“Since the late nineteenth century, the use of the term ‘community’ has remained to some extent associated with the hope and the wish of reviving once more the closer, warmer, more harmonious type of bonds between people vaguely attributed to past ages”.¹

We often talk about councils representing and working for communities. But what is meant by ‘community’? Community is a sociological construct and has multiple meanings, moving boundaries and changing components, depending on the particular perspective taken.

Communities are delineated by common characteristics but these can be geographical, physical (e.g. ethnicity) and cultural. Communities contain both groups and individuals and interestingly, communities tend to have lives well beyond those of the individuals or groups within them at any point in time. In Local Government, our communities often have artificial external boundaries but generally there are multiple internal boundaries or subsets as well. Councils often have to think about those moving in and out of their community, as well as those who are fixed within. An artificial boundary does not mean a council is not required to interact with those outside that boundary.

Communities have variously been described as things (or groups of things), as systems with interconnected parts acting as a whole, and as processes. That is, a community can be a thing which exists apart from us, it can be something we are a part of and it can be something we do together.² Councils need to consider the nature of community in order to effectively deliver services to their community. There is a wealth of information available to councils on community, community engagement and servicing the community.


The website clearly outlines what is meant by community engagement, the benefits of and principles for successful engagement, looks at engagement strategies and provides a valuable list of tools (in the toolkit) for assisting in the planning, implementation and evaluation of community engagement activities.

For councils, successful community engagement can help to deliver: practical and relevant policy development; effective and efficient service delivery; notice of emerging issues and proactive management; and improved reputation.

The website’s authors refer to the six ‘c’s of successful community engagement (see table), as developed by Brown and Isaacs³, and have a focus on participatory engagement.

Continued Page 28
The Six ‘C’s of Successful Community Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capability</th>
<th>The members are capable of dialogue.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>Mutual benefit beyond self interest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution</td>
<td>Members volunteer and there is an environment that encourages members to ‘have a go’ or take responsibility/risks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuity</td>
<td>Members share or rotate roles and, as members move on, there is a transition process that sustains and maintains the community corporate memory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Reliable interdependence. A clear vision with members operating in an environment of sharing and trust.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscience</td>
<td>Embody or invoke guiding principles/ethics of service, trust and respect that are expressed in the actions of the community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the website it is argued that participatory engagement improves community ownership of a direction, course of action, or decision and promotes positive project outcomes. Further, it is important to consider the implications of any proposed participation processes and to “avoid promising a level of participation and power that is never intended to be given, or designing processes that claims to be empowering, but merely offers ‘token’ levels of participation.

A second document relates to Community Grants. Community grants programs are often a relatively small component of council duties and budget, but this function, which is replicated by councils Australia-wide, is an important and widely recognised Local Government role.

Councillors in Tasmania will provide over $1 million in funding assistance this year to groups in their communities through Community/Financial Assistance Grants Programs. Grants will be to individuals, teams and community groups and will be used to support sport and recreation, capital works, social inclusion, capacity building, cultural events and more - with grants ranging from $100, to several thousands of dollars.

The Queensland Government recently released Guidelines for Local Government Administration of Community Grants and this document may form a useful tool for those councils who are intending to review their current policy and practices. Reassuringly, the authors have not taken a once size fits all approach. They have

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recognised that the awarding and management of a $200 grant to an individual must be far less cumbersome and bureaucratic than funding a large scale event or capital development.

The guidelines step through a six-part cycle:

1. The need to set and review strategic objectives - ‘what are we trying to achieve with this grant program?’, and ‘how does it align to our broader strategic agenda’. Councils should have a clearly articulated policy on community grants;

2. Program design - including risk assessment, resourcing, easy-to-use application forms and evaluation;

3. Communicating with the community - raising awareness, ensuring equity of access and providing comprehensive guidelines;

4. Assessing applications - well developed assessment criteria incorporated into the design phase, sound governance processes (e.g. conflict of interest procedures), advice to applicants and appropriate funding agreements;

5. Monitoring approved grants - making sure funds are spent correctly, acquittal procedures and reporting;


The guidelines were developed following an examination of grant giving practices in eight Queensland councils by the State’s Auditor General, who highlighted some key governance concerns. These included the importance of ensuring equity of access to grants and, in particular, ensuring the advertising of grants (rather than relying on word of mouth) and also providing those involved in the assessment of grants with the opportunity to declare a conflict of interest.

The guidelines also urge councils to adopt a two-tier training strategy. That is, to have externally focused training for community organisations in order to improve capacity (e.g. how to source and apply for grant funding, governance, program management) and internally focused training to support effective administration of the grants scheme and reduce key dependencies. Case studies and samples are provided, as well as links to other relevant sites.


2 [Action and Research Open Web: www2.fhs.usyd.edu.au/arow/o/ m11/What%20is%20Community.htm


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Staff Movements

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Christine Materia for her work in the area of Natural Resource Management and Climate Change over the last two years at LGAT. Christine has taken a permanent post with the Department of Health and Human Services and we wish her all the best in her new position.

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