

Engagement tools and techniques

Information sheet

The following engagement tools and techniques may be useful to councils in undertaking a disability inclusion action planning process:

Advisory groups

1. Advisory or reference groups
2. Steering committee

Information sessions

3. Key stakeholder briefings
4. Deliberative workshops/ forums
5. Field trip / site tour
6. Publications

Consultation

7. Focus groups
8. Informal engagement
9. Community information and feedback session
10. Survey

Media

11. Media
12. Social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube).

This is by no means a comprehensive list, but focuses on the tools and techniques that may be most useful for councils to engage with people with disability and key stakeholders. The tools and techniques are described over the following pages, and the strengths and limitations of each discussed.

If you would like further information on engaging with people with disability the Australian Government has produced a guide to inclusive consultation for people with disability, ***Inclusive Consultation: A practical guide to involving people with disabilities.***

1. Advisory or reference groups

Advisory groups are generally chaired by a councillor and comprise representatives from external stakeholder groups, such as relevant disability community groups and peak organisations. They can also include community members (such as people with disability and/or carers) and representatives from relevant government departments or agencies.

Generally an advisory group includes up to 12 members. It can provide early input to the development of the disability inclusion action planning process, including the engagement process itself.

Advisory groups should generally be formed at the beginning of the disability action planning process and run throughout its course. They provide an opportunity to **empower** select members of the community and key stakeholders in the decision making process.

What works:

- Brings together a group of stakeholders with diverse expertise and a high level of interest into the action planning project
- Builds understanding, relationships and consensus over time
- Creates formal or informal champions for the process and the project
- Works for people with a range of disabilities and specific needs in order to engage effectively.

Potential limitations:

- Needs to be well chaired as members can have strongly opposing views which must be carefully managed
- Can perpetuate existing dialogues and narrow discussion and viewpoints to a select few members of the disability community
- Not statistically representative, although if members are carefully selected can represent a variety of views
- Ongoing resourcing required, often including preparation and distribution of agendas and minutes.

2. Steering committee

A Steering Committee is generally an internal group from a number of different program areas within Council that provide project control and/or advisory roles. A key aim is to build internal consensus on the planning and program direction. Steering Committees can also be referred to as a project task force or working group.

Key external stakeholders can also be members of a steering committee but generally perform an advisory role only.

Steering committees are usually convened for the life of a project while task forces or working groups can also refer to a short term splinter group that focuses on a particular issue or aspect of a project. Their governance arrangements tend to be more informal.

Steering Committees for complex projects generally have sub-committees to undertake specific aspects of the project. For example development and delivery of engagement processes are often delegated to a subcommittee.

Steering committees operate to **empower** staff to be part of the disability action planning decision-making process. They also support close **collaboration** with external stakeholders.

What works:

- Builds internal cross-council buy-in and awareness as well as multi-disciplinary expertise
- Can bring in the views of diverse stakeholders with a high level of interest and/or expertise into the process, including key external stakeholders as required
- Builds relationships and consensus over time
- Working with a known (and generally invited) cohort of people so any requirements for full participation can be considered well in advance
- Closely combines governance with disability inclusion action planning, which reduces the chance of a disconnect between elements of the process.

Potential limitations:

- Needs to be well structured and well chaired
- Requires the support of the Executive otherwise there may be a lack of follow through on decisions that can erode morale and involvement
- Resource intensive
- If staff are co-opted rather than choosing to be in the committee it can result in a lack of commitment or support
- If not well run and it involves external stakeholders, it may create relationship damage.

3. Key stakeholder briefings

Key stakeholder briefings can either involve a group of stakeholders with similar interests or be held one-on-one.

They are generally used early in a project to inform key stakeholders (disability peak and community organisations) about the process and their opportunities to be involved in the action planning process. Briefings can also be used throughout the project to keep key stakeholders updated on events and activities.

Briefings can invite questions or feedback from attendees. They are not generally used to obtain detailed responses from participants although this can be useful at key milestones or when a sensitive issue has arisen.

Briefings generally focus on **informing** and **consulting** with key stakeholders.

What works:

- Provides focused engagement with stakeholders who are likely to be interested in, and influential to, disability action planning outcomes
- Allows project information to be delivered directly to key influencers
- Can be held in the stakeholder's own offices at a time convenient to them – particularly for one-on-one briefings
- Provides flexibility to meet individual or group disability needs
- Can result in sensitive information being obtained that might not be provided more publicly.

Potential limitations:

- May only engage with a small proportion of the disability community and tends to involve representatives from official organisations rather than people with disability/ carer residents
- Can be perceived as privileging some engagement participants
- Informality can increase risk of later misunderstanding or misrepresentation of views or commitments.

4. Deliberative workshops/forums

Deliberative workshops aim to build a deep, and preferably shared, understanding of an issue and to build consensus on the preferred approach or solution.

Deliberative workshops also generally:

- Involve a series of two or more workshops, or alternatively workshops held over two or more days, which allows participants to consider and develop their views and understandings between events
- Provide a large amount of information to participants in clear and understandable ways, both before and during the workshops.

They are usually attended by a large number of participants (50 or more). Representative sampling can be used to select some or all participants. They can include a variety of tasks and activities, such as presentations, expert panel discussions and game playing.

Small group work is often a feature of a deliberative forum, with each small group reporting their input back to the wider group. The small groups are preferably facilitated by volunteers or project team members who have been trained or briefed in advance.

Reporting back from small groups can be done verbally or through electronic technologies.

Deliberative workshops generally support community **involvement** and **collaboration** in the action planning process.

What works:

- Develops deep understanding of issues and highly informed input
- Encourages strong participation from local community members both with and without a disability
- Can build understanding, relationships and consensus over time between both highly engaged and less engaged individuals
- Participants will often formally or informally champion the process
- Can result in a generally agreed approach and/or solutions.

Potential limitations:

- Requires a significant time commitment from participants
- Can require strongly opposing views to be carefully managed
- Requires people to be confident of processing significant information and publicly stating their views although this should be mediated through using various techniques and visual as well as written media
- Needs to be very well structured and facilitated

- Significant lead time, preparatory work and resourcing required, particularly to ensure that people with a range of disabilities and specific needs are able to contribute fully.

5. Field trip / site tour

Field trips provide an opportunity for a small group of people with a high interest in a particular physical issue to see it firsthand or to view relevant examples, approaches or solutions to a particular issue/s.

Field trips are used to **inform** key stakeholders or members of the community.

What works:

- Provides stakeholders (including members of Council's executive) with a personal experience of disability, examples, approaches or solutions
- Helps to develop shared perspectives and understandings
- Can assist to build relationships among key stakeholders
- Can act as a circuit breaker in respect to a high priority and problematic issue/s.

Potential limitations:

- Needs to be well organised – which is often time consuming
- Time commitment of at least half a day generally necessary
- Only suitable for small groups – or will need to be repeated numerous times
- Requires careful planning to ensure that people with disability are able to attend and participate fully in the field trip
- Should be used sparingly and for only high priority issues as it is resource and time intensive.

6. Publications

Publications are the most widely used engagement method and can take many forms, including:

- Brochures/newsletters
- Discussion, issue and background papers
- Fact sheets
- Media releases
- Records of meetings
- Documents.

It is important that all paper or online publications developed as part of the disability action planning process are provided in a variety of accessible formats.

A dedicated or linked disability action planning website is a useful repository for information and other resources but should be supplemented by audio, video and social media content.

Publications are a fundamental element of any engagement strategy to **inform** and **consult** with the broader community.

What works:

- Easily transmittable to a wide audience across a range of accessible platforms

- Integrates well with other engagement techniques
- Can be used effectively and relatively inexpensively at all stages of engagement
- Written responses can incorporate considered and detailed viewpoints.

Potential limitations:

- Requires regular updating otherwise interest and commitment to the project can be lost
- Consideration of presentation and visual elements are needed to reduce the tedium of simply printed words
- Written submissions tend to favour articulate people, those from an English speaking background, and those with sufficient resources to prepare detailed response
- People with a print handicap can be excluded from accessing information that is provided only as printed text unless careful integration of accessibility elements is included.

7. Focus groups

A small group of people are invited to share their views by a facilitator. Focus group participants can be randomly or self-selected from the disability community.

When participants are randomly selected, focus groups can be used to test proposals or approaches on a representative sample of community members.

Focus group participants may be paid for their time and/or may receive assistance with childcare and travel expenses.

Focus groups operate largely to **involve** members of the community in the decision-making process.

What works:

- Can be used to target specific members of the community such as people with disability, including CALD community members or homeless people
- Less threatening for people who don't like to talk in large groups
- Enables activities to be targeted directly to the group, maximising participation and ensuring that specific needs can be met to support contribution
- Provides finely grained information.

Potential limitations:

- Needs skilled facilitation to engage all group members
- Groups are not large enough to be a fully representative sample of a population: therefore insights are indicative
- Participants (particularly if randomly selected) may have limited information or knowledge about the issues canvassed
- Often time consuming to recruit participants, particularly if specific community sectors desired.

8. Informal engagement

Informal engagement can take many forms such as a phone conversation or coffee or attendance at a local event, for example a festival or country show. It seeks to check in with and build understanding among stakeholders as well as key local members of the community.

Informal engagement, particularly with individuals or small groups, allows both project staff and stakeholders to ask specific, and potentially sensitive, questions in a confidential forum. It also provides an opportunity to distribute information and to hold discussions with people with disability who may not be comfortable participating in more official engagement activities. This form of engagement is particularly useful in rural and regional Local Government Areas where more formal networks may not be available to reach members of the disability community.

Informal engagement can be used to simply **inform** as well as to directly **involve** relevant community members in the action planning process.

What works:

- Project information can be delivered directly to key influencers
- Can quickly build relationships and support for a process
- Is effective in accessing hard-to-reach groups with special needs or interests
- Can be used to improve the effectiveness of other, more formal forms of engagement
- Can work effectively for risk management
- It is relatively inexpensive.

Potential limitations:

- It depends on relationships between individuals: if an individual leaves council the relationship can be lost
- Informality can increase the risk of later misunderstanding or misrepresentation
- There could be a lack of transparency and clarity regarding content and outcome of the engagement
- Can be labour intensive and may require time to build relationships.

9. Community information and feedback session

These can also be known as open house, drop in session, stall, and/or listening post. This technique typically takes the form of a drop in session for several hours in a prominent location, such as a council building, park or community event such as a festival or country show.

The community and stakeholders are invited to view displayed material, written and graphic, about the disability inclusion action planning process or specific, related issues and provide verbal and/or written feedback on an individual basis to members of the project team.

Information is often presented on large storyboards but can be communicated in a variety of formats including video and oral presentations. Information and feedback sessions provide an opportunity to both **inform** a large cross-section of the community about the action planning process as well to provide feedback (**consult**) on key issues.

What works:

- Provides an opportunity for council disability inclusion action planning teams to interact with people informally on a one to one basis, allowing a personal connection, detailed information and conversation about specific issues

- Can be held at the same time as an existing community event or at high use areas therefore maximising attendance at minimum cost
- Enables people to come and go at their own convenience
- Allows for a variety of information formats to support diverse access needs
- Encourages broad community participation and reduces the risk of groups mobilising or vocal people dominating
- Individual feedback can be captured on a variety of mediums that allow for easy collation and analysis
- Participants can provide contact details and be kept in touch with updates
- Can be conducted in association with other techniques.

Potential limitations:

- Planning is required to ensure that the time and setting does not disenfranchise any members of the disability community
- Does not generally support direct involvement in decision-making and there needs to be a clear explanation of how feedback will be used in the action planning process
- Stakeholders with specific issues in regards to disability action planning may want a more structured, opportunity for their views to be heard and responded to
- Can be expensive to prepare information materials for a one off session and is most cost efficient when a number of sessions are held
- Can be time consuming and resource intensive to have council staff on hand to answer questions
- Care needs to be taken to temper community expectations regarding how Council can and will respond to feedback received.

10. Survey

A survey is a structured method of gaining feedback about particular issues. A survey can be either one or a combination of the following formats:

- face-to-face
- paper based
- telephone
- online.

Surveys are used to gain responses to a set of predetermined questions. Questions are usually either structured (close-ended, pre-selected responses) or unstructured (allowing the respondent to answer freely). Surveys are usually used to gain feedback from a large sample size of participants but can also be used to gain a quick response to a specific issue/s among a smaller cohort.

Community surveying can be selected or weighted to be a representative sample or can be self-selecting.

Surveys are generally a vehicle to **consult** and **involve** the broader community on issues and priorities for action planning.

What works:

- Can quickly and efficiently get feedback from a broad cross-section of the community
- Engages people in decision-making who are not willing to attend or speak at public events
- Facilitates an efficient reporting process
- Works for people with a range of disabilities and specific needs to support effective engagement.

Potential limitations:

- Does not create dialogue or build consensus
- Online and paper based surveys can have a low response rate requiring more labour intensive survey methods
- Limited detail able to be provided in responses
- A high number of unstructured questions can result in significant time spent collating, coding and analysis.

11. Media

Media covers print and online journalism, television and radio. It includes:

- Advertisements
- Articles
- Interviews
- Media releases
- Public appearances.

As with written information, timely distribution of quality information is crucial for effectively managing media. For disability action planning it is essential that content is provided in a variety of accessible formats.

Before engaging with the media it is important to be aware of communication protocols, including responsibilities and roles for responding to media enquiries.

Key messages and questions and answers (Q&As) are useful tools to assist with providing information quickly to a project team or communications staff, who will undertake proactive media briefings, organise interviews, prepare media releases and respond to media questions.

Social media is described separately.

Media is generally used to **inform** the community about the disability action planning process and about consultation activities.

What works:

- Easily transmittable to a wide audience across a range of accessible platforms
- Integrates with other engagement techniques
- Combining traditional media with social media can increase response rates
- Can be used effectively at all stages of engagement to build knowledge and support of the action planning process
- Can be relatively inexpensive if councils existing media channels are used.

Potential limitations:

- Timing and context for the distribution of information is determined by media outlets
- Interests of media outlets and of the project may not always be in alignment
- Resource intensive process particularly if council does not already have systems in place to provide accessible content and formats
- Some media, particularly print media, tends to favour articulate people and those from an English speaking background.

12. Social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube)

Social media refers to online communication channels (websites and applications) that support direct community based input and interaction. The most common websites and applications used by Local Government include Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. These are increasingly providing add-ons to support improved accessibility for people with disability.

Council can create a specific online profile around the topic of disability inclusion action planning. It would be used as a vehicle to interact through several platforms within the website such as Facebook and Twitter. Social media encourages the development of online networks with the community and stakeholders.

Social media is a more interactive medium than conventional media and can be used to effectively **consult** and **involve** as well as inform the community.

What works:

- Used by a large number and diverse mix of people including young people who can be difficult to reach through other forums
- Compatible across a range of devices and formats
- Can tap into existing online disability communities and act as a platform to share content, opinions and ideas
- Can involve people who may normally be apprehensive about committing to a group or expressing viewpoints in person
- Can involve people who are time poor or who travel frequently
- Functionality is evolving to provide a range of options for different disability needs.

Potential limitations:

- Most content on social media is the property of the propriety organisation
- Must be kept up-to-date constantly or it appears abandoned, unprofessional and unimportant, communities disengage quickly
- Potential for issues and discussion to escalate and attract significant attention
- Can involve high staffing costs depending on level of moderation, sign off procedures for posts, and desired response time
- Support and encouragement may be required to engage people who have not previously been active in this medium
- Requires councils to have a high level of web-based accessibility to ensure that a diversity of the disability community is included.