Community Engagement

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Introduction

Council’s vision states that the Bega Valley Shire is a community that works together to achieve a balance between quality of life, enterprising business, sustainable development and conservation of the environment.

Community engagement is a way of including the views of our community in our planning and decision making processes. In other words, we engage our community to identify, understand and develop strategies to address and respond to their needs and concerns now and into the future.

To effectively engage, Council needs to be open and accountable to the community and provide ample opportunity for input and feedback. Council acknowledges that by involving a cross section of the community in a consultative process, it can make better decisions. Council also knows that strong relationships with the community is integral to the successful delivery of Council services and requires a relationship built on trust, goodwill and respect with the community.

The intent of this draft community engagement procedure is to have a clear statement of when, how and why, and to what level the Council will engage with its local community.

The NSW Office of Local Government (OLG) and the NSW State Government are working very closely with all local government bodies to ensure adequate planning and community engagement is in place to assist local communities and local government move forward in the most appropriate and sustainable way. A new focus for local government has been developed after much consultation and is reflected in the Local Government Amendment (Planning and Reporting) Act 2009 which was assented to on 1 October 2009.

This legislative reform followed public consultation conducted by the OLG on the integrated planning and reporting package, which included the draft Bill, Regulation, Guidelines and Manual.

The specific aims of the Integrated Planning and Reporting framework are to:

- improve integration of various statutory planning and reporting processes undertaken by councils as required by the Local Government Act 1993 and the Department’s guidelines Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979.
- strengthen councils’ strategic focus
- streamline reporting processes
- ensure that the Local Government Act 1993 and the Integrated Planning and Reporting Guidelines support a strategic and integrated approach to planning and reporting by local councils.

The expectation of the Integrated Planning and Reporting (IPR) framework is that the level of “community consultation” has been extended to include “community engagement” at key points of the planning and review process. The new requirements expect a more comprehensive approach, as to enable the development of long-term plans that reflect the ambitions of the community.

The new system is built on the principle that all members of the community have a right, and a responsibility, to contribute to their community’s future.

It is important to understand the difference between consultation and engagement and to incorporate these changes into Council’s policy and procedures. The definitions have been used to describe different levels of community engagement:

- **Informing**
  To provide the community with balanced and objective information to help them understand a problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions. Examples of this include the publishing of fact sheets, media releases, letters and updates on Council’s website.
• **Consulting**
  To obtain community feedback on alternatives and/or decisions. Examples of consulting include placing documents on public exhibition, online submissions/surveys, suggestion boxes, neighbourhood notifications of Development Applications.

• **Involving**
  To work directly with the community throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered. Examples of involving the community include holding workshops, committee meetings, focus group meetings on specific plans/topics.

• **Collaborating**
  To partner with the community in aspects of the decision making process including the development of alternatives and identification of the preferred solution.

Examples of collaboration include delegated decision making to S355 committees, development of specific programs to enable long term feedback on key issues.

At all levels of engagement, Council will outline to community members involved in the community engagement processes, how decisions are made and what factors are taken into consideration when determining service priorities and program functions.

Transparency of decision-making processes will assist community members understanding on complex and technical matters and will enable participants to better understand how their input will be considered within the larger context of the Bega Valley Shire Council’s role and objectives.

Details on the levels of engagement is found in Appendix B.

Council is also required by various legislation and policies to consult with its constituents on a variety of issues and business matters. This procedure will provide a practical and systematic approach to demonstrating our commitment to these principles by ensuring quality community involvement and relationship building both within the organisation and between the organisation and the community. The procedure will also aim to consider the relevance and application of emerging technologies and opportunities as tools to engage with the community.

The provision of effective communication and engagement processes is implicit in Council’s values outlined in the Community Strategic Plan, Bega Valley 2030:

- Openness and transparency
- Integrity
- Service
- Team focus
- Accountability
- Equity
- Inclusion and respect
- Learning
The community engagement procedure is underpinned by the following principles which will be used to guide behaviours throughout the engagement process:

- Clarity of purpose
- Commitment
- Hospitality
- Respect
- Simplicity, accessibility and openness
- Communication
- Evidence
- Flexibility and responsiveness
- Timeliness – setting clear and reasonable timeframes
- Valuing the contributions of all
- Moderation of on-line discussions
- Collaboration
- Ethics
- Avoiding duplication i.e. not over consulting
- Continuous learning

The principles checklist in appendix A provides a more detailed explanation.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this community engagement procedure is to:

- Make clear statements about the scope and purpose of Council’s community engagement activities
- establish standard processes for community engagement
- ensure that the community understands the decision making process and know where to find out about activities and opportunities and who to contact
- ensure those processes are implemented by Council staff and where relevant by external consultants employed by Council
- ensure that relevant decision making takes account of outcomes acquired from such processes along with relevant legislative requirements and other Council policies
- ensure where appropriate that the community is kept informed of decisions about community engagement processes.

It is intended that this community engagement procedure framework will give the community a clear understanding of:

- Council’s commitment to community engagement
- When community engagement will occur
- What level of engagement will occur
Where community engagement sits in the Council’s processes

Adapted from the ACT Department of Territory and Municipal Services Community Engagement Policy
Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community engagement</td>
<td>The processes through which the community and other interested parties are informed about and/or invited to contribute, through consultation or involvement, to proposals or policy changes relating to Council services, events, strategic plans, issues, projects and the like.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>People that live within the Bega Valley Shire and/or wish to live, visit, work and/or invest in it. The community includes residents, rate payers, state and federal government agencies, the private sector and community organisations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Council also has a commitment to ensure that it engages those specific target groups identified in its Social Issues Papers, 2013.

- Children (0-11 years old)
- Youth (12-24 years old)
- Older people
- People with a disability
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (ATSI)
- People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD)
- Women

Strategy

The use of the word "strategy" satisfies the requirements of the Division of Local Government through the proposed amendments to the Local Government Act (1993). These amendments relate to Community Strategic Plans being accompanied by a Community Engagement Strategy.

Benefits of Community Engagement

There are a number of benefits from having a community engagement procedure, it:

- commits Council to be open and accountable
- helps Council plan services better to meet community needs and aspirations
- helps Council prioritise services and make better use of resources
- allows broader range of views to be expressed and more information to be assembled prior to making decisions
- enables Council and the community to work together to achieve balanced decisions
- offers opportunities for residents to contribute to and influence outcomes which directly affect their lives

When will Community Engagement Occur?

Council will engage the community on:

Strategy planning

This refers to the development of strategic plans and projects that informs the Community Strategic Plan and associated strategies and key activity plans.
Policy development and/or implementation
This includes any policy development that has a direct impact on the community.

Site specific
This refers to any changes to a site that may have impact on the community.

Service planning
This includes the development and/or improvement of a service.

Areas of improvement
This refers to any improvement required to increase the quality of lifestyle for the community eg shopping areas, open spaces, etc.

Legislative requirements (including planning issues)
This refers to all prescribed plans and projects under the Local Government Act (1993); and other relevant Acts.

Appendix C outlines the tool that will be used to guide Council staff in designing community engagement activities and has been adapted from the ACT Department of Territory and Municipal Services Community Engagement Policy.

What Level of Engagement will occur?
Council will call for different levels of engagement depending on the issue, and its immediate or long term impact on the community. The levels of engagement with the community may include:

Level 1 – Inform
To provide the community with balanced and objective information to help them understand a problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.

Level 2 – Consult
To obtain community feedback on alternatives and/or decisions.

Level 3 – Involve
To work directly with the community throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered

Level 4 – Collaborate
To partner with the community in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and identification of the preferred solution.

The levels of engagement are adapted from the “IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum” developed by the International Association for Public Participation – see Appendix B.

Comments Welcome
Comments and feedback on this policy are welcome and should be directed to Council’s Group Manager Community and Relationships.

By mail
Bega Valley Shire Council
PO Box 492
BEGA NSW 2550
By phone
Telephone: 6499 2222

By facsimile
Fax: 6499 2200

By Electronic Mail
council@begavalley.nsw.gov.au
Appendix A
Principles Checklist

The Community Engagement Strategy is underpinned by the following principles which should be heeded throughout engagement processes:

Clarity of purpose
A clear definition of why the engagement is occurring and its context; in order to plan and resource an effective process.

Commitment
Demonstrated commitment to establish and maintain credibility and accountability.

Hospitality
Friendly, welcoming environment with appropriate refreshments provided.

Respect
Mutual respect for the needs, aspirations and opinions of all within the community.

Simplicity, accessibility and openness
- Ensure that all individuals or groups can access the range of community engagement processes available.
- Be sensitive to the needs of particular individuals or groups to maximise their ability to contribute.
- Provide information in a form that is easy to understand and appropriate for all sectors of the community.
- Accessibility on-line acknowledges users with a disability as well as those with
- Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), mobile devices or older browsers. It also takes into account the ability of other machines to read and process Council content and data programmatically for the benefit of current and future users.

Communication
Establishment of a two way process of providing accurate and timely information, in plain English and demonstration that feedback is being valued.

Evidence
Establishment of good engagement practices that are based on sound research and quality information.

Flexibility and responsiveness
Establishment of engagement plans that are flexible during the process, eg. time and venue may change due to community feedback.

Timeliness
Ensure that participants know how long an engagement process is expected to last and when feedback is expected at each stage of the process.

Valuing the contribution of all
Ensure that a cross section of the community are invited to the community engagement activity.
Moderation of on-line discussions

Community engagement guidelines and a moderation process will be used for all on-line discussions to ensure the discussion is appropriate, intelligent and lawful.

Moderation will only occur to remove a contribution that:

- Is off-topic
- Is defamatory, abusive, harassing or hateful
- Includes any abusive, obscene, indecent or offensive language
- Endorses commercial products or activities or solicits business
- Violates copyrights or other forms of licences and consents
-Invades anyone’s privacy, reveals the identity of another user or impersonates anyone
- Encourages conduct that may or would constitute a criminal offence or give rise to civil liability, or that otherwise violates any local, state, national or international law or regulation anywhere in the world

It will state publicly when and why a contribution has been edited or removed.

Collaboration

Establishment of partnerships with relevant community groups, State and Federal government, local government partners, other stakeholders, and/or with internal sections of Council.

Ethics

Members of various consultative groups, along with Councillors and staff to adhere to relevant Code of Conduct including requirements to address pecuniary and non-pecuniary interests and to allow the views of all members to be heard.

Avoiding duplication - Don't over consult

The community is consulted about a range of issues and by a range of people in a variety of ways. It is important to recognise this and not to over consult which can result in residents feeling that their time is being wasted and comments such as "we have already told you what we want, why are you asking us again?" Each individual process will be required to undertake an assessment as to prior work and information already held by the Council about a particular issue.

Continuous Learning

Establishment of a reporting system to ensure that Council learns from the community engagement activity and is able to monitor and evaluate success to enable improvements.
## Appendix B

**Levels of Engagement - How Bega Valley Shire Council engages with its community**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informing</th>
<th>Consulting</th>
<th>Involving</th>
<th>Collaborating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goal</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To provide the community with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions</td>
<td>To obtain community feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decision. Different projects may involve different groups such as: -committees -focus groups (open &amp;/or by invitation) - community or group representatives - the broad community</td>
<td>To work directly with the community throughout a process to ensure that community concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered</td>
<td>To partner with the community in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution and in specific local situations allow final decision making about aspects of a decision to be in the hands of the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Promise</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>We will keep you informed</td>
<td>We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and provide feedback on how the community input influenced the decision</td>
<td>We will work with you to ensure that your concerns are considered and reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how the community input influenced the decision</td>
<td>We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions and actions to the maximum extent possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What it will look like when we are informing the community</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fact sheets</td>
<td>Neighbour notifications of Development Applications</td>
<td>Workshops</td>
<td>Advisory groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Releases</td>
<td>Focus groups</td>
<td>Committees</td>
<td>Participatory decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public presentations</td>
<td>Public meetings</td>
<td>Polling</td>
<td>Developing specific programs for individuals or particular groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brochures</td>
<td>Documents for public comment</td>
<td>Developing the key parts of a major plan – eg Local Environment Plan or Council’s Community Strategic Plan</td>
<td>Delegated decision making to s355 committees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holding public meetings</td>
<td>Surveys</td>
<td>Online discussions between the community and Council</td>
<td>Online collaboration including co-development of solutions and programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters</td>
<td>On line submissions, suggestions and feedback</td>
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<tr>
<td>Web site</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Where will you find information about the Council and its activities</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the media</td>
<td>How will we contact you to consult you?</td>
<td>How will we get you involved?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At Council offices and libraries</td>
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<tr>
<td>On the website at <a href="http://www.begavalley.nsw.gov.au">www.begavalley.nsw.gov.au</a></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>How will we work with you?</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>We will provide clear guidelines to ensure effective and fair feedback is obtained</td>
<td>By attending workshops or other forums which will be widely advertised</td>
<td>By attending workshops or other forums which will be widely advertised</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We will provide clear guidelines to ensure effective meeting, workshop or online discussions</td>
<td>We will provide clear guidelines to ensure effective collaborative decision making</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Community Engagement wheel

Inform
- Do you need to provide information? Describe a project or other event?
- Do you need to inform people with the same outcome?
- Do you need to address many receptors or stakeholder?

Consult
- Do you need direct feedback or to seek consensus?
- Do you need feedback on key draft documents?
- Do you need to maintain control of feedback?
- Do you need to build or maintain relationships?
- Do you need help to determine an outcome?
- Do you need to disseminate or feedback to key stakeholders?

Collaborate
- Involves community that will have a big impact on the community or region, or whole community?
- Do you need to listen to the people?
- Do you need to work with traditional land owners?
- Do you need to work as a community to address an issue?
- Do you need to work as a community to identify issues?
- Do you need to work as a community to define the project or service?

Involve
- Do you need to involve people who are not part of your community?
- Do you need to involve people who are in your community?
- Do you need to involve people who are not in your community?
- Do you need to involve people who are difficult to reach?

Adapted from the ACT Department of Territory and Municipal Services Community Engagement Policy.