

Case Study: City of Cockburn's C. Y. O'Connor Beach: Community engagement outcomes drive bold, unique, Australian-first coastal erosion reduction trial



Highlights at a glance

- The City of Cockburn is a local government authority located approximately 17 km south of Perth, the capital city of Western Australia. It has a population of over 125,000 people.
- Limited budget of \$5,000. The budget covered communications/marketing materials creation and advertising costs, staff time and contractor support.
- Innovation through the integration of a placemaking approach. An effective tool for education, interest and input on complex or dry topics.
 - Informing – Example of reef structure and signage installed along the beach foreshore to tell the story of the journey on mitigating coastal erosion.
 - Consulting – Sea container workshop at C.Y. O'Connor Beach creating an inviting community space with comfortable couches and a complimentary food and beverage van. Staff were on hand, including the project engineer, to answer questions and show modelling using iPads.

Objectives:

- 1) To raise awareness about the serious erosion challenges at C. Y. O'Connor Beach.
 - 2) To understand the community's vision and values for the space, which would help to inform design options for a long-term treatment strategy to mitigate and reduce the impacts of erosion.
- **IAP2 Spectrum:** Inform ⇒ Consult ⇒ Inform (close the loop).
 - **Three key outcomes showing impact of engagement:**
 - 1) **Identifying the community's vision and values** for the C.Y. O'Connor Beach was a strong component of the consultation, without preordained options being sought. When a unique opportunity presented itself to address coastal erosion, the City had the confidence for such a bold initiative to be trialled, as it met community expectations identified through the engagement process.
 - 2) **From disengagement, due to lack of awareness and impact, to engagement post process.** Community and stakeholders at the start, were disengaged due to a lack of detailed knowledge about the dramatic negative effect coastal erosion was having on C.Y. O'Connor Beach. The community's view changed to engaged. This was, in no small part, due to the City's onsite pop-up sea container, which opened up to showcase information and provided a consultative space where interactive activities occurred.
 - 3) **Most important was closing the loop**, after consultation had occurred. This consisted of information being provided at the beach, with informational signage about the reef structure being trialled, detailing the story of the journey to help explain how the City got to the current point. A life-sized concrete module, of the type used in the reef trial, was on display for the closing the loop phase. The importance of education, particularly raising awareness of erosion challenges, is ongoing.

Three key engagement takeaways:

1. An appreciation that inform/consult on the engagement spectrum, if done well, is effective at delivering positive outcomes for Council/community and external stakeholders.
 2. The effectiveness of combining a 'go to them' placemaking approach with the development of the engagement process.
 3. Organisations should recognise the valuable contributions that the community can make to complex engineering topics, such as erosion management. Ensuring that the information and resources are accessible to the community is crucial for effective engagement.
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Key search words: Local government, public amenities, climate change, erosion, reef, engineered fringing reef, community engagement, consultation, coastal adaptation, inform and consult.

1.0 Objectives

C.Y. O'Connor Beach has faced erosion since the late 1990s, with studies indicating future shoreline recession and risks to assets and amenities. Climate change-driven rising sea levels may worsen the situation, leading to potential loss of foreshore and community infrastructure. It is the City's most vulnerable and costly beach to address.

The initial engagement objectives were:

- 1) Raise awareness of erosion challenges at C. Y. O'Connor Beach.
- 2) Understand the community's vision and values for the space, to inform potential erosion treatment design options.
- 3) Obtain the community's feedback on the draft options developed based on the visioning and values exercise.

The project did change. Objectives 1 and 2 were completed but objective 3 was placed on pause. An unexpected opportunity, the 'erosion reduction reef trial' became available. The timing was perfect to consider the opportunity.

The City, due to the engagement process, felt confident it understood the great importance that C.Y. O'Connor Beach has for the community, the great affection that it inspires among community members and the values that mattered most to them from the survey and onsite workshops. Participants valued a wide sandy beach, walking/jogging on the beach, its natural appearance, ease of access and that it is dog friendly.

Typical options used to mitigate erosion are groynes or sea walls. These imposing physical structures may affect these uses and don't meet community expectations. Groynes could impact the ability to walk on the beach and seawalls would impact having a wide sandy beach and its natural feel.

Under the IAP2 Community Engagement Model, the City led the engagement and was responsible for the implementation. This approach is both to inform the community and to help shape the project. Decision-making rests with the City of Cockburn. No legislative requirements were in place for the process.

C. Y. O'Connor Beach is cherished for its diverse activities. Phase one aimed to inform the public, beach users and nearby residents of the significant challenges posed by erosion. Feedback from the public was critical to understand the level of importance of the beach to the public, the type of activities it was used for

- City of Cockburn is a local government authority, 17 km south of Perth, Western Australia
- Climate change is contributing to coastal erosion at C. Y. O'Connor Beach, impacting infrastructure used by the public
- The objective was to inform beach users about erosion challenges and establish a collective vision for C.Y. O'Connor Beach, guiding future erosion response options
- On the IAP2 spectrum it was at *inform/consult* level
- Targeting affected beach users, visitors and tourists, a placemaking approach utilised a pop-up sea container as an information hub and workshop venue. Feedback was gathered through face-to-face discussions with staff, including project engineers.

and the level of knowledge on the impacts and whether there was acceptance that major erosion mitigation was required.

Stakeholders were identified by impact and interest and mapped by living near C. Y. O'Connor Beach or by potential interest in the project. Public stakeholders, such as neighbouring local governments, were directly engaged with face-to-face meetings. Community sentiment was disengaged at the start due to low awareness of the seriousness of the erosion's impact on the beach. Years of mitigation by the City and the expense were not understood, such as the massive sand nourishment program and relocation of a pathway due to erosion impacts.

A comprehensive communications plan was developed in parallel to the engagement process, for its two phases. With the opportunity to be part of the erosion reduction reef trial, the City, due to the detailed community feedback, had confidence the community would support the opportunity. The trial is still in progress. Depending on how it goes, there would still be an intent, in the future, to get feedback on any design that involves major structural changes. The City had not yet reached that step because the erosion reduction reef trial opportunity presented itself. Closing the loop remains an ongoing communication task for the City. In closing the loop, a full-scale concrete module, like the ones used in the reef trial, along with many signs on shore, tell the story of how the City came to have a reef structure trial offshore.

2.0 Methodology

The City, at a corporate level, had documented governance on community engagement. Its Community Engagement Framework outlines the commitment the City provides in its promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision, while confirming the boundary of the Council as the ultimate decision-maker as shown in the extract below.

'It provides a structure and process for initiation, development, adoption and review of the City's community engagement practice based on:

- *Placing value on the insight provided by stakeholders*
- *Council as the ultimate decision-maker*
- *Making better decisions, which consider the interests and concerns of potentially affected people.*

Under the City's **Strategic Community Plan**, there are components that apply to this project:

- **Economic, Social and Environmental Responsibility:** One of the top three priorities identified was 'bushland, wetland and coastal natural area protection'.
- **Listening and Leading:** One of the top three priorities identified was 'community engagement and consultation'.

The **Corporate Business Plan**, under section 2.3, *Address Climate Change*, states 'Address climate change through planning, adaption, mitigation infrastructure and ecological management.'

The City had traditionally used its contacts for ratepayers and residents and typically emailed links or posted surveys out. Social media channels were often used, along with advertising in the media and on the City's website.

The erosion at C.Y. O'Connor Beach posed an issue for engagement with the correct people, those directly impacted by decisions on addressing the beach erosion. The main audience was not limited to residents but included visitors from other local government areas and tourists.

Over time, the City had seen a trend in the decline of the numbers of people participating in in-person workshops, while online participation grew. There was low interest in attending workshops at a typical venue, like a library. From previous engagements on other projects, the feedback from participants to the City identified reasons for low response levels at attending workshops. The preference, due to people being time poor, was to engage through online tools and methods. However, surveys are not always effective or appropriate as they don't give participants the information and context they need to participate fully. This is particularly true of complex and technical subjects, like coastal erosion.

The City had to find an approach that enabled it to access a hard-to-reach beach user. The City addressed this with a 'go to them' approach by creating a community space by the beach using a converted sea container that was both an information centre and an interactive workshop space to gather views. The physical presence of the sea container was a talking point and intrigued visitors would come up to staff at the sea container and ask questions about it. The sea container opened to a social space with couches and a food and soft drinks pop-up, run by a local charity. A grassed area was also used near the beach with signs explaining the story to date.

Engagement methods

From the survey data, the City learned that, in the past 12 months, the majority of participants had visited the beach over 20 times and that 82% of them were aware of the erosion. Most respondents visited the beach with their family or their dogs. The top three activities enjoyed at the beach were walking/jogging, swimming and dog-related activities. Participants were positive towards erosion control measures if they could preserve the type of amenity they currently enjoy at the beach. For example, participants were more receptive to groynes than sea walls, as they would retain the wide, sandy beach for activities like dog walking.

Workshop participants valued beach walks and general relaxation on the sand. Other activities they valued included swimming and water activities, running and cycle paths. They wanted it to remain pet friendly and have shady trees. Their vision related to the beach being pet friendly, clean and accessible.

A project engineer attended stakeholder meetings with the South West Alliance and the neighbouring local government, the City of Fremantle.

A converted pop-up sea container was established on site over a hot summer weekend to provide information and conduct workshop activities with the community. There was space to undertake visioning exercises where written comments by beach goers could be captured and coded. Visitors could easily talk to staff about erosion issues, mitigation the City had undertaken to date, and treatments used around the world to respond and adapt to coastal erosion. A project engineer was also available for beach users to ask about more technical aspects and potential solutions. Staff used iPads to demonstrate modelling to people visiting the container.

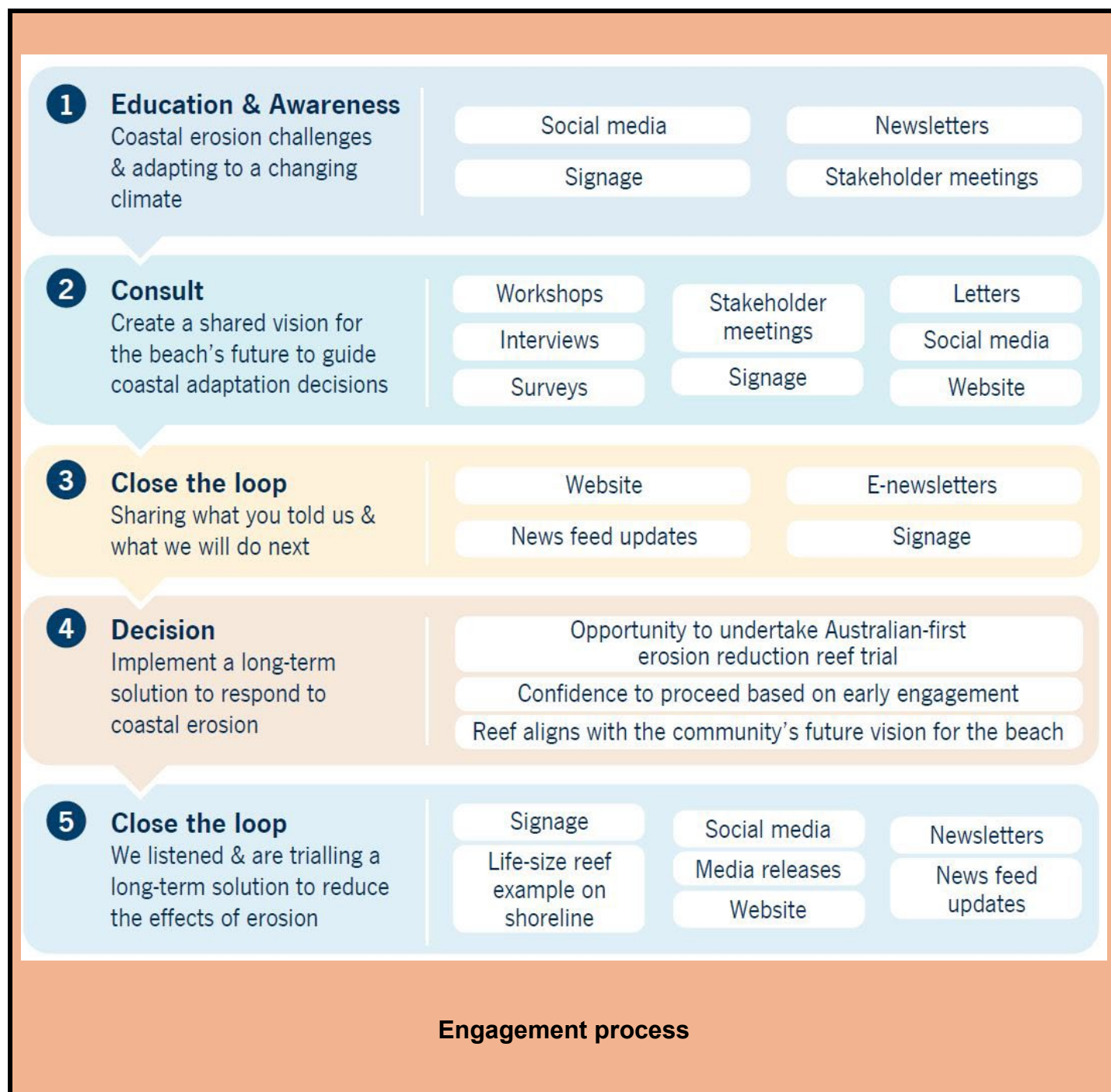
External communication channels used to provide information and context included social media, the City's website pages, local newspaper advertising and media releases. The City also sent letters to absentee owners/ratepayers with a 2 km radius advising them of the consultation process.

The City continued, after the consultation, to close the loop by providing extensive information to demonstrate that the City had heard the community's views and was progressing on them. The City continued to inform and educate about erosion to keep the discourse in existence and continue growing awareness.

Multiple information channels were used, including information provided at the beach with informational signage about the reef structure being trialled, detailing the story of the journey to help explain how the City

got to the current point. A life-sized concrete module, of the type used in the reef trial, was on display for the closing the loop phase.

There was a very limited budget available of approximately \$5,000. The budget covered communications/marketing materials creation and advertising costs, staff time and contractor support from Town Team Movement (formerly Spaced Out Placemakers).



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
<p>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</p>	<p>The City's approach to public participation is documented in its Strategic Community Plan 2030 and its Community Engagement Framework. One of the five strategic outcomes in the Strategic Community Plan is:</p> <p>Listening and Leading – <i>A community-focused, sustainable, accountable and progressive organisation.</i></p> <p>The City's Community Engagement Framework outlines the commitment the City provides in its promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision, while confirming the boundary of the Council as the ultimate decision-maker as shown in the extract below.</p> <p><i>'It provides a structure and process for initiation, development, adoption and review of the City's community engagement practice based on:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>• Placing value on the insight provided by stakeholders</i> <i>• Council as the ultimate decision-maker</i> <i>• Making better decisions, which take into account the interests and concerns of potentially affected people and organisations.'</i> <p>At a project level, the ability to target those potentially affected by any future impact of coastal erosion and the method to mitigate was at the forefront of the City's thinking. It was factored into the engagement planning to not only speak to residents and ratepayers but also those that use the beach, and neighbouring local governments who share the coastline. There was no predetermined outcome on the City's part. The City was genuine about the process informing how the project transpired.</p>
<p>2. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision</p>	<p>Due to the nature of local government, there can be other factors, outside of the Council decision-making process, that impact on the ability to fully accept the input of the</p>

IAP2 Core Values	Example of how this was considered in the design of your project methodology
	<p>community. Planning, development and environmental laws have strict conditions that cannot be ignored.</p> <p>It is vital to manage expectations of the community to ensure that the ultimate decision is one accepted by the community due to their understanding of how their contribution influences the decision.</p> <p>The community was informed that the City had no preconceived options or allocated budget for implementation.</p>
<p>3. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognising and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision-makers</p>	<p>The process included technical information and images to demonstrate the reality of the high erosion risk if left unaddressed. The erosion would impact public use of the beach and have potentially negative outcomes for the nearby infrastructure. There were several options open to the City on mitigating the risk. A placemaking approach was developed for the community and stakeholders to work with Council to create a collective vision for the space and understand different types of erosion treatments, which would help to inform a sustainable solution.</p>
<p>4. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision</p>	<p>Traditionally, local government would take a broad approach to engagement and utilise the list of contacts available to them, such as ratepayers and residents. This results in methods typically being broad in reach, such as surveys.</p> <p>C.Y. O'Connor Beach required a very targeted approach to participation in order to understand the values and vision of users of the beach and its surrounds. The City narrowed the scope to beach users across a range of activities. Nearby residents were approached for their input, given unaddressed issues could not only impact their enjoyment of the beach but potentially could impact their properties.</p> <p>Users of the beach extended beyond residents of the City of Cockburn.</p>

IAP2 Core Values	Example of how this was considered in the design of your project methodology
	<p>The very targeted focus was important to do as it helped shape understandings of the level of risk, the level of amenity possible and the solutions available.</p>
<p>5. Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate</p>	<p>Prior engagement activities on other projects indicated a decline in participation over time. Feedback to the City indicated a lack of interest in attending typical workshops held in a room at places like the local library. Being time poor, potential participants were looking for alternatives to give input in a faster way, such as online surveys. The issue for the City was how to reach beach users as there was no source of information of their profile or ability to contact them directly.</p> <p>The creative idea was to go to where the potential participants were undertaking their usual activities at C. Y. O'Connor Beach. A sea container was positioned on site at the beach. It was fitted out and manned as a pop-up information area and a feedback station at the consult phase for beach goers who may not have been included in the usual engagement channels.</p>
<p>6. Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way</p>	<p>The issue of coastal erosion can be divisive around the impact of climate change as a factor and the very technical aspects of various mitigation options. This was addressed through the face-to-face participation methods of information provided at the beach, within the sea container, at the feedback workshops and stakeholder meetings.</p> <p>The ability to engage with the City's staff and project engineers opened the conversation on some difficult topics. Anecdotal feedback at the time indicated that the participants had a deeper understanding on the journey to date for the City with its sand nourishment program and relocating of pathways.</p>
<p>7. Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision</p>	<p>The engagement process had a communication plan running alongside it. Two closing the loop phases, one after the consultation phase, shared what the participants had told the</p>

IAP2 Core Values	Example of how this was considered in the design of your project methodology
	<p>City and what the City would do next. A second close the loop phase occurred after the decision to conduct the erosion reduction reef trial was made. The purpose of the close the loop information was to demonstrate that the City has listened to the participants and is trialling long-term solutions that will reduce the effects of beach erosion.</p>

His Worship the Mayor Logan K. Howlett, JP – City of Cockburn

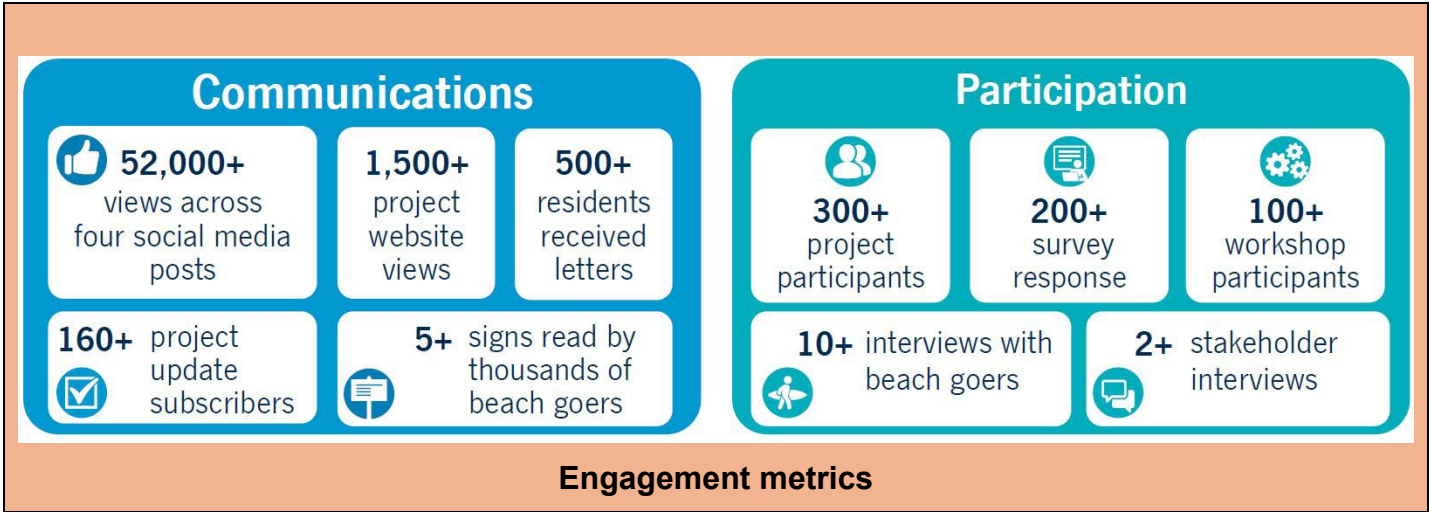
‘Community engagement is the heartbeat of our City. Through active consultation with 300+ community members and beachgoers from all over Perth, we heard how important it is to protect our coastline from the effects of a changing climate and adapt to challenges like shoreline recession. Over the past 20 years, the C.Y. O’Connor Beach shoreline has eroded by more than 50 m. Our community told us it values C.Y. O’Connor Beach as a place to walk, swim, admire sunsets and appreciate our coastal history. Finding a long-term solution to maintain “their space” far into the future while retaining its natural character and a wide, sandy beach is a top priority.



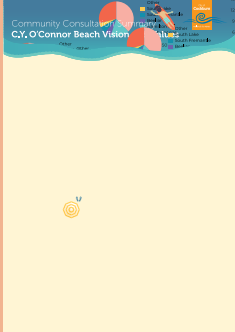
I’m so proud we have formed this partnership with Subcon and The University of Western Australia to embark on this new and innovative journey, which will help us learn and share ways to protect an iconic local beach for generations to come. This outcome is possible thanks to our community being a valuable part of this vital conversation.’

Rory Garven, Acting Head of Sustainability and Environment – City of Cockburn

‘This Australian-first erosion reduction reef trial is a cost-effective and industry-leading approach to respond to the effects of shoreline recession at one of our community’s most loved assets. The project will include establishing an extensive field monitoring program to assess the reef’s performance over three years and using the data to develop improved models to more broadly predict how artificial reefs can protect coastlines. In addition to these benefits, the reef also provides significant habitat for fish and enhances local marine biodiversity.

Genuine and early engagement laid the foundation for a unique and innovative way of responding to erosion challenges and the impacts of climate change. The absence of a predetermined outcome allowed the community’s values and aspirations to help shape the project’s direction. This empowered the project team to embark on this unique and ground-breaking trial with confidence, knowing this style of treatment aligns with our community’s desire to see a sandy beach for dog-walking, swimming, and play, protected as far as possible into the future.’



 <p>Sea container converted to onsite pop-up community space for public information and feedback.</p>	 <p>Sharing project outcomes with beach users through signage and a visible display of the concrete reef structure.</p>	 <p>Infographic summarising the consultation findings.</p>
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3.0 Manage engagement

There were three aspects that made a difference to how the engagement was managed.

1. A collaborative effort for the engagement process for the City's staff across three business areas.
2. Involving technical experts at face-to-face engagement is the key to making information accessible and easy to understand, so participants could engage meaningfully.
3. Moving away from typical data-gathering tools, to narrowing the focus to those directly impacted by the decision. This included innovative thinking on how to engage where the beach users were.

A critical aspect, internally to the City, was to ensure three areas within the City were integrated on the project to ensure engagement was fully understood and managed. The teams were, advocacy and engagement, marketing and communications, and the landscape and coastal projects team. All were part of the engagement planning process. The approach, messaging and undertaking of engagement had to be consistent across the teams.

The biggest informational challenge was to impart the importance of addressing the erosion issue and the urgency of action to the beach users. A small number of beach users and residents were unsure about the impact of climate change. There was some debate on whether erosion was a natural occurrence and therefore not to be addressed. The City chose to focus on what the community envisaged the future of the beach would be.

This was addressed by having the project engineer at the sea container pop up at the beach. They were available to the public to discuss items of interest on the technical aspects. Education on mitigation activities the City had been undertaking on a regular basis, such as large trucks on the beach engaged in sand nourishment using a massive amount of sand from other locations to C.Y. O'Connor Beach and the moving of a pathway about to be lost to erosion, helped the education of public on the realities of the ongoing battle to retain the amenity of the beloved beach. Lessons learned emphasised that involving technical experts and face-to-face engagement is the key to making information accessible and easy to understand, so participants can engage meaningfully.

A further concern was with engagement methods. Feedback from previous engagement projects had indicated a decline in the willingness to attend formal, more structured, face-to-face workshops and a preference for online surveys.

The need was for narrow targeting of those directly impacted by erosion at C.Y. O'Connor Beach, such as beach users across a wide range of activities and the local residents with their properties potentially, in the long-term, being impacted by continued shoreline recession.

Authentic and early engagement laid the foundation for a unique and innovative way of responding to erosion challenges at C.Y. O'Connor Beach. The absence of a predetermined outcome by the City allowed the community's values and aspirations to shape the project's direction.

4.0 Outcomes, impact and insights

The reach was outstanding. Out of the City's 232 projects, seeking community feedback on the City's 'Comment of Cockburn page', this project had the 11th highest number of responses. Over 100 people attended the sea container workshop pop-up. The City has never had this level of participation in a workshop before; numbers typically average around 20. Achieving the IAP2 value of 'providing participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way' would not be possible if the engagement had been solely online or the workshop wasn't in the format it was. The Facebook reach exceeded the average reach of 4,000, with a range of 6,600 to 20,300 across project specific posts.

The key outputs were:

- A detailed feedback report provided clarity on the public's understanding of the significant impact of coastal erosion at C. Y. O'Connor Beach.
- Identification and acceptance, by the community, of the extent of erosion mitigation required to preserve future beach access as long as possible and use as they visioned it in the future.
- Community vision, crafted at the workshop.

The outcomes have been exceptional. When the opportunity presented itself for the City to participate in the erosion reduction reef trial, the public feedback was substantive enough to provide clear direction and provided confidence to the City that such a trial would be seen as favourable to the community and stakeholders.

From March 2022, the City of Cockburn installed a 100 metre-long engineered erosion fringing reef at the beach as part of a coastal management trial. This erosion reduction reef trial is the first of its kind in Australia and aims to slow erosion rates by breaking down wave energy before it reaches the shore. The reef consists of 135 precast concrete modules installed offshore.

The City has ensured the conversation continues with the community and more broadly with visitors to the beach. In the closing the loop phase, the City's commitment is physically present at the beach with large interpretative signs covering the topics of what is coastal erosion, erosion control, how the coastline is changing, and a description of the engineered fringing reef, alongside a full-scale module as used in the offshore reef structure.

The top three impacts are:

1. An appreciation that inform/consult on the engagement spectrum, if done well, is effective at delivering positive outcomes for Council/community and external stakeholders.
2. The effectiveness of combining a 'go to them' placemaking approach with the development of the engagement process.
3. When the opportunity presented itself to be part of the erosion reduction reef trial, the engagement process has provided substantive direction that it met public expectations on mitigation of the erosion issue so the City had confidence agreeing to be part of the trial project.

Evaluation

It is standard practice for the City's staff to evaluate the engagement project and assess the lessons to be learned from it.

Key points were:

- Understanding the importance of the type of engagement, which can take time, effort, resources, commitment of staff to get right.
 - There is a tendency for organisations and elected members to prefer surveys as they give a high-level overview of issues. However, because the participants often lack sufficient information, the quality of the information received is insufficient. Surveys don't give participants the information and context they need to participate fully in complex situations.
 - Disparity in understanding/sentiment towards erosion challenges is seen in survey responses compared to discussions with workshop participants.
 - Discussions about erosion with engineers were fruitful and left participants feeling more aware and informed leading to more impactful engagement – while many might have been aware erosion existed, they did not fully appreciate the extent of the issue.
- Organisations should recognise the valuable contributions the community can make to complex engineering topics, such as erosion management. Ensuring that the information and resources are accessible to the community is crucial for effective engagement.
- In-person workshops in the digital era have a purpose. Using a sea container as a point of interest to 'see what it's all about', lounge setting for comfortable discussions, and easy activities that people can relate to, help to create interest, and form an approachable setting to discuss complex topics.

Acknowledgements and to find out more:

We would like to thank City of Cockburn for agreeing to share this case study and insights to advance engagement practice. This case study was authored by Julia Zivanovic of Knowledge on behalf of the Advocacy and Engagement Business Unit at the City of Cockburn.

For more information about this project see:

- comment.cockburn.wa.gov.au/CYOConnorBeach
- cockburn.wa.gov.au

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