

Community Engagement Strategy (2016-2020)

Progress Report: September 2016 - December 2017 (summary)

Golden Plains Shire Council is committed to enhancing the opportunities it provides to the community to be involved in Council's decision making processes. As part of this ongoing commitment, Council adopted its first Community Engagement Strategy (the Strategy) in August 2016.



Image: Bannockburn Primary School students participating in the Bannockburn Heart Play Space engagement field trip 2017

This Progress Report reviews Council's implementation of the Community Engagement Strategy over its first 15 months, from September 2016 – December 2017. There is significant evidence that Council is improving in its community engagement practice across the organisation, however we recognise that there are a number of areas for improvement which need to be addressed to ensure we achieve our objectives by 2020.

This review has been structured according to the four key principles that underpin the Strategy which were based on the issues the community said were most important: genuine participation in decision making; transparency and the need for trust; fairness and equity; and effective planning and management. The review concludes with an overview of the community's satisfaction with Council's performance in engagement, based on the Local Government Satisfaction Survey 2017.

Please note: this document is a summary version of the full report, for detailed analysis of program data and case studies of engagement practice, please see the full report, available on our website:
www.goldenplains.vic.gov.au/consultations.

Prepared by Susan Firth-McCoy, Community Engagement Officer, February 2018

1. Genuine participation in decision making

Principles and objectives

What's important to the community	What success looks like
<ul style="list-style-type: none">More opportunities to contribute to Council's decision making processesMore ways of participating – range of methods of engagementMore active participation opportunities (not just receiving information and filling in surveys – opportunity to speak with other community members)Knowing that the engagement is genuine, not tokenistic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Greater rates of participation in engagement activitiesMultiple options to participate in the engagement processesEffective two-way communication with clear and relevant informationGenuine engagement – using the community's contribution to influence Council decisions.

Source: Community Engagement Strategy (2016-2020): Part A

Achievements

- 36 community engagement processes (23 public engagements and 13 with Council service users), 31 per annum, higher than national average (Source: Christensen 2017)
- 3,700 community members participated, representing over 15% of Golden Plains Shire's total population (although this may be an over-estimate as some individuals may have participated in multiple engagements)
- 1 in 3 engagement processes provided more than one method for community members to be involved
- Majority of processes (60%) used interactive methods, such as workshops, voting, or pop-up conversation posts; not just surveys or submissions
- 1 in 3 processes gave community members a higher level of influence over the process and/or outcomes of the project, not just informing or consulting
- Almost 20% of all staff and managers were trained in 'positive interactions with community' which resulted in increased staff motivation to engage with the community, and enhanced skills in face-to-face engagement, including empathy and active listening.



Areas for improvement

- A number of community members feel Council does not provide enough community engagement opportunities (Source: Local Government Community Satisfaction Survey 2017)
- Community members have indicated they want more in-depth and long-term involvement in issues that are important to them, however the majority of engagement processes were at the 'consult' end of the spectrum, meaning Council retained the overall decision-making power
- Some community members feel that engagement opportunities are not genuine, and many community members have commented that Council needs to listen more to community members (Source: Local Government Community Satisfaction Survey 2017)

Image: Golden Youth Empowerment Roadshow youth committee members and Council's Youth Development Officer at a conversation post at Children's Week event (2017)

2. Transparency and the need for trust

Principles and objectives

What's important to the community	What success looks like
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Openness and transparency of both the engagement and decision-making processes• Clear and timely communication about opportunities• Demonstrate how community input has influenced the outcome• Close the loop: provide information to participants and broader community about the final decision• Knowing that the input from consultations will be considered and not ignored.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Open communication and publicly accessible information about the engagement process and how this influenced the decision or outcome• Timely communication that enables a reasonable opportunity for the community to give input to the engagement processes• More frequent demonstration of feedback on engagement outcomes being provided to key stakeholders and community• Community has improved understanding of Council's decision-making processes.

Source: *Community Engagement Strategy (2016-2020): Part A*

Achievements

- New standardised communication templates are being consistently used by staff to ensure community members can access key information including: why we are engaging, what is negotiable, what level of influence community will have, and how we will use their feedback
- Improved accessibility of Council meetings, which are now held after work hours (as of February 2018)
- Almost 90% of public engagement processes provided publicly accessible information, documents, project timelines and contact details via Council's online engagement platform 'Have Your Say'
- Over 5,000 unique pageviews and an overall trend of increasing community interaction with 'Have Your Say'
- 90% of Golden Plains Shire Gazette editions featured articles about community engagement, averaging 2.5 articles per edition
- 120 members signed up to the new Community Engagement Register, a database of Golden Plains Shire community members who are interested in participating in engagement activities
- Improved rate of 'closing the loop': over 80% of all engagement processes reported back to the community on engagement outcomes, and 95% of all public engagement processes either provided feedback or are scheduled to provide feedback in early 2018.

Areas for improvement

- Some community members feel that Council does not communicate effectively about engagement opportunities, and would like communication to be more frequent, direct, and timely (Source: Local Government Community Satisfaction Survey 2017)
- Communications about engagement opportunities in the Golden Plains Shire Gazette are sometimes lacking in specific information about how to get involved
- A small number of projects were untimely in closing the loop, and took over 6 months to provide feedback to participants after results had been analysed.

3. Fairness and equity

Principles and objectives

What's important to the community	What success looks like
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fair and reasonable opportunity to become involved• Accessible and inclusive engagement opportunities for all who want to participate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Better representation from diverse community and stakeholder groups across the Shire• Appropriate time, venue, and location for those who are affected by, and interested in, the engagement.

Source: Community Engagement Strategy (2016-2020): Part A

Achievements

- The ages and geographic locations of engagement participants were broadly representative of the Shire's demographics.
- Evidence of some excellent practice examples of creative and successful approaches to engaging with specific age groups including children, young people, and older residents
- Over 85% of all engagement processes provided accessible opportunities such as workshops on weeknights after work hours, pop-up conversation posts on weekends, or online engagement
- 40% of Council engagement processes used an outreach approach and linked their engagement with an existing community event, meeting or space; making it easier for community members to participate
- Engagement opportunities were regularly shared with Council's Access and Inclusion committee, and an accessibility checklist was developed to enhance the inclusion of community members with disabilities
- 70% of all engagement processes with an online component also provided an offline option (e.g. hard copy, or face-to-face), to ensure accessibility for those who are not comfortable using the internet, or have poor or no internet access
- 18 pop-up conversation posts were held at community events and spaces across the Shire, reaching over 1,000 community members.

Areas for improvement

- Inconsistency in ensuring that all relevant demographic groups are involved in engagement processes, including children and young people, and community members with disabilities
- Despite community preference for Council linking engagement opportunities with existing events and community group meetings, the majority of engagement processes (60%) used stand-alone opportunities
- Some community members feel Council staff and Councillors need to 'get out and be seen' engaging in the community more (Source: Local Government Community Satisfaction Survey 2017).



Image: Cr Joanne Gilbert with Community Engagement Officer Susan Firth-McCoy at a Conversation Post at Smythesdale Country Market (2017)

4. Effective planning and management

Principles and objectives

What's important to the community	What success looks like
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be more proactive than reactive• A coordinated approach to communications and engagement across departments• More consistency in practice across Council departments• Engage earlier in the process (both with community members and decision-makers).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engagement processes are coordinated and consistent across Council departments• Cross-departmental sharing of information is regular practice• Council policies are aligned with engagement principles• Projects reflect the application of best practice principles and framework• Good planning of the engagement process – including identifying the resources, people, and time required• Continual quality improvement through monitoring and evaluation of community engagement processes• Early and effective engagement with decision-makers.

Source: *Community Engagement Strategy (2016-2020): Part A*

Achievements

- Broad range of Council departments (12 in total) engaged with the community, with evidence of increasing coordination and collaboration across departments
- New Community Engagement Practice Framework (draft) developed
- New internal engagement management software developed to improve consistency, documentation, and coordination of engagement across the organisation (planned launch in March 2018)
- Range of new resources and tools developed for staff, and stored on a dedicated Community Engagement page on Council's new staff intranet
- 90% of all public engagement processes received some level of advice or support from the Community Engagement Officer
- New induction program in community engagement commenced for all new staff
- New staff peer-support network commenced for community engagement practitioners
- New regional network initiated with other community engagement officers from neighbouring Councils
- Councillors and senior managers directly participated in a number of major engagement activities across the Shire.

Areas for improvement

- Lack of coordination in engagement processes across Council departments
- Significant inconsistency across the organisation in planning for engagement, documentation, and evaluation of engagement processes
- A number of policies and resources are still in draft form, and many staff are not aware of the new resources and tools now available to support engagement practice
- Only 25% of public engagement processes involved the Community Engagement Officer at the planning stage, which limited quality assurance and consistency
- There is inconsistency in understanding of, and commitment to, engagement across the organisation, caused in part by the lack of an embedded culture which consistently promotes community engagement.

5. Increased community satisfaction in engagement

Community satisfaction is one way in which we can measure our overall effectiveness in engagement. The annual Local Government Community Satisfaction Survey measures community views of Council's performance across a range of areas, including community engagement.

Achievements

There has been an overall improvement in the community's satisfaction with Council's performance in community engagement since the adoption of the Community Engagement Strategy, with overall scores increasing from 44/100 in 2015 to 48/100 in 2017 (Source: Know Your Council website 2018).

Areas for improvement

While the increase in community satisfaction scores is encouraging, 30% of respondents rated our performance as 'poor' or 'very poor' (Source: Local Government Community Satisfaction Survey 2017), and our overall scores are 4% lower than average when compared with similar large Shire councils (Source: Know Your Council website 2018). This suggests that while we are on the right track, there is still significant room for improvement.



Image: Council's Early Years staff hosting a conversation post at Children's Week event (2017)

Learn more

Have Your Say

www.goldenplains.vic.gov.au/consultations

Sign up to the Community Engagement Register

www.goldenplains.vic.gov.au/community-engagement-register

Contact the Community Engagement Officer

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