



Community Engagement Policy

Policy, procedure, protocol	Policy
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Related documents	Bellinggen Shire Council Community Engagement Strategy Bellinggen Shire Council Community Engagement Plan Bellinggen Shire Council Community Engagement Toolkit
Author	Communication & Engagement Specialist
Section / Department	Executive Manager Organisational Strategy and Communications
Linkage to Our Community Vision	5 Civic Leadership
Objective	5.2 Our community is informed and engaged with a strong sense of civic leadership
Strategy	5.3.3 The principles of social justice underpin our activities and decision making processes



1 Purpose

This policy outlines the principles that underpin Council's approach to community engagement.

The policy commits Council to community engagement practices that are trustworthy, responsive, simple, and progressive.

The policy affirms that Council understands effective community engagement leads to improved decision making.

The policy acknowledges that effective community engagement results in strong, well-functioning, highly connected communities that understand and participate actively in a range of democratic processes.

2 Scope

This policy provides direction on formal and informal community engagement activities undertaken by, or on behalf of, Bellingen Shire Council.

3 Application

This policy applies to all community engagement activity undertaken by Council, including work undertaken by consultants, representatives, and volunteers.

4 Legal Parameters

4.1 NSW Local Government Act 1993

Bellingen Shire Council has observed the requirements outlined in the Local Government Act 1993 in the development of this strategy.

Specifically, that Council exercise its *"functions in a manner that is consistent with and promotes social justice principles of equity, access, participation and rights"* (s.8) and Chapter 4 on how communities can influence Council *"by participating in Council community engagement activities."*

4.2 NSW Environmental, Planning and Assessment Act 1979 and Environmental Planning and Assessment Regulation 2000

In accordance with the Environment Planning and Assessment Act 1979 and other relevant legislation, Councils must prepare a Community Participation Plan (CPP) for the purpose of outlining how and when Council will engage with the community regarding its land use planning functions.

This plan, as a standalone component of the Bellingen Community Engagement Framework, seeks to provide a single document that the community can access, that sets out all of council's community participation requirements under land use planning legislation, including all minimum mandatory exhibition timeframes, and should be referenced in accordance with this policy.



5 Definitions

5.1 Community

Community includes all the people who live, work, study, own property, conduct private or government business, visit or use the services, facilities and public spaces and places of our Shire. The community can be referred to as stakeholders or be comprised of stakeholders.

Communities are formed around shared localities, interests, values, beliefs or other common links and Council acknowledges that Bellinghen Shire is made up of numerous communities, with citizens often associating with many different community groups at any given time.

5.2 Citizenship

Council views all members of the various communities as citizens. Citizenship within Bellinghen Shire involves political, civil, and social rights and responsibilities. Citizenship grows and develops with the participation of citizens in democratic processes.

5.3 Community Engagement

The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) defines community engagement as a planned process with the specific purpose of working across organisations, stakeholders, and communities to shape the decisions or actions of the members of the community, stakeholders, or organisation in relation to a problem, opportunity, or outcome.

Bellinghen Shire Council commits to being flexible and responsive in its approach to community engagement. It will apply different approaches to engagement depending on the aims and timeframe of the engagement and the level of interest or concern within the target community.

The Community Engagement Strategy provides a framework for Council's approach to community engagement.

The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum of Public Participation and code of ethics are also important reference points for Council's community engagement practice.

Other models and methodologies will also have a bearing on Council's community engagement practice depending on specific circumstances, inclusive of both collaborative and routine engagement methods to create opportunities for individuals to participate in a collaborative process with Council and enhance our decision-making processes and outcomes when appropriate.

Council acknowledges that community engagement plays a vital role Council achieving its purpose to: *"Create a sustainable future together for the good of all"*.

- Effective engagement generates better decisions, delivering sustainable economic, environmental, social, and cultural benefits for Bellinghen Shire.
- Effective community engagement enables the free and full development of human potential, fosters relationships based on mutual understanding, trust, and respect, facilitates the sharing of responsibilities, and creates more inclusive and sustainable communities.



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- Meaningful community engagement seeks to address barriers and build the capacity and confidence of people to negotiate and partner with institutions that affect their lives, in particular people who may have previously felt excluded or disenfranchised.
- A wide range of methods and technologies are available, including new and emerging tools associated with digital technology to facilitate appropriate and effective community engagement. Online community engagement is a high priority as people increasingly expect to access services and experiences online. Other engagement methods need to be considered to include those who are not active online.

6 Principles

Bellingham Shire Council seeks to place community engagement at the centre of Council activity and decision making, to increase community wellbeing, resilience, and connectedness. Council's community engagement approach promotes an active community, through routine and collaborative engagement processes.

Bellingham Shire Council supports the IAP2 Code of Ethics for its community engagement practice.

- **Purpose** - We support public participation as a process to make better decisions that incorporate the interests and concerns of all affected stakeholders and meet the needs of the decision-making body.
- **Role of Practitioner** - We will enhance the public's participation in the decision-making process and assist decision-makers in being responsive to the public's concerns and suggestions.
- **Trust** - We will undertake and encourage actions that build trust and credibility for the process and among all the participants.
- **Defining the Public's Role** - We will carefully consider and accurately portray the public's role in the decision-making process.
- **Openness** - We will encourage the disclosure of all information relevant to the public's understanding and evaluation of a decision.
- **Access to the Process** - We will ensure that stakeholders have fair and equal access to the public participation process and the opportunity to influence decisions.
- **Respect for Communities** - We will avoid strategies that risk polarizing community interest or that appear to "divide and conquer."
- **Advocacy** - We will advocate for the public participation process and will not advocate for a particular interest, party, or project outcome.
- **Commitments** - We will ensure that all commitments made to the public, including those by the decision-maker, are made in good faith.
- **Support of the Practice** – We will mentor new practitioners in the field and educate decision-makers and the public about the value and use of public participation.



7 Community Engagement Protocols

The following Engagement Protocols have been established for community gatherings facilitated by Council. This will ensure that the expectations of everybody are made clear and the meeting can be productive and positive for all concerned. The list will be displayed at the venue and the meeting facilitator will articulate the protocols as part of facilitating the meeting.

Importantly, failure to abide by these Engagement Protocols may result in offending parties being requested to remove themselves from the community gathering and / or the suspension and re-scheduling of the community gathering, to afford those wishing to adhere to the Engagement Protocols the opportunity to participate.

Engagement Protocols:

- Show respect for each other.
- Listen to understand.
- Focus on the issue in question, not individuals.
- Speak honestly.
- Articulate hidden assumptions.
- Be brief and meaningful when voicing your opinion.
- Seek common ground and understanding (not problems and conflict).
- No recording of the meeting without everyone's prior permission.
- No alcohol to be served or consumed at the venue.
- Show respect for each other.

8 Policy Statements

Council is committed to open dialogue with its communities, to empower them to have a meaningful role in Council's planning and prioritisation processes.

Council will articulate the level of influence, in all engagement processes and will highlight the negotiable and non-negotiable elements of any community engagement.

Council will encourage a diverse range of perspectives to be heard and will actively seek to gain broad representation of communities when undertaking engagement processes.

Council will continue to provide opportunities for community members to come together to learn and share information and have meaningful and informed deliberations.

Council will consider the cost-effectiveness of community engagement processes when developing project proposals.

Council will support staff to gain confidence and capacity to engage effectively with communities.

9 Roles & Responsibilities

Engagement is part of everyone's role. Every staff member is involved in some way in engaging our community.

Senior Management, Team Leaders and Supervisors are responsible for ensuring that the appropriate level of engagement occurs in accordance with this policy, Council's Community Engagement



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Strategy and in consultation with Council's Communication and Engagement Specialist.

10 References

Internal Documents

Bellingen Shire Council Community Engagement Policy

Bellingen Shire Council Community Engagement Strategy & Toolkit

Bellingen Shire Council Community Participation Plan

External Documents

[Local Government Act NSW 1993](#)

[Environmental Planning and Assessment Regulation 2000](#)