

Engagement is key to good community planning

The new requirement that Queensland councils prepare a long-term strategic Community Plan provides councils with the opportunity to reconnect with their communities, writes **JEMIMA HUTCH**.

The Queensland Government recently introduced a requirement that local councils prepare a Community Plan to guide the growth and development of their communities over the next 10 years and beyond.

For many councils, particularly those experiencing significant social, economic and environmental change, such a requirement might pose itself as a rather daunting challenge.

But with a well-planned and responsive approach to community engagement, the process of developing and then implementing a Community Plan will be well-placed to succeed.

According to Queensland's *Local Government Act 2009*, a Community Plan will provide each council in Queensland with an overarching long-term strategic 'roadmap' to help guide the development of all other council planning policies and operations.

The Community Plan will address all areas of community interest, including social issues, safety, development, economy, infrastructure, environment and transport.

Community Plans will be developed with and for the communities they serve. For this reason, developing a Community Plan requires inclusive and responsive community engagement.

Effective engagement will serve to establish a sense of stakeholder ownership during the planning process and will help to turn planning ideas into tangible outcomes upon the conclusion of that process.

The *Local Government Act* stipulates that council decisions should be based on meaningful community engagement. More

specifically, it stipulates that a Community Plan must be developed in accordance with the council's Community Engagement Policy.

This being said, council's role in community planning is to facilitate the process, to provide information and to design a framework to coordinate strategies and actions that will support the community vision and the implementation of priorities. Put simply, the role of the council is to put in place a process to ensure that the Community Plan can happen.

But, given the scale of engagement required, particularly for larger and diverse communities, this process can be an almost overwhelming concept for council officers and councillors, who act as the "face" of the community planning process, to grasp.

The key to success then, is to make community engagement purposeful, inclusive, meaningful and outcomes-driven.

After all, communities want to be seen to be heard, but most of all they want their concerns and aspirations to be acted on.

There are various consultation and community engagement techniques that can be used to ensure that the community's views and ideas are captured, from small focus groups and themed workshops through to open community "Q&A" style forums.

Depending on the size, structure and dynamics of the community concerned, certain consultation techniques will be more effective than others.

In most instances, a "trial and error" process of developing a community consultation strategy ensures that the community is

fully engaged in developing the Community Plan.

Beyond the life of the community planning process, effective engagement can provide the council with a platform for information sharing and for breaking down barriers (real or perceived) between councillors and their constituents (where those barriers are seen to exist).

And with a long-term strategic vision in mind, Community Plans provide councils with an opportunity to develop effective community engagement strategies that can be utilised in various other strategic planning contexts in the future.

Community planning, while required under *The Local Government Act*, offers a tool for councils to work in collaboration with their constituents to establish a vision that truly reflects the aspirations of both the council and the community it serves.

It also offers an opportunity for councils to test their approach to community engagement for application in other planning forums.

But perhaps most importantly, it provides councils with the opportunity to reconnect with their communities, and to demonstrate a genuine commitment to the long-term which extends well beyond the life of the planning and engagement process.

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