



**GWYDIR**  
SHIRE COUNCIL



# Community Engagement Strategy

## Community Engagement

### **Any process that involves the community in problem solving or decision making and uses community input to make better decisions**

*Definition of Community Engagement (IAP2)*

### Introduction

Gwydir Shire Council adopted its Community Engagement Strategy on 11 February 2015. Following the 2016 elections, this document was reviewed.

All councils in NSW are required to operate within the Integrated Planning and Reporting (IP&R) Framework. This framework was introduced by the NSW Government to facilitate a strong and sustainable local government system by ensuring all local councils have in place strategic plans, underpinned by community priorities and supported by appropriate resources.

The IP&R Framework encourages councils to view their various plans holistically to understand how they relate to each other, and in doing so, leverage maximum results.

Ultimately, it aims to provide greater accountability and transparency in local government, by strengthening councils' strategic focus, streamlining reporting processes and making it easier for the community to understand and track councils' progress on identified priorities.

In addition, Council has a legislative requirement under the Local Government Act 1993 to ensure that community input is a part of the decision making process. Chapter 3 of the Act refers to Council's charter. Ten of the 11 points in the charter require community engagement:

- to provide directly or on behalf of other levels of government, after due consultation, adequate, equitable and appropriate services and facilities for the community and to ensure that those services and facilities are managed efficiently and effectively
- to exercise community leadership
- to exercise its functions with due regard for the cultural and linguistic diversity of its community
- to properly manage, develop, protect, restore, enhance and conserve the environment of the area for which it is responsible
- to have regard for the long term and cumulative effects of its decisions
- to bear in mind that it is the custodian and trustee of public assets and to effectively account for and manage the assets for which it is responsible
- to facilitate the involvement of Councillors, members of the public, users of facilities and services and Council staff in the development, improvement and coordination of local government
- to raise funds for local purposes by the fair imposition of rates, charges and fees, by income earned from investments and, when appropriate, by borrowings and grants
- to keep the local community and the state government (and through it, the wider community) informed about Council's activities
- to ensure that, in the exercise of its regulatory functions, Council acts consistently and without bias, particularly where an activity of the Council is affected.



This IP&R Framework requires every local council to prepare and implement a Community Engagement Strategy (s 402(4) of the Local Government Act), for engaging the local community for the development and review of its Community Strategic Plan. The Community Engagement Strategy must be based on the social justice principles of access, equity, participation, and rights.

It is often challenging to involve the community in planning processes, but it is important for the long-term success of the Community Strategic Plan that as many community members as possible are involved in its development.

The framework is built on the principle that **all members of the community have a right, and a responsibility, to contribute to their community's future**. These plans will span at least 10 years – well beyond the Council term of office – so it is expected that people in the community will take some ownership of them and contribute to their delivery in some way. This is why the term ‘engagement’ has been used in the new legislation, rather than ‘consultation’.

Council’s continuing goals are:

- To provide the community with appropriate information on Council itself, on governance and decision making mechanisms, on Council’s services, events and projects and any associated issues.
- To capture community input on strategic plans, directions, issues, priorities and projects.
- To work on an ongoing basis with the community to ensure that community ideas, concerns and aspirations are listened to and understood.
- To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision making process, including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.

This document identifies Council's most effective past methods of community engagement and seeks to map out a pathway for the coming term.

Regarding its community engagement strategies, Council continues to utilise the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) concepts and values with the following IAP2 principles underpinning Council’s approach to community engagement:

- Integrity – when there is openness and honesty about the scope and purpose of engagement.
- Inclusion – when there is an opportunity for a diverse range of values and perspectives to be freely and fairly expressed and heard.
- Deliberation – when there is sufficient and credible information for dialogue, choice and decisions, and when there is space to weigh options, develop common understanding and to appreciate respective roles and responsibilities.
- Influence – when people have input in designing how they participate, when policies and services reflect their involvement and when their impact is apparent.

Community Engagement by Gwydir Shire Council will continue to be made up of one or more of the IAP2 five strategies:

- Inform
- Consult
- Involve
- Collaborate
- Empower

**However COLLABORATION** will be the most significant part of our engagement. It involves working with key stakeholders and the community to find solutions and alternatives.



This stage comes after all the information is sought through the **CONSULTATION** and **INVOLVING** stages to ensure that the issues are well understood.

**It should be noted that under the Local Government Act, except in very limited circumstances, only the elected body of Council is 'empowered' to make decisions and implement actions.**

Council's Community Engagement Strategy identifies stakeholders and sets out methods of engaging with each of these groups within time and resource constraints.

The Strategy considers those groups whose voice may not normally be heard in community discussions. These include people with disabilities, Aboriginal communities, young people, people in geographically isolated areas, single parents, and the elderly.

It is acknowledged that every council is different and each individual council needs to work towards identifying the most effective methods to engage with its community. Gwydir Shire Council is no exception. In fact, these differences were in evidence when the Shire of Bingara, Yallaroi and part of Barraba were amalgamated to form Gwydir Shire Council.

This amalgamation highlights that the differences can also be substantial between rural areas, as well as between metropolitan and rural areas, and may appear superficially to possess the same characteristics. For example, the former Bingara Shire Council was a 'maximalist' council while Yallaroi was a 'minimalist' council. Both legitimate positions and no doubt reflected each Council's community expectations. These cultural differences are manifested in the rating strategies adopted.

As with all rural councils there are periods of varying on-farm incomes due to climatic variations. When rural councils modify their increases to reflect a poor season these rate changes, when less than the allowable rate pegging limit, are lost forever under the current rate pegging regime.

The 2006 Percy Allen Report into the sustainability of local government in NSW used the following definitions:

In deciding the most appropriate future role for Local Government, there are three distinct possibilities. The definition and case for each is set out below:

**Minimalist:**

Councils are the body corporate for the local community and as such should look after the common property and regulate the usage of private properties. This role would ensure that councils live within their meagre resources largely dictated by a single tax base (land rates) subject to a state imposed ceiling (rate pegging).

**Maximalist:**

Councils are the governments of their areas and as such should foster the welfare of the whole community, even if this means duplicating the work of other tiers of government. They should undertake such services that local communities want and are prepared to pay for.

**Optimalist:**

Councils are champions of their areas and as such should take a leadership role in harnessing public, NGO and private resources to promote particular outcomes rather than attempt to fund and operate local initiatives on their own. Because of funding constraints, an 'optimalist' approach may allow a 'minimalist' resourced council to exercise maximum leverage.



Since its formation, Gwydir Shire Council has held a positive outlook and view about the future, has seized opportunities, and endeavoured to create the future that was desired, rather than holding the 'attitude' of simply waiting around and hoping for something to happen.

Teamwork between the elected Council and all staff members has remained a positive force for change. The elected Council is focussed on the future.

The greatest asset of Gwydir Shire Council is its employees - their work ethic, their effort and their conduct. Many employees do not simply work their hours but they are also active participants and volunteers in our community.

The Gwydir Shire as a whole boasts an extremely high percentage of volunteers. From cooking cakes and meals, selling raffle tickets and ushering, to 'doing the books' and attending meetings, our community prospers greatly due to people generously and continuously giving of their time to make things happen.

Although great things are being achieved and there are many positive things happening, Gwydir Shire Council needs to capitalise on such assets and continue to 'value add'. This is only possible by effectively partnering with our community and delivering what they want.

Gwydir Shire Council has become an **optimalist** body. Its current biggest engagement challenge is to meet the increasing expectations of the community. Although it may be difficult to gain consensus on levels of service, it is helpful to at least hold these discussions with the community and learn what is important to them and what they need and desire.

Gwydir Shire Council has a small population and is geographically vast. These attributes are both an asset and a challenge.

Gwydir Shire Council relies on its Customer Service Charter and Section 8 of the Local Government Act, 1993 which sets out the minimum services it is required to provide. When determining how these and additional services are to be delivered, Council and its staff have an 'open door and interactive policy'.

Community members and visitors can attend Council meetings which are open to the public and held on the fourth Thursday of the month commencing at 9.00 am in the Council Chambers of 33 Maitland Street, Bingara and 54 Hope Street, Warialda on a rotational basis.

All Councillors can be contacted by mail at Locked Bag 5, BINGARA NSW 2404. Councillors are elected representatives and can be contacted by the public at any time. On request, Councillors are also available to speak at public engagements such as school or educational functions, community groups and business and industry meetings.

Community members and visitors are able to meet and present their ideas and projects to Councillors and staff. For example, the Warialda Chamber of Commerce approached Council and presented a policy document entitled 'A Draft Population Policy for Gwydir Shire Council'.

Following this the document was endorsed as an aspirational population target and that the staff further develops the strategies required to implement, as far as possible, the achievement of the goals outlined in the policy document.

It is only through collaboration that many events, projects and services are possible. Like Council, many local community groups have a 'can do attitude'. An example is the regionally

acclaimed North West Theatre Group. The success of the company is based on the excellent private/public partnership which has developed over a decade. The North West Theatre Company contributes a base amount to Council annually for the use of The Roxy Theatre plus 5% of all door takings. Since the partnership commenced, the Company has contributed in excess of \$30,000 to the Roxy infrastructure and it has taken on responsibility for some maintenance. Without such partnerships, assets such as The Roxy would be lost.

Gwydir Shire Council is committed to every resident. This is highlighted through our commemorative birth certificate ceremonies. Our youngest citizens are welcomed regularly through Council's playgroups. It is a very effective way of connecting with young families and it provides an effective and positive channel of communication.

Since its formation on 17 March 2004, Council has engaged with the community through many different methods. The following methods of engagement are deemed the most effective:

- Rate Notice flyer
- Council advertisements
- From the Mayor media articles
- Newspaper articles
- Radio interviews
- Television interviews
- Social media – Website, Facebook
- Email list
- Displays and noticeboards
- Community newsletters
- Staff newsletters
- LG articles
- Videos – YouTube
- Suggestion boxes
- Surveys
- Stakeholder groups i.e. attending S355 Committee meetings, allowing them to highlight what they are doing
- Community meetings
- Deliberative panels

Similarly, the following have been identified as our main partners:

### NSW – external partners

Information and Privacy Commission  
Fire and Rescue  
Rural Fire Service  
State Emergency Service  
Police Force  
Education  
Schools  
TAFE and Community Education  
Family and Community Services  
Ageing, Disability and Home Care  
Community Services  
Housing NSW  
Finance and Services Fair Trading  
NSW Procurement Board

Geographical Names Board  
State Records  
Rural and Regional Local Health Districts  
Division of Local Government  
Environment and Heritage  
Environment Protection Authority  
Treasury  
Trade and Investment, Regional  
Infrastructure and Services  
Destination NSW  
Primary Industries  
Local Land Services  
Resources and Energy  
Roads and Maritime Services

## NSW – external partners

Organisational Strategy and Policy  
Community Services and Planning  
Public Infrastructure  
Heavy Plant  
Joint Weight of Loads Committee  
Central Northern Regional Library  
Committee  
Fossicker’s Way Promotion Committee  
Local RMS Traffic Committee  
Warialda Chamber of Commerce  
Bingara and District Vision 20/20  
Bush Fire Liaison (Service Level  
Agreement) Committee  
Local Emergency Management Committee  
Border Regional Organisation of Councils  
Arts North West (changes to membership  
makeup being considered)

Namoi Joint Organisation of Councils  
Northwest Regional Community Care  
Project Advisory Committee  
Bingara District Historical Society  
Gravesend Historical Society (in recess)  
Warialda Historical Society  
CHSP and Disability Services Advisory  
Committee  
Gwydir Learning Region Committee  
Bingara Showground Advisory Committee  
Disabled Access Committee  
Naroo Hostel Advisory Committee  
Northern Slopes Landcare Association  
Bingara Special Events Committee  
Australian Rural Road Group Inc  
Internal Audit Committee  
Transport, Water and Sewerage Assets

So how will Council roll out its community engagement with a view to developing a meaningful and measurable Community Strategic Plan, given that only the elected body of Council is ‘empowered’ to make decisions and implement actions?

Council has decided to empower community groups to undertake the consultative process: Bingara and District VISION 20/20 (Vision 20/20), Warialda Rotary (Rotary), Warialda Chamber of Commerce (WCC), and community leaders in various villages. These groups and leaders have established themselves as approachable, dedicated and effective visionaries. Council will support and guide them through the provision of a community space, information, administration support, and advice. All groups chosen have in place strategic planning documents (Bingara and District VISION 20/20, Warialda Chamber of Commerce Population Policy), skilled volunteers and a willingness to listen.

Given Gwydir Shire Council is a small community, it has the advantage of most people knowing ‘someone’ on a committee and this creates an air of familiarity and a space for more people to be open and willing to share their individual aspirations and needs.

These groups will host shopfronts over a period of a week, open for evening and daytime sessions. These flexible hours also allow more people to come forward and express their wants and ideas over a cup of tea or even a beer.

Once the information is collated, Council will continue to work with these groups to form a draft Strategic Plan.

The newly elected Councillors, following their induction, will experience a strategic planning workshop facilitated by Blackadder Associates. By utilising an external consultant, the Councillors will work through Council’s existing services and goals objectively without the possibility of any staff influence.

## Actions from Community Engagement Strategy

### Phase One – Review and plan engagement

Internal – group to review and then ask all staff to comment	Consult
Notices – website, Facebook, newsletter, Rate notices, school newsletters	Inform
Noticeboards	Inform
Email list	Inform
Classifieds	Inform
Letter to user groups, S355 Committees and community groups	Inform

### Phase Two – Developing Ideas and Options and starting the conversation through Vision 20/20, Rotary, WCC and community leaders

Website and Facebook – links to surveys	Consult and Involve
Social Media –Facebook – Did you Know?	Consult and Involve
Shopfronts	Consult and Involve
Surveys – specific topics, riverside management and seniors lifestyle and needs	Consult and Involve
Attend committee meetings	Consult and Involve

### Phase Three – Refining ideas/suggestions into Strategy

Stakeholder meetings	Collaborate
Community Meetings	Collaborate
Focus Groups	Collaborate
Deliberative Panel findings	Collaborate
Public exhibition of draft Strategy, shopfront	Collaborate
Councillor workshop	Collaborate
Senior Staff workshop - break down visions, into strategies and actions	Collaborate

### Phase Four – evaluate the process and level of public participation

Methods	Review
Development and adoption of Community Strategic Plan	IP&R legislatively required to review processes
Development and adoption of Delivery and Operational Programs	Quarterly Reviews
Review/debriefing with community groups and leaders in December 2017 – celebratory workshop	Written evaluation