

Development Watch Inc

PO Box 1076, Coolum Beach, QLD, 4573



ABN 53 627 632 278

www.developmentwatch.org.au

Email: president@developmentwatch.org.au

9 June 2017

Community Engagement Toolkit
Department of Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning
By email: bestplanning@dilgp.qld.gov.au

Dear Committee,

Re: SUBMISSION ON COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TOOLKIT

I am writing on behalf of Development Watch, an organisation based in Coolum Beach. Development Watch (DW) has as one of our aims “to encourage planning policies and practices that enhance our quality of life”.

We support the community engagement toolkit. It is a very comprehensive document and the stated objectives are laudable. Whilst there are some statutory minimum requirements in the Act and Regulations and the toolkit provides Councils with considerable information to make effective choices, in our view there ought to be some better guidance on minimum standards for engagement. It is not sufficient to include a statement in the toolkit that Councils should not only implement the guidelines and practices outlined and do so with enthusiasm.

Whilst the community can point to the guidelines and principles outlined in the toolkit, if there is no obligation for Council to act in accordance with these, there is no effective method of influencing Council behaviour.

What recourse does a community have if their Council is “recalcitrant”, in terms of community engagement?

Governing Principles:

We support these guiding principles. In the principle relating to “Information is timely and relevant” we suggest a stronger emphasis on the need for early engagement in

the process (be it a significant development proposal, local planning law or planning scheme or amendment).

The principle “Decision making is transparent” we suggest that there be a further round of consultation once Council has undertaken initial consultation and developed the proposal before it is finalised to allow all stakeholders to understand how their feedback has been taken into account and to provide a further opportunity to comment.

IAP Models

We strongly support the use of the “Checklist for developing an engagement plan” as a minimum that Council must consider.

Yes we think it would be useful if the toolkit had information on how to evaluate community engagement.

On the point of evaluation, perhaps an independent evaluation of major engagement processes and outcomes would be more appropriate. If evaluation is done, it is usually done in-house and focuses on process: # of meetings/workshops/submissions, not whether community input influenced the decision, or how people felt about it. As a result, we really don't have good evidence of the effectiveness of consultation, accountability for decisions arising after consultation, or how to improve. (see examples of possible problems under “Other”)

Yes, a completed example of an engagement plan would be useful.

Part 4 – Selecting engagement tools:

Critical success factors for engagement - timely engagement:

We strongly support these. There should be a stronger emphasis on the need for early engagement with stakeholders. Councils should use email distribution lists to provide early advice to key community groups and affected/interested persons.

Tool: Choosing the right engagement tool:

The list is very comprehensive and perhaps could be aligned more clearly with minimum expectations in relation to the issues that Councils engage with the community on. This would assist small Councils to be effective and would provide a baseline for larger Councils.

A minimum expectation is early advice to key community groups and interested parties through direct email.

We support the use of social media and other on-line tools to inform the community but the traditional methods of advertisements (in the body of the local papers) and notices on the relevant site are still required.

We consider it is helpful to provide ideas and case studies about current trends in engagement in the toolkit.

Other

Finally, in relation to community engagement on Planning Scheme Amendments: it should be mandatory that submissions made to Council be made public on Council's website, as they are with Development Applications. Submitters have the right to ask that their personal details (eg. name, address (except perhaps the town of residence) be withheld. However to fully understand any final decisions made by Council and/or the State and for the purposes of transparency, the community needs to be able to see all submissions as well as the town from which the submissions came, in order for the community to understand why a certain decision has ultimately been made.

Following are examples of recent issues our Association has encountered with community engagement on a Planning Scheme Amendment :

- No early community consultation. This created a problem in that by the time the community became aware of the proposed amendment and understood what was proposed and the affect it could have on them, they only had two weeks to respond
- Public notification was in the lead up to the Christmas/school holiday period
- The residents group who initially approached Council and asked for the Planning Scheme amendment contained a limited number of supporters (despite their advice to the contrary) and had not fully informed their members of the consequences of the proposed amendment – the information provided to them came from the developer
- The residents group had previously been sponsored by the developer who would ultimately gain from the amendment
- An RTI request had to be lodged to obtain copies of the submissions and other documents in order for the community to be informed

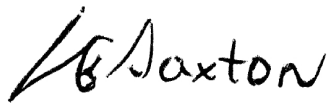
And in another example:

- 1500 submissions were lodged on a proposed Planning Scheme amendment in another area – the majority were against the proposal and yet the community had no way of viewing the submissions and to understand the reasons why Council, despite the lack of support from the

majority of the community, is seemingly proceeding with the amendment. Again, an RTI request had to be lodged to obtain copies of the submissions.

Whilst these examples of problems we have encountered may go outside the parameters of the subject of a toolkit, we have taken the opportunity to raise them in the event that the toolkit may be able to assist in overcoming these problems.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lynette Saxton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "L".

Lynette Saxton,

President, Development Watch Inc.