

MACKAY REGIONAL COUNCIL
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
GUIDELINES

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

These Community Engagement Guidelines outline a framework for community engagement and identify the ways in which Mackay Regional Council can enhance community involvement in the planning of Council services and programs in Mackay.

There is a strong impetus for developing Council processes which encourage greater community engagement. Council can develop more responsive policies and programs because they will be based on a sound assessment of the priorities of the residents of Mackay region.

More importantly, the involvement of residents and other spheres of government in the early stages of the process enables Council to gather information about concerns, ideas and options regarding proposals, prior to Council decision-making. This ensures that Council planning integrates economic, social and environmental considerations and increases the likelihood that Council decision-making will be supported by all concerned.

The Community Engagement Guidelines outline the key principles which need to be considered in implementing community engagement activities. They are drafted to provide guidance to Councillors, Council staff and consultants in the planning of activities which engage and involve the community.

2. INTRODUCTION

For the purposes of this document, community engagement can be defined as 'any process that involves the public in decision-making, and that uses public input to make better decisions' (International Association for Public Participation, 2002). It refers to the processes implemented by Mackay Regional Council to consult, hold discussion, exchange information, negotiate with and inform residents and other spheres of government during the planning and evaluation of Council policy, programs and services.

Genuine and effective community engagement has benefits for Council and citizens. Broadly, engagement allows Council to tap wider sources of information, perspectives and potential solutions. This in turn results in assistance and guidance in terms of decision-making and consequently better outcomes for the community.

Community engagement is considered to be an integral component of informed decision-making. As such it aims to ensure that as many people as possible who are affected by decisions of Council have the opportunity to be consulted about their needs and concerns prior to decisions being made.

Community engagement processes aim to consider all available information and opinion on the economic, social and environmental impact of Council policy, programs or services.

Community engagement processes are open, two-way and on-going. As such, Council actively informs the community of community engagement processes initiated by Council and seeks involvement of individuals and representatives of relevant community and government organisations in these processes.

To ensure openness and accountability, the results of all community engagement processes initiated by Council are available to the public except in those cases where confidentiality must be applied.

The single most important success factor in improving community engagement is genuine commitment to best practice engagement. This means ensuring:

- community engagement forms an integral part of the development, implementation and evaluation of policies, programs and services
- both Council officials and citizens have the capacity to engage effectively
- there is transparency and accountability in the process

3.1 PURPOSE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement aims to:

- Ensure that significant policies and programs submitted to Council detail community inputs regarding their social, economic and environmental impact on the community.
- Ensure that a range of options are considered in the development of Council policy and programs prior to Council decision-making.
- Ensure that the community is adequately informed of Council's plans and the rationale for Council's decisions.
- Foster collaboration and cooperation between Council and the community, including other spheres of government in the planning and implementation of programs and services for the Mackay area.

Input from community members and groups into the Council decision-making process means a better, more informed decision for everyone.

This is achieved by::

- Improving the quality of relations between the Council and its community thus making the work of Council easier
- Satisfying community expectations of social justice principles
- Enhancing community ownership of decisions and the resultant outcomes
- Adding value to Council's decision-making processes by drawing on the skills and wisdom of community members
- Maximising the possible positive impacts of Council decisions and minimising the possible negative impacts.

3.2 BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Involving the community prior to decisions being made by Council can have substantial social, political and financial benefits for all concerned. These include:

- A broader understanding by Councillors and Council staff of community needs, concerns and priorities prior to decision-making.

- Expansion of community input into the development of Council's plans and policies.
- The development of appropriate and responsive policies and programs by Council which integrate economic, social and environmental issues.
- Increased likelihood that social and cultural considerations will be integrated with technical solutions.
- Increased ability and credibility of Council in representing and advocating for the interests of the local community with other government organisations.
- Increased community cohesion resulting from a reduction in Council/community conflict regarding decisions taken by Council.
- Commitment from the community to the decisions undertaken by Council through their involvement in discussion of issues and options.
- Increased access of groups such as Aboriginal people, Torres Strait and South Sea Islanders and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to discussions about Council initiatives which are likely to impact upon them.
- Community access to information underpinning Council decisions.

Community engagement does not replace the decision-making functions of Council. Rather these processes are designed to ensure that Council has access to a broad range of information about community needs, opinions and options prior to decisions being made. It also increases the likelihood that Council decisions are understood and supported by the community.

4. CRITERIA FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.

Initiating community engagement processes may be considered in the planning and evaluation of policies or programs which meet one or more of the following criteria:

- The future use of a significant area of land within the city is being decided.
- There is, or there is likely to be, strong community concern or interest in the issue.
- The proposals coming before Council are anticipated to have a significant impact on the economy, lifestyle or environment of the city or its residents.

- The resolution of an issue or implementation of a proposal is likely to require a substantial redirection of ratepayer revenue in up-front or on-going maintenance costs.
- Information is needed by Councillors or Council staff about community needs, priorities or values to ensure planning is appropriate and responsive.
- That Council has statutory obligations to engage the community.
- The Council wishes to ensure that minority or disadvantaged groups have information about, and access to, the services and programs of Council.
- Council believes there is a need.

5. DESIGN OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESSES

For successful community involvement in Council planning activities, the processes need to be well prepared and adequately resourced.

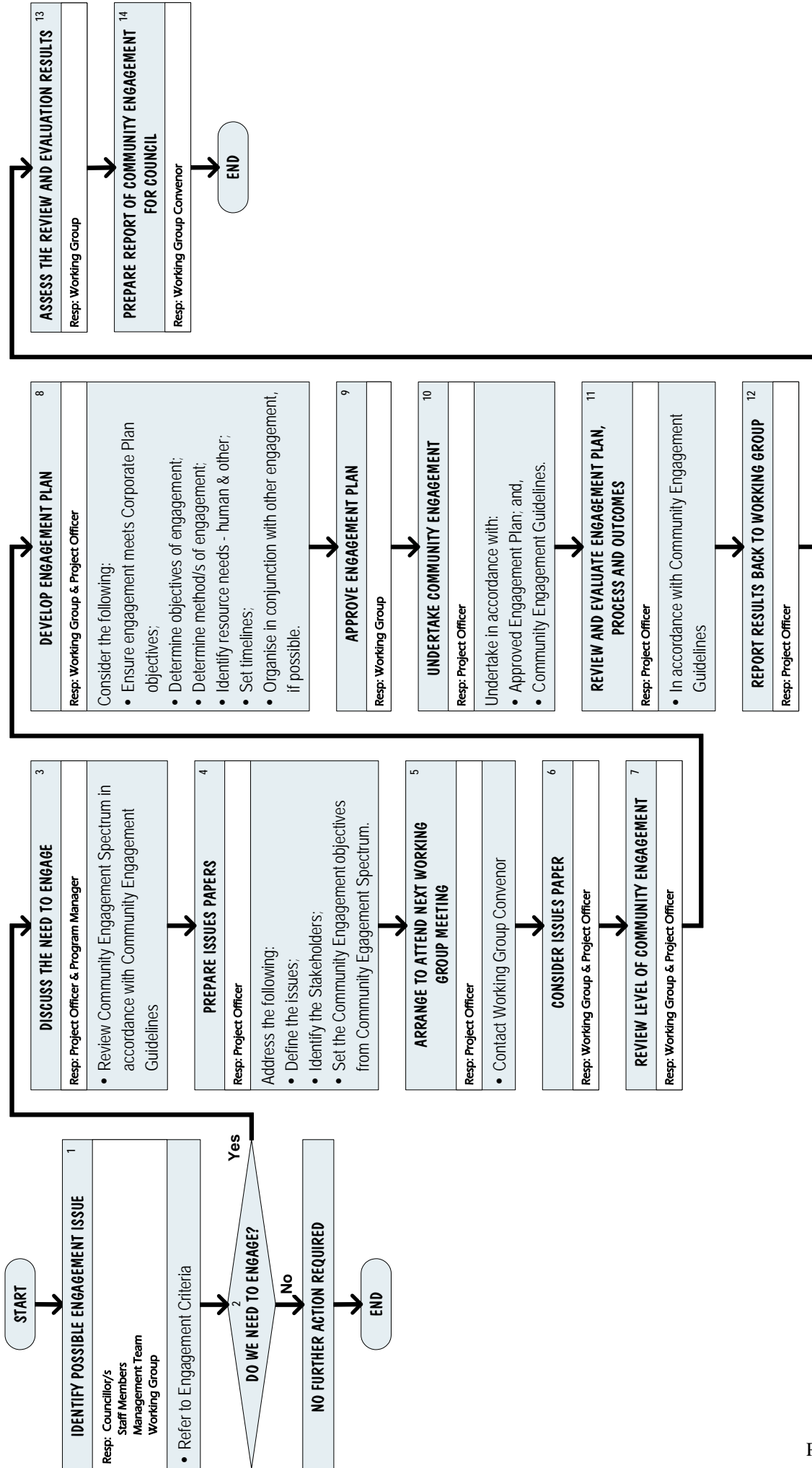
Consideration needs to be given to:

- Detailing which planned activities require engagement with the community.
- Defining the objectives for the proposed engagement process.
- Outlining key stakeholders to be involved in the engagement process
- Describing the broad methodologies to be used for community engagement.
- Outlining proposed timing of activities.
- Indicating resources that will be required to support community engagement activities.

6. TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In planning major community engagement activities, the following phases and tasks will be undertaken to ensure uniformity across Council in the consultation process. These are summarised in the Community Engagement Handbook which has been disseminated across the organisation and is also distributed at every staff induction.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS



The Community Engagement Plan will include the following:

- The objectives
- Any background information and rationale for the activities being undertaken
- Who will be involved
- What messages are being sent by Council to the community
- How information from the community will be used by Council in its planning and decision-making
- How outcomes and information will be shared with the participants and the public
- The time frame for the activities being undertaken
- How the process will be evaluated

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

These are many and varied. Each has its strengths and weaknesses as a method of consultation. These strengths and weaknesses should be understood and acknowledged before being incorporated into the Community Engagement Plan.

8. WORKING GROUP RESPONSIBILITIES

A Working Group has been established with cross-Council representation. All members of the Working Group have been trained in engagement techniques and are able to assist in designing community engagement methodologies and processes.

There are different levels of engagement from informing to empowering the community. The following table best describes examples of these different levels and techniques.

9. Increasing Level of Community Participation Spectrum

Inform	Consult	Engage	Collaborate	Empower
<p>Objective: To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives and/or solutions.</p> <p>Promise to the Public: We will keep you informed.</p>	<p>Objective: To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.</p> <p>Promise to the Public: We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.</p>	<p>Objective: To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public issues and concerns are consistently understood and considered.</p> <p>Promise to the Public: We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and issues are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.</p>	<p>Objective: To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>Objective: To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.</p> <p>Promise to the Public: We will implement what you decide.</p>
<p>Example Tools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Fact sheets ⇒ Web sites ⇒ Open houses 	<p>Example Tools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Public comment ⇒ Focus groups ⇒ Surveys ⇒ Public meetings 	<p>Example Tools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Workshops ⇒ Deliberative polling 	<p>Example Tools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Citizen Advisory Committees ⇒ Consensus-building ⇒ Participatory decision-making 	<p>Example Tools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Citizen Juries ⇒ Ballots ⇒ Delegated decisions

International Association for Public Participation (2002)

10. WHO WILL BE INVOLVED

Community engagement endeavours to involve individual residents and representatives of community and government groups who have an interest in, or are directly affected by, Council programs, policies or services.

In planning which individuals, groups or sectors need to be involved in the community engagement activities of Council, consideration will be given to:

- The location of populations likely to be affected by Council's decision. Where the impact of decisions is confined to a particular geographical area of the City, Council will endeavour to ensure representation from the areas affected
- The likely impact of the decision on residents or groups in the community
- Representation of significant minority groups
- Balanced representation with respect to gender and age.

To ensure that the community is informed of community engagement processes being initiated by Council, adequate publicity is needed and includes the placement of notices in the media, on public notice boards and communicated via Council mailings.

Council will maintain a comprehensive list of contacts and addresses for all key stakeholder groups in the region. This will need to be updated at regular intervals. The listing will be used as a basis for preparation of mailing lists where Council wishes to advise community groups of planned community engagement activities.

Where individuals or groups believe that they have a substantial interest in proposals before Council, but have not been included in a specific public participation process or activity, Council will endeavour to ensure that they be given an opportunity to participate within a reasonable time frame, provided that this does not contravene statutory requirements.

11. “YOUR COMMUNITY, YOUR COMMENT”

Mackay Regional Council promotes the concept of “Your Community, Your Comment”.

“Your Community, Your Comment” has been developed to promote constructive and ongoing communication between the community and Council. It is imperative that people of all ages and from all walks of life are engaged in the process. Members of the public will be asked, at every community engagement process, whether they would like to be included in any future community engagement on one, or a number of specific topics.

12. SCHEDULING OF ACTIVITIES

Timing of community engagement activities needs to take into account the ability of individuals to participate. To enhance opportunities for community involvement, consideration will need to be given to:

- Providing adequate advance notification of the activities to be undertaken
- Scheduling activities at times which ensure the involvement of specific groups
- Scheduling activities at times outside major holiday periods such as Christmas.

Where circumstances indicate that changes need to be made to community engagement activities planned by Council, individuals and groups likely to be affected need to be informed of the changes and the reasons for the restructuring of activities.

13. FEEDBACK

Providing timely and appropriate feedback to those who have participated in engagement processes can enhance the legitimacy of the final outcome and assist in the management of expectations.

Feedback is a critical element of the engagement process. It is the point at which those that have participated can see whether their views have been accurately represented and, when relevant, taken into account when decisions are made.

14. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Community Engagement Plans prepared for community engagement activities need to include information about how these activities will be evaluated.

Effective evaluation of community engagement activities can provide considerable benefits to Council by contributing to setting best practice standards and building support for client and community involvement by providing evidence of how effective engagement works.

15. CONFIDENTIALITY

Information, advice, opinions and recommendations obtained from community engagement activities initiated by Council are freely available to the public unless specifically designated as confidential.

When information is accepted as confidential, there is an obligation on all parties involved to respect confidentiality.

16. MANAGING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

At a minimum, Council staff responsible for planning community engagement activities should have an understanding of:

- The objectives and principles of community engagement
- Community engagement methodologies and when it is appropriate to use them
- The principles of facilitation, negotiation and mediation and their role in the engagement process

17. TRAINING

It is imperative that all staff responsible for community engagement have the required skills. Training should also be made available to interested Councillors and should be part of any orientation for new Councillors.

Training of Councillors and staff will focus on the development of the following competencies:

- Understanding of the principles of community engagement
- Ability to select appropriate community engagement methodologies for different situations
- Understanding of alternative dispute resolution concepts
- Knowledge of available outside expertise and understanding of situations where outside assistance is appropriate.

Professional assistance may be necessary for the planning and implementation of some community engagement activities in the following situations:

- When issues arise which require an independent person to negotiate or mediate between Council and the community

- When it is anticipated that the scope of community engagement activities will require the time and skills of experienced professionals.

18. CONCLUSION

The success of community engagement depends on Council practice that focuses on:

- clarity of objectives
- being clear about timeframes, resources and other constraints
- understanding community perception of the engagement process
- maximising involvement by reducing barriers and ensuring the benefits of engagement outweigh the costs of time and effort
- establishing trusting relationships
- respecting diversity of communities including differences in cultural backgrounds, language, age, literacy and interests
- maintaining flexibility throughout the engagement process, allowing citizens the opportunity to raise issues and propose options