

‘0 to be engaged’

By Verne Krastins, Community Engagement Advisor, City of Port Phillip, and Fellow, LGPro

There’s no doubt that engaging with the community is on many minds in local and state government circles. Many Victorian councils are grappling with their community planning roles, and they are taking a good look at their capacity and readiness to engage.

About community engagement

So there’s a lot of effort going into community engagement. But we do jump to the process, don’t we? There are encyclopaedias of engagement tools - think tanks, fish tanks, think tents, citizen’s juries, round tables, meetings and things facilitators do.

They are all excellent tools but their application tends to be seen in isolation and for single outcomes – maybe for a service review, a policy framework or a planning dispute. Unfortunately, the longer term benefits of engaging with the community for the community plan could be equally short lived.

To get around this, the City of Port Phillip is having a go at integrating notions of community engagement and community leadership. And having spoken with officers and councillors from a number of municipalities, I can say there are many angles and notions to community engagement.

About us

My impression is that council organisations often focus more on the means to resolve a particular issue rather than articulating a broader purpose for community engagement.

Talk to a community development professional, and community engagement is about capacity building and connectivity. A governance professional may say it is about decision making and democratic participation. A marketer or PR professional says it’s about knowing what will mobilise your publics. And to a councillor it is about representation.

Another impression is that ‘internal’ units and directorates tend to be the owners and drivers of ‘community engagement’, somewhere amongst corporate planning, governance and organisation development.

That’s fine – someone has to drive the process. But community planning alone is not going to strengthen our communities. It simply tells us what is important to the community. For the same reason, lots of consultation won’t strengthen communities either.

About them

So what’s missing? When we, local government people, talk about community engagement, we tend to mean ‘us’ engaging

with ‘them’ (the community). So naturally it becomes an internally focused enterprise which satisfies our needs as much, if not more, than theirs. Very rarely do you hear about local governments enabling engagement between community sectors. Indeed, we often find this difficult because of our silo accountability structures, or we simply find it threatening.

Thank goodness for the community developers whose business is about strengthening communities on a daily basis, through direct intervention, connecting people with each other, and helping build self-reliance.

Camps on the same page

Community planning is the ideal opportunity to bring the governance and community camps together. For governance, community planning gives a snapshot of people’s hearts and minds. For community development, it can focus their community strengthening activities and broaden their tendency to focus on “pockets of need”.

At Port Phillip, the current thinking is that, as we engage with our community on the community plan, we will also look for ways to enable self-generated action by the community further down the track. We believe that encouraging community leadership is one of the keys to this, and I suspect that if the community developers bring their expertise to bear on what community planning and relations tell us, the community leadership path will serve both governance and community strengthening well.

A final thought

My sense is that if the purpose of community engagement is simply to fulfil a process and inform policy, we miss out on opportunities to nurture our communities, grow their connectivity and help individuals have a greater say in how they experience daily life. Our community plans need to evolve into community development plans.

Professor Mark Considine in his 2005 paper, *Actions for Community Strengthening with Local Government* (DVC), talks about local government’s role in community strengthening. He makes a telling statement which sort of sums up the way forward.

“There are relatively few cases [in local government in Victoria] where community strengthening priorities have resulted in new on-going governance arrangements at the local level.”
I’d suggest vice versa too.