to understand:

- What is important to the community and staff about being involved and contributing to the decision making processes of Council
- How best to communicate with and engage stakeholders and the community
- What is needed to improve community engagement practice.

820	People responded to the Community Engagement Survey 2016
120	Or more staff have participated in the engagement sessions to contribute to the Strategy
29	Community members from across the Golden Plains Shire have participated in the Community Reference Group
7	Elected representatives (Mayor and Councillors) contributed to the development of the Strategy



What key findings underpin the Strategy?

Participation in decision making

The respondents to the Community Engagement Survey indicated a high level of interest in contributing to Council's decision making processes and that they are looking for more active participation opportunities as compared to only the exchange of information.

- 99% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they think Council should involve the community in decisions that affect them
- 77% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they want to participate in Council's decision making process
- 91% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that when they provide input, receiving information on the final decision is important

Transparency and need for trust

Survey respondents reflected a view that there was a lack of transparency in Council's consultation processes. Fifty percent (50%) of respondents indicated that Council was not perceived to consider or incorporate community input in decision making. This view leads to perceptions that the consultations are not genuine or are tokenistic with the Council already firm in their view about what they are likely to do anyway (see Figure 2).

“Council considers and incorporates community input when making decisions...”

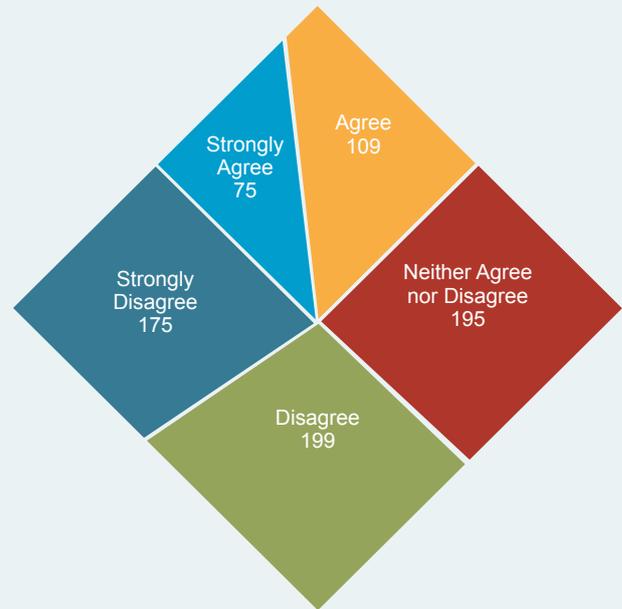


Figure 2: Perceptions of Council considering input from community



“ Whilst we may attempt to consult with the community, the rural nature of our council can hinder our capacity to receive great feedback that is indicative of the whole community. ”

Fairness and equity in engagement

There is a perception amongst some survey respondents that Council's engagement processes do not enable reasonable and fair opportunity to become involved in the engagement opportunities. One of the significant barriers to becoming involved was not hearing about the engagement opportunities (47%) and not being able to participate during the day due to work or family commitments (23%).

Golden Plains Shire staff also highlighted some of the constraints of engaging in a large rural local government area.

Effective planning for engagement

Council staff engaged in the development of the Strategy identified the need to engage earlier in the process of the projects, to be more coordinated with communications across Council and to be receptive to community's ideas and suggestions on projects. An analysis of some work examples from Council highlighted the need to undertake early research about the townships where the engagement focus is occurring and to engage decision makers earlier in the project.

“ I work in Daylesford and live in Sythes Creek so not practical to get to Bannockburn during the week, day or night ”

“ Take a more measured approach to community engagement and outlining the intent of the entire project so it's a clear process ”



Our vision for community engagement

Currently the Council defines community engagement as the set of processes by which Council invites, facilitates and considers stakeholder input in decision-making about specific projects.¹

The success of community engagement practice is largely influenced and assessed by Council's performance of engagement practice against the expectations by members of the community. Every community member will have a different view of what successful engagement might look like. The challenge for Council is to be responsible for establishing expectations and then fulfilling those expectations through the community engagement practice.

Golden Plains Shire Council's goal is to undertake well planned, clear and transparent community engagement practices, and provide a breadth of opportunities for information exchange and involvement of the community in Council's decision making processes.

What does successful engagement look like?

Based on the input from key stakeholders and the community, successful engagement is characterised by:

- Good planning of the engagement processes
- A clear purpose that is communicated to all
- Identifying target audiences
- 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
- Giving feedback on the outcomes of the engagement processes and 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.

“ Empower staff to engage community in first instance and make changes to their own practice based on that ”

“ When resident's money is being spent, or when decisions are going to be made that affect them, they should be consulted. ”



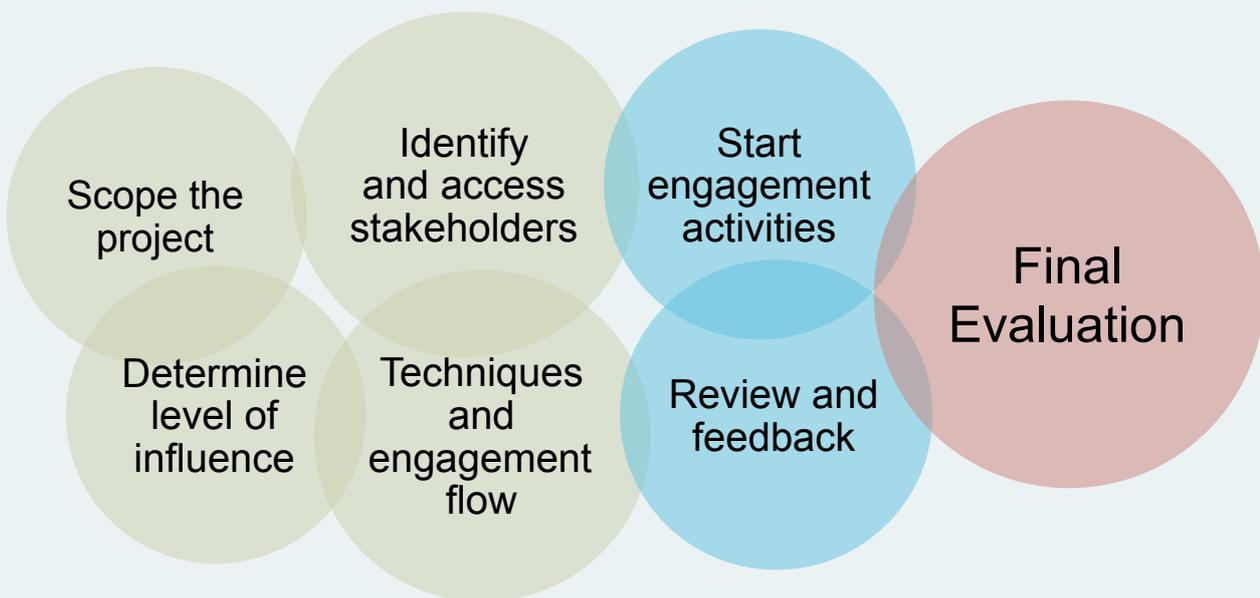
¹ Golden Plains Shire Community Engagement Framework, adopted December 2010.

A community engagement planning process

This section outlines the key steps in planning an engagement process that would be used by staff that are responsible for leading an engagement process as part of their work projects and initiatives.

The community engagement planning process is useful when staff are engaging stakeholders and the community in the development of Council

Strategies, development and implementation of programs and projects, or responding to community led initiatives. The logic process of planning and implementing the engagement design is illustrated in Figure 3. Table 1 that follows provides a description of what is happening at each stage in the process.



Engagement Design | Implementation | Evaluation & Report

Figure 3: Community Engagement Planning Process



Step	Key Phase	Description
1	Scope the project, engagement and method (project logic)	Determine the need for a Community Engagement Plan and how the engagement will influence the project 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 relevant stakeholders	Identify and assess the relevant stakeholders considering what role they may play in the engagement processes
3	Determine level of influence/participation by stakeholders and community	Determine the appropriate level of engagement and clarify the specific engagement goals
4	Choose techniques, evaluation strategies and design the engagement flow	Determine which methods and communication activities are best suited for the stakeholders, engagement objectives and level of influence Consider the resources needed to support the implementation of the engagement design
5	Implement the engagement activities (as part of the project plan)	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, stakeholders and community on progress of engagement activities, outcomes and impacts for the work being done
7	Develop final evaluation	Complete the evaluation process



The Strategic Directions

The following strategic directions and key objectives have been developed to show Council’s commitment to enhancing community engagement practice. The aim is to build on current effective practice and create a more comprehensive and consistent approach to engagement processes that responds to community interest and achieves the Council’s corporate objectives.

The Strategy has an accompanying Action Plan (Part B) that outlines suggested detailed actions over a period of four years, 2016 – 2020.

Strategic Direction 1 - Accessible and transparent engagement practice

What's important to the community	Key Objectives	What success will look like
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More openness of Council's decision making processes • Greater choice of method options to participate in engagement opportunities • More than sharing information and responding to surveys • More active involvement in engagement activities – sharing ideas with other community members • Showing the community how their input has been considered in the outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and promote a range of options for communities to participate in engagement processes • Create more opportunities for active participation in engagement processes • Reduce the barriers for wider community involvement • Actively communicate the decision making process, including decision making criteria when engagement is planned • More consistently communicate how community input has contributed to Council's decision making processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater rates of participation • Better representation from across the Shire • Community has improved understanding of Council's decision making processes • More frequent demonstration of feedback on engagement outcomes being provided to key stakeholders and the community • Improved satisfaction of Council's CE practice

Strategic Direction 2 - Improved internal communication and engagement

What's important to the community	Key Objectives	What success will look like
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A coordinated approach to communications and engagement • Be more proactive than reactive • Embedded in Council's culture • Centralised messages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop mechanisms for the regular sharing of key projects impacting on other areas of Council • Improve shared understanding of key functional areas to facilitate more effective internal engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross departmental sharing of information is regular practice • The community experiences a seamless transition of service between departments

Strategic Direction 3 - Aligned Policy and Practice Framework

What's important to the community	Key Objectives	What success will look like
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More transparency about Council's decision making processes • More consistency in practice across Council • The use of a standard template that is easy to implement • Change to Council policies and procedures to be more inclusive of communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a contemporary community engagement policy and practice framework that aligns with Council's vision, mission and strategic objectives. • Have a contemporary community engagement policy and practice framework that is known and understood by all staff and Councillors • Ensure that the community engagement policy and practice framework is actively used in the planning of engagement processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council policies are revised and aligned with the corporate objectives • An induction program on community engagement practice is in place • Regular audits of a sample of projects reflect application of the framework

Strategic Direction 4 - Enhanced understanding, capacity and skill in community engagement practice

What's important to the community	Key Objectives	What success will look like
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More effective community engagement practice • An understanding of what community engagement processes will be used • Knowing that the engagement is genuine • Knowing that the input from consultations will be considered and not ignored 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen shared understanding of why, and how Council will engage, including community expectations and Council's capacity to deliver • Broaden the skills in community engagement practice across Council's functional areas • Create opportunities for the community to understand Council's framework for community engagement practice and to develop skills in engagement practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A consistently applied practice framework is in place • A targeted specialist skill development program is implemented

Strategic Direction 5 - A more coordinated approach to engagement practice

What's important to the community	Key Objectives	What success will look like
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More proactive approach to engagement rather than reactive • More advanced notice of engagement opportunities • A Community Hub portal that the community can access and see the progress on engagement processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review the positioning of the Community Engagement Officer role within the organisation to ensure best fit • Create and promote a space on Council's intranet for tools, templates and resources to support community engagement practice • Create systems that allow for the sharing of information on community engagement activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A coordinated system for the information and tracking of community engagement processes • The strategic positioning of community engagement resources with Communications and Marketing • A range of simple templates are on Council's intranet for ease of access and application

Glossary of Terms

The Strategy includes a number of terms that are used in the Strategy; the table below provides a definition for each of these terms.

Table 2: Glossary of Terms

Community	Individuals or organisations who may have an interest in the outcome of a project and/or who may have some influence over the outcome of the project.
Community Engagement	<p>Community engagement is the activities that the Golden Plains Shire use to gather and share knowledge, interact with relevant stakeholders and the community in order to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Include community knowledge in the design and implementation of Golden Plains Shire Council's 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 the Golden Plain Shire's strategies, programs and initiatives• Better inform the community about Golden Plains Shire Council's services, strategies, programs and initiatives.
Community Engagement Plan	A well thought out, comprehensive, written down plan prepared before a project commences that sets out how Council will engage the community in relation to that project.
Council	The Golden Plains Shire Council, including staff, Councillors and the policies and guidelines that deliver the services, events, projects and initiatives.
Project	A particular piece of work being undertaken or facilitated by Council. This includes constructing a facility, staging an event, planning or delivering a program or service, or undertaking a study or strategic planning.





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