



***COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT  
SNAPSHOT OF COUNCILS***

**April 2007**

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Community engagement is an area of ongoing development and a topic of debate within all spheres of Government. The LGA recognises that Councils are often involved in more intensive engagement on a regular basis at a local level than other governments, and sometimes on behalf of, or in conjunction with, other governments.

To assist Councils in this area, the LGA commenced a project Citizen/Community Engagement Project with State Government support through the Office of State/Local Government Relations, aimed at highlighting and developing tools and techniques to support good practices.

As a first step LGA issued a Circular to all Councils (Circular 11.12), inviting Councils to complete a questionnaire about current community engagement practices, and to submit case study examples to be considered for a showcase of leading practice examples.

For the purpose of the questionnaire the following definitions were used.

- “Community engagement is about involving the community in decision making processes, which is critical in the successful development of acceptable policies and decisions in government, the private sector and the community.”  
Source: adapted from [www.dpi.wa.gov.au/communityengagement/727.asp](http://www.dpi.wa.gov.au/communityengagement/727.asp)
- The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) terminology has been adapted to define the level of community engagement along a spectrum, as follows<sup>1</sup>:

Inform	One way communications – providing balanced and objective information to assist understanding about something that is going to happen or has happened.
Consult	Two way communications – obtaining public feedback about ideas on rationale, alternatives and proposals to inform decision making.
Involve	Participatory processes - inviting involvement to help identify issues and views to ensure that concerns and aspirations are understood and considered prior to decision making
Collaborate	Working together to develop understanding of all aspects of issues, work out alternatives and identifying preferred solutions.

The IAP2 spectrum continues along to encompass “empower” whereby final decision making is in the hands of the public. It is to be noted that except in very limited circumstances it is only the elected body of Council which is empowered to make decisions and implement actions within the terms of the Local Government Act 1999 (SA).

26 Councils responded to the invitation, 12 metropolitan and 14 country Councils, representing a cross section of large and smaller metropolitan Councils, regional centre Councils, and small rural Councils. The information and data have been provided by Council officers in good faith and it's to be noted that the responses have not necessarily been endorsed by Councils.

A summary of the questionnaire responses follows. The collated questionnaire response data is attached as Appendix A.

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<sup>1</sup> Refer <http://www.iap2.org.au> for more information.

**1. Is your Council's Public Consultation Policy a stand alone document or part of a broader policy framework or strategic document?**

Although most respondent Councils stated they have developed a "stand alone" policy there is a trend towards broader policy frameworks reflected in comments:

- broader framework in progress
- a positive approach to a community engagement culture is embedded across the organisation
- part of "Organisational Effectiveness Goal"
- development of a Community Engagement Strategy identified in Youth Plan

Several larger Councils state they have embraced and adopted the IAP2 principles and are moving towards an integrated community engagement framework across their organisations. This includes a commitment to dedicated resources at a corporate level to support this approach, and the preparation of handbooks, toolkits and guidelines to support staff in all disciplines. In some cases, larger Councils are offering mentoring/advice to smaller metropolitan and rural Councils.

The City of Onkaparinga community engagement framework is highlighted as a leading practice example, accessible via [www.onkaparingacity.com/web/page?pg=1917&stypen=html](http://www.onkaparingacity.com/web/page?pg=1917&stypen=html)

**2. Does your Council use terminology or definitions which are different to what is used in this questionnaire?**

Definitions and terminology used by Councils is generally consistent with that adapted for the purpose of the questionnaire (see page 1). It is noted that "empower" is a common term used by Councils when referring to outcomes of community development and community capacity building activities. This is to be distinguished from the definition of "empower" used by IAP2, see page 1.

**3. Does your Council's Public Consultation Policy and practices extend beyond the prescribed S50 (4) minimum standards?**

- Publication of a notice in a paper circulating in the area allowing 21 days to make submissions
- Consideration of submissions prior to Council decision.

All but one Council answered yes to this question, with the one "no" response, qualified by "but normal to extend beyond minimum standard in practice".

A scan of a sample of Council Public Consultation Policies confirmed this result with a commitment to broader steps set out in most policies, along with examples of techniques for specific circumstances, and or reference to other guideline documents or resources. It is also noted that many Councils have developed their policies (and procedural guidelines and checklists) along the lines of templates and models offered in LGA resource materials such as:

- *Public Consultation – LGA Discussion Paper 2007* – edited version of previous editions
- *LGA Community Engagement – 2005 Rating, and Managing Community and social Impacts and community Rating Decisions*
- *Making it Real: A resource for community consultation 2002* (An initiative of the LG Community Services Association of SA).

**4. Provide examples of recent citizen/community engagement initiatives beyond what is prescribed.**

All but two smaller rural Councils provided examples of recent initiatives. Examples follow:

- Annual Business Plan, Budget and Rate Reviews
- Strategic Plan – Township workshops, issues based and planning workshops
- Neighbourhood House, Community Centre - Facilities and service reviews
- Local re-generation projects – community development models (Playford's *Imagine Peachey*), (Marion's *Historic Village*)
- Community Development, Social Planning
- Elderly Citizens Forum
- Dry Zones
- Kerbside waste services
- Post free survey response forms, with email option
- Major Projects Planning – State Aquatic Centre, Prison
- Riverfront, reserves, wetlands
- Facility reviews and upgrades
- Monthly Public Agenda Forum and question time (City of West Torrens)

**5. Does your Council allocate an annual budget for engaging communities in decision making processes which is linked to priorities in its strategic plan?**

More than half of the respondents answered “yes” to this question. Many made reference to budget allocation as well as staff resources, and commented that the annual budget is supplemented by project based funding. This is consistent with the response by the “no” responses, indicating that community consultation budget is resourced through project based or advertising/public relations budget lines.

Clearly the resource allocation depends on the size and resource base of the Council, and the level and availability of in-house expertise. For example, several larger metropolitan Councils have, or are moving towards, designated community engagement research and policy positions, and an integrated approach across the organisation. Smaller Councils look for resource efficient options for engaging with their communities.

**6. Has your Council prepared handbooks, charters, guidelines to assist in the design of strategies to engage communities in decision making processes?**

Nine Councils (35%) answered yes to this question, with three referring to steps/checklists set out in their policy, and another six referring to separate resources in the form of guidelines and checklists. In addition to those nine responses:

- two Councils stated that they were in the process of preparing resources
- another stated that consultants were engaged for specialist advice and assistance as required; and
- one referred to use of expertise in house for advice and assistance.

A scan of these Council resources indicate varying levels of support for the design of community engagement strategies, choosing appropriate methodology and/or techniques for specific circumstances, and ensuring broad representation through community engagement initiatives.

7. The four most frequently used method/s used to communicate information by Council to their communities (one way process) are listed below in order of frequency of responses/extent of use.

- Local media
  - including Advertiser, and regular columns in local newspapers, media articles and editorials, local TV and community radio
- Direct Mail
  - Council newsletters, letters, and information to specific stakeholders, geographic communities.
- Internet and website
- Displays

Information is communicated to individuals at service centres, and to groups at presentations, public forums, and through committees and interest groups.

8. The method/s used to engage communities in decision making processes and the level of usage of each method by respondent Councils is summarised below.

No	Method	Rate level of use: low, medium or high
All	Public Meetings/Forums	Low - High depends on issue
All	Written submissions	Medium – High
20	Survey/Questionnaire	Medium – High
17	Random surveys	Low – Medium
17	Established networks and representative bodies (other than Council Committees)	Medium – High
17	Displays/Workshops	Medium – High
16	Focus Group	Low – Medium
15	Discussion/interview	Low – High depends on issue
12	Telephone Info Line	Low
10	Ward Forums	Low – Medium
6	Internet – Website - Email	Low – Medium
3	Passion Café, Conversation Couch, Informal gatherings	Medium
1	Peer to Peer Surveys using volunteers	Low
1	Agenda Forum	High

Other methods of informing Council decisions are petitions and delegations to Council.

9. Please list Council committee structures or collaborative initiatives that seek to engage citizens/communities and stakeholder representation in planning and decision making. For example, YAC, advisory/reference groups, steering/management committees, social planning forums, ward/precinct committees. Please rate level of impact on decision making, and how representatives are selected.

All respondent Councils have established various committee and reference group structures which have direct links to Councils' decision making processes. In most cases they have a medium or high impact on decision making. Depending on the nature of the group, membership may be open, through expression of interest then selection, invitation by Council, or by stakeholder group nomination. Examples follow.

## Local Government Association of SA

LG Act - S41	Advisory	Impact: low, med or high	How are representatives selected?
Reconciliation	Aboriginal Forums	High	Expression of Interest
Econ/Business Development	Issues based Round Tables/Forums/Ctees	Medium to High	Nomination
Youth Advisory	Youth Advisory(YAC)	Medium to High	Self selection
	PAR Advisory	Medium to High	Invited stakeholders
	Sport and Recreation	Medium	Call for nominations
Heritage		High	Application if interested
	Residents Groups Community Forums	Medium to High	Open – encouragement
Emergency/Risk		High	Nomination – Council select
	Environmental	Medium	Self select, by invitation
	Couch/conversations	Low–Medium	Self select
	Village Manage Plan	Medium	Self select
	Ctty Development - Regeneration	Medium-High	Express interest - interview

### 10. Does your Council take any steps to foster involvement of diverse community groups?

The following table summarises the responses and provides examples of the steps taken to engage with diverse community groups.

No of Councils	Under-represented Group	Initiative
23 (88%)	Young people (↓25)	YACs; surveys; Youth Plans; focus groups; Youth Participation & Services Model (Onkaparinga)
14 (54%)	Aboriginal people	Reconciliation, community development, Advisory/Liaison Groups, agreements/accords, cultural development, HAAC
12 (46%)	Culturally and linguistically diverse groups	Community development, collaboration with agencies, cultural celebrations, multicultural networks, social programs for older people. In house cross cultural training, new arrivals program, Harmony Day.
8 (31%)	Women	Community/neighbourhood development, Forum, women's groups, safety issues, approach to domestic violence
7 (27%) (Note 1)	Aged and disability	Community Development, Regional Groups, HACC, DDA Reference Group
2	People on low income	Forums – Low Income Support Program
1	Homeless	Neighbourhood Liaison Officer
1 (Note 2)	Silent majority (disadvantaged)	Pathways for families, community gardens, food co-ops, local community development projects

**Note 1:** For most participant Councils, Home and Community Programs (HACC) provide an opportunity to engage with older people, people with a disability and their carers. The responses above do not reflect the scope of these programs.

**Note 2:** Councils have opportunities to foster involvement of “silent majority” users of services via community centres, neighbour houses, libraries, and outreach services, and through community development initiatives. The responses above do not reflect the scope of these programs.

**11. Please describe any recent collaborative community engagement initiative/s involving your Council and other levels of Government and/or the community or corporate sectors. Examples follow.**

No of Councils	Initiative	Level of involvement
10 (38%)	Infrastructure, townships and urban area planning & evaluation	High – Medium
8 (31%)	Social Planning – Sustainability (local and regional)	High
5 (19%)	Economic Development, Business, Tourism	High
3 (12%)	Strategic Visioning, Planning Policies including PARs	High – Medium
3	Ageing Taskforce, HAAC Forums	High
3	Waste Management	Medium
3	Cultural Development	Medium
2	Education	High
2	Environmental Management – including NRM, Drought,	High – Low
2	Recreation & Leisure	High
1	Youth Networks : Education, Arts, Suicide program	Varies
	Volunteer Development	Low

**12. Has the effectiveness of Council’s citizen/community engagement initiatives been evaluated in the past three years?**

- Three Councils (Adelaide, Charles Sturt, and Onkaparinga) have recently evaluated community engagement policies or initiatives, and one Council (Adelaide Hills) include relevant questions in its Annual survey.
- One Council (Tea Tree Gully) includes questions about customer satisfaction in its annual survey.
- Several Councils made reference to anecdotal and ongoing revision internally, and evaluation through LGA Comparative Surveys.
- One Council (Marion) is undertaking an internal review with the objective of increasing level of engagement, and a pilot project is progressing.

Of particular note are summarised extracts from Onkaparinga and Adelaide City Councils evaluation reports as follows:

Adelaide:

- The 3 consultations reviewed generally went above and beyond specifications in the Policy and were well received by participants. A general lack of consistency in approach to consultations across the organisation was suggested. Recommended: minor revision of the Policy, review of manual to an on-line tool kit incorporating IAP2 framework, and consultation coordinated centrally.

Onkaparinga

- Commended for commitment and coherent well-documented strategy. Suggest review to redefine stakeholders, the function of Community Forums, broadening methods used, and re-consider use of certain terms. Urge submission of revised strategy to IAP2 for consideration of award for excellence in public participation.

**13. Can you identify barriers to achieving greater levels of citizen/community engagement, and do you have any ideas for minimising those barriers?**

The following table highlights the barriers identified in order of frequency of responses

<b>Barriers</b>	<b>Ideas to minimise barriers</b>
Apathy – Willingness to be involved	Ongoing awareness: LG role and what is on offer Motivate through communications Target specific groups
Cynicism – cannot influence – lack of clarity about what can be influenced	Residents panels to encourage participation Provide reasons for choice/decision Better feedback in a timely manner
Cost – Funding and resources	Build into project funding(See Note 1) Share across metro area on like issues Re-arrange priorities of projects
Time poor community	Strategic consultation on Council wide issues
Limited knowledge/awareness in departments where community engagement not core business	Community Engagement framework Central strategy – contact/advisory person Reference guide Build into projects as legitimate priority
Self interest rather than greater good – Biased focus	Ensure broader representation of interests
Geographic distance	Use variety of methods – IT
Access to transport	Assistance with transport to attend
Voiceless Minority	21 <sup>st</sup> C town meetings, World Cafe, Citizens Juries

Note 1:

*“Regional Councils with dwindling resources are finding even legislated minimum requirements hard to do.”*

**14. Councils were invited to submit examples of community engagement initiatives to be considered for showcasing as ‘good practice’ examples/case studies.**

A separate publication is being prepared on case studies which is expected to be published before the end of June, 2007.