



Victorian Local Governance Association

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Local Government Consultation and Engagement

Principles

The following principles underlie all good consultation practice.

Focus

Everyone should be clear on why consultation is being undertaken. Every significant project, policy development and strategy should have a consultation plan as part of the overall project plan. Refer to section 5 for more detail about how to develop a consultation plan.

There must be a statement of what the purpose of the consultation is. It should be clear to all involved why the consultation is happening and this will assist in ensuring that appropriate methods are used and the consultation is targeted.

In particular, it is important to identify whether the consultation is "closed" (ie: do you agree or disagree with proposition X) or "open" (what do you think the issues are in dealing with situation or problem X).

It will help participants' understanding of the process and their expectations of the outcomes.

It is also desirable to identify the start and finish of the consultation process. It is helpful when participants are aware of when consultation is finished and decision-making is to take place.

Checklist:

- **Why is this consultation being done?**
- **What exactly am I consulting about - am I looking for comment on a draft recommendation or conclusion (ie: a closed consultation) or am I generating ideas about an issue (ie: an open consultation)?**
- **Is the start and finish of the consultation process clear?**
- **How will the consultation improve the final outcome?**

Inclusiveness, accessibility and diversity

All affected parties must be consulted. Care should be taken to ensure that all affected parties are identified. Some interests may be less immediately obvious than others, but may be just as important. The extent of consultation, though, needs to be considered in light of the significance of the project or issue.

The process should be accessible for all those who should be involved and everyone must be given an equal opportunity to be included. The council should take active steps to ensure that all interests are adequately represented.

The diverse nature of the Australian community must be recognised and issues of language and culture need to be addressed. The Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria (ECCV) can be consulted for advice on consulting with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities.

All groups and individuals should be actively encouraged to participate and any barriers to participation should be tackled. This is particularly relevant for groups and individuals who have traditionally not participated for reasons such as language, age or mobility.

The choice of venue can impact on the accessibility of the consultation process. An interesting, accessible venue can make it easier to attract people to participate.

Remember that staff, particularly frontline staff, can make an important contribution.

Councils should always try to take consultation to the target groups rather than making them come to you.

Checklist:

- **Who are the stakeholders with regard to the issue/s under question?**
- **Are there any groups of stakeholders which are difficult to access?**
- **What am I going to do to ensure these people have the opportunity to be heard?**
- **How can I take the consultation to them?**
- **If a venue is involved, is it suitable and accessible?**

Provision of information

Consultation should be based on informed comment and input and this means that information must be made available, in an appropriate form, to those participating in the process.

Good information for those impacted by the issue and potential participants will result in better understanding, more informed input, better access to the process and a greater sense of ownership of the process and outcomes.

How the information is presented is very important. Information should be readable, well set-out, interesting and feature pictures, graphics and cartoons where possible.

Checklist:

- **What information am I providing to those people who are being consulted?**
- **Is the information adequate to ensure that they can express an informed opinion?**
- **Is the information provided in a way which is easily understandable, meaningful and fun?**
- **Am I providing adequate opportunity for people to receive the information or was it a "one-off" item?**

Timing

The consultation must be timed to ensure that the results of the consultation are able to achieve its purpose, namely to inform the policy, planning and decision-making processes.

The consultation must take place early enough in the decision-making process to ensure that its outcomes may be considered prior to the decisions being made. As a general rule, the earlier in the process, the better. This means that where possible, consultation should occur on the scoping or identification of the issues rather than just on the final decision. It will also enhance the credibility of the process if people feel that issues have not been resolved prior to consultation.

Checklist:

- **At what stage of the process is consultation occurring?**
- **Is it early enough to help identify all the issues or is it merely seeking comment on already identified issues?**
- **Is it sufficiently early in the process for people to feel that the council is genuinely interested in their opinions?**

Responsiveness and feedback

Consultation should be transparent and open and the council should respond to all issues raised. Where possible, participants should know at the start of a process how their input is to be used.

The council should be genuinely open to input and be prepared to take on new ideas. Participants should be clear about how their input is being treated and how it might impact on the final decision. The council should respect the diverse range of interests and views which may exist around a particular issue and make genuine attempts to resolve conflicts, while recognizing that it has the ultimate decision-making role.

The requirement to provide feedback can help ensure that all input is considered in the decision-making process. The receipt of input makes participants feel that their participation has been valued. Feedback can be general (ie: it is often not practical to provide a tailored response to each individual input) but the feedback should go to all participants.

Communicating the decision-making process, both at the beginning and end of the consultation, may also help people feel that they were listened to, even if they disagree with the ultimate decision.

It may be appropriate at times for participants to be involved in the decision on how their input is to be used.

Checklist:

- **Is the decision-making process clear and has this been communicated with respondents?**
- **Do I have a plan for how feedback is to be provided to respondents?**

Evaluation

Consultation processes should be evaluated following the completion of decision-making to assess whether the goals of the consultation process have been achieved. In this way, the council is able to review and improve its consultation processes while also increasing the credibility of consultation.

Participants should be involved in evaluation processes wherever possible.

Checklist:

- **Is evaluation part of the consultation plan?**
- **Is there a commitment to undertake the evaluation?**
- **How will my council use the outcomes from the evaluation to ensure better consultation practices in the future?**
- **How will participants contribute to the evaluation process?**

Resourcing

While not strictly a principle, adequate resourcing is fundamental to good consultation. Consultation involves both direct and in-kind resourcing and this needs to be identified when the consultation plan is being developed. Ideally, these resources should be included in the budget for the overall issue or project.

While resourcing consultation appears to add costs to an issue or project, in the long-term investment in consultation can mean that the overall cost of an issue/project is less than what it might have been through getting it right and having community ownership.

Checklist:

- **Has a proper consultation plan been developed as part of the project or issue planning?**
- **Is there adequate resourcing for the consultation plan?**