KEMPSEY SHIRE COUNCIL

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY   **Procedure 2.3.1**

Policy No. and title	2.3	Media and Community Awareness and Engagement Policy
Procedure	2.3.1	Community Engagement Strategy
Version	1	
Date Adopted	19 April 2011	

OBJECTIVES

To define a consistent approach to be taken by Council when engaging with the community.

STATEMENT

1   Improve the relationship between Council and the community.

2   Enable the community to be better informed about Council issues, processes and decisions which might affect them.

3   Develop trust and credibility both internally and externally.

4   Help identify actual and potential problems/issues.

5   Reduce misinformation and misconception.

6   Increase meaningful participation.

7   Develop stronger communities.

8   Receive valuable feedback.

9   Value the input of the community.

10   Provide sustainable outcomes to the Council.

BACKGROUND

As part of Council's restructure, the Community Engagement Department was established. The purpose of the Department is to review Council's current community engagement practices, to research best practice models and other Council and government agency's approaches to community engagement. This policy will link to the current practice and direction of Council.

SCOPE

This procedure will apply to all Councillors and Council staff. It also applies to contract workers, consultants and tenderers who are undertaking community engagement on behalf of Council.

DEFINITIONS

Community – is broadly defined as those who have an interest in or are affected by the business of Council and the way it operates and may include: residents and landowners; service providers; users of Council services; business operators; visitors; associations and organisations based locally or in the wider region; people who work and recreate in the Kempsey LGA; and statutory and government agencies.

Community Engagement – is any process that values community input to help Council make better informed decisions. It recognises that if the community is going to be affected by a decision, it needs to be informed of, and dependent on, the nature of the issue and be engaged in the decision making. Community engagement does not replace but enhances the formal decision-making functions and responsibilities of Council as an elected governing body.

Council values the diversity of skills, views and expertise in the community and aims to use these to improve decision-making. Effective community engagement contributes to:

a)   Strengthening local democracy, both participatory and representative democracy

b)   Enhancing service excellence

c)   Ensuring good governance.

CORE PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Council recognises the following core principles that underpin any of its community engagement processes. They represent Council's best practice approach in community engagement. They are not prescriptive but rather are used to guide the development, implementation and evaluation of the community engagement process.

1   Our Council affirms that community engagement is critical to effective, transparent and accountable governance in the public, community and private sectors.

2   Our Council believes that effective engagement generates better decisions, delivering sustainable economic, environmental, social and cultural benefits.

3   Our Council also recognises that meaningful community engagement seeks to address barriers and build the capacity and confidence of all people to participate in and negotiate and partner with institutions that affect their lives, in particular those previously excluded or disenfranchised.

4   Our Council endorses the core principles of integrity, inclusion, deliberation and influence in community engagement based on our Council's values and behaviours of trust, cooperation, service, innovation and pride.

5   Our Council believes that inclusion underpins our community engagement approach – when there is an opportunity for a diverse range of values and perspectives to be freely and fairly expressed and heard.

6   Our Council affirms the value of education, ongoing monitoring and evaluation and knowledge sharing about active citizenship and community engagement processes and outcomes.

COUNCIL OBJECTIVES FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Council aims to:

a) Use the community's input to make better, more sustainable decisions

b) Make clear the nature of the decisions to be made that involve community participation

c) Make clear any matters that are non-negotiable and why

d) Learn from and build on previous relevant community engagement carried out

e) Use methods that are inclusive, flexible and appropriate to those participating

f) Facilitate mutual understanding between groups and individuals with differing perspectives and interests

g) Build positive relations between Council and all sections of the community

h) Provide an opportunity for Council to evaluate its community engagement procedures as a means of communication.

FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN KEMPSEY SHIRE

COMMUNICATION

When and how will community engagement occur?

Various factors, and the issue to be considered, influence when and how Council may engage the community. There are also a range of resources that are utilised to determine the view of the community. They include consultation through surveys or focus groups etc, staff knowledge and research findings. Council also needs to consult when there is a lack of clarity on an issue or program.

METHODS OF ENGAGEMENT

Information gathering can occur through public exhibition of documents and plans etc. This occurs through the local media or via the Council website. Submissions to Council will also relate at times to an item on exhibition. Surveys, public meetings, citizen panels, community conversations, workshops and forums are also methods of engagement. The technique used varies depending upon who is being consulted and the nature and complexity of the issue.

What are the steps to engagement?

There are a number of steps to follow in the engagement process:

1 Understand your objective. What are you trying to achieve? Is there a decision to be made? For example, Council might be considering the adoption of an affordable housing policy. The method of communication, and the audience, might be different to the one that you would appeal to if you were to hold an alcohol free event in the CBD.

The Council needs to determine what the subject or issue is before identifying the level of engagement needed. If it is a complex and controversial issue the level of engagement requires higher level or more specific engagement tools. The simple practice of asking why, what, when, how and who is always useful.

2   Type of engagement

        i.e. information distribution, specific consultation with a particular stakeholder group or a range of groups. This is an important stage of the process as the type of engagement used is specific to the type of project you have. Broad community engagement is a fluid process so multiple methods could be used at different stages of the project depending on the project.

3   What is the degree of impact or potential impact on the community?

4   What engagement tools will be required?

5   Develop a specific communications strategy for the initiative or project that fits the requirements.

6   Provide feedback on outcomes where necessary.

What do the terms 'inform' and 'consult' and 'involve' mean in this context?

   a)   Inform – this is an essential element of the process. As well as improving access to and use of services, Council needs to inform residents about the options in relation to services, policies and proposed initiatives or developments. This information should be provided in a form that encourages and enables meaningful community consultation.

   b)   Consult – this is a process whereby the Council can seek advice, information or opinions to inform the decision-making process. This includes the use of activities such as surveys, public meetings and forums.

   c)   Involve – this is the action that Council takes to enable them to consult and respond to issues and questions. This is done through the building of relationships and having open dialogue. If community members and stakeholders are involved in the process of assisting to shape policy, it can give them ownership of the end result.

LEVELS OF IMPACT

The level of consultation may be determined by the level of impact a decision or proposed plan may have on stakeholders and community members. A matrix may include one of the following which alerts relevant Council officers to the importance of the issue or proposal:

High (shire-wide)	S1
Medium (shire-wide)	S2
Low (shire-wide)	S3
High (local, stakeholder or community specific)	L1
Medium (local, stakeholder or community specific)	L2
Low (local, stakeholder or community specific)	L3

Level of priority

   a)   essential or urgent

   b)   desirable or of moderate importance

   c)   optional

HOW WILL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES BE MANAGED?

The engagement process will be managed by the Director Community Engagement. When planning consultation, sufficient resources (including staffing) need to be allocated in advance to ensure the best possible outcome. It is important to ensure effective communication within the organisation in order to gain the best outcome from the process.

Community Representation

The community representatives in this context are those people who are likely to be affected by or interested in the particular issue or topic. They may include a range of individuals or groups.

Reporting back

It is important to report back to stakeholders, Councillors and other staff members to inform people of the progress and possible outcome of the matter. People need to feel they are listened to even if their suggestions or view is oppositional to the end decision. If people believe that staff or councillors have listened to them and at least taken onboard their comments, they are more likely to return to future consultation sessions. If you keep coming back and asking the same questions even if you are from a different council department the community become disengaged.

Evaluation

Evaluation is an important part of the process. It allows an organisation to see what it has done well and what can be improved. Did the Council get the information it needed? Did the community feel that they were listened to? By evaluating a project it allows you to improve planning and implementation for future projects. It is also important to share the evaluation with other relevant Council staff so all Council participants can learn from the experience.

The effect of community engagement on projects

The intent is to reduce duplication and therefore increase the opportunity to gain maximum value out of each process. It should assist individual departments to better collaborate and to ensure that engagement is both timely and relevant. It should also improve internal communication.

Budgets and timelines

Budget allocations and timeframes may be required depending on the type of engagement required. These would have to be determined on a case-by-case basis.

VARIATION

Council reserves the right to review, vary or revoke this procedure which will be reviewed periodically to ensure it is relevant and appropriate.