Councils online

The online world is expanding into almost every corner of council activities, bringing with it improved accessibility, efficiency and cost-effectiveness that are welcomed by councils and communities alike. So it is our feature introduces a dynamic online approach to community consultation, as well as addressing the need for councils to develop policies on staff use of the ever-growing range of online social media.

However, this online expansion is also increasing the complexity of the operations that must be managed by harassed IT staff. Fortunately, specialist local government IT suppliers, such as those showcased here, can offer a practical solution to this problem, in the form of managed services, while expert help is also at hand for those living in fear of that nightmare, massive data loss triggered by an IT disaster.

The listening imperative

by David Schulz
Local Government Industry Solutions Manager
Objective Corporation

Greater engagement with communities is both an internal desire and, increasingly, an external mandate for councils.

Almost without exception, local governments across Australia have some community engagement content or links on the home page of their website. The calendar of events brims with public meetings and requests for feedback on plans and strategies.

A number of new planning outcomes are being mandated for local governments, particularly in New South Wales and Queensland. These reflect a national local government framework that seeks greater linkage between community expectations, land-use planning and asset management. Drawing heavily on the New Zealand model, long-term strategy planning requires significant community engagement at all stages in the process.

Despite legislative obligations and best intentions, very few councils appear to have genuine dialogue and vibrant engagement with their community. Why the disconnect?

Document-based consultation
Councils think in documents. Traditionally this has been the only way to communicate the same message to multiple people. There is an obligation for councils to ensure that all issues around a particular area or project are considered. Many of the issues are interrelated. So managing this process as a whole and publishing it as a single document makes complete sense to Council.

This follows through to consultation around the document. Nearly all the consultations I've seen publish the document as whole. This is typically a single PDF file. Similarly, comments in response are gathered by a simple, unstructured feedback form.

The problem is that very few people in the community care about every issue in a typical policy document. For a land-use plan, cyclists may be interested in the provisions for cycleways. If residents don't have children, they may not care about planning for playgrounds. Bundling all the issues together makes it hard for individuals to get to the parts that they are interested in.

Counting the cost
As much as document-based consultation frustrates attempts to engage the community, it's also expensive for Council. The feedback received typically raises multiple issues relevant to the plan or strategy under discussion. Much manual effort is required to review each submission, identify issues of relevance and associate them to the relevant part of the document. It is generally difficult, if not impossible, to generate a statistical overview of the responses received.

The manual processing of traditional consultation provides an intrinsic disincentive to engage broadly. The more feedback, the greater the administrative burden on Council. Even worse is that broad, generalised feedback on a whole document robs Council of a detailed understanding of the many issues presented in any strategy or plan.

Issue-based engagement
To move beyond document consultation to a richer community engagement means getting specific.

Remember, 'community engagement' is actually a bit of a misnomer. Councils are actually seeking to engage with the many individuals who make up a community. Individuals want to engage with issues, not documents. Issue-based engagements are more likely to achieve genuine conversation than document-based consultations.

A move from consultation to engagement also implies a conversation that is not just one person commenting on the document, but many people exploring an issue in detail. This can't occur at the general level of the whole document. The feedback the community provides needs to be specific to a particular issue and should be visible to others to foster that dialogue.

Moving online is the key
The move from broad document to the specific issue clearly points to a web-based engagement model for establishing a conversation with the individual members of the community. Online engagement offers the ability to discuss complex issues and understand the subtlety and detail of how the community responds to that issue. Having that conversation as a group, rather than via thousands of point-to-point responses, exponentially increases the value of the conversation.

For councils, this means publishing documents as navigable engagement environments, not monolithic PDF files. It means engagement environments that organise and structure feedback and automate reporting and generate statistical measures to reduce the time and money required to engage with the community.

Engagement environments
A good engagement environment publishes the document structure as a navigable menu. Visitors can quickly move through the structure to identify points of interest. The presentation should be rich, graphical and consistent with the published document.

A visitor to the environment is able to leave comments about specific issues, instead of the whole document. As the comments are tagged to specific sections of the document, this is also a win for Council as it reduces time-consuming analysis of general feedback. Comments from previous visitors about an issue are visible, allowing the conversation to evolve into a multi-point discussion between members of the community and not just a point-to-point interaction with Council.

Publishing a document as an issue-based engagement environment can be time-consuming and expensive if traditional word-processing tools are used to develop the content. Collaboratively authoring the content in a specialist environment allows content to be organised around the document structure and tagged to issues, providing a single click creation of the engagement environment as an alternative publishing format.

Experience from across the ditch
Some of the most significant community engagements in coming years will be the long-term community plans introduced in recent amendments to the Local Government Acts in New South Wales and Queensland. Long Term Council Community Plans were introduced some years ago in New Zealand. The New Zealand model is evident in the requirements for long-term community plans in Australia. Recognising this, we have seen many speakers from New Zealand on the programs of recent local government conferences, providing delegates with the benefit of their experience.

What is clear from the New Zealand experience of community planning is that engaging with community stakeholders is the secret to successful long-term planning. Long-term plans that fail to reconcile the technical and commercial landscape with the aspirations of the community lack legitimacy and fail to forge a common understanding between the community and Council.

Engaging Auckland
This was certainly recognised by Auckland Regional Council (ARC). As a progressive organisation, they are focused on finding the best way to engage with their community. Facing a time-critical need and explicit statutory requirements to complete their Regional Policy Statement, Regional Land Transport Statement and Long Term Council Community Plan, ARC selected Objective Corporation's uCreate and uEngage solutions to manage the creation, publishing, maintenance and community consultation of these documents.

Providing access to the documents through an online engagement environment has allowed members of the community to easily pick up the issues of interest and relevance to them.

John Holley, Group Manager ICT, Auckland Regional Council, said, "uEngage has transformed our consultation process and how we communicate with our community. Delivering consultation information directly to the public via the web has increased our response rate from stakeholders by 60 per cent.

"We are now reaching wider audiences and engaging those members of our community who are more likely to contribute to the decision-making process electronically rather than via the traditional means. For example, it is easier to login to the portal and submit two paragraphs against the plan, as opposed to printing out a plan, writing a letter and posting it to the Council."

This significant upswing in engagement would have overwhelmed the organisation if traditional practice had persisted. By moving to best practice community engagement, John Holley says, "we are saving time and reducing the administrative effort required to create stakeholder lists, process email and letter responses and minutes from consultation meetings, and analyse data.

"We estimate that we have saved up to $20,000 per annum using uEngage rather than Access databases as our primary consultation tool," he continues, noting there have been other, unforeseen benefits, too – the most notable being happier staff. Besides enjoying the buzz of knowing they're providing better service to external stakeholders, "on their own initiative, staff are now producing internal documents such as business plans with uCreate because it is straightforward to compile and produce when multiple authors are involved.

"Working virtually has also allowed for more flexible working arrangements for staff."

Conclusions
An online engagement environment that allows the community to quickly identify issues of interest and provide feedback directly against those issues is necessary to foster rich and meaningful engagement. Efficiently creating these environments requires an automated publishing option within the collaborative authoring tool used to develop the strategy or plan.

To achieve this without drawing heavily on Council's already strained human resources, feedback through the online engagement environment should be structured and automatically tagged to specific issues to generate reports and statistical measures automatically.

Communities don't care about documents; they care about issues relevant to them. If local government is to realise the clear aspirations it has for its strategy and planning positions to reflect community opinion, this must be respected.

Contact: David Schulz
ph. (07) 3506 7506
email david.schulz@objective.com