

Case Study: Enabling public participation through the Community Wellbeing Advisory Forum – a fresh approach to community wellbeing planning and action



Highlights at a Glance

State what is unique or innovative

- The approach of open participation in the Community Wellbeing Advisory Forum and peer-led consultation allowed us to hear a diversity of voices and enabled a deeper level of community participation.
 - Our relationships with participants and commitment to the shared journey were given priority, which led to better outcomes across reach, depth of participation, and quality of the data and resulting Plan.
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- The Forum and the development of the Plan were integrated with a professional development program for the Community Wellbeing team. This program supported staff with the knowledge, skills and confidence required to immerse themselves in the community engagement process and the subsequent writing of the Plan.
 - Through this co-designed, immersive and flexible development process, we now have a group of staff and community residents who feel connected to the Plan and who can be involved in the delivery of wellbeing initiatives in Alexandrina.

Identify organisation, sector and geographical location

- Organisation: Alexandrina Council
- Sector: Public
- Geographical location: Alexandrina LGA

State engagement objectives, purpose and scope

- Scope: Develop a Community Wellbeing Action Plan with clear priorities and actions, that will guide Alexandrina Council's work around wellbeing over the next four years, 2022–2026.
- Purpose: To ensure that the Plan reflects our community's strengths, needs and aspirations for wellbeing.
- Engagement objectives:
 - 1) Engage with community members of diverse backgrounds, including those less likely to participate in Council's traditional consultation processes.
 - 2) Meaningfully collaborate with the community via the Community Wellbeing Advisory Forum to design and deliver the engagement process.
 - 3) Identify our community's strengths, needs and aspirations for wellbeing to inform the Community Wellbeing Action Plan.

State spectrum level

- Inform, Consult, Involve and Collaborate

Three key outcomes showing impact of engagement

- 1) Development of a Community Wellbeing Action Plan that has been shaped by a broad cross-section of our community
- 2) Community leadership fostered through meaningful engagement
- 3) Improved trust between community and Council through talking, listening and working together.

Three key engagement takeaways:

- 1) Engagement methods that are flexible, creative and embrace higher levels of the IAP2 Spectrum can help Councils to better engage and work with the communities they serve.

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- 2) Meaningful community engagement presents opportunities for Councils and communities to learn new skills, learn about each other, and develop trust.
 - 3) Meaningful community engagement need not be financially expensive, can nurture volunteerism and civic engagement, and help save money over the long term by ensuring Council plans/expenditure are aligned with their communities needs and priorities.
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Key search words: Public, Government – Local / Municipal, Council plan, community forum, collaborate

1.0 Objectives

- **Identify organisation, sector and geographical location**

Alexandrina Council is a regional local government authority delivering local governance, administration and services to support the prosperity of our community. We are located on the Fleurieu Peninsula in South Australia and include 11 townships and surrounding districts.

- **Outline the engagement objectives, purpose and scope – what decisions needed to be made?**

The scope of the project was to develop a Community Wellbeing Action Plan that will guide Alexandrina Council's work around wellbeing over the next four years, 2022–2026. The purpose of the engagement was to ensure that the Plan reflects our community's strengths, needs and aspirations for wellbeing.

Our objectives were to:

- 1) Engage with community members of diverse backgrounds, including those less likely to participate in Council's traditional consultation processes.
- 2) Meaningfully collaborate with the community via the Community Wellbeing Advisory Forum to design and deliver the engagement process.
- 3) Identify our community's strengths, needs and aspirations for wellbeing to inform the Community Wellbeing Action Plan.

The Community Wellbeing team works across the Alexandrina community covering all locations, ages, ethnicities and abilities. As a new team, we had an opportunity to develop an Action Plan for the future that our whole community had a stake in. Accordingly, its development process needed to reflect this.

Alexandrina Council is home to a connected, skilled and diverse community.

Our community grew by 2.28% (n=635) during 2020–21, compared to 0.31% in regional South Australia, and the previous five-year trend indicates increasing growth.

We needed to plan and resource our community's future wellbeing, and our community were best placed to tell us what is needed.

A collaborative approach to community planning resulted in a Community Wellbeing Action Plan built upon our community's diverse needs and aspirations.

- **Describe what role the public had in the decision-making process, including an outline of the affected stakeholders, stakeholder sentiment (engaged, disengaged, distressed, outrage), whether they provided input in designing how they would be involved and likely level of influence**

Community members were invited to collaborate with us on its development via the Community Wellbeing Advisory Forum.

- Twenty community members responded to an initial call for forum members, outlining their interest and experience in wellbeing
- The forum was open invitation, allowing anyone to join the forum and activities at any stage. We endeavoured to nurture a forum representative of our diverse community, including young people, people living with disability and First Nations peoples. Sixty individuals participated across the forum's life
- A key activity undertaken by forum members was peer consultation. Thirty members opted to lead wellbeing conversations with their communities during May to September 2021. The key questions – 'What's working well? What do people want? Do you have any ideas to get us there? Who needs to be involved?' – and who, where, when and how they were asked of our community was decided by forum members in their working groups. Support was provided by the Community Wellbeing team as needed
- Forum members presented their findings at an open forum using methods of their choosing
- The information gathered by the forum and staff informed the development of the Community Wellbeing Action Plan, and the forum provided input on draft versions
- We allowed flexibility in how much community members participated, recognising people have busy lives. We believed that some participation from a wide cross-section of our community was more valuable than full participation from a few. As expected, there were varying levels of engagement from 'very engaged' through to those who participated in 1–2 forums/activities. Overall, there was a positive view of the forum and enthusiasm to contribute to a participatory planning process for our community.

- **Explain the reasons for the use of the particular participation process – including whether there were any legislative requirements to engage (as applicable)**

The Community Wellbeing Advisory Forum and peer-led consultation activity were used for several reasons:

- By enabling forum members to be ‘peer consultants’, we anticipated they would reach a more diverse range of voices than Council could alone
- We expected that community members would be more comfortable sharing their views on wellbeing with peers, including the ‘good, bad and the ugly’
- This was a new way of working for our Council and community. We anticipated it would deepen relationships between Council staff and self-identified community leaders, expand our mutual networks, and build skills and confidence in community engagement for forum members and staff alike.

- **Outline supporting communications/materials developed**

A range of methods were used to inform, consult, involve and collaborate with forum members and/or community throughout the process, including:

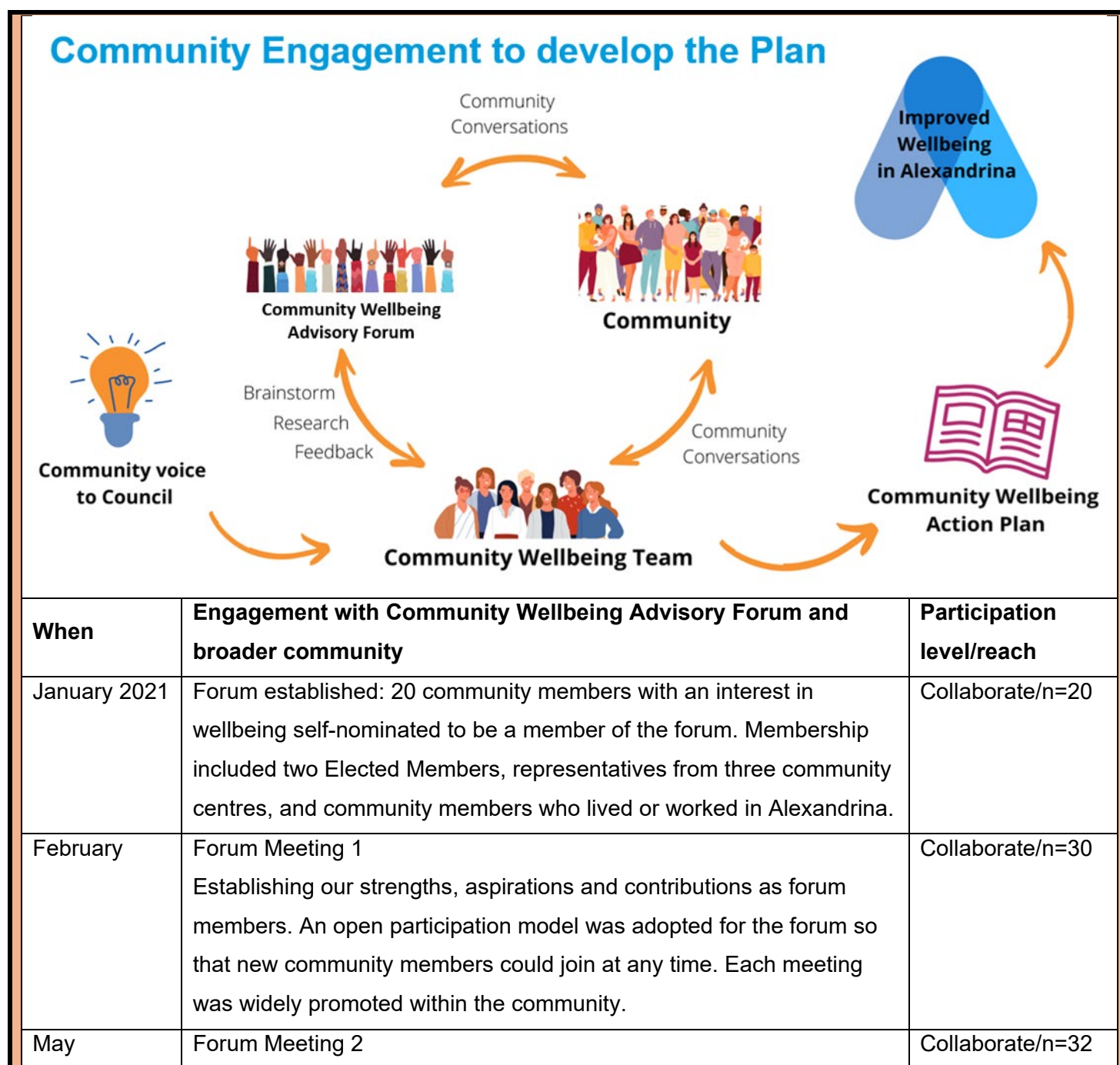
- Five face-to-face forums involving small group discussion, reflection, presentations, prioritising activities, and evaluation activities
- Webpage
- Poster
- Infographics and summaries
- Survey – short and long form
- Community Wellbeing Action Plan.

2.0 Methodology

Plan engagement

- Outline project governance model and engagement program (including input from participants as applicable)
- Describe engagement methods and delivery, sequencing and anticipated participation levels/targets (and display as applicable)

The engagement program involved engagement with the Community Wellbeing Advisory Forum and engagement with the broader community. Initially, we anticipated we would collaborate with around 45 community members across the life of the forum and consult with another 200 through broader community consultation; however, our actual participations levels and reach exceeded these targets.



	<p>Planning consultation with community about wellbeing – developing key questions, who we would ask, and how.</p> <p>Thirty forum members formed working groups based on their target group of interest (children and families, young people, older adults, First Nations people, people living with disability, culturally and linguistically diverse community members, LGBTQI+ community). Forum members decided when and where to engage their target group using their networks and connections, and how they would ask the key questions. The Community Wellbeing team provided support as required.</p> <p>Forum members who were part of the First Nations working group advised that they couldn't proceed with the consultation as they believed First Nations people should be part of the planning process – only one First Nations community member was present that evening. The Community Wellbeing team acted on this advice, pursuing discussions with local Elders and First Nations organisations. The disability working group had limited time to undertake peer consultation, and as a result the Community Wellbeing team took on this responsibility.</p>	
May – September	<p>Community members shared their views and aspirations for wellbeing with forum members undertaking peer consultations.</p> <p>The Community Wellbeing team connected with First Nations leaders to discuss how to proceed. Together we decided to draw on existing First Nations-led consultations and worked with the chairperson of a First Nations organisation to host a yarning circle focussing on specific wellbeing needs and ideas for the Ngarrindjeri community.</p> <p>We drew on earlier consultation with people living with disability, in particular for the Disability Access and Inclusion Plan, to understand the wellbeing needs of residents living with disability and their carers. This was supplemented by feedback from Mission Australia and Fleurieu Mentoring.</p> <p>Community feedback from the 2021 Village Conversations – a series of conversations with our 11 villages about their aspirations for their</p>	Consult/n=600+

	township – were a valuable supplement to the peer-led consultations as they captured the voices of numerous children and young people.	
September	Forum Meeting 3 Sharing our findings about our community's aspirations for wellbeing and celebrating the engagement.	Collaborate/n=22
November	Forum Meeting 4 Prioritising the fresh ideas for community wellbeing – which ideas should be prioritised and how will we begin to take action.	Collaborate/n=18
March 2022	Forum Meeting 5 Learning from our year together and celebrating our achievements. Naming the Community Wellbeing Action Plan and deciding how we'd like to stay involved.	Collaborate/n=13
July – August	Consultation on the draft Community Wellbeing Action Plan with the Community Wellbeing Advisory Forum, Council staff and Elected Members.	Involve/n=45
September onwards	Ongoing engagement with forum members who opted to stay involved in a flexible way based on their target groups and topics of interest and across the public participation spectrum (consult, involve, collaborate, empower) to achieve community aspirations identified in the Plan.	Collaborate/n=16

- **Outline the enabling factors/conditions and how participation was supported to ensure inclusion**

Enabling factors and conditions that supported this process and participation included:

- **Autonomy and strengths-based:** Forum members were able to choose the engagement methods they were comfortable with and that would suit their chosen target group. They pooled their knowledge, skills and connections and shared the workload to consult with the community and achieved outcomes that could not be achieved alone.
- **Tailored support:** The Community Wellbeing team supported forum members as needed with planning, implementation, materials and printing, and budget to assist the consultation (e.g. refreshments for respondents).
- **Valuing the relationship:** There was no requirement for forum members to participate in any parts of the process. The Community Wellbeing team gave priority to the relationships with the forum members and valued the process of working together rather than the outputs. This removed pressure from forum members and fostered a supportive environment for collaboration.

- **Focus on diversity:** A conscious effort was made to ensure a diversity of voices were heard by inviting under-represented groups into the forum (e.g. youth) and setting up working groups within the forum that each focussed on hearing from different demographic groups.

- **Describe data collection tools**

Forum members decided what data collection tools were most suitable for engaging their target groups. A variety of tools were used, including electronic and hardcopy surveys, focus groups, casual group conversations and one-on-one interviews. Within the forums themselves, a mixture of tools and activities were used, including small and large group discussion, voting, panel discussion and reflective art-based activities.

- **Outline resources such as budget, timeframe, internal delivery and contracted support**

A small budget of \$20,000 spent over 20 months resourced the engagement process through to final Plan development.

As a new team where half the staff were transitioning from community aged care to community development roles, the Community Wellbeing team undertook professional development to build internal capacity to support the forum, community engagement, and development of a plan for our work into the future. An experienced community engagement practitioner, Moira Were AM of Ethical Fields, was engaged to support staff professional development, including:

- team building
- skill development in communication, project planning and evaluation
- planning and engagement activities for the Forums
- analysing data from the consultation processes.

Moira walked alongside the team through the process, providing strategic and practical engagement advice and facilitated forum sessions in a safe and inclusive way, generating community trust in the process.

Alignment with IAP2 Core Values for the practice of public participation

IAP2 Core Values	Example of how this was considered in the design of your project methodology
1. Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process	Community members from across Alexandrina were involved in every step of the engagement process, from participation in the forum, to designing the peer-led consultation, and providing input into the final Plan.
2. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision	Forum participants and community respondents were made aware that the feedback gathered through peer-led consultations would be used to develop the Community Wellbeing Action Plan. This is reflected in the target groups, strengths, priorities and actions described in the Plan.
3. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognising and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision-makers	The Plan is built upon the wellbeing needs and aspirations identified by a diverse cross-section of our community. The Plan is an important resource for communicating about our community's wellbeing needs and aspirations to 1) our team – to ensure staff time and resources are directed to our community's priorities for wellbeing, 2) our community – to show we have listened and how we will respond, 3) our colleagues within Council and partnering organisations – to identify how we can work together to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes for Alexandrina's communities.
4. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision	Forum members used their networks to reach people of diverse backgrounds through the peer-led consultation, including those who may not normally engage with Council's usual engagement strategies. Where there were ongoing gaps in participation (e.g. First Nations people, people with disability), the Community Wellbeing team took on reaching out to these cohorts through key contacts and other means to ensure their views influenced the decisions made.
5. Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate	Forum members designed engagement methods for their peers. They decided who, where, when and how they engaged with the community selecting methods they thought would be most appropriate to their target group.
6. Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way	<p>Meaningful participation through the forum and the engagement process was enabled through the provision of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target group demographic data – so forum members could understand the target group they had chosen to consult with • Supporting information about what we are consulting about and why we are using peer-led consultation • Relevant tools, such as long- and short-form survey

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact information of key people or groups relating to their chosen target group • General support to problem-solve aspects of their engagement project and reporting.
7. Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision	The collated community feedback was shared with the forum via their own working group presentations and a review of the fresh ideas for community wellbeing at later forums. Forum members were provided with two drafts of the Community Wellbeing Action Plan so members could see how the community feedback they had gathered featured in the plan, and so they could provide feedback to inform the final Plan.



LGBTQI+ Working Group reviewing their consultation findings and planning their presentation to the forum



Forum members reviewing the fresh ideas for wellbeing from our community, and sharing how they'd like to stay involved at the Giving Tree



3.0 Manage engagement

- **Outline the specific challenges (risks and constraints, engagement history if relevant) and describe how you responded to the challenges. Describe if modifications were required to overcome unintended outcomes**
 - The Community Wellbeing team and forum agreed that diverse representation was essential, and we had to deliberately make space for diverse voices. Targeted invitations to under-represented groups to become forum members (e.g. young people), and direct engagement in appropriate ways (e.g. with First Nations people) helped.
 - We were unsure how forum members would receive the invitation to be involved in peer-led consultation. We recognised the potential benefits in fostering civic leadership and gathering a wider range of voices, but equally recognised potential barriers, such as time commitment and confidence required to participate. To minimise barriers to participation, involvement in peer-led consultation was completely optional, working groups were supported by Community Wellbeing staff and access to shared consultation tools, such as survey forms.
 - The forum environment was unfortunately unsuitable for two Year 6/7 students who were invited to participate with their teacher. Our strong relationship with the school meant we were able to discuss this openly and modify their participation to meet their needs.
 - Maintaining engagement in the forum was challenging at times. We delivered the forums in different townships and in the evenings to maximise accessibility; however, distance sometimes deterred participation. COVID-19 required changes in scheduling on two occasions and operational adjustments to ensure safe participation, both requiring clear and timely communications. Providing good food, building personal relationships, sending personal invitations, and interactivity within the forum were helpful in retaining engagement.

- **Describe the approach to data collection, management, analysis and generating the findings**

Data collected by the forum, Community Wellbeing team and through Village Conversations using methods described earlier were compiled in Excel under the seven target groups from whom the feedback came.

Data was further categorised under the four consultation questions: 'What's working well? What do people want? Do you have any fresh ideas to get us there? Who needs to be involved?', and one of five overarching wellbeing themes (Our Vibrant and Artistic Community, Our Active and Healthy Community, Our Connected and Inclusive Community, Our Places and Spaces, Our Community's Resources). A sample of the data was reviewed by a Community Wellbeing team member to develop a schedule and descriptions of sub-themes that sat beneath the five wellbeing themes. Three team members then categorised and sorted the data by sub-theme to identify the top five sub-themes relating to what's working well and what people want for each of the seven target groups.

Findings were triangulated against other feedback from our community present in strategic documents and reports to check their validity.

Top themes relating to 'What People Want' informed the priorities in the Community Wellbeing Action Plan for each of the seven target groups. Actions were generated under each priority using a combination of ideas suggested by our community, existing projects underway, new opportunities and data about our community's needs.

The draft Plan was reviewed by the Community Wellbeing team, forum members and Elected Members, and feedback was used to develop the final Plan.

4.0 Outcomes, impact and insights

Reflection and evaluation of engagement

- **Comment on appropriateness and effectiveness of the engagement program, including reach, outputs, outcomes, impact and actual spectrum level or influence**

The engagement program was successful in hearing from a large and diverse cross-section of our community and met or exceeded our targets across the journey. The Community Wellbeing Action Plan was built from the community's views and ensures that Council's work on wellbeing is directed by our community's needs and aspirations. The process enabled participation across the spectrum from Inform through to Collaborate and resulted in a number of other positive outcomes and impacts, including capacity building and improved trust.

Reach

600+ (2% of population)

Children & Families, Young People,
Older Adults, First Nations,
People with Disability, CALD, LGBTQI+

Spectrum Level

Inform, Consult, Involve
& Collaborate

at various stages across the
journey

Outputs

Community Wellbeing
Advisory Forum
established:

60

unique participants

30

Forum members
involved in peer-led
consultation

Wellbeing views of

600+

gathered

Community Wellbeing
Action Plan built on
community feedback



Outcomes

Deepened
relationships between
Forum members and
Community Wellbeing
team and expanded
our networks

Forum members and
staff built skills in
community
engagement together

1418

volunteer hours and

\$64K

value contributed via
Forum and stakeholder
responses

Community Wellbeing
Action Plan reflective
of community
aspirations and driving
the work of the
Community Wellbeing
team.

Impact

Fostered community
leadership through
safe and inclusive
processes

"There is a fantastic network
of leaders in this group
making it a safe space to
complete our presentation..."
Forum Member

Improved trust
between community
and Council through
talking, listening and
working together

"The inclusiveness of the
groups and our chance to
speak up and have our say and
know that our contributions
will be used." Forum Member

Action towards
improved community
wellbeing

- **Outline the evaluation of the engagement undertaken, insights or lessons learnt**

Methods to evaluate the process and outcomes of the forum included surveys, rotating interview panel, one-on-one interviews and team debrief.

Insights and lessons learnt included:

- Forum participants needed more clarity regarding the purpose and expected outcomes of their participation and time to digest and consider information/activities before responding. This feedback prompted the Community Wellbeing team to develop clearer communications and allow more time to support participants.
- We needed to be flexible and responsive to challenges and changes as they arose; for example, to change our approach to consultation to suit different target group needs.
- Participants were eager to see outcomes/action – they reported generally seeing the ‘talking’ part but not enough ‘doing’. They were eager to contribute to action, which presented opportunities for involvement in the delivery of the Plan.

- **Outline the reporting processes to decision-makers, key stakeholders and participants, identify how feedback shaped decisions made**

There were several reporting milestones throughout the journey, including:

- Summaries and decisions made by the forum were shared with participants after each forum
- Forum members presented their consultation findings at an open forum
- The Community Wellbeing team shared draft versions of the Plan with the Forum, Council staff and Elected Members and sought their input
- Achievements relating to the delivery of the Plan were shared with Forum members
- The final Plan was presented at the September 2022 Council meeting.

- **Provide evidence about levels of participant, stakeholder and organisation satisfaction**

The Forum delivered a meaningful and satisfying experience for Forum members, Community Wellbeing staff and Alexandrina Council.

Community participants enjoyed networking, the diversity of representation and feedback, sharing ideas and skills, and the positive space created.

'The journey on the way has allowed us as a group to share our skills, to bring our strengths to the table, and to learn from each other.'

**Forum Member,
Strathalbyn**

'If everyone puts their heads together, and if we have a lot of different opinions and opportunities like this forum, we can get a lot of work done and people's voices can be heard.'

**Forum Member, Mount
Compass, Year 11 student**

Alexandrina Council valued the diversity represented within the Forum, the authenticity of the experience, and the investment by our community.

'Most diverse event I've been to for Alexandrina.'

**Alexandrina Council
Elected Member**

'There's no doubt that the wellbeing forums helped to foster people who perhaps would not consider themselves to be leaders, but who brought forward fantastic ideas.'

**Forum Member and
Alexandrina Council Elected
Member**

Innovation and uniqueness

Outline how this project advances knowledge or practice

The approach of open participation in the Forum and peer-led consultation allowed us to hear from people who wouldn't normally participate in local government consultations using traditional methods. Furthermore, it allowed deeper participation by residents in planning for the future for our Council and community. Community members had opportunities to be involved across the IAP2 spectrum from Inform through to Collaborate (to co-design and deliver the consultation and Plan).

The Forum was highly interactive and provided different ways for community to be involved. Participants learnt about their community, Council roles and processes, and built relationships with staff and each other.

Our relationships with participants and commitment to the shared journey were given priority, which led to better outcomes in terms of reach, depth of participation, and quality of the data and resulting Plan.

The Forum and the development of the Plan were integrated with a professional development program for the Community Wellbeing team described earlier. This program supported staff with the knowledge, skills and confidence required to immerse themselves in the community engagement process and the subsequent writing of the Plan.

Through this co-designed, immersive and flexible development process, we now have a group of staff and community residents who feel connected to the Plan and who can be involved in the delivery of wellbeing initiatives in Alexandrina. The team continues to stay connected with these residents as informal 'wellbeing champions' who assist with promotion, planning and advising on wellbeing initiatives that are being implemented under the Plan. While the Forum operated for an 18-month period, it will have an ongoing legacy through this network of engaged citizens for many years.



Acknowledgements and to find out more:

We would like to thank Alexandrina Council and community for agreeing to share this case study and insights to advance engagement practice. This case study was co-authored by Alexandrina Council and members of the Community Wellbeing Advisory Forum.

For more information about this project see:

- www.alexandrina.sa.gov.au/cwaf
- <https://www.alexandrina.sa.gov.au/connect/wellbeing/our-plans/community-wellbeing-action-plan>

To connect with the authors:

- www.alexandrina.sa.gov.au/contact

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