



Community engagement and Integrated Planning and Reporting (IPR)

Local government is often referred to as the closest tier of government to the community. This is because local government is overseen by an elected council of community members, and an administrative arm that delivers services to meet aspirations and objectives set by the local residents and ratepayers through engagement.

Community engagement

Local governments often need to make difficult decisions. Matters such as planning, whether to invest in a project or the future direction of the local government can divide communities.

Currently, local governments are required to engage with the community when creating their 10 year strategic community plan as part of their Integrated Planning and Reporting (IPR). The community must also be consulted on matters such as local laws, differential rates, planning, and other matters and aspirations that are relevant to the diverse needs of individuals within a community. The current extent of community engagement simply stops at inviting submissions but engagement should be more than that.

We know that engagement works best when there is an ongoing process that enables relationships and trust to build over time. Strong community engagement not only strengthens our representative democracies but also builds community capacity.

Community engagement also needs to allow for socially disadvantaged groups within a community to engage. Identifying how to best engage diverse communities in a meaningful way is an important step in community engagement.

Local government decision making should be done in conjunction with the community from the very beginning of a project proposal. Establishing effective partnerships between local government and the community results in a greater sense of ownership, greater take-up of services and initiatives and better outcomes for all community groups. This reduces the chances of marginalisation while encouraging unified community outcomes.

Other local governments across the globe, for example, can and have engaged their community through place management, participatory budgeting, citizens' juries, which have resulted in better community outcomes as can be seen in the case study in Brazil.

It is important to understand the difference between informing the community about what the council is proposing, and empowering the community to play an integral role in determining the goals, strategies and actions to be undertaken.

What are the opportunities for reform?

Community engagement charter and policies

Some local governments do community engagement very well but there is currently very little in Western Australia to provide guidance or best practice, or consistency across local governments. Within any community situation, there are risks involving engagement such as small groups of active residents getting disproportionate interest or the potential for engagement becoming a box ticking exercise and a resource burden on local governments.

A charter allows a streamlined opportunity for local governments to communicate clearly when, how and on what matters the community will be engaged to mitigate such risks. A charter can help councils identify the matters on which to engage, evaluate the resources needed and provide guidance on the best methods to engage on a particular issue.

To achieve a cohesive framework, the charter should cover the following:

- Set engagement requirements
- Set principles that can deliver performance outcomes to ensure that engagement must be genuine, inclusive and respectful, fit for purpose, informed and transparent and processes must be reviewed and improved
- Set methods to measure performance

	Victorian model	Queensland model	South Australian model
What is required?	Community accountability as part of overarching principles that support council governance.	Local governments must be socially inclusive and undertake meaningful community engagement.	A community engagement charter is required to ensure the community is at the forefront of the planning process.
What does it mean?	Local governments are required to have and maintain a community engagement policy.	Local governments are accountable, effective, efficient and sustainable.	The charter must be used to guide public participation in the preparation and amendment of designated policies, strategies and schemes.
How does it work?	<p>Community engagement policy must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ be part of overarching principles that support council governance ▪ be done in consultation with the community ▪ identify what matters require community engagement 	<p>Any action undertaken needs to be consistent with the local government principles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Transparent and effective processes, and decision-making in the public interest ▪ Sustainable development and management of assets and infrastructure, and delivery of effective services ▪ Democratic representation, social inclusion and meaningful community engagement ▪ Good governance of, and by, local government ▪ Ethical and legal behaviour of councillors and council employees 	<p>The Framework aims to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Foster better planning outcomes that take account of the community views and aspirations ▪ Establish trust in the planning process ▪ Improve community's understanding of the planning system <p>While this focuses on planning it could be used as a model for other aspects of a local government's activities.</p>

A charter can be adapted to suit the local government and its community but have a set of minimum requirements to achieve effectiveness.

Social media

As social media continues to advance, platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are being used by local governments as a tool to strengthen community engagement. While social media is being embraced by the sector, concerns have been expressed at the negative and undisciplined way it is being used. This was especially evident during the 2017 local government election.

Unfortunately, social media has also given rise to “keyboard warriors” who have launched attacks against council members and local government employees. Other than pursuing defamation, there is no specific legislation that addresses this issue.

An option for reform is to introduce a legislative requirement that local governments must adopt a social media policy. The policy would not only address the use of social media by council members and staff, but also the appropriate use of social media in community engagement.

This policy would be supported by the Mandatory Code of Conduct that will apply to council members and candidates that is being introduced as part of earlier consultation of the Local Government Act review.

Integrated planning and reporting

IPR is a legislative requirement under the Local Government Act 1995 and requires at a minimum that a local government produces a strategic community plan and a corporate business plan.

- **Strategic community plan** is a 10+ year plan informed by community aspirations.
- **Corporate business plan** is a plan that mobilises resources to implement the first four years of the strategic community plan.

Planning

IPR enables community members and stakeholders to participate in shaping the future of their community and in identifying issues and solutions. IPR is a process designed to articulate the community’s vision, outcomes and priorities;

allocate resources to achieve the vision, striking a considered balance between aspirations and affordability; and monitor and report progress.

What are the opportunities for reform?

For IPR to be effective, the plans need to be understandable and easily communicated. The local governments that are successfully implementing IPR have straightforward plans appropriate for the size of their organisation, which are understood by their whole administration, council and the community. The plans should be realistic and take into account the local government’s available resources.

Community consultation must also be undertaken in conjunction with the local government’s financial plan so that the prioritisation of resources can be understood and accepted by the community.

[Your views on possible changes are sought in the survey.](#)

Reporting

IPR provides a structure for local government to report their progress on meeting strategic and community objectives. There is no formal performance reporting mechanism for local government in Western Australia, besides their annual report.

What are the opportunities for reform?

It is currently open to local governments to design their own means of reporting progress and outcomes to the community. There are good examples in the sector, including video reports, user-friendly newspaper inserts and displays at the local market. However, in other local governments the monitoring and reporting in respect to IPR could be improved.

Measuring consistent benchmarks across all local government has significant benefits. It enables identification of the success or failure of policies and programs, or where greater investment may be required. It further provides a means to increase local government accountability and performance to the community and tools for the community and council to make evidence-based decisions when assessing performance.

Integration and alignment

Integration is critical to the effectiveness of IPR. Some local governments integrate IPR into their whole organisation's structure and processes by incorporating it into their Chief Executive Officer's Key Performance Indicators, flowing right down to their officers' position descriptions. Other local government plans are less integrated and function as standalone documents.

What are the opportunities for reform?

The State Government requires local governments to develop a number of statutory plans such as local health plans, disability and access plans and town planning schemes. These statutory plans are controlled by different State government departments which can make alignment challenging. Currently, there is no requirement for these plans to be integrated with the IPR documents and each plan has different timeframes for completion and review. Integrating these plans with IPR will create efficiencies in local governments and would assist in informing the whole IPR process.

The IPR process could also be used as a tool for communicating and realising priorities through the State Government.

Flexibility

The IPR Framework and Guidelines establish that IPR is not a "one size fits all" model and each local government should use IPR at a scale appropriate to the size and needs of the organisation and community. It is also recognised that local governments will have different approaches to IPR. The framework and guidelines were deliberately written with the flexibility that reflects this.

Some local governments are of the opinion that the advisory standards are not appropriate for them due to their size, location or capacity. Maintaining flexibility in IPR whilst seeking to create greater reporting consistency across the sector is a key challenge this review is hoping to address.

A more detailed paper explaining [Integrated Planning and Reporting and outlining opportunities for reform](#) is available online.

Have your say

Have your say on these important issues by completing the [survey](#) or emailing actreview@dlgsc.wa.gov.au. A [more detailed paper](#) is also available.

