Communications and Community Engagement Strategy

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ABOUT THIS STRATEGY

This *Communications and Community Engagement Strategy* (hereafter the Strategy) aims to strengthen Council's relationship with community and enhance delivery of Council's corporate plan strategic priorities through meaningful communications and community engagement. The Strategy supports Council's Corporate Plan and is part of Council's commitment to meaningful communication and community engagement.

The Strategy will focus Council's communication and engagement efforts to ensure the community is receiving accurate and timely information where, when and how they want to receive it, as well as implementing best-practice engagement processes to ensure the community's voice is being heard on the topics they see as important.

This strategy is supported by:

» Community consultation report detailing the outcomes from the April-May 2022 consultation

» Discussion paper outlining the strategic considerations informing this strategy

» Communications and community engagement toolkit containing the appendices and tools supporting this strategy.

COMMUNICATIONS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

WESTERN DOWNS REGIONAL COUNCIL

GOAL: To strengthen Council's relationship with community and enhance delivery of Council's corporate plan strategic priorities through meaningful communications and community engagement

CONVERSATIONS WITH OUR COMMUNITY HAVE SHAPED OUR STRATEGY
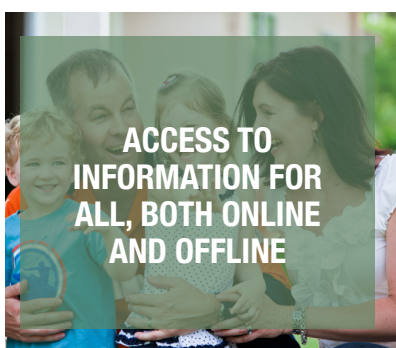
THE COMMUNITY WANTS TO HEAR ABOUT
- » Council decisions
- » Major project information
- » Upcoming events
- » General community updates
- » Disaster updates

THE COMMUNITY WANTS TO TALK ABOUT
- » Local projects and infrastructure developments
- » Council decisions
- » Roads
- » Open space use and maintenance
- » Local events

OUR APPROACH

ONE COUNCIL, ONE REGION, ONE VOICE

SUSTAINABLE AND PLANNED PROGRAM OF CONTENT ALIGNED TO THE COMMUNITY'S NEEDS

ACCESS TO INFORMATION FOR ALL, BOTH ONLINE AND OFFLINE

LEVERAGE COMMUNITY NETWORKS AND CHANNELS FOR INFORMATION DISTRIBUTION

ONGOING AND DELIBERATE ENGAGEMENT TO INFORM COUNCIL DECISION-MAKING

COMMUNICATIONS ACTIVITIES
- » Monthly eNewsletter to replace all existing newsletters
- » Printed copies of newsletter supplied to key locations throughout the region
- » Regular content provided to` community publications
- » Streamlined social media channels
- » Updated website
- » Works notices distributed prior to planned construction activities
- » New customer service processes to improve response times

ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES
- » Embed an organisational framework to ensure consistent and ongoing engagement
- » Annual community engagement exercise to understand the community's priorities
- » New online engagement portal
- » Regular engagement opportunities on projects and initiatives of importance to the community
- » Internal training to support community engagement

STRATEGIC APPROACH

Goals

Overarching goal

To strengthen Council's relationship with community and enhance delivery of Council's corporate plan strategic priorities through meaningful communications and community engagement.

Objectives

The objectives of the Strategy are to:

1. Increase awareness and understanding in the community of Council's programs, services and decision-making processes

2. Develop and maintain opportunities for local people and groups to inform policy, service delivery and what happens in their communities

3. Improve responsiveness to existing queries and feedback channels

4. Build the capacity, confidence, and competence within Council to communicate, engage and deliver this Strategy.

Communications and engagement strategies

Council will deliver on the objectives and work to keep the community informed and part of the conversation through the following strategies:

One Council, one region, one voice (Consistent and trusted)

Council must consolidate the number of communications channels, particularly social media and newsletters, to ensure consistency. Using a variety of different channels administered by a range of people can result in a disparate voice from Council. It also divides and diffuses communication efforts. It is important to have a limited number of official channels that the community trusts, as community members do not want to struggle to get the information they are seeking by finding and subscribing to multiple newsletters and social media streams. It is important to make it easy for people to engage with Council and receive information.

Council e-newsletter as flagship channel

A single consolidated monthly e-newsletter will be the flagship communication channel for Council to share news, updates and events information.

It will be important to align communication topics with the strategic priorities within the Corporate Plan; the community feedback also aligned with these strategic priorities. This will be an opportunity for Council to demonstrate how it is delivering on the Corporate Plan.

Communication on all other channels including social media will include a call to action to subscribe to the newsletter. The newsletter stories can also be shared in channel appropriate ways on other channels.

Sustainable and planned program of content

Council will harness a monthly content process to develop a sustainable program of content through multiple channels to reach key stakeholders. This process will involve all teams across Council providing information for the newsletter and social media channels, creating economies of scale where a single story is shared with the community on a range of channels. This content can then be amplified by stakeholders sharing the stories on their channels, therefore placing minimum reliance on Council's budget and resources.

Access to information for all

Focusing on regularly providing the information community wants to receive in a timely manner will allow Council to build trust in their operations and decisions. This multi-channel approach will ensure information reaches the maximum number of community members. This relies on consolidating the number communication streams on each channel to a single trustworthy source from Council. It also includes ensuring critical information is provided in both online and print formats.

Leverage community networks and channels

Existing community communication channels newsletter and periodicals (e.g. Window on Wandoan, Murilla Community News) can be leveraged to reach a wider audience. They may be particularly useful for reaching members of the community who prefer or rely on printed communications. Feedback from the community indicates they want to hear directly from Council and not just through community groups. It is important not to rely entirely on community groups to be the carriers of Council's communication but to use them to amplify Council's communication.

Ongoing and deliberate community engagement

Community engagement works best when it is an ongoing, cumulative process enabling relationships and trust to build and strengthen over time. Individual engagement events should be planned and designed with this in mind and aim to contribute to the overall aims of the engagement process. This Strategy focuses on hosting all engagement activities in a centralised online location and embedding engagement in project processes. It also focuses on Council budgeting and the forward planning cycle.

Training and education

Council has skilled, motivated and creative people with a passion to deliver for their community. This Strategy includes the development of a toolkit and delivery of training to better help staff to deliver for the community, as well as the establishment of an engagement champion network within Council. This is key to strengthening the training program for staff and Councillors to empower them to deliver best practice communication and engagement aligned to our customer service charter.

Desired outcomes

OBJECTIVE 1

Increase awareness and understanding in the community of Council's programs, services and decision-making processes

» Community has greater clarity around Council budget and decision making and is better informed and aware of Council services and activities

» Community has higher levels of understanding and greater support for Council initiatives

» The community understands Council's role as a key driver in liveability, service provision and advocating for regional interests

» Council delivers planned and effective communications as part of a planned and proactive framework.

OBJECTIVE 2

Develop and maintain opportunities for local people and groups to influence policy, service delivery and what happens in their communities

» Community members feel involved and valued in key Council decision making

» Community members feel their voice is heard through well-structured feedback mechanisms

» Council is in touch with community aspirations and needs through appropriate engagement mechanisms

» Council uses an engagement approach based on best practice frameworks of community engagement

OBJECTIVE 3

Improve responsiveness of existing feedback channels response timeframes

» Community members feel Council is responsive to their comments, questions and concerns

» Call centre staff are equipped with key messages and FAQs for projects, activities and events

» Council has procedures and mechanisms in place to ensure community queries are responded to in a timely and respectful manner

OBJECTIVE 4

Build the capacity, confidence, and competence within Council to communicate, engage and deliver this strategy

» Council has a coordinated and consistent approach to communications and community engagement

» Council teams build communication and engagement considerations into project lifecycles from the beginning

» Council teams can identify appropriate level of engagement for each project based on a robust framework

» Community has increased trust in Council resulting in decreased scrutiny and community concerns

Key messages

MESSAGE THEMES

The following message themes have been identified from the Council Corporate Plan as topics of importance to the Council and the region. These themes shape the overall Council narrative. Key messages for each communication and engagement initiative or activities will need to be developed in alignment with these themes and key messages.

- » Strong and diverse economy
- » Active and vibrant community
- » Quality lifestyle
- » Sustainable and responsible Council

In addition, the community wants more communication from Council particularly about the following topics indicated during community consultation:

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

TONE

The tone of voice used by Council should be consistent across all audiences and channels.

- » **Helpful** – Council's role is to ensure the community and stakeholders have information they need to be involved and conduct business with Council.
- » **Approachable** – Write in a conversational manner to resonate with the audience and come across as friendly and approachable. For example, use 'make sure' instead of 'ensure'.
- » **Practical** – Provide relevant and useful information in a clear and concise manner.
- » **Regional authority** – When content is of a strategic nature, Council should position itself as the expert or authority on the region and its growth.

COMMUNICATIONS

Communication approach

The communication approach encourages an integrated approach to communication and engagement – combining owned and shared channels to establish credibility and trust in the community. To make the most of existing resources (people and budget), initial methods focus on **owned channels** – making the most of what council controls to streamline communications and maximise reach and influence.

MULTI-CHANNEL APPROACH

Using a multi-channel approach will ensure information reaches the maximum number of community members. This includes providing critical information in both online and print formats.

It is recommended to develop and implement a marketing campaign to build awareness and increase exposure to Council services and projects being delivered across all channels.

CONSOLIDATION FOR SIMPLIFICATION

Community information is spread across a range of newsletters and social media channels. This approach means community members have to work to find channels and subscribe to them all, which causes confusion about authoritative sources of Council information and does not present a unified single Council voice.

Council needs to consolidate the various e-newsletters and social media accounts to create a single official Council presence for each channel. The primary focus is to reduce duplication of effort internally and simplify and streamline communications and engagement for the community to provide a single trusted Council source.

The primary focus of consolidation efforts is for the following owned channels:

- » E-newsletter
- » Social media
- » Engagement portal

Communication methods

E-NEWSLETTER

Opportunities

» There are several community e-newsletters produced by different teams and divisions across Council. Each has its own list of subscribers. The main Council newsletter, eNews, has a growing database of 2,100 subscribers. Council has an opportunity to create economies of scale and support the approach of one region, one Council one voice by consolidating these newsletters into the eNews newsletter.

» Community consultation found newsletters were the second most popular way for community to receive information after social media channels.

» Newsletters provide an opportunity to tell a fuller story or provide more context than social media channels. Being able to tell a more complete story is important, given the scope of the information the community told us they want more communication from Council about, including:

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

» Council's Corporate Plan 2021-2026 has clearly defined pillars: a strong diverse economy; an active vibrant community; quality lifestyle; and sustainable organisation. Content for the e-newsletter can be easily aligned to these pillars and ensure alignment between the Corporate Plan and community information needs.

» E-Newsletters can be designed and laid out in a way that facilitates printing. Community consultation and background investigation for this strategy found a number of community members access information exclusively in printed formats.

» Content generated for the newsletter can be adapted to be shared on other Council and community channels.

» Community groups who produce local printed publications, such as the Window on Wandoan and Murilla Community News contacted during the community consultation, indicated they would welcome content from Council.

Actions

» Relaunch a single e-newsletter as Council's flagship communication channel providing regular detailed information and news to the community. Include a call to action to subscribe to the e-newsletter on all Council communications.

» Consolidate the various subscriber lists from all existing newsletters into a single subscriber list and send the first issue to the combined list with a clearly identified opt-out opportunity.

» Design the newsletter to facilitate a limited print run with small bundles placed in centralised locations such as the libraries, customer centres, cafes, and general stores in communities across the region. This should be reviewed after 12 months to determine if this is effective and if the print numbers are appropriate for take up rates.

» Establish a monthly process to generate a program of content from across Council which can be used in the newsletter, shared on Council's other channels and amplified through community group pages. (See B).

» Develop a schedule to forward plan content aligned with the corporate pillars. Council must aim for content segments that appear in each newsletter e.g. Message from the Mayor, quick facts, highlights and events, news from the regions, etc.

» Ensure maximum engagement through creative use of visual and plain language support materials.

» Establish streamlined content collation, curation and approval processes to simplify development.

» Provide regular content to local printed publications to assist with getting Council news out to community members who rely on printed information.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Opportunities

» Council has a range of social media pages on a variety of channels administered by different teams. Each has its own list of 'followers'. There is an opportunity to create economies of scale and support the approach of one region, one Council one voice by consolidating social media efforts across Council.

» Community consultation found social media channels were the most popular way for community to receive information from Council. However, these channels are limited in their ability to tell a long story or provide detailed context. They are useful in generating engagement and driving traffic to webpages and encourage subscription to e-newsletters where people can get more detail.

» Engagement can be amplified by increasing the volume of quality posts that align with the topics the community wants to hear more about.

» According to a Wyzowl's annual state of Video Marketing survey report, 94% of marketers agree that videos help increase user understanding of their products or services. Additionally, 83% of people would consider sharing video content with their friends if it is specific to their interests. These statistics are promising for the goal of getting others to share Council messages and information.

» Replying to followers who ask questions in a timely manner will increase engagement and in turn, trust, respect and increased word-of-mouth promotion.

» Sharing content from trusted external sources rather than reproducing the same content will increase the likelihood of shares in return, further boosting engagement.

» Interacting with others' posts (support partners, local business and industry, and community groups) can also increase the visibility of Council.

Actions

» Consolidate the various social media pages to create a single official Council presence for each channel.

» Develop a social media policy, including escalation and response procedures to ensure appropriate and timely responses.

» Link the forward schedule of posts into the monthly newsletter content cycle. Ensure all teams have the opportunity to provide content.

» Use videos, creative visuals and plain language as appropriate to the specific channel.

» Repost and comment on content on key stakeholders' channels.

WORKS NOTICES (IMPACT AND DISRUPTION COMMUNICATIONS)

Council recognises that sometimes its activities impact community members' lives. To maintain a strong relationship with the community, it is important Council proactively and directly informs people who are impacted by construction and other Council activities. Providing accurate and current information is essential to managing community expectations and encouraging an understanding of way the work needs to be undertaken and its benefits.

Opportunities

» Feedback from community during consultation indicated that residents are often not told when their water is being turned off or the road in front of their house being resurfaced ahead of time.

» Often these types of impacts are generally contained to a specific area where it is easy to identify who will be impacted.

» Council has a range of channels available to communicate these impacts. Direct, targeted and personal communication is important where people are impacted.

Actions

» Establish consistent approach to works notices including minimum requirements.

» Distribute work notices to all directly impacted properties prior to planned works.

» Geo-targeted social media posts can be used to supplement this communication.

WEBSITE

Opportunities

» Ensure content is always current and relevant to increase credibility and trust in Council as the authoritative source of information.

» Improving user experience through intuitive navigation, page layouts, content (length and tone) will ensure people continue to return to the site when they are seeking Council information.

Actions

» Use monthly content process to assist with providing rotating and fresh engaging content in home page tiles.

LISTENING AND FEEDBACK CHANNELS

Communication and engagement extend beyond Council asking for community feedback. Council hears from community in person, online, through emails, phone calls, letters and petitions. These tools are part of the engagement process, and they are used to gather community input on Council's activities.

Opportunities

» During community consultation and investigations, a high number of people reported not receiving responses to queries and comments lodged via Council's feedback channels.

» Call centre staff reported they often did not hear back within reasonable timeframes if at all when requesting information from other Council teams. There is a need to educate all staff about the importance of adhering to mandated response times for community inquiries, and potentially a need to develop or refresh customer service policy (ensuring specified response timeframe KPIs) and retrain staff.

» Providing the same key messages for projects and activities to all customer facing staff will ensure consistency of messaging.

» Equipping customer facing employees with the resources and information they need to respond to questions without referring to other teams will improve communication outcomes and satisfaction.

» The recent community consultation on communications and engagement has established a baseline for measuring improvement efforts.

Actions

» Set up a central repository that houses FAQs and key information in a location (e.g. intranet or SharePoint) that is universally accessible to all customer facing staff.

» Establish guidelines that all project teams are to provide FAQs for inclusion in the central repository before on-the-ground activities, which will impact the community, or any engagement activities begin. This will assist customer facing staff to better assist community members and reduce the load on project teams in responding to call centre team requests.

» Conduct a communications and engagement survey as part of the annual engagement exercise to better understand community needs and satisfaction levels.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Engagement approach

Council uses the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum model to guide engagement with the community. The five levels each represent gradual deepening of public participation in decision making.

ABOUT IAP2 – A GLOBAL STANDARD

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) aims to promote and improve the practice of public participation. The IAP2 has developed an engagement spectrum which is widely used to determine the appropriate level of engagement to be applied in each situation. The spectrum ranges from a basic level of information through to empowering citizens to make their own decisions.

Applying IAP2

The key aspect of the IAP2 model is whether the community has the opportunity to influence Council's decisions about a particular project or initiative. Often, these are referred to as the 'negotiables' of a project and, by seeking community input, this enables Council to manage expectations about what can and cannot be achieved through the project.

In addition to the proposed annual engagement exercise focused on needs and priorities, there will be local or regional projects that the community feels strongly about and wishes to have a say. A decision-making matrix has been provided in E to assist Council in determining how and when to engage.

It is important Council does not engage on every decision or project; there are times when it is necessary to proceed without consultation and decisions can be explained to the community through the communication channels.

Engagement topics

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

While the community provided feedback that they wish to be consulted on these topics, there may not be any negotiable elements on all topics.

Engagement methods

ANNUAL ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITY

Opportunities

» Engaging regularly with the community to identify priorities to feed into the Council budgeting and forward planning cycle is a tried and tested, practical method to respond to community needs.

» Using an annual process is also an opportunity to engage the community in the idea that the Council budget is finite and that choices need to be made.

Actions

» Set up an annual community engagement cycle to identify community priorities and assess satisfaction with communication and engagement activities.

» The annual engagement activity would involve using the online engagement platform as well as a series of in-person events such as drop-in community sessions. Given the significant effort involved in this type of engagement activity, Council may prefer to run a major activity every two years with a 'check-in' on the alternate years.

PROJECT AND INITIATIVE ENGAGEMENT

Opportunities

» Currently Council's engagement activities are undertaken in an ad hoc manner with no rationale to support the purpose and desired outcomes of the engagement. Using the IAP2 model and implementing a decision-making matrix will assist in determining how and when to engage the community.

» A mix of online and in-person engagement activities will be necessary to ensure engagement is accessible to all community members. Increasingly, Councils are moving to online portals to support community engagement activities as these portals make it easy for the community to find information and understand what projects and activities are open for consultation.

» Establishing a single platform will allow the Council to provide high-quality authorised information and opportunities to ask questions and provide feedback. This will assist Council to further build transparency and trust with the community. It will also create efficiencies by centralising all engagement.

Actions

» Implement a suite of tools, including checklists for when to engage and how, to guide Council teams in ensuring they are engaging at the right times, and in a way that makes the process of engaging with the community easier.

» Develop and launch a centralised online engagement portal to provide a one-stop shop with all current engagement opportunities. The portal should be easy to find and navigate and capture all current engagement activities. It will provide community members with a tool where they can review, consider and respond to community engagement related projects.

EMBEDDED ENGAGEMENT

Opportunities

» Community engagement can add value to project helping projects to avoid delays. It is critical to the success of projects and maintaining community trust.

» Council currently undertakes engagement in an ad-hoc manner with no consistent approach across the organisation. Creating a culture of engagement across all teams and integrating engagement into organisational systems and processes will assist Council to deliver a structured and consistent approach to engagement.

Actions

» Write or update the Customer Service Charter to confirm commitment to engagement and feedback channel response timelines.

» Develop a Community Engagement Framework to provide guidance to staff on when to engage and the step-by-step process. For example, engagement is essential when there are design decisions related to infrastructure such as road and utilities.

» Establish a network of engagement champions to lead and monitor activity against processes, collaborate on content, and share best practice.

» Embed consideration of and planning for communications and engagement early in the project lifecycle documentation.

» The communication team to position themselves as trusted advisors with a member of the team owning the relationship with each division or project team. They will be the key contact and will attend division planning meetings to understand the forward plan of works and advise on communicate and engagement matters.

» Ensure business unit and project teams involve the communications team in meetings to identify communication needs and provide advice.

TRAINING AND EDUCATION TO BUILD CAPACITY

Opportunities

» An effective training program for staff and Councillors will empower and equip them to best practice communication and engagement, and strong customer service. It will ensure everyone understands the importance of communications and engagement and provide them with practical tools.

Actions

» Develop toolkit to support staff with improving communication and engagement.

» Rollout training to support use of toolkit.

» Develop and roll out a community engagement awareness and education program that assists staff in understanding how to appropriately determine community engagement requirements on a project-by-project basis.

» Training for Engagement Champions.

EVALUATION

Evaluating this communications and community engagement strategy will be important in identifying which activities are working and which ones need to be adjusted.

The annual engagement process is also a good opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of Council's communications and engagement. The questions asked during the April-May 2022 can be used as a baseline for future evaluation. The questions relating to satisfaction with Council's communications and engagement will be particularly useful in creating a short evaluation survey that can be linked into the annual engagement exercise.

OBJECTIVE	EVALUATION APPROACH
1. Increase awareness and understanding in the community of Council's programs, services and decision-making processes	Quarterly report on: eNewsletter subscribers and open rate; social media metrics (posts and engagement); website statistics (visitors, time on site, pages visited) Annual engagement exercise, proposed survey questions: • What information do you receive from Council and how often? (content and frequency) • How do you receive information from Council? (channel usage) • How satisfied are you with the way Council communications with you? (0 to 10 scale) • What Council decisions have you had a say on? (engagement opportunities) • How have you had your say? (participation activities) • How satisfied are you with the way Council engages with you? (0 to 10 scale)
2. Develop and maintain opportunities for local people and groups to influence policy, service delivery and what happens in their communities	Annual analysis: number of engagement opportunities; number of people that participated; outcomes of engagement.
3. Improve responsiveness to existing queries and feedback channels	Quarterly evaluation of KPIs: response time from Council teams to the call centre; response time to the community; use of FAQs to respond to enquiries.
4. Build the capacity, confidence, and competence within Council to communicate, engage and deliver this Strategy.	Quarterly evaluation: number of training hours for engagement champions; timely contribution of content for the monthly e-newsletter

Communications and Community Engagement Strategy