



Early in 2007 Twyford Consulting (now Twyfords) published *Beyond Public Meetings: Connecting Community Engagement with Decision-Making*, a practical guide to planning community engagement. Based on our many years' experience *Beyond Public Meetings* identifies the basics: who is a community, what is community engagement and what are the major challenges. It explores these elements using interesting case studies and describes in detail the three foundations of good community engagement: values-based; decision-oriented and goal-driven.

In a world where community consultation and engagement have become more important and issues such as global warming, water shortages and the local impact of globalisation highlight how community issues are also everyday individual concerns and individuals want to play a role in deciding the best course of action.

If after reading this chapter you would like to purchase a copy of the book, simply go to the store at www.twyfords.com.au

Beyond Public Meetings: Connecting Community Engagement with Decision Making

Chapter 1 - Engaging Communities and Making Decisions

One day, Angus, who was five years old, took his father to school to show off his classroom. The desks were arranged in clusters, and Dad noticed that each cluster had a different label. Angus's teacher, Mrs C, explained that each group of students had been asked to decide on a name for their cluster.

Dad read some of the names – there were the Bulldogs, the Cool Dudes...

'And what's your group called, Angus?'

'We're the Flowers'.

'Oh', said Dad, trying to hide his surprise at such a poetic name.

'There are two boys and three girls in Angus's group', Mrs C explained. 'Everyone was asked to vote for the name they wanted, but the girls got together and voted as a bloc, while Angus and Ethan voted individually. The girls had the numbers, and that's why their group is called the Flowers'.

At this point, Angus beckoned to Dad, and whispered in his ear...

'Ethan and I aren't Flowers. I'm the Bears... and Ethan is the Cross-Eyes'.

This book is about engaging communities. While some of us might think that community engagement is something that only happens when people are about to

have their houses knocked down to make way for a new bypass road, there can be no doubt that community engagement is increasingly becoming a part of legal and governance frameworks around the world. Communities are beginning to expect and demand to be engaged, and they are being engaged by a broad spectrum of organisations across a huge range of situations, from governments amending the constitution to local community groups deciding where to put the park benches.

Whatever the scale or scope, the one thing that all engagement processes share is a decision.

The case of Angus and the Flowers is an example of engaging a community in a decision-making process. Mrs C engaged her class so that they could decide on a name for their group. No doubt she explained to the children what they were doing. She may have set some parameters or criteria – keep it brief, and no rude words! – and then allowed the various communities to have their say. Engagement complete. Decisions made.

Of course, as Angus's defiant explanation to his father indicated, not all the stakeholders were happy with the outcome. While they were stuck with the Flowers thing, there was no way that either Angus or his friend Ethan were buying into it.

The classroom example illustrates the central challenge for anyone trying to engage communities around decisions. How can communities with a stake in the outcome help make better decisions, and how might that process create more capable communities with a better understanding of the issues and greater acceptance of the decisions that are made?

This book represents a new approach to community engagement, an approach that is about connecting communities to decision-making. Community engagement should no longer simply be a box-ticking exercise, or something done only because people expect it. Communities not only have a right to be involved in decisions that affect them, but they can also help to improve the quality of decisions made.

The central message of this book is that good engagement of communities is more about a mind-set than it is about particular skills or techniques. That mindset is based on a belief in the value of engaging people in decision-making processes.

Figure 1 illustrates two common mind-sets that are obstacles to successful engagement. The perspective presented on the left, summed up by the conclusion that it is futile and hazardous to engage communities, represents the approach many organisations have to engagement. The corresponding assumptions that are often held by communities are shown on the right. Is it any wonder that engagement processes can be stressful and unproductive?

Decision-maker assumptions

The community:

- *Cannot grasp complex issues*
- *Is easily influenced by the media*
- *Allows narrow concerns to shape its views*
- *Is mostly apathetic*
- *Doesn't appreciate the constraints of the process*

And therefore ...

It is futile and hazardous to involve the community

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Community Assumptions

The decision-makers:

- *Have better knowledge on which to base decisions*
- *Have ignored us in the past*
- *Have already made up their minds what they want to do*
- *Will not be influenced by the views of the community*
- *Are selectively deaf and unscrupulous*

And therefore ...

Our efforts are a waste of our valuable time

Beyond Public Meetings: Connecting Community Engagement with Decision-Making responds to the challenges depicted in Figure 1. It outlines an approach to community engagement that enables organisations and communities to literally go beyond public meetings and other traditional techniques, to overcome their assumptions and work together to make better decisions.

This book has evolved out of material developed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), which is the leading international exponent of community engagement, and delivers training for practitioners around the world. The book is based on the first section of the two-day Planning module, which introduces the foundation concepts of community engagement, and how to apply them in planning a community engagement process.

Beyond Public Meetings: Connecting Community Engagement with Decision-Making then takes these concepts further, by drawing on the knowledge of highly-skilled and experienced community engagement practitioners and IAP2 trainers. The authors have applied the IAP2 concepts to real-life projects over many years, and in turn have used those experiences to continue to develop the IAP2 model. The book expounds a new approach to community engagement, using stories and real-life case studies, an approach that is leading edge, yet easy to understand. It is based on IAP2 foundations, in that it is values-based, decision-oriented and goal-driven, and it is structured, rigorous and above all, proven.

Chapter 2 begins with a case study of a typical community engagement scenario, which will be referred to throughout the book. Having outlined the scenario, we then proceed to define community engagement, and consider some of the skills and disciplines that are drawn on when communities are engaged. We explain the

terminology of community engagement, and outline some of the possible challenges and pitfalls that can confront the unwary practitioner or project proponent.

Some of the key issues to be considered whenever a community is to be engaged are introduced in Chapter 3. These include identifying the problem to be solved, identifying the decision-maker, and identifying the objectives of the engagement process, all of which are discussed in the context of the case study introduced in Chapter 2.

Chapter 4 is concerned with community identity. Just who is the community that is to be engaged? This chapter also discusses the relationship between the decision at the heart of the engagement process and the community of interest around that decision. It also explores the value of looking beyond the usual suspects in order to identify other participants who can help to make good decisions.

Why engage communities? Community engagement facilitates understanding, creates more sustainable decisions, and identifies critical issues early. It also acknowledges the human desire to have a say on those issues that affect us. In Chapter 5, we discuss the ways in which engaged communities can support better decision making.

The first of the three IAP2 foundations of good community engagement, that it is values-based, is discussed in Chapter 6. We discuss the manner in which our opinions and 'positions' are informed by our values, and explore the influence that values can have when decisions need to be made. The role of organisational values in community engagement is also discussed.

Chapter 7 takes a detailed look at the IAP2 Core Values that define best practice community engagement. It explores their meaning and implications and how they can be applied in the real world. The IAP2 Code of Ethics for Practitioners is also considered.

The second foundation of good community engagement is that it is decision-oriented. Communities should always be engaged around a decision, which is clarified by a decision statement. Chapter 8 discusses the qualities of a good decision statement, and the role they play when communities are engaged.

Chapter 9 introduces the third IAP2 foundation, that good community engagement is goal-driven. We discuss how community engagement goals are defined by the level of impact the community can have on the decision that is to be made, in the context of the IAP2 Community Engagement Spectrum.

Chapter 10 summarises the journey so far, provides a brief outline of related issues that are beyond the scope of this book, and looks to the future of community engagement, both in Australia and around the world.