

Effective Engagement: building relationships  
with community and other stakeholders

# Book 3 the engagement toolkit



### 3.4 Citizen Committees

#### Description:

Also known as public advisory committees and public liaison committees, citizen committees consist of a group of representatives from a particular community or set of interests appointed to provide comments and advice on an issue. Generally, relevant community groups and agencies are invited to nominate as members of the committee, although people with specific skills may also be asked. Members meet regularly to provide ongoing input and advice over the duration of the project. These generally have an agreed life span and are normally organised at the local level to address a specific issue.<sup>6</sup>

#### Objectives:

The objective of citizen committees is to provide broad-based input into planning and decision-making from a range of groups and agencies that are affected by a proposal or issue.

#### Outcomes:

The citizen committee may have sufficient ownership of a project or issue to take responsibility for the actions that are needed. Where the citizen committee's role is more in a consultation and planning mode, the final plans will be based on better information and deal with a wider range of issues as a result of this broad-based and extensive consultation mechanism.

#### Uses/strengths:

- Allows the involvement and input of a range of people (e.g. fishers and surfers as well as relevant government departments).
- Allows development of consensus (where achievable) or directions for action on complex issues that affect the broad community.
- Effectively disseminates detailed information and decisions to members of the organisations or community sectors represented on the committee.
- Provides opportunities for exploring alternative strategies and building on commonalities and alliances.
- Provides for a detailed analysis of project issues, timelines and deliverables and a focus on the outcomes.

- Participants gain an understanding of other perspectives leading toward an agreed, integrated outcome.

#### Special considerations/weaknesses:

- Participant selection is a major consideration:
  - The range of interests must be broad enough to represent all those affected, and those with relevant interests and skills
  - Community members must be willing to work together on a common challenge
  - Organisers must be aware of potential conflicts.
- The original terms of reference need to be agreed upfront and recorded.
- Contact should be maintained with the committee to ensure that it does not take on a life of its own.
- Members' comments to the media may not coincide with the sponsor's policy. A set of principles can be developed to avoid this happening.
- The general public may not embrace committee recommendations.
- Members may not achieve consensus (although consensus may not be the goal).
- The sponsoring agency or agencies must accept the need to give and take.
- May be time and labour intensive if the issue is significant.

#### Resources required:

- Venue
- Catering
- Staffing
- Moderator/facilitator
- Overhead projectors
- Data projectors
- Video
- Slide projector
- Projection screen
- Props for working in groups (pens, paper, pins, etc.)
- Children's requirements

#### Can be used for:

- Engage community
- Discover community issues
- Develop community capacity
- Develop action plan
- Communicate an issue

- Build alliances, consensus

#### Number of people required to help organise:

- Large (> 12 people)
- Medium (2–12 people)

#### Audience size:

- Large (> 30)
- Medium (11–30)

#### Time required:

- Medium (6 weeks – 6 months)
- Short (< 6 weeks)

#### Skill level/support required:

- High (Specialist skills)
- Medium (Computer & other expertise)
- Low (No special skills)

#### Cost:

- High (> AUD\$10,000)

#### Participation level:

- High (Stakeholders participate in decision)

#### Innovation level:

- Medium (Some new elements)

#### Method:

1. Consider the demographic profile of the community to ensure most of those groups that will be affected by an issue or proposal are represented.
2. Consider special interest groups.
3. Consider groups most affected by the issue.
4. Conduct stakeholder analysis prior to inviting groups to propose.
5. Be flexible to allow other representatives to join if they make themselves known during the participation process (however, it is more effective not to allow alternative representatives, as they can hijack the agenda and/or may need extra briefings that slow down the process).
6. Clearly state the role of the citizen committee and the objectives of the participation.
7. The organising group or agency should work closely with the committee during its formation.
8. The organising group or agency should work closely with the group during the participation process.

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Environment and Energy (1994) *Public consultation guide*, Toronto, Ontario.

9. Use third-party facilitators to manage conflict.
10. Be forthcoming with information.
11. Use a consistently credible process.
12. Set up reporting arrangements to ensure that members communicate with their constituents via their regular communications networks (e.g. newsletters, meetings, presentations, email, or websites).
13. Record decisions and keep a running summary. This is important if new people join the group.

**References:**

- Crosby, N, Kelly, JM & Schaefer, P (1986) 'Citizens panels: A new approach to citizen participation', *Public administration review*, 46(2): 170-178
- Ministry of Environment and Energy (1994) *Public consultation guide*, Toronto, Ontario