

B4 Community engagement

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Purpose

This module outlines the importance of engaging the community in walking programs, and describes a range of proven techniques and effective programs.

Introduction

Community engagement is a fundamental component of developing community-based plans. While this may appear to be a simple concept, care must be taken to ensure that the plans reflect those values the community cherishes most. This module provides a structural approach to community engagement when developing walking plans and strategies.

B4.1 Benefits of community partnerships

It is essential that council's work is perceived in the community as relevant and in tune with community expectations, values, amenity and/or needs.

Community engagement is a valuable process that can provide positive benefits and outcomes for organisations, while simultaneously engendering community ownership of projects and programs.

Activities designed to involve the community in council initiatives will help to improve the integrity of the democratic process. This involvement will also provide avenues for any feedback, and perhaps facilitate early solutions to problems that may arise when scoping projects and programs.

Allowing opportunities for the community to have input into any proposed walking strategies and walking programs will help this work to be perceived as relevant, attractive and a genuine effort to improve the local quality of life.

B4.2 Principles and objectives

Any engagement activity that is designed to gather input from the community should be valid, worthwhile, relevant and underpinned by the following principles:

- ▶ two-way communication flows: active listening, information sharing, a foundation of mutual respect and trust
- ▶ inclusiveness: supporting diversity and reaching out culturally, economically and geographically to those hardest to connect with
- ▶ collaboration: building community partnerships, accepting the community as a legitimate partner, encouraging active community participation, and engendering community ownership of council activities
- ▶ community capacity building: helping provide community members with the means to engage with council, thereby allowing them to take advantage of opportunities such as funding, non-monetary support and training/education (whether through council or other organisations).

B4.3 Opportunities, strategies and actions

Opportunities

Seeking out opportunities to conduct engagement activities is the best way to match the objectives of the walking program to the values and aspirations of the local community.

Successful community engagement is about identifying, creating and harnessing appropriate opportunities to attract the community's attention and interest in a walking program.



It may also include an education program about the benefits that walking can provide to the individual and to the local area.

Engagement activities can help to explore the benefits of walking from a community perspective. Understanding the community means understanding the values that people hold.

Values can dictate the level of involvement people are willing to have, and can help determine how people might like to participate in forming a walking program or having input into any design or planning for walking facilities.

Strategies

There is no single prescriptive formula to create a successful community engagement strategy, but rather a number of tactics that councils could use to find the right mix for their community. A successful community engagement strategy is one that effectively creates a community dialogue about the proposed programs and plans.

Common elements that make up a good community engagement strategy include:

- ▶ *A background check:* Checking the responses from the community to any past and current engagement activities will help councils to find and apply past lessons learned.
- ▶ *Use of sociodemographic information:* Such information provides insight into who in the community may like to contribute to important walking programs and projects, and how and why they may contribute.
- ▶ *A communication plan:* This will help to identify the audience council is talking to, and to outline effective ways to impart information, open the lines of communication, and engage in active listening.
- ▶ *A protocol for dealing with the community:* While this can be flexible and adapt to the circumstances of each project, it should clarify the roles of all stakeholders and include a simple consistent manner of dealing with community and media enquiries.

Understanding the demographics of the community, as well as how people like to receive and give information, will help councils to decide on the best ways to achieve community input. For example, a 'walk to school' program, a tourist walk and a seniors fitness walk will all have different participants with different needs.

For people in outer metropolitan, rural and remote communities, geographic distances and social isolation can be a barrier to walking. Appropriate hubs (physical or even virtual) should be provided to connect people, within the community, and to council. A good example of connecting rural communities is the *Beyond the Farm Gate* program in the Glenelg Shire, south-west Victoria (see the case study: 'Community engagement process in Glenelg Shire').

Actions

Community engagement activities should be considered at the first step in the planning process to ensure that the development of the walking program is guided in the direction of true engagement, rather than being a promotional or marketing exercise.

A number of useful actions can be undertaken to help start the planning for a successful community engagement process (see Table B4-1). These include actions related to determining the nature of the project and type of information to be discussed; who the stakeholders are; what the communities are; and the development and evaluation of the actual engagement strategy. More guidance on these types of actions can be found in a variety of references, including the following:

- ▶ Multicultural Affairs, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Community relations resource kit, <http://www.premiers.qld.gov.au/library/pdf/comm_rel_kit.pdf>.
- ▶ Department of Communities, Engaging Queenslanders, series of community engagement guides, <http://www.getinvolved.qld.gov.au/share_your_knowledge/resources/guides_publications.html>.
- ▶ Department of Emergency Services, A guide to effective community engagement, <http://www.emergency.qld.gov.au/publications/pdf/guide_to_eff_comm_engagement.pdf>.
- ▶ Office of Youth Affairs, Youth Participation Strategy, <http://www.generate.qld.gov.au/pdf/YPC_Youth_Participation_Strategy.pdf>.

B4.4 Developing community partnerships

The strongest partnerships are built on mutual respect, recognition of complementary strengths, and trust. Openness, sharing of perspectives, flexibility and responsiveness are key qualities in developing effective community partnerships.

Table B4-1

Key ways for council to engage people to participate in planning for walking programs

Technique	Descriptions and possible activities
Group	
Public meetings/forums	Usually more than 20 people attend Need to be widely publicised through an advertised invitation Should be held at a convenient time, usually late afternoon/evening to include those who work Include formal proceedings or a presentation May be followed by a question and answer session
Workshops	Can be sessions aimed at gathering information in the beginning phase to assist with developing a walking strategy Presence of an expert, facilitator and technical staff to help workshops run smoothly Workshop possibilities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ search conferences — usually a whole day or weekend ▶ design or participative mapping activities — need prior preparation of community maps and can be an important information-gathering method ▶ seminars
Consultative Liaison Committee/Group	An important way to receive ongoing advice and communication on developing policies or proposals from important stakeholders and interested community members or groups Forming a charter and getting members to agree on it to help clearly outline protocols of the group and its role in decision making
Personalised	
Individual discussion, surveys, interviews	Selected individuals consulted over the telephone, in street surveys or by going door to door Questioning of a statistically valid community sample that represents the whole population or sector conducted by telephone or written questionnaire Surveys to be carefully developed to prevent sampling bias, and an adequate and cost-effective sample size to be used to obtain accurate results (see Ortuzar & Willumsen 1994 for further details)
Open house	An informal drop-in session where council staff and any consultants or technical staff can discuss or address issues on an individual basis Have some display materials to prompt discussion
Verbal or written submission	An opportunity for people to make a written or verbal submission, which should be acknowledged, and consideration given to how they will input into the process
Information distribution	
Display and exhibitions	Can be staffed or static and are usually the best option when there is something to show and if the community believes that the issue is of high importance
Information bulletins and brochures	Regular updates can be costly, so possibly include a walking program article in an existing council publication
Websites, email	An interactive web page that has updates and an email address as a point of contact, for people who prefer to provide and receive information this way May be costly, so a separate page link off council's existing site, with any updates announced in a special section, could be considered

Note 1: Adapted from National Environmental Protection Council's *Guideline to community consultation and risk communication* Table 6-A (National Environment Protection Council 1999).

Note 2: Please note that this document is a source for consultation on risk communication. While the development of a walking program may not be a particularly contentious issue, the Table 6-A matrix provides a detailed look at each option and also contains some advantages and disadvantages of these methods. This document, which also sources *The Human Services Planning Kit* (Department of Housing and Urban Development, South Australia, February 1994), can be found at <http://www.ephc.gov.au/pdf/cs/cs_08_community_consult.pdf>.



Case study: Community engagement process in Glenelg Shire

To develop a shire-wide walking strategy, the Glenelg Shire Council conducted 'walking' forums in Portland in 2002, in Heywood in 2003, and in Casterton in 2004.

The forums aimed to give community members the opportunity to discuss walking in the Glenelg Shire. Activities included:

- ▶ seeking ideas and views on walking issues and barriers to walking
- ▶ discussing projects that could increase walking in towns around the shire
- ▶ providing some solutions to overcome the barriers to walking.



Source: South West Sport Assembly Initiative, funded by VicHealth

Figure B4-1
Beyond the Farm Gate program

The *Beyond the Farm Gate* program was developed from the early forums as part of the Glenelg Walking Strategy. At its peak, the pilot program involved up to 350 participants.

The walking program was originally designed to attract senior rural women who may experience social isolation (one of the barriers to walking discussed at the forums). The program focused on creating walking networks in the community and promoted the health benefits of walking.

Program participants in the pilot year received a 'gorgeous girl' bag that included a diary for recording their walks and thoughts, a water bottle from the local Water Board, and a pen and notebook from a local printer.

The program organisers contacted walk leaders, called 'leading ladies', who helped to encourage women in the community to walk. The local community health service providers were the hub for the program.

Case study: Just Walk It

Partnership with health and community service providers

Just Walk It is a Heart Foundation program funded by the Queensland Government through Sport and Recreation Queensland. The *Just Walk It* program has around 5,000 participants across Queensland. It is a free program that aims to help people become more physically active by walking regularly as part of a group.

Just Walk It has volunteer walk organisers who lead the walks. A walk organiser kit is given to anyone who wants to become an organiser and the foundation provides some training. Health professionals are encouraged to coordinate or support the program in their area.

The number of participants achieving sufficient physical activity (>150 minutes and 5 sessions per week) increased from 50% at the beginning of the program to 63% after 6 months.



Source: Heart Foundation
Figure B4-2
Just Walk It

Community partnerships may involve other levels of government, community groups, local business, health and community service providers, and educational institutions. Such partnerships have been developed at the initial stages of planning for walking programs, and also as a way to continue the development and growth of walking programs. See the following case studies: '*Just Walk It*', 'Shopping centre walks', '*Wet Tropics Walking Strategy*', '*Beyond the Farm Gate*' and '*Walk to School*'. Programs such as *Beyond the Farm Gate* and *Just Walk It* have been shown to produce an increase in the walking levels of participants.

Case study: Shopping centre walks

Partnership between local businesses

The Green Apple Wellness Centre's shopping centre walks at the Aspley Hypermarket in north Brisbane are an excellent example of local businesses providing the foundations for a free, community-based walking group.

While the concept of the program began with some doctors on the northside of Brisbane, the Green Apple Wellness Centre took over the operation of the walks and made it their own. The Aspley Hypermarket provides the venue and funding for the walk leaders.

Although a commercial venture, the Green Apple Wellness Centre aims to form community partnerships with programs that fit its philosophy that people do not have to be young, fit or slim to start a program, and they do not need designer clothes.

The shopping centre walk is not used as a marketing tool to gather new members, although the walkers are treated as though they are members. (There are 60 to 100 participants each Monday, Wednesday and Friday.) The wellness centre has an information form detailing any special medical conditions, and each participant has a badge with their name on the front and any critical information on the back.

The company has a procedure manual for the walk leaders, which helps to make the walk experience consistent. The procedure includes a proper warm-up and cool-down. The website at www.greenapple.wellness.com.au provides more details.



Source: Green Apple Wellness Centre
Figure B4-3
Shopping centre walks

Case study: Wet Tropics Walking Strategy

Partnership with community groups

The *Wet Tropics Walking Strategy* was developed over two years to guide the future development and management of a range of walks throughout the wet tropics.

Uniquely, these public walks are managed by a range of entities, including the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, local governments, and community and Indigenous groups. There are also some privately managed walks.

A diversity of walk experiences is available, including shorter, longer, and heritage walks. The strategy contains key steps for managing individual walks, along with key actions for land managers wanting to add new walks to the existing list of around 148 managed walks in the area.

The strategy provided the framework for the development of a high-quality walking track network. During the development of the strategy, a walking advisory group provided expert advice to assist with implementation of the strategy, and community advisory groups enhanced communication with the public about walking issues.

Engagement with the Aboriginal community was especially important, and traditional owners were consulted about the inclusion of particular walking tracks. Aboriginal groups have an ongoing role in promoting the cultural nature of the tracks, and this role is an important way for Aboriginal groups to develop tourism and impart cultural education.



Source: Wet Tropics Management Authority
Figure B4-4
Wet Tropics Walking Strategy



Case study: Beyond the Farm Gate

Partnership with health and community service providers

Partnerships for this program were categorised into two main groups: program sponsors and health agencies. Around 23 supporting organisations and health and community centres in the south-west region of Victoria took part.

The local community health service providers, part of an integrated health promotion called primary care partnerships (PCPs), were an important strategic partner, as these community centres in rural areas are often a central point or hub for community information. These PCPs committed themselves and their affiliated health/community centres to undertake the program. They helped to distribute program materials and to promote the program.

Participants in the *Beyond the Farm Gate* program on average walked over 5 times per week after the program, compared to 3.6 times before the program.

Case study: Walk to School

Partnership with educational institutions

The Brisbane City Council's Active School Travel (AST) program focuses on a number of ways to travel to school, and found that common concerns about children walking to school included both road safety and personal safety.

The program has engaged with Queensland University of Technology (QUT) researcher and academic Brodie Cambourne, who developed the *Walk to School* program.

The *Walk to School* program suggests to parents alternative forms of transport, and encourages children living in the local area to walk to school. The groups are supervised by accredited walk volunteers, who follow safety guidelines.

QUT's research and active promotion have helped the *Walk to School* program grow from 4 leaders and 20 children to its current 215 volunteers and over 500 children participating across Queensland.

A big plus for this partnership from the point of view of Brisbane City Council is the high level of risk management planning that QUT has done in developing the program. This research is an invaluable addition to any strategic planning process.

References

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