Stakeholder and Community Engagement Policy Framework

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Strategic Pillar	Community Choice
Responsible Branch	Customer and Communication

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Council has recognised the importance of engaging with its communities to deliver services and infrastructure, and plan collaboratively.

1.2 The Stakeholder and Community Engagement Policy Framework is one component of Council's engagement process. The Framework is the overarching document that guides Council's Community Engagement and Participation Plan and the Community Engagement Toolkit.

1.3 The Stakeholder and Community Engagement Policy Framework articulates Council's commitment to its communities and provides the community with engagement principles that underpin and drive Council's engagement practices and actions.

1.4 The Framework applies to all forms of engagement by councillors and officers, and those external parties such as consultants representing Council. Its implementation through the community engagement plan and supported by the toolkit includes:
   a) the planning, delivery and evaluation of any community engagement activity
   b) engagement with the community regarding issues, proposals and Council decisions such as projects, strategic plans, programs or service delivery
   c) engagement with key groups in the community
   d) regular engagement activities and responsibilities.

2 DEFINITIONS

2.1 Stakeholders – refers to the range of stakeholders Council will engage with. This includes, but is not limited to political representatives, Government departments, not-for-profit groups and organisations, specific community groups and associations, special interest groups, sporting clubs across the Local Government Area

2.2 Community – including those who live, work, play and visit our region.

2.3 Social justice principles --- The Social Justice Principles ensure social considerations such as equity, access, participation, and rights are taken into account when engaging the community. Social Justice Principles are based on eliminating inequity and promoting inclusiveness of diversity. The Social Justice Principles consist of Access, Equity, Participation and Rights. Social justice principles are identified in relation to the Community Strategic Plan.

2.4 Community engagement – the process whereby Council and the community engage in a two-way conversation. This can be via formal or informal engagement processes. Community engagement relies on a two-way approach with both Council and the community actively seeking to engage with each other.

2.5 Community consultation – a more formal process that generally relates to the 'consult' section of the IAP2 spectrum. Consultation generally involves Council presenting an idea, policy or proposal to the community for input.

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3 COMMUNITY PROFILE

3.1 QPRC has a diverse population spread across a few centres. The estimated resident population for 2021 is 63,364 and is forecast to grow to 88,258 by 2041.

3.2 QPRC is in south-eastern NSW, between 10-100km east of the Canberra CBD, and between 250-280km south-west of the Sydney CBD. It is bounded by Upper Lachlan Shire and the Goulburn Mulwaree Council area in the north, Shoalhaven City and Eurobodalla Shire in the east, the Snowy Monaro Regional Council area in the south, and the Australian Capital Territory and the Yass Valley Council area in the west. Queanbeyan is named from an Aboriginal word meaning "clear waters", while Palerang is named after Mount Palerang.

Figure 1: Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council area

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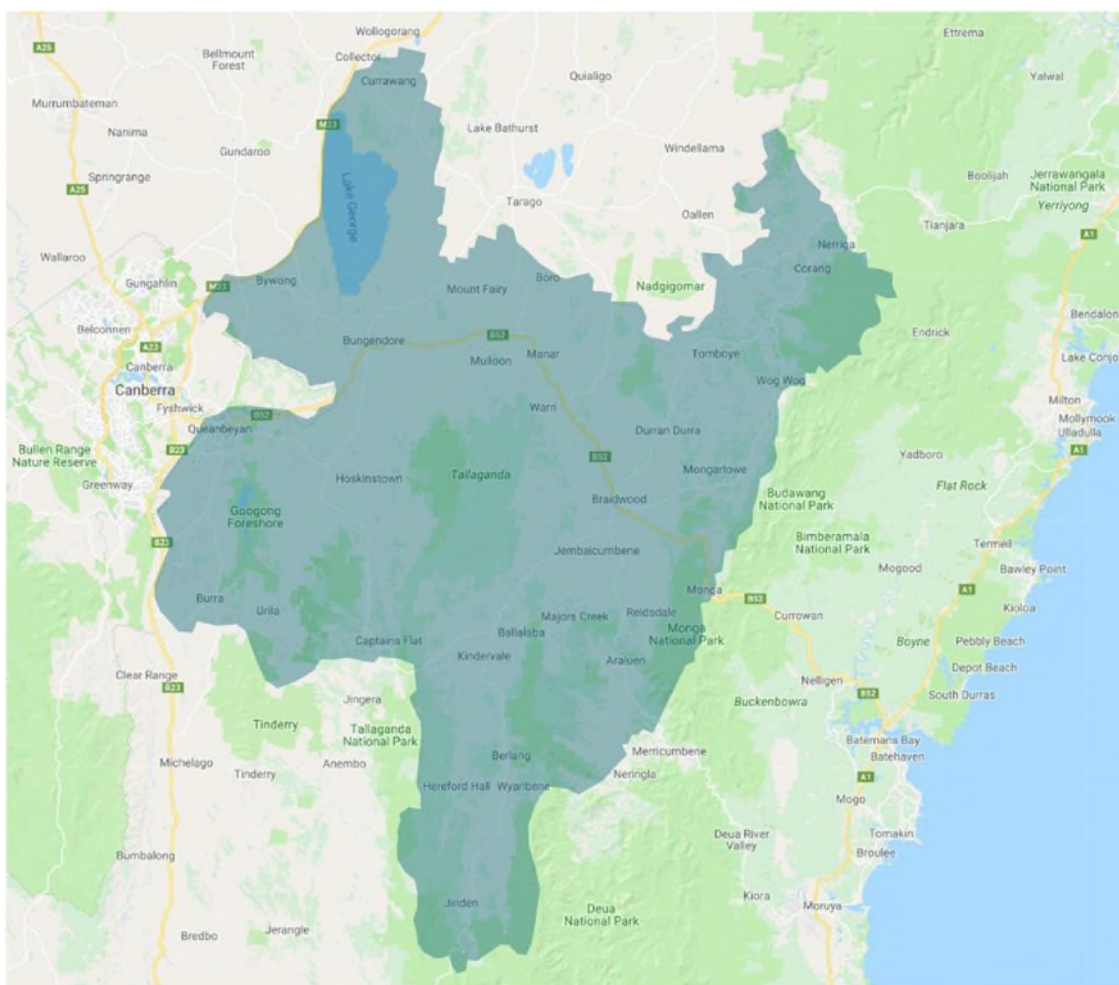
4   COUNCIL DECISION MAKING – LOCAL DEMOCRACY

4.1   Councils are the closest tier of government to communities, providing local services, infrastructure, policies and planning. Local government in NSW (as set out in the *Local Government Act 1993*) provides for governed bodies of Council that are democratically elected generally every four years.

4.2   Councils make decisions through local democracy processes which are both representative and participatory.

Representative:

4.3   Representative democracy is the process by which a community elects councillors to be the governing body of the Council. In QPRC, councillors represent the entire local government area, rather than wards (which sees the LGA divided into sections with an equal number of councillors representing each section).

4.4   The role of the elected Council is to develop and implement policies, programs and long-term strategic plans, as well as ensuring financial stability, monitoring performance, and making decisions to direct and control the affairs of Council.

4.5   The elected Council is the final decision maker and is accountable to the community. Councillors are the representatives of the community. Therefore, they are accountable to the community. It is important that the community can contact and meet with councillors to discuss and contribute their views and ideas. Councillors spend time undertaking formal and informal community engagement. This helps ensure that a Council's policies and programs are acceptable to, and meet the needs of, the community.

4.6   Community engagement is a mechanism to assist councillors to understand and incorporate the public will and community concerns into decision-making. Community engagement should not be viewed as a 'box- ticking' exercise, or something that is only undertaken to pacify the vocal minority. Good community engagement involves a two-way flow of information. Community engagement can be a very effective way of increasing community understanding of an issue, and a way to increase support for council policies and decisions.

4.7   Councillors have an important role to play in engaging with their constituents, recognising diverse local community needs and interests, considering social justice principles.

4.8   Practically, councillors provide an open conduit between Council and the community. Councillors seek the views of their communities to understand the issues and opportunities for Council and the community to work together.

4.9   Councillors at QPRC attend Council meetings and hear the views of those people presenting at public presentation sessions. They are also required to consult regularly with community organisations and other key stakeholders to ensure they are best informed to make decisions on matters affecting the community.

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4.10 When making decisions, councillors should consider the long-term and cumulative effects of actions on future generations, consider the principles of ecologically sustainable development and ensure their decisions are transparent, taking accountability for decisions and omissions. Councils should also actively engage with their local communities using the Integrated Planning and Reporting framework and other measures.

Participatory:

4.11 Participatory democracy is the process by which community members are actively involved in decisions that affect them. The community can participate through a variety of community engagement processes and activities that influence and shape the elected Council's decisions.

4.12 The Queanbeyan-Palerang region has many community groups and associations which should be embraced and regularly engaged with, especially on local issues. Community groups and associations form an important part of the community and can advocate Council and other levels of government.

4.13 The Stakeholder and Community Engagement Policy Framework, the Community Engagement and Participation Plan and the Community Engagement Toolkit provide the basis for Council to undertake community engagement on a day-to-day basis. These documents will also highlight the importance of two-way engagement and identify how community groups, associations and individuals can engage with Council.

4.14 The community can participate in Council decision making through planned community engagement processes and activities. Council engages community members in several ways, to:
   a) determine strategic plans
   b) budget assets maintenance and service levels
   c) identify community issues, needs and priorities
   d) plan, change or evaluate infrastructure programs, facilities or services under its "five pillars"; community, choice, character connections and capability
   e) meet legislative obligations under various Acts
   f) obtain input to other matters where there may be impacts, either perceived or real, on stakeholders and communities

4.15 The Queanbeyan-Palerang community includes all those who live, work, play and visit within the local government area, as well as key stakeholders including businesses, service providers and other levels of government.

4.16 Council's Stakeholder and Community Engagement Policy Framework defines Council's commitment to the community and outlines the community engagement principles that drive Council's engagement practices.

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5   PRINCIPLES AND COMMITMENTS

5.1   Council commits to the following community engagement principles.

TABLE 1: PRINCIPLES AND COMMITMENTS

Principle	Commitment
Respect	☐ We will actively ask for your views and opinions to support and have input to decision making ☐ We will value and consider all feedback ☐ We will keep you informed ☐ We will not seek community input if the decision is already made
Integrity	☐ We will clearly explain why we are asking you to participate ☐ We will be open about the level of influence that you have ☐ We will communicate how your input was used in our decision making and work
Continuous Improvement	☐ We will review and improve our community engagement practices to keep pace with best practice ☐ We will listen to the community and other stakeholders when developing our engagement plans ☐ We will evaluate our engagement activities regularly to see where we can improve
Participation and inclusion	☐ We will provide opportunities for all the voices in our diverse community ☐ We will provide a variety of ways for community members to participate and actively seek new voices in our communities ☐ We will communicate with you in a timely manner and when your input is most influential ☐ We will communicate with you in plain language
Responsive approach	☐ We will undertake our engagement in a planned, coordinated and well-resourced manner ☐ We will provide you with all the information that you need to enable you to meaningfully contribute ☐ We will work together with you and share information and results ☐ We will evaluate our engagement activities regularly to see where we can improve ☐ We will advise you of how we have considered your feedback and how it has influenced decision making

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6 STATUTORY FRAMEWORK

6.1 The NSW *Local Government Act 1993* states that: *"The council must establish and implement a strategy (its community engagement strategy), based on social justice principles, for engagement with the local community when developing the community strategic plan."*

6.2 Beyond statutory requirements, the *NSW Local Government Act 199*3 states that a Council has the following Charter: *"Members of the public may influence council decisions concerning matters such as the levels of rates and charges, the terms of community strategic plans, delivery programs and operational plans, the granting of development consents, etc by participating in council community engagement activities including by making submissions to the council and comments on or objections to proposals relating to those matters."*

6.3 Council recognises the value to be gained by engaging with stakeholders and the community beyond the statutory requirements.

7 QPRC FRAMEWORK

7.1 QPRC acknowledges the statutory requirements in the development of this Stakeholder and Community Engagement Policy Framework.

7.2 All staff within QPRC undertake their work within the Community Strategic Plan Towards 2042. This Plan belongs to the residents of Queanbeyan-Palerang and forms the peak planning document for Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council in terms of its Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework.

7.3 The Community Strategic Plan has five pillars. The framework underpins the work that Council officers and councillors do in achieving the activities and projects for the community within these five pillars. Council's successful engagement in each of these pillars will see the involvement of community and stakeholders in the development of projects and polices which reflect community needs and aspirations.

Strategic Pillar 1: Community
A safe, harmonious, happy and healthy community leading fulfilled lives.

Strategic Pillar 2: Choice
A diverse, resilient and smart economy that creates choice and job opportunities.

Strategic Pillar 3: Character
A clean, green community that cherishes its natural and physical character.

Strategic Pillar 4: Connection
A safe and well connected community with good infrastructure enhancing quality of life.

Strategic Pillar 5: Capability
Contemporary civic leadership and governance that is open, transparent and accountable.

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8 FRAMEWORK

Who do we engage with?

8.1 The Queanbeyan-Palerang community includes all those who work, live, play and visit the local government area as well as key stakeholders including business and community groups, Council committees, service providers and other levels of government. QPRC commits to providing opportunities for all community members to participate in engagement activities that affect them regardless of location, age, cultural background, gender, income, sexual identity, education, language skills or disability.

How does the community want us to engage?

8.2 Council does not have a ward system, although it has disparate and unique community centres such as Braidwood, Bungendore, Captains Flat, Googong, Queanbeyan, Royalla, and Wamboin and more. Each of these communities has different needs and levels of access to councillors and Council officers.

8.3 Communities express a desire to be able to connect and communicate with Council easily. They want to have sufficient notice of new projects, plans or policies for their area and sufficient time to consider and contribute.

8.4 The community wants access to their councillors and acknowledgement and assistance from them as their elected representatives

8.5 The community wants timely information and wants to be provided with feedback on how their suggestions and information has been used in decision making.

8.6 They expect Council to communicate widely using several different methods to enable as many community members as possible to see what is happening, when it is happening and understanding how they can provide their input.

8.7 A common theme from the community and councillors is that engagement must be undertaken early in the development of plans and projects to capture feedback at a time when it is most able to be incorporated into decision making.

How do we engage?

8.8 Council wants to gain the best input from the community at the right time and in a way which is convenient and accessible.

8.9 To do this, Council will make it clear to the community what it is trying to achieve, understand who needs to be involved, and will engage in different ways and according to unique community characteristics and location to make sure everyone can be heard.

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8.10   Council commits to engaging in an honest and transparent manner, clearly communicating any limitations or impediments that impact on our ability to engage effectively as well as clarifying early in the engagement process about how much the community may influence decision making. This will include clearly stating what can be negotiated and what cannot be negotiated and the reasons why. Council will implement a minimum 28-day consultation timeframe on all matters, unless there are exceptional circumstances, which will be communicated.

8.11   Community engagement will feature prominently in Council's Project Management Framework which will ensure the requirements for engagement are addressed early in the project.

8.12   In addition to targeted engagement activities and effort, Council will also maintain relationships and practices with community and stakeholders through Council's range of committees, public presentations at Council meetings, regular community meetings and by acknowledging the importance of, and engaging with, community groups and associations. Many of the community associations in our region are formally constituted and their thoughts and opinions should be given appropriate consideration by Council.

8.13   Council will be mindful of the impact school holidays, especially Christmas/New Year, has on the community's ability to engage on specific matters. With this in mind, Council will ensure adequate time is provided for the community to engage with Council by extending engagement and consultation windows beyond the minimum 28-day period.

8.14   The practical implementation of the Stakeholder and Community Engagement Framework will be undertaken through the Community Engagement and Participation Plan and the Community Engagement Toolkit.

8.15   The Community Engagement Plan includes an action plan of all the engagement mechanisms and activities undertaken by Council officers and an accompanying schedule. It also references best practice engagement standards - the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) - and how much involvement and influence communities and stakeholders will have, measured against this standard.

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Figure 2: IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation
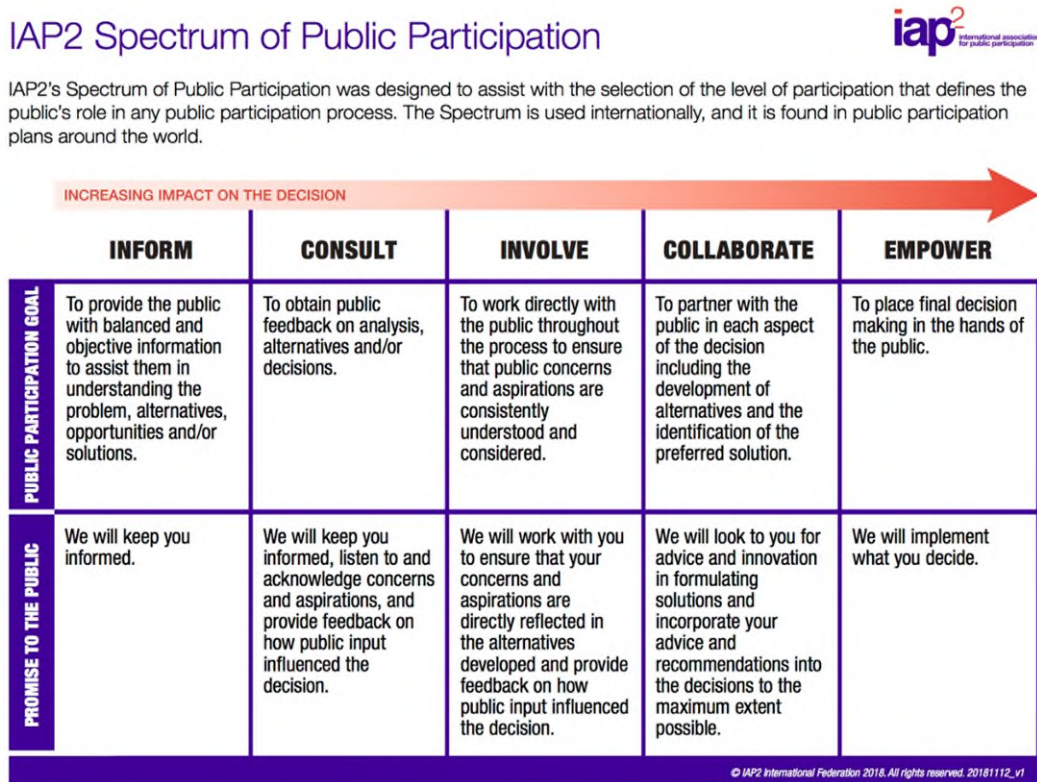
8.16   The Community Engagement Toolkit provides a variety of engagement methods and includes practical advice and guidance to Council officers and third parties such as consultants, on how to assess impact and to deliver appropriate engagement in accordance with different levels of impact.

How can the community engage with Council?

8.17   Community engagement is necessarily a two-way street and requires communities and stakeholders to actively engage with Council. There are several ways that communities can engage with Council and become involved in matters which are of interest or impact on them.
   a)   Attending Council meetings, and addressing Council in open session prior to the commencement of the formal meeting
   b)   Joining a Council committee
   c)   Attending community meetings held in each of the community centres.
   d)   Attending drop-in information sessions regarding projects and strategy developments
   e)   Providing feedback through customer services such as the website, email, letter, or phone
   f)   Visiting Council's website and Council's engagement website, Your Voice
   g)   Joining a local special interest or community group which has mechanisms for dialogue with Council
   h)   Community groups or associations inviting Council staff along to meetings to address specific subjects
   i)   Connecting via social media

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j) Joining in local events and activities
k) Joining in forums
l) Direct contact with local councillors
m) Direct contact with a staff member
n) Visiting local libraries and community centres

8.18 By getting involved, community members can contribute to conversations which affect them. In doing so they can have their voice heard, considered and understood. This in turn helps Council to plan, understand and negotiate with communities to address issues which affect the local government area and its unique local centres.

9 MECHANISM FOR EVALUATION OR REVIEW

9.1 This framework has been informed by document review, assessment of community characteristics, review of best practice community engagement, analysis of current organisational practice, and interviews with Council staff, councillors and community members representing local centres.

9.2 This framework will be reviewed in line with the community strategic planning process.

9.3 Reviews will also evaluate Council's community engagement activities and improve practice. Additionally, the community's satisfaction with community engagement will be monitored via feedback in the biennial community survey.

9.4 Additionally, Council will develop feedback tools for stakeholders to assess the quality of engagement. Useful qualitative information includes:
a) whether the public participation activities used the most suitable and effective techniques
b) cost of community engagement, including consultant and staff time
c) whether the public participation activities were conducted effectively
d) whether the engagement was cost-effective and timely
e) what impact the engagement had on decision-making
f) whether people from all participant groups felt that they were listened to.

9.5 Incorporating these qualitative responses will provide QPRC with more complete information to use as a basis for effectively evaluating its stakeholder and community engagement activity.

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