Community engagement in Australian local government: A closer look and strategic implications

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LG Community Engagement Census: A snapshot of practice

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Outline

- Research Overview
- LG CE Census
  - Methodology and responses
- Findings
  1. How often are councils engaging?
  2. What methods are councils using?
  3. Who is responsible for community engagement inside councils (and how is it positioned)?
  4. What’s driving community engagement in local government and what’s making it difficult?
- Conclusion and Discussion
- Very very preliminary findings from the follow on research
Methodology

- Online survey – 352 Local governments – Eastern Seaboard States
  - New South Wales (128)
  - Queensland (77)
  - South Australia (68)
  - Victoria (79)
Response Rate % by council Type and State (Pop = 352, n= 175)

### Response Rate by Council Type and State

#### Capitals & Metro
- NSW: 56.3%
- Qld: 69.6%
- SA: 48.3%
- Vic: 41.7%
- All states: 49.7%

#### Urban Regional
- NSW: 63.4%
- Qld: 77.3%
- SA: 70.0%
- Vic: 39.8%
- All states: 49.7%

#### Urban Fringe
- NSW: 63.4%
- Qld: 77.3%
- SA: 70.0%
- Vic: 39.8%
- All states: 49.7%

#### Rural & Remote
- NSW: 63.3%
- Qld: 41.7%
- SA: 39.8%
- Vic: 39.8%
- All states: 49.7%

### Notes
- Pop = 352, n= 175
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How often are councils engaging?

Mean estimated number of community engagement processes per council type per annum (n=164)

- Capitals & Metro: 44.1
- Urban Regional: 34.1
- Urban Fringe: 29.8
- Rural & Remote: 15.3
- All council types: 29.4
How are councils engaging?

- **Traditional methods** – public meetings, public submissions, advisory/community reference groups

- **Contemporary methods** – community summit/workshop (< 30 participants), community summit/workshop (>30 participants), drop in/open house/staffed display, focus groups

- **Online methods** – online discussion forums and online surveys

- **Deliberative methods** – citizen’s jury/deliberative panel/forum

- **Emerging methods** – open space/unconference, and participatory budgeting.
Open Space/Unconference
Co-Design
Deliberative Group methods
Participatory Budgeting

Past  Present  Future

Percent

Past  Present  Future

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Who is designing and delivering local government community engagement processes?

*Internal responsibility for planning and delivery of community engagement (n=175)*

- Relevant plus specialist staff (Hybrid) - 45%
- All relevant staff (Distributed) - 25%
- Case by case (Ad hoc) - 10%
- Specialist Staff (Centralised) - 5%
- Relevant staff plus executive staff - 0%
- Other - 0%
Estimated number of dedicated community engagement staff per local government (n=175)
Organisational position of community engagement (n=175)

- No specific work area for CE: 26.9%
- Communications/ media/ public relations combined with CE: 25.1%
- Community/ social planning combined with CE: 14.3%
- Governance/ corporate performance combined with CE: 9.1%
- Two or more work areas combined with CE: 5.1%
- Community development combined with CE: 3.4%
- Research combined with CE: 2.3%
- Other: 2.9%
- Planning/ placemaking/ urban projects combined with CE: 1.7%
- Unsure: 0.6%
What are the challenges in delivering community engagement for councils?

Highest ranked difficulties in delivering community engagement (n=167)

- Public interest: 23.4%
- Time: 37.1%
- Budget: 14.4%
- Lack of leadership commitment at executive level: 9.0%
- Knowledge and skills of staff: 8.4%
- Councillor support: 5.4%
- Statutory requirements: 2.4%
What’s driving community engagement by councils?

Highest ranked driver for community engagement practice in local government (n=174)

- Known effectiveness in assisting council with its decisions: 27.6%
- Meet statutory requirements: 21.8%
- Enthusiasm/demand from public: 18.4%
- Deliver on corporate strategies and policies: 14.9%
- Enthusiasm/demand of council staff: 10.3%
- Enthusiasm/demand from Councillors: 6.9%
Summary

• Number of processes vary by council type

• Traditional, contemporary and online methods dominate

• Strong intent to use deliberative and emerging methods in the future

• The number one driver for use is ‘known effectiveness for assisting in decisions”

• The number one challenge is the time required.

• Understanding and profile of community engagement within councils varies widely – there is significant coupling of the community engagement function with communications, media and/or public relations
Next Phase
- Exploration
Methodology

- 20 Semi-structured interviews
- 8 Victorian councils - (2 each of Metro, Fringe, Regional, Rural)
- Mix of staff – Executive, Management, Middle Management, Staff
Very very very very very preliminary findings
How LGs conceptualise engagement

Haus and Sweeting (2006) – Local Democracy – 4 types

1. Representative

2. Network – partnering, PPPs

3. User/Market > private sector values - “customer”

MEETING INDIVIDUAL NEEDS AND/OR MANAGING RISK

4. Participatory > collaborative, deliberative, participatory – “citizen”

DEMOCRACY
Other themes

Leadership – Councillors, Executive, Managers, Staff

Consistency – “If it’s done well…”

Resourcing and capabilities

Increasing prevalence of online platforms