



# Discussion paper - Communications and Community Engagement

**WESTERN DOWNS REGIONAL COUNCIL**

August 2022

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The Western Downs is approximately 300km north-west of the Brisbane CBD, stretching over 38,000km<sup>2</sup> and including the regional centres of Dalby, Jandowae, Chinchilla, Miles, Tara and Wandoan. Positioned as the Energy Capital of Queensland, the region's economy includes thriving industries such as agriculture, health, transport, manufacturing and energy production. Located in the heart of the resource rich Surat Basin, the region has a diversified energy portfolio with five pillars of energy generation: coal, gas, ethanol, wind and solar, which cement the region's reputation as the energy capital of Queensland. Rural land is used largely for forestry and agriculture, particularly grain and cotton growing, with some sheep and cattle grazing and broadacre farming.

Originally home to a number of Aboriginal groups, including the Bigambul and Kambuwal people, the Western Downs was settled by Europeans in the 1840s. The original industries focused mainly on sheep and cattle grazing, grain growing and timber getting. Growth took place during the late 1800s and continued into the early 1900s when several small townships were established and railway lines opened.

The Moonie oil field began production in 1961, creating many new jobs within the region. The population of the Council area increased from the mid-1990s, rising from approximately 22,300 in 1996 to about 33,000 in 2011. This growth was aided by the opening of the Kogan Creek Mine and the Kogan Creek Power Station in 2006. Population growth is expected to continue, particularly from gas and oil explorations and operations in the Surat Basin.





## About Council

Western Downs Regional Council (WDRC) is committed to creating a diverse region and remaining at the forefront of the changing world. Council is a dynamic organisation with a diverse workforce of around 750 staff spread across the region. The Council team are dedicated to making a real difference.

As the level of government closest to the community, the Council is pivotal in delivering essential services to residents and businesses. Council provides a vast variety of services to the region including traditional local government services of water, waste, sewerage, parks, libraries, swimming pools and roads as well as saleyards, aerodromes, cinemas, a gas network and truck wash down facilities. It is also responsible for the State's largest local road network spanning more than 10,000km.

## KEY DRIVERS FOR THE STRATEGY

The Communications and Community Engagement Strategy (The Strategy) is underpinned by robust feedback gathered through region-wide consultation in April and May 2022 including an online survey and engagement with community organisations. These feedback gathering activities provided key insights into the community's communication needs and preferences. More than 500 respondents participated and provided feedback on what topics they would like to hear about, how they wish to hear it and what else they want to know. Broadly speaking, the community wants more communication and deeper engagement with Council for better community outcomes.



### Internal drivers

WDRC is committed to creating a diverse region and remaining at the forefront of the changing world. The *2021-2026 Western Downs Regional Council Corporate Plan* provides the strategic direction for operational activities over the next five years. The Plan sets out Council's strategic priorities and outlines the goals for each priority area. Strategic priorities in the Corporate Plan are underpinned by meaningful communication and community engagement.

Council is focused on fostering a strong, diverse economy and aggressively pursuing business and investment opportunities, particularly in agribusiness, manufacturing, and energy. This Strategy will help Council build an active and vibrant community that is resilient and well positioned to capitalise on opportunities that are essential to economic growth.

WDRC has a reputation for delivering initiatives and projects. The Strategy will enhance and streamline communication and engagement to support the timely delivery of initiatives and projects.



### External drivers

The Strategy responds to the community needs and preferences to hear from Council in a timely and responsive manner, further demonstrating that Council supports the community.

Council is facing a rapidly changing traditional and digital media landscape, and information accessibility is also evolving. Western Down has a growing young community driving increasing demand for online and digital communications and greater scrutiny of Council activities and projects. The closure of printed newspapers in the region has led to some residents feeling disconnected and out of touch with events and news. The strategy supports the communication needs of a diverse population with a multi-channel approach.

The Western Downs region is perfectly positioned to capitalise on many opportunities across a diverse range of sectors including agribusiness, energy, tourism and manufacturing.

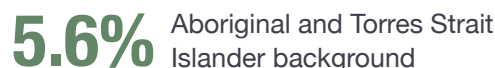


## Who Council communicates and engages with

Council is responsible for delivering a wide range of services to communities across the region. The message and approach to individuals, groups and organisations will vary depending on the purpose of the communication. Council will consider tailored approaches for specific demographics or user groups who may find it more difficult to participate due to barriers such as limited access to transport or the internet.

Community engagement enhances Council’s capacity to partner with community to make well-informed, accepted and sustainable decisions. It does not however, replace the final decision-making power of Councillors or the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The results of community engagement activities will also be balanced against the evidence provided by professional staff on relevant topics.

### COMMUNITY FAST FACTS



Source 2021 Census

#### COMMUNITY

- » Ratepayers
- » Current and potential residents
- » Customers
- » Community groups, clubs and organisations
- » Businesses, industry, investors
- » Volunteers
- » Visitors and Tourists
- » Mayor and Councillors
- » Employees
- » Potential employees

#### STAKEHOLDERS

- » Federal, State and Local Government
- » Funding bodies
- » Contractors
- » Media
- » Project partners
- » Regulatory or statutory authorities

#### GROUPS WHO MAY EXPERIENCE BARRIERS TO SERVICES AND PARTICIPATION:

- » Youth
- » Elderly
- » New residents
- » Visitors and tourists
- » People experiencing with a disability, vision or hearing impairment
- » People experiencing challenging financial circumstances
- » People with limited literacy
- » Culturally and linguistically diverse community members







# THE CURRENT SITUATION

## Key insights


The Western Downs community values a successful and sustainable relationship with Council that is built on a foundation of trust and transparency. Community consultation and background investigation undertaken to inform the strategy revealed several key insights about Council's current communication and engagement activities:




**Community satisfaction with communication and engagement is low**



**Community members want to hear from Council, but feel they are not being communicated with**



**Community wants regular communication through a mix of channels**



**Community networks are strong and could be utilised more**



**Community members want to engage more but lack the opportunity**



### **Community satisfaction with communication and engagement is low**

The consultation survey specifically asked about satisfaction with communication and engagement to gain insight into the current community perceptions and provide a baseline to measure the implementation of the Strategy.

On average, the community rates Council 4 out of 10 for communication and 4 out of 10 for engagement. Around 70% of respondents rated their communication satisfaction as a 5 or lower (out of ten), and 77% rated engagement satisfaction as a 5 or lower (out of ten). However, 1 in 5 community members (20%) are not at all satisfied with the way Council currently communicates and engages.

These ratings indicate there is room for improvement but as the following section details, there are opportunities to improve these ratings fairly quickly and easily. There will always be a percentage of community members who are not satisfied, but by implementing the Strategy, Council expects to see an improvement in the ratings.



### **Community members want to hear from Council, but feel they are not being communicated with**

The community wants more communication from Council about:

- » Council decisions
- » Major project information
- » Upcoming events
- » General community updates
- » Disaster updates

Many feel they do not receive this information at all from Council. In addition, based on the feedback received, the community does not appear to have a strong understanding of Council's roles and operations.

Focusing on providing the information the community wants to receive in a timely manner will allow Council to build trust in their operations and decisions.



### **Community networks are strong and could be utilised more**

Participation in community groups is one of the hallmarks of a resilient community. Around 48% of Western Downs community members are involved in a community group, which is a positive indicator of the strength of the community in the region.

The Community Activation Team has a database of more than 400 community groups. This network could be used to disseminate messages and promote engagement opportunities.





### **Community wants regular communication through a mix of channels**

The WDRC population is spread across a large geographic area, which can make it challenging to distribute communication consistently throughout the community.

Adopting a multi-channel approach to reach the community will address the geographic challenge but is also in line with community feedback that they want to hear information from Council via multiple channels.

The most preferred channel for receiving communication was via Council social media accounts, with newsletters the second most popular channel. A large proportion of the community is hearing about Council information from word of mouth and community groups. A multi-channel approach to communication, including both digital and print-based channels, supports the communication needs and preferences of a geographically dispersed and socially diverse population.

During consultation, the community clearly articulated a need for more frequent communication from Council. 92% of the community would like to receive communication from Council at least monthly, with more than half wanting communication at least fortnightly. Currently Council is providing information quarterly.



### **Community members want to engage more but lack the opportunity**

More than a third of community members believe they have not had the opportunity to have their say on previous Council decisions.

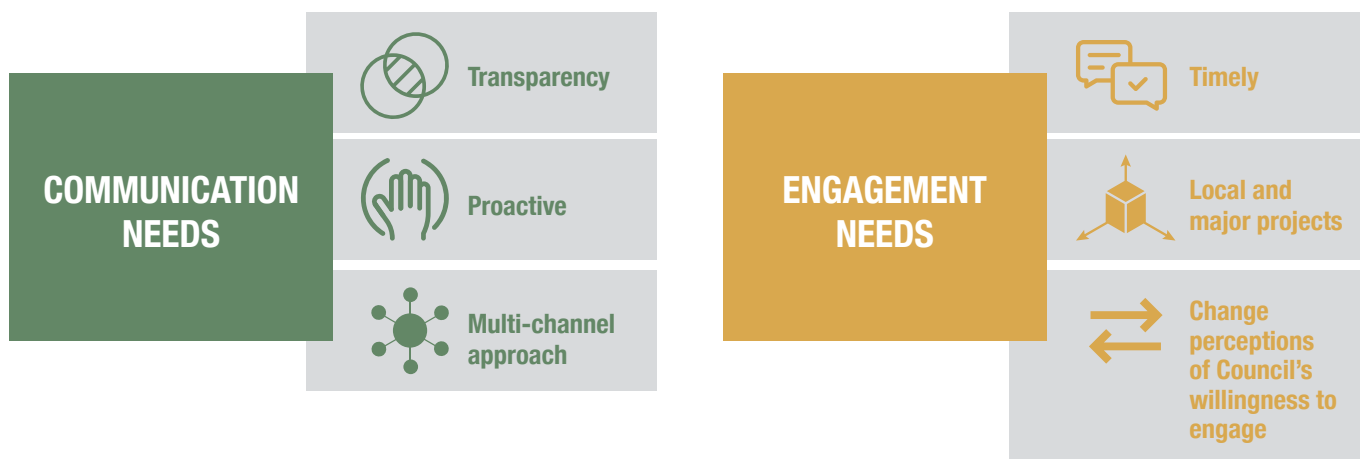
If given the opportunity, community members would like to participate through online surveys or via an online engagement platform. However face-to-face engagement is still extremely important to the community, including in-person information sessions, meetings with Councillors and direct contact with Council.

The community is interested in having a say on a variety of topics including:

- » Major and local projects and infrastructure developments
- » Council decisions
- » Roads
- » Open space use and maintenance
- » Community activities such as local events

## Consultation conclusions

Community consultation identified three key needs for communication and engagement which have directly informed the development of the Strategy. The overarching themes are focused on transparency, clarity and a community-focused approach to communication and engagement.



## Challenges and opportunities

Overall, the community is looking for the Council to be more proactive in communicating and engaging across the region.

CHALLENGES	OPPORTUNITIES
Previous experiences of Council-led engagement have affected Council reputation with community	Focus on providing the information the community wants to receive in a timely manner, allowing Council to build community trust in operations and decisions
Communication is often reactive, responding after something has happened or been questioned by community	Regular proactive communication
Communication techniques are not aligned to audiences and channels	Reach all audiences via clearly identified channels
Communication tends to be one way (telling, not listening)	Improve two-way communication by providing timely and relevant responses to feedback
Too many communication channels	Consolidate the number of communication channels particularly social media and newsletters (one Council, One region)
Community has limited knowledge of Council services and operations	Education campaign about Council Services
Ad hoc approach to community engagement with no single process or platform to bring all community engagement activities into one place for the community to review and respond	Establish a single engagement portal for all Council activities
Consideration of communication and engagement is not embedded in Council processes, particularly in early stages of project planning.	Embed consideration of communication and engagement into Council project lifecycles. Establish engagement champions across Council divisions and teams
There are no longer any printed local newspapers, but a high demand for them exists within the region	Leverage community networks and existing community newsletters/periodicals to distribute Council news.





## Communications and Community Engagement Strategy