Consultation report – community engagement

Contents

Introduction

A new Local Government Act will need a strong foundation in community engagement and participation, which will support local government to understand, and respond to, their communities' needs.

Community engagement can assist local governments to identify community priorities, and provides an important opportunity for council members to hear directly from their communities. It encompasses the way in which local governments inform, consult, involve, collaborate with and empower their communities

Local governments need to make decisions about major new infrastructure developments, expanding the range of community services provided, and planning for the needs of the future population. Matters such as planning, whether to invest in a project, or the future direction of the local government can elicit strong views from the community and businesses. Councils need to find a way to represent the interests of their community, and balance competing priorities.

Effective community engagement builds trust between the community and the council and improves the quality of councils' decision making. Community engagement works best when it builds relationships and trust, and strengthens representative democracy.

The Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries released a discussion paper to canvass options which could support and enhance how local governments engage with their communities.

This paper provides an overview of the feedback received during the consultation period.

How we consulted

Following the release of discussion papers in September 2018, over 100 workshops, forums and meetings were held with community, local governments and stakeholders. This consultation included 28 community workshops across Western Australia and 'pop-up' stalls in shopping centres and community halls. Multiple workshops were held in all Western Australia's regions.

The workshops provided an opportunity for attendees to discuss topics that were of interest to them. All attendees were also encouraged to provide a submission.

Individual council members, local government staff, peak bodies, community organisations, councils and community were invited to have their say by completing online surveys or providing a written submission.

The objective of the consultation was to seek the views of as many interested people as possible, rather than scientifically sampling the population. As a consequence, responses are from people with a keen interest in local government, either because of their working relationship or because of their experiences with local government (often their own).

Responses received

Overview

A total of 3,151 responses to the review were received. This was made up of surveys on each of the 11 discussion papers released, written submissions and informal 'post card' responses collected during workshops.

For every topic residents/ratepayers provided the largest number of responses.

The gender balance amongst survey responses was reasonably representative (55% male, 45% female), but the sample was skewed heavily towards older age groups. Around 75 per cent of respondents were aged 46 years or over, with nearly half over 55. Less than 12 per cent were aged 35 or under.

Breakdown on responses on community engagement

A total of 284 responses addressed the topic of community engagement, which included 70 written submissions and 214 survey responses.

The 284 submissions were drawn from private individuals and residents/ratepayers groups (137); local government councils and zones (47); council members (33); local government staff and chief executive officers (49); government agencies (2); peak bodies (3) and stakeholders from business and civil society (13).

What we heard

The following sections provide data on and outlines key messages from the feedback received on the topic of community engagement.

A common theme in many submissions was that community engagement is a key element of representative democracy and can enrich the process of decision making for local governments. Many submissions also emphasised the importance of tailoring engagement to local circumstances.

Areas of concern particularly focused on the conduct of some people and organisations on social media and appropriate ways for local governments to address vexatious and defamatory comments on their social media channels.

In relation to community engagement, the Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA) supported the introduction of legislative requirements for local governments to adopt community engagement policies, which would allow them to determine effective strategies for engaging their communities at the local level.

The Integrated Planners Network (IPN) WA - Local Government Professionals Australia WA (LG Professionals) provided strong support for community engagement being at the centre of Integrated Planning and Reporting (IPR) practices. The IPN fully supports mandating community engagement requirements but does not support prescribing the mechanisms in which this is undertaken, given the significant diversity that exists across local government communities.

The WA Council of Social Services also noted:

All levels of government, from the national to the local level, have a responsibility to use the community's resources that they are entrusted to manage to create a better society. In many ways, local government is the closest level to the community, and yet is one with which many residents do not engage – except for the few who respond to consultations on local planning and development, or cast a vote every two years for candidates about which they generally know very little.

Feedback on community engagement related closely to the topics of IPR, elections and council meetings. These topics are explored broadly in this report as they pertain to community engagement. There are consultation reports for each of these topics that provide an in-depth analysis of feedback received.

Methods of community engagement

Community engagement can be done in many effective ways to maximise opportunities for the community to engage and participate in local democracy. Best practice in community engagement goes beyond the requirement to simply consult and can be more impactful when decision making is done in conjunction with the community from the beginning of a proposal. Establishing effective partnerships between local government and communities results in a greater sense of ownership, greater take-up of services and initiatives, and better outcomes for all community groups.

Workshops

Discussions in workshops about how and when local governments should engage with their community resulted in varied feedback. There was strong support from local government staff and some community members for the Act to outline minimum standards and intent rather than being prescriptive on requirements for engagement.

Some participants emphasised that diverse groups within a community should be reached to ensure an accurate representation of the district including culturally and linguistically diverse communities (CaLD), Indigenous Australians, young people, seniors, and people with disabilities.

Surveys and written submissions

Submissions from local governments largely recognised the need for community engagement, with many indicating a desire to improve or expand their efforts in this area. The majority of local government submissions endorsed WALGA's position that the Act should require the adoption of a community engagement policy, the contents of which should be determined by each council.

Many submissions from residents included constructive suggestions for how engagement could be more effective moving forward.

Survey respondents were presented with different methods of community engagement and asked what methods they believed were most effective. In order of most favoured method to least, residents and ratepayers answered:

- Community forums (86 percent)
- Online (75 percent)
- In person (70 percent)
- Other (41 percent)
- Citizen juries (34 percent)
- Telephone (29 percent)

Responses from other stakeholders were in line with that of residents and ratepayers, with the exception of citizen juries which received less support (only 22 percent) than engagement via telephone (32 percent).
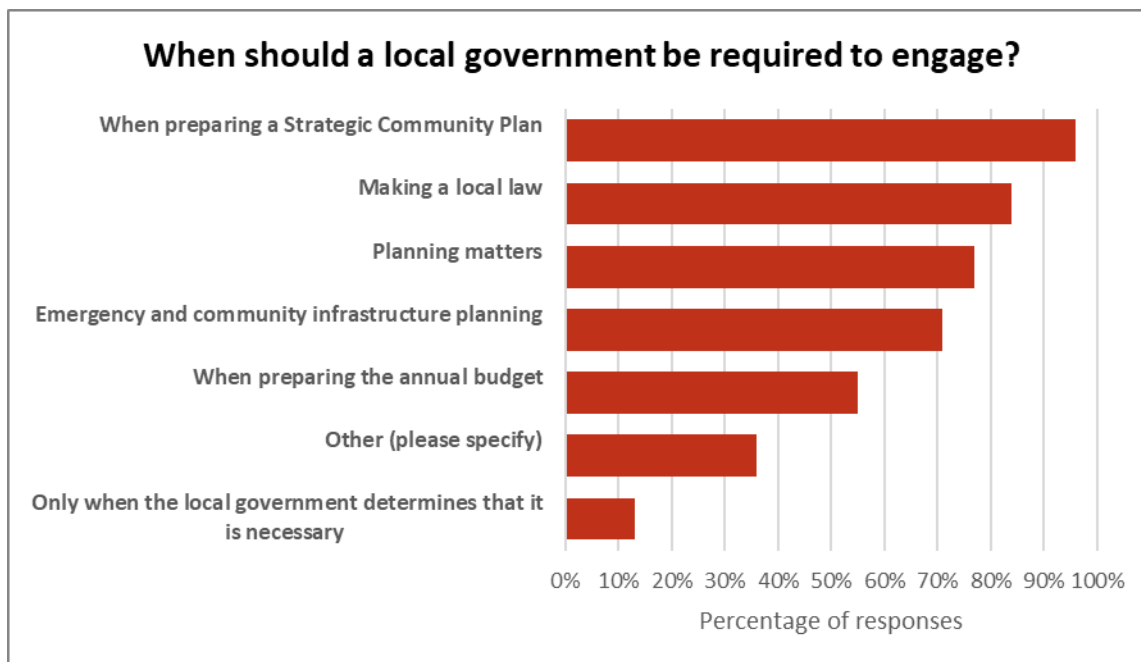
In respect to 'other' methods of engagement responses from local government, including council members and administration, most frequently stated that methods of engagement need to be tailored. Other responses highlighted the International Association for Public Participation model for community engagement and methods that employed co-design.

Members of the public were more likely to propose either very active engagement strategies or more passive 'informing' strategies: variations on community forums and citizen juries such as co-design and councillor listening posts were raised, as were traditional forms such as newspapers and notices in libraries.

The role of council meetings in providing an important opportunity for council members to hear directly from their communities was recognised in many submissions. A number of residents highlighted the importance of public question time and the requirement for general electors' meetings to engage directly with council.

Some submissions commented that engagement should be made as accessible as possible, including preparing information in different languages where appropriate. In order to achieve this, local governments should be smart and intentional in how they engage, ensuring that they invest in practical engagement methods.

There was strong support for local governments being required to engage when preparing a Strategic Community Plan, making a local law, for planning matters and when preparing the annual budget.

When should a local government be required to engage?

Category	Percentage of responses
When preparing a Strategic Community Plan	~95%
Making a local law	~83%
Planning matters	~77%
Emergency and community infrastructure planning	~71%
When preparing the annual budget	~55%
Other (please specify)	~36%
Only when the local government determines that it is necessary	~12%

Percentage of responses

Peak bodies and other stakeholders

The Committee for Perth recognised that community engagement has more impact when decision-making is done in conjunction with the community from the beginning of a project proposal or policy change.

Civic Legal acknowledged that community engagement already occurs, particularly in creating planning frameworks and in the application stage for many developments. They suggested that dissatisfaction with engagement is generally the result of poor implementation of the consultation process.

Some submissions explored methods of engagement and topics where engagement is crucial; while others focused on the different voices in the community that must be heard to ensure an accurate representation of the public.

Inclusion Solutions submission highlighted the potential that local governments have if they connect with the community:

> "Local Governments can be so much more than administrative centres. They can be the beating heart of community if they have the right attitudes and right people. Local Governments should be networked and connected throughout their community - and the very best ones are..."

Community engagement charter

A charter can help councils identify when and how they can engage their communities and provide guidance on the best methods to maximise participation and engagement. A charter can be adapted to suit the local government and its community but has a set of minimum requirements.

Workshops

Feedback was generally supportive of local governments being required to adopt a community engagement charter. It was recommended by local government staff at one workshop that the Act require for the charter to be reviewed every 2-3 years.

Some participants acknowledged that local governments should be permitted to determine the provisions included in the charter, ensuring that policies are suited to their context. Suggestions for possible areas a charter could cover included human rights, accessibility, Indigenous Australians and CaLD groups.

In contrast, a small number of local government staff raised that the Act should not make any prescriptions for community engagement, and at most should only require local governments to have a social media policy.

Surveys and written submissions

There was substantial support for local governments being required to adopt a community engagement charter, with 88 per cent of community members, 77 per cent of council members, 73 per cent of staff and 75 per cent of responses made on behalf of local governments stating they were supportive of the concept.

Opinions as to whether local governments should determine the contents of their charter was varied. Some submissions advocated for local governments to have the power to tailor the charter to suit local circumstances. These responses generally emphasised the difference in community demographics, population, local government resources and scale of projects between local governments.

Survey respondents were asked to identify the relevance of principles for an engagement charter. Overwhelmingly, respondents felt that all five principles presented were relevant:
- Engagement is informed and transparent (91 percent)
- Engagement is inclusive and respectful (91 percent)
- Engagement is genuine (91 percent)
- Engagement processes must be reviewed and improved (88 percent)
- Engagement is fit for purpose (86 percent)

Peak bodies and other stakeholders

As noted above, WALGA supported the introduction of legislative requirements for local governments to adopt community engagement policies which would allow them to determine effective strategies for engaging their communities at the local level.

The Small Business Development Corporation acknowledged the need for a community engagement policy or framework and highlighted that business operators should be recognised as an important cohort of the local community.

Social media

With the widespread adoption of social media, 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 by some people and organisations. Other than pursuing defamation, there is currently no specific legislation that addresses this issue.

Workshops

Feedback from local government staff during workshops highlighted a need for guidelines for appropriate engagement with the community on social media.

It was also suggested that the strategic use of social media is an important way to engage all residents, not only rate payers.

Surveys and written submissions

Many submissions recognised the benefits of utilising social media to engage with a broad cross section of the community. A number of submissions noted that it was particularly useful in regional communities where it may be difficult to attend forums and electors' meetings. It was widely acknowledged that many local governments already use social media effectively.

There was broad support for the requirement to have a social media policy to guide behaviour on social media and assist local governments to effectively manage feedback received.

Peak bodies and other stakeholders

The Property Council of WA echoed the feedback received at workshops regarding guidelines for dealing with 'keyboard warriors' on social media.

The Commonwealth Department of Infrastructure, Regional Development and Cities supported a requirement for local governments to adopt a social media policy, noting that such a policy could not only address poor online behaviour, but also inform community engagement practices.

Summary

An analysis of feedback received through the consultation workshops and submissions has identified the following key themes:

- There is a desire from local governments to engage effectively with their communities, with many indicating they wish to improve or expand their efforts in this area.
- There is support for the introduction of a community engagement charter.
- Social media policies could assist local governments engage appropriately and effectively with their communities.

Where to from here

Feedback and suggestions received during the consultation period will be used to inform the new Local Government Act.

Consideration will be given to balance the legislative requirements for community engagement that maximise community engagement and participation, with the flexibility for local governments to adopt practices which work for their communities.