



communication information and participation



Social Outcome

A community that is engaged, well informed and valued.

A community that has an improved understanding of Council's role and function.

Promotion of the positive aspects of living in the Shire.



Importance to Quality of Life

The theme of '*Council, Communication, Information, Participation and Involvement*' refers to the variety of ways in which Council and the community provide and share information, come together to discuss challenges, aspirations and issues, listen to each other and respect and value the contributions of each other.

Open, communicative, accountable, efficient, effective and participatory local government is an essential component in building a strong, healthy and well connected community.

Information needs to be easily accessible to all residents. People need to know where to seek information and be provided with clear, simple, easy to read (in plain English) information at highly utilised key points in local communities.

Residents should be able to actively participate in their communities and society and therefore achieve civic understanding. To do this, people, require knowledge of civic institutions, political and legal systems and processes and the history that underpins them. They need to understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens, and democratic values and principles such as democratic decision making, representative and accountable government, freedom of speech, equality before the law, social justice and equality (*Victorian Essential Learning: Civics and Citizenship 2008*).

There has been a recent world wide shift in local government, in response to increasing pressures, to view residents only as customers, not as residents who should be involved and connected to the democratic process:

Social Indicators

% of household with an internet connection.

Perceived adequacy of opportunities to participate in local planning.



“Local governments all across the world are facing similar dilemmas: Their resources are not keeping up with the increasingly complex social issues, and the federal and state governments are devolving more responsibilities than money. The common response to this has been to ‘reinvent’ government to be more like a business with a greater emphasis on efficiency and customer service. Although it may be true that local government needs to improve customer service, there is a danger inherent in treating citizens as customers. To the extent that government treats citizens only as customers, residents think of themselves as only taxpayers and feel that much more alienated from their local government.”

Source: Jim Diers, 2004: Neighbour Power: Building Community the Seattle Way.

It is extremely important to value and actively pursue the contributions that the community can make to the future directions of the Shire:

“There are other things that communities can do better than government can. Community members have local knowledge and can provide a local perspective. At the same time, they think more holistically than government departments that tend to specialise in specific functions. The community is often more innovative than the local government and can constitute a powerful force for change.”

Source: Jim Diers, 2004: Neighbour Power: Building Community the Seattle Way.

Current Context

Council is one of the major sources of community information. A key issue for the community during the consultations was knowing when, how and where to access information. Often, residents indicated that as a new resident, the first port of call to find out about their local community would be Council.

During the consultations, residents raised a number of issues regarding information provision, communication between Council and the community, consultation, participation, and Council as an organisation that values community development as having a key role in developing relationships and involving residents.



Residents often described a lack of knowledge or difficulty in establishing a link and connection with Council and expressed their frustration, lack of understanding and intimidation at the complicated processes and legalities associated with Council run projects, decision making and a significant confusion at the roles and responsibilities of residents and Council.

Residents felt that Council should facilitate the practice of developing citizenship skills, involvement and leadership, the exploration and development of values and dispositions to support citizenship and the empowerment of informed decision making.

- **Information Provision**

The provision of information to the community was regularly discussed by residents in the consultation process. Residents felt that Council has an extremely important role to play in the dissemination of information relating to both Council activities and wider community activities. People regard Council as the catalyst or first point of call for many people seeking information about their community (especially new residents).

People regarded some of the current systems of information provision as good, such as the Wyong Shire Council page in the local papers, but also described the things that make it hard for people to access information from Council. Some of these include:

- Information not available in different languages other than English;
- Not all residents have access to the internet;
- Council website is not easy to negotiate;
- There is a lack of up to date information on Council's website; and
- The shift from hard copy to electronic – not everyone has a computer connected to the internet, and if they do, they often cannot access large documents.

It is becoming widely accepted that broadband internet access is an essential requirement to participate in the “new information age” and households with no or only dial up internet service are increasingly left behind in the information age.

In 2006, 52.6% of households in the Shire were connected to the internet. 30.8% had broadband connectivity and 21.3% had a dial-up connection. 41.1% of households were not connected to the internet.



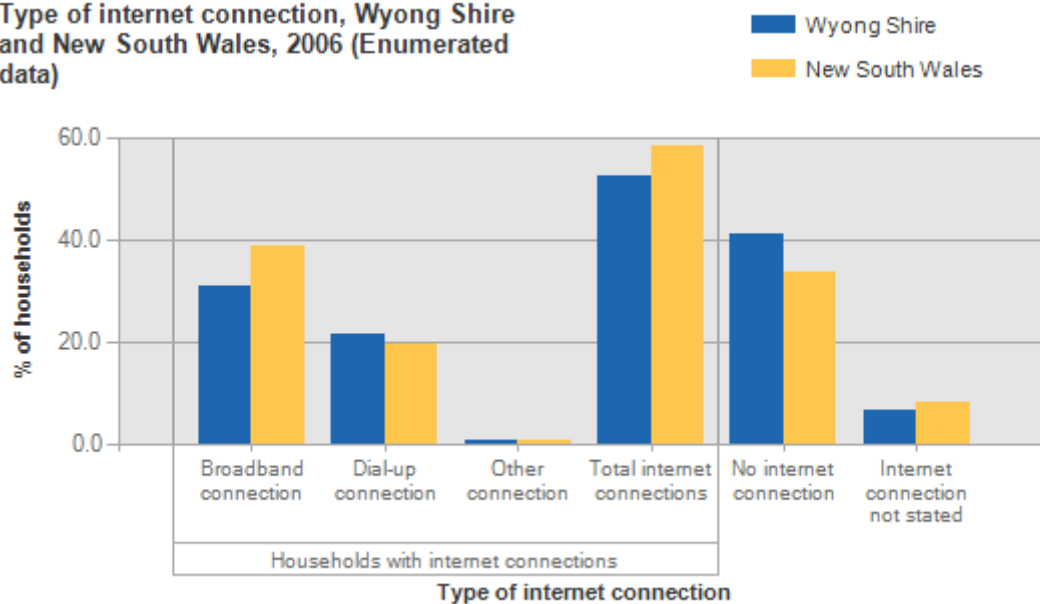
Analysis of the type of internet connection of households in comparison to NSW shows that there was a larger proportion of households with either no internet connection or a dial up connection, but a smaller proportion of households with broadband connectivity. Wyong has the lowest proportion of households with internet connection of all LGAs in the Sydney Statistical Division.

Table 10.1: Type of Internet Connection

	Number	%	NSW %
Broadband Connection	16,639	30.8	38.5
Dial-Up Connection	11,525	21.3	19.3
Other Connection	265	0.5	0.6
Total Internet Connections	28,429	52.6	58.4
No Internet Connection	22,230	41.1	33.7
Internet Connection Not Stated	3,435	6.4	7.9
Total Households	54,094	100.0	100.0

Source: ABS Census, 2006 (Wyong Shire Community Profile – .id Consulting).

Type of internet connection, Wyong Shire and New South Wales, 2006 (Enumerated data)



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006 Census of Population and Housing (Enumerated)

By far the most commonly described method of information dissemination that would be of benefit to residents is the provision of hard copy information rather than just electronic (email) or internet based.



"We need hard copies of the community directories, new resident's kits and other relevant information – older people and many others in the Shire don't always have access to computers."

"As a new resident I would rather have access to a quick and easy paper information brochure that sticks on the fridge, rather than logging onto the computer and accessing the internet which takes ages."

Other ways that residents felt they could be better informed and information could be better distributed are as follows:

- Help to ensure that the local papers are distributed to all suburbs in the Shire: Currently there is no local paper delivery in some suburbs;
- Erect Council noticeboards in suburbs and at transport interchanges (e.g. actually on train platforms);
- Utilise community publications and newsletters more effectively;
- Ensure that people from a CALD community are catered to with language links on Council's website, interpreter services, welcome kits in other languages etc; and
- Ensure that information in publications and on Council's website is as up to date as possible.

Although the Shire has a low proportion of people connected to the internet, it is still important for Council to keep up to date with current and relevant trends of internet usage and seek alternative and innovative ways for residents to access information technology e.g. telecommuting centres, wifi access, etc.

• **Wyong Shire Council – Communication with the Community**

Another of the most common themes to emerge from the consultations was communication between Council and the Community. Regular communication from Council to the Community was raised as extremely important to residents. Many residents expressed that they felt Council is not approachable, is not there for the community, does not listen and does not communicate well with them about local issues.

"Council gets too insular sometimes and doesn't seem to think that it is there for the local community."



"Listen to the community – then Council will get a better understanding of a problem and how to fix a problem."

"It's important for Council to talk to the community – but listen to us too!!"

"There should be better communication regarding development and issues in the local area."

Residents indicated that often they were left with no clue as to what is happening in their community and that Council "goes quiet" on certain issues:

"If Council doesn't talk to the Community, then the community makes up the story – and there are lots of stories around about what's actually happening."

Residents expressed a desire for Council to be open, honest and transparent and communicate with residents at all stages of a project, even if it is not going well:

"Communication must happen the whole way along about certain projects, even if it's not all good news – we should be able to know what's going on."

People continually expressed the need for Council (Councillors and Council Officers) to keep communicating and made a number of suggestions for the best way to do this. Suggestions included:

"Council needs to be user friendly to multi-cultural residents, for example, language links on Council's website, interpreter service, welcome kits in other languages etc."

"Council could be more responsive with requests and inquiries."

"Have Council days out in the community – not just for events."

"Develop community notice boards in lots of different areas so that are kept up to date."

"Keep putting articles in paper/radio/community newspapers/newsletters."

"Elected Councillors need to communicate with the community and be more present in the community."



"Promote Council as an organisation that is involved in community development not just roads, rates and rubbish."

"Meet with the people on a regular basis."

Residents regularly mentioned that different Council departments do not seem to communicate with each other:

"There needs to be better communication within Council and across Council departments."

Residents on the whole thought that all Council officers and Councillors should be more visible, approachable and positive in the community (rather than just in the Council chambers or in enforcement type roles) and enable positive and strong relationships with the community to be developed.

- **Consultation**

Residents in the consultations were very keen and enthusiastic to be involved, and have many valid comments regarding the opportunities and challenges that living in the Shire presents. The community has a stake in the future planning for the Shire and they naturally have an interest in any plans for the future of the area they live.

They were very keen to see ongoing community consultation (in the form of the community plan consultations, i.e. conversations) implemented across all levels and sections of Council. Residents felt that there should be ongoing regular conversations between the Community and Council about living in the Shire:

"Continue with these community consultations."

"Keep talking to residents and seeking their opinions."

"Individual conversations are great – this is a good way of going about it."

*"This current process of community consultations **is** an important one."*



“Conversations are a good start – to get an understanding of the depth and breadth of what the people think.”

“It’s about valuing what people have to say.”

There was discussion from residents that they felt that some Council consultations were token, and rather for information purposes than truly asking for the opinion of the community. This was further emphasised by the feeling that they don’t see their input reflected in the plans and projects that are developed:

“It’s important for communities to see their opinions/thoughts/inputs reflected in action.”

“Action followed up from consultations with communication.”

“Communication from Council to the community – hearing back regarding the various consultations we are involved in.”

- **Participation**

Residents highlighted their desire to be more involved in the decision making processes of Council, in a participatory way rather than a tokenistic way. People were keen to be actively involved with Council, and felt that they have something positive to offer in creating Wyong Shire as a good place to live, and working together for the common good of all residents.

Residents were concerned that Council thought of them as a hindrance to certain processes rather than positively contributing members of the community:

“Wyong Council should be engaging people who live in the place to be involved in the community and local government.”

“Simple solutions to simple problems – residents are the experts and will often know the simple easy solutions to local problems rather than having a huge State and Local Government approach to everything.”

“We want to be involved, not just token involvement. We want to help make the decisions.”



Jim Diers, in his book 'Neighbour Power: Building Community the Seattle Way' states:

"I am convinced that people still yearn for a sense of community and want to contribute to the greater good. They also want a voice in their government."

Around 34% of Wyong Shire residents in the Quality of Life Survey agreed that there were adequate opportunities to be involved in the planning for the population and provision of services. Residents who did not agree (48%) that there were adequate opportunities to be involved cited insufficient information about opportunities and the fact that government doesn't really take any notice. Those residents who felt that the opportunities to become involved were adequate were likely to have higher wellbeing scores (CCRF, 2008).

- **"Community" as a Key Council Priority**

Residents in a number of consultations highlighted the importance of Council as an organisation that is involved and committed to people and improving the quality of life of residents. Many residents felt that the focus of Council is on roads, water and building things rather than really connecting and linking with people:

"The focus of Council should be as an organisation that is dedicated to, and involved in Community Development not just roads rates and rubbish."

It is clear from resident's responses to the questions and the way in which the themes emerged, that establishing networks, connecting and linking with people and being active and involved is one of the most important elements for people to feel good about themselves and where they live.

People also emphasised the importance of Council viewing the community as partners and contributors rather than customers or consumers. Residents felt that they have lots of assets and strengths that could really benefit Council and working together would have the best outcome for local communities.

"Council and the community should work in partnership to achieve great things for the future."



What We Can Do

What Council Can Do:

Local government is recognised as the closest level of government to the community. Councils' therefore have a key role in working together with the community to respond to local issues, challenges and aspirations of residents.

Council is a significant provider and producer of community information. Council currently provides information through a range of mediums such as media articles, brochures, directories, community noticeboards etc.

Council provides access to information through the Wyong Shire Council website. The site provides 24 hour, 7 day access to Council information including business papers and an online payment facility. Community Directories, Council Notices and Job vacancies are also available on the website.

Council also provides a wide range of information services through its branch libraries. Libraries are located at Bateau Bay, The Entrance, Toukley, Lake Haven and Tuggerah Information Centre at Westfield Tuggerah.

Council provides information relevant to the Shire and the Central Coast Region to government, business, community organisations and local residents. Council has a role in informing these groups about key social trends and issues, demographic information and social indicators, providing information on services available to the community and what's happening in the local community, funding programmes, as well as Council's activities.

Not only does Council have a role as a provider of information, but it has an extremely important role in consulting and actively involving residents in the processes and decisions of Council.

Community consultation is the key mechanism for the identification of local values and local needs. Good community consultation is able to:

- Gain valuable and unique perspectives from the local community;
- Ensure that services, facilities, programmes, activities and decision making are more relevant and appropriate;



- Enable people to have a say, develop new skills and gain an increased sense of connection to the community;
- Empower people to have their opinions sought and recognised as valid; and
- Focus on Quality of Life rather than satisfaction, e.g. Hearing the stories of local people living in the community – what is it like to live in Wyong Shire, rather than quantifying or rating their satisfaction with Council services.

Council's Role could be further enhanced by:

- Developing a strategy for community engagement to ensure consistency of approaches across Council;
- Enhancing the Wyong Shire Council website to be more user and community friendly; and
- Ensuring provision of information is in plain English and multi lingual (where necessary).

What Other Organisations Can Do:

- Provide up to date appropriate, relevant information to the community.
- Engage the community in planning and service provision.
- Work in partnership with Council and the Community.
- Advocate and involve all groups in the planning and provision of services.

What the Community Can Do:

- Form action groups and committees.
- Create a local newsletter/newspaper.
- Take action on local issues as a group.
- Lobby government and others regarding community concerns.



What I Can Do:

- Write letters.
- Participate in advisory and action groups e.g. Precinct Committees, Progress Associations.
- Keeping up to date about what's going on in the area by reading papers, checking the website etc.
- Vote in elections.
- Write a letter to the local newsletter about an issue, concern or local opportunity.
- Take an interest in local government issues – observe Council meetings.
- Answer surveys when asked.
- Get involved with activities and projects that have involvement of the community.
- Get to know your local politicians.
- Provide input to Council about living in Wyong Shire.
- Provide feedback to Council about the appropriateness of information.
- Talk to your local Council and Councillors about things that concern you.



Communication and Information Action Plan

What we aim to achieve	How we are going to achieve it and why	Timeframe	Council Section Responsibility & Involvement of Other Sections	Community Partners	Resources
An engaged Community	Develop a Community Engagement Strategy for Council to provide staff with best practice models of community engagement and ensure consistency of approaches.	Year 3 2010/11	Future Planning, Community Development & Communications Unit.	Target Groups, Young People, CALD Community, PWD, ATSI etc	Within existing
An informed community	Enhance the Wyong Shire Council website, particularly the Community Development and Social Planning section of Council's website to make them interactive and user friendly and more responsive to the community.	Year 2 2009/10	Communications Unit, Community Development & Future Planning.	-	Within Existing
	Ensure that all council produced directories are in plain English, relevant and up to date with accurate helpful information.	Years 1 - 5	Community Development, Communications Unit, Libraries.	Local Community Community Groups, NGO's	Within existing
	Review the Community Services Directory and the Central Coast Families website to ensure a usable accessible resource for families in the Shire.	Year 1	Community Development	Local Community Community Groups, NGO's	Within existing
	Provide hard copies as well as electronic versions of information, brochures, welcome kits etc.	Years 2 - 5	Community Development	-	\$2.5K per year
	Install community noticeboards in various locations across the Shire.	Years 2,3,4.	Community Development	NGO's, Community Groups, Community Members	\$5K per year
	Better utilise internet (Facebook, YouTube, MySpace), radio, TV and local newsletters in the providing of information to the community.	Years 1 - 5	Communications Unit, Community Development	-	Within existing
A technologically connected community	Explore innovative options for residents to access Information Technology, e.g. Wi fi sites, telecommuting etc.	Years 1 - 5	Community Development, Communications Unit, Future Planning, IT Section, Library Services		Within existing



What we aim to achieve	How we are going to achieve it and why	Timeframe	Council Section Responsibility & Involvement of other sections	Community Partners	Resources
Up to date information to support planning and decision making	Continue to provide and maintain comprehensive data sets on population and demographic trends to guide future policies and planning e.g. on line Community Profile, Population and Household Forecasts	Current & Years 1 – 5 2012/13 update based on 2011 Census Data	Future Planning	-	\$10K per year to maintain profile and forecasts. \$60,000K in 2012/13 to update profile and forecasts.
	Undertake further analysis of the Quality of Life survey data as a sub area level.	Year 1 2008/09	Future Planning	-	\$5K (Funding allocated in 08/09 management plan)
	Continue to monitor and measure Quality of Life of Wyong Shire residents through longitudinal surveys conducted every four years.	Year 4 2011/12	Future Planning	Local community	\$80K
An improved understanding of Council's role and function	Establish an annual Welcome to Wyong event for Council and community organisations and groups to promote and raise awareness of their roles and functions.	Year 3 2010/11 & ongoing.	Events Co-ordinator	Local community Community groups, NGO's	\$10K per year
	Promote facilities, programmes and activities undertaken by Council to inform residents about what's on and available in the Shire.	Years 1 - 5	Communications Unit, Whole of Council	NGO's, Community Groups, Community members	Within existing
	Investigate providing a Civics and Citizenship Programme to de stigmatise the role of Local Government in the school environment	Commencing Year 2 2009/10 & ongoing	Community Development, Community Education Unit	DET, Schools, Education Providers	\$5K per year
Promotion of the positive aspects of living in the Shire	Develop a publication of local people and their stories which builds on the Community Plan consultation phase	Year 2 2009/10	Community Development, Future Planning	Community members involved in community plan consultations	\$7.5K
	Establish a weekly 'Out and about photo gallery' – visual vox pop gallery.	Commencing Year 2 2009/10 & ongoing	Communications Unit, Community Development.	Community members. Tourists etc.	\$2K per year.



