



# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

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# Walcha Council Community Engagement Strategy

## 1 Executive Summary

Walcha Council is committed to sound Community engagement. Consultation is a regular and important part of Council's everyday services and it believes that

- ❖ People in our community should be involved in the decisions that affect them
- ❖ People in our community deserve high quality public services shaped around their needs and priorities
- ❖ Our Council policies and strategies should serve local circumstances and aspirations.

This Community Engagement Strategy recognises the importance of community input and will.

- ❖ Provide a guide as to how Council engages with the local community;
- ❖ Strengthen the partnership between Council, government stakeholders, service providers, local organisations and the local community through ongoing community engagement;
- ❖ Improve knowledge and skills of Council staff and improve internal coordination.
- ❖ Council is accountable for monitoring, evaluating and reporting and improvement (MERI) on community engagement activity.

This document fulfills the requirements of Section 402A of the Local Government Amendment (Governance and Planning) Act 2016 – Schedule 1 which states – “A Council must establish and implement a strategy (we have called it the ‘Community Engagement Strategy’) for engagement with the local community when developing its activities” (ie: Operational, Delivery and Community Strategic Plans – other than routine Administrative matters).

### 1.1 Strategic Context

#### 1.1.1 Introduction

Community participation is integral in recognising human rights and strengthening civil society. It encourages trust and respect between the community and Council by enabling stakeholders to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. Community engagement is usually initiated by Council but is essentially a two-way flow of information on issues that affect the community and is an invaluable tool in Council's decision making process.

The purpose of this strategy is to:

- Strengthen Community Involvement in planning services and programs
- Provide a consistent, whole of Council approach to community engagement

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- Support Council to engage with a wider cross section of the community, including groups that are harder to reach or traditionally have not been Councils focus.

### 1.2 Principles for Effective Community Consultation and Engagement

#### 1.2.1 Fair and transparent process

- ❖ A plain English explanation of the aims of the engagement process is provided to participants.
- ❖ Clear statement of how community feedback, advice and concerns will be considered in the decision making process.
- ❖ Feedback to the community on how and why it influenced the decision.
- ❖ Timelines for the engagement process give the community the best chance of influencing the outcomes.

#### 1.2.2 Honest, integrity and respect

- ❖ Genuine engagement – not tokenistic or contrived.
- ❖ Clear outline of what is negotiable and not negotiable.
- ❖ Actively listening to and respect for differing community views and perspectives.
- ❖ Allow consideration of the big picture so people can become engaged in the process.
- ❖ Listening to the individual issues that affect the quality of life of residents.

#### 1.2.3 Open and inclusive process

- ❖ A variety of community engagement processes and mediums will be used to enable all communities and stakeholders to effectively participate and to influence decisions.
- ❖ The interests and concerns of communities and stakeholders directly affected by decisions will be keenly sought.
- ❖ Everyone involved in the process is treated equally and respectfully.

#### 1.2.4 Well informed effective communication

- ❖ All information relevant to the community's understanding and evaluation of a decision will be made available in a clear, concise manner.
- ❖ Actively listening to community views and perspectives.
- ❖ Ensure community has time to become well informed.
- ❖ Inform the community of processes that are imposed on them and that are non negotiable due to legislative requirements.

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## 2 Strategies

### 2.1 Strategy 1: Inform

#### Goal:

To provide the community with appropriate information on Council itself, on governance and decision making mechanisms, on its services, events, projects and many associated issues.

This is the primary form of community engagement. In order to be able to actively engage in the community and in Council's decision making processes, the community requires information in a variety of ways to reach all sections of the community. For a number of people, depending on the nature of the issue, this may be the only form of community engagement they want.

#### Commitment to the Community:

We will keep you informed.

#### Methodology – how, when, who, evaluation:

Provide up-to-date information. Make up-to-date information available on Council's processes, meeting agendas and minutes, on services Council provides; including on how the community can access the service, and on how residents may feedback any issues, concerns and suggestions for service improvements.

Provide the community with information regarding changes in Federal and State Legislation that will directly affect how Council is able to provide the services the community wants.

Ensure that all information provided to the community is in a form that is accessible to all groups in the community eg: people with disabilities, people with computer literacy difficulties, young people, the aged; and, people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Information is provided in a myriad of ways including media, exhibitions, posters, leaflets, reports, displays and on-line.

#### Media:

Continue with a range of media releases distributed to local media and if needed, regional and metropolitan media. All media releases will be posted on Council's website and social media outlets.

#### Understand how the community prefers to receive information:

Conduct community surveys to analyse, among other things, the community's preferred methods of receiving information. Council will need to conduct a thorough survey of its residents to determine the preferred method of engagement this in itself will require several different methods of engagement, including face to face interviews, on line interactions and focus groups in the community of place.

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### In-house publications:

Initiate the publication of a Community Newsletter. Council's own publication which will be letterboxed to the community each quarter.

Continue to produce additional copies of Council agendas and minutes to be available to the public for reference at Council offices, Library and at other places as considered to be of importance to more isolated communities. Consider the production of a range of in-house publications to be made available to residents such as:

- ❖ New Residents' Kits
- ❖ Council's Services Directory including Sport and Leisure

### On-line information provision:

Publish all of Council's printed materials on-line, supplemented by additional information, images, audio and video where appropriate. Maintain Council's website [www.walcha.nsw.gov.au](http://www.walcha.nsw.gov.au) as an authoritative, complete and timely source of information on Council's activities, services and facilities. Make information available in open formats to allow the user to choose the delivery method they prefer, whether it be, for example, a web browser on a desktop PC, a portable device, email newsletter. Improve and promote email newsletter service and allow residents to select topics of interest to them so that they are regularly notified. Participate in and build social networks to allow Council to target its communications better and improve its information provision and promotion. Ensure digital communication is part of the corporate culture and is considered a core business function. Ensure all media releases are updated on Council's Social Media outlets.

### When:

Ongoing and as specific events and projects are scheduled.

### Who:

Entire community.

### Evaluation:

Amount of feedback received on the processes, results from community surveys and visits to Council's websites.

## **2.2 Strategy 2: Consult**

### Goal:

To obtain community input on strategic plans, directions, issues, priorities and projects, Council will ensure that Community consultation takes place around:

- ❖ The 10 year Community Strategic Plan
- ❖ The development of new Council policies, strategies and service plans
- ❖ The monitoring review and evaluation and improvement of existing Council policies, strategies and service plans
- ❖ The planning and development of new services and infrastructure
- ❖ The ongoing provision, management and review of Council services, and infrastructure

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- ❖ The setting of priorities for Council in relation to social and strategic planning, services and infrastructure, and
- ❖ On issues which impact on and or are of concern to the community or to any group within the community, including:
  - Broad community issues, eg: community safety;
  - Specific issues that impact on a particular group, eg: older people, business community, disadvantaged group
  - Matters that effect people in a particular street, village or town, eg: speed limits;
  - Matters that affect a particular site, eg: change in land use.

### Commitment to the Community:

We will listen to you, seriously consider your ideas and keep you informed about what input was received, an analysis of this input and the final decision/s reached following a report to Council.

### Methodology – how, when, who, evaluation:

Consultation methods will be chosen that will not only take account of the primary stakeholders but also be accessible to the broad community. The purpose of each consultation process will be conveyed clearly. This will include:

- ❖ What the consultation is to achieve
- ❖ Background information as appropriate, and
- ❖ The role of Council and the community.

Community consultation techniques will vary depending on who is being consulted and the nature and complexity of the issue that Council is consulting about. Available resources will also determine the type of consultation techniques that can be utilised ie: the timeframe available for consultation, the funds available, the staffing resource capacity, etc.

A range of consultation techniques will be utilised to ensure greater participation levels. These will include Community Meetings, surveys, focus groups, consultative workshops, advisory committees and on-line feedback.

### Community Meetings:

Council will conduct annual Community Meetings in our towns and villages. . All information in the form of minutes will be made available to the public through Council meetings and on line so that community is aware of issues and topics covered at these meetings. Quarterly reports on the status of issues raised will be presented to Council for there consideration. Perhaps the community meetings could adopt a more inclusive approach through a follow up workshop. Community meetings are an opportunity for Councillors and staff to listen to the residents attending and to take ideas on board for discussion at the follow-up workshop to inform the 10 year Community Strategic Plan to set Council's priorities.

### **Resources**

#### Surveys/Questionnaires:

- ❖ Access to an experienced staff member or consultant to design survey.

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- ❖ Staff to undertake phone or personal surveys and collate and analyse data.
- ❖ Website
- ❖ Printing
- ❖ Postage
- ❖ Telephone
- ❖ Up to date mailing lists

### Instructions

- ❖ Surveys can use questionnaires to collect information and these can be delivered through face-to-face interviews, self completion written forms, telephone surveys, or electronic surveys.
- ❖ Determine which type of survey will be most appropriate for the target group and information to be collected.
- ❖ Find out what is already known and what relevant surveys are being done or planned elsewhere. This will avoid duplication and will help establish what you need to find out from your survey.
- ❖ Talk to locals with strong views and local knowledge to sharpen the focus of the questions.
- ❖ Survey writing is a skill that improves with practice and feedback, so where possible seek someone who is experienced in writing surveys who can advise you on the requirements of survey writing, but rely on your own understanding of the issue or topic.
- ❖ Preliminary investigations, e.g.: focus groups or interviews with people on a 'convenience' basis (outside shops and businesses), can help to develop some of the issues/range of questions needed.
- ❖ Determine how the information is to be obtained. Surveys can be done by asking people questions through a mailed survey or in personal interviews, inviting a response through the Council website or by a combination of methods.
- ❖ Select your target audience. How will you sample them? What areas of the community do you need to reach? How will you ensure that your survey gives a representation of the ideas of the group?
- ❖ Draft the survey questions.
- ❖ Trial this with a pilot study to ensure the answers will give the information you wanted. (Check readability and clarity of questions).
- ❖ Undertake the survey.
- ❖ Collate and analyse the results.
- ❖ Write a report and make available to those surveyed, to appropriate authorities and to the media. If the report is lengthy and/or detailed, provide a synopsis of the key points.

### Focus Groups:

Focus groups are one example of an active participation methodology used to explore the opinions, knowledge, perceptions and concerns of individuals in regard to a particular topic. A focus group typically involves six to ten people who have some knowledge of or experience with an issue or may be randomly selected. Group discussion is led by a moderator who guides participants through a series of open-ended questions. The information gathered can provide important clues to the participant's attitudes and values as they relate to an issue.



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Attendances at Focus Groups are usually by invitation targeting specific groups with relevant experience of the subject matter. Individual Councillors will be given the responsibility of hosting and encouraging involvement in these focus groups. Randomly selected Focus Groups may also be convened from time to time to allow a wider perspective on specific issues.

Focus Groups should cover the major stakeholders likely to be impacted by Council decisions. Groups identified will endeavour to ensure that they incorporate people mentioned in the Walcha Social Plan; this includes:

- ❖ Older People
- ❖ Young People
- ❖ Children
- ❖ Women
- ❖ People with a Disability
- ❖ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

With the addition of groups such as:

- ❖ Business Houses
- ❖ Agricultural Producers
- ❖ Community Groups
- ❖ Volunteers

Convening multiple focus groups with different community members on the same topic can strengthen Councils level of understanding about issues associated with the topic of concern. It is important to have a skilled facilitator who encourages all members of the group to participate, to provide a comfortable venue and to ensure that the participants feel confident about expressing their views.

Further efforts may be required to obtain additional comments or views which may not have been articulated during the focus group. This may include follow up phone calls with participants, opportunities to have an informal discussion with participants following the focus group, and/or opportunities for participants to make written or email comments following the event.

### Interviews:

From time to time, for example in the development of the Social Plan or a specific service, interviews are conducted in the homes of some residents, such as the frail aged, the house bound, carers, etc.; and occasionally at schools or at the Youth Centre with students with special issues or needs.

### Consultative Workshops:

Consultative Workshops are open to the community with the aim of briefing interested residents on specific projects and to get their feedback prior to the preparation of plans such as the Local Environment Plan.

### On-line Comment:

Enhance on-line consultation by providing additional channels for community response; for example, using video, discussion forums or comments tagged by users in their own web spaces and programmatically picked up by Council. Build consultation-specific websites when appropriate and make consultations listed on

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Council's website more convenient to users by incorporating survey or comment forums directly in the web page.

Participate in and build social networks to allow Council to receive community input from those communities.

Provide direct and timely responses to comments on-line and publish the results of consultations wherever possible.

Maintain a program of 'active listening' or 'continuous consultation' by monitoring mentions of Walcha on the internet and feeding these conversations to the relevant Council officers. Commit to the use of clear, jargon-free language.

### When:

Council will ensure that the community is consulted on issues which impact on and or are of concern to the community or to any group within the community in a timely manner to allow adequate community comment to occur and be analysed in order to inform the decision making processes.

There will be community meetings held each year in each community.

### Who:

All groups/persons who are impacted will be consulted. Stakeholders will vary according to the issue, but could include residents, ratepayers, businesses, volunteers, those who visit or work in the Shire, other service providers/agencies, community groups, other levels of government, peak bodies, etc. It could also include particular groups within the community, eg: older people, families, children, youth, different ethnic groups, business people, people with a disability etc.

In relation to the Community Strategic Plan stakeholders include:

- ❖ Interested residents.
- ❖ Volunteers
- ❖ Councillors
- ❖ Staff
- ❖ All community organisations.
- ❖ Schools
- ❖ All demographic target groups
- ❖ Business community
- ❖ Government organisations
- ❖ Oxley Local Area Command

Invitations will be sent to all of the above and the whole community will be invited through the media, the internet, flyers, posters and the like.

### Evaluation:

The evaluation process should include promotional techniques, who was consulted, numbers involved, method/s used, adequacy of timescale, information provided, feedback from participants including through surveys and on-line, and web visits and number of contributions.

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## 2.3 Strategy 3: Involve

### Goal:

To work on an ongoing basis with the community to ensure that community ideas, concerns and aspirations are listened to and understood and that community knowledge is harnessed for the benefit of all.

Community involvement enables the community to provide ongoing and in-depth input into community planning and into the development of solutions and resources that are best able to meet the community's needs. It also enables the community and service users to have substantial input into the development of services.

Participatory structures and on-line engagement have the potential to empower Communities and to enable residents including young people to gain skills in community participation. In turn they provide ongoing dialogue with Council and the potential for higher quality and specialist input into Council's planning and decision making processes.

### Commitment the Community:

Council will work with you on an ongoing basis to ensure that your ideas, concerns and aspirations are considered. We will provide feedback on Council's decisions.

### Methodology – how, when, who, evaluation:

#### Consultative Groups and 355 Committees of Council

Consultative Groups are established by Council. Membership is by invitation of the Council and expressions of interest generally advertised in the media and on the web. It is essential to the balanced operation of any consultative/working/user group and the like that membership is reflective of all views and is regularly refreshed and not "hijacked" by strongly held thoughts of non elected people or interest groups and not become "owned" by a small group of residents. Outside of the "involving process" it is inappropriate for members to lobby or endeavour to politically influence the Council. It should be noted that all meetings of Council open to the public and will be advertised accordingly.

These Committees include:

- ❖ Walcha District Town & Beautification Committee
- ❖ Walcha Preschool Advisory Committee
- ❖ Walcha Arts Advisory Committee
- ❖ Walcha HACC Committee

### Working Groups:

Council may establish Working Groups from time to time to focus on particular issues at hand. Each Working Group would be determined by the Council together with specific terms of reference and reporting mechanisms. These Groups are "sunset" groups which cease to function once Council is satisfied that their work is complete. This will give people a specific task to work towards and not have it drag out unnecessarily.

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### Volunteer Groups:

The encouragement and support of volunteer groups such as:

- ❖ Hospital Auxiliaries
- ❖ Historical Societies
- ❖ Service Clubs

These groups may be facilitated by Council or may be self-forming. They are encouraged and supported by staffs who work closely with them. They focus on the service for which they volunteer. Attendance is open to all relevant volunteers and interested residents.

### On-line involvement:

Make more use of on-line spaces – such as blogs and forums – where two-way communication between Council and the community is encouraged and nurtured.

Formalise moderation guidelines and terms of use (community guidelines) to ensure on-line discussions are appropriate, intelligent and lawful. Acknowledge and mentor those community members who are active participants on-line or who wish to be.

Hold workshops for Councillors to encourage their use of blogs and other social media to communicate and converse with the community.

Hold social media workshops at the Library to promote Council's on-line engagement and give practical support for community participation.

Ensure that priority is given to open data formats to allow cost-effective and efficient use of that information by other Council systems as well as external applications and users.

Keep relevant senior staff, managers and key professional officers informed of online discussions and report to Council as appropriate.

### When:

Ongoing and as specific events and projects are scheduled.

### Who:

Entire community.

### Evaluation:

Amount of positive feedback received on the processes, results from community surveys, visits to Council's websites, minutes of meetings.

## **2.4 Strategy 4: Collaborate**

### Goal:

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

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Engagement at a collaborative level provides the community with a high level of involvement in Council's decision making. This type of community engagement encourages community members to be involved in identifying solutions to local issues.

Today we face an entirely new environment for innovation and getting things done. The days of the lone genius quietly tolling away in pursuit of that Eureka moment to revolutionise our Council is over. We are now in the days of asking and listening to our residents and ratepayers, and working with them for the betterment of our whole community, innovation demands collaboration. In the past we could focus on a single task in an assembly-line fashion, handling our completed activity to the next person who would in turn do the same, until the job was finished. Now the jobs change fast, requiring learning new skills rather than merely repeating the old. We have to seek out people who have other pieces of the puzzle and work with them to tackle increasingly complex issues at a much faster pace.

### Commitment to the Community:

We will work together for the best outcomes for our Shire.

### Methodology – how, when, who, evaluation:

#### **Community Meetings**

There are a range of innovative methods which can be used in workshopping forums. A well facilitated community meeting can generate a wide range of feedback about a topic and ensure that many people have their say, not just the loudest and most articulate attendees.

Opportunities may also exist to provide information, or to create consultations at existing community meetings, at the invitation of other groups. Attending existing meetings makes good use of community infrastructure, and if negotiated in advance, is likely to minimise community frustration, demonstrate respect for community processes and to lead to more coordinated engagement.

All information in the form of minutes will be made available to the public through Council meetings and on line so that the community is aware of issues and topics covered at these meetings.

Community meetings are an opportunity for Councillors and staff to listen to the community and to take ideas on board for discussion at the follow-up workshop to inform the 10 year Community Strategic Plan and to set Council's priorities.

#### **Working Groups**

Council may establish Working Groups to focus on particular issues. These groups would be facilitated by council employees to ensure a true collaborative approach is taken.

These Groups are "sunset" groups which cease to function once Council is satisfied that their work is complete. This will give people a specific task to work towards and not have it drag out unnecessarily.

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## **Consultative workshops**

Facilitated discussion groups or workshops involving participants selected either randomly or to approximate the demographics of a community, can be a good way to draw out a range of views and opinions. Discussion groups and workshops usually explore a limited number of community or Council established issues over a brief period of time. Discussion groups tend to involve relatively open-ended dialogue whereas workshops are generally more structured activities which often combine dialogue with other strategies such as information provision. An action research approach is sometimes the basis for the coordination of these techniques.

## **Volunteer Groups**

The encouragement and support of volunteer groups such as:

- ❖ Hospital Auxiliaries
- ❖ Historical Societies
- ❖ Service Clubs

These groups may be facilitated by Council or may be self-forming. They are encouraged and supported by staff, who work closely with them. They focus on the service for which they volunteer. Attendance is open to all relevant volunteers and interested residents.

## **On-line involvement – open data, websites, social networks, etc.**

To enhance on-line consultation by providing additional channels for community response; for example, using video, discussion forums or comments tagged by users in their own web spaces and programmatically picked up by Council. Build consultation-specific websites when appropriate and make consultations listed on Council's website more convenient to users by incorporating survey or comment forms directly in the web page.

So that the residents and ratepayers can participate in and build social networks to allow Council to receive community input from those communities.

To provide direct and timely responses to comments on-line and publish the results of consultations wherever possible.

### When:

Ongoing and as specific events and projects are scheduled.

### Who:

Entire Community.

### Evaluation:

Amount of positive feedback received on the processes, results from community surveys, visits to Council's websites, minutes of meetings.

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## 2.5 Strategy 5: Empower

### Goal:

To place final decision making in the hands of the public through its elected representatives.

### Commitment to the Community:

Councils decisions will be in the best interests of the community.

### Methodology – how, when, who, evaluation:

#### **Collation of information to be displayed publicly for comment**

All information gathered during the community engagement process will be collated and made available for comment in different forms for access by the whole community. Closing the 'consultation loop' and informing participants as to how their opinions and information have contributed to the preparation and decision of Council is vital. Providing participants with feedback is important in respecting the partnership and maintaining ongoing engagement with the local community.

The views and comments of participants specific to the consultation process itself is a valuable learning tool. Candid evaluation at the conclusion of each consultation program will ensure that Council continues to improve how consultation is carried out in the future. It should include questions regarding the values of the process, whether the stated objectives and purpose were clear and achieved and whether the methods used were suitable.

To achieve this Council will:

- ❖ Aim to include details about the evaluation component in the planning of the project. This will ensure that issues are give due consideration in a methodical manner and where appropriate changes be made to the strategy and/or project to reflect the needs and priorities expressed by the local community.
- ❖ Clearly outline and communicate the evaluation/feedback mechanisms and decision-making process with participants at the earliest possible stage of the project.
- ❖ Provide regular project updates and/or feedback on how decisions were made in a timely manner. Within a reasonable timeframe at the conclusion, Council will ensure that the results and reports are made available in a range of formats and in a variety of venues as determined at the commencement of the project.
- ❖ Provide, where appropriate, opportunities for feedback through a variety of means. This could include written submission via post or email; feedback forms; verbally through meetings and workshops or web-based methods, such as social networks , twitter, discussion boards or e-forums, etc.

#### **Involvement of the Community**

Community involvement ensures effective planning and decision making. It provides important information on Council development and identifies major issues and broader community concerns. The Council will work to open up

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dialogue with the community and provide opportunities for the community to be involved in decisions that affect them.

The Council will seek community involvement through activities such as public meetings and workshops, Community Liaison Groups, media announcements, letterbox drops, advisory committees, newsletters and questionnaires.

### When:

This needs to be attended to at all times to ensure the Council has the support of its community.

### Who:

Entire community.

### Evaluation:

The generic goal of most evaluations is to provide “useful feedback”. Most often, feedback is perceived as “useful” if it aids in decision-making. In order to make this evaluation “useful” Council will endeavour to monitor:

Content, quality and relevance of the engagement

- ❖ What was learned?
- ❖ How will it be used?

Attitudes and achievements of the Community

- ❖ What does the community think of the process
- ❖ Do they think the process will make a difference in their local area? If yes, what kind of difference?

Quality of engagement (including facilitator)

- ❖ Do people in the community support and agree with the process?
- ❖ Do they think the method was appropriate to their needs?
- ❖ Does the process communicate information they want to know?

## 3 References

1. Mid Western Regional Council – Community Engagement Strategy.
2. Latrobe City Council – Community Engagement Policy and Strategy.
3. Cootamundra Shire Council – Community Engagement Strategy.
4. Greater Shepparton City Council – Community Engagement Strategy.
5. Mosman Council – Community Engagement Strategy.
6. ACT Government – Your Guide to Engaging with the Community – ACT Government Community Engagement Manual.
7. Department of Main Roads Qld – Community Engagement – Policy, Principles, Standards and Guidelines.
8. Gwydir Shire Council – Community Engagement Strategy.