

Model Local Government Policy #2

Community Engagement

Introducing Community Engagement

In 2001 Black & Hughes in their report; "Identification and Analysis of Indicators of Community Strength and Outcomes," wrote that; *"the strength of a community is defined and measured by the extent to which resources and processes within a community maintain and enhance both individual and collective wellbeing in ways consistent with the principles of equity, comprehensiveness, participation, self-reliance and social responsibility. and*

The sense of community is weakened when sections of a community feel that they are marginalised or excluded from its activities and benefits, and particularly from its decision-making processes. Thus, inclusive attitudes such as tolerance of diversity and provision of equality of opportunity contribute to community strength.

The absence of any legislated community engagement forum from the WA local government sector, is a direct root causation factor which has seeded legitimisation of access to and participation in, corrupt and discriminatory behaviours.

The costly, resource-intense, ineffectual Code of Conduct chastisement system is a child born from regulatory failure to engage or deliver community engagement principles. Model Policy for Community Engagement is a management tool methodology capable of immediate deployment across WA local governments to deliver observable and measurable enhancement to our communities' strength.

Local Government Reform

The current WA **Local Government Act** explicitly specified an intent to facilitate:

- *"Greater community participation in the decisions and affairs of local government" and*
- *"Greater accountability of local governments to their communities"*

In October 2012, the Department of Local Government wrote: *"Across Australia, community engagement is progressively being reframed as core local government business."* That *"Local governments need to adopt community engagement practices as a core function" because "it helps strengthen the relationship between communities and government."*

If those two prescriptions were important enough to be championed by the Department scribe and specified in legislation, why then is community engagement;

- a) **Not enforced;**
- b) **Not measured and reported; and**
- c) **Excluded from the Local Government Act., reform review process itself?**

Promising one direction and delivering the opposite does not engender confidence in good governance. Adopting Model Policy would champion effective compliance.

Fragmentation Profiting Discrimination

Current laws, regulations and State government policy feed the maintenance of detrimental fragmentation of the 148 local governments, sector. That fragmentation profits impunity of discriminatory practices. Although no longer exclusively race based; remnants of "Jim Crow" or "apartheid" style doctrine can still today be observed practiced by local government administrators with or without Council endorsement. A root cause of this has been Government interference in local government employment, assuring that those who ascend to position of local government power were able to apply their will over community citizens irrespective of official policy.

Throughout history, it has only been after the intervention engagement from community committees & groups standing up, that societal advancement benefit has been driven.

The previous Minister failed in his reform drive using a mantra of Agile, Smart and Inclusive because he omitted to recognise the critical value and importance of Community Engagement.

The new Minister revised that mantra to:

- Reducing Red Tape
- Greater Transparency, Accountability, and Simplicity
- Clearer Roles and Responsibilities
- Stronger Financial Reporting and Traceability
- Earlier Intervention, Streamlined Resolution, Stronger Penalties

Each of these precepts require substantial community engagement investment to succeed. So yet again, reform failure is probable as, although the Minister's intentions are admirable, communications suggest engagement of community will continue to be mismanaged by those who are known to profit from exclusion of community from practical engagement.

What reform benefit can be achieved, if those community members experienced in identification of system failings continue to be excluded from the reform process by those employees who created the failings and then benefit from misguiding reform?

Example of mischievous misguiding of reform is openly visible in reading changes to the Act. adopted since 1995.

District communities are recognised reservoirs of highly skilled practitioners. People who have managed some of Australia's largest corporations, or engineered some of the worlds most iconic constructions, and are now in a position to donate time and skills to their communities. Why then is the State regulating for petty local government bureaucrats to override that higher skill level?

Establishing a Model Community Engagement Policy will achieve respect through guiding and measuring functional community engagement delivering consistency, openness, accountability and culture to local government management.

Model Community Engagement Policy Brings Together, at Least the Following Items under a single Management Framework Guide

Civic Ceremonies and Events bonding the local community such as:

- Integrity in Indigenous Recognition;
- ANZAC, VE / VP Remembrance Days;
- Opening or Naming Ceremonies;
- Award or Presentation Events.

Community or Charity events such as:

- Festivals;
- Street gatherings by Neighbourhood Watch or Street Teams;
- Rotary, Lions and other service group events.

Governance support for Council such as committees for:

- Review of Local Laws and policy;
- Measuring performance outcomes; and
- Identifying community standards expectations;
- Identifying community values & needs.

Community Volunteering opportunities:

- Serving on advisory, governance and audit committees;
- Undertaking, manual tasks or services;
- Health and medical support;
- Socially at risk & homeless support;
- Sports & recreation support.

Culture and Arts

Model Local Government Community Engagement Policy delivers observable and measurable results.

Exposing A Hidden Agenda?

In addition to prescription in the Act., in October 2012, the Department of Local Government published advice stating that "from 1 July 2013, local governments will be required to provide evidence of their community engagement"

Examination of the City of Melville (as a local example) Annual Financial Reports, failed to identify any evidence of any entry attributable to effecting actual Community Engagement. Leaving questions hanging:

1. Are the Financial reports inaccurate? If so, why did the Auditor not raise those inaccuracies?
2. Does this omission prove the City is negligent in its legislated and regulatory community engagement obligations?
3. Does this example that the City transacts no function nor business in respect to its required Strategic Community Plan?
4. Has the Department imported regulation it is either incapable or not prepared to uphold?

Model Community Engagement Policy is a management resource immediately available and capable of preventing perceptions of the performance and reporting failure kind exempld here.