Community Involvement in Decision Making – Central Victoria

Discussion Paper

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This discussion paper relates to the event '***Could a 'Standing Citizen Chamber' restore trust, confidence and resilience within local communities?'*** held in Castlemaine on July 24th 2018. Relevant links can be found at the end of the paper.

Democracy for Dinner July 2018, Castlemaine Victoria

Event Overview

In July 2018, 16 central Victorians came together to discuss the opportunity presented by changes to the Local Government Act as well 'Standing Citizen's Chambers' as one model of deliberative decision making. The conversation was led by Cathy Wheel, who spoke to the opportunity that deliberative democracy offers for trust and resilience, Geoff Turner, who spoke to the changes to the Local Council Act, and Lexi Randall-L'Estrange, D4D Convenor, facilitated the conversation.

The opportunities presented in the Local Government Bill Exposure Bill that were focused on in this event were: Part 3 – Council decision making, Division 1 Community accountability - Community engagement policy (page 53), and Part 4 – Planning and financial management, Division 1 Strategic planning - Community Vision (page 74).

Discussion

Conversation flowed from questions to both of the presenters as well as semi-structured whole of group and small group conversations. The ideas put forward are captured below.

High level statements and ideas

- Councils will be obliged by the new Local Government Act to set up a community engagement policy. We believe this is a great opportunity for the community to participate in this process.
- The community wants an opportunity to be involved in decision making, not just 'advising'. People present felt they had previously been 'victims of community consultation'.
- We are not asking for funding, we are asking for process. There is an enormous amount of talent and time in the community and it can be harnessed to support engagement

processes. If we can collectively decide on a process that works, then all stakeholders (State and local government, business, service delivery organisations, community groups, philanthropy, individuals etc) can work on the resourcing approach.

- The needs, concerns and opportunities for our community extend beyond what the Shire has the authority or resources to deliver. We want processes and a vision that is inclusive of our whole lives individual and collectively, including issues like physicality, liveability, access, environment, heritage, economy etc. When the Shire can't deliver certain initiatives (because of scope or resources), then it can support the community to advocate / apply for funding / seek alternative courses of action.
- There is a desire to work on an iterative process that helps the Shire to develop their trust in the community and get comfortable sharing power. Building trust, respect and communication goes both ways – the Shire (elected and employed) need to learn to trust residents and residents need to learn to trust them in return. We want to know - what issues are the Shire facing? How do we show the Shire we can help? How do we work in a way that is complimentary and supportive?
- If we can't make new models of decision making and engagement work in this community then where else could it! We have so much underutilised social capital.

Shire-led community "engagement"

Concerns were shared that the engagement policy developed would not in itself be an inclusive process. There is a desire to work together on the pending engagement policy to decide:

- Definition of "engagement"
- What issues are the priority for being addressed by the Shire
- What issues matter to whom in the community (and therefore who should be engaged in decisions that impact them)
- What issues will the community be involved in
- Which engagement methodologies are used for what type of issues (mindful of inclusion and reaching the people who don't opt-in to consultation. Balancing face-to-face / online).
- Level of power and authority granted to the community in each engagement methodology
- How are the processes monitored and by whom
- What are our metrics of success
- Who / how is accountability managed regarding delivering on community advice / decisions

There is an overarching desire for transparency, proactive communication to the community, and an inclusive process for all of the above.

Issues that matter

A small group got together in the breakout session to discuss issues that mattered to them, as an example of an issues analysis. Issues raised were:

- Disability and social inclusion
- Affordable housing policy (co-housing, public and social housing, tiny houses)
- Compulsory inclusionary zoning
- Local waste recycling facilities to create local jobs and provide resources (e.g. materials for local artists and industry)

- Retirement village (private industry and non-profit partnership, Shire land)
- Piloting and supporting new processes for democracy
- Shire tendering / consulting / procurement policy (reduce outsourcing, keep it local, develop local economy, develop local capacity)
- Far better community transport including walking, cycling, public transport, gopher policy
- Secondary education
- Local jobs / economy
- Policy and transparency for selling council-owned land, focus on community infrastructure

Representation

We discussed what constitutes adequate / fair representation of the community in a sortition (random selection) model

- Recent census results were proposed as a basis
- What constitutes diversity? Identity diversity, cognitive diversity, what else?
- What other dynamics could reflect a diversity of views / values? E.g. old / new guard

Other topics / comments

- We want an approach that builds capacity of community and leverages the talent, good will, time and other resources available
- We want to explore successful models e.g. Voices for Indi and build off these cases (success and failure). A participant mentioned the Toowoomba engagement model used in the 90's to develop a plan for Toowoomba 2050 that was successful in mobilising investment for the airport and other major community-identified needs.
- We want to explore "How do we motivate people to get involved in the process?" and "How do we help people see 'community' for what it is and can be?"
- We want easy access to information i.e. how do we find out about Shire owned land so we can have a collective understanding of community assets?

Ideas / Projects

The following ideas and projects were put forward during the dinner conversation for further consideration:

- A community-wide skills analysis (could be extended to mapping other assets / resources)
- A community-wide issues analysis (all issues, not just those in Shire remit)
- Development of collective values to guide community processes that can be enacted in operational decision making
- Pilot the sortition model on a particular issue that is important to the community (and where there is scope for genuine influence in the process)
- Shire, with supporting from active community groups (e.g. Democracy for Dinner, Localising Leanganook, grant applicants) to work collectively on community engagement / surveying
- Over 90 groups submitted for community grants – we should reach out to them proactively in the first instance. Build from there as a means to gather diverse views.

- Find out who in government and industry is looking to pilot new models of community engagement and position Castlemaine as a destination to test and pilot e.g. 'living lab' (as a means of bringing resources in).

Limitations

Attendance at the events is open to anyone, however time of day (evenings), cost associated to attend, and the nature of the topic, means that the attendees don't reflect a cross-section of the community (nor is this the intention of dinner format events). As such, the views presented in this document are of the attendees only, and are not being presented as a reflection of the community.

Every effort has been made to ensure the events are inclusive and accessible. All venues used are wheelchair accessible and cost of food is $25-$35 depending on the venue. Democracy for Dinner is volunteer run and has no funding, so participants must cover their own costs to attend. Grant funding is being considered to increase the inclusivity and sustainability of the model.

Thank you

Thank you to the presenters who worked on developing the content for the event, Cathy Wheel and Geoff Turner. Thank you to Castlemaine District Community House for access to the venue and Murnong Mammas for the catering. Thank you to participants Adam Meehan and Lucy Kendall for volunteering to serve food and clean-up which made the event possible.

Links

July event 'Could a 'Standing Citizen Chamber' restore trust and resilience?' article including link to event brief (paragraph 1), resources and case studies:
https://democracy4dinner.org/2018/07/25/citizens-jury-and-deliberative-democracy-case-studies/
March event 'How can we do democracy better?' (in partnership with Localising Leanganook) in video: https://democracy4dinner.org/2018/07/04/how-can-we-do-democracy-better-richard-walsh-in-conversation-with-gen-barlow-and-cam-walker/

Context

Following two years of D4D community dinner conversations on democracy and policy, and the first public format event in March 2018 held in partnership with Localising Leanganook (see above), significant energy has be catalysed in the Mount Alexander Shire Community and surrounding areas to take practical steps towards improving democracy. Two ideas presented at the March event have gained traction. The first is a development of a community vision to support collective action, developed through a community-led process. The second was adopting community engagement approaches that engage 'beyond the usual suspects' (self-selected groups), and consideration of the 'kitchen table model' adopted by Voices for Indi as a means of creating a welcoming environment that is proactively inclusive of the diverse views of the community. These projects are being explored with Democracy Working Group partners (Democacy for Dinner & Localising Leanganook).