ACELG
Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government

Institute for Sustainable Futures

UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN AUSTRALIA

Working Paper No. 5
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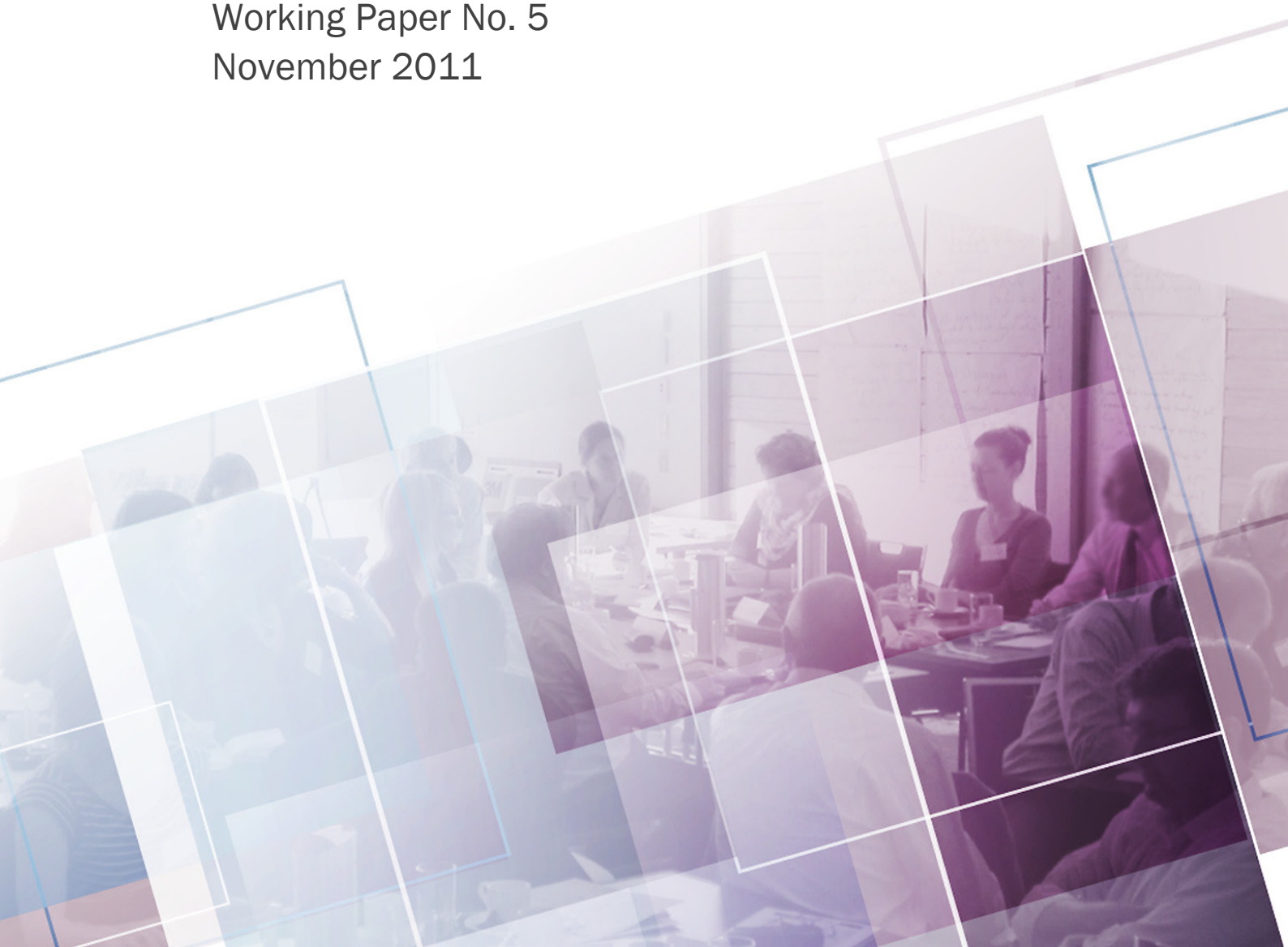

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Contents

Executive summary

This working paper was commissioned by the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) to provide a national update on what is taking place across the local government sector in relation to community engagement, and identify the ongoing challenges and questions for councils in engaging communities. In a survey of local government managers designed to inform ACELG research priorities, the need for better relationships with communities was identified as one of the top ten critical issues facing local government. In part this paper was commissioned as a first step to informing discussion about how to meet that need.

The paper explores:

- Influences on community engagement practice in Australia
- An overview of practice - from council policy commitments through to examples of leading practice
- The range of community engagement methodologies currently being used
- Support and guidance available to councils
- Key issues and challenges identified by practitioners which have implications for practice and for further research.

Some of the main findings are outlined below:

Context

- 'Community engagement' is used as an umbrella phrase by the sector to include information, consultation, engagement and empowering activities
- Citizens are now seeking more direct ways to get involved in public life and decision-making, particularly on issues in which they have a direct interest
- Notions of democratic governance and community governance are influencing the way councils define their relationships with their communities, and the role of councillors
- Councils in all states are developing policy responses to the issue of engagement – and in South Australia and Queensland are required to do so by legislation
- While legislation relating to community engagement varies from state to state, local government legislation generally contains both general commitments to community engagement principles and specific consultation requirements for a range of specific decision making scenarios.
- The trend is to require community engagement in the preparation of long term community visions and strategic plans.

Practice

- The 2007 South Australian project, 'Community Engagement – Snapshot of Councils' provides valuable data on council community engagement policy and practice
- That survey, and other data, indicate the wide range of issues that communities are consulted about and the diversity of methods and approaches are used by councils
- Case study materials from local government and other award programs offer insight into successful participation and engagement activities
- Victorian research cited in this report suggests typical engagement efforts are not representative and new strategies for reaching the 'hardest to engage' groups are required
- More needs to be known on the extent to which individuals and community organisations are initiating the engagement with councils and the impact that has on practice
- Online tools for participation are growing in popularity; a national social media survey being conducted by ACELG and the University of Canberra will provide valuable new information on the use of social media by councils

- Involvement of communities in visioning processes when preparing long term community plans, for example by Gold Coast City Council, is generating interest in trialling futures methods
- There is a growing interest in the role of more deliberative forums in decision making, and in appreciative inquiry, although the use of these techniques is not widespread
- The practices of councils vary substantially between urban and rural locations; research currently being conducted by ACELG and Edith Cowan University will add to the knowledge of the particular needs of rural, remote and indigenous councils
- The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) 'State of the Practice' research project and a planned census of engagement activities will help fill existing knowledge gaps.

Support and Guidance

- The wide array of guidance material provided by local government associations and state government organisations is summarised in this report
- An overview of case study sources, including international websites, is included as another opportunity for learning and exchange amongst practitioners
- Local government associations provide training, most notably the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ)
- Some councils provide in-house training and take advantage of privately provided courses, in particular courses provided by IAP2; more than a thousand people from councils have completed the IAP2 qualification in public participation
- A summary of key resources has been published as a companion to this report.

Issues and Challenges

The opportunities for improving community engagement practice that were raised by interviewees or which came through strongly in the literature are summarised under the following themes:

- Creating a supportive organisational culture
- Ensuring legislative requirements are met in a meaningful way
- Measuring how policies are translating into practice
- Reframing community engagement to be viewed as core business and not confined to individual projects
- Being clear about limits to consultation
- Getting back to communities on how their inputs were used
- Integrating outcomes of consultation into decision making
- Operating within resource constraints
- Having adequate staff and support systems inside council to do this work
- Sharing information about likely costs of processes and looking for cost sharing options
- Continuing the wide range of support materials and activities that various institutions make available to councils
- Rethinking how community engagement skills are developed
- Effectively meeting the challenges for engaging rural, remote and Indigenous communities
- Providing the information needed for effective participation
- Applying State government material on civics literacy
- Recognising a role for councillors in building civic capacity

Discussion and feedback on these themes, and the suggestions for further research, are invited from the local government sector.

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose and structure

This working paper, commissioned by the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) seeks to provide a national update on what is taking place across the local government sector in relation to community engagement, and identify the ongoing challenges and questions for councils in engaging communities. In a survey of local government managers designed to inform ACELG research priorities, the need for better relationships with communities was identified as one of the top ten critical issues facing local government. In part this paper was commissioned as a first step to informing discussion about how to meet that need.

The research seeks to address the following questions:

- What are councils in Australia currently doing to engage communities in decision making?
- What are some stand-out examples of effective practice?
- How do moves to more extensive and direct community engagement impact on the roles of elected councillors and how have "representative" and "direct" democracy been combined most effectively in local government?
- What is the role of organisational culture, policy, resourcing and staff expertise in the suite of engagement approaches offered?
- To what degree have deliberative approaches been taken up by councils in Australia, and what have the challenges and successes been?
- What typologies of engagement[1] exist and which of these seem to best reflect the diverse array of engagement activities taking part in the sector?
- What are the ongoing questions and challenges for councils in engaging communities for the second decade of the 21st century?

About the report's structure

This report is intended for use by several audiences:

- The primary audience is managers and policy makers in local government
- A secondary audience is community engagement professionals and local government associations who guide and support councils in their community engagement work
- Researchers who are interested in knowing more about current local government community engagement practice and in influencing future research to fill identified gaps may also find this report of value.

Section 2: indicates why community engagement has become increasingly important in local government. It also outlines a number of influences such as legislative changes, changing expectations, and local government interest in learning from and adapting the good practices of others. The way that key bodies influence council engagement policies and approaches are outlined in a diagram in Appendix 1.

Section 3: describes the broad approaches and specific methods that councils across Australia are using. While largely descriptive, the report does include some reflections on those methods by the interviewees

Section 4: outlines in greater detail four innovative approaches that some councils have started to use.

[1] That is, conceptual 'mapping' of different types of engagement methods, categorization of these methods etc – for example the IAP2 public participation spectrum.

Section 5: summarises useful resources available to councils to assist in developing their overall approaches to community engagement.

Section 6: focuses on some of the issues and challenges for councils in developing and extending their engagement with the community. It draws on the practical experience of councils and on the literature. Based on these issues and challenges it identifies some areas for potential future research on community engagement in local government.

Research approach

This research was a 'mixed methods' piece of social research. It consisted of a literature review, including council case studies, and ten interviews with public engagement practitioners and/or policy advisers from around Australia. Interview participants were selected to provide input from each state and territory, and a variety of local government perspectives. The interviews aimed to test the findings from the literature review, seek additional examples of council practice and guide materials and support, and to invite practitioners to reflect on the needs of the sector and the research priorities.

Because the sample of interviewees was small, we do not claim that the views expressed are representative of all practitioners or policy makers. Rather, this qualitative data is meant to provide insight into some issues that might be further explored in consultation with the sector more broadly.

This report is not intended to be a guide on how to 'do' community engagement, and nor does it seek to re-create or synthesise existing principles and guidance materials. It does, however, highlight useful resources. Key resources identified are outlined in the annotated bibliography, 'Community Engagement Resources for Local Government' http://www.acelg.org.au/upload/program1/1317178789_ACELG_Annotated_Bibliography.pdf.

1. 2 What does the report mean by community engagement?

> The question 'who is our community?' is a critical one. For many councillors the community means the ratepayers. The approach encouraged by the CE [community engagement] team is to think 'who is impacted by our decisions?' It is also inclusive of the councillors, and is not just externally focused (City of Melbourne interviewee).

The term 'community' can refer to people brought together due to geographical proximity, shared characteristics, beliefs or interests who interact directly in a face-to-face way or remotely using a variety of media including the internet (Fritze, Williamson & Wiseman 2009).

While some service delivery functions of councils are limited to residents of the local government area, many councils define community to include a much broader suite of stakeholders (City of Holdfast Bay 2010). For example Latrobe City (2005) speaks of *"all citizens, ratepayers, landowners and members of the general public (including all individuals, groups, organisations, government, industry and business) who have a stake and interest in the municipality of Latrobe City".* This broader definition of community would include anyone who lives, works, conducts business, studies, visits, owns property in or participates in the services offered in the local government area.

According to many, community engagement involves two-way communication:

> a two-way process of dialogue by which the aspirations, concerns, needs and values of our local community and other relevant stakeholders are incorporated into policy development, planning, decision-making, service delivery and assessment (City of Canada Bay 2010: p. 2).

This report mirrors the language it observes being used by councils in their work in this sphere – namely, that of 'community engagement' as an umbrella phrase to include information, consultation, engagement and empowering activities[2]

[2] In the IAP2 model, 'participation' is used rather than 'engagement' as an umbrella term which encompasses information giving, consultation, involvement, collaboration and empowerment (IAP2, 2004).

2. Factors shaping community engagement by local government

It can be said that engagement is at the heart of what a council is designed to do:

> The role of a Council includes acting as a representative government by taking into account the diverse needs of the local community in decision making;[3] ...(and) fostering community cohesion and encouraging active participation in civic life.[4]

Practitioners and theorists have identified a range of ways in which local governments benefit from providing opportunities for public participation. These benefits include the potential for community engagement to improve decision making processes:

> providing opportunities for people who are affected by or interested in a Council decision to participate in the decision making process in order to enhance the resulting decision, plan or project (VLGA 2009)

> local governments that inform, consult and listen to their local communities, and communities which are engaged and participate in their governance make for healthy democracies and involved citizens (Hansen 2003); (La Trobe 2005: p. 6)

They also encourage better governance:

> fostering democratic representation, social inclusion and meaningful community engagement greatly assists in the delivery of high quality local government (City of Townsville 2010: p. 2).

Engagement can help a council ensure that good services are delivered where they are most needed and that they are tailored to local needs. Ongoing feedback ensures that services meet the community's needs, and that improvements are recognised by the community (Leeds City Council 2006). In addition, engagement increases likelihood that communities will accept council policies and decisions, which in turn brings pragmatic time and cost savings (for example, LGASA 2000). Engagement is therefore a core element of local government - an effective tool to facilitate decision making, and a way to reach decisions with which the community feels satisfied.

International work on the impacts of participation in a local governance context has found that positive impacts include building the confidence of previously excluded groups, the inclusion of a wider range of community members (with consequent changes in development priorities), changed attitudes among public officials and elites, and, improved civil society capacity, governance arrangements and policy change (Gaventa 2006 cited in Gaventa and Barret 2010
Around Australia councils are grappling with how best to involve communities in governance. As expectations of service delivery by councils grow and the need for longer-term strategic planning is recognised and embraced, methods of engaging communities are changing.

Some of the key factors shaping local government community engagement are: (i) new ways of thinking about governance; (ii) the changing expectations communities have of local government; (iii) changes to local government legislation; and (iv) the development of principles and frameworks of effective engagement by external organisations. We will now examine each of these influences.

[3] VIC Local Government Act 1989 - Section 3D (2a)
[4] VIC Local Government Act 1989 - Section 3D (2f)

2.1 Emerging thought on governance

The ways councils think about governance can affect how they relate to their communities. When councils use the term 'governance' they usually mean corporate governance – that is, accountability for organisations' decision making and behaviour. 'Democratic governance', a term which is increasingly being used, refers to deepening democratic engagement through the participation of citizens in decision making. 'Community governance' refers to collaboration between public, private and non-profit sectors. For government this entails a change from delivering specific services to initiating collective processes which involve a wide range of players in meeting community needs. This theme is currently being investigated by ACELG.[5]

Also related to this theme was a project that the UTS Centre for Local Government undertook with the Local Government Community Services Association (LGCSA) of Australia. Entitled *Just Communities*, this action research project investigated local government's role in promoting community democracy and wellbeing. In particular, it explored the relationships between how councils engage local communities, the organisation frameworks they employ, and the results achieved (Artist *et al.* 2010).[6]

The *Just Communities* research proposes a model in which three elements (democratic governance, civic engagement, and organisation management) are required to promote local wellbeing through democracy:

Just Communities – the 'GEM' model for local government promoting wellbeing through democracy

> **G –** Democratic governance
> Where leadership and decision-making by elected councillors is based on a sound appreciation of community issues and needs and a commitment to effective community engagement in the political process.
>
> **E –** Civic engagement
> Where councils employ effective techniques to enable active citizens to influence the formulation and implementation of public policies that affect their daily lives.
>
> **M –** Organisation management
> Where public value management policies and practices are embedded in the workplace culture, acknowledge citizens' rights to participate and ensure that the outcomes of community engagement inform decision-making. Source: Artist *et al.* 2010

The Grattan Institute in Melbourne (Kelly 2010) looked into city-level decision making in eight cities that have significantly improved they ways in which they cater for their residents' needs, and considers what governance arrangements accompanied this improvement. The report concludes that high and sustained levels of public engagement in decision-making existed in many of the cities, especially where improvement required tough choices.

[5] ACELG is partnering with the Municipal Association of Victoria and Local Government Managers Australia in a research project titled 'Evolution in community governance: Building on what works' that draws upon interviews with councils across Australia, and with representatives of a non-government provider, the Bendigo Bank, to explore how these ideas are playing out in practice. The literature review for that research project (Pillora & McKinley 2011) examines different concepts of governance, summarises community governance theories and frameworks, and explores the application of community governance approaches by Australian councils.

[6] The Centre for Local Government <http://www.clg.uts.edu.au/> is based at the University of Technology Sydney and was established in 1991. It is an ACELG partner.

> Residents must be involved in decisions. Those cities that made tough choices and saw them through had early, genuine, sophisticated, and deep public engagement.' and suggests that 'this level of engagement is an order of magnitude different from what happens in Australia today (Kelly 2010: p. 4).

Community engagement is also deeply connected to concepts of democracy. Democracy, in the way that it is defined and practised, is undergoing long-term change. Over a period of several hundred years, what has been termed "representative democracy" has become dominant. This form of democracy emphasises elected representatives in formal institutions and the processes that support them (Keane 2009). However, it has been argued that since the middle of the last century we have been entering a phase, or an "emerging historical form", which is better termed "monitoring democracy". 'Monitoring democracy' involves a wider range of institutions and processes, including citizens' juries and assemblies, commissions, think tanks and enquiries. These processes sit outside the formal institutions but have an influence on them. These influences can be seen as operating "upwards, downwards and sideways" on the formal organisations, and in this way as "spreading democracy" beyond the ways in which it has been more conventionally perceived (Keane 2009).

2.2 Changing community expectations

Many authors suggest that in recent years there has been an international trend to encourage greater participation by community members in making decisions over local developments (Nelson, Babon, Berry & Keath 2008), and that local authorities are offering a greater range and number of public participation initiatives (Lowndes, Pratchett & Stoker 2001a).

Others suggest that, in addition, citizens are now seeking more direct ways to get involved in public life and decision-making, particularly on issues in which they have a direct interest (Maxwell 2003, cited Curtain 2003). This may in part be because citizens have become better educated, more diverse, and less deferential (ibid). In this view it is community expectations which are leading change:

> Citizens are arguing for a new notion of governance that requires political leadership to engage with citizenry in ways that allow for ongoing input into decision-making and policy formation. (Naidoo 2003)

Many Australian councils name 'community expectations' as a key driver for the development of community engagement policies, or for reviewing their approach to community engagement – often in tandem with legislative requirements (Logan City Council 2009). Commentators in the sector claim that one of the 'most dynamic and exciting challenges for Local Government over the past five years has been managing and responding to increasing community expectations' (Arnott 2011).

2.3 Legislative requirements

This section briefly describes some of the local government legislative responsibilities regarding community engagement to illustrate the range of expectations which exist.[7] The legislative requirements for community engagement differ in each state and territory of Australia. Legislation ensures a minimum level of engagement and there are specific requirements to consult with landholders, residents, government agencies and others in particular situations. Nevertheless, the ways in which councils engage with their communities vary considerably and are to a large extent determined within the organisations.

The following discussion highlights some recent legislative changes that are influencing councils in their approach to community engagement. These changes indicate that there is a general trend

[7] Note: This is not a comprehensive legal review nor should it be considered legal advice. These sections highlight some approaches across jurisdictions and do not claim to provide a systematic comparative review of all requirements in all states and territories.

towards a more explicit commitment to community engagement in decision making within the local government acts in different jurisdictions, and highlights opportunities for more comprehensive community engagement in strategic planning.

Community engagement principles enshrined in legislation

All local government Acts for each state and territory in Australia (excluding the ACT which does not have such an act) outline the in-principle need for local government to engage with the community and to encourage and assist participation. For example, the Tasmanian legislation states: 'In performing its functions, a council is to consult, involve and be accountable to the community.'[8]

Some acts include statements of commitment to engagement principles and objectives such as 'democratic representation, social inclusion and meaningful community engagement',[9] 'better decision making',[10] 'transparency',[11] and 'accountability'.[12] For example, the Northern Territory Act seeks to 'Provide a legislative framework: to require councils to promote and assist constructive participation by their local communities in achieving effective local government for their areas'.[13]

Section 223 of the *Victorian Local Government Act 1989* concerns the specific opportunities constituents have for presenting to council or committess of council as part of the 'Right to make a submission'.[14] Section 208A requires that each council develop a 'program of regular consultation with its community in relation to the services it provides' (Surf Coast Shire 2010: p. 1). The Act identifies six *Best Value Principles*:

> (a) all services provided by a Council must meet the quality and cost standards required by section 208D
> (b) subject to sections 3C(2)(b) and 3C(2)(c), all services provided by a Council must be responsive to the needs of its community;
> (c) each service provided by a Council must be accessible to those members of the community for whom the service is intended;
> (d) a Council must achieve continuous improvement in the provision of services for its community;
> (e) a Council must develop a program of regular consultation with its community in relation to the services it provides.[15]

The NSW legislation contains a number of provisions concerning principles of 'open' or 'transparent' government. These include the requirement (as a general rule) for council meetings to be publicised and open to the public, and for councils to provide public access to correspondence and reports held by Council.[16] The Act also states that members of the public may influence council decisions concerning various kinds of matters by 'participating in council community engagement activities including by making submissions to the council and comments on or objections to proposals relating to those matters'.[17]

Minimum requirements for issue-specific consultation

As well as referencing general principles of community engagement, local government legislation generally includes clauses that detail when, how and with whom engagement (usually consultation or information provision) is to be carried out. Minimum requirements in relation to land use

[8] TAS Local Government Act 1993 - Section 20- Functions and powers (1) and (2)
[9] QLD Local Government Act 2009 - Section 4(c)
[10] WA Local Government Act 1995 - Section 1.3 (2a)
[11] SA Local Government Act (1993) Note to Chapter 4
[12] VIC Local Government Act 1989 - S3C; WA Local Government Act 1995 - S 1.3 (2c)
[13] NT Local Government Act – Section 4 (f)
[14] <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/consol_act/lga1989182/s223.html>
[15] Extract from the Local Government Act 1989. See <http://www.clg.uts.edu.au/pdfs/Felicettietal2006.pdf>
[16] *NSW Local Government Act (1993) Note to Chapter 4*
[17] *Local Government Act (1993) Note to Chapter 4*.

planning are frequently identified, and legislation sometimes includes a minimum period of exhibition for a plan or proposal, and the requirements for advertising it to the public. These appear across all jurisdictions in some form.

Elected representatives and community engagement

Council elections are one way that community members can seek representation.

> It is necessary to ensure that the councillors who comprise each Council are democratically elected by persons entitled to vote at municipal elections and that the Council is responsible and accountable to the local community.[18]

For example in Western Australia the Act outlines the role of the councillors as:

> A councillor — represents the interests of electors, ratepayers and residents of the district; provides leadership and guidance to the community in the district; and facilitates communication between the community and the council[19]

Ongoing dialogue with elected representatives is a possible direct channel through which community members can engage with council, although there do not appear to be any particular standards included in legislation about this form of engagement. Councillors are responsible for ensuring legislated community engagement is carried out by council officers but they are not usually required to engage or enter into dialogue with community members about it.

However, legislation often dictates the way in which community members should be notified about public meetings, including meetings of council, and details such as how and when they should be able to access agendas and minutes. The South Australian *Local Government Act 1999* specifies that the *'chief executive officer must give notice to the public of the times and places of meetings of the council'*, [20] and that notice is given by:

> ... causing a copy of the notice and agenda for a meeting to be placed on public display at the principal office of the council— (a) in the case of an ordinary meeting—at least three clear days before the date of the meeting; or(b) in the case of a special meeting—as soon as practicable after the time that notice of the meeting is given to members of the council.[21]

It also specifies that in deciding the time and place of the meeting the characteristics of the community and the council area, and *'the best ways to bring notice of a meeting of the council to the public's attention'*[22] must be taken into account. Similar provisions also exist in relation to council committees.[23]

In Western Australia the legislation states that *'Time is to be allocated for questions to be raised by members of the public and responded to at (a) every ordinary meeting of a council; and (b) such other meetings of councils or committees as may be prescribed.'* [24]

Community engagement in long-term community strategic planning

[18] VIC Local Government Act 1989 - Section 1 (3)
[19] LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1995 - SECT 2.10.
[20] SA Local Government Act 1999 – Section 84 (1)—Public notice of council meetings
[21] SA Local Government Act 1999 – Section 84 (2)
[22] SA Local Government Act 1999 – Section 84 (2a)
[23] SA Local Government Act 1999 – Section 88
[24] LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1995 - SECT 5.24.

In recent years in local government in Australia there has been a focus on long-term strategic planning which integrates principles of sustainability and liveability. As many states have moved toward longer-term planning (for example community planning or community strategic planning), often with a visioning component, requirements for community engagement in this process have been included (see Table 1 below). New South Wales, Western Australia and Queensland have all adopted a ten-year planning process with community engagement, while Victoria and Tasmania operate within four- and five-year planning horizons respectively. In the Northern Territory the planning horizon required is one year, and in South Australia it is four years.

Table 1 - Planning horizon required by councils in Australia

State or territory	Strategic plan required and the planning horizon for this plan	When required?
WA	1 year Management Plan 10 year Community Strategic Plan	Current requirement From 2012, by June 2013[25]
NT	1 year Municipal or Shire Plan	Ongoing requirement
QLD	10 year Community Strategic Plan	By Dec 2011[26]
NSW	10 year Community Strategic Plan	Staged implementation from 2010 through to June 2012
VIC	4 year Council Plan	Ongoing requirement
TAS	5 year Strategic Plan	Ongoing requirement
SA	4 year Strategic Management Plan 10 year financial plan, and an infrastructure and asset management plan	Ongoing requirement

In NSW, recent amendments to the NSW *Local Government Act 1993* (NSWDLG 2010) require every council to develop a minimum ten-year *Community Strategic Plan*, informed through community engagement. The community plan is each council's principal planning document, informing asset management and service provision planning in the form of a delivery program and an operational plan. The *Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework* (IPRF) in NSW requires councils to engage communities. NSW local government legislation requires that communities must be involved in visioning processes that span a 10-year or greater timeframe. It also requires that:

> The council must establish and implement a strategy (its "community engagement strategy"), based on social justice principles, for engagement with the local community when developing the community strategic plan.[27]

The NSW Local Government Act also includes more standard requirements that councils exhibit the draft plan for public comment 'for a period of at least 28 days', and that submissions must be considered by the council before the plan is endorsed or amended.[28]

Western Australia has adopted a similar reporting framework to NSW, new regulations under the *Local Government Act 1995* requiring each local government to develop a minimum ten-year

[25] <http://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au/Pages/Results.aspx?ItemID=143836>
[26] The draft regulations state that Queensland Councils are required to adopt a Community Plan for their local government area by 1 December 2011. However, this timeline has not been finalised and it will be confirmed when the Queensland Government releases the final regulations <http://www.qlgcsa.org.au/community_planning_toolkit/2_what.html>
[27] Local Government Act 1993- section SECT 402 Community strategic plan (4
[28] (1993), Section 402 of the Act *(6)*

Community Strategic Plan that acts as its principal planning document (DLG WA 2010a). The new framework will be in place on 1 July 2012 to allow time for the sector to transition to the new arrangements (DLG WA 2010b). The existing requirement in the Western Australian *Local Government Act 1995*[29] is that councils must prepare an annual budget and an annual financial report, although some councils create four-year strategic plans.[30]
In Queensland, local governments are now required to focus on longer term planning to ensure their capacity to manage and sustain growth and development. The *Local Government Act 2009*, requires that local governments develop a minimum ten-year *Community Plan* to provide strategic direction for planning processes[31] and the *Local Government (Finance, Plans and Reporting) Regulation 2010* lays down the requirements for community planning (Queensland Government, Department of Infrastructure and Planning [not dated]). Councils must also have a community engagement plan which outlines the approach to community engagement used in developing the Community Plan. The Community Plan then informs the development of a priority infrastructure plan under the State's *Sustainable Planning Act 2009* which provides an integrated planning policy for the local government's planning scheme area:[32]

> The community plan sets a strategic vision for what the community wants the area to be like in 10, 20 or more years. Through its outcomes, priorities, goals and indicators it will be the primary tool to inform Council's corporate plan, long-term financial plan and long-term asset management plan.[33]

Progress with the implementation of the Community Plan and Corporate Plan must be reviewed at least annually. While this annual review would not need to include further community engagement, every fifth year, the Community Plan must be refreshed by comprehensive community engagement (Queensland Local Government Community Service Association 2010; Queensland Department of Infrastructure and Planning 2009).

The *City of Brisbane Act 2010* (Qld) and associated regulations also emphasise community engagement. The Act stipulates that Council must have a community plan and a community engagement policy (Brisbane City Council 2011).

In Victoria, councils are required to develop a Council Plan every four years following a general election. These plans must include the strategic objectives of the council, strategies for achieving them over the next four years, a Strategic Resource Plan describing the financial and non-financial resources needed for implementation in that four year period, and a suite of indicators to monitor performance (Department of Planning and Community Development 2010). The Act also requires each council to have an annual budget for each financial year. Three-yearly Municipal Public Health Plans (MPHPs) are also required by Victorian councils.[34] They focus on council programs and strategies to reduce health risks and enhance wellbeing.

In Tasmania, local governments must prepare a Strategic Plan every five years which is informed by a community engagement process. The priority actions in the Strategic Plan inform a local government's five-year *Corporate Plan*. A research project to evaluate implementing a common framework for long-term financial and asset management planning for all Tasmanian councils (Roorda and Howard 2009) indicated that a framework of this nature would have a range of benefits. This included being a mechanism for Tasmanian councils to move from annual budgeting to

[29] Western Australian Government website, Local Government Act 1995, <http://www.slp.wa.gov.au>
[30] For example <http://www.lakegrace.wa.gov.au/docs/Revised%20Strategic%20Plan%202011%20-%202015%20Final.pdf>.
[31] <http://www.dlgp.qld.gov.au/resources/factsheet/lg-legislation/link-between-community-planning-spa.pdf>
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] The Health (General Amendment) Act 1988, 29B.

long-term financial planning based on consultation with the community on asset service levels and financial sustainability. The research also highlighted a range of barriers, including the need for resources (people and guidelines) to assist in completing and implementing asset management and long-term financial plans (Roorda and Howard 2009).
Northern Territory local governments must prepare a municipal or shire plan, reviewed annually. This plan must contain any long-term community or strategic plans adopted by the council.[35] Strategic planning of community service provisions are also outlined in *Regional Management Plans*. The *Local Government Act 2008* requires three regional management plans be developed for the whole of the Northern Territory, to identify opportunities for cooperative arrangements relating to service delivery.[36]

In South Australia, councils must prepare a strategic management plan that looks forward at least four years and an annual business plan, linked to the strategic plan (as outlined in the Local Government Act and Regulations).[37] These plans must be publicly available. Section 122 of the Act prescribes the minimum features they must include, but does not require them to take any defined form thus plans may vary from council to council but will have minimum features included (Government of South Australia n.d.). The legislation also states that members of the public must be given a reasonable opportunity to be involved in the development and review of councils' strategic plans, through a consultation process (ibid).

The emergence of long-term planning requirements in many jurisdictions in Australia is a key influence on how local government is expected to engage with communities. Reflecting on the NSW experience, Prior and Herriman (2010) note the new planning framework:

> offers a mechanism to embrace a series of influences that have affected local government over the past few decades. At the same time it presents ongoing challenges to local councils in formulating and implementing community strategic plans.

As planning frameworks are extended, the need to engage communities in longer-term visions and the strategies for achieving them may take precedence over more tactical or operational decision making. Practical decisions about how best to engage diverse communities in open ended discussions about the municipality's future will need to be made, and clear frameworks developed for integrating inputs from different parallel community engagement processes.

Requirements for community consultation policies

South Australian and Queensland local government legislation require that councils create a community consultation policy. In South Australia for example, councils are required to create a Public Consultation Policy which outlines how council will engage the community about various decisions and situations (Tatiara District Council SA 2009; see Appendix 3). In Queensland, the State Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) provides guidance on the creation of policies.[38]

Our interviews suggest that LGAQ worked to change the Act to make requirements for community planning which is engaged with community and implemented the requirements for councils to have a community engagement policy.

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35 <http://notes.nt.gov.au/dcm/legislat/legislat.nsf/d989974724db65b1482561cf0017cbd2/3f332a50182d8bc76925784c001e6b12?OpenDocument>

36 <http://www.localgovernment.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/41506/NORTHERN_REGION_RMP_Aug_08.pdf>

37 *Local Government (Financial Management and Rating) Amendment Act 2005*: p. 3, <http://www.localgovt.sa.gov.au/legislation>

38 <http://www.lgaq.asn.au/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=8c43313712ba8f085696b3d3cf0be173&groupId=10136>

Reporting on community engagement activities

At least one state requires that councils report on their community engagement activities. 'Best Value Victoria' was a new approach introduced through legislation in 2000 to improve the delivery of local government services, making them affordable and more responsive to local needs. It also sought to encourage councils to engage with their communities in shaping their services and activities. One principle relates to community engagement. The Best Value Principles are enshrined in the Local Government Act and must be applied to all services and activities.[39] The *Victorian Local Government Act 2001* requires councils to report regularly (at least once a year) to the community on their achievements in relation to the Best Value Principles (VLGA 2001: p. 14). [40] The Code of Reporting allows for councils to do this either in their annual report, or as a separate stand-alone Best Value report made available to the public (VLGA 2001: p. 14).

Some authors have suggested that

> Best Value and its attendant phenomenon of community engagement appear to have had a dramatic and positive impact on the very role of local government, extending it from a service purchasing and service delivery function to a facilitation and advocacy role for better community conditions' (Demediuk and Solli 2007).

Beyond compliance – voluntary engagement

Beyond complying with legislation, councils often create opportunities for engagement around various issues or planning processes based on needs (such as meeting community expectations or canvassing the variety of views and potential solutions to a controversial issue). This may build on the minimum requirements set by legislation (see Box 2) and could focus on a range of issues – for example, how rates will be set, whether or not to invest in a specific piece of infrastructure, or what actions council should include in an environmental strategy. This is described more in **Section 3 – Practice.**

Box 2 – Beyond legislative requirements

District Council of Mt Barker's community engagement for the 2005 District Wide Industry Development Plan Amendment (DPA)

Council followed the required legislated DPA process and engaged with the community at an 'inform' level by: sending an information package to every household in the district, publishing a public notice in The Advertiser and The Courier, providing public displays, making the DPA available to interested parties at key community locations, and holding an open house and five community information forums. Holding information forums at multiple locations and sending information to all households in the district was beyond the minimum requirements of the legislated DPA process. Council also engaged at a 'consult' level by giving stakeholders (government agencies and the community) the opportunity to provide written submissions (over a three month period) and to speak at a public hearing. Source: District Council of Mt Barker (Collins 2008)

[39] <http://www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/53080/Best-Value-August-2006.pdf>
[40] VIC Local Government (Best Value Principles) Act 1999.

Box 3 – Legislative requirements of councils – in summary

In the past requirements have almost universally included the need to:

- **Exhibit draft land use (spatial) plans for comment**
- **Exhibit draft budgets and infrastructure/ service delivery (operational) plans**
- **Exhibit particular topic- specific plans or proposals**
- **Provide certain documents for public notice**

More recently, some states also require:

- **Community engagement in long-term community strategic planning**
- **Developing a community engagement policy for council**
- **Reporting on community engagement efforts.**

2.4 Principles and frameworks of effective engagement

> "Find what the community needs and wants and then build the assets. Don't presume what they want" (interviewee)

There is a vast range of community engagement features discussed in the literature, some of which have been translated into key principles of effective engagement (International Conference on Engaging Communities 2005; NCDD 2009), or criteria for evaluating practice. For example, the UK Audit Commission identified five principles for successful community engagement based on an extensive review of local government community engagement strategies (UK Audit Commission cited in Fritze, Williamson & Wiseman 2009).

One of the best known sets of principles are the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) 'Core Values' (see Box 4 below) and their 'spectrum' of public participation approaches (See Appendix 3 for more information on this spectrum). As well as providing a framework for community engagement practice, the IAP2 spectrum is useful source of practitioner training, professional support and review of practice.

In the US, the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD) (with the participation of IAP2 and the endorsement of many other institutions) has developed a set of seven Core Principles for Public Engagement which are intended to represent the 'common beliefs and understandings of those working in the fields of public engagement, conflict resolution, and collaboration' (NCDD 2009).

Box 4 – IAP2 core values

The core values outlined by IAP2 for community engagement are:

1. The public should have a say in decisions about actions that could affect their lives.
2. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
3. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognising and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.
4. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
5. Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.
6. Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
7. Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

The Brisbane Declaration on community engagement developed at the *International Conference on Engaging Communities* held in Brisbane in August 2005 drew on a number of sources for global definitions and aspirations for community engagement, including *the International Association of Public Participation's (IAP2) core values*. The Brisbane declaration endorses the core principles of integrity, inclusion, deliberation and influence in community engagement, whilst also identifying that 'meaningful community engagement seeks to address barriers and build the capacity and confidence of people to participate in, and negotiate and partner with, institutions that affect their lives, in particular those previously excluded or disenfranchised' (IAP2 2005).

Several high level principles and frameworks are being used to guide Australian councils' conceptual approaches to and practice of engagement. The documents noted most frequently in council community engagement policies appear to be the IAP2 Spectrum and the Brisbane Declaration. For example:

- The City of Canada Bay Community Engagement Policy (2010) engagement principles are based on IAP2 core values and aim to be 'reflective of the philosophy of the NSW Local Government Amendment (Planning and Reporting) Act 2009' (City of Canada Bay 2010: p. 2).
- The City of Canada Bay states that 'Council's definition of community engagement is based on the United Nations Declaration on Community Engagement 2005' (City of Canada Bay 2010: p. 2).
- The Surf Coast Shire 2010 Community Engagement Policy refers to the Victorian charter of human rights and responsibilities (Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission 2010).

Using these principles within organisations is not always straightforward, and may require reflection and revision by the organisation. Practitioners working at Sunshine Coast Council during the development of their policy reflect on the use of the IAP2 Spectrum:

> ... one of the senior councillors challenged whether or not we should reference the IAP2 spectrum within the policy because she believed that we as a Council were very unlikely to empower the community and therefore any reference to empowerment was potentially misleading. After some debate the reference to the Spectrum was retained in a modified form after other councillors championed community empowerment as something the SCRC should aspire to in certain circumstances (interviewee cited in Rogers & Gould n.d)

This demonstrates the way that councils are engaging with principles established by outside organisations and are using them to guide and question their own aspirations for community engagement.

3. A snapshot of practice

This section reviews the role and scope of community engagement policies in local government. It seeks to highlight the way they are linked to other resources (such as frameworks, checklists etc.), and some of the community engagement issues/approaches which are raised by the nature of the content of these policies.

It examines when, and with whom, councils are engaging and the main methods of engagement currently used and concludes with some reflections on what we know about best practice in community engagement.

For this review, the policies of 11 councils were considered in detail,[41] and others were identified through a longer list using a web-based search. See Box 5 for examples of policies developed by councils in each state and territory.

3.1 Policy commitments of individual councils

Community engagement policies are public commitments by councils to their community engagement practice.[42] The content of the policies reveals different dimensions to community engagement that councils are considering, and decisions about when and how to engage with communities.

How many councils have a policy?

While data[43] is not readily available on the number of councils that have community engagement policies, not all do. It also appears that most councils with a policy have developed it since 2000.

In 2007, the South Australian Local Government Association (LGASA) researched the local government engagement practices of 26 Councils.[44] One question the LGASA posed was: "Has your council prepared handbooks, charters, guidelines to assist in the design of strategies to engage communities in decision making processes?" Nine Councils (35%) answered yes to this question, with three (12 %) referring to steps/checklists set out in their policy, and another six (23%) referring to separate resources in the form of guidelines and checklists (LGASA 2007).

Some councils don't have a dedicated community engagement policy, but have committed to the principles and practice of engagement in other formal documents. For example, the City of Sydney does not have a specific community engagement policy, but their vision document *Sustainable Sydney 2030* includes as a strategy, 'Implementation through Effective Partnerships', with Action 10.7.1 stating: 'Lead public debate on the future of local government in Sydney'. The document states 'Ongoing engagement will be maintained as a foundation principle to delivering the Vision over the next 20 years and beyond' (p. 197).

[41] City of Canada Bay, Sutherland Shire, Manly Council, Rockdale, Surf Coast Shire, Colac Ottway Shire, Latrobe City, The City of Onkaparinga, City of Holdfast Bay, Prospect City Council, City of Townsville

[42] Note that this language is reflective of the wording being used by many councils. Other policy names for documents with similar intents include: Public Consultation Policies and Community Consultation Policies

[43] The authors are not aware of any updated lists of council policies, compiled by state or nationally, for example

[44] The sample represents roughly a third of South Australian councils – in 2007/08 there were 68 councils in South Australia (Technologyone 2010).

Box 5 – Examples of other individual council community engagement policies and strategies*

New South Wales
- City of Canada Bay Community Engagement Policy (2010)
- Sutherland Shire Community Engagement Policy (2009)
- Manly Council Community Engagement Policy (2009)
- Rockdale Community Engagement Strategy and Policy (2006)

Victoria
- City of Bendigo Community Engagement Policy, Guidelines and Toolkit (2011)Surf Coast Shire Community Engagement Policy (2010)
- Colac Ottway Shire Community Engagement Policy (2010)
- Latrobe City Community Engagement Policy and Strategy (2005)

South Australia
- The City of Onkaparinga Community Engagement Framework (n.d.)
- City of Holdfast Bay Community Consultation and Engagement Policy (2010)
- Prospect City Council Community Engagement Policy (2007)
- City of Marion Community Consultation and Engagement Policy (2010)

Northern Territory
- Central Desert Shire Community Engagement Strategy and Policy (2011)

Tasmania
- Glenorchy City Council Community Engagement Policy (n.d.)
- Huon valley Council Community Consultation and Communication Strategy (n.d.)

Queensland
- City of Townsville Community Engagement Policy (2010)
- Gladstone Regional Council Community Engagement Policy (2010)
- Sunshine Coast Regional Council Community Engagement policy (2009)
- Logan City Council Community Engagement Policy (2009)
- Mackay Regional Council Community Engagement Policy (2009)

Western Australia[45]
- **Freemantle community Engagement Framework (2010)**

**This is not a comprehensive list of policies held by Australian councils, but a sample that are readily available online.*

What's included in these policies?

Each policy contains a statement of commitment to the principles and practice of community engagement, for example:

> The purpose of this Policy is to define council's commitment to community engagement, and in doing so, ensure that Councillors, council officers and the community apply this to their own role. (Sutherland Shire Council 2009: p. 1).

[45] Other Western Australian councils make mention of policies but do not appear to have them available online – such as City of Swan's Community Engagement Policy (http://www.swan.wa.gov.au/Our_City/Have_Your_Say) and City of Bunbury Community Engagement Strategy & Operational Guidelines <http://www.bunbury.wa.gov.au/pdf/minutes/10/101130_Council_Minutes_Amended.pdf>.

Policies may also include details of the mechanisms that council will use:

> This policy ... defines the principles underpinning Council's engagement activities, the role of councillors and staff in engaging with the community, and the mechanisms which council will use to engage the community (Sunshine Coast Council 2009).

Such policies also frequently contain definitions of key terms, a statement of the benefits that community engagement may deliver, a set of principles for how engagement activities will be carried out and differing levels of detail about who in council is responsible, what methods will be used, and what types of council decisions will be informed by community engagement. In making these specifications, they often reference other international or national frameworks.

For example, Surf Coast Shire Council's three-page policy outlines the benefits of community engagement and the principles it will use in its engagement work (integrity, inclusion, deliberation, and influence), as well as the specific features of how council will work to engage citizens in decision making (Surf Coast Shire 2010). Similarly, Rockdale Council's *Community Engagement Strategy & Policy* discusses issues such as when community engagement will take place, what level of engagement will occur, and how community engagement activities will be managed. It includes a set of nine principles adopted from the 'NSW Planning System Handbook 2003: Community Engagement' (Rockdale Council 2006: p. 3).

As well as the commonly included content of community engagement policies outlined above, there were some important themes that appeared less frequently. These are listed here as they may be useful considerations for other councils in developing new policies.

- **Timing of consultation:** The City of Holdfast Bay policy states that "For the purposes of determining the period of public consultation, the time between the 15 December and the 15 January inclusive in any year, will not be counted when determining the consultation period" (City of Holdfast Bay 2010, 2.1.7). Colac Otway Shire Council's new community engagement policy proposes a minimum of six weeks for any document on exhibition (Colac Shire 2010).
- **Commitment to diversity in participation:** One of the principles for the City of Townsville (Qld) is "Commitment to the provision of culturally appropriate processes to encourage increased access by Aboriginal people, Torres Strait and South Sea Islanders, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to participate in discussions about Council initiatives" (City of Townsville 2010).
- **Managing expectations:** The City of Holdfast Bay makes the commitment that "Council will be honest about the degree of influence the community is able to exercise in any particular community engagement event or process" (2010, s 2.1.3). Sutherland Shire's policy, unlike most, outlines when it may choose to not engage with the community: *Council may not engage with the community when: council is confident that current and accurate data or information is available to make an informed decision; matters are administrative or routine management; external timeframes imposed on council do not permit the inclusion of an engagement process; decisions are imposed by external agencies; or there is an emergency situation"* (Sutherland Shire Council 2009: p. 4).
- **Privacy**: Sutherland Shire's policy contains a statement addressing the issue of privacy, and what council's privacy commitments are to its community (Sutherland Shire Council 2009: p. 8).
- **Deliberation:** Surf Coast Shire Council's policy includes definitions of *community*, *citizenship*, *community engagement*, *deliberative democracy* and *deliberative democratic processes*.
- **Developing staff capacity:** Surf Coast Shire Council's policy includes a commitment to supporting 'all staff to continue to gain confidence and capacity to engage effectively with communities' (Surf Coast Shire 2010: p. 3). Sunshine Coast Council also focuses on staff capacity building stating that in order to develop a culture of engagement across the organisation, council will

provide community engagement training for councillors and staff, and establish a network of community engagement practitioners to share information and experiences (Sunshine Coast Council 2009: p. 4).

- **Coordination of consultation activities across council:** The City of Canada Bay policy includes a goal to maintain a community engagement register to record its higher level engagement activities. The intention is to reduce the risks of duplication and over consultation, record activities undertaken, and allow the community to see via the website what consultation is being planned or is actually occurring (City of Canada Bay 2010: p. 4).
- **Providing other documents internally to support practice:** The City of Canada Bay has developed a *Communication and Consultation Toolkit* for internal use by council officers to provide consistency in the application of the policy (City of Canada Bay 2010: p. 5). Similarly, Sunshine Coast Regional Council developed a community engagement toolkit to provide technical guidance for staff on planning, undertaking, and evaluating community engagement activities. Manly Council's policy (2009) states its intention to follow the adoption of the policy with a more detailed strategy and methodology document.
- **Evaluation of engagement work:** Rockdale Council's *Community Engagement Strategy and Policy* (2006) contains a commitment to evaluate its community engagement. The evaluation will assess community representation, the methods used for the engagement, publicising the engagement, various aspects of timing (promotion time and time of the actual activity), and the information that was gained (Rockdale Council 2006: p. 6). Sunshine Coast Council commits to establishing performance indicators to measure the outcomes of engagement processes (Sunshine Coast Council 2009: p. 4).
- **Role clarification:** Manly City Council's policy provides details about the different roles of councillors and staff (Manly Council 2009).

Leading practice in community engagement

The City of Onkaparinga Engagement Framework[46] is highlighted as a leading practice example in the LGASA (2007) *Community Engagement Snapshot of Councils*, and it won an IAP2 award. Rather than produce a single policy document, Onkaparinga Council created a community engagement handbook, a strategic document that formed part of their Community Engagement Framework. The process began with a review of their existing community engagement practice, and has been linked to research and evaluation. The process of developing the framework involved staff and community stakeholders in various ways. The framework established a *Community Engagement Unit* with specific support functions across council, a stakeholder register, and a resident feedback register.

3.2 Engaging: About what, with whom and how?

As described in Section 2 of this paper, councils are required to consult with communities and inform them of key decisions or changes made by council as prescribed by legislation which varies across jurisdictions. In addition, councils voluntarily engage communities at other times. This section describes council approaches to engaging communities, drawing on existing reviews of practice. It illustrates these with examples provided by councils and other stakeholders interviewed for the research. See also Section 6 of this report for a brief analysis of trends and emerging issues.

What do councils engage people about?

A three-year research project undertaken by eight Victorian Councils, the Victorian Local Government Association (VLGA) and researchers from Swinburne University of Technology (Brackertz & Meredyth 2008: p. 1) showed the reasons that councils consult are both pragmatic and

[46] For more information see: Community Engagement Framework; Community Engagement Approach decision Making Diagram; or the Community Engagement Guide Available from <http://www.onkaparingacity.com/onka/home.jsp> or <http://www.onkaparingacity.com/onka/council/community_engagement.jsp> or see the more detailed case study in IAP2 2010.

ideas driven – including ideas about "local government's role in democracy, in community building and engagement, in fostering civil society or in redressing social injustice or exclusion" (Brackertz & Meredyth 2008: p. 3). The research found that councils typically consulted communities about items including:

- Major policies and strategies
- Policies and targeted strategies that are place or issues based
- Operational and service planning and development
- Performance evaluation
- Issues of special concern to the community.

These findings align with observations from the VLGA that site-specific issues include building statutory matters, and that performance evaluation can include council-wide and individual service and/or issue assessments of council performance (e.g. council satisfaction surveys) (VLGA 2001: p. 12).

This diversity of engagement topics is also supported by research carried out in South Australia. In 2007, the LGASA conducted research into local government engagement practices. Twenty-six councils (twelve metropolitan and fourteen country councils) responded to the invitation. The LGSA mapped a range of activities being undertaken and highlighted a series of barriers to greater levels of engagement (LGASA 2007: p. 8). Some of the decisions about which South Australian councils were engaging communities (and specifically, consulting them) included annual business plans, budget and rate reviews, strategic plans, township workshops, neighbourhood house or community centre facilities and service reviews, facility reviews and upgrades, local regeneration projects, community development, social planning, elderly citizens' forums, dry zones, kerbside waste services, riverfront and reserve issues wetlands, and major projects planning such as a state aquatic centre or prison (LGASA 2007).

Who are councils engaging with?

We turn now to the extent to which the range of people consulted in consultation processes are representative of the wider community. This question is important for councils because of their possible commitment to representative democracy.

Brackertz and Meredyth (2008) suggest that 'Ideally consultations should aim to include all those affected by the issue'. Sarkissian and Hoffer *et al.* (2009) argue that an engaged citizenry 'must not exclude any social, cultural or age group', and must promote the inclusion of everyone's knowledge as valid and valuable (p.78). In reality 'this is not often the case, nor is it always practicable' (Brackertz & Meredyth 2008: p. 3). Research in Victoria showed that currently most council consultations 'attract only a small section of the community that is often not representative of the broader constituency' (Brackertz and Meredyth 2008: p. 3). This aligns with observations made by international researchers that:

> … public meetings and comment solicitations frequently generate viewpoints from a group of people older, whiter, more affluent, more educated, and more likely to be male than the citizens within their community.[47]

Practitioners often discuss 'hard to reach' groups such as young people, the unemployed, culturally and linguistically diverse groups, those with literacy barriers, and the geographically remote. These 'hard to reach' members of the community are rarely represented in community engagements

[47] Anthony et al. 2004; Berry et al. 1984; Carr and Halvorsen 2001; Marshall and Jones 2005; McComas 2003; Stedman and Parkins 2003, cited in Halvorsen, K.E., 2006.

because personal characteristics that may make participation difficult or seem unappealing, and because of the types of community engagement techniques used.

For example young people often don't become involved in community engagement approaches because they find them 'irrelevant, a waste of time and boring', and because they do not experience results relevant to their concerns (Sarkissian and Hoffer *et al.* 2009: p. 134). The remoteness of some communities is also a challenge (e.g. the NT Barkly Shire, with 323,000 sq km, is much bigger than Tasmania), as is limited internet access in these areas.

Dr Robyn Morris from Edith Cowan University (WA) stresses the importance of effective engagement strategies for councils with indigenous communities particularly because the responsibility for service delivery to remote indigenous communities has shifted to local governments in WA. Dr Morris advised that indigenous people often shun consultation processes because of prior bad experiences. She reflects that consultation is also sometimes avoided by local government officers and/or elected members due to a lack of understanding or experience in how to do this effectively. Some have also had bad experiences in the past when they have endeavoured to engage with indigenous communities.[48]

Brackertz and Meredyth point out that 'lumping' a wide variety of different types of groups and people as 'hard to reach' may not be useful. People and groups experience different barriers to participation, and their experience is also linked closely to the participation methods offered by councils. Brackertz and Meredyth suggest focusing on the characteristics that pose a barrier to participation, and recognising that some groups or individuals will have some or all of these:

- Demographic characteristics
- Cultural characteristics
- Behavioural and attitudinal characteristics
- Structural characteristics of council that provide a barrier (Brackertz & Meredyth 2008: p. 16).

Some prompts for thinking about engaging with these groups more fully range from thinking about how and where members of these groups already come together, what information networks already exist, who they trust, who influences the group, and how other organisations facilitate access (Brackertz & Meredyth 2008: p. 16).

Some strategies they outline for involving hard to reach groups include:

- overcoming prejudice – of council staff and consultants
- identifying hard to reach groups – recognising that there are multiple publics
- adapting consultation methods to be more inclusive
- communicating and negotiating access
- consultation with specific groups
- community relations and trust
- choosing appropriate locations
- using expert knowledge and working with consultants.

(Brackertz & Meredyth 2008: p. 17-18)

The disconnect between principles and practicalities of community engagement means that councils face difficult challenges about how to use their resources to best design participation processes that engage with a diverse or representative range of the community members.

[48] In interview. Dr Morris has been involved in the WA Rural Remote and Indigenous Council Scoping Study prepared for ACELG (Morris, Callaghan and Walker 2010)

One practical way that councils seek to identify a wide range of publics to engage with is through 'stakeholder mapping', and much of the guide materials created for councils include this as a key stage of planning community engagement. For issues which affect all communities within the LGA such as long-term strategic planning, councils frequently consult with a broad range of stakeholders (including government institutions, community organisations, businesses and citizens) in an effort to engage a demographically diverse group.

For example, a senior staff member from Tweed Shire Council outlined the diverse range of methods to involve 'hard to reach' groups in the development of the council's strategic plan: "We actually went to where ordinary people go – to shopping centre, markets, clubs, tried to think where do those people we don't reach go? We had a barbeque at the skate park and used the Koori times." While the council saw the importance of these diverse approaches in preparing for the long-term plan, they did have some reservations as the use of all these methods is financially burdensome.

The following example from Wagga Wagga City Council also demonstrates this approach.

Box 4: Example: engagement process in developing the Wagga Wagga strategic plan

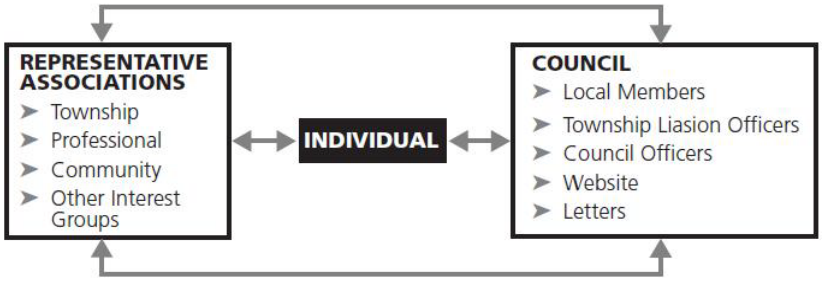
The process for creating the strategic plan commenced with Council's community survey conducted in 2006 and continued with input from rural village meetings and various Council committees (Wagga Wagga 2011). To build on the background information, further consultations took place with a broad cross section of the community to create both council's *Social Plan* and *Community Strategic Plan* during 2007, including:

- Focus groups to target specific demographic categories including older people, children and families and people from cultural and diverse backgrounds
- Local institutions: Defence, Charles Sturt University, Riverina Institute of TAFE
- Targeted business representatives
- NSW Farmers' Federation
- Council committees, progress associations and organised community groups.

Source: Wagga Wagga 2011

While some processes of engagement seek to engage with community and representative groups, for example by forming a committee of community leaders from a range of key stakeholder groups, others seek to engage with 'non-aligned' community members as individual citizens. The diagram below (Figure 3) by Latrobe City Council shows some of the ways that community members can be involved in council decision making as individuals, or through involvement with representative groups, or both.

Figure 3 – communications pathways between community members and council (Latrobe City 2005, p.9)



Other processes use random selection (e.g. citizens' juries and other deliberative democratic

processes), or demographically representative groups (e.g. online panels), to ensure people from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds are represented.

Practitioners also report that some communities are 'over-consulted'. For example in the NT there are many, and often competing, community reference and advisory groups, some of which operate outside of a local government structures, but may be seeking to engage citizens on similar issues.

3.3 What methods and approaches are being used?

Local government participation work might be considered to most frequently address the 'inform' and 'consult' aspects of the IAP2 spectrum (See Appendix 3).

Community engagement approaches by councils are highly diverse, both in relation to the circumstances (issue, topic, timing) of engagement and also the methods used to support engagement. The South Australian research cited above (LGASA 2007: p. 5) revealed that the four most frequently used methods by councils to communicate information to their communities are (in order of frequency of responses/extent of use):

- Local media
- Direct mail
- Internet and website
- Public signage

Approaches to media include advertisements in the state-wide newspaper, regular columns in local newspapers, media articles and editorials, local TV and community radio.

Direct mail can include 'letterbox drops' or personalised addressed correspondence to the householder, council newsletters, letters, and information to specific stakeholders and targeted geographic communities. Signage is used to communicate information to individuals at service centres, for example noticeboards in the council foyer and the library and to groups at presentations, public forums, and through committees and interest groups (City of Prospect 2007: pp. 3-4). While not common, public information sessions and personalised briefings (held at request) are methods that some councils are using to disseminate information (Latrobe City Council 2005).

In terms of engagement, the same survey found that the most widespread and frequently used communication tools were:

- Public meetings
- Written submissions
- Survey/questionnaires
- Displays/workshops.

Some additional consultation methods that many councils are using which are not included on this list include residents panels, focus groups, committees of council, and meetings with elected representatives. In addition, when describing its methods, Latrobe City Council (2005) notes engagement methods used by council and those used by residents – including citizen-initiated activities such as petitions, and telephone calls. Councils often use a combination of methods in different situations especially when engaging on complex issues and/or with a very diverse community – see Box 6 for an example. The Latrobe *Community Engagement Policy and Strategy* notes that these modes of communication have different strengths and will be better suited to different community engagement objectives (Latrobe 2005: p. 16).

Box 6 – Example: methods used by the City of Prospect, South Australia

The City of Prospect (2007, pp.3-4) in South Australia describes the elements it uses in community consultation:

- A regular (quarterly) magazine (Creative Community)
- Other direct mail publications or letterbox drops, as appropriate
- Advertising in Standard Messenger and other newspapers and publications
- Regular media releases and briefings
- The Council website
- General fixed displays in community buildings
- Specific displays
- Community forums and stakeholder meetings
- Market research or surveys
- Questionnaires and circulars at Council offices
- Focus Groups (randomly chosen, targeted stakeholders or voluntary).

Some of these methods and how they are applied are discussed below.

Survey/questionnaires

As outlined above, surveys and questionnaires are amongst the most commonly used tools of community engagement. They can be community-wide surveys (open to all residents and other stakeholders) on a wide variety of issues, or their issue/stakeholder scope can be narrowed. Surveys have been used to help inform service provision and to help inform provision of engagement activities. Warringah Council recently conducted telephone surveys of residents to determine their community engagement preferences. See Box 6 for more information about the use of surveys for this purpose.

Box 7 – Example: Warringah Council Community Engagement Review

Warringah Council in NSW is well known for its commitment to community engagement and innovative approaches to community involvement in planning and decision-making. Its *Community Engagement Policy*, the *Community Engagement Matrix* and the *Community Engagement Toolkit* (for staff) are available on the council website. In 2010 the Council undertook a comprehensive review of its community engagement to better understand the needs of their local community. The review involved:

- Five hundred telephone interviews of residents from the Warringah local government area, achieving a completion rate of 60%
- Two focus groups with residents randomly selected from the residents who had participated in the telephone survey
- Internal meetings with staff and Councillors.

The survey sought feedback on the level of interest in personal involvement in council decisions, methods for hearing about council decisions, methods for contributing to council decisions, satisfaction with community consultation by Warringah Council in general, and main sources of council information. The results of the review are available on the council website.
For more information contact Warringah Council's Community Engagement and Research Coordinator.

Over the past eight years the Local Government Association of Tasmania (LGAT) has undertaken a bi-annual 'Satisfaction Survey' on behalf of all Tasmanian councils. The survey reveals any long-term changes in the level of resident satisfaction with council performance and enables councils to benchmark against other similar councils in the state. According to LGAT, the surveys consistently show that the overall satisfaction with council services is very high, and where results for a particular category are low, the council is able to implement changes and demonstrate improvements through

improved results in subsequent surveys. Larger Tasmanian councils such as Hobart, Launceston and Glenorchy City Councils also conduct their own satisfaction surveys.

A senior staff member from Tweed Shire Council (NSW)sees that one of the big challenges is improving democratic representation in decision making, and suggested that ratepayers are generally 'an apathetic lot' evidenced by the same people writing each week to the local paper. Improving democratic representation in decision making is one of the biggest challenges facing councils. While councils may have a database of ratepayers, they cannot access all residents: *"Only the electoral commission can tell us about the 10,000 people who aren't ratepayers and we want to hear from them as well."*

Council committees or working groups

Council committees are a commonly used method of engagement. They can be formed around particular functions of council – planning, aged care, youth services, access or the environment, for example. Committees may include council staff, elected representatives, stakeholder group representatives or individual citizens selected to represent a particular perspective or demographic characteristic, or individuals who are selected for their expertise on the topic concerned.

Committees are sometimes time bound and established for a particular purpose – providing input into a plan for example – in which case they may be called 'working groups'. Working group members can be invited as representatives of the community and they can also be drawn from organisations and agencies. Working groups may also be formed from the general community to reflect the demographics of the community (Queensland Local Government Community Service Association 2010).

A survey of engagement practices in South Australia found that:

> Councils had a wide range of advisory committees on various topics, with varying estimates of impact and varying methods for recruiting participants (LGA 2007: p. 6)

Council committees are used effectively in some contexts on specific issues or planning tasks. For example, 'participatory rate setting processes' were raised by one interviewee as an example of community engagement undertaken by some Queensland councils which is resulting in 'reduced flack on decisions'. These involve a committee of residents being selected based on diverse roles and demographics.

Similarly, participatory budgeting is a process for involving citizens in setting priorities in the context of resource constraints, often through a working group format. One interviewee referred to councils who undertake this process and use it to say 'you told us you want this level of service; this is what is needed to pay for it'. He saw it as a good tool for educating the community about the constraints involved in projects such as unseen costs, for example risk management and OH&S, elements that don't directly contribute to the end product, but which we expect as a society. Working groups of this sort may provide a deliberative space in which participants can access expert information, hear different perspectives and explore their own views. More information on deliberative approaches is included in Section 4 – Emerging approaches).

Committees are not without their problems. They may be criticised because of the small number of people involved and their (often) unrepresentative makeup. The large time commitment involved may skew participation towards those with more time or resources, and may mean that certain demographics are under-represented. In addition, strong personalities and confusion about roles or tasks can create challenging group dynamics. The City of Melbourne for example, had to dismantle a

number of consultative committees that were deemed dysfunctional. That said, wider community consultation can complement committee decision making:

> The collated community feedback was provided to both the War Memorial Review Committee and to 103 respondents who requested the document. The War Memorial Review Committee subsequently recommended to Council to proceed with the project, taking into consideration feedback from the engagement process (Popping 2008: p. 5).

Participants on community committees or advisory groups sometimes become frustrated. For example, local government reform in the Northern Territory reduced fifty-six community governments to eight shires, each with a series of local boards (community-based advisory groups).[49] Board members report that they are frustrated by the lack of respect for their forum by the council and other government representatives who attend their meetings. It is also reported that in some places there are competing community reference groups, and that communities are sometimes over consulted.

Box 8 – Working groups for Toowoomba 2050

In a major community planning exercise in the city of Toowoomba, five working groups were formed – Community, Infrastructure, Environment, Development, and City Working Groups. They met three times in line with stages in the planning process and their input was a major contribution to the vision, strategies and actions in the Toowoomba 2050 Community Plan. Source: Queensland Local Government Community Service Association 2010, A Toolkit for Community Planning. Online resource. Step 4-6. Community Engagement. <http://www.qlgcsa.org.au/community_planning_toolkit/index.html>

Public meetings

Public meetings have been a popular method of issue-specific community engagement by local government. They often feature a mix of technical experts (council staff, government agencies or consultants), council policy staff and elected representatives. The format is frequently that of staff and experts contributing through a formal presentation followed by an open forum for community questions and comments. They are characterised by being open to any resident, can attract large numbers, can sometimes be relatively unstructured with respect to participation processes, and can sometimes feature a small number of vocal participants expressing outrage at plans or proposals (especially when not effectively facilitated). They have been criticised for not supporting effective dialogue or deliberation, and for the impacts that an adversarial style can have on participating community members and staff.

Research in the US has found that many participants have low expectations of public meetings and do not expect that their participation will affect decisions (McComas 2003). People go to meetings because, among other reasons, they view them as important opportunities to gather information about potential decisions and about community members' viewpoints (Halvorsen, 2006; p154). Research in the UK (using focus groups with the public) suggest that public meetings are the most readily identifiable type of public participation, and that they are seen as an opportunity for the public to voice protest over particular issues. There was a common feeling that council officers and members came to listen but had 'already made up their minds' (Lowndes, Pratchett & Stoker 2001).

In interviews carried out for this paper, one interviewee reflected on their personal experience of attending a hostile public meeting where councillors and staff felt 'under attack'. These comments

[49] The Shires are East Arnhem, West Arnhem, Victoria Daly, Roper Gulf, Tiwi Islands, Central Desert, MacDonnell, and Barkly.

reflect commonly expressed criticisms of the public meeting format (when it is not successfully managed). They suggest that public meetings are not suitable for use in all situations regardless of the engagement objectives or circumstances.

> 'You may as well line us up in front of a firing squad; people just line up to throw rocks ... After we did the LEP community engagement the councillors and staff were pretty much shell shocked – because at every meeting they got screamed at.' [anonymous]

> People think 'oh we have to get community engagement; we have to have a series of public meetings'. Then people feel like 'we told them' and the councillors think 'oh that's the noisy minority'. [anonymous]

The same interviewee cited a particularly hostile meeting held in the past few years as being the impetus for council exploring other approaches for face-to-face engagement, and for revisiting the ongoing flow of information to the community on key issues.

> As a result we have attempted to talk about more communication with community, through a regular newsletter, more engagement with rural ratepayers who are particularly marginalised and trying to focus on quality of councils activities not quantity – e.g. quality of roads

Research elsewhere suggests that a limited amount of distrust of an agency made people more likely to participate in public meetings (Laurian 2004) but that a deep distrust in the organisation caused individuals to "exit" the process by not attending at all - as they didn't trust them to listen to their concerns (Laurian 2004, cited in Halvorsen 2006: p. 155). Conversely, some research suggests that attending a comfortable, convenient, and satisfying public meeting increases participant trust in an agency (Halvorsen 2003).

Even a hostile public meeting can have long-term positive learning outcomes, but in the short term research suggests it can affect staff (or councillor) confidence, and result in a professional wariness towards community engagement and a reluctance to get involved (Halvorsen 2006).

Direct engagement with councillors

Elected representatives act as an ongoing channel of information between council and residents on a range of issues. One interviewee said it was the role of councillors to help empower the community to access government – both council and other levels of government.

> 'I don't think 99% of people in the community have any idea of what work councillors do – the depth, the workload' (interviewee)

Council meetings themselves are another form of community engagement, with community members able to attend and address council on matters being discussed. Some councils may make council meetings more accessible to citizens by moving meetings to various community venues, and may also design separate forums for councillors to meet residents and hear from them directly. An interviewee from Lismore Council said: 'around six times a year we go to rural communities, we ask *what do you want?* Councillors sit and listen, 20–25 people come, people have discussion, people can hear.'

Another interviewee discussed a positive experience that a council had in using community engagement to help with setting rates.[50] The process (community participation in rating decisions) developed 'terms of reference' that assisted with determining the mix of community representatives

[50] Rating – determining the way that rates revenue is collected from property owners by council, including the rules about discounts or exemptions.

that was to be involved, and people were approached by invitation (rather than in a public 'expressions of interest' process). Councillors and group members were very clear on how information was going to be used, and it was made clear that community members were 'recommenders', while councillors were the decision makers. The interviewee suggested that the process works better when councillors are not in the room during meetings of the group, but that they can come into the room at the end, to demonstrate their support for the process: 'When councillors come into the room as part of the discussion, community members become disillusioned that councillors seem to have their minds made up'. She reflected that it's very difficult for councillors to ignore their own feelings and views if they participate in or even observe the meeting.

Workshops

'Workshops' is a loose term which covers a range of processes. Usually they focus on a specific topic, plan or strategy document. They may include guest speakers, general discussion, or more targeted tasks for participants such as visioning activities, or prioritising possible elements of a plan. They are usually smaller than public meetings and may be more process focused, having a more participatory dynamic. The diversity of face-to-face engagement activities used by some councils is revealed a statement by the City of Sydney from their website: 'We currently host about 50 public conversations a year, from City Talks to business forums, community meetings and public rallies.[51]

Onsite visits are another type of workshop often used for planning issues or for proposed infrastructure. They combine elements of displays and briefing sessions. For example, a consultation about constructing a war memorial conducted by Campbelltown City Council (Popping 2008) included a community open day with a guided walk of the proposed site, and with staff and elected members on-site to answer questions, followed by a barbeque. It also included a mock-up Memorial Garden design with the proposed dimensions, design features and site location presented on-site for public viewing (Popping 2008).

Resident panels

There is a growing interest in long running and creative forms of participation that go beyond single, issue-specific consultations. Well known examples include the Newcastle Voice panel which now has over 2,400 members representing businesses, community organisations and residents, and the Parramatta Residents' Panel (Sharp and Anderson 2010). To be part of the Parramatta Residents' Panel, members are required to live in the Parramatta Local Government Area and are selected to represent the population both demographically (except with respect to age – panel members must over the age of 16) and geographically. Council states that the Residents' Panel does not aim to reach the hard-to-reach/minority groups within the community. Instead, these groups are consulted when required via different processes (Franey and Clark 2005). Panel members can be asked to:

- complete surveys
- attend focus groups
- attend workshop sessions
- attend public meetings
- participate in online discussion forums.

The University of South Australia partnered with two large metropolitan councils, with funding from the Local Government Association of South Australia, to run pilot online citizen panels in three metropolitan councils (Sharp & Anderson). The pilot ran for 18 months and while each participating council aimed to have 300 citizens involved in an ongoing way through the panel, they each recruited between 400 and 700 (ibid p. 44). This pilot was the first in Australia to 'establish online

[51] City of Sydney web page entitled 'Consulting with the community' <http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/2030/thedirections/ConsultingWithTheCommunity.asp> Accessed 3 February 2011.

panels across multiple councils and with the aim of learning and disseminating knowledge about this approach' (ibid p. 34). Each council conducted between five and seven research or consultation surveys with their panel over the course of the 18-month pilot (ibid p. 43).

The research accompanying this pilot suggests that the panels were an effective way to involve residents who did not previously participate. Most of the recruitment for the panel took place through a mail-out to all residents with a rates notice. Over 60% of panel members had never attended a council meeting or been involved in decision making with council (ibid p. 46). Of those who had attended a council meeting previously, most had done so over 12 months before. Feedback from participating panel members also supports the conclusion that online panels can effectively engage a new audience of constituents who have not participated in local government consultations before (ibid p. 46), for example: 'A good way to have a say. I am usually quiet and do not have an opportunity to say what I think in a big group of people'(ibid p. 47).

Resident panels can be used to seek views on a variety of themes and can also be conducted in conjunction with other forms of engagement. Examples of consultation that Parramatta City Council has undertaken using the panel include: a parking meter feasibility consultation, a review of the Residential Development Strategy Housing Survey prior to the survey being sent to all households, a Customer Service Satisfaction Survey, a survey on the 2005–06 Management Plan and the feasibility of a rate rise and a survey on volunteer motivation (Franey & Clark 2005). Many of these were part of multiple engagement approaches, with focus groups, telephone surveys and mail surveys being used in conjunction with the online residents' panel (Franey & Clark 2005). More information on online methods for engagement, particularly social media, is included in Section 4 – Emerging approaches).

Reflections on methods being used

As described above, councils have traditionally sought to engage community members through public meetings, workshops and surveys to enable a wide range of people to have input (Queensland Local Government Community Service Association 2010). These remain some of the methods that are used, but increasingly these approaches, attract fewer people than more targeted approaches which use existing social networks or work with people's connections to specific geographical areas (Queensland Local Government Community Service Association 2010).

Creative approaches to engaging multiple publics, through multiple methods, are part of the current landscape of practice. When extensive community engagement is required many councils try to engage multiple groups in multiple ways, on the same issue, especially, for the development of Community Plans and Community Strategic Plans. See Box 9 – Tumut Shire Community Plan. Reviews of councils' own lists of their most commonly used methods suggest that local governments in Australia mostly use "informing" and "consulting" levels of engagement (see Appendix 3 for information about these terms). Further research about the relative frequency of various approaches is needed to verify this.

Box 9 – Tumut Shire Community Plan

Multiple methods were used to engage people in developing the Community Plan for Tumut Shire in NSW:

- Twenty-five key people were invited to be "community contacts" for their sector or community. A total of 280 people were involved in forums discussing issues for eight different community sectors, such as youth, seniors etc.
- Open community forums were held in Adelong, Batlow, Talbingo and Tumut
- Feedback forms were circulated throughout the shire and at an annual festival
- A web-based feedback form was available for people to provide comments online
- Feedback forums were held in Adelong, Batlow, Talbingo and Tumut.

Source: Queensland Local Government Community Service Association 2010, A Toolkit for Community Planning. Online resource: <http://www.qlgcsa.org.au/community_planning_toolkit/index.html>

3.4 Organisational cultures, councillors and staff

This section briefly examines the role that organisational culture as well as staff and councillors play in how community engagement is understood and carried out. The culture of a council influences how and to what degree it engages with the community. This in turn can affect who is engaged, and how engagement relates to decision making. Interviewees pointed to a range of internal factors that impact on the effectiveness of efforts to engage citizens. Some reflected that community engagement within local government has developed as internal to specific projects, rather than being seen as core to governance. Linked to this is the observation that the practice is frequently carried out by those who are young, relatively inexperienced and lacking power within organisations. The question was: 'How do we make it less marginal and project based (i.e. a process which is internal to specific projects) and more central to decision making?' (Interviewee)

One practitioner spoke about the goal of their community engagement work as *embedding collaborative practice into the core of decision making* – their goal is that the most senior staff should be willing, eager and ready to engage with stakeholders.

Status within the organisation may also be reflected by decisions about staffing. If a council has a dedicated community engagement team, this can indicate that community engagement is deeply and centrally embedded in the culture of the organisation. Onkaparinga, Melbourne and Melville councils are three good examples of this. Councils with dedicated community engagement teams appear to be in the minority (noting that to our knowledge no systematic surveying has been carried out on this matter).

One benefit of having dedicated teams or staff is that it demonstrates the organisation's clear commitment to having the expertise required for effective engagement (rather than assuming all staff can design and deliver these processes). Another is that it provides a central location for holding and consolidating knowledge about the organisation's engagement practice and history, as well as a hub from which policy responses and staff capacity building can be coordinated.

For instance, the Community Engagement Unit at Onkaparinga Council in South Australia:

- reviews and updates the Community Engagement Handbook
- trains and mentors staff in the use of the handbook
- participates in any major community engagement projects
- promotes the engagement approach
- researches and implements innovative ways of engagement
- evaluates their approach to ensure on-going improvement

- develops and maintains a stakeholder register and/or resident feedback register (IAP2 2010: p. 68).

At Melville Council (WA), community engagement practices are embedded in the *Community Plan*, and the Community Development team has positioned itself to be a key resource to the council, allowing other staff members to seek them out for advice and help. The Community Development team has also developed strategies for building confidence amongst staff and councillors in undertaking community engagement. Confidence building may be especially important if staff have had previous negative experiences. A few public meeting experiences with a hostile audience may make them less likely to have positive expectations regarding their ability to work effectively with members of the public (McKinney & Harmon 2002, cited in Halvorsen 2006: p. 155-6).

At the City of Melville processes are tested in-house with staff (30% of whom live in the area). This familiarises staff with the value of the engagement project (buy-in) and enables the consultation process to be refined. The specialist staff provide the assurance for other staff that community engagement is important, and reminds them that even if people don't attend events, the opportunity has been given to the community to have input.

City of Melville community engagement staff also explained the benefits of such efforts for councillors, for example how it can inform their decision making. One interviewee felt that if staff and councillors have successful community engagement experiences, it can help counter the attitude that good consultation is 'just more work'.

The City of Melbourne also has dedicated community engagement staff – see Box 10 for more information.

Box 10 – Staffing at City of Melbourne

The Community Engagement (CE) team, comprising three or four people, work with an established engagement framework, drawing on the IAP2 framework. Components include investing in people, and building a language around engagement within the organisation.

Their approach is to build the capacity of staff, rather than just rely on experts. At least 200 members of staff from a cross section of council departments have been through a '101' of community engagement. Some staff have also attended the IAP2 five-day training course. An eight-step process has been developed which is to be applied to the range of council projects so that everyone is approaching engagement the same way. They are trying to move beyond a 'tick and flick' approach, and encourage a more deliberative approach.

The importance of committed CEOs/General Managers and Senior Managers was raised in the interviews. In reflecting on community engagement practice in Western Australia, one interviewee noted that *'where the CEO is right behind community engagement, for example at Melville and Swan Councils, practices are much more advanced'.* Another reflected on the potential for individuals to make a huge difference within organisations, suggesting that the departure of one leader can create the space for a large shift in how the organisation engages with stakeholders. It was suggested that individuals can also become 'locked' into patterns of behaviour with particular stakeholders: 'How do we see people in our business? We can see them as part of the problem or as part of the solution – there is a worldview here' (interviewee).

The issue of the attitudes of elected representatives, and how they can affect the whole organisation's community engagement efforts was raised by interview participants. A change in

elected representatives can bring new ideas and change to these relationships. One interviewee describes a council that had a 'racist' elected representative who couldn't understand the Indigenous community. Over time, relationships can become damaged and trust is weakened between key groups and the organisation: '*A Youth Officer was sent in to engage with indigenous youth and write a report highlighting issues. The notion of engagement has empowered the community'.* They describe changing elected officials at the next election in line with the community's new expectations of more balanced and respectful attitudes to community relationships.

One interviewee stressed the important role of councillors in community engagement and capacity building, but pointed out that elected representatives don't get training in community engagement or in broader democratic processes or the functions of other levels of government: all areas which are important for councillors' connections with the community. The idea that councillors should be educated about how to advocate on behalf of community members, or at least inform community members of how to access / affect decision making by various levels of government, was raised. Councillor-focused training is taking place in some areas of Australia. For example, IAP2, in partnership with Melbourne City Council, have run some councillor-focused training on community engagement, which uses peer-to-peer education techniques. An event focused on 'dealing with outrage' was attended by 50 Victorian mayors and they are now considering how to take this training further. The training was based on Peter Sandman's work (Sandman 2011) on risk communication. It suggests that 'generally organisational leaders end up enraging citizens when they talk to people' (interviewee).

The *Just Communities* project (Artist *et al.* 2010) offers two tools which it believes might promote participation by local government: a Code of Ethics and Conduct for Councillors and Officers Facilitating Community Empowerment; and a Charter of Active Citizenship for Citizens and Citizens' Organisations. The Code of Ethics and Conduct calls for 'value-adding' to the representative leadership role of councillors, who by broadening the range of decision-making processes used, would become champions of people's participatory rights and would promote increased equity and community inclusion and cohesion (Artist *et al.* 2010). The leadership style, they suggest, would require highly developed skills of facilitation, listening and collaboration; partnership and network building; and, tension management and conflict resolution. The proposed Charter of Active Citizenship would complement the Code by indicating a range of ways in which elected and unelected officials could assess their performance and if necessary, make changes to ensure responsiveness to citizens and their organisations (Artist *et al.* 2010).

3.5 Leading practice in community engagement

In any field there is interest in determining leading practice so others can learn from their example. What defines successful community engagement? How do we know what leading practice is? In this field it is generally the informal assessment by peers and the more structured and formalised assessment through awards programs that determines 'leading practice'.

Through this research examples provided by practitioners and policy makers included the following Tasmanian councils noted by LGAT for undertaking innovative and effective engagement:

- Circular Head and Waratah-Wynyard Councils in North West Tasmania which share an on-line forum titled 'Your Say'
- Burnie City Council which supports the *Advance Burnie Forum* initiative[52]

[52] <http://www.advanceburnie.com.au>

- Brighton Council, a low socio-economic area on the fringe of Hobart, which has developed a very good relationship with the community and supported a high profile community group, the *Brighton Alive* community initiative
- Clarence City Council which has excelled in the area of climate change and community engagement, especially in relation to planning decisions
- Latrobe Council which won an award for excellence for a planning exercise, consulting effectively about both the soft and hard infrastructure aspects of the project.

The more structured assessments usually depend on the degree to which the engagement process embodies one or more of the commonly accepted principles of effective community engagement - outlined in Section 2.4. For example the UK Audit Commission, based on an extensive review of local government community engagement strategies, identified the following principles for successful community engagement:

1. Commitment to user focus underpinned by core values such as honesty, inclusiveness, fairness and realism
2. Clarity of purpose (i.e. shared understanding about whether the primary purpose is information provision, consultation, encouraging involvement in decisions, etc.)
3. Understanding your communities: Careful consideration of the best ways of working with diverse communities of place, population and interest
4. Communicating appropriately: Employing a wide and effective range of communication strategies appropriate for diverse audiences
5. Delivering change: Ensuring that the outcomes of engagement strategies have a genuine impact on relevant decisions and outcomes (UK Audit Commission, cited in Fritze, Williamson & Wiseman 2009).

The IAP2 core values awards give information about what leading public participation practitioners judge to be the best practice processes taking place in Australasia. The book *The Best of Practice – Community Engagement in Australasia 2005-2009* contains case studies of twenty-one award winning processes or policy frameworks (IAP2 2010). For the period 2007 to 2011, the winning entries from Australian councils were: [53]

- Brisbane City Council (Qld) – Neighbourhood Planning CityShape Conference, awarded 2006 Robust Public Participation Process, highly commended
- Hinchinbrook Shire Council (Qld) – Our Town Our Future: A revitalisation strategy for Ingham, Qld, awarded 2006 Robust Public Participation Process, highly commended
- City of Onkaparinga (SA) - Community Engagement strategy, awarded 2007 Best Public Participation Policy Framework
- Surf Coast Shire (Vic) – Aireys Inlet Citizens' Jury, awarded 2008 Public Participation Enhanced Decision-making, winner
- Gold Coast City Council (Qld) – Hinze Dam stage 3, awarded 2008 Public Participation Enhanced Decision-making, highly commended
- City of Sydney Council (NSW) – Sustainable Sydney 2030, awarded 2008 Robust Public Participation Process
- City of Gosnells (WA) – Engage Not Enrage; involving young people in the City of Gosnells public participation, awarded 2008 Robust Public Participation Process, highly commended
- City of Maribyrnong (VIC) – the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities Communications Strategy 2008-2010, awarded 2008 Public Participation Policy Framework, winner
- Penrith City Council (NSW) – Neighbourhood Renewal program; an integrated approach to community engagement in Kingswood Park, awarded 2008 Public Participation process – highly commended
- Uralla Shire Council (NSW) – Community Engagement Strategy project, awarded 2009 Public Participation Enhanced Decision-making, highly commended
- Gold Coast City Council (Qld) – Bold Future, awarded 2009 Public Participation for Decision Makers, winner.

[53] Many of these were sponsored (initiated/managed) by councils in partnership with various other organisations, including consultants – see IAP2 2010 for more details.

Other examples of the principles and frameworks that are being used by Australian councils are outlined in Section 2.4.

4. Emerging approaches

A number of new community engagement approaches are emerging in response to the experiences by some that traditional methods are ineffective, and to respond to the growing expectation by more articulate and assertive communities for more active participation in decision-making.

This section thus briefly examines four emerging approaches to community engagement, with includes examples from local government and outlines available guidance material. The four approaches considered are:

- deliberative methods
- 'futures methods'
- Appreciative Inquiry, and
- social media.

Although not yet widespread in their application in local government, these approaches are attracting growing interest. In the case of appreciative inquiry, deliberative methods and future methods, there is a body of practice elsewhere (in public participation theory, organisational development, futures studies) but not within local government. As for social media, while there is a much wider base of experience in this sector, it is a rapidly evolving field and is still in early stages for many councils.

4.1 Deliberative methods

Deliberative democratic processes are techniques for community engagement which are informed by the desire to provide a space where people can deliberate on complex issues in dialogue with other citizens and in the presence of information about issues. They are:

> … techniques that facilitate deliberation about issues and common values rather than just soliciting individualistic position or preference statements … allow for discussion among participants and between participants and officials' (Halvorsen 2006: p. 153).

Carson and Hartz-Karp (2005: p. 122) suggest that deliberation requires 'open dialogue, access to information, respect, space to understand and reframe issues, and movement toward consensus':

> Deliberative democracy forums or processes involve selecting ordinary citizens from the entire population. The selection, while random, needs to balance gender and match age, education and other relevant factors to the distributions revealed by census statistics. This microcosm is often called a mini-public (New Democracy 2009).

Deliberative processes are often designed to address the 'collaborate' or 'empower' goals in the IAP2 spectrum (IAP2 2004) – that is, there is an expectation that citizen views will directly inform policy (see Appendix 3). In other cases, they are held to 'consult' or 'involve' where there is only a commitment to hearing and considering views. Some features of deliberative processes that may differ from other methods of engagement include:

- The chance to *reflect on and reconsider their views* in light of what they hear in conversation with other people (Gunderson 1995). This is different for example from a poll, where individuals are asked their opinions without the opportunity to speak with others. It relates to the processes

of 'judgment and preference formation and transformation within informed, respectful, and competent dialogue'.

- A space that fosters *respectful dialogue* between participants rather than forceful or aggressive communication. This can be achieved even when people disagree (different for example from very adversarial position-based public meetings). Skilled facilitators and clear ground rules or agreements are often used to ensure that all participants are heard and are treated as equals. Kleinman *et al.* (2007) and Carson (2005) emphasise the importance of the facilitator or moderator during deliberative forums.

- Consensus: Many techniques aim for consensus as part of the process, asking 'what decision can the whole group *live with*'? In this way it seeks commonality, and asks people to consider being flexible about aspects of the decision which don't matter as much to them as others.

- Access to information: This is in recognition that many social and environmental policy issues are complex, and participants will need balanced information from 'experts' with the opportunity to ask them questions and get additional information if they need it.

- Learning: Deliberative processes potentially offer learning and capacity building benefits – both on the issue at hand, but also in facilitation or dialogue, and potentially in the capacity of citizens to engage with political systems beyond the event itself. This is enhanced by information about decision making and policy processes, which is often a key component of deliberative processes.

- Inclusion, a critical element of deliberation, as a variety of perspectives, backgrounds and levels of influence enrich the discussion and validate the outcomes (NCDD 2009). Inclusion is often achieved through random selection of participants, with a focus on recruiting a demographically diverse group of citizens or having a broad range of views represented.

What are the options/different approaches to being more deliberative?

Specific methods that people consider 'deliberative' include citizens' juries, consensus conferences, planning cells, deliberative polling and deliberative forums. For example, a citizens' parliament involves a large group of randomly selected citizens (matching the demographics of the area they represent) coming together to listen, learn, reflect upon and discuss an issue of public importance (New Democracy 2009). Through this transparent process of deliberation, they produce recommendations for those in leadership that reflect the considered views of the broader community (New Democracy 2009). There is also current research taking place about how to make existing forms of discussion and decision making (e.g. advisory committees) more deliberative (see Hendricks *et al.* 2011).

Use of deliberative processes by local government

The use of deliberative democratic processes in Australia is new compared to their history in the United States and Europe (Carson 2007: p. 1). A 2006 inventory of Australian deliberative democratic processes (DDPs) from 1977 to 2006 documented seventy-eight events. Only three of these took place before the early 1990s. Almost 40% were convened under the direction of a single minister in Western Australia between 2001 and 2006 (see Gregory, Hartz-Karp & Watson 2008). Almost half of the DDPs were designed, coordinated and facilitated by one person (Carson 2007). The most popular type of deliberative democratic process, as revealed by this review, was the citizens' jury (37% of those documented) (Carson 2007: p. 3).

In the inventory Australian DDPs scored well on representativeness and deliberativeness but low on influence (Carson 2007: p. 6). Evidence from some deliberations, however, shows a meaningful

policy impact. Since this inventory, the New South Wales Nature Conservation Council (NCCNSW) developed a project to work with a series of local governments to hold climate change-focused citizen's juries. These processes were designed to provide input to councils' climate change policies and feed into a state-wide summit (NCCNSW 2010; NCCNSW 2009). Some of the local processes undertaken as part of these processes have seen citizen recommendations adopted by local councils in full (NCCNSW 2010).[54]

The Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment used a similar model to assist a number of rural councils to hold citizens' juries on climate change. This process involved capacity building for council staff. The ACT Government also initiated a citizens' jury process on climate change in 2006 (Riedy *et al.* 2006). Ballina Shire Council was a participant (Acret & McNamara 2010) in the NSWNCC project and had staff attend training. Then, in mid-2010 it held a citizens' jury to gauge how the community believed the council should respond to the risks posed by climate change. See Box 11 for more details on their approach.

A range of guide materials have been written about using deliberative processes in the Australian context including Carson (2009a), Carson (2004), Carson (2003a) and Carson (2003b).

Box 11 – Example: Ballina Shire using deliberative democracy to inform climate change policy

'Whilst we wanted the outcomes that the deliberative democracy (DD) process would deliver, we also wanted to raise awareness about Council's consideration of climate change issues and increase our positive profile around dealing with complex issues. Therefore we took a multifaceted approach and used two connected DD processes with associated publicity. These being a conversation café (World Café) and citizens' forum (Citizens' Jury).'(p.2)

'We randomly recruited for participants, using a market research firm to ring 2000 homes across our shire (we have a population of just over 40 000). In the days leading up to this recruitment, we ran advertising in local papers and on local radio and did media releases as well.'(p.2)

The World Café event was held and over 140 people actually attended on a wet and cold Ballina night. … People were really keen to discuss the issue and indeed this was evident in the evaluations – they were grateful for a place to talk about their concerns, whatever those concerns might be. Over about two-and-a-half hours, people ate, drank, talked and put their thoughts on paper. There was a high degree of respect for the opinions of others and this was a real focal point of the World Café. (p.3)

'We [then] used a traditional deliberative democracy approach, known as the Citizens' Jury, structured into three separate components. These included using an introductory evening to introduce the concept and provide some exposure to other participants and councillors; a full day using expert speakers to provide background, information and stimulate thought; and a final day of deliberation.' (p.4)

'… for staff, the process has provided a strong degree of transparency and probity to a process that must often seem quite arbitrary to those outside of the Council's own staff involved in writing strategies and policy. Involving a reasonably large section of the community by contacting them in the first place will hopefully provide some degree of confidence in the outcomes that are reached. (p.4)
Source: Acret, S. and McNamara, S. (2010) 'Climate Change – What does your community really think?' Ballina Shire Council. Presentation to the 2010 Coastal Conference. 10-12 November 2010, Batemans Bay. <http://www.coastalconference.com/2010/papers2010/Suzanne%20Acret%20full%20paper.pdf>

In a different local government area, one interviewee spoke of a local government-run 'world cafe

[54] Personal communication [8, June 2010] from Dr Kath Fisher, Southern Cross University, an organiser and facilitator in the New South Wales project.

process'.[55] This focused on a compliance issue for commercial businesses in the area and the process was run by the Community Services Director and involved the chamber of commerce, police and various other arms of council including rangers. Councillors were also involved as participants. It was suggested that one of the advantages of the World Café format is that it allows councillors to participate and 'have normal opinions' – that is, to name and 'own' their opinions. The results of the café were then taken back to councillors to be considered. 'It went a long way towards improving the ambivalence, dealing with resentment – a gesture by council towards community issues' the interviewee noted.

Surf Shire Council is an individual Victorian council that has recently won awards for a deliberative process (IAP2 2010). A Melbourne-based interviewee discussed the positive results arising from citizens' juries that she'd been involved in, where participants had said it was a privilege to be involved. For more information on resources see Section 5.

4.2 Futures methods

This section briefly looks at futures studies and futures methods in the context of the strategic planning functions of councils and communities. Futures studies involve putting forward possible, probable and preferred futures. They are interdisciplinary and the focus is on methods to conduct futures studies as much as it is on the issues being studied. This is similar to 'visioning' exercises sometimes used in local government to determine the future of a municipality over a timeframe. Although forecasts may be used, practitioners who use futures methods prefer to develop scenarios – a range of alternative futures (Roney 2010). These methods are thought to deliver a range of benefits to participants, not least of which is empowerment in relation to the future:

> Community visioning creates the opportunity for developing 'a stronger say' and returns the decision-making power back to the community. It gives communities the knowledge of 'how to question the future' and – more importantly – the knowledge and confidence to question futures being proposed.[56]

The Futures Academy provides an overview of the following futures methods and techniques such as Environmental Scanning; Scenario planning; Delphi Method; Cross-Impact Analysis; Trend Analysis; Simulation and Modelling; Visioning; Futures Workshops; Causal Layered Analysis (CLA); Back-view mirror analysis; Futures Biographies; Monitoring; Content Analysis; Back casting; Relevance Tree; Morphological Analysis; Futures Wheel.[57]

Applied to local government in Australia

Australian local governments are being required to consult much more with their communities about desired futures. Section 2 of this paper about legislative requirements outlined the trend towards councils being required to do long-term strategic planning for a whole local government area. This type of planning is based on the community's visions for the future over a timeframe of ten years or longer. The Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework requirements of the NSW Local Government Act were outlined by way of example.

Councils in Australia are showing increasing interest in futures studies and futures methods. Councils that have pioneered the use of some of the futures methods referenced above include the Gold

[55] A World Café is a type of deliberative democratic process in which a large group assembles around a number of small tables, and discusses one element of the broader issue at each table. All participants except one scribe per table move from table to table throughout the night, allowing time for reflection, conversation and a diversity of views to be expressed in a respectful non-oppositional way.
[56] IAP2 2010: p. 141 (Gold Coast City Council)
[57] <http://www.thefuturesacademy.ie/futures/methods>

Coast City Council and Maroochy Shire Council in Queensland. The experience of the Gold Coast City Council was written up as a case study by IAP2 and is summarised below in Box 12.

Box 12 – Example: Gold Coast City Council Bold Future Project

This project was a foresight initiative focused on hearing the community's preferred futures, with a focus on 2047 and beyond. Council appointed a Bold Future Advisory Committee in 2007, and ran a seven month community consultation through to May 2008, with city forums, surveying and web inputs involving 11,000 community responses (IAP2 2010).

Twenty-eight community reference groups were conducted around the Gold Coast, and twenty-five city and staff forums were held. Forums were conducted with representatives from diverse sectors of the community including business groups, individuals, state government managers, staff and students of Bond University, Griffith University and Gold Coast TAFE, local schools, and the Gold Coast City Council Junior Youth Council. Each forum included expert presentations and guided visualisations to focus participants on their preferred futures for 2047.
City Forums and Surveys asked participants about:

- Current preferences across the Gold Coast
- Current preferences for the particular theme under examination (our environmental future, our economic future etc.)
- Preferred futures for the theme being explored
- Why those futures were preferred
- Constraints to achieving those futures
- Opportunities to overcome constraints.

(Description taken from longer case study contained in IAP2 2010)

Between 2002 and 2005, Maroochy Shire Council in Queensland completed an applied futures studies-based project in community futures called *Maroochy 2025* (Gould 2009). According to a case study documenting this initiative the project was unique for three key reasons. Firstly, it was the first long-term community visioning project undertaken by a local government in Queensland. Secondly, the Maroochy 2025 project used an anticipatory action learning framework to guide the processes and methods. Finally, the project incorporated a diverse and comprehensive use of applied futures studies on a large scale and in real-world contexts.

In both these cases, experienced futurists were used to facilitate the work.

> National conversations about alternative futures – followed by completion of agreed projects – would do much to reactivate voter interest in local democracy, and if the process includes continuing engagement in the outcomes it could re-energise a jaded electorate. But clearly these can be no ordinary fireside chats: the facilitation must be skilled and wise and sure.[58]

4.3 Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an approach to introducing change that is used for organisational planning purposes, as well as community-scale visioning and planning. It focuses on the positive, and is the 'cooperative search for the best in people, their organisations, and the world around them' (Appreciative Inquiry Network 2011). It is also described as an action learning approach which aims to create a space for dialogue that is 'conducive to self-directed experimentation in social innovation' (Cooperrider and Srivastva 2000):

[58] Martin, J.M, Statisticians: New Champions For the Future, *Journal of Future Studies*, Vol 15, No 2, December 2010.

> The appreciative mode awakens the desire to create and discover new social possibilities that can enrich our existence and give it meaning" (Cooperrider and Srivastva 2000)[59]

AI seeks to identify and encourage what the organisation is doing right – providing a frame for creating an imagined future that builds on and expands the joyful and life-giving aspects of the organisation (Watkins & Cooperrider 2000, cited in Appreciative Inquiry Network 2011).

The approach has been used for international development projects (Ole Sena & Booy n.d., Elliot 1999), national scale visioning processes (Browne 2003), city scale visioning processes,[60] in sports coaching (Gordon 2008), and in community development (Elliot 1999).
The application of AI is described in four steps – the 4D model: Discover the best of what is; Dream what might be; Design what should be; create a Destiny based on what will be.[61]

AI applied to local government in Australia

Australian councils that have documented their use of AI include Blue Mountains Council in NSW and Onkaparinga City Council in South Australia. The example below from Onkaparinga City Council demonstrates the potential benefits of this approach for building trust with communities (Box 13).

Box 13 – A Strength-based approach to community development at Onkaparinga City Council

"Appreciative Inquiry is fully participatory and it focuses on the conditions and environments in which people live. It works from the strengths and resources which exist within people and their communities. It purposefully uses these strengths as the resources for creating positive changes." (p.35)

"The workshops with these communities discovered, in turn, strengths and resources within these communities and their dreams and aspirations. It was also a powerful way of strengthening community and agency relationships and support networks ... " (p.34)

Description of community development process used in the 'Community Connections Project' by City of Onkaparinga, described in: Tesoriero, F., Boyle, F., Enright, L. (2010) *Using Strengths-Based Ways to Build Community and Contribute to Social Inclusion. New* Community Quarterly Summer 2010 http://www.newcq.org/database/sites/default/files/ncq-84-strengths.pdf

As with the other approaches outlined in this section it may be that further work is needed to determine if councils are interested in this approach and in guidance and training in its use.

4.4 Social media and online engagement

Until recently the internet was used primarily in the context of a one-way conversation, a broadcast of information. The movement toward Web 2.0 principles has changed the way the internet is used allowing users to create and spread content.[62] Social media refers to types of online tools that are designed to facilitate connections between people, as well as communication and engagement strategies.

[59] Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was developed at Case Western Reserve University in the US in the early 1990s, primarily as a methodology to help business and government organisations improve their effectiveness or competitive advantage (Elliot 1999). AI is used in place of the traditional problem solving approach which tries to identify what is wrong and develop solutions to fix the problems. More information and underlying principles can be found via the Appreciative Inquiry Network: <http://www.appreciativeinquiry.net.au>
[60] See the 'Imagine Chicago' website: <http://www.imaginechicago.org/>
[61] LGSA website: <http://www.lga.sa.gov.au/site/page.cfm?u=2429>.
[62] <http://www.egov.vic.gov.au/government-2-0/so-what-is-government-2-0.html>

Information and communication technologies are being used around the world to engage people in new ways. For example the United Kingdom's People's Panel brought together some 5,000 citizens to provide feedback on government service delivery initiatives (Cabinet Office 1999 cited Brown & Keast 2003). Other such initiatives include UK online, e-Scotland and Winona Democracy Online (Brown & Keast 2003).
The Australian Federal Government site includes a guide on social media titled 'Social Media 101: A beginner's guide for Finance employees' which explains the basics: What is social media? What does it have to do with social networking? What does this look like? Why should I care? A glossary of terms is included.[63] Governments at all levels are encouraged to maximise the use of social media tools to help achieve community engagement objectives. A useful resource for a local government audience is an online presentation from a 2010 conference in New Zealand on the use of a wide range of social media tools, in particular Twitter and Facebook.[64]

Use of social media by Australian local government

Communication with communities through the use of the internet is not new for local government. Most, if not all, Australian councils are using websites to provide information to their local community. Councils, along with other public and private sector organisations, are increasingly using social media tools to communicate with a greater diversity of people about a broader range of issues.

Councils whose successful use of social media has been well publicised include Brisbane City Council who, along the with Queensland Police, kept people informed of developments during the January 2011 floods via Twitter feeds and a Facebook page.[65] Melville Council in WA reports that 85% of residents have internet access, so 'Council knows they need to make better use of on-line engagement tools'. They are also looking at a range of online engagement processes, including the use of companies that specialise in these areas.

To evaluate the extent of the use of social media tools (particularly Facebook and Twitter) by Australian councils in all states, research is being carried out by the University of Canberra on behalf of ACELG.[66] While this research is still in progress, the data indicates a wide range of councils, including some small rural councils, are setting up Facebook pages and Twitter accounts. The impact appears to variable from council to council. Following the completion of the data gathering exercise, an analysis will be undertaken by ACELG on the trends in social media use, and also the success factors.

Much of the available literature on social media, including case studies, tends to focus on the opportunities provided by online tools to better communicate with, and better understand an organisation's customers. An important consideration for this paper is assessing how effective councils are in using social media tools to engage citizens in a more deliberative way.

Use of social media for engagement

There is a substantial body of material around the potential of the internet generally, and social media in particular, to further the aims of authentic public engagement. In particular it is claimed that social media in its various forms can give a greater voice to people who are less able, or less

[63] <http://gov2.net.au>
[64] <http://www.egov.vic.gov.au/website-practice/web-2-0/social-networks-and-social-media-in-government/local-government-guide-to-social-media.html>
[65] A well known example from the UK is 'FixMyStreet' <http://www.fixmystreet.com/> a website which allows residents to report problems with local roads and infrastructure and receive feedback from the relevant local government authority that governs their area. One benefit of this approach is that it does not rely on community members knowing 'who to contact' in council, or even to which council to report their issue.
[66] ACELG Innovation and Best Practice Program, <http://www.acelg.org.au>

inclined, to engage with government.

A growing number of councils are using online consultation processes. For example, Circular Head Council in Tasmania has created a dedicated community consultation site, '*Your say Circular Head*' , so that "*... you, your friends, neighbours and colleagues can help shape future directions, comment on key issues that affect us all and guide Circular Head Council in making important decisions*".[67] It is noted that, just as with traditional consultation processes, these processes don't necessarily indicate the level of influence on local decision making.

The UK Centre for Advances in Public Engagement (CAPE) in the paper *Promising Practices in Online Engagement* examines a range of online engagement practices in order to assess the rhetoric arising from the "digital democracy" movement (Bittle *et al.* 2009). The authors argue that it is still unclear how the internet might help build capacity and momentum for 'inclusive, collaborative and boundary-crossing problem solving at all levels'. Bittle *et al.* provide examples of effective use of the internet for public engagement, but conclude that, on the whole, successful sites have one thing in common: they are all gatherings of like-minded people. A number of principles are outlined:

- allow citizens to set priorities
- use citizens as fact finders
- generate bi-partisan buy-in
- merge online and face-to-face engagement
- help experts and citizens to collaborate
- foster local problem solving.

The authors also highlight key considerations for developing a successful online engagement strategy. They suggest taking a close look at the different segments of the intended audience and then, just as in any other project, identifying the objectives and goals, and putting together an overall plan. They conclude that, in relation to online tools, the times of 'let's-build-it-and-they-will-come' are over, and that increasing the audience size requires a lot of time and commitment from organisers and the right incentives to keep participants engaged.

Matt Leighninger (Leighninger 2011) from the US Deliberative Democracy Consortium (DDC) notes that before selecting the best way to communicate with citizens, it is important to understand where they 'are' online (or what internet sites they 'occupy' or 'go to'), how they prefer to be engaged and what they expect from government . According to Leighninger, the DCC focuses on a range of scenarios, identifying the citizens' and organisations' needs in each, and suggesting tactics from each situation:

> You want to know the immediate citizen reaction to a particular, well-known issue or decision' versus 'You need new ideas, and more information, from citizens to help make government more effective and/or efficient (Leighninger 2011).

There are a number of 'tactics suggested by DCC, each illustrated with case studies from around the world and grouped in themes: collaboration, survey attitudes, and prioritising options.

The term, eDemocracy has been coined to describe the use of emerging information and communication technologies in democratic processes. The Queensland State Government has set out a range of principles to ensure online tools for engagement are positioned firmly within the broader community engagement agenda.[68] These principles are inclusiveness, reaching out, mutual

[67] <http://yoursay.circularhead.tas.gov.au>.
[68] <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/en/explore/education/classroom-activities/eDemocracy>

respect, integrity, affirming diversity, adding value and security and privacy.

Developing a social media policy

While there are different views about the use of social media, there is consensus that councils do need policies and guides to ensure the effective use of these tools, and to minimise the associated risks. Public sector examples include the South Australian Government's social media policy, and the federal Department of Finance and Deregulation guidelines for the department's own staff.[69] Councils are beginning to develop policies for online technologies. For example Mosman Council in NSW has a Twitter Policy.[70]

The Young Foundation in the UK has published a social media framework for councils based on the following principles:

- Listen to social media users and conversations about local issues
- Participate in conversations, building dialogue with citizens through social media
- Transform service redesign, replacing or complimenting existing ways of working (The Young Foundation 2010).

The paper includes practical suggestions and useful resources for getting started, and then for using the tools for dialogue, not just for broadcasting messages.

The Victorian e-Government Resource Centre, while centred around Victorian Government information, has a range of useful resources for any public organisation interested in developing a social media framework.[71] The e-Government vision has four pillars:

- Substantially improving support and services to citizens
- Providing better community engagement and more effective democracy
- Using innovation in finding new opportunities
- Creating a framework for ongoing reform within government.

Keeping up with developments

The use of social media within local government is an emerging and fast growing field, and further research about the practical application of these tools is still required. Two avenues for local government practitioners to contribute to the knowledge in the sector are outlined below.

In NSW, the Local Government Web Network is being supported by the NSW Local Government and Shires Association (LGSA).[72] The network has published a collection of short 'stories' on a range of online engagement topics by members of the network, including local government practitioners.

The Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) has set up a national community of practice around the area of social media and community engagement on its Innovation and Knowledge Exchange Network website (http://www.iken.net.au), and a working paper on the topic is planned for release in early 2012.

[69] A listing of close to two hundred social media policies can be found at <http://socialmediagovernance.com/policies.php>
[70] <http://www.mosman.nsw.gov.au/web/external/twitter>
[71] <http://www.egov.vic.gov.au>.
[72] <http://lgwebnetwork.org>.

5. Support and guidance

This section addresses the question of what support and guidance is available for the sector and councils in Australia by state government departments and state local government associations?

Associations offer a variety of resources, and they vary state to state in their focus and intent. Organisations that specialise in community engagement (including IAP2, the Australian Facilitators Network and the International Association of Facilitators) also offer training and resources, as well as networking benefits for practitioners. Guidebooks have also been produced by various authors locally, and there is a wide range of other international materials available to Australian councils. There is a clear need for support materials and training to be practical and applicable. As one interviewee observed:

> Local government is incredibly pragmatic. We just want to get the job done. If you stray too far into the conceptual and far away from goal oriented, people just glaze over. There is a need to suggest pragmatic solutions.

5.1 Guidance

Guidance materials developed for councils vary in pitch and content. Some are general introductions to the ideas and benefits of engaging communities, some provide detailed checklists to assist with planning and evaluation, some contain resources such as document templates, and many contain information about methods.

A summary of these resources by state, is contained in Box 14 – Community Engagement Guides for Australian Local Government.

Some of these resources are described in the ACELG 'Local Government and Community Engagement Annotated Bibliography' available on the ACELG website. By way of example, three of these are described below.

The Victorian Local Governance Association document 'Let's Talk – a consultation framework' (2007) provides an easy-to-read overview of some of the key philosophical and practical considerations for consultation and engagement. The sections 'why do we talk?' and 'how do we talk?' provide useful context and background reading, and are not solely pitched at council staff members so but may be useful for councillors and community members. A two-page summary describes various techniques including examples of both benefits and pitfalls. It is a useful resource for anyone seeking a succinct introduction to a range of engagement methods.

The Victorian Local Governance Association 'Best Value Victoria, Community Consultation Resource Guide' (2001) contains principles and also a set of checklists to apply at various stages of the consultation cycle. The checklists are brief, clear and practical prompts to consider in planning a consultation activity. The document also describes briefly 'traditional methods', and 'new and innovative methods' including e-consultation, simulations, charrettes, and large group methods. It contains a 'consultation chart', which suggests various consultation methods and their suitability to local government activities.

Box 14 – Community engagement guides for Australian local government

Some key recent resources produced by state government or industry associations about how local government might successfully engage communities are listed below.

QUEENSLAND

- State of Queensland (2010), Community engagement in Queensland Local Government – A guide. Published by the Department of Infrastructure and Planning, December 2010,
- LGAQ (2010), 'Community engagement policy development guide'
- Department of Communities, Queensland Government, (various dates) Community Engagement Guides. http://www.getinvolved.qld.gov.au/engagement/guides/index.html
- Queensland Government Department of Communities (2007) 'Engaging Queenslanders: An introduction to working with culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) communities'

WESTERN AUSTRALIA[73]

- Government of Western Australia, Department of Local Government (2010d), 'Implementing the Principles of Multiculturalism Locally'. Office of Multicultural interests, Department of Local Government.
- WA Department of Indigenous Affairs (2004), 'Engaging with Aboriginal Western Australians'
- WA Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Western Australian Government (2002), 'Consulting Citizens: A Resource Guide'.
- WA Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Western Australian Government (2003), 'Consulting Citizens: Planning for Success'.
- WA Department of the Premier and Cabinet (2005), 'Guidelines for Community Engagement Using Information and Communications Technology (ICT)'. Version: 1.2.
- WA Department of the Premier and Cabinet (2006), 'Consulting Citizens: Working Together: Involving Community and Stakeholders in Decision-Making'.

VICTORIA

- Victorian Local Governance Association (2007), 'Let's Talk – a consultation framework'. April 2007.
- Victorian Local Governance Association (2001), 'Best Value Victoria, Community Consultation Resource Guide'.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

- LGASA (2008), 'Community Engagement Handbook. A Model Framework for leading practice in Local Government in South Australia'. Local Government Association of South Australia.

In Queensland, the Department of Communities has created a series of Community Engagement Guides under the banner 'Engaging Queenslanders' for community engagement practitioners. The currently available guides are:

- an introduction to community engagement
- community engagement methods and techniques
- community engagement in the business of government
- engaging people with disabilities
- evaluating community engagement
- working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) communities
- working with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities
- an information kit for CALD communities.

[73] Note: WA does not currently have any local government specific guidance material so other items are listed instead.

The 'community engagement policy development guide' (LGAQ 2010) has been created specifically for a local government audience to enhance the capacity of local government to develop a policy outlining the purpose, intent and processes of community engagement. This guide is not intended to be a strategy for community engagement, but to inform council's community engagement policy development and implementation processes.

The South Australian LGA community engagement handbook *A Model Framework for Leading Practice in Local Government in South Australia* is a guide that focuses on getting the basics right for any kind of engagement. It emphasises good planning rather than novel techniques or process methodologies. It outlines five distinct phases of community engagement: planing, strategy development, implementation, feedback and reporting, and final evaluation. It also outlines a number of steps to be carried out within each phase. It contains hypothetical case studies to illustrate each phase and key step. The handbook also contains a number of useful templates, including a stakeholder list template, a matrix score sheet template, a community engagement evaluation template, a strategy template, an action plan template and a community engagement feedback report template (LGA 2008).

According to one interviewee there 'hasn't been much guidance for WA councils', but the Department of Local Government and Regional Development is now preparing materials in anticipation of the impending reforms to local government legislation which will require integrated planning and reporting (similar to NSW). The Western Australia Local Government Association (WALGA) is also looking at developing a 'Community Engagement Guide for Local Government'. The WA Department of Indigenous Affairs and the Department of the Premier and Cabinet have both developed resources on various aspects of community engagement that councils can use (WA Dept. of Indigenous Affairs 2004; WA Dept. of the Premier and Cabinet 2002, 2003, 2005, 2006).

The Northern Territory Department of Housing, Local Government and Regional Services is responsible for developing and regulating local government in the Northern Territory, and is attempting to provide accessible, plain English information to newly formed councils. At this stage, community engagement guidance material has not been provided by the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory (LGANT).

As well as general community engagement guidance materials made specifically for a local government audience, there are guides for engaging communities on specific issues such as climate change (Fritze, Williamson & Wiseman 2009). There are also guides on engaging specific groups within the community, including 'hard to reach' groups (Brackertz & Meredyth 2008). Guides for engaging youth have also been developed by the New Zealand Ministry of Youth Development 2003 and by the United Nations.[74,75]

Other guidance include case studies and tools such as the following three web-based sources which link to a large number of other frequently updated resources:

- **Active Democracy** – University of Western Sydney Professor Lyn Carson's website provides links to many community engagement resources, reviews and some case studies. It also has links to information on specific engagement methods – http://www.activedemocracy.net.
- **National Coalition of Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD)** – This US-based organisation's members include more than 1,400 organisations and professionals from 40 countries (NCDD 2011). Its website offers free access to 'thousands of resources and best practices'. A useful

[74] <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/ch10.pdf>
[75] <http://www.cscr.murdoch.edu.au/_docs/involvingchildren.pdf>.

starter page is the 'best of the best resources' recommended books, guides and tools about dialogue, deliberation and public engagement <http://ncdd.org/rc/best-of-the-best-resources>.

- **Participedia –** This relatively new international wiki-based site allows participation from researchers and practitioners around the world: '*Participedia collects narratives and data about any kind of process or organization that has democratic potentials. A process is democratic when it functions to include, empower, or give voice to those affected by collective decisions in making those decisions*' (Participedia 2010). The website aims to eventually have articles on a range of participatory methods, such as deliberative polling, citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting, as well as articles about the organisations involved with participatory governance <http://www.participedia.net/wiki/Special:BrowseData/Methods>.

5.2 Case studies

Case studies are a useful vehicle for exchanging information about practice and are included in most of the guides referenced above. However, they are not generally presented in a way that allows for comparisons across different types of engagement practice. The IAP2 Best Practice Awards is an exception, with case studies for winners collated in a handbook (IAP2 2010). The authors acknowledge that award entries do not always give the most balanced picture of practice, and so they include peer reviewed case studies that discuss pitfalls and lessons learnt from failed efforts.

As mentioned above, *Participedia* is a recently developed international resource open to Australian councils. It encourages people to post community engagement examples that feature characteristics of a more deliberative practice approach as well as those that don't. It also discusses what is meant by participation, and asks that people post examples where processes may have been labelled as participatory but were not (for example because of political pressure or certain agencies co-opting the process), as well as those which may not have originally had goals of participation but ended up having some participatory features.

The site is administered from North America by academics and postgraduate students. At the time the present report was published, there were four Australian case studies on the site, and many more from Asia, Europe and North and South America.

5.3 Training and skills development

This section highlights some approaches to training that are available to local government, and discusses some trends in what is being offered.[76] For instance, IAP2 runs practitioner-focused training and networking events across the country which involve guest speakers presenting on a particular process or a method. They also hold leadership breakfasts, focused on decision makers and elected officials using peer-to-peer learning. Two hundred people attended the recent Melbourne event of this kind. IAP2 is also organising some pilot short courses, (e.g. course for water professionals) to assist with specific working environments and community engagement needs. This helps to create shared understanding across sectors, and to counter a siloed approach in organisations or industries.

The certificate course run by IAP2 is an internationally recognised qualification in public participation. In local government there are now over one thousand people who've been through the certificate course, but interviewees suggest that they may not get the institutional backing for implementing what they've learnt.

[76] ACELG is currently reviewing training offered to local government across a wide range of topics, and is assessing learning needs in the sector. See Learning in Local Government – A National Survey <http://www.acelg.org.au/program-details.php?pid=12>

IAP2 has also developed a new course in 'dealing with outrage' – 50 Victorian mayors attended such a course and IAP2 is now seeing how this can be extended. The course is based on Peter Sandman's work (Sandman 2011) in the US on risk communication which suggests that generally organisational leaders end up enraging citizens when they talk to them.

Local government associations also provide training. Initiatives of the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) are provided here as an example of the role of associations in supporting local government learning needs around engagement. LGAQ engaged IAP2 to start training local government staff in various aspects of community engagement planning and practice. Since then, staff in Queensland has done a three-hour session or other training. This includes around 40–50 who have done the IAP2 certificate training. LGAQ now has in-house trainers and is a registered training organisation. They also seek to embed elements of IAP2 within other training such as the Diploma of Business Administration (which includes a half day on community engagement), and the 'Emu' (Elected Member Update) training each year, in which they include content for councillors on participation.

In addition, some associations go to councils and help with projects as a way to build skills. A representative of LGAQ described it as 'leaving footprints' within the organisation they have worked with.

Training within individual councils also takes place, but data about the nature and extent of in-house training appears limited. Commitments are made in various policies about providing training – for example, Surf Coast Shire Council's *Community Engagement Policy* includes a commitment to supporting 'all staff to continue to gain confidence and capacity to engage effectively with communities' (Surf Coast Shire 2010: p. 3).

Overall there seems to be a trend towards more staff being involved in training, more in-depth training, a whole-of-organisation focus in training, and including leaders and elected representatives in training including through embedding principles of community engagement into leadership or other training.

5.4 Research into current practice

In the absence of any systematic work on what's being done by practitioners and organisations, IAP2 identified a need to assess long-term trends and to provide spaces where people can talk about public participation in a *bigger picture* context, not just a focus on methods. As a result, IAP2 held five summits as part of a 'State of the Practice' review project. It will do the same in two to three years' time.

IAP2 plan to do some quantitative research on 'what is happening, how much is happening?' It hopes to use this work to help shape the research agenda, and also to inform the practice of all organisations and sectors that are doing community engagement.

The Centre for Citizenship and Public Policy at the University of Western Sydney ran an international deliberation forum in early 2011 which has resulted in seed funding being allocated to several partnership projects in deliberative democracy. These grants require researchers to pair with practitioners, and some have a local government focus.

The University of Canberra (an ACELG partner) is undertaking research that is exploring the opportunities and challenges of greater grassroots community engagement with water reform focusing on Murray Darling Basin communities. The research will focus on four key questions:

1. How do communities perceive their current role in the process of water reform?
2. How can communities and their representative organisations best be engaged in water reform?
3. What capacity constraints exist to greater community engagement in water reform?
4. How can they be built?

5.5 Networks

Existing professional networks provide a valuable way for local government practitioners to learn from the experiences of others and to exchange information about what is working in practice. The following are some of the networks identified by the practitioners interviewed:

- The Australasian Facilitators Network[77] is a self-organising community of practitioners that operates through broadcast emails, as well as annual conferences. Participants in the network are based in Australia, New Zealand, South-East Asia and the Pacific. There are no membership fees and the level of participation is optional.
- The International Association of Facilitators[78] offers fee-based membership, has a range of resources for sale, provides information about events, and the opportunity to have skills certified through their 'IAF Certified™ Professional Facilitator' program.
- Facilitation-focused networks offer peer support and information about process design and delivery, and appear to include members with a wide range of backgrounds and work contexts (including staff from government who are responsible for engaging communities). They tend to focus less on the governance aspects of decision making and more on the craft and practitioner skills of delivering group participant processes.
- As mentioned elsewhere IAP2 is another member-based organisation. It focuses on the philosophy and practice of public participation in the context of decision making. It is international and has an Australasian chapter. It provides training, networking and conferences to members.
- The WA Local Government Managers Association (LGMA) hosts a 'Community Development Network'. One interviewee said this network was very supportive of community engagement.

One interviewee suggested that in Western Australia, the mining industry has been more of a leader in the engagement work than councils, posing the question of how councils can benefit from this expertise. Networks and connections with organisations other than councils may be necessary to utilise expertise and local knowledge.

[77] <http://www.facilitators.net.au/>
[78] <http://www.iaf-world.org/IAFWorldwide/Oceania/Oceania_Page2.aspx>.

6. Issues and challenges

The following section outlines a range of themes drawn from the literature review and research interviews that warrant further discussion. They reflect issues and challenges for councils in seeking to improve community engagement practice.

6.1 Fostering engagement and participation within councils

Creating a supportive organisational culture.
This involves adequate resourcing, staffing, and policies and a positive attitude among councillors (Brackertz & Meredyth 2008: p. 34). One interviewee described their work in community engagement as being about building capacity, supporting organisational change, and encouraging an openness and willingness to do things differently. 'Without internal readiness it's just lip service – it might be well intentioned lip service but it's still lip service'. The role of elected members was also highlighted as an important factor:

> 'The 2016 batch [of councillors] will be a totally different kettle of fish, as younger people get involved, with different ideas about engagement, and different relationships with communities. It just takes time for this to become "this is how we do business"'(interviewee).

Interviewees spoke again and again of the importance of a supportive organisational culture. One mentioned the idea of a 'fortress council' which sees the community as ratepayers, as people the council needs to be wary and defensive of. This type of organisation is very hierarchical and sees a strong division between policy staff and councillors, and this attitude is reflected in the ways councillors and staff speak about the community: 'The view is that if some people or groups get too powerful, 'council will lose'. Another interviewee suggested that a lot of resources have been invested in customer relations and progress has been made on information provision but the remaining question is, 'how do we invite the community into decision making?'

Staff at the City of Melbourne noted that a key challenge is the shift in mindset that is required to view communities as representing a resource to councils which adds value in decision making. It was also acknowledged that community engagement involves risks for council so parameters often need to be set.

Ensuring legislative requirements are met in a meaningful way.
This report has outlined the strengthened legislative basis for community consultation and engagement. However interviewees from Tasmania and Western Australia felt there was still a tendency for councils to satisfy minimum requirements and not act according to the spirit of the legislation. This view is supported by interviewees who said that, in councils with this attitude, very few people get involved in consultations.

Measuring how policies are translating into practice.
As outlined in this report a growing number of councils have community engagement policies and frameworks. Drawing on interviewee comments about the gaps between policy and practice, it is important for councils to know how their policies are being applied and in what areas improvements are needed. On a national level there could be further exchange of information about what constitutes a model policy and how to use the policy development process to encourage learning within the organisation.

This theme is linked to the broader question of the need for evidence that processes and methods are working and are cost effective. The use of surveys, for example by Warringah Council, is one

approach outlined in this report. It would be useful to further explore how councils are measuring the effectiveness of their approaches to community engagement.

Community engagement needs to be seen as core business and about more than just methods.
Some of those interviewed reflected that 'oodles of stuff is already written about the practice', highlighting that existing guidance materials focuses on skills and tools, practice methods, tools and techniques, and is very practitioner focused. One interviewee commented:

> "this is a weakness – the whole field thinks of itself as a practice, but in fact this is core business, and that we focus on questions like: 'how do we engage online?' or 'how do we run processes with diverse stakeholders?'. While these are important questions, it is also critical to ask how do we make this work for decision makers? how do we help them do their job better? and how do we build organisational capacity to work with stakeholders?"

Some suggested that community engagement practice may historically have been seen as the responsibility of more junior staff, and not as core business. Community engagement needs to be promoted and supported from the top down through the entire organisation at both the elected member and officer levels. Similarly, IAP2 committee members note that new categories in their awards programs focus on evaluation, and also on government official/organisational commitment, rather than just on successful use of engagement methods. They also note that recent training/networking events have focused on bringing together elected representatives or senior staff to help create a culture that supports community engagement and sees it as central to business.

This important shift in thinking is encapsulated in this quote from an interviewee who commented:

> 'There seem to be reasonable foundations for engagement; many local government organisations are creating frameworks and guidelines. Lots of training is available in the practice of participation, and some training for decision makers. There are some legal requirements for agencies to do public participation. There are networks, conferences etc happening. But people are less confident/ satisfied with the reach of decision making. It's patchy between organisations.'

6.2 Reviewing decision making processes

Some interviewees suggested that a greater focus is needed on how participation influences decision making. There is evidence that councils are becoming more interested in making collaborative governance core business, rather than just in running successful, but isolated, engagement processes.

Integrating outcomes of consultation into decision making.
Questions that might assist a council integrate the results of community engagement processes into decision making include:

- How are councils dealing with various data sources to determine priorities? How are 'findings' from engagement being embedded into decision making practices along with other sources of knowledge?
- How are quantitative methods such as surveys, and qualitative methods such as focus groups, interviews and workshop discussions being integrated to determine community priorities?
- Are quantitative methods privileged over qualitative methods because of an interest in large numbers?
- How do moves to more extensive and direct community engagement impact on the roles of elected councillors, and how have representative and direct democracy been combined most effectively in local government?

6.3 Fostering trust through accountability

Being clear about limits to consultation.
Processes which are not truly designed to influence decision making are what Janette Hartz-Karp describes as "DEAD": Decide, Educate, Announce and Defend. It is a 'false model of consultation' which often results in community anger and frustration at the tokenism of the consultation, and ultimately decreases community interest in consultation (Hartz-Karp 2010, cited in The Australian Collaboration: p. 1).

A recurring challenge is a general misunderstanding about consultation. When communities tell government what they want and need, for example, that a bridge or road needs fixing, they expect that it will be addressed. One interviewee commented that 'they [communities] get very frustrated when nothing seems to be done'.

Councils need to publicly acknowledge that when they can't influence a particular issue, or that the decision in question has already been made, or that the budget is constrained. Interviewees note that it is more respectful if the council is 'up-front' about its limits on consultation. It is important to establish the rules of the conversation when matters are heated, and to look at 'what can we agree on'.

Getting back to communities on how their inputs were used.
Halvorsen (2006: p. 154) suggests that when the basis for a decision is well explained, including why specific concerns were not fully addressed, participants are more likely to support the decision and believe that decision makers acted in good faith. However, there is evidence that providing information to communities about how their inputs have affected decision making is still not universally part of public participation practice. For example, the District Council of Mt Barker (SA) observes that:

> Councils do provide media releases and make Council resolutions public, but individual feedback on how Council has responded to submissions or an overall project feedback summary is not usually provided. This can make community members feel that their comments have been ignored. (District Council of Mt Barker 2008: p. 4)

Drawing on these reflections, questions for further discussion include:

- How can councils ensure feedback is provided to the public on how its contributions to particular decisions have been taken into account?
- Is there an opportunity for enhanced learning between councils and with other organisations with expertise and experience in this process?

6.4 Resourcing considerations

Acknowledging resource constraints
It is acknowledged that lack of resources is a barrier for many councils to effective engagement. For remote and rural councils in the NT, for example, financial sustainability is an ongoing challenge, with the bulk of council funding being provided for special purposes (specific projects or services), and limited funds retained for 'core business'. For example, Victoria Daly receives only 10% of its income from rates. Another ACELG study will specifically examine the challenges for rural and remote councils.

Having adequate staff and support systems inside council to do this work.
Interviews with practitioners suggested that engagement is usually seen as external, but that internal engagement is also critical and needs to be resourced:

> it's important to have internal engagement before you go anywhere near stakeholders' (interviewee).

Specifically this might involve having discussions within the organisation about 'what do we want to know?', 'what are we doing well?' and 'who do we need to talk to?' (interviewee).

Another interviewee talked about the historical divide between staff and skills sets:

> 'That focus has been (in the past) very much an engineering focus. You can't blame that on the engineers – they are trained in how to build stuff. They don't have skills in how to ask people what to build, how to build it. When councils do ask people, they rarely bring the engineers into this process as an opportunity to learn'.

At the City of Melbourne, the interviewee advised that while there has been a rapid uptake of community engagement approaches through extensive training and support for staff it is a continual challenge to gain support. Community engagement staff are trying new approaches – for example, using stories and illustrations, and drawing on the personal experiences of staff around government decisions that have affected them.

The role of independent facilitation was raised by one interviewee as an important element of community engagement activities run by councils, stating '... it's important for credibility'. This can be important for deliberative forums. Kleinman *et al.* (2007: p. 160) argue that:

> The quality of facilitation is a crucial factor in the success of any consensus conference. Not only does it create a safe and encouraging environment for participants to share their perspectives and ideas but also good facilitation keeps discussion on target and ensures that all voices have an effect on the final outcome.

This may raise the need for engaging independent facilitators rather than relying on internal staff, depending on their skills and the situation.

Sharing information about likely costs of processes and looking for cost sharing options.
A report by the UK public participation organisation Involve seeks to quantify the costs of different engagement methods. This kind of guidance, perhaps with worked examples from real (perhaps anonymous) councils, may provide practitioners with valuable guidance about resourcing implications of various approaches.

Continuing the wide range of support materials and activities that various institutions make available to councils.
Changing how councils do business takes time, and there is an ongoing need for communicating leading practice and developing core skills. One interviewee when reflecting on the role of LGAQ in supporting councils suggested:

> 'We need to not run out of energy – we need to keep our shoulder to the wheel and keep working; that is the important thing.'

Rethinking how community engagement skills are developed.
The importance of developing training which is 'training by doing', not 'training by telling' was raised as an important direction for the future. The provision by local government and professional associations of mentoring services in community engagement was raised as one model for helping councils to learn by doing. This is already being done by LGAQ.

One interviewee discussed the limitations of training, and highlighted the importance of experience, mentoring, shadowing and support through a real-life engagement process:

> 'Some of this can only be learnt by experience: experience comes by making mistakes!'
> 'We have to move from 'training by listening' to 'training by doing'.

Similarly, the role of on-the-job experience – learning by doing – was highlighted:

> 'Learning by experience is important even when someone has done all the training.'

The effectiveness of engagement activities relates to cultural norms, and the skill and experience of the practitioner. This is an area in which people are less able to learn from a book, and some interviewees suggested that perhaps this has been under-emphasised in guidance materials to date, which instead focus on process design methods. Awareness of these cultural dimensions to engagement was suggested as an element that is not commonly included in training, along with broader interpersonal responsiveness. 'How do we train for that?' asked one interviewee.

Another interviewee described the process where training can develop skills in individual staff members, who are often project managers or team members, but on returning to the organisation they lack support from senior staff or elected members about the approaches they have learned.

The importance of councillor training was also raised by interviewees. Political agendas can present real challenges for maintaining the value and integrity of the engagement process. The City of Melbourne provides training for decision-makers that concentrates on their role as public leaders in a democratic space.

Drawing on the interviewee perspectives outlined above, questions for further discussion include:

- Is there adequate information about the skills and skills gaps in the sector?
- Are certain skills needed that require a different training focus?
- Is there a need for greater mentoring in community engagement activities, especially in new processes or embedding processes into council's core business? This could include a focus on learning by doing, and supporting staff in applying their learning once they return to their organisations.

6.5 A focus on meeting the challenges rural, remote and Indigenous communities

Building on the section of the report that looked at who is being engaged and how, the question of cross-cultural communication was identified by some interviewees alongside the unique issues faced in rural communities.

The importance of culture, history and credibility in 'getting through the door' with communities, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, and particularly with rural communities was identified. Interviewees raised the potential barriers that appearance and dress can pose when trying to establish relationships with new groups, for example wearing revealing clothes where more modest attire is the norm, or suits where more relaxed dress is the norm, can be barriers. In engaging with indigenous communities, the awareness required also included how to liaise with traditional owners at the same time as the broader community.

A representative from LGANT provided advice on some of the challenges for local government in remote communities that must be taken into account in planning and undertaking community engagement. See Box 15 below. The capacity constraints of councils along with low literacy and numeracy rates are major issues. ACELG, with the assistance of Edith Cowan University in WA, is undertaking additional research into the community engagement needs and challenges of rural and remote communities.

Box 15 – Challenges for councils and remote communities in the Northern Territory

- Councils are often the 'providers of last resort', responding to community issues that are beyond council core business because there are no other providers.
- The large distances involved in covering some remote communities is also a challenge (e.g. the NT Barkly Shire, with 323,000 sq km, is much bigger than Tasmania), as is limited internet access. Low literacy and numeracy also impact on engagement efforts.
- Financial sustainability is a challenge, with the bulk of council funding being provided for special purposes and limited funds provided for 'core business', e.g. Victoria Daly receives only 10% of its income from rates.
- Conflicts of interest issues can arise for board members and councillors due to family and clan loyalties, and some groups can be disenfranchised for cultural reasons.
- Priorities for councils include increasing the percentage of Indigenous employees, and providing a career path for employees to move into more senior roles.
- After significant restructures, governance and operational arrangements for the shires and boards are still being bedded down, and training for council staff is still being undertaken.
- In some areas, for example Nhulunbuy, the mining company provides all the core council functions through the Nhulunbuy Corporation Ltd. This includes infrastructure, roads, rubbish collection etc., and so the dynamics with the community are very different.
- The Commonwealth's Northern Territory Intervention, and the family income management it introduced, remain big issues.

Source: LGANT interviewee

6.6 A focus on civic capacity

Providing information needed for effective participation.
Another dimension of building capacity is ensuring that citizens have access to the information they need to respond effectively to an issue. Deliberative processes in particular focus on providing information from a number of sources, and they allow adequate time to engage with issues (e.g. through background reading or presentations from a variety of expert speakers). How can you ensure that the people involved have an adequate understanding of the issues? As one interviewee commented:

> 'If it's participatory democracy without information, consideration, reflection, it's just a bloody nightmare. There needs to be space for questioning if it's really deliberative.'
>
> 'As a councillor people will batter you with simplistic solutions to complex issues. There can be a huge knowledge differential, e.g. between residents.'

Applying State government material on civics literacy.
In Queensland, the Department of Communities has created resources that explain to the community, and particularly to the multicultural community, what community engagement is and what they can expect. Their website[79] provides a portal to the community which explains how to get involved as a volunteer, or in political processes. It includes a list of various open consultation processes. It also provides information on Australia's system of government. This is a clearly set out page that would be a useful resource for members of the community looking to participate in some way.

They also have a 'kit' which is a series of eight fact sheets on topics such as 'understanding the Australian government system', 'get involved in your local comunities' and 'working with the Queensland Government on public policy'. The kit seeks to help people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities understand the various ways to get involved with the Queensland Government.

These resources could be directly used by councils (e.g. the 'what is community engagement' fact sheet) or adapted for their own uses (for example, creating a 'working with Council X on public policy'). These resources remind us that a basic understanding of the system of government might be needed by people in the community to help them engage with local government processes.

Recognising a role for councillors in building civic capacity.
While the view still holds in many places that councillors are elected to make decisions on behalf of communities, it is changing. Increasing emphasis is being placed on the role of the councillor in providing the community tools, information, and options on how to empower themselves. One of the councillors interviewed suggested that there is a low level of awareness of 'democratic/civic processes' in the community and, in some cases, among the councillors.

Councillors often end up helping members of the community access other levels of government as well, although elected representatives do not necessarily get training in how the systems of government works. It was suggested that there are many councillors who do not understand the system. Elected representatives do not necessarily understand the details of the structure of state governments, but residents frequently raise issues about other levels of government e.g. state roads versus local roads.

[79] <http://www.getinvolved.qld.gov.au>.

Councillors can work quite closely with community groups to explain at what stage they can get involved, a critical role for anyone in local government. One interviewee said of their experience as a councillor: *'You see how lacking people are in even the most basic understanding of how they can affect decisions relating to them'.*

Based on this feedback questions for further discussion include:

- What are the opportunities to provide more training for councillors on civics education and accessibility of council engagement processes from a community perspective?
- How can councillors be better recognised and acknowledged for their part in building civic awareness?

7. Conclusions and future directions

Local government in Australia and internationally has been paying increasing attention to how to involve communities more directly in planning and decision making. While representative democracy is the basis of the legitimacy of local government, there has been a growing recognition that the "conventional" formal methods of representation and consultation (such as public exhibition of plans) have limitations. In particular, they tend not to engage communities in an active or deliberative way, they often do not attract a large number of participants, and those community members who *do* respond to such processes are rarely representative of the diversity of the community.

A growing awareness of these limitations is demonstrated clearly in the development of new engagement methods by councils across the country. It is also encapsulated in legislative changes (such as the requirement for councils in many jurisdictions to develop longer-term strategic plans through community engagement), and in changing relations between state and local governments, seen for instance in the establishment of a joint working party in Western Australia to develop approaches to strategic planning and community engagement as a component of implementing local government reform.

There is an abundance of material available about what methods of community engagement and participation are appropriate and what methods are effective in which circumstances, as well as about the spectrum of possible approaches, ranging from consultation to engagement and empowerment. Guidance material is produced from within and outside local government, and the overlapping spheres of local government associations, state departments of local government, participation-focused professional networks and industry associations. All influence how local government engage with communities.

While the guidance is extensive, there is an emerging sense in the sector, and exemplified here and in supporting research, that the bigger questions of how to embed engagement at the heart of decision making needs to be reflected further in future training and guidance. This may mean a continued focus on training senior council staff and elected representatives in community engagement principles and practice within the context of leadership training, allied with other initiatives as suggested. It may also require greater support for councils to try new approaches with the support of an accompanying organisation – 'learning by doing' rather than by listening.

Organisational culture challenges also remain. Even where legislation requires greater consultation and engagement with communities, some elected councillors are still coming to grips with what this means for their roles in decision making. There are also ongoing questions about how to effectively integrate the information generated through public participation into decision making.

Consultation and public engagement can be a major challenge in councils that are under-resourced and unsure about how to manage such engagement, and perhaps apprehensive of raising expectations by engaging in dialogue with the public. Decisions about how to resource community engagement is a key challenge, and some councils have established dedicated teams to support practice across the organisation.

In parallel to this, in the public participation field, there have been developments in the range of methods being used for engagement, and the number and types of more deliberative decision-making forums being used, as outlined here and in the accompanying document, 'Community Engagement Resources for Local Government'. There is scope for councils to be supported to adopt

more deliberative, appreciative and 'futures' focused approaches to community engagement, especially in the context of an emerging need for long-term strategic community planning.

There could be benefits in a stronger cross-jurisdictional platform for information sharing about community engagement – in order to brief communities on what is available to them, and to help councils access guidance information and information about practice from across Australia. Interviewees suggested a centralised database with links to all existing council community engagement policies (either nationally or by state).

While some data on community engagement practice was identified during this research, a better understanding of what is taking place nationally is needed. Support was expressed for the proposed IAP2 census project and for it to include a local government focus – possibly in partnership with local government organisations. As well as surveys of practice, documenting the experiences of community engagement through online methods, and the impact of community consultation on strategic planning were suggested as other areas where research could inform practice. It was also felt that how to involve a wider range of staff in the conversations about effective community engagement was an important area for future attention.

Invitation to comment
ACELG acknowledges the wealth of knowledge and experience in the local government sector on the topic of engagement and welcomes feedback on the key findings of the report and suggested future directions.

Feedback on this report and further enquiries can be directed to:

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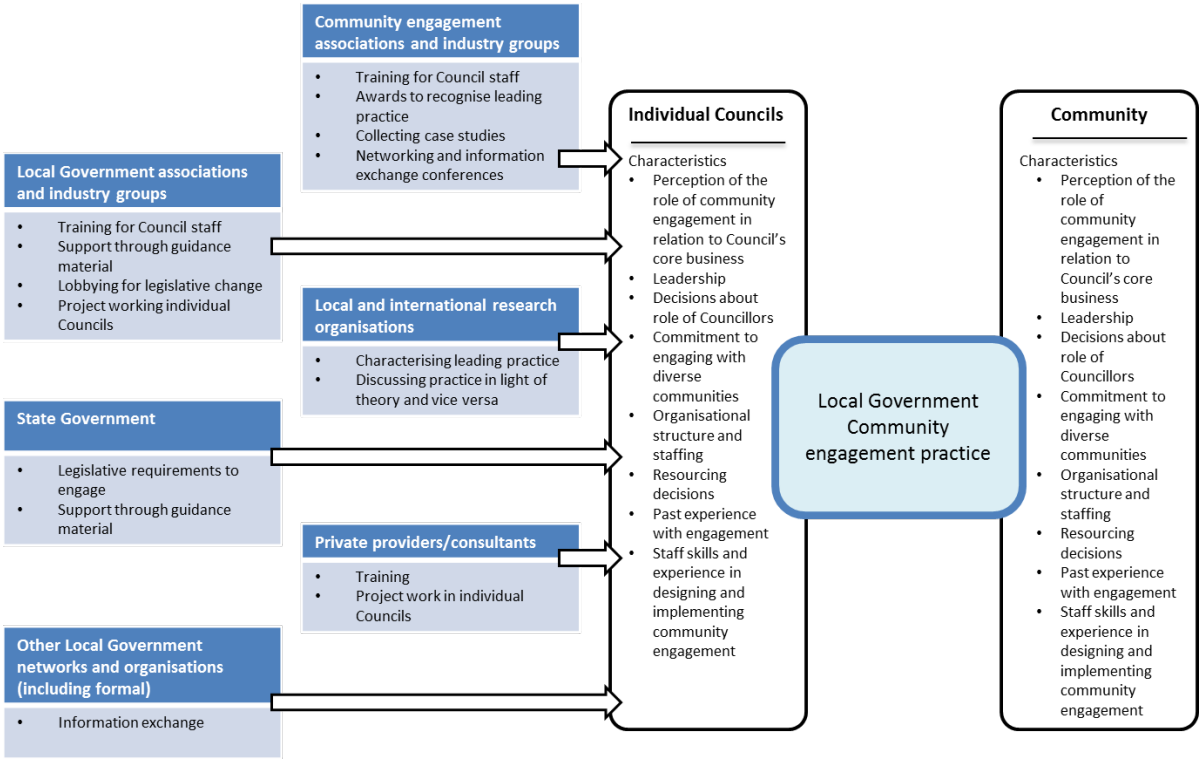
Appendix 1 – The 'landscape' – factors influencing local government community engagement

The following figure outlines the ways in which key bodies influence or interact with councils when approaching community engagement, as well as the characteristics of the community and of the council.



Appendix 2 – The IAP2 spectrum

The International Association of Public Participation proposes a 'spectrum' of engagement approaches, which vary in terms of the degree of participation (IAP2 2004).

➔ Increasing level of public impact ➔				
Inform	**Consult**	**Involve**	**Collaborate**	**Empower**
Goal: to provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	Goal: To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions	Goal: To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood	Goal: To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution	Goal: To place final decision-making in the hands of the public
Promise to the public: we will keep you informed	Promise to the public: We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision	Promise to the public: We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	Promise to the public: We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	Promise to the public: we will implement what you decide.
Example techniques to consider: • Fact sheets • Web sites • Open houses	Example techniques to consider: • Public comment • Focus groups • Surveys • Public meetings	Example techniques to consider: • Workshops • Deliberative polling	Example techniques to consider: • Citizen advisory committees • Consensus building • Participatory decision making	Example techniques to consider: • Citizen juries • Ballots • Delegated decisions

IAP2's Public Participation Spectrum is designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role (IAP2 2011). The Spectrum captures the idea that differing levels of participation are legitimate depending on the goals, time frames, resources and levels of concern in the decision to be made. Most importantly the Spectrum sets out the promise being made to the public at each participation level (IAP2 2011). As you move through the spectrum there is a corresponding increase in expectation for public participation and impact. In simply 'informing' stakeholders there is no expectation of receiving feedback, and there is a low level of public impact. At the other end of the spectrum, 'empowering' stakeholders to make decisions implies an increase in expectations and therefore an increased level of public impact (DSE 2011).

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The Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government Working Paper series aims to review the current 'state of play' in particular policy areas, provide background on policy issues, and identify examples of effective responses to those issues. The series is deliberately grounded in real-world cases, involves field practitioners, and aims to make a valuable contribution to policy making by councils, local government associations and state and federal agencies that work with local government.

Suggestions for future working papers are welcome and may be directed to ACELG's Senior Research Officer: stefanie.pillora@acelg.org.au

ABOUT ACELG

ACELG is a unique consortium of universities and professional bodies that have a strong commitment to the advancement of local government. The consortium is led by the University of Technology Sydney's Centre for Local Government, and includes the University of Canberra, the Australia and New Zealand School of Government, Local Government Managers Australia and the Institute of Public Works Engineering Australia. In addition, the Centre works with program partners to provide support in specialist areas and extend the Centre's national reach. These include Charles Darwin University and Edith Cowan University.

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