



Deliberation at scale

Principles and practical ideas for
small rural councils

November 2017

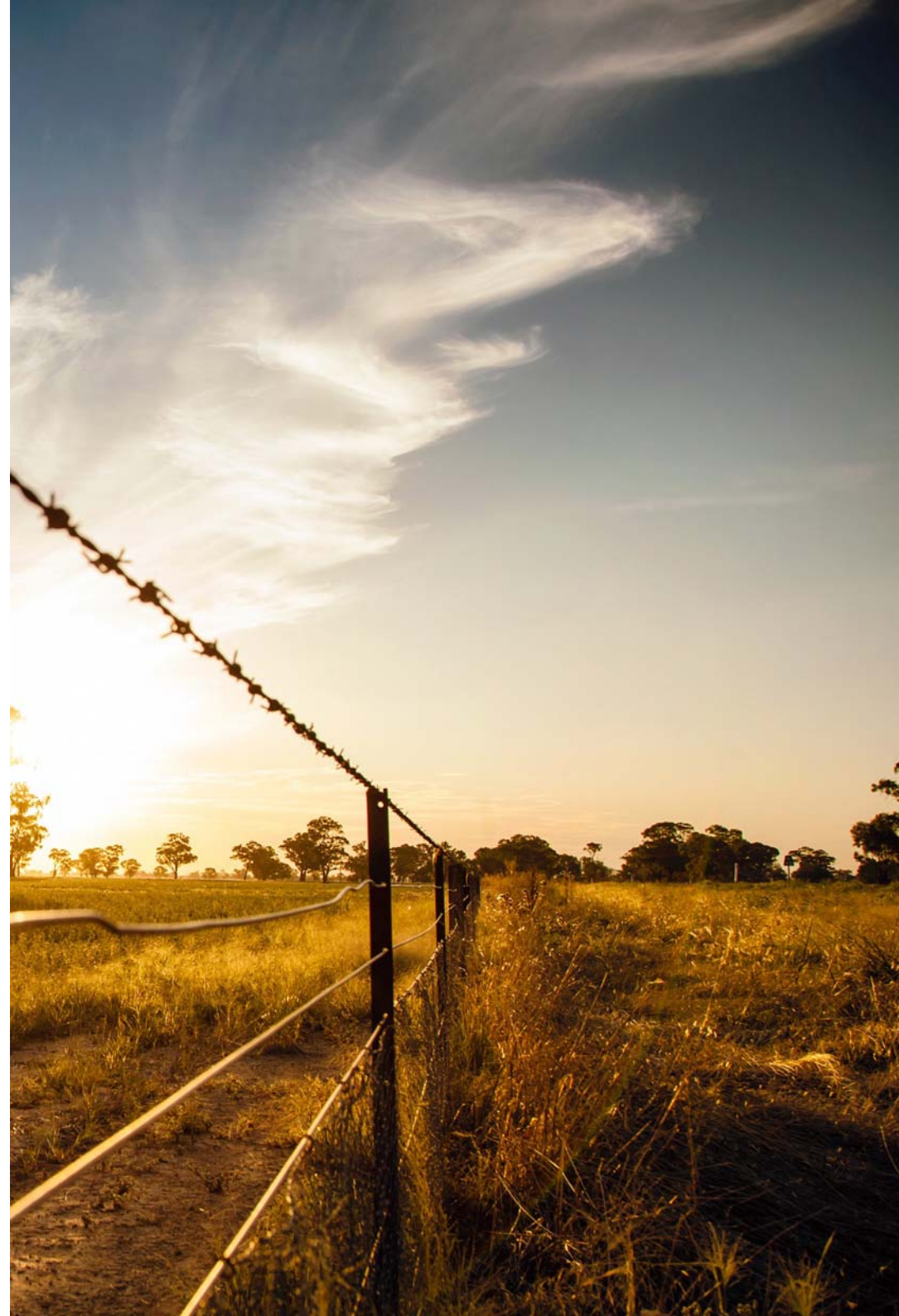
Context

The majority of applications for higher rate caps over the past two years have been from small rural councils who have limited resources to undertake complex engagement.

Whilst the Essential Services Commission does not mandate engagement tools and techniques, it is keen to encourage best practice engagement throughout the sector so that citizens can better understand the trade-off's required to achieve financial sustainability in their community.

Providing communities with the opportunity to deliberate on their future in the context of council budgets is an important focus of the sector in Victoria. This approach does not necessarily mean that expensive tools such as citizens juries should be held, but rather councils can use the principles that underpin these types of tools to achieve an outcome with their community which is based on deliberation, rather than information provision or simple consultation. Lighter touch methodology includes café discussion groups and inclusion of randomly selected participants in existing groups. This paper gives small rural councils a framework for how they might use deliberation as a tool. It has been written in consultation with the newDemocracy Foundation.

The Essential Services Commission has commissioned this principles based document to serve as a resource for small rural council engagement. Never the less it is applicable to all councils considering their engagement around applying for higher rate caps.



What is deliberation?

Deliberation is a long and careful consideration or discussion of a problem, with an equal share of voices and the broadest range of information inputs.

This is the principle behind deliberation at community level - the concept that in order for a decision-making process and outcome to engender trust from those it affects, the broader community should be involved in a meaningful way.

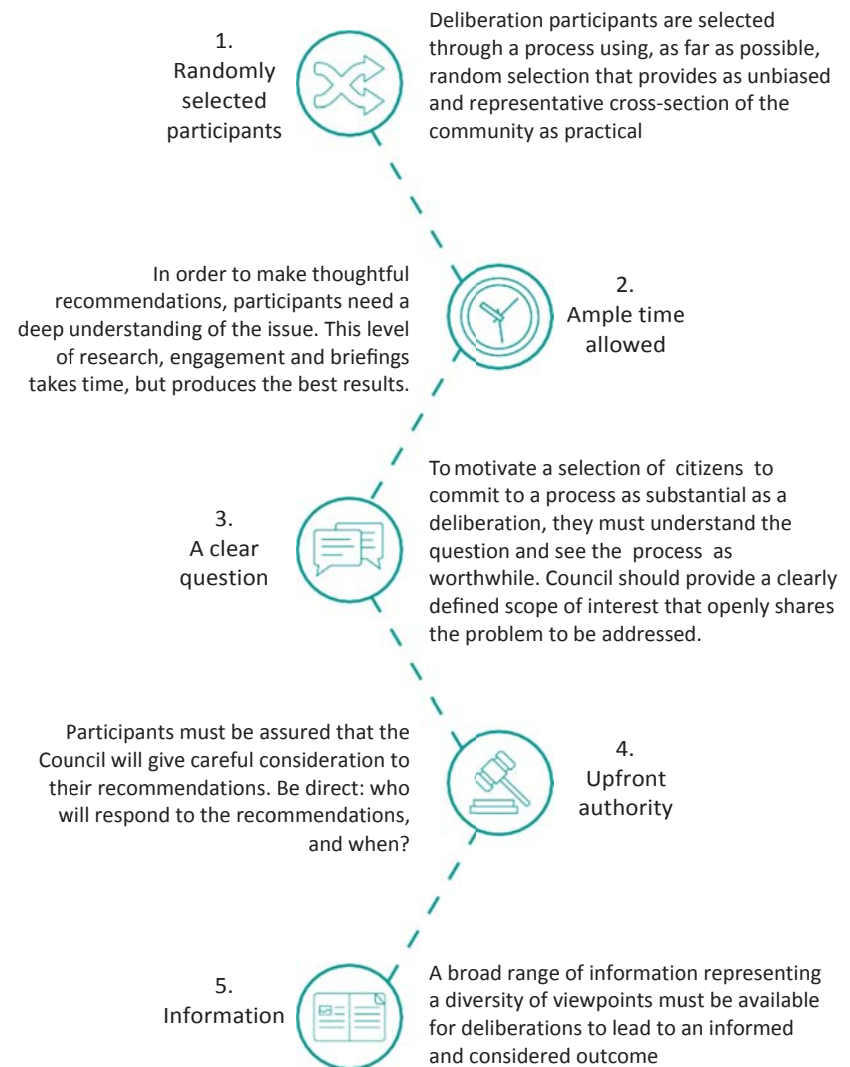
Community deliberation empowers ordinary citizens by providing the knowledge and resources required to understand complex issues, and consequently make a judgement about their preferred course of action to address them.

Once a given matter and its remit is identified community deliberations do not necessarily follow any particular pattern or structure within the framework. Rather, deliberations are free to grow and change organically, and participants should be given the flexibility to discuss a given matter in a way that is most productive to them.

Motivation and commitment from the participants in a deliberative engagement process is key. This can be achieved through being clear on the process they are involved in, assisted by personal and challenging facilitation and demonstrated respect for all contributions to the discussion and deliberation.

An engaging, meaningful and successful deliberation requires that five key principles are adhered to. These are briefly outlined here, and explained in full throughout this document.

Key principles of deliberation:



1. Randomly selected participants

Experience and research has shown that randomly selected groups of people can act as a representation of the broader community in a way that is trusted (they are 'people like us').

Councils will always hear from the noisiest voices: the quintessential squeaky wheel. While these voices have a right to be heard, they are rarely a representative reflection of the whole community. Randomly selecting participants in a community engagement provides an effective way to tap into a broader range of views.

Involving randomly selected participants in a deliberation, where they can think critically about an issue before making recommendations, will allow you to get clarity of intent and advice from the community on difficult issues. Participants can generate a collective view after weighing competing viewpoints, identifying experts of their own choosing, integrating information and inputs and exploring common ground, and ultimately to reach agreement on the advice they wish to give Council. It is important to show the broader community how the participants are selected to ensure trust is engendered for their decisions. Similarly, the broader community should have an opportunity to provide input to the group through surveys or other input opportunities.

Randomly Selected Participants: Practical ideas for a small, rural council

To make selection as broad, representative and random as practical, you need to access a wide range of community members from which to draw participants. Councils have ready access to this in the form of rates databases and property databases. One option is to randomly select a proportion of these to mail an invitation to register or to participate. Another option is to use other available electronic or online databases. Does Council have an email subscriber database? Access to other volunteer, sporting or business networks? Could you partner with a local newspaper to generate a random sample or to prompt online registrations of interest from

which a random selection can be made? The most important step in any of these approaches is to make sure to account for the natural bias of those typically who opt-in for this kind of engagement, and counter that by seeking out those who typically don't. That will give an ideal pool of potential participants from which you can draw the widest range of ages, gender and locations to be involved in your engagement. The number of participants is also a way to make the process more practical for a small, rural council. Where a major metropolitan council may require a process to involve 40 or more participants, the smaller population in regional areas means it is possible to achieve the same representation from a group as small as 20-30.



2. Ample Time Allowed

A genuine engagement with the community on an issue as significant as the rates they pay, the services that are provided and the local infrastructure they access will require time. This is why it is important for councils' themselves (elected and non-elected officials) to be supporters of a deliberative solution. Most problems which warrant investment in a deliberative process will be complex topics and that means that people who participate need to have the time to educate and immerse themselves before they reach a point of feeling confident making recommendations.

A full-scale deliberative process takes around six months from beginning to end. This allows for the necessary in-house preparation, the actual deliberation itself and the analysis and reporting on completion. As a guide, participants in a project need at least 40 hours spread over five to six sessions to meaningfully deliberate and find common ground without feeling pushed toward a pre-ordained outcome. Ideally, that happens in-person, but there are other remote options which can be used instead of having all sessions conducted face-to-face. Online tools are more readily available, and even teleconferencing can be made to work in many instances. Small group sessions where participants organise themselves between sessions can take place without the overheads a full meeting requires.

Ample Time Allowed: Practical ideas for a small, rural council

- Give the participants themselves an opportunity to design their process. Ask them how they would like to deliberate outside the in-person sessions. In some smaller communities, there may be other existing connections to they will comfortable use that help make the process cost and time effective.

- While time between sessions is essential to allow time for personal reflection (to reach real judgement rather than shallow opinion), it is still possible to make a project financially viable by running some sessions consecutively. For example, a two-day weekend session, followed by remote deliberation before the group regathers to synthesise their thoughts and make recommendations over another two-day weekend session.



3. A Clear Question

Everyday people need to instantly understand the problem to care enough to get involved. The issue that is put to a deliberative process should be framed as an open-ended question without attempting to guide the tone or nature of the response. Clarity of scope should be provided, but without restricting the ability of participants to critically analyse the issues (and all possible solutions) before making recommendations. Openly share the problem so that participants can really grasp what is hard.

Framing the question for a deliberative process around Council services, infrastructure and rates should go to the heart of the issue without limiting a response to a simple yes or no. For participants to see that they are being asked to participate in a process where their consideration of trade-offs is given the seriousness it deserves, there must be freedom for their exploration and response. Cynicism will abound if there is a perception of a predetermined outcome or if participants feel corralled in relation to their recommendations.

A Clear Question: Practical for a small, rural council

- Engage Councillors in setting the question. They will have a key role in sharing the process with the community, so need to understand why it has been framed the way it has. Ultimately, it will also be their responsibility to decide how to respond to the outcomes of the process, so it is useful that they own it from the outset.
- To make sure the process addresses the very specific requirements of the Essential Services Commission requirements around higher cap applications, it may be possible to accompany the question with a scoping statement that focuses participants' attention on key issues facing Council such as service levels and infrastructure priorities. This will help ensure Council is provided with realistic, relevant and specific recommendations that best inform any decision around an application to the Commission.
- Aim for a question that is around ten words, written in plain-English.



4. Upfront Authority

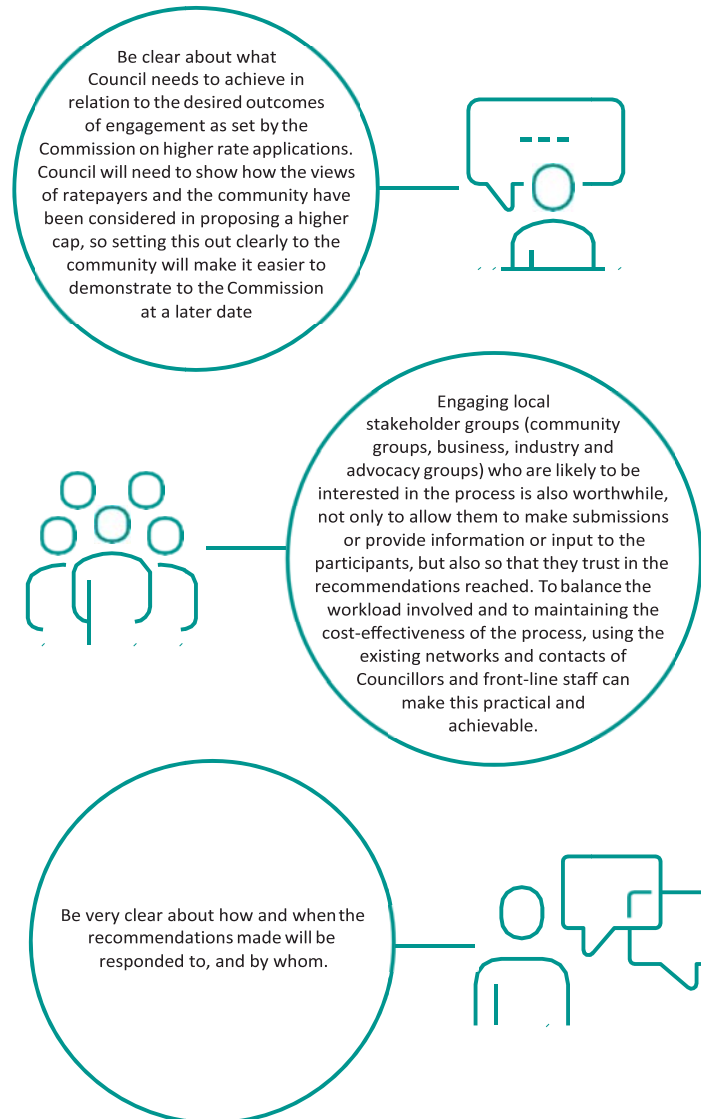
To encourage everyday people to respond to the opportunity to register for and to participate in a deliberative process that requires a considerable time commitment, they need to know that the recommendations they reach will be given serious consideration by Council decision makers.

Council must commit upfront to how they will respond to the outcomes of a deliberative process. That does not mean Council is required to accept the recommendations, but allows the community and participants to understand how Council's process will be undertaken.

For example, Council could commit that the unedited recommendations of the participants will be published by Council and provided to the Commission, with a response to recommendations provided before Council adopts a new Council Plan or decides on service level changes, infrastructure priorities or a higher rate application. In short, the process needs to pass the test of being the single best offer to participate in a shared public decision-making that a local resident can ever expect to receive.



Upfront Authority: Practical ideas for a small, rural council



5. Information

In order for participants to engage in meaningful deliberation, they require access to a broad range of information, from a variety of viewpoints, provided in a manner and form that is accessible and accurate. Participants in a project will understand (and should be reminded) that all sources of data, opinion or input have their own biases and perspectives and they need to critically analyse these.

Deliberative projects build on this by simply asking participants to identify what they need to know, and the sources they trust to provide that information. This is the starting point for identifying speakers and other inputs for the process that follows.

Information: Practical ideas for a small, rural council

- Council can and should provide a baseline of information for participants to review at the commencement of their deliberations. This must be written in plain-English and should clearly set out what Council believes are the long-term funding needs facing the community.
- The broader community's responses to other feedback mechanisms (eg surveys) could also be considered.
- Be up front about the reality without jargon or emotion.
- Outline the plans and strategies that are in place which have led to a view that trade-offs need to be made or the options that could be considered.
- Be equally clear about the actions Council has already taken and adopted, or rejected to address the needs identified. Importantly, participants must then be given opportunity to challenge the materials.
- Use online resources to support the process and to develop the critical thinking capacity of participants. For example newDemocracy has a range of research and development notes and short videos which can be freely used.



This report was prepared by KJA, in collaboration with the newDemocracy Foundation.

