



# Listen.Talk.Action.

**Draft:** Community engagement & communications report





# Contents

Intent.....	2
How to use the report.....	3
Process .....	4
Introduction to communications and engagement.....	5
Community engagement explained.....	6
Risks .....	10
Who to approach .....	14
Capacity.....	16
Current activities.....	24

Appendix 1a - Two Cents Group Communications and Engagement Report

Appendix 2a - BVSC Community Engagement Procedure

## Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters of the Shire - the people of the Yuin nation and show our respect to elders past and present.

This is a collection of documents about harnessing the mutual benefits of Council and the community working together. We offer our thanks to all who have contributed to the process, including members of the community and the Community Engagement and Communications Reference Group, Council staff and Councillors, and the Two Cents Group.

# Intent

Conversations find new paths, get louder or softer, they become relevant and sometimes get lost, but they never end.

This document is designed to open the channels of two way communication and engagement between Bega Valley Shire Council and the local community. It aims to firstly establish to the community the importance and mutual benefits of open conversation.

Beyond this we aim to point out the difference between communications and community engagement, why they are dealt with separately, and how they can improve trust through an exchange of information and a greater level of collaboration.

Writing of a way forward for organisational communications and community engagement should never be held in the pages of a static document because of two key elements that are forever shifting and developing: people and technology.

Readers of this Community Engagement and Communications Toolkit should therefore consider a fluid environment brought about by advances in technology that enables, challenges and changes expectations within our community.

Council remains watchful of these new developments, and elements within the following documentation will be updated on an ongoing basis as and when required.

A formal document review will occur every two years that considers cumulative changes and advances in technology, engagement methods and community expectations.

# How to use the report

Laying the groundwork for the toolkit

## Part one – the report

This document explains in detail the importance and results that can be achieved through engaging the community. It is intended as a supporting document for the following section through an explanation of the community engagement process, its relationship with communications and the framework used to deliver the best results. Part one also contains full and summarised details of the Communications and Engagement Review conducted by Two Cents Group.

## Part two – the toolkit

This document provides staff with the tools required for successful community engagement. Tools are listed and explained, outlining their suitability for specific projects along with details of how to set them up successfully.

Part of the toolkit includes a section detailing the seven steps required for building a project specific engagement plan which takes the process from choice of engagement to closing the loop.

# Process

## The steps involved in delivering the report and toolkit

The Bega Valley Shire Council Community Engagement and Communications Report and Toolkit is the culmination of two years' work involving Councillors, Council staff, industry professionals and valuable input from the community.

The roots of this plan lie in the results of our triennial independent community survey conducted by IRIS in 2012. A clear response emerged from the survey, in which the community called for more in terms of Council communications, whilst pointing towards technology as the fastest growing means in which people are choosing to seek information and engage with us as an organisation.

From here we developed Council's Communications Strategy which looked in depth at the importance of viewing communications as a people oriented function, allowing for Council information to be easily digested, shared and discussed within the community. Following extensive workshopping the Communications Strategy was adopted with a request from Councillors that additional independent advice be sought on strengthening our community engagement practises.

We then engaged industry experts, Two Cents Group to analyse our practises, policies, procedures and strategies. At the same time we formed the Communications and Community Engagement Reference Group to discuss over a 12 to 18 month period effective ways to include local people in Council processes.

Feedback from community members of the Reference Group, along with a report from Two Cents have fed significantly into this final toolkit which draws on other resources tailored specifically to our capacity as a regional Council with a limited rate base.

Although a final report, it is written to be expanded and developed in line with changes in community needs, available resources and technology.

# Introducing engagement

## When communications and community engagement meet

When we first released our Communications Strategy in 2013 we received feedback from the community that criticised us for adopting a document that focused primarily on outward bound information.

This observation was partly justified because the strategy did indeed look mainly at how to best release Council information to the community. However, its intent was not a declaration of how to get our information 'out there', instead it was an exploration of how to get the same information 'in there', meaning we wanted our information to be received by the community, easily processed and understood, and to generate conversations which involve friends, family, neighbours, peers, community groups, local businesses, Council staff and Councillors.

This document is designed to provide the community with the next steps that go beyond the act of delivering information.

It's a document that outlines new and existing methods of interacting with the community. It demonstrates strategies tailored to specific requirements, showing that community engagement is not an out of the box solution that fits all circumstances.

Indeed it is the choice of *how* we engage with the community that provides us with the desired feedback and participation that we constantly seek.

Feedback based on good communications and solid engagement is of great value to the broader community, but even at this stage it is possible for the process to stall if there is no plan in place which looks at what we do with this information once received.

We hope the information on the following pages will be of great interest to people wanting better involvement and understanding of the vital relationship between Council and the local community.

# Community engagement

## What is it, and why is it so important?

Community engagement is a valuable tool of understanding and action.

In its simplest form it is two or more parties influencing outcomes through talking and listening to one another.

A more complex view demonstrates a number of ways it can be used that are unique to the situation at hand.

It can be the simple act of informing the community of an operational matter (a road closure for example), consultation or feedback (requesting views on a proposed development), or actively seeking participation through direct involvement and collaboration (asking for input on town centre designs).

Similarly, community engagement also exists for local people to start the ball rolling in terms of initiating conversation, asking us what we think of their ideas or comments.

It is, however, important to note that community engagement is used to inform our decision making processes without replacing our responsibility as civic decision makers.

Thoughtfully executed community engagement builds trusting relationships between Council and the community, and is of mutual benefit to all parties involved. The following list demonstrates the individual benefits to Council and the community.

The benefits for us include:

- tapping into wider sources of information, perspectives and potential solutions, which improves the quality of decision-making
- ensuring decisions respond to the community's expressed needs and desires, which will ensure value for money for expenditure and improve respect for Council
- raising awareness in the community about the issue for which they are being engaged
- the opportunity to build consensus around a decision, which may reduce conflict
- demonstrating a willingness to involve the community, which increases Council's legitimacy and respect in the community
- demonstrating more transparency and accountability in the way decisions are made.

The benefits for you include:

- opportunities for learning, accessing information and resources, and building new skills
- improving networks and connections in the community
- feeling 'listened to' and valued
- influencing Council's decisions to better meet the community's needs and aspirations.

# Engagement framework

## When to inform, involve and empower

Bega Valley Shire Council has referred to the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) framework in this report in recognition that IAP2 is a world-class leader in the engagement of communities.

IAP2 has developed a spectrum for community engagement which provides a methodology for determining the level of influence a community has over a decision and therefore what level of engagement is appropriate.

The IAP2 Spectrum shows that differing levels of participation are appropriate, depending on the outcomes, timeframes, resources and levels of concern or interest in the decision to be made.

Most importantly, is the realisation that each participation level involves a promise made to the community. If the promise is not defined, or is understood differently by the participants and the decision maker, the process may result in dissatisfaction and/or disillusionment. At all public participation levels, promises should be made clear and upheld.

The IAP2 Spectrum is a tool that enables the user to determine the level of engagement and the most suitable techniques to use during the engagement process.

There are five different levels of engagement within the IAP2 Spectrum, which we use as a guide in determining the level of community engagement to be considered. For example, if Council has made a decision regarding a project, and it is not actively seeking community input then 'Inform' is the most appropriate category. On the other hand, if the outcome is of high community concern, then you may need to 'Involve' or 'Collaborate' with the community to determine an outcome that meets both the community and Council needs.

**A summary of the five different levels of public participation and the definition for each is outlined in the table below, along with the suggested decision maker for each level:**

Level of influence	Description of intent	Decision maker
<b>Inform</b>	To provide information about the problem or project to be addressed.	<b>Council</b>
<b>Consult</b>	To seek an opinion or input to inform a decision.	<b>Council</b>
<b>Involve</b>	To engage with stakeholders in order to understand and consider their input and feedback.	<b>Council</b>
<b>Collaborate</b>	To work in partnership to come to a decision.	<b>Council &amp; community</b>
<b>Empower</b>	To give the decision-making role to the stakeholders.	<b>Community</b>

Table 1: Different levels of community engagement, description of intent and identification of the decision maker.

## IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

The table below broadens the five levels of public participation as recommended by IAP2 to include examples of organisational goals, community benefits and a non-exhaustive list of engagement tools suited to the task at hand.

					
	<b>Inform</b>	<b>Consult</b>	<b>Involve</b>	<b>Collaborate</b>	<b>Empower</b>
<b>Public participation goal</b>	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.
<b>Promise to the public</b>	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.
<b>Example techniques</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Fact sheets</li> <li>▪ Web sites</li> <li>▪ Open houses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Public comment</li> <li>▪ Focus groups</li> <li>▪ Surveys</li> <li>▪ Public meetings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Workshops</li> <li>▪ Deliberative polling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Citizen advisory committees</li> <li>▪ Consensus-building</li> <li>▪ Participatory decision-making</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Citizen juries</li> <li>▪ Ballots</li> <li>▪ Delegated decision</li> </ul>

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# When to ask

## What types of issues should we engage about?

Engaging the community without a planned approach that takes into account the issues and their suitability for requesting input from the community can be counterproductive.

Below is a list of key issues that warrant a community engagement approach.

- community planning and land-use planning
- local government corporate planning (strategic plan and vision etc.)
- local government service levels/standards
- proposed local laws/by-laws
- the design and location of new infrastructure or facilities (including roads)
- specific projects or programs (such as sport and recreation, employment and training, community safety/crime prevention, flood mitigation, tourism)
- community issues
- legislative, policy or service issues that are the responsibility of higher levels of government, but where the Council wishes to convey community views (such as alcohol management plans, housing, education, the environment and health).

This is not an exhaustive list, and certainly we have engaged the community on a wide range of issues that are assessed on their own merits.

# What are the risks?

## Best intentions can provide unexpected results

Being aware of the key challenges and risks involved in community engagement and how to address them is vital for achieving the best results. The following pages highlight some challenges and what we can do to address them.

### Lack of follow through

If the Council is not seen to follow through on the outcomes of a community engagement process, the community may lose faith in the process.

#### *How to address this:*

- **PLAN:** Prepare details of past engagements that have been effective. Was the community adequately informed of the project outcomes?
- **DO:** During the initial engagement process highlight the next steps to the community. Ensure them that feedback on the project outcomes will be provided through appropriate channels.
- **REVIEW:** Capture community sentiment upon closing the loop.

### Managing community expectations

Residents may have unrealistic expectations that Council will implement all their suggestions or that Council has broader authority than is really the case.

#### *How to address this:*

- **PLAN:** Identify reason for engagement, achievability and community expectations.
- **DO:** Only engage beyond 'informing' if there is scope to consider community feedback. Explain process and what is achievable.
- **REVIEW:** Close the loop. Inform community of outcome and assess result.

### Lack of representativeness and inclusiveness

More vocal and well-organised interest groups may be more active than marginalised groups in the community. Some people may lack the time, confidence, language skills or mobility to contribute equitably. Unrepresentative participation will undermine the quality of the outcomes and the credibility of the process.

#### *How to address this:*

- **PLAN:** Identify who you want to engage and choose the appropriate tools to deliver achievable and practical outcomes.
- **DO:** Engage across existing community networks, providing multiple online and offline opportunities for the community to respond. Consider community accessibility, culturally appropriate engagement and target engagement if necessary.
- **REVIEW:** Ensure that feedback is provided and people have an opportunity to be involved in implementation.

## Over-engagement

Unnecessary or unproductive engagement can lead to 'consultation fatigue', making people cynical and antagonistic about community engagement.

### *How to address this:*

- **PLAN:** Consider using results from similar engagement projects, focus the project goals, investigate if other agencies have engaged on the same subject.
- **DO:** Work with other agencies in joint engagements. Meaningfully engage by explaining how community participation can change the course of a project.
- **REVIEW:** Close the loop. Demonstrate the value of engagement and highlight the results.

## Negative input

People may be overly negative in their input due to broader frustrations with the Council, such as from a lack of engagement in the past or from a view that their feedback was not adequately considered in previous engagement activities.

### *How to address this:*

- **PLAN:** Research past engagements in same location or on the same subject. Plan to be forward looking but also acknowledge past issues.
- **DO:** Listen actively to stakeholder concerns, acknowledge past experiences, and be polite and respectful. Focus discussion on the future, not the past. Use appropriate engagement methods (e.g. not a public meeting if there is controversy or anger).
- **REVIEW:** Close the loop. Demonstrate difference between past failures and current successful projects and highlight the role of engagement.

## Not enough time or resources to engage well

Half-hearted, poorly planned or poorly resourced community engagement will lead to poor outcomes.

### *How to address this:*

- **PLAN:** Be realistic about what level of engagement is possible with the available time and resources. Ensure adequate time and resources are available before starting. Refer to this report and toolkit to form achievable engagement plan.
- **DO:** Consider engagement tools that require minimal resources to run such as online tools. Conduct engagement with succinct material and only relevant information.
- **REVIEW:** Assess engagement. Was a good result achieved with minimal resources? Consider using in future engagements.

## Constituents' lack of interest in participating

Many Councils struggle to get sufficient participation by residents in engagement processes such as community meetings and workshops and are therefore reluctant to spend resources on engagement.

***How to address this:***

- **PLAN:** Invite relevant people/groups. Ask people how they would like to be involved. Plan to conduct engagements relevant community hubs with high foot traffic. identify reason for engagement, achievability and community expectations.
- **DO:** Ensure that activities are fun, social and held at a time of day and in locations that are convenient for people. Be inclusive and highlight past outcomes from successful projects.
- **REVIEW:** Close the loop. Provide feedback to people about how their input has been reflected in the project or idea and follow up with them about any ideas or actions they suggested.

# Developing a plan

## Getting started with community engagement

Including an explicit community engagement component within the overall project can sometimes be the difference between project success or failure. How we approach the development of an Engagement Toolkit for our projects will be dependent upon the size of the project, the level of complexity and the number of people involved.

For most projects, it is recommended that we treat community engagement as a separate, discrete project component.

***Accordingly, we recommend the development of specific tailored engagement plans for working with the various project stakeholders.***

In the following pages, we address some of the broader considerations in planning and managing effective engagement, and explore a model for matching the type of engagement to specific projects.

# Who to approach

Identifying the stakeholders who can help the most

## Stakeholder Identification

Stakeholder identification and analysis is integral to the engagement planning process. By understanding and managing the relationship between stakeholders (including community members) we increase the likelihood of achieving desired overall project outcomes. Conversely, failure to appreciate the dynamics of the relationships that exist between stakeholders can lead to obstructions that will ultimately have a negative impact upon the overall project.

Utilise appropriate staff across the organisation who may be well placed to identify and introduce stakeholders that are required for the engagement process.

## Engaging Diverse Groups

The local community comprises people with different backgrounds, needs, values and aspirations. Observable and unobservable, they include ethnicity, gender, age, tenure, functional background, socio-economic background, values, sexual orientation and physical and mental ability.

This broad definition of diversity emphasises the importance of an inclusive culture and of valuing difference between individuals and communities. While we should aim to be inclusive in all our work, at times it may be necessary to tailor our engagement processes and activities to enable some communities or individuals to fully participate. For example, if we are seeking comment on the design of a children's park, it would be in everyone's interest to target young families and accessibility groups/advocates in our engagement plan.

Established community networks and contacts should be regularly reviewed to identify gaps and new opportunities.

## Getting Started

General considerations for working more inclusively may include:

- Building trust is often the first step in successfully engaging with communities who have previously not been involved in project development. This may take considerable time, but mutual learning will provide long-term benefits.
- Consider the relevant and appropriate contacts who are best placed to connect Council with desired community groups or members. These contacts are valuable starting points for approaching and communicating with the group that you wish to engage.
- These contacts can also provide knowledge of the styles that are effective for communicating with particular communities and also vital practical knowledge, like when, where and how a particular group meets.

- Community agencies often operate on low and unpredictable levels of funding. This can limit their capacity to participate in an engagement process, especially in the face of more pressing or short-term issues such as helping clients to find accommodation, find a job or cope with a mental illness.
- Initially, we may need to negotiate ways to help these communities to work with us. For example, when we bring a group of stakeholders together for the first time, we may find that the issues and concerns that they raise are slightly different, or outside the scope of our project. To address this we could first try working with the group to address their immediate goals or priorities, possibly through bringing in other agencies to assist. By demonstrating a willingness to address the immediate concerns of the stakeholders, we are more likely to build a relationship of trust which will make it easier to work with this group and others during the current project and in the future.

# Human, Social and Community Capacity

It's important to look at participatory processes that build the capacity of community, stakeholders, and indeed us, to respond to social, environmental and economic challenges. Consequently, an understanding of human, social and community capacity is required for effective engagement planning and implementation.

Community capacity is the sum of two important concepts – human and social capacity. Human capacity is the skills, knowledge and abilities of individuals. Social capacity is the nature and strength of relationships and level of trust that exists between individuals.

These two elements can be mutually reinforcing. For example, individual skills can be applied much more effectively in an environment where there is trust and cooperation. Similarly, a close-knit community can respond more quickly to change if there is a range of individual skills and leadership abilities available to sustain development.

The increasing level of public impact seen in the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum has implications not just for the effect of the engagement on the community, but also the ability of the community to participate or respond positively to this impact.

Therefore, as part of our engagement planning we need to consider:

- What is the community's capacity (human and social) to participate or meet your expectations?
- What is our role in building community capacity?
- What is our capacity (human and social) and others in the project to build community capacity?

In addition, social relations constitute an additional resource for individuals and communities. By understanding the dynamics of these relationships, it is possible to derive substantial benefits towards achievement of mutual outcomes.

The process of disseminating information (inform) is fundamental to many government and non-government activities. While this serves to build individual knowledge (human capacity), it contributes only minimally to social capacity. This is particularly true of one-way processes such as newsletters or media releases.

However, engagement activities from further along the spectrum, such as a participatory extension or education program, can not only build individual knowledge (e.g. through the subject or nature of the program), but also build relationships between those who are learning together. Skills learnt are often reinforced through peer support, exchange of ideas and experiences. While there is an increasing level of expectation in participation and a greater reliance upon the abilities of those involved to meet this expectation, the positive impact on learning and relationships extends the potential success of the activity for the

government/organisation and the stakeholder/community.

Community engagement is an investment in both the present and the future of a community's human and social capacity. For example:

- If communities are not adequately informed, an imbalance in knowledge is created that privileges some and alienates others.
- If involvement is promised, or action from a consultation expected, but not delivered, trust between the community and government is eroded. Future approaches may then be compromised by current actions.
- If representatives of some segments of the community are empowered and not others, this can further divide a community.
- If leadership programs are not sensitive to community structure or diversity, they can erode any trust the leader has built within that community.

# Closing the loop

Thank people by showing them the results

It's very easy to view community engagement as a process that ends with community feedback. To end the process here can be frustrating for the people and stakeholders who have volunteered their time and thoughts to developing a project with Council.

It is empowering for the community to see how their feedback has assisted in the decision making process, and there are a number of tools available in part two of this report (the toolkit) designed specifically for feeding project outcomes back to the community.

Of course this may result in further feedback from the community which, depending on the project and situation, may require another round of community engagement. Refer to the 'developing your project engagement plan' section in the toolkit to determine if further engagement will be required.

# So what about us?

## What is our capacity as a Council to engage the community?

A communications and engagement review and Toolkit will of course need to be informed largely by feedback and involvement from our community. In 2014 we undertook a community survey that for the first time asked local people exactly what they thought about the way we communicate and engage.

As engagement is an issue that involves everyone in our community there was a push to attract Involvement (IAP2) from as wide a demographic as possible. With this in mind we provided the option for community members to meet with an independent consultant face-to-face, or to answer questions and provide feedback in an online survey.

The results from both were collated independently and reported back with findings and recommendations by Two Cents Group (Appendix A). Engagement tools and proposals (including those made by Two Cents Group) will be discussed in pages to come, but in building a picture of Bega Valley Shire Council's capacity to engage, we include below the feedback on the community survey and face-to-face sessions.

## Community feedback overview – Two Cents Group

The axiom 'you can't please all of the people, all of the time' is perhaps no more apt than when talking about local government. With the feedback collated from the community sessions, we have attempted to eliminate what were merely perceived as subjective 'gripes' and concentrate on particular areas of community concern and those that we have reason to believe would have cause to effect community-wide change.

Whilst it must be acknowledged that uncommon issues are important and can often be attributed to the feelings that residents have towards the Council, they are often due to extraordinary circumstances that aren't common problems within the community. They are, however, often great lessons in how communication should be carried out at all times. In line with this, John F. Kennedy's quote is deemed the most fitting.

*"The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word 'crisis.' One brush stroke stands for danger; the other for opportunity. In a crisis, be aware of the danger - but recognize the opportunity."*

**– John F. Kennedy**

Finally, another axiom that holds true in this case is that 'perception is reality'. Whilst it is very easy to dismiss people's concerns with a statement such as, 'that simply isn't the case', the only way we can actually solve the issue is to alter or correct their perception of the issue, rather than dismissing their complaint altogether.

Aligned with this, various communication methodologies have been segmented into a number of distinct categories. Some of the feedback and recommendations put forward may stray beyond the original brief, however, we are of the belief that they are all intrinsically linked, and

thus merit strong consideration.

## Communications & Community Engagement Feedback Survey: Key Outtakes

Approximately 41% of online survey respondents claimed to have a negative view of the Council. With almost half of the respondents attributing their perception to the way in which the Council communicates with the community, it is abundantly clear that a shift in perception can only be achieved through the Council's communication and engagement efforts.

As a result of the implementation and ongoing management of the recommended communications and engagement strategies, it is anticipated that the community's collective view of the Council will prove far more positive comparative to the current perceptions. The core objective of these initiatives will ultimately be to increase the level of positive perceptions by 10%-15%, and concurrently decrease the negative attitudes towards the Council by 10% within the next 12 months.

Primarily, respondents' negative views towards the Council could be attributed to the quantity and indeed the quality of community information provided, the accessibility of this information, and finally, the poor delivery methods adopted. Many were of the opinion that the Council was somewhat evasive and selective in terms of the information that was shared with the general public. Respondents felt that information was "spun" and released too slowly to the community, with residents left to seek out the information themselves, which at times would prove quite an arduous task. From these findings, it can be concluded that in order for the Council to improve the existing communication strategies and effectively shift community perceptions, the Council must be more open, honest and consistent in its communication efforts.

Respondents went on to highlight the Council's tendency to 'speak at' the community as opposed to listen to the community. Demonstrating what was perceived as a lack of understanding and responsiveness to community views and concerns, community members felt that decisions were often made without consulting the community, or were already made before any consultations took place, and no rationales were provided afterwards.

Community members also felt that the implementation of various initiatives was unnecessarily drawn out and that there was a lack of follow up action taken, with little to no review or re-consultation conducted to determine the success of particular initiatives from a community point of view. These key findings reinforce the Council's responsibility to establish and maintain an active two-way dialogue with the community on an ongoing basis, and remain transparent.

In addition to the accessibility of information, community members also voiced their concern regarding the accessibility of the Council staff. Respondents felt that this was far too restricted, perceiving there to be a void between Council and the broader community. Further expanding upon the notion of accessibility, social media proved to be at the lower end of the spectrum in terms of where residents typically turned to for Council news, however respondents have demonstrated a propensity to regularly engage with these forums.

The challenge that lies herein is to make Council staff and Councillors readily available to the community. In order to achieve this heightened accessibility, the existing social media forums should be relaunched as direct means for the Council and community members to communicate freely, at any time of day, in an open, yet somewhat controlled environment.

In spite of the aforementioned negative views that community members uphold, a significant proportion of respondents also shared some positive insights.

In stark contrast to the negative views shared, some community members felt that the Council had demonstrated genuine interest and made every effort to listen to the community's thoughts, suggestions and concerns. Additionally, these respondents were of the opinion that the Council was being proactive in improving their communication efforts and seeking feedback from the community, with the survey in question proving merely a testament to this. Another recurring positive outtake from the online survey was the perception that the Council had delivered adequate information using various communicative tools across both print and digital platforms.

Aligned with the aforementioned findings and the recommended methodologies, it is envisaged that the channels which will experience the greatest growth over the next year are the Bega Valley Shire Council website, Facebook and e-newsletters. Despite being the most commonly favoured and highly valued source of Council news at present, newspapers may, to an unknown extent, be affected in the future by Fairfax cost reductions.

In addition to this, word of mouth poses the greatest challenge in terms of achieving and maintaining message consistency, with the dissemination of misinformation and the dilution of important brand messages proving all too common. In an effort to lessen the likelihood that information will be relayed incorrectly, it is important that the Council endeavours to adequately educate and inform each and every member of the Bega Valley Shire community by ensuring that Council staff and the necessary information are readily accessible.

### **Community Sessions: Key Outtakes**

As demonstrated in the community survey results, a greater portion of community feedback was overwhelmingly negative, ignited by individual experiences. The view that community members upheld towards the Council, was more often than not, a direct result of the Council's communication and engagement initiatives.

Attendees acknowledged that spending more money was not the necessary solution, but rather the communication process needed to be smarter and far more simplified.

As expected, when community members were asked to rate the Council's communications and engagement efforts, many responses were evidently clouded by individual issues or concerns. This feeling shared by some community members, despite originating from a myriad of sources, was further distorted by a sense of confusion in regards to who was in fact culpable. In sharing their views of the Council's communications and engagement efforts, many suggested that whilst the manner in which the Council communicates and disseminates valuable information needed to be revised, it was primarily the content of this communication that members felt warranted the greatest improvement.

Typically, community members acknowledged the local newspaper and word of mouth as the two primary means in which Council news is sought or uncovered. The e-newsletter was also recognised, with members claiming to actively share this with fellow community members, however there were a few attendees who were unaware of the e-newsletters existence. No attendees were aware of, let alone had read, the Village Newsletter, and many did not find social media to be of any use. Social media appeared to be something that the majority of community members did not actively use, however this can almost certainly be attributed to attendees' lack of knowledge or understanding as to how social media works and the benefits it poses from a communication and engagement perspective, with current Facebook and

Twitter accounts allowing for significant reach into the community. Overall, attendees felt that community information was something that they had to seek out themselves, as opposed to it being readily available to them.

The way in which community news and information was consumed varied amongst attendees. As previously stated, very few attendees demonstrated a willingness or ability to use or refer to social media as a source of information, however all frequently listened to the local radio and read the newspaper. A number of community members scoured the entire local newspaper for Council news, whilst others reverted to the Community Link advert as a favoured source of information.

Community members acknowledged the challenge that the Council faced in effectively sharing news and engaging with a number of smaller communities that make up the Bega Valley Shire. In light of this, whilst the primary focus was on news that affected the community in its entirety, a more targeted focus on local areas was welcomed.

Once again, the notion of accessibility, or lack thereof, remained a primary concern for community members. Undoubtedly vital to the success of the Council's communication and engagement efforts, many felt that community news and information was not readily available and that the Council did not provide the necessary guidance to assist members with finding the sought after information. Attendees also felt that the information that was released, was selectively drip fed to the community, creating a sense of distrust. Full transcripts and/or audio recordings of Council meetings were suggested, whilst housing this and other valuable community news and information, in a centralised portal was also welcomed.

When posed with the question regarding the key challenges that come with communicating with nearly 34,000 community members who have different interests and needs, attendees primarily inferred that the biggest challenge is as the question states - the broad range of needs and concerns amongst the community. Additionally, a key challenge that we as observers inferred, was that those who were the most forthcoming in sharing their views, were those who had limited access and an inability to utilise digital platforms confidently, if at all. It goes without saying that social media would undoubtedly be the most effective means in which to disseminate information, from an engagement, time and cost perspective, however some individuals have been reluctant to embrace it.

The following is a summary of the core methods in which community members suggested the Council could improve its communication and engagement efforts:

- Daily radio segment.
- News updates included in rates notices.
- Transcripts or audio recordings of all Council meetings.
- Reinforcement of Council and Councillors' accountability for particular areas of concern.
- Educating and informing community about Council's internal processes.

## Customer service surveys

In addition to the Two Cents survey discussed above, Council runs monthly surveys to gauge the level of satisfaction with our levels of customer service. Results from these surveys are overwhelmingly positive and in contrast to some of the feedback discussed above.

# Where from here?

We've got your feedback, so what comes next?

It's clear from reading the summary of our communications and engagement survey that Council needs to continue working hard to strengthen its position in the community.

To demonstrate this we will look at the specific communications and engagement projects that are planned or under way, and in part two we will introduce an engagement toolkit that provides a wide range of engagement methods that can be selected and used to enhance community involvement in specific projects.

# Current activities

## What we're doing to communicate and engage

This report and toolkit draws on a number of resources aimed at harnessing the power of community feedback . The purpose of this is threefold:

- To improve relations between Council and the community
- To increase understanding of community and Council needs
- To facilitate the decision making process

When combined, this will significantly improve perception and reality of the way we operate as an organisation that engages the community. This is important because of the few sources generally drawn on to build individual perceptions, it is commonly 'known' perceptions that feed them the most.

This means that working hard to change the way we are perceived will go a long way towards breaking the vortex of poor perceptions feeding poor perceptions.

Working towards this outcome will of course take a large commitment from us; one which cannot rely solely on developing a range of community engagement tools, but instead it must actively grow with community expectations and be utilised appropriately across the whole of the organisation.

It may be the case that we are already working towards this with a range of new initiatives in the pipeline, but if they are not succeeding in changing perceptions then we need to ask ourselves why and rethink how we are communicating our plans and efforts to the community.

Key projects aimed at improving our communications and engagement practises will be detailed in the following pages.

# Community group

Local people helping us to better engage with the community

In addition to seeking external assistance from an industry consultant, Council resolved in April 2014 to seek assistance from the community in forming a workable and mutually beneficial Communications and Engagement Toolkit.

The Community Engagement and Communications Reference Group comprising community members from around the Shire, key Council staff and Councillors first met in May 2014 to openly discuss our successes, failures and a way forward for opening dialogue with the community.

The group is assisting Council to ensure we are listening, providing opportunity for people to have input in the decisions that affect them and that Council's processes and procedures are clear and consistently applied.

Important feedback regarding our engagement and communications practises is being taken on board and together the group is building the foundations of better relations between Council and the community.

# A new Council website

## The central place for information exchange

Council's existing website was identified in our Communications Strategy as:

"It's noted that our website fails to utilise the full suite of mediums available for communication in the Web 2.0 age. We need to move on from seeing a website as an electronic noticeboard. Technology now allows us to use websites as virtual meeting places where information can be discussed and shared. We need to follow the trends in web usage, offering interactivity through numerous mediums."

On top of this we would add that our website needs to be utilised as a central place for community engagement. Websites are still the only medium that offers the ability to instantly access relevant information and provide feedback. Organisational websites are perfectly suited to housing user friendly and effective engagement tools that can be switched on and off to suit individual projects.

Additionally, we are first to admit that finding information on our current website can be a challenge. This is a common fault with websites containing large amounts of information, and when combined with our current limitations with online engagement it has been a major driver to develop something new.

We are in the process of building a brand new website that has at its core easy navigation and multilevel community engagement tools. Navigation is being approached in a logical manner that serves the end user and is backed by a greatly improved search function. We are in the process of workshoping navigation with our Community Engagement and Communications Reference Group, who are all regular users of Council's website and subsequently well qualified to provide us with valuable advice.

Online engagement tools have been significantly added to and improved. As this Toolkit points out, community engagement is not a one-size-fits-all solution to organisations wanting community input, it's therefore important that we have available the right engagement tools for the job and consider their use in line with the intended audience.

The new website's 'Your Say' section will house tools such as simple Like/Dislike rating buttons as per a Two Cents recommendation (see Appendix A), open comments sections, online surveys, quick polls, image voting, formal submissions and interactive mapping. The above tools will be housed within the new website's architecture negating the need to sign in and navigate to an external site (such as Bang the Table as is the common approach). This breaks down a significant barrier because time consuming activities such as signing in or loading new websites can turn people away from online participation.

The new website will be ready for launch by mid-2015.

# Your own community app

## An app that's run by you

Still in the development stage, this mobile application (app) will provide a place for the community to engage with each other and with Council on any matter they deem relevant and important.

Council's only role in this app will be to develop it, contribute to the conversation and moderate the content openly, fairly and transparently. This means we will only remove content if it is found to be unfair to other users of the app. Fair complaints of Council services will not be moderated.

The engagement component will work along the lines of a standard social media site such as Facebook, but will be better suited to discuss local issues as the subject matters will be targeted and not lost in the ever flowing Facebook news feed.

A community app will also present us with a unique opportunity to target our communications at a wider local demographic through mobile services such as push notifications and GPS coordinates, meaning that a question of where we should build a play park in Pambula could be targeted at people in the Pambula area.

The app will be far more than Council asking the community what it thinks of our operational matters; we will be one voice among many, and people will be free to use the app for browsing community driven features such as events or photo galleries posted by local residents. The purpose of this is to work not just at the coal face of engagement through directly asking questions of local people, but to build the foundations of open dialogue through giving back to the community and building trust.

This is a work in progress and funds have been set aside for its development. We anticipate its delivery by mid-2016.

# Social media

## Using it right and helping others to get connected

Social media is a technology that is simultaneously capable of inspiring, empowering, disabling and isolating the community. It is not the 'silver bullet' to solving disengagement issues as many organisations are realising, but if conducted inclusively and in synchronisation with other community engagement tools it can be a very effective means of communicating with and harnessing feedback from local residents.

A key finding and recommendation in the Two Cents review was that as a community organisation we should be providing support for members of the community who for a number of reasons are yet to, or simply do not want to, embrace social media as a means of communicating with Council. In the report it says:

“One of the biggest challenges lies within the digital realm. Many of the residents do not have full access to the internet, own a smartphone nor feel comfortable communicating through these digital forums. However, social media, predominantly Facebook, would be the most cost and time effective solution for the Council to actively facilitate meaningful community engagement.”

The Two Cents report goes on to discuss methods of addressing the divide between people who use social media and those who don't. While it recognises that internet access is a problem in some places within the Shire, the report recommends that considerable improvements to engagement outcomes will be felt by adopting a targeted training plan for people with limited experience in using social media and other online tools.

“Although many have questioned social media's validity as an effective communication channel and a large majority of community members demonstrated a lack of knowledge and understanding of social media, communicating with residents through such forums is undoubtedly the most effective means in which to meet these expectations.

In an effort to counter community members' concerns regarding social media that stem from a lack of knowledge and understanding of the platforms, and ultimately improve the user experience, it is highly recommended that the Council provide residents with free workshops to educate and empower community members to confidently engage online. The Council could engage an experienced representative from within the Council, or an external provider to facilitate the workshops.

Addressing the different platforms that the Council typically utilises, whilst also catering to users' varying degrees of experience, the workshops could be conducted on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. The website, e-newsletter, Village Newsletter and other printed materials that are displayed on local notice boards in community halls, town centres and public libraries, should all be employed to promote the workshops in order to secure community-wide awareness.”

Our communications and engagement community survey indicated strong use of online (website, social media, e-news) mediums in discovering Council information. When combined they show more people accessing our information via electronic mediums than the traditional medium of newspapers. The difference between discovering information (communications) and providing feedback (engagement) however is significant and we must always strive for best practice in terms of content and how electronic mediums are utilised. The Two Cents report recommends:

“Deemed suitable platforms for information dissemination, communication and engagement, social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter can greatly assist in the facilitation of a two-way dialogue between the Council and the community. With a view to improving the accessibility of local news and the Councillors themselves, the existing social media forums should be revised as a direct means for this two-way dialogue to flourish.

At present, whilst updates remain quite regular, engagement on the Council Facebook page is considerably low. In order to improve this and ensure that the Council remains friendly, approachable, interactive and informative, more visual and engaging content must be shared on a regular basis.

The following are the four key principles that must drive all social media engagement initiatives on a day-to-day basis, to ensure that the aforementioned objectives are consistently achieved:

### Consistency

- Ensure that the Council’s personality, tone and language utilised remain consistent across all online and offline platforms.
- Aligning with the Council’s brand values, the Council should always be friendly, approachable, honest and informative.
- New content should be posted on the Council’s social media pages daily to maintain consistency and reaffirm the Council’s online presence.
- Content posts can be scheduled in advance to save time, across multiple platforms. Facebook in particular offers this functionality, however there are also other tools that can help you manage content posting across multiple platforms, such as Hootsuite.
- Respond to all comments and posts within 1-2 days, even if it is to simply acknowledge that it has been received.

### Relevancy

- Ensure that all content posted is of interest to the community and enriches the Council’s personality and engagement initiatives, whilst consistently adding value to the online exchange between the Council and the community at large.

### Visibility

- Identify pages of interest and local businesses for Bega Valley Shire Council to ‘like’ or ‘follow’.
- This will increase the Council’s visibility and also grant access to more content that may well be worth sharing with the Council’s followers.

- Run competitions with the objective being to increase engagement, be that through ‘likes’, ‘comments’ or ‘shares’, drive traffic to the website and capture data.

## Content

- Consistently updating the Bega Valley Shire Council social media pages on a regular basis with interesting, informative and engaging content that resonates with the local community, is pivotal for building credibility amongst the community and developing an engaged and active following online. Furthermore, in doing so, the overall perception of the Council can be improved in the minds of residents and the establishment of an active two-way dialogue facilitated.
- The following are a few examples of types of content that the Council should disseminate through the existing social media forums. These can take the form of written updates, photos, videos, infographics etc, and be shared across each of the adopted platforms where appropriate.
  - Community news and updates advising residents of local service interruptions, upcoming events and initiatives (somewhat similar to a noticeboard).
  - Seek feedback on Council decisions and community issues.
  - Pose questions, seek suggestions and run polls to garner community insight and intelligence.
  - Real-time updates during emergencies.
  - Showcase local businesses and their promotional activities.
  - Run community competitions to generate active engagement e.g. photo sharing, voting etc.
  - Council staff and Councillor profiles.

Social media, like any form of community engagement, must not be used as an out-of-the-box-solution. Different projects and people will require and benefit from different approaches and methods that are appropriate to the job at hand, and sometimes engaging electronically is not suitable at all.

The extensive power and reach of social media, however, plus its capacity to get people talking should not be overlooked. Encouraging increased uptake in engagement on our primary social media site (currently Facebook) is strongly encouraged. For example, in 2014 when local floods resulted in road closures throughout the Shire, we posted regular updates on our Facebook page which, in spite of having currently 1,660 followers on our page, we reached more than 18,000 unique viewers over the space of a few days.

A strong focus on building local users, plus improving our content and online strategies, will reap significant benefits for Council and the Community. This includes developing a minimum response time for addressing comments through our commitment to providing timely and relevant community information.

# Analogue is important too

## When digital doesn't do enough

The explosion of digital communications and engagement cannot be ignored by organisations wishing to conduct open dialogue with its community. The mutual benefits of online engagement are many, but we will always remain committed to maintaining a strong focus on face-to-face and manual engagement methods. While these traditional methods may not be as effective in terms of reach, they are still very powerful as they are more personal and capable of generating positive outcomes through the act of discussion. Face-to-face engagement can be more reliable in terms of accuracy and the ability for both parties to fully understand each other's view.

With this in mind we currently have in place a number of non-digital communications and engagement processes that are generally well received in the community.

### **Village Newsletter: a weekly village based newsletter**

Launched in 2014, this initiative to deliver information relevant to people living in the Shire's villages and localities is an important communications tool and engagement facilitator. It brings Council information to the attention of people who may not have Internet access or have difficulty accessing information from other traditional news mediums. The Village Newsletter has been very well received and is available through Post Offices, village halls, and is circulated and shared on village e-news networks.

### **Roving Councillor workshops: bringing Councillors and staff to your town**

Council hosts regular 'roving' workshops in the major town centres of Bermagui, Bega, Merimbula and Eden. The purpose of the workshops is to enable the community to bring forward ideas, issues and local topics to Council for discussion. It also provides an opportunity for the Council to have a greater connection with the community. Roving workshops are advertised through mainstream print media including press releases and our Community Link paid advert, online media including Facebook and our website, and through email invites to key stakeholder groups such as business chambers. The local media are also invited and encouraged to ask questions. Plans are in place to expand the roving workshops to the Shire's main villages over the next 12 months.

### **Community Link: a fortnightly information advert in the local newspapers**

This long running regular in our local newspapers features fortnightly updates on Council news and information. It's currently undergoing change with a proposed move to increase interactivity and engagement through connecting its content to online items

### **Face-to-face conversation: sometimes still the best way to engage**

For engagement to be at its most effective, we need feedback to be a representation of the community.

Our social media sites and our website do this to an extent, and our Facebook page in particular has considerably broadened our reach, but we want to capture the spontaneous nature of being asked a simple question:

- “What do you think?”
- “What would you like to be built right here?”
- “What’s the most incredible experience you’ve had in a public space?”

We’re taking our questions to the community. We’re interviewing people on the street and asking them how they would like their community to develop.

Video/audio/image gallery and written feedback will be presented back to the community through numerous mediums, creating an effective balance between personal and digital mediums.

This is a key driver for the development of Place Based engagement which empowers communities to work with Council in forming strong and successful neighbourhoods. Place based engagement is discussed further on page 34.

This links with a key finding in our Communications Strategy through providing access to easy and emotive information, and encouraging the spreading of easy and emotive conversation as a result.

### **Community events: taking information to the community**

If we are working on a project that needs detailed explanation, we take the conversation to you with a Council presence at local markets or fairs. This allows us to be flexible in who we approach for comment. If it is a project that involves the broader community we will aim to approach a diverse crowd, or if it involves a niche stakeholder group we will target our engagement methods accordingly.

### **Suggestion boxes: a simple way to tell us what you think**

Customer suggestion boxes are now provided in all library branches and the front counter of the Council administration building. The purpose of the suggestion boxes is to provide an avenue for the community to provide feedback or share an idea with Council. All suggestions are recorded and responded to. As a direct complimentary program to the customer suggestion boxes, an online suggestion function is also provided via our website. Suggestions are handled using the same process as the suggestion boxes located in libraries and the administration building.

### **Listening posts: onsite community engagement**

Listening posts are effective in gaining input from numerous locations regarding large projects affecting the broader community. Similar in style to community events engagement, our listening post method involves setting up in locations specifically related to proposed projects.

# Case study: listening posts

## Using face-to-face engagement for the best results

Working with Landscape Architects, Spiire Australia, Council formed a community engagement plan to assist with developing landscape masterplans for the Shire's four major towns.

Listening posts were chosen as a key engagement tool because of their suitability for setting up at the site of a proposed project. This was beneficial for Council and the community because people were able to get a feel of proposed changes by being in the place where they would occur, and Council had access to a wide local demographic.

This was more effective than traditional village hall style events where the expectation is to host a meeting at a specific time and place. These meetings tend to attract a narrow section of the community resulting in feedback that is not as useful as the holistic view achieved at listening posts.

We also found it beneficial to have external consultants leading the listening post events. Their expertise in the field was valued by the community and people appreciated the consultant's independence and degree of separation from Council strategies.

The listening posts were complimented with online surveys that allowed for a more structured approach to gathering community feedback. Using a combined approach of face-to-face and online engagement allowed for the right balance of qualitative and quantitative data to inform the final draft plan that was adopted unanimously in February 2015.

# Place based engagement

## Neighborhoods with voices and vision

Place-based approaches are an 'asset approach' because they focus on the positive qualities that a community possesses. These may be skills, knowledge or connections which can be built upon to help communities improve their own wellbeing.

Using an asset approach such as place based engagement means viewing communities and their capacity to facilitate change and growth from within as a productive tool for local development.

The asset approach:

- Identifies and makes visible the assets within a community through establishing a local skills and knowledge base
- Sees citizens and communities as the co-producers of wellbeing, rather than the recipients of services
- Promotes community networks, relationships and friendships that can provide caring, mutual help and empowerment
- Values what works well in an area
- Identifies what has the potential to improve the local community
- Supports individuals' strong communities through self-esteem, coping strategies, resilience skills, relationships, friendships, knowledge and personal resources
- Empowers communities to control their futures and create tangible resources such as services, funds and buildings.

In addition to the asset approach listed above, the specific principles of utilising a place based approach are detailed below:

- Designed to meet the unique needs of locations
- Engage stakeholders across all sectors in collaborative decision-making
- Seize opportunities, particularly local skills and resources
- Evolve and adapt to new learning and stakeholder interests
- Encourage collaborative action by crossing organisational borders and interests
- Pull together assets and knowledge through shared ownership

Through adopting place based community engagement in the Bega Valley Shire we will be taking the next step in forging relationships with strong and resilient communities. We want frank and open discussions with large and small communities who have a solid understanding of their needs, limitations, means and skills base.

These will not be single issue engagements, but ongoing partnerships capable of working together to build communities using joint assets from individuals, groups and Council.

# Reach for the toolkit

The how to on community engagement for your project

Thank you for reading the BVSC Community Engagement and Communications Report. On the following pages you will find the summarised and full Two Cents report. In section two, the BVSC Community Engagement and Communications Toolkit you will find important steps that guide you through the process of developing and implementing a community engagement plan for your specific project.

# Appendix 1a

## Two Cents Group: Bega Valley Shire Council Draft Communications & Community Engagement Report

The following is a summary of the Communications and Engagement Report conducted by the Two Cents Group. The recommendations are listed in the following pages for the purpose of viewing in tandem with our list of current engagement activities. When viewed together a holistic picture of our strengths and weaknesses will be formed and a subsequent list of engagement tools and practises will be presented.

The full report follows the summary.

### Key findings

Following investigation of Council's community and engagement survey and face-to-face session, as well as investigation of our current practises and procedures, the Two Cents Group found that:

#### Community animosity

There exists a level of animosity within the community directed at Council and Councillors. According to Two Cents, the animosity is often a result of unsuccessful interactions and claimed issues of accountability.

#### Access to information

A common theme in the community sessions and survey was dissatisfaction with the means offered for the community to access information from a centralised area.

#### Online communications disparity

A global and societal shift to electronic and online media is taking place but the Shire's unique demographic and geographic placing presents a barrier to some in accessing online services.

#### Brand values

Council's brand values are intrinsically linked to community perceptions and delivery of promises. Brand values are identified in the report as: not merely what an organisation claims to be, but rather a reflection of what a resident says based on their experience with the brand.

#### Confused messaging

Sometimes the messaging within Council's key public areas (reception) can be confusing to the public.

#### Internal communications

Developing project unique engagement plans is not prioritised across the whole organisation. This reflects a lack of internal process and cohesion between project outcomes and the community.

## Recommendations

Based on the report's findings, the following recommendations were made:

### Brand promises

Brand promises, although informally well known to the people who work for Council, may not be familiar to the broader community. It is strongly recommended that Council publicly launch the following core brand promises, and continue to measure the delivery of these promises through regular and consistent engagement with the community:

- Council and its representatives strive to foster a safe and supportive community environment for each and every one of its residents by providing the necessary facilities, infrastructure and ongoing support.
- Council's communication and engagement initiatives are guided by the principles of honesty, integrity and credibility.
- Council endeavours to remain responsive to the community's needs and ensure the transparency and accessibility of community news and information, across a broad range of mediums and in a timely manner.
- The Council aspires to provide ample opportunity for meaningful community engagement, both online and offline.
- The Council accepts responsibility for all decisions that are made on behalf of community members.

### Developing a process

It is imperative that Council follows a methodical process of agreed actions followed by adequate communication and engagement plans and delivered/explained to the community in a timely and consistent manner.

### Level of engagement

Using industry accepted engagement modelling, Council must determine the level of engagement suitable to individual projects or actions. The chosen level may at times need explanation and the accepted engagement model should always be available for community reference.

### Staff training

It is recommended that new and existing staff with roles in project facilitation and customer contact be provided with training that outlines the mutual benefits and process of developing project specific community engagement plans. Initial training will be face-to-face learning directed by Council management and communications staff, with follow up content to be available on a newly developed staff intranet to be delivered this year.

### Internal communications & project management

This important first step involves the completion of project specific engagement plans that work across different internal groups and sections. To maximise effectiveness it is vital that the process of sharing information and available skills is formalised into a working check sheet that is signed off by Council officers upon the completion of tasks. Effective internal communications is paramount in developing project engagement plans because it fully utilises the Council skills base to prepare, publish and share information for the community to consider.

## **New website launch**

It is recommended that a project engagement plan be utilised to prepare for the launch of Council's new website, highlighting the significant improvements in information delivery and online engagement. The engagement plan should include a follow-up survey to gauge community satisfaction after a six month period.

## **News and updates with rates notices**

This recommendation was posed by multiple residents during the community sessions and through the online communications survey. Many people were interested in having Council and community news sent out with the rates notice. This is something we have trialled with specific information in the past, however it should be noted that uptake of electronic notices is likely to increase in the future.

## **Village Newsletter**

This successful weekly publication is likely to increase its effectiveness with development of a publicity plan and a subsequent push to increase its circulation. Note: the Two Cents report mentions our failure to adequately launch the publication. This was intentional until a greater circulation was achieved.

## **Social media**

See pages 27 – 29 and Appendix A.

## **New initiatives**

The following recommendations detail proposed new engagement methods as outlined in the Two Cents report. These are intended to complement existing practises and are drawn largely from issues raised in the community survey and face-to-face sessions.

### **Council radio segment**

A recommendation to facilitate a regular weekly or fortnightly segment on local radio to improve access to senior staff and Councillors.

### **Touch screen kiosks**

The report recommends mobile technology be fully utilised through interactive and temporary touch screen kiosks located in central locations that boast high foot traffic throughout the Shire, such as outside supermarkets, post offices, retail precincts and schools. Tablets can be made available to the public as a means to source information and/or communicate directly with the Council. The tablets will help to drive engagement through the website, whilst also providing general information for visitors such as maps of local areas. Boasting a heightened level of interactivity and serving a multitude of purposes, the tablets will have a community-wide appeal.

### **Live chat & webinars**

Reinforce Councillors' community standing and improve accessibility through the provision of live chat and webinars on the Council website and via the existing Facebook profile. Promoted across Facebook and Twitter, e-newsletters and the Council website, Councillors can provide community members with the opportunity to engage in live online discussions in a unique, compelling and timely manner.

## Neighbourhood meetings & educational seminars

Neighbourhood meetings are proposed to be informal meetings hosted by Councillors in key urban and rural neighbourhoods within the Shire. Educational seminars are formal meetings targeted at key stakeholders and based on specific issues with awareness raising as the focus.

## Council internal processes

It is recommended that the Council be more forthcoming in providing residents with an insight into the processes that are followed and how particular projects are progressing. In an effort to educate, inform and instil confidence in the Council, information pertaining to the scope and timeline of a project, or the final decision and subsequent results of a particular initiative should be openly shared with community members in a timely manner. *Note: Council has now resolved to place quarterly major project updates on its website. The first update was uploaded in February 2015.*

## Council scorecard

The report recommends that a Council scorecard be established. The scorecard will assist the Council in its endeavour to keep the community informed, measure the Council's progress and achievements, and grant community members the opportunity to have their say.



# Bega Valley Shire Council

*Draft Communications & Community Engagement Report*



# Contents

## **1.0 Executive Overview**

## **2.0 Collated Feedback Overview**

**2.1** *Communications & Community Engagement Feedback Survey Key Outtakes*

**2.2** *Community Sessions Key Outtakes*

## **3.0 Best Practice**

**3.1** *Council Brand Values*

**3.2** *Council Brand Promises*

**3.3** *Consumer Engagement Model*

**3.4** *Consumer Engagement Case Study*

**3.5** *Best Practice Model*

**3.6** *Staff Training*

**3.7** *Internal Communications*

## **4.0 Recommendations**

### **4.1 Existing Initiatives**

4.1.1 Website

4.1.2 News & Updates with Rates Notices

4.1.3 Village Newsletter

4.1.4 Social Media

### **4.2 New Initiatives**

4.2.1 Interactive Complaint Reconciliation Forum

4.2.2 Radio Segment

4.2.3 Billboard Placements

4.2.4 Touch Screen Kiosks

4.2.5 Live Chat & Webinars

4.2.6 Neighbourhood Meetings

4.2.7 Educational Seminars

4.2.8 Council Internal Processes

## **5.0 Measurement and KPIs**

**5.1** *Issue or Complaint Reconciliation Survey*

**5.2** *Council Scorecard*

## **6.0 Conclusion**

# 1.0 Executive Overview

The following report has been collated to assist the Bega Valley Shire Council with identifying the key challenges that are negatively impacting the Council's communications and engagement initiatives, and provides recommendations to help govern their improvement. The information, results and feedback obtained from the following sources informed the generation of the report, offering great insight into how the Council and the Bega Valley Shire community currently converse with one another;

- Communications and community engagement feedback survey
- Community listening sessions
- Extensive research and anecdotal findings

Whilst many of the issues highlighted by various community members fell outside the remit of the original brief, they all undoubtedly play a role in defining the status of the Council brand, and as such, dictate the success of the communication and engagement strategy.

The key objectives of this report are to guide the Council in it's efforts to:

- Drive meaningful, informed and authentic engagement with the community.
- Educate, inform and empower the local community.
- Actively encourage community members to get involved in decision making processes and provide feedback whenever sought.
- Provide community members with ample opportunity to openly communicate and engage with the Council and it's representatives.
- Be proactive and receptive to new and innovative ways to communicate and engage with the community.
- Alter the community's perception of the Council and strengthen their unification.

Throughout the three main community sessions that were carried out on behalf of Bega Valley Shire Council, it became increasingly evident that there existed a great deal of animosity towards both the Council and the Councillors, of which was primarily based on individual experiences and community members' interactions with the Council. Frequently, there was also a fractured understanding of exactly

who they should direct their indignation towards. However, the common concern amongst community members, across all of the sessions, proved to be accountability.

From a communication perspective, there appears little in the way of centralised communication tools where residents can find out information about their specific concerns with ease. Since the launch of the Village Newsletter, it became very apparent that not one attendee had seen or heard of the publication. This lack of awareness highlights an underlying issue, whereby communication initiatives such as these lack the benefit of promotion and adequate distribution, despite the best intentions of the initiative.

One of the biggest challenges lies within the digital realm. Many of the residents do not have full access to the internet, own a smartphone nor feel comfortable communicating through these digital forums. However, social media, predominantly Facebook, would be the most cost and time effective solution for the Council to actively facilitate meaningful community engagement. Subsequently, this then leads to a considerable disparity between the most effective communicative medium for the Council and the manner in which the residents can and prefer to be communicated with.

In developing, implementing and monitoring a revised communication and engagement strategy, it was deemed crucial that the Council adopt a Best Practice Model. A six stage process has been devised to provide the Council with a framework to guide the execution of methodical communication and engagement initiatives, and also aid the internal decision making and issue management processes.

Informed by the Council's past and present communications and engagement activities, and the insights garnered from the community sessions and online survey, the following recommendations have been posed to the Council for strong consideration:

- News and updates included with annual rates notices.
- Launch and distribute the Village Newsletter through a range of channels.
- Strengthen social media engagement.

# 1.0 Executive Overview

- Establish a public interactive complaint reconciliation forum.
- Secure a weekly/fortnightly radio segment.
- Secure billboard placements throughout the Bega Valley Shire.
- Install touch screen kiosks in prominent, high foot-traffic areas of the Bega Valley Shire.
- Facilitate live chat and webinars.
- Hold neighbourhood meetings and educational seminars.
- Share Council's internal processes, dialogue and project timelines.
- Conduct regular internal communication and engagement training.

The key metrics that will assist the Council in quantifying the efficacy of these initiatives are:

- Website visits and engagement.
- Number of e-newsletter sign ups.
- Social media engagement.
- Webinar or video views and engagement.
- Seminar or meeting attendance and engagement.
- Radio listeners and on-air engagement.
- Issue/complain reconciliation.
- Community survey completions, and feedback received.
- Community sessions attendance and engagement.
- Active participation in Council decision making processes.
- Anecdotal observations and word-of-mouth (WOM).
- Communications with the Council and service experience.
- Environmental support.
- Council scorecard results.

## 2.0 Collated Feedback Overview

The axiom 'you can't please all of the people, all of the time' is perhaps no more apt than when talking about local government. With the feedback collated from the community sessions, we have attempted to eliminate what were merely perceived as subjective 'gripes' and concentrate on particular areas of community concern and those that we have reason to believe would have cause to effect community-wide change.

Therefore, singular issues have been pushed to the side for the purpose of the community engagement review, with common issues given precedence. Whilst it must be acknowledged that such uncommon issues are important and can often be attributed to the feelings that residents have towards the Council, they are often due to extraordinary circumstances that aren't common problems within the community. They are, however, often great lessons in how communication should be carried out at all times. In line with this, John F. Kennedy's quote is deemed the most fitting;

*"The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word 'crisis.' One brush stroke stands for danger; the other for opportunity. In a crisis, be aware of the danger - but recognize the opportunity."*

**- John F. Kennedy**

Finally, another axiom that holds true in this case is that 'perception is reality'. Whilst it is very easy to dismiss people's concerns with a statement such as, 'that simply isn't the case', the only way we can actually solve the issue is to alter or correct their perception of the issue, rather than dismissing their complaint altogether.

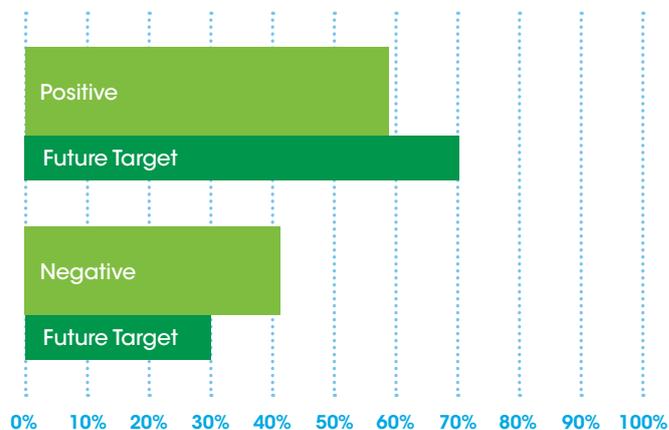
Aligned with this, various communication methodologies have been segmented into a number of distinct categories. Some of the feedback and recommendations put forward may stray beyond the original brief, however, we are of the belief that they are all intrinsically linked, and thus merit strong consideration.

### 2.1 Communications & Community Engagement Feedback Survey Key Outtakes

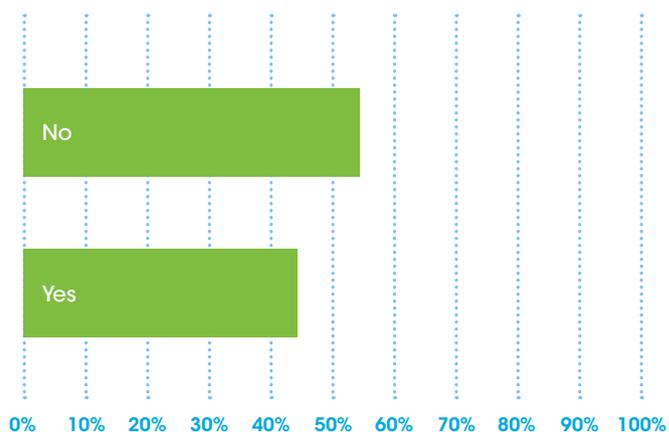
Approximately 41% of online survey respondents claimed to have a negative view of the Council.

With almost half of the respondents attributing their perception to the way in which the Council communicates with the community, it is abundantly clear that a shift in perception can only be achieved through the Council's communication and engagement efforts.

#### Q5. In general, do you hold an overall positive or negative view of Bega Valley Shire Council?



#### Q6. Does your answer to question five relate in any way to the way Council communicates with the community?



As a result of the implementation and ongoing management of the recommended communications and engagement strategies, it is anticipated that the community's collective view of the Council will prove far more positive comparative to the current perceptions. The core objective of these initiatives

## 2.0 Collated Feedback Overview

will ultimately be to increase the level of positive perceptions by 10%-15%, and concurrently decrease the negative attitudes towards the Council by 10% within the next 12 months.

Primarily, respondents' negative views towards the Council could be attributed to the quantity and indeed the quality of community information provided, the accessibility of this information, and finally, the poor delivery methods adopted. Many were of the opinion that the Council was somewhat evasive and selective in terms of the information that was shared with the general public. Respondents felt that information was "spun" and released too slowly to the community, with residents left to seek out the information themselves, which at times would prove quite an arduous task. From these findings, it can be concluded that in order for the Council to improve the existing communication strategies and effectively shift community perceptions, the Council must be more open, honest and consistent in its communication efforts.

Respondents went on to highlight the Council's tendency to 'speak at' the community as opposed to listen to the community. Demonstrating what was perceived as a lack of understanding and responsiveness to community views and concerns, community members felt that decisions were often made without consulting the community, or were

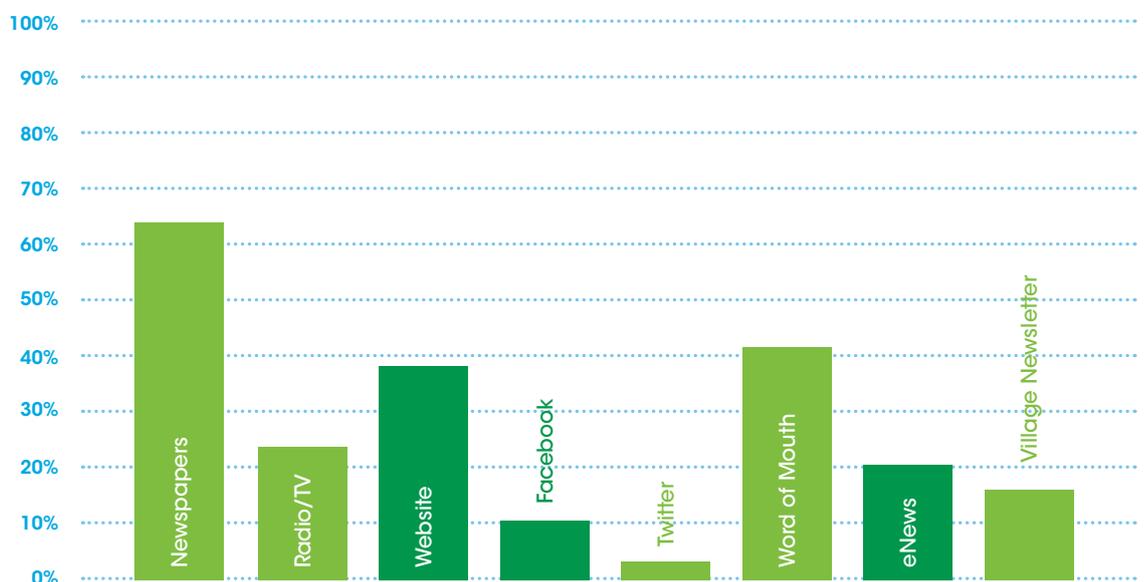
already made before any consultations took place, and no rationales were provided afterwards.

Community members also felt that the implementation of various initiatives was unnecessarily drawn out and that there was a lack of follow up action taken, with little to no review or re-consultation conducted to determine the success of particular initiatives from a community point of view. These key findings merely reinforce the Council's responsibility to establish and maintain an active two-way dialogue with the community on an ongoing basis, and remain transparent.

In addition to the accessibility of information, community members also voiced their concern regarding the accessibility of the Council members themselves. Respondents felt that this was far too restricted, perceiving there to be a void between Council members, Councillors and the broader community as a whole. Further expanding upon the notion of accessibility, social media proved to be at the lower end of the spectrum in terms of where residents typically turned to for Council news, however respondents have demonstrated a propensity to regularly engage with these forums.

The challenge that lies herein, is to make Council members and the Councillors alike readily available to the community. In order to achieve this heightened accessibility, the existing social

**Q2. How do you usually find out about Council news?**



## 2.0 Collated Feedback Overview

media forums should be relaunched as direct means for the Council and community members to communicate freely, at any time of day, in an open, yet somewhat controlled environment.

In spite of the aforementioned negative views that community members uphold, a significant proportion of respondents also shared some positive insights. In stark contrast to the negative views shared, some community members felt that the Council had demonstrated genuine interest and made every effort to listen to the community's thoughts, suggestions and concerns. Additionally, these such respondents were of the opinion that the Council was being proactive in improving their communication efforts and seeking feedback from the community, with the survey in question proving merely a testament to this. Another recurring positive outtake from the online survey was the perception that the Council had delivered adequate information using various communicative tools across both print and digital platforms.

Aligned with the aforementioned findings and the recommended methodologies, it is envisaged that the channels which will experience the greatest growth over the next year are the Bega Valley Shire Council website, Facebook and e-newsletters. Despite being the most commonly favoured source of Council news at present, newspapers are expected to be affected by a considerable cost-reduction due to be implemented by Fairfax. It is possible that the four local papers that are currently distributed throughout the Bega Valley Shire may be rationalised as part of the Fairfax cost saving strategy. This significant cut has significant potential to decrease the quantity of local news, and will nevertheless have a direct bearing on the circulation and readership of the existing publications.

In addition to this, word of mouth poses the greatest challenge in terms of achieving and maintaining message consistency, with the dissemination of misinformation and the dilution of important brand messages proving all too common. In an effort to lessen the likelihood that information will be relayed incorrectly, it is important that the Council endeavours to adequately educate and inform each and every member of the Bega Valley Shire community by ensuring that Council staff and the necessary information are readily accessible.

### 2.2 Community Sessions Key Outtakes

As demonstrated in the community survey results, a greater portion of community feedback was overwhelmingly negative and subsequently ignited by individual experiences. The view that community members upheld towards the Council, was more often than not, a direct result of the Council's communication and engagement initiatives. Attendees acknowledged that spending more money was not the necessary solution, but rather the communication process needed to be smarter and far more simplified.

As expected, when community members were asked to rate the Council's communications and engagement efforts, many responses were evidently clouded by individual issues or concerns that disallowed community members to respond objectively. This indignation that many community members shared, despite originating from a myriad of sources, was further distorted by a sense of confusion in regards to who was in fact culpable. In sharing their views of the Councils' communications and engagement efforts, many suggested that whilst the manner in which the Council communicates and disseminates valuable information needed to be revised, it was primarily the content of this communication that members felt warranted the greatest improvement.

Typically, community members acknowledged the local newspaper and word of mouth as the two primary means in which Council news is sought or uncovered. The e-newsletter was also recognised, with members claiming to actively share this with fellow community members, however there were a few attendees who were unaware of the e-newsletters existence. No attendees were aware of, let alone had read, the Village Newsletter, and many did not find social media to be of any use. Social media appeared to be something that the majority of community members did not actively use, however this can almost certainly be attributed to attendees' lack of knowledge or understanding as to how social media works and the benefits it poses from a communication and engagement perspective. Overall, attendees felt that community information

## 2.0 Collated Feedback Overview

was something that they had to seek out themselves, as opposed to it being readily available to them.

The way in which community news and information was consumed varied amongst attendees. As previously stated, very few attendees demonstrated a willingness or ability to use or refer to social media as a source of information, however all frequently listened to the local radio and read the newspaper. A number of community members scoured the entire local newspaper for Council news, whilst others reverted to the Community Link advert as a favoured source of information. Community members acknowledged the challenge that the Council faced in effectively sharing news and engaging with a number of smaller communities that make up the Bega Valley Shire. In light of this, whilst the primary focus was on news that affected the community in its entirety, a more targeted focus on local areas was welcomed.

Once again, the notion of accessibility, or lack thereof, remained a primary concern for community members. Undoubtedly vital to the success of the Council's communication and engagement efforts, many felt that community news and information was not readily available and that the Council did not provide the necessary guidance to assist members with finding the sought after information. Attendees also felt that the information that was released, was selectively drip fed to the community, creating a sense of distrust. Full transcripts and/or audio recordings of Council meetings were suggested, whilst housing this, and other valuable community news and information, in a centralised portal was also welcomed.

When posed with the question regarding the key challenges that come with communicating with 33,000 community members who all have different interests and needs, attendees primarily inferred that the biggest challenge is as the question states - the broad range of needs and concerns amongst the community. Additionally, a key challenge that we as observers inferred, was that those who were the most forthcoming in sharing their views, were those who had limited access and an inability to utilise digital platforms confidently, if at all. It goes without saying that social media would undoubtedly be the most effective means in which to disseminate information, from an engagement, time and cost

perspective, however particular demographics have been reluctant to embrace it.

The following is a summary of the core methods in which community members suggested the Council could improve its communication and engagement efforts:

- Daily radio segment.
- News updates included in rates notices.
- Transcripts or audio recordings of all Council meetings.
- Reinforcement of Council and Councillors' accountability for particular areas of concern.
- Educating and informing community about Council's internal processes.

# 3.0 Best Practice

## 3.1 Council Brand Values

### *Saying vs. Doing & Promising vs. Delivering*

At the very core of the Best Practice Model outlined in section 3.3, lies the Council's brand and overarching brand values. The establishment of clearly defined brand values that inform behavioural practice is pivotal for fostering a positive community culture and measuring the success of the Council's community initiatives. Deemed the pillars of the Council brand, the Council's brand values not only communicate what the Council stands for, but are the guiding principles for decision making and provide a framework for measuring internal performance and behaviour.

It is highly recommended that the Council champion and continue to reinforce the following brand values:

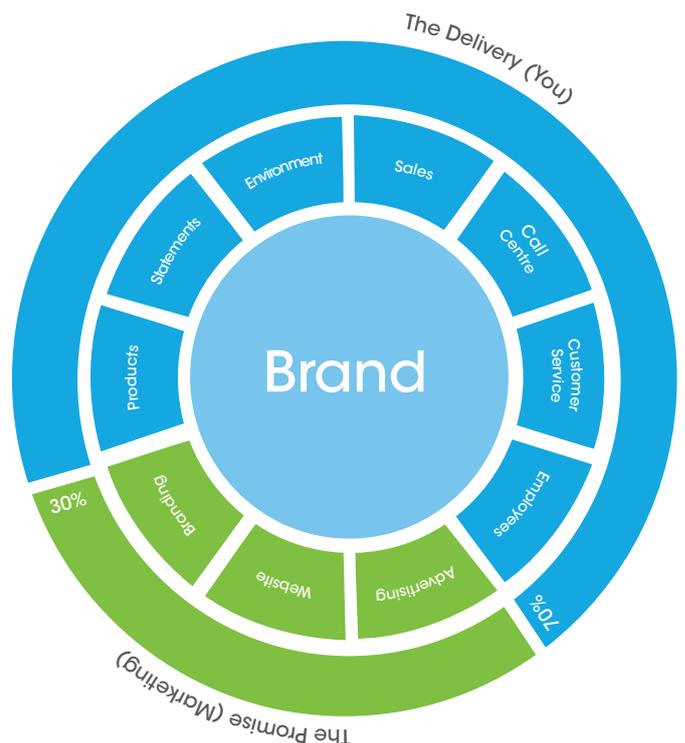


A brand is not merely what an organisation claims it to be, but is rather a reflection of what a customer, or in this case, resident, says it is based on their experience with the brand. Therefore, the Council brand and it's reputation are intrinsically linked. The Council's identity, aforementioned brand values, brand promises, leadership, and key communication and engagement initiatives all attribute to the

community's perception of the Council and it's reputation.

As highlighted in the brand chart above, the Council's brand promise only accounts for 30% of brand perception. It is in fact the delivery of these promises, that has the most significant impact on how the community perceives the Council. Ultimately, each and every experience with the Council and it's members influences the perception of your brand and how community members choose to engage with you. From something as deceptively small as receiving an annual rates notice or visiting a public library, to attending a Council meeting or filing a complaint, each touchpoint, each interaction, be it direct or indirect, will shape the community's experience and subsequent view of the Council. It is therefore the Council's responsibility to ensure that consistency in it's communications and engagement efforts is cultivated and effectively sustained so as not to dilute the brand and it's core messages.

A notable source of message inconsistency which warrants immediate attention is the Council reception. Reflective of the current nature of the Council's communications strategies, the reception space



## 3.0 Best Practice

is abundant with various messages competing for attention. As a result the value and effectiveness of these messages is weakened considerably, and thus decreases audience receptivity and message retention. Refining these messages and streamlining their delivery, is pivotal to achieving and maintaining brand message consistency and ultimately fostering a positive perception of the Council brand.

The chart on the previous page illustrates how the Council's brand perception is typically cultivated.

With a view to reinforcing the strength and longevity of the Council brand and ensuring that the Council maintains a reputable standing, a 'saying vs. doing' concept applies. Aligning with the brand value of transparency, successful communications strategies rely heavily upon the notion of 'say it, do it'. Given that the Council remains under relentless scrutiny by the community at large, there is very little that can, nor should, be concealed from the general public. When implementing the recommended communications strategies, it is imperative that the Council follows a methodical process whereby if a decision is agreed upon, then that decision is followed through, adequately communicated and justified to the community in a timely and consistent manner.

Timeliness is also a key consideration when it comes to brand perception. Whilst the community sessions were welcomed, it was suggested that perhaps they weren't promoted far enough in advance nor adequately to the community. Merely solidifying this, the second session on the Monday evening failed to attract a single attendee, whilst only one person attended the Tuesday evening session. The subject of timeliness also frequently arose in conversation surrounding the day-to-day communication efforts of the Council.

Another factor that seemed to generate criticism was the subject of accountability, which, once again, goes right to the core of the Council brand. Admitting culpability was something that community members felt was lacking within the Council, with many of the attendees stating that they would rather the Council acknowledged and accepted responsibility for Council decisions made. However, they felt that it was culturally not in the Council's nature for someone to step forward and accept liability.

## 3.2 Council Brand Promises

The foundation of a brand's strength is its ability to align its promise with that of which is delivered to the community. After all, a brand promise can only truly be delivered through action. On numerous occasions throughout the community sessions, residents highlighted that they felt as though the Council was failing to deliver on many of their promises, or their communications did not necessarily align with the subsequent actions taken. This can have significant ramifications for the credibility of the Council brand, thus reinforcing the importance of developing and delivering upon a brand promise that is unique and compelling, yet believable and attainable.

It is strongly recommended that the Council launch the following core brand promises, and continue to measure the delivery of these promises through regular and consistent engagement with the community;

- The Council and its representatives strive to foster a safe and supportive community environment for each and every one of its residents by providing the necessary facilities, infrastructure and ongoing support.
- The Council's communication and engagement initiatives are guided by the principles of honesty, integrity and credibility.
- The Council endeavours to remain responsive to the community's needs and ensure the transparency and accessibility of community news and information, across a broad range of mediums and in a timely manner.
- The Council aspires to provide ample opportunity for meaningful community engagement, both online and offline.
- The Council accepts responsibility for all decisions that are made on behalf of community members.

# 3.0 Best Practice

## 3.3 Consumer Engagement Model

The following Consumer Engagement Model allows us to effectively measure the level of engagement a consumer, or in this case resident, has with the Council brand. The model is purposefully segmented into five stages, and helps us to identify points of engagement and disengagement. As can be seen in the accompanying diagram, communication with and/or consumption of a brand increases relative to the level of positive engagement that the consumer has with the brand. Undoubtedly, a shift in consumer attitude and behaviour is co-dependent on driving positive and meaningful engagement.



## 3.0 Best Practice

### 3.4 Consumer Engagement Case Study

The following case study is a fitting example of the co-dependence of a resident's behaviour and experience with the Council, and their resultant perception of and future engagement with the Council.

A Bega Valley Shire resident visited the Council office to enquire about the necessary paperwork and procedure for registering his pet cat. The receptionist advised the resident of the specific documentation that was required. Unfortunately the resident did not have one particular document that the receptionist required. The resident was made aware that registering the cat without this document would cost more, and it was recommended that he return at a later date with the documentation to complete the registration.

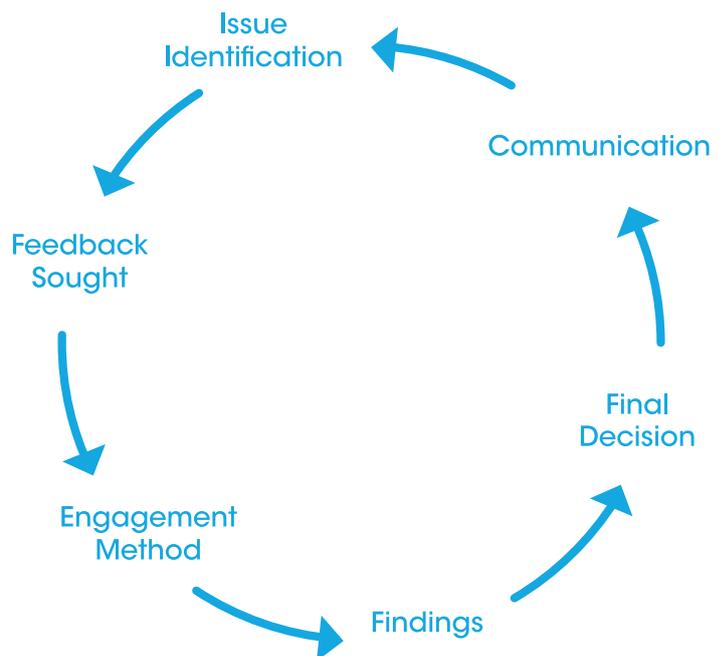
The challenge that arose from this encounter is that the resident could potentially have walked away with a negative perception of the Council, irrespective of the fact that it was the resident's responsibility to supply the necessary documentation. This gives us cause to question how the situation could have been managed differently in order to achieve a better outcome and a more positive response in the resident's mind?

In an effort to deliver sufficient support and ensure that the resident walks away with a positive perception of the Council, the receptionist could have commenced the lodgement process and saved it in the system in lieu of the residents return with the remaining documentation. Alternatively, the staff member could have allowed the resident to email the remaining documentation through for completion, thus eradicating the need for him to return to the Council office. Irrespective of which procedure the receptionist chose to follow, she could have also sent further information through to the resident via email following the encounter, to ensure that he was equipped with all of the necessary information.

### 3.5 Best Practice Model

The Best Practice Model outlined below, will provide the Council with a framework to guide the execution of methodical and effective communication and

engagement activities, and aid the decision making and issue management processes. This process should be consistently followed by the Council when addressing community concerns or making community-based decisions.



#### 1. Issue Identification

- a. What is the issue that needs to be addressed?  
What decision(s) need to be made?

#### 2. Feedback Sought

- a. What feedback is required/sought from the community regarding this issue or decision? What degree of involvement should the community have in the decision making process?

#### 3. Engagement Method

- a. What is the best method for the Council to collect this feedback from the community?

#### 4. Findings

- a. What does the community feedback tell us?  
How will this influence the final decision?

#### 5. Final Decision

- a. What is the final decision or chosen solution to the issue posed?

#### 6. Communication

- a. What is the best method for the Council to communicate the final decision or solution to the community?

### 3.0 Best Practice

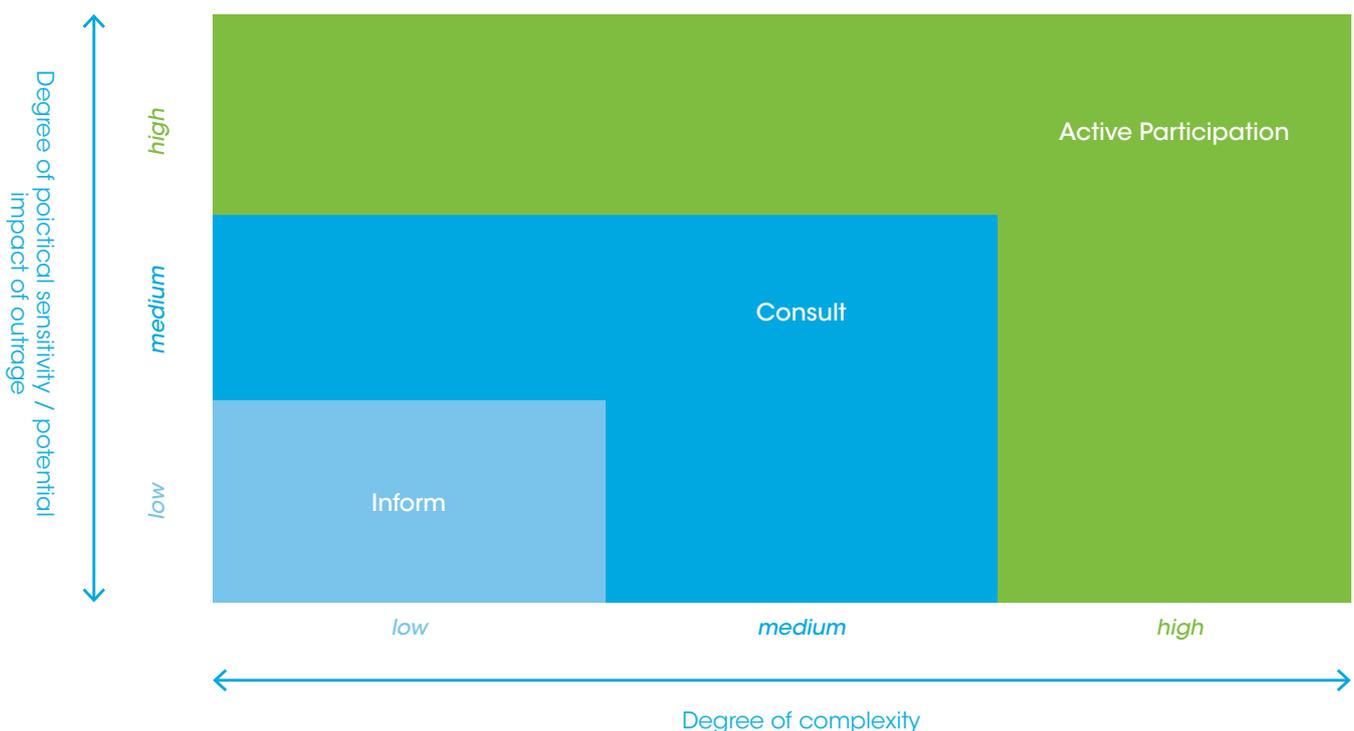
Determining the level of community involvement during the decision making process can be somewhat challenging. Whether the Council merely seeks information, more involved consultation or active participation from the community, the decision made must be relative to the complexity of the issue at hand and it's subsequent impact on the community. Adapted from a matrix developed by the South Australian Government and the Local Government Association of South Australia, the diagram provided can assist the Council in deciphering what degree of community engagement is most appropriate. (Source: adapted from *Community Engagement Handbook - A Model Framework for leading practice in Local Government in South Australia, Local Government Association of South Australia, 2008.*)

If the degree of complexity is deemed to be low, then there is only one clear issue that needs to be addressed, limited remedies or solutions are available, and it is unlikely that there are further options that the Council is yet to consider. Comparatively, if the complexity is classed as medium, then there are one or two issues that need to be addressed, a range of solutions available for

consideration, and it is likely that there are additional options that the Council is yet to identify. Furthermore, if the issue is regarded as highly complex, then there exists multiple issues, the range of options available remains unclear, and there is an even greater likelihood that an extensive range of solutions are yet to be uncovered by the Council.

The degree of political sensitivity or potential community impact or outrage axis helps to further determine the level of community engagement required, relative to the complexity of the issue. If this is classed as low, then the impact of the issue is deemed fairly limited (in terms of the number of people directly affected and the financial ramifications), there is general acceptance amongst the community regarding the Council's existing view on the issue, and the likelihood that community groups will vocally oppose the decision is low.

An issue is regarded as medium if the issue will cause some degree of impact on the community, views about the issue in particular remain varied, and there is a greater likelihood that community groups will vocally address the issue and/or oppose the decision. If, however, the degree of sensitivity or



## 3.0 Best Practice

community impact is deemed high, then the issue will indeed affect a considerable percentage of community members and/or require significant Council funding, community expectations are in opposition of the Council's, and there exists groups who have already proven vocal about the issue.

Upon assessing the degree of complexity and political sensitivity of the issue in question, the level of community involvement can be determined. If the issue is positioned on the lower end of the spectrum, the appropriate level of engagement would be 'inform', whereby the Council would openly communicate with the community to let them know about a decision that has been made or direction that the Council intends to pursue. This lower level of community engagement can be disseminated through fact sheets, newsletters, media releases, local newspapers, social media and community events, for example.

Comparatively, if the degree of political sensitivity and complexity are deemed high, then more collaborative 'consultation' and 'active participation' would be necessary. Taking the form of focus groups, workshops, online forums and polls for example, 'active participation' requires considerable community involvement to help solve issues and drive initiatives forward from conception through to implementation. This higher level of input and involvement of local residents is crucial not only for the unification of the Council and the community in the decision making process, but also reaffirms the Council's commitment to proactively motivating and engaging with the community on a regular basis.

The aforementioned Best Practice Model will help to ensure that the Council maintains transparency in its communications with the community during decision making processes. It is crucial that the Council remains forthcoming in communicating who is responsible for making the final decision, what changes can be implemented, the resources that are available and the means in which change will be affected.

Establishing and effectively implementing the Best Practice Model will assist the Council with improving organisational performance, strengthening communications methodologies, realigning community perceptions and re-establishing a positive

community culture. The Best Practice Model will provide the Council with a practical framework to guide the day-to-day operations of the Council, both internally and externally.

### 3.6 Staff Training

In order to ensure that all Council staff and representatives are equipped with the knowledge and tools to deliver quality, consistent and meaningful communications and engagement, internal training sessions should be conducted on a regular basis, particularly when new staff members join the workforce. Facilitated by TwoCents in the interim, and perhaps a senior Council staff member thereafter, the sessions will be constructed to provide all staff members and representatives with adequate training to empower them to confidently lead the implementation of the revised communications and engagement strategy.

The following topics should be a primary focus for these internal training sessions:

- The Bega Valley Shire Council brand
  - Brand values
  - Brand promises
  - Best Practice Model
- Communications methodologies
  - Tone of voice
  - Adopted communications channels & subsequent guidelines
- Complaint and issue reconciliation
- Designated roles and responsibilities (where necessary)

In addition to face-to-face group sessions, education and training will also be deployed through webinars and videos, printed manuals, presentations and PDF documents, in order to ensure that adequate resources remain available to Council staff and representatives at all times.

In order to encourage Council staff members to proactively communicate and engage with the community, and essentially unite the Council in the pursuit of a common goal, an internal reward system could be established. Whether it be a

## 3.0 Best Practice

'Communicator of the Month' award or simply recognising staff members who have facilitated positive community engagement through internal communications, the initiative will incentivise Council staff members to assume accountability for effectively managing the Council's communication efforts on an ongoing basis.

Centralising internal communications in either of the aforementioned manners will ensure that each and every Council member is held accountable for the internal management of projects and the subsequent engagement with the community.

### 3.7 Internal Communications

It has become evidently clear that there is no central communications process in which all Council representatives are tasked with following, giving rise to a divided and disengaged internal culture. In order to effectively realise positive change from an external communications perspective, it is imperative that the inherent gaps in the Council's internal communications procedures be identified and promptly rectified prior.

Recently a skate park project had been initiated, however it was only in the final stages of completion that Council staff became aware of the project, leaving little to no time at all for the Council to adequately promote its launch. In this instance, a lack of internal communication about a great community project resultantly lead to a lack of communication with the wider community, merely solidifying the interdependence between internal and external communications. Evidently, when internal communication remains ineffective, external communications initiatives suffer significantly as a direct result.

Adopting an online project management tool such as Wrike or Mavenlink for example, will provide a centralised platform for Council members to appoint roles and responsibilities, efficiently collaborate, remain abreast of planned, current and past projects or initiatives, and coordinate the planning and implementation of promotional activities. Alternatively, an internal communications matrix or spreadsheet could be developed where Council staff members can record and monitor the completion of tasks, assign who is responsible for each task, the communications tools utilised, who the target audience is and the frequency in which each task must be completed.

## 4.0 Recommendations

In an effort to rectify the inherent issues that currently hinder the Council's existing communications and engagement initiatives, TwoCents advises that the Council should endeavour to champion digital platforms such as the website and social media. In saying that however, it is also acknowledged that traditional media should continue to remain a focus for the Council so as not to disengage community members who may not be versed in utilising the recommended online tools. By adopting an holistic and integrated approach, whereby each offline initiative drives traffic to the central digital platforms, it is envisaged that transparency and accessibility will improve significantly.

- Deliver short and long-term results
- Transparent
- Measurable

### 4.1 Existing Initiatives

#### 4.1.1 Website

Coinciding with the completion of the new Bega Valley Shire Council website, it is highly recommended that an official launch take place to promote and educate the community about the new website. Showcasing it's renewed design and improved functionality, the Council should engage in promotional activities across the below channels and champion the new website as the central platform for all communications and engagement with the community to flourish. Highlighting the key functions that would be of interest to the community, such as the 'Have Your Say' portal and 'Media Hub', will be a great way to encourage the community to proactively engage with the new website.

#### Promotional Channels

- Social media
- Billboard
- e-Newsletter
- Community noticeboards
- Village Newsletter
- Council offices
- Local newspaper - Community Link

The Council should consider conducting a short survey once the new website has been operational for a 6 month period, in order to gauge the community's satisfaction and garner feedback regarding the overall user experience.

#### 4.1.2 News & Updates with Rates Notices

In an effort to keep community members educated and informed, it is recommended that local news and updates be delivered along with homeowners' annual rates notices. This solution was posed by multiple residents during the community sessions and through the online survey conducted by the Council, and is deemed worthy of the Council's consideration.



Following the comprehensive review of the Council's previous and existing communications and engagement initiatives, and direct liaison with community members, a range of solutions have been collated as recommended by TwoCents. During the process of determining the most appropriate solutions, each solution posed was required to meet the following criteria:

- Attainable
- Effective
- Illustrate creative licence

## 4.0 Recommendations

### Distribution Channels

- Addressed mail\*
- Email

\*TwoCents recognises the evident cost implications that could potentially inhibit the distribution of news and updates with rates notices.

### Content

The news and updates provided could either be relevant to the Council in its entirety, or more localised content, relative to the homeowners location within the Bega Valley Shire. The following are just a few examples of content that could be included with the rates notices:

- Upcoming community engagement events or activities.
- Key initiatives implemented in the past twelve months.
- Key local environmental concerns and initiatives.
- Bega Valley Shire Council annual report.

#### 4.1.3 Village Newsletter

Whilst the content remains paramount, prior to officially launching the Village Newsletter, the circulation and promotion of the publication must be strongly considered.

### Distribution Channels

In order to ensure optimum circulation and readership, the Village Newsletter should be distributed through the following channels:

- Website
- Social media
- Community noticeboards
- Public libraries
- Residences - unaddressed letterbox drop\*
- Local newspaper liftout in the Bega District News

\*TwoCents recognises the evident cost implications that could potentially inhibit the distribution of unaddressed mail to residents.

Additionally, the website, social media, radio and billboards, should all be harnessed to generate

awareness and promote the aforementioned distribution channels from which the Village Newsletter can be sourced.

### Timeframe

In order to facilitate the distribution of the Village Newsletter across a wider network and ensure optimum readership, it is recommended that the publication be distributed on a fortnightly or monthly basis.

#### 4.1.4 Social Media

In recent years, social media has grown exponentially and so to have audiences' expectations that businesses and indeed local Councils utilise these platforms to communicate. Subsequently, it has become increasingly evident that there is an inherent expectation that the Council engages with its community members more thoroughly and regularly, addresses issues promptly, maintains transparency and remains openly accountable for community-based decisions. Although many have questioned social media's validity as an effective communication channel and a large majority of community members demonstrated a lack of knowledge and understanding of social media, communicating with residents through such forums is undoubtedly the most effective means in which to meet these expectations.

In an effort to counter community members' concerns regarding social media that stem from a lack of knowledge and understanding of the platforms, and ultimately improve the user experience, it is highly recommended that the Council provide residents with free workshops to educate and empower community members to confidently engage online. The Council could engage an experienced representative from within the Council, or an external provider to facilitate the workshops.

Addressing the different platforms that the Council typically utilises, whilst also catering to users' varying degrees of experience, the workshops could be conducted on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. The website, e-newsletter, Village Newsletter and other printed materials that are displayed on local notice boards in community halls,

## 4.0 Recommendations

town centres and public libraries, should all be employed to promote the workshops in order to secure community-wide awareness.

### Benefits

Reaffirmed as the cornerstone of the Council's engagement strategy, the benefits of harnessing social media as a communicative tool to deliver better community value, positive messages and greater opportunities for meaningful engagement are:

- **Timeliness**
  - Information can be distributed promptly and with ease, and engagement facilitated in real-time.
- **Accountability**
  - The Council and its representatives are directly responsible for the efficacy of all communication efforts.
- **Social cohesion**
  - The Council and local community are united on the one platform with a common interest.
- **Responsiveness**
  - The Council and community members can respond to online communications and disseminate information quickly and easily.
- **Visibility and audience reach**
  - The Council can garner access to a broader audience that it wouldn't otherwise be able to reach, and subsequently increase its visibility.
- **Cost-effectiveness**
  - Aside from the human resources required to run the social media forums, no financial outlay is required. Financial costs will only be incurred if post promotion or paid Facebook advertising is conducted.

Deemed suitable platforms for information dissemination, communication and engagement, social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter can greatly assist in the facilitation of a two-way dialogue between the Council and the community. With a view to improving the accessibility of local news and the Councillors themselves, the existing social media forums should be revised as a direct means for this two-way dialogue to flourish.

At present, whilst updates remain quite regular, engagement on the Council Facebook page is considerably low. In order to improve this and ensure that the Council remains friendly, approachable, interactive and informative, more visual and engaging content must be shared on a regular basis. To assist with facilitating this, it is recommended that Councillors be granted administrative access to the social media profiles. Not only empowering Councillors to manage community engagement initiatives themselves and providing heightened accessibility to the community, this is also particularly important for allowing the Councillors to run live chat segments through the Bega Valley Shire Council Facebook page, as recommended in section 4.2.2.

In addition to the Councillors, it is also recommended that a select roster of Council staff be appointed the responsibility of managing social media, in order to maintain consistency and help build a positive rapport with the community.

In line with this, the development of social media response guidelines is necessary, to equip each representative tasked with managing the social media forums with all the information and guidance they require. Whilst you can't prepare for each and every issue that will arise, it is recommended that issues that can be responded to through the channel, situations that need to be removed from the online space, and those that call for escalation within the company, be segmented accordingly. In order to maintain integrity, it is crucial that all responses are personalised, and scripted responses are avoided.

Additionally, it is also recommended that a set of Facebook engagement rules be established that solely apply to community members themselves. These engagement rules will dictate how community members should engage with the Council to facilitate positive communication by outlining what types of messages and language won't be tolerated and subsequently removed.

The following are the three key principles that must drive all social media engagement initiatives on a day-to-day basis, to ensure that the aforementioned objectives are consistently achieved.

## 4.0 Recommendations

### Consistency

- Ensure that the Council's personality, tone and language utilised remain consistent across all online and offline platforms.
  - Aligning with the Council's brand values, the Council should always be friendly, approachable, honest and informative.
- New content should be posted on the Council's social media pages daily to maintain consistency and reaffirm the Council's online presence.
  - Content posts can be scheduled in advance to save time, across multiple platforms. Facebook in particular offers this functionality, however there are also other tools that can help you manage content posting across multiple platforms, such as Hootsuite.
- Respond to all comments and posts within 1-2 days, even if it is to simply acknowledge that it has been received.

### Relevancy

- Ensure that all content posted is of interest to the community and merely enriches the Council's personality and engagement initiatives, whilst consistently adding value to the online exchange between the Council and the community at large.

### Visibility

- Identify pages of interest and local businesses for Bega Valley Shire Council to 'like' or 'follow'.
  - This will increase the Council's visibility and also grant access to more content that may well be worth sharing with the Council's followers.
  - Actively 'like', 'share' and 'comment' on other pages' content to broaden the Council's audience reach.
- Run competitions with the objective being to increase engagement, be that through 'likes', 'comments' or 'shares', drive traffic to the website and capture data.

### Content

Consistently updating the Bega Valley Shire Council social media pages on a regular basis with interesting,

informative and engaging content that resonates with the local community, is pivotal for building credibility amongst the community and developing an engaged and active following online. Furthermore, in doing so, the overall perception of the Council can be improved in the minds of residents and the establishment of an active two-way dialogue facilitated.

The following are a few examples of types of content that the Council should disseminate through the existing social media forums. These can take the form of written updates, photos, videos, infographics etc, and be shared across each of the adopted platforms where appropriate.

- Community news and updates advising residents of local service interruptions, upcoming events and initiatives (somewhat similar to a noticeboard).
- Seek feedback on Council decisions and community issues.
  - Pose questions, seek suggestions and run polls to garner community insight and intelligence.
- Real-time updates during emergencies.
- Showcase local businesses and their promotional activities.
- Run community competitions to generate active engagement e.g. photo sharing, voting etc.
- Council staff and Councillor profiles.

### Channels

- Facebook (Primary)
- Vimeo/YouTube (Primary)
- Twitter (Secondary)
- Instagram (Secondary)

## 4.2 New Initiatives

### 4.2.1 Interactive Complaint Reconciliation Forum

In order to rectify the issues pertaining to accountability, transparency and timeliness that were frequently raised by community members, the launch of a public online complaint reconciliation forum is strongly recommended. Supplementing the existing system that is currently used solely for internal

## 4.0 Recommendations

purposes, all online complaints would be entered into the centralised system and made readily available to the public. As currently conducted, once a complaint is entered into the system, irrespective of whether they are filed through the website or social media forums, a unique reference number will be generated and issued to the complainant.

Displayed on the website for public access, as a part of the 'Have Your Say' component of the new website, all complaints issued by community members will be listed immediately following their submission, along with the following information:

- When the complaint was filed.
- Who has been allocated to resolve the complaint within the Council.
- The response submitted, in either written or video format.

Responses submitted by the Council to resolve complaints, can be in either written or video format. Submitting responses in video format are deemed a unique and effective way to personalise the communication between the complainant and the Council, and stamp out the perceived absence of accountability.

Ultimately, the online system will assist the Council to ensure that complaints are managed effectively and resolved in a timely manner, and that transparency with the community is maintained. It will also allow community members to monitor the progress of their submissions and that of their fellow residents, providing insight into how and when each complaint was resolved; information of which would otherwise be unattainable.

### Promotional Channels

- Website
- Social media
- Council offices
- e-Newsletters
- Village Newsletter
- Local newspaper - Community Link

### 4.2.2 Radio Segment

It is recommended that the Council secure a regular segment on the local radio, be it weekly or fortnightly, to provide community members with the opportunity to speak directly with key Council members or Councillors, allowing them to voice their concerns and ask pressing questions regarding issues that have a bearing on the community at large.

Increasing the accessibility of key Council staff members, a regular radio segment will demonstrate to the community the Council's dedication to delivering upon its brand promises of providing opportunities for meaningful community engagement, ensuring the accessibility of Council members, and responding to and delivering Council news in a timely manner across a range of forums.

### Channels

- Edge 93.7FM
- ABC Radio South East NSW
- Power FM South East
- 2EC East Coast FM

### Promotional Channels

- Website
- Social media
- Billboard
- Community noticeboards
- e-Newsletter
- Village Newsletter
- Local newspaper - Community Link

### 4.2.3 Billboard Placements

In an effort to communicate key brand messages to the community on a grander scale, it is recommended that the Council secure semi-permanent or short-term billboard placements throughout the Shire. Positioned alongside high traffic areas, billboards are an effective medium for garnering awareness, improving brand recognition and heightening message retention. Serving as a directional piece for community members, the billboards would serve to drive passersby to particular

## 4.0 Recommendations

platforms such as the new Bega Valley Shire Council website or promote upcoming initiatives or key events. Undoubtedly, the cost and location of these billboards are key considerations for the Council.

In addition to billboard placements, it is also recommended that the existing Bega Valley Shire welcome signage be revised accordingly to align with the new brand identity. The inclusion of the website and social media platforms is recommended to encourage visitors, and indeed residents, to engage with the Council through these mediums.

### 4.2.4 Touch Screen Kiosks

In order to heighten the Council's presence and accessibility within the community, it is highly recommended that mobile technology be championed as a community engagement platform. Located in central locations that boast high foot traffic throughout the Shire, such as outside supermarkets, post offices, retail precincts and schools, tablets can be made available to the public as a means to source information and/or communicate directly with the Council.

The tablets will help to drive engagement through the website, whilst also providing general information for visitors such as maps of local areas. Boasting a heightened level of interactivity and serving a multitude of purposes, the tablets will no doubt have a community-wide appeal.

### 4.2.5 Live Chat & Webinars

Reinforce Councillors' community standing and improve accessibility through the provision of live chat and webinars on the Council website and via the existing Facebook profile. Promoted across Facebook and Twitter, e-newsletters and the Council website, Councillors can provide community members with the opportunity to engage in live online discussions in a unique, compelling and timely manner.

The topics of discussion during the live chat sessions and webinars will be at the community's request and also determined by the Council in line with existing issues or pending decisions. The live chat segments and webinars can be held on designated days and times on a monthly basis, and all recordings are to be made available to the public following each session.

### Promotional Channels

- Website
- Social media
- Community noticeboards
- Village Newsletter
- e-Newsletter

### 4.2.6 Neighbourhood Meetings

In order to give community members greater opportunity to raise issues and/or ask questions, it is recommended that neighbourhood meetings be carried out seasonally. Run by Councillors, the neighbourhood meetings could simply take the form of a booth, positioned in prominent, central locations. More informal in comparison to the existing Council meetings, the neighbourhood meetings could take place at local events such as school fairs, or in township centres for example.

The Councillors would spend a week or so in different townships within the Shire over the course of a couple of months, providing the opportunity for residents to speak directly to Council representatives in an informal setting with relatively unrestricted accessibility. Additionally, during their visit, the Councillors could take the time to meet local business owners to demonstrate the Council's support of local enterprise.

Reinforcing the brand values of community, accessibility, accountability and transparency, conducting these informal meetings will help to instill trust in the Council and ensure that the Councillors themselves become powerful advocates of the engagement process.

### Promotional Channels

- Website
- Social media
- Community noticeboards
- Village Newsletter
- e-Newsletter
- Radio
- Billboard
- Local newspaper - Community Link

## 4.0 Recommendations

### 4.2.7 Educational Seminars

With the Council's brand values at the forefront, it is recommended that formal seminars be conducted for the primary purpose of educating and informing local residents and business owners. Facilitated by individual Councillors or Council representatives, the seminars could be targeted towards particular industries, topics, be they environmental or social for example, and/or issues of community concern. Conducted in a community hall, the seminars should be scheduled every 2-3 months. All members of the public who seek to learn more about particular initiatives or topics will be welcome to attend the seminars, and will also be given the opportunity to request or suggest topics for upcoming seminars via the website and social media forums.

#### Promotional Channels

- Website
- Social media
- Community noticeboards
- Village Newsletter
- e-Newsletter
- Radio
- Billboard
- Local newspaper - Community Link

### 4.2.8 Council Internal Processes

In light of the community's concerns regarding the transparency and accountability of the Council and further stemming on from the Best Practice Model, it is recommended that the Council be more forthcoming in providing residents with an insight into the processes that are followed and how particular projects are progressing. In an effort to educate, inform and instill confidence in the Council, information pertaining to the scope and timeline of a project, or the final decision and subsequent results of a particular initiative should be openly shared with community members in a timely manner. Taking the form of fact sheets with infographics and timelines, or written debriefs, such initiatives are imperative for achieving the desired level of transparency.

#### Distribution Channels

- Website
- Social media
- e-Newsletter
- Village Newsletter
- Local newspaper - Community Link

## 5.0 Measurement & KPIs

Measuring the results of the Council's revised communications and engagement initiatives is pivotal for determining their effectiveness and identifying any necessary improvements. The following is a list of key metrics that will assist the Council in quantifying the community's responsiveness to the changes implemented and the perceived value of the Council's communication and engagement initiatives.

- Monthly website visits and engagement.
  - Number of new and returning visitors
  - Duration of website visits
  - Number of pages viewed
  - Journey taken through the website
  - Number of and purpose of search queries
  - Content downloads
  - Referral sources, etc.
- e-Newsletter sign ups and engagement.
  - Number of e-newsletter subscriptions
  - Open and click-through rates
- Social media engagement.
  - Number of 'likes' or 'followers'
  - Degree of interaction, i.e. 'likes', 'comments', 'shares' and 'mentions'
  - Demographics and location of users
- Webinar or video views and engagement, i.e. 'likes', 'comments' and 'shares'.
- Seminar or meeting attendance and engagement.
- Radio listeners and on-air engagement.
- Issue/complaint reconciliation.
  - Number of complaints received
  - Frequency of filed complaints
  - Response and resolution rates
  - The ratio of resolved and unresolved issues
  - First contact resolution rates
  - Escalation rates and the channel from which the issue has been escalated
- Community survey (follow up, 6-12 months time).
  - Survey completions
  - Results and feedback received
    - Comparison to previous survey results
- Community sessions (follow up, 6-12 months time).
  - Attendance and engagement levels
  - Feedback received
  - Comparison to previous sessions
- Active participation in decision making processes.
  - Number of opportunities granted for community feedback and/or involvement.
  - Number of community members willing to get involved when active participation is welcomed.
  - Outcome or perceived outcome of the process.
- Anecdotal observations and word-of-mouth (WOM).
- Service experience.
  - Customer service quality
  - Number of service complaints filed
- Communications.
  - Volume of calls received by the Council
  - Enquiries submitted online
  - Council office visits
  - Suggestions and/or feedback received
- Environmental support.
  - Rates of environmental program involvement
  - SoE (State of the Environment) reports filed
- Council scorecard results.

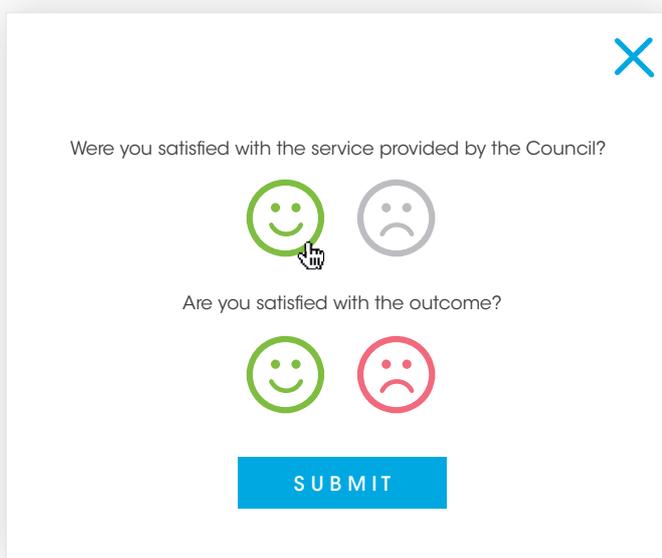
### 5.1 Issue or Complaint Reconciliation Survey

It is recommended that the Council issue a short two-question survey to community members upon responding to an issue or complaint, to assist the Council in determining the community's overall satisfaction with the Council. This survey will not have an expiration date, and will be made available to the public through the website, allowing for valuable data to be captured all year round. Irrespective of the channel that the issue or complaint is submitted, each community member would be directed to the survey on the website and asked to provide their feedback by responding to the following questions by selecting either a happy or sad face.

## 5.0 Measurement & KPIs

1. Were you satisfied with the service provided by the Council?
2. Are you satisfied with the outcome?

These two simple questions will provide valuable insight into whether the community members' experience with the Council was either a positive or negative one, and assist the Council in identifying any gaps in the various communications,



The screenshot shows a survey interface with a close button (X) in the top right corner. The first question is "Were you satisfied with the service provided by the Council?" with a green smiley face selected. The second question is "Are you satisfied with the outcome?" with a red frowny face selected. A blue "SUBMIT" button is at the bottom.

engagement and issue reconciliation activities undertaken throughout the year.

### 5.2 Council Scorecard

Further expanding upon the aforementioned issue or complaint reconciliation survey, it is highly recommended that a Council scorecard be established. The scorecard will assist the Council in its endeavour to keep the community informed, measure the Council's progress and achievements, and grant community members the opportunity to have their say.

In addition to demonstrating the Council's dedication to implementing new initiatives and addressing local issues, the scorecard will allow the Council to measure and report on whether their objectives and/or promises have aligned with that of which was carried out and/or achieved. Ultimately, the scorecard will grant residents, and the Council itself, the opportunity

to score the overall performance of the Council, offering valuable insight into residents' perception of and satisfaction with the Council's performance.

The scorecard will help to distinguish the Council's overall performance based on the aforementioned KPIs and following key performance measures:

- Performance improvement - Did the initiatives undertaken lead to an improvement in performance?
- Target achievements - Were the set targets or objectives met?

The scorecard will be broken up into the six key service areas of the Council, of which are outlined below:

- Residents & Household
- Recreation & Community
- Planning & Development
- Environment & Sustainability
- Business & Industry
- Council & Engagement

The results of the Scorecard will be compiled into a report and made available to the community via the Bega Valley Shire Council website. The report will outline how the Council performed over the past 12 months relative to the targets and performance measures that were put in place, and allow the Council and community members to compare performance results to the previous year.

Each year, the scorecard report will outline the following for each key service area:

- Performance measure/metric
- Previous year's results
- Whether there has been an improvement or decline in performance
- This year's target and corresponding result
- Whether the target was achieved or not

The scorecard and corresponding annual reports will help to inform the establishment of key objectives and initiatives for the following year, and most importantly, assist the Council with maintaining a high level of transparency with the community.

## 6.0 Conclusion

In acknowledging the key challenges that pose the greatest impact upon the Council's communication and engagement initiatives, it can be discerned that Bega Valley Shire Council can benefit greatly from harnessing digital platforms, such as the website and social media, to facilitate meaningful engagement and realign the community's perception of the Council. Essentially, in doing so, the Council can effectively educate and inform the community, empower residents to engage with the Council, and ultimately strengthen the unification of the Council and the Bega Valley Shire community.

## 7.0 TwoCents Team Profiles



**Simon Dell, *Managing Director***

Simon Dell is the Managing Director and Founder of TwoCents Group, a national agency dedicated to supporting business of all sizes and in all areas of marketing and communications. His role within TwoCents is to lead the development of strategic and creative communications plans for clients and advise on art direction and creative. He spends a lot of time training companies and speaking around Australia on topics such as digital marketing, branding and social media. He's also part of the Spin Cycle team on Brisbane's local 4BC radio, one of Fairfax's writers on advertising and marketing, a writer for MYOB, and also a contributor for industry portals Marketing Mag and Mumbrella.



**Amber Gerrard-Maxwell, *Account Co-ordinator***

As an Account Coordinator at TwoCents Group, Amber is responsible for managing the marketing and communications initiatives of a roster of clients hailing from a broad range of industries. Offering clients valuable strategic and creative support, Amber is dedicated to aiding in the development and implementation of targeted promotional activities across both online and offline platforms, in the pursuit of helping her clients grow their businesses.

# Appendix 2a

Bega Valley Shire Council Community Engagement Procedure

## Procedure 5.17.1 Community Engagement

<b>Department</b>	Strategy and Business Services
<b>Responsible Officer</b>	Community Strategic Planning Coordinator

### Introduction

Council's vision states that the Bega Valley Shire is a community that works together to achieve a balance between quality of life, enterprising business, sustainable development and conservation of the environment.

Community engagement is a way of including the views of our community in our planning and decision making processes. In other words, we engage our community to identify, understand and develop strategies to address and respond to their needs and concerns now and into the future.

To effectively engage, Council needs to be open and accountable to the community and provide ample opportunity for input and feedback. Council acknowledges that by involving a cross section of the community in a consultative process, it can make better decisions. Council also knows that strong relationships with the community is integral to the successful delivery of Council services and requires a relationship built on trust, goodwill and respect with the community.

The intent of this community engagement procedure is to have a clear statement of when, how and why, and to what level the Council will engage with its local community.

The NSW Office of Local Government (OLG) and the NSW State Government are working very closely with all local government bodies to ensure adequate planning and community engagement is in place to assist local communities and local government move forward in the most appropriate and sustainable way. A new focus for local government has been developed after much consultation and is reflected in the Local Government Amendment (Planning and Reporting) Act 2009 which was assented to on 1 October 2009.

This legislative reform followed public consultation conducted by the OLG on the Integrated Planning and Reporting package, which included the draft Bill, Regulation, Guidelines and Manual.

The specific aims of the Integrated Planning and Reporting framework are to:

- improve integration of various statutory planning and reporting processes undertaken by councils as required by the *Local Government Act 1993* and the Department's guidelines *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*.
- strengthen councils' strategic focus
- streamline reporting processes
- ensure the *Local Government Act 1993* and the Integrated Planning and Reporting Guidelines support a strategic and integrated approach to planning and reporting by local councils.

The expectation of the Integrated Planning and Reporting (IPR) framework is that the level of "community consultation" has been extended to include "community engagement" at key points of the planning and review process. The new requirements expect a more comprehensive approach, as to enable the development of long-term plans that reflect the ambitions of the community.

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The new system is built on the principle that all members of the community have a right, and a responsibility, to contribute to their community's future.

It is important to understand the difference between consultation and engagement and to incorporate these changes into Council's policy and procedures. Definitions have been used to describe different levels of community engagement:

- **Informing**  
To provide the community with balanced and objective information to help them understand a problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions. Examples of this include the publishing of fact sheets, media releases, letters and updates on Council's website.
- **Consulting**  
To obtain community feedback on alternatives and/or decisions. Examples of consulting include placing documents on public exhibition, online submissions / surveys, suggestion boxes, neighbourhood notifications of Development Applications
- **Involving**  
working directly with the community throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered. Examples of involving the community include holding workshops, committee meetings, and focus group meetings on specific plans / topics.
- **Collaborating**  
To partner with the community in aspects of the decision making process including the development of alternatives and identification of the preferred solution.

Examples of collaboration include delegated decision making to S355 committees, development of specific programs to enable long term feedback on key issues.

At all levels of engagement, Council will outline to community members involved in the community engagement processes, how decisions are made and what factors are taken into consideration when determining service priorities and program functions.

Transparency of decision-making processes will assist community members understanding on complex and technical matters and will enable participants to better understand how their input will be considered within the larger context of the Bega Valley Shire Council's role and objectives

Details on the levels of engagement can be found in Appendix B.

Council is also required by various legislation and policies to consult with its constituents on a variety of issues and business matters. This procedure, along with Council's Community Engagement and Communications Toolkit will provide a practical and systematic approach to demonstrating our commitment to these principles by ensuring quality community involvement and relationship building both within the organisation and between the organisation and the community. The procedure will also aim to consider the relevance and application of emerging technologies and opportunities as tools to engage with the community.

The provision of effective communication and engagement processes is implicit in Council's values outlined in the Community Strategic Plan, Bega Valley 2030:

- Openness and transparency
- Integrity
- Service

- Team focus
- Accountability
- Equity
- Inclusion and respect
- Learning

The community engagement procedure is underpinned by the following principles which will be used to guide behaviours throughout the engagement process:

- Clarity of purpose
- Commitment
- Hospitality
- Respect
- Simplicity, accessibility and openness
- Communication
- Evidence
- Flexibility and responsiveness
- Timeliness – setting clear and reasonable timeframes
- Valuing the contributions of all
- Moderation of on-line discussions
- Collaboration
- Ethics
- Avoiding duplication i.e. not over consulting
- Continuous learning

## Purpose

The purpose of this community engagement procedure is to:

- Make clear statements about the scope and purpose of Council's community engagement activities
- establish standard processes for community engagement
- ensure that the community understands the decision making process and know where to find out about activities and opportunities and who to contact
- ensure those processes are implemented by Council staff and where relevant by external consultants employed by Council
- ensure that relevant decision making takes account of outcomes acquired from such processes along with relevant legislative requirements and other Council policies
- ensure where appropriate that the community is kept informed of decisions about community engagement processes.

It is intended that this community engagement procedure, along with the community engagement and communications tool kit framework will give the community, and staff a clear understanding of:

- Council's commitment to community engagement
- When community engagement will occur
- What level of engagement will occur

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## Definitions

### ***Community engagement***

The processes through which the community and other interested parties are informed about and/or invited to contribute, through consultation or involvement, to proposals or policy changes relating to Council services, events, strategic plans, issues, projects and the like.

### ***Community***

People that live within the Bega Valley Shire and/or wish to live, visit, work and/or invest in it. The community includes residents, rate payers, state and federal government agencies, the private sector and community organisations.

Council also has a commitment to ensure that it engages those specific target groups identified in its Social Issues Papers, 2013.

- Children (0-11 years old)
- Youth (12-24 years old)
- Older people
- People with a disability
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (ATSI)
- People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD)
- Women

## Strategy

The use of the word "strategy" satisfies the requirements of the Division of Local Government through the proposed amendments to the Local Government Act (1993). These amendments relate to Community Strategic Plans being accompanied by a Community Engagement Strategy.

### ***Benefits of Community Engagement***

There are a number of benefits from having a community engagement procedure, it:

- commits Council to be open and accountable
- helps Council plan services better to meet community needs and aspirations
- helps Council prioritise services and make better use of resources
- allows broader range of views to be expressed and more information to be assembled prior to making decisions
- enables Council and the community to work together to achieve balanced decisions
- offers opportunities for residents to contribute to and influence outcomes which directly affect their lives

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## When will Community Engagement Occur?

### Council will engage the community on:

#### **Strategy planning**

This refers to the development of strategic plans and projects that informs the Community Strategic Plan and associated strategies and key activity plans.

#### **Policy development and/or implementation**

This includes any policy development that has a direct impact on the community.

#### **Site specific**

This refers to any changes to a site that may have impact on the community.

#### **Service planning**

This includes the development and /or improvement of a service.

#### **Areas of improvement**

This refers to any improvement required to increase the quality of lifestyle for the community e.g. shopping areas, open spaces, etc.

#### **Legislative requirements (including planning issues)**

This refers to all prescribed plans and projects under the Local Government Act (1993); and other relevant Acts.

Appendix C outlines the tool that will be used to guide Council staff in designing community engagement activities and has been adapted from the ACT Department of Territory and Municipal Services Community Engagement Policy.

## What Level of Engagement will occur?

Council will call for different levels of engagement depending on the issue, and its immediate or long term impact on the community. The levels of engagement with the community may include:

### **Level 1 - Inform**

To provide the community with balanced and objective information to help them understand a problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.

### **Level 2 - Consult**

To obtain community feedback on alternatives and/or decisions.

### **Level 3 - Involve**

To work directly with the community throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered

### **Level 4 - Collaborate**

To partner with the community in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and identification of the preferred solution.

The levels of engagement are adapted from the “IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum” developed by the International Association for Public Participation – see Appendix B.

### Comments Welcome

Comments and feedback on this policy are welcome and should be directed to Council’s Group Manager Community and Relationships.

#### ***By mail***

Bega Valley Shire Council  
PO Box 492  
BEGA NSW 2550

#### ***By phone***

Telephone: 6499 2222

#### ***By facsimile***

Fax: 6499 2200

#### ***By Electronic Mail***

[council@begavalley.nsw.gov.au](mailto:council@begavalley.nsw.gov.au)

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## Appendix A

### Principles Checklist

The Community Engagement Strategy is underpinned by the following principles which should be heeded throughout engagement processes:

#### ***Clarity of purpose***

A clear definition of why the engagement is occurring and its context; in order to plan and resource an effective process.

#### ***Commitment***

Demonstrated commitment to establish and maintain credibility and accountability.

#### ***Hospitality***

Friendly, welcoming environment with appropriate refreshments provided.

#### ***Respect***

Mutual respect for the needs, aspirations and opinions of all within the community.

#### ***Simplicity, accessibility and openness***

- Ensure that all individuals or groups can access the range of community engagement processes available.
- Be sensitive to the needs of particular individuals or groups to maximise their ability to contribute.
- Provide information in a form that is easy to understand and appropriate for all sectors of the community.
- Accessibility on-line acknowledges users with a disability as well as those with
- Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), mobile devices or older browsers. It also takes into account the ability of other machines to read and process Council content and data programmatically for the benefit of current and future users.

#### ***Communication***

Establishment of a two way process of providing accurate and timely information, in plain English and demonstration that feedback is being valued.

#### ***Evidence***

Establishment of good engagement practices that are based on sound research and quality information.

#### ***Flexibility and responsiveness***

Establishment of engagement plans that are flexible during the process, e.g. time and venue may change due to community feedback.

#### ***Timeliness***

Ensure that participants know how long an engagement process is expected to last and when feedback is expected at each stage of the process.

#### ***Valuing the contribution of all***

Ensure that cross sections of the community are invited to the community engagement activity.

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### ***Moderation of on-line discussions***

Community engagement guidelines and a moderation process will be used for all on-line discussions to ensure the discussion is appropriate, intelligent and lawful.

Moderation will only occur to remove a contribution that:

- Is off-topic
- Is defamatory, abusive, harassing or hateful
- Includes any abusive, obscene, indecent or offensive language
- Endorses commercial products or activities or solicits business
- Violates copyrights or other forms of licences and consents
- Invades anyone's privacy, reveals the identity of another user or impersonates anyone
- Encourages conduct that may or would constitute a criminal offence or give rise to civil liability, or that otherwise violates any local, state, national or international law or regulation anywhere in the world

It will state publicly when and why a contribution has been edited or removed.

### ***Collaboration***

Establishment of partnerships with relevant community groups, State and Federal government, local government partners, other stakeholders, and/or with internal sections of Council.

### ***Ethics***

Members of various consultative groups, along with Councillors and staff to adhere to relevant Code of Conduct including requirements to address pecuniary and non-pecuniary interests and to allow the views of all members to be heard.

### ***Avoiding duplication - Don't over consult***

The community is consulted about a range of issues and by a range of people in a variety of ways. It is important to recognise this and not to over consult which can result in residents feeling that their time is being wasted and comments such as "we have already told you what we want, why are you asking us again?" Each individual process will be required to undertake an assessment as to prior work and information already held by the Council about a particular issue.

### ***Continuous Learning***

Establishment of a reporting system to ensure that Council learns from the community engagement activity and is able to monitor and evaluate success to enable improvements.

## Appendix B

### Levels of Engagement (How Bega Valley Shire Council engages)

Informing	Consulting	Involving	Collaborating
<b>Goal</b>			
To provide the community with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions	To obtain community feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decision. Different projects may involve different groups such as: - committees - focus groups (open &/or by invitation) - community or group representatives - broad community	To work directly with the community throughout a process to ensure that community concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered	To partner with the community in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution and in specific local situations allow final decision making about aspects of a decision to be in the hands of the community
<b>Promise</b>			
We will keep you informed	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and provide feedback on how the community input influenced the decision	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns are considered and reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how the community input influenced the decision	We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions and actions to the maximum extent possible
What it will look like when we are <b><i>informing</i></b> the community	What it will look like when we are <b><i>consulting</i></b>	What it will look like when we are <b><i>involving</i></b> the community	What it will look like when we are <b><i>collaborating</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fact sheets</li> <li>• Media Releases</li> <li>• Public presentations</li> <li>• Brochures</li> <li>• Holding public meetings</li> <li>• Letters</li> <li>• Web site</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neighbour notifications of Development Applications</li> <li>• Focus groups</li> <li>• Public meetings</li> <li>• Documents for public comment</li> <li>• Surveys</li> <li>• On line submissions,</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workshops</li> <li>• Committees</li> <li>• Polling</li> <li>• Developing the key parts of a major plan – e.g. Local Environment Plan or Council’s Community Strategic Plan</li> <li>• Online discussions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advisory groups</li> <li>• Participatory decision making</li> <li>• Developing specific programs for individuals or particular groups</li> <li>• Delegated decision making to s355 committees</li> <li>• Online collaboration including co-development of solutions and programs</li> </ul>
Where will you find <b>information</b> about the Council and its activities	How will we contact you to <b>consult</b> you?	How will we get you <b>involved</b> ?	How will we <b>work</b> with you?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the media</li> <li>• At Council offices and libraries</li> <li>• On the website at <a href="http://www.begavalley.nsw.gov.au">www.begavalley.nsw.gov.au</a></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We will provide clear guidelines to ensure effective and fair feedback is obtained</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By attending workshops or other forums which will be widely advertised</li> <li>• We will provide clear guidelines to ensure effective meeting, workshop or online discussions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By attending workshops or other forums which will be widely advertised</li> <li>• We will provide clear guidelines to ensure effective collaborative decision making</li> </ul>

## Appendix C



Adapted from the ACT Department of Territory and Municipal Services Community Engagement Policy

