

## **IAP2 Submission to South Australian Local Government Participation and Elections Review**

The International Association for Public Participation Australasia (IAP2 Australasia) welcomes the opportunity to participate in the Local Government Participation and Elections Review. IAP2 Australasia is the peak body for the community and stakeholder engagement profession with nearly 15,000 members across Australia and New Zealand.

### Community Engagement Charter

#### **1. Ensure the Community Engagement Charter has a clear definition of 'engagement' that applies to all councils**

There is the opportunity and need for a clear definition of what engagement is. IAP2 defines engagement as *"an intentional process with a specific purpose of working across organisations, stakeholders and communities to shape the decisions or actions of members of the community, stakeholders or organisation in relation to a problem, opportunity or outcome"*.

There is a lack of understanding, among both decision-makers and the broader community, on what engagement is. Engagement is broad spectrum and ranges from informing through to empowering the community. All engagement methods are valid, and the appropriateness will depend on the nature, scale and complexity of the project.

Considering engagement as a project risk can sometimes create the risk. Engaging earlier in a project stage, for example taking into account engagement factors at the earliest stages of project planning, will mitigate risks and allow earlier identification of likely issues (including broader project risks), providing valuable time for better informed strategic decision making.

The definition of engagement should be included in the Charter to ensure that all councils are working with the same definition of engagement.

#### **2. Include community engagement as a key strategic consideration in projects**

It is widely acknowledged by governments at all levels that community engagement can be a significant project risk for infrastructure and planning projects, but there are also substantial opportunities in engagement that may go unrealised.

Managing community opposition and making substantial changes to projects, particularly at late stages of project planning, can add costs and delay projects.

Engagement expertise is critical to the strategic considerations for project planning. Strategic engagement expertise will identify appropriate opportunities within a broader project plan to enable engagement to enhance a project, not simply pose a risk to be managed. For example, local knowledge can assist project planners to better understand local context that can feed into project design.

#### **3. Councils should determine how they will engage with their communities, but the Charter should set an engagement framework that accounts for project complexity, scale, budget and time**

Engagement by the general public should be appropriate for the community that a council is seeking to engage with, which would be best determined by the council itself. Opportunities for engagement will differ depending on geographic and demographic factors, and additional engagement opportunities may be needed for a project that is of a particularly large budget or time period.

While individual councils should determine how they engage with their communities, the requirement to factor in the complexity, scale, budget and time should be set in the Charter, which could include a paragraph such as:

*ensuring that there is at least one opportunity for the greater community and business to participate in an engagement activity that is suitable for the project taking account of factors such as resources, scale, complexity, budget, and time.*

This could be supported by further examples such as an online or public meeting, workshop, community discussion or survey.

#### **4. Develop a Community Engagement Atlas/Wiki to reduce engagement fatigue**

One risk that IAP2 Australasia has identified in engagement is a sense of engagement fatigue, particularly when a community is consulted about an issue repeated times without seeming to account for previous engagement. This reduces trust in the engagement process.

There is the opportunity for government to develop a Community Engagement Atlas/Wiki. This online tool could provide key information and statistics including educational information, what is happening (and where), and what is important. It would provide transparency for community and stakeholders, the proponent(s) and government, reduce community engagement fatigue, identify, mitigate and reduce risks and increase trust in projects.

IAP2 is happy to discuss this in further detail if more information is required on how a Community Engagement Atlas/Wiki would work in practice.

#### Promoting trust in local government

IAP2 Australasia awards organisations 'Core Values Awards' each year to build awareness, contribute to the engagement practice, and recognise excellence in public participation and community engagement. We have had several local governments across Australia win Core Values Awards over many years.

A winner in 2023 in our 'Research' category was Moreton Bay Regional Council, for their 'Moreton Says: Hearing the missing voices' project. I have attached a copy of the case study to demonstrate how one local government used engagement to build trust in the council. This case study may provide some useful insights and a template for South Australian local governments to use for their broader engagement in their communities.

More examples of successful local government engagement initiatives are available at [www.iap2.org.au/case-studies/](http://www.iap2.org.au/case-studies/)

#### **Conclusion**

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with the review team to discuss IAP2 Australasia's submission. We would also welcome the opportunity to facilitate a broader discussion with our membership, noting that our members have considerable expertise and can share lessons learned from their previous experience in facilitating local government engagement.