SERVICES

Context engages communities, organisations and stakeholders effectively, ethically and creatively.

Our community engagement services are offered to all levels of government, public authorities, community organisations and private clients.

Facilitation

Examples of our facilitation projects are many and varied, from one-off facilitations on a specific issue, to internal facilitated workshops and ongoing community liaison groups.

For Parks Victoria we facilitated small focus to discuss the complex issues around wild horses in a national park; because of conflicting values we chose an affinity groups model (2014).

For example, we held internal workshops with the Gunaikurnai Traditional Owner Land Management Board as well as wider consultation to help them defined the scope of a Context to prepare a brief for the preparation of a Joint Management Plan (JMP) for the ten parks and reserves subject to the Agreement (2014).

With the environment team from the City of Melton we shaped a series of internal workshops designed to draw together knowledge from across the organisation and build commitment to the development of an Environment Strategy (2014).

Chairsing community liaison groups

We have helped establish and then provide independent facilitation of a community liaison / reference group for a range of clients to help build more effective communications between the client and community.

Examples include our work with Greennearth Energy on the Geelong Geothermal Project (2010-13) where the aim was to increase community understanding of geothermal energy and this project, and to ensure the company recognised community issues and interests in the project’s development.

Other recent examples include City West Water Community Liaison Committee (2007-15), the Mt Egerton Environment Review Committee (Dept Minerals and Energy) and the Bendigo Mining ERC and the Independence Stockman Community Reference Group (2010-13). Our roles included preparation for and facilitation of meetings (including input into agenda items and liaison with key stakeholders), ongoing project support and client liaison.
Place-making – Community values identification

Context specialises in working with communities and cultural groups to help reveal their feelings about and connections to place. This is an important element of place-making and cultural heritage work. We use a wide variety of approaches, from interviews, focus groups, on-line and face-to-face surveys, open workshops, site visits, ‘back-tos’ etc. The best approach is one that feels comfortable for the community and suits the project’s aims. Often this means crafting something specifically for each individual project and community.

For example, when we investigated the Aboriginal connections to Atherton Gardens (Fitzroy high-rise), a community gathering around a barbeque enabled people to meet us and contribute via a short interview, either then or at a later stage.(2013)

In shaping an interpretation strategy for the Royal Children’s Hospital, community engagement included an online survey, random vox pops in the hospital space, targeted in-depth interviews with key hospital and external stakeholders, and social media interactions through blogs and Facebook. The strategy is designed to guide the hospital’s approach to celebrating and displaying its heritage over the long term, to foster a continued sense of shared and personal belonging and identity for the RCH community, and to bring history to life in the hospital’s new building. Real engagement was critical (2014).

Anzac Parade is a significant element in Canberra's designed landscape. For those with personal, family and community connections to Anzac Parade and the memorials that line the route, this place is filled with memories and meaning. Context used a combination of research and focus groups to develop a new, rich understanding of these meanings and connections so as to shape policies to protect Anzac Parade (2012).

Engaging communities in strategic planning: design & delivery

Often we are asked to design and run a community engagement process as part of the development of a strategic plan or policy. For example, in 2012 we developed a creative and highly engaging process for Bellarine Bayside to activate a largely disaffected community in relation to the Northern Bellarine Foreshore Plan: we used the beach theme, starting out with playful approaches on a serious topic.

On Norfolk Island, we recently completed an extensive program of community engagement as part of developing a new heritage management plan for the Kingston and Arthur’s Vale Historic Area (KAVHA), one of 11 sites that make up the Australian Convict Sites World Heritage Listed property. We combined interviews, group workshops, on-line surveys and an extensive communication campaign to engage people in helping shape the new plan (2014-15).

Knox Liveable Streets (2011) is an award winning plan, created through extensive community participation facilitated by Context. More than 100 face-to-face and on-line surveys helped build our understanding of community values of streets, what residents like or dislike about their streets, their attitudes relating to street trees and how they would like to see their street look in the future. We used dialogue groups to expand the conversations, and facilitated a series of internal workshops with Council officers, building their appreciation of the issues and potential solutions and seeking to establish collaborative relationships across the whole organisation.

For the City of Ballarat Historic Urban Landscapes project, we developed a community engagement methodology that would enable refinement of the historic urban landscape characterisation we developed in the first stage of the project (2013).

Indigenous consultation

A significant aspect of our community engagement experience relates to work with Indigenous communities, organisations and individuals to help bring their values and perspectives into a variety of types of projects, often heritage or land use planning related. For the City of Melbourne, we developed the first Indigenous Culture and Heritage Framework (2007) designed to deepen the City’s links with its Indigenous communities. We subsequently prepared the Indigenous Heritage Action Plan (2012) and are currently working with the City and consulting with Traditional Owners on its implementation. Some of this work includes development of digital resources –
With Parks Victoria we engaged with Indigenous community representatives across the whole Australian Alps National Heritage Listed landscape about deficiencies in the listing and to recommend changes to reflect their values and stories (2013).

And currently we are working with the Australian War Memorial consulting with Indigenous service personnel and veterans about some proposed changes at the Memorial.

**Digital engagement: surveys & interactive mapping**

Context uses a range of digital engagement tools such as web-based surveys, blogs and social media and development of digital mapping and database tools to document community values.

On-line surveys form a key part of many projects, enabling us to seek viewpoints on a local or national scale, or to target people with specific interests. Over the last two years we have designed, run and analysed more than 15 online surveys, each for a particular project, and with up to several hundred responses.

For example, for our recent work on Norfolk Island, we wanted input from Norfolk Islanders, many of whom no longer live on the island but who feel a deep and enduring connection. An on-line survey proved the best tool, and we used it to gather initial ideas and issues and also to enable comment on the draft Plan when it went on exhibition.

With the Indigenous heritage work for the City of Melbourne, we have been guiding development of a GIS-enabled database of Aboriginal heritage in the city; this will become an important interactive database for use by Traditional Owners to record the places and stories they value.

Another example is the use of social media through blogs and Facebook as part of the consultation component of the Royal Children’s Hospital project.

**Analysis**

Analysis of community responses, particularly across a number of technical areas is one of our strengths as we combine community engagement and land use planning, environment/sustainability and cultural heritage expertise.

For example, we used a combination of community feedback methods for projects such as KAVHRA heritage management plan and the Northern Bellarine Foreshore Plan including on-line, targeted discussion groups, open house exhibition of responses – and then undertook an integrated analysis, reporting to our client and to the community on the responses.

We have many similar examples on both small and larger projects.

**Advice & independent reviews**

Some clients have asked us for an independent review and analysis of community feedback that they have already gathered. For Example, Parks Victoria commissioned us to review data on community views about the proposed conversion of Frankston Reservoir to a park (2011). Another example related to dog-walking on Mornington Peninsula beaches where we developed a methodology for the analysis of existing hard copy surveys that had been undertaken without the analysis stage being considered (2013).

**Internal learning, commitment and review**

Enhancing the skills and resources of our clients – building capacity and commitment – is an exciting aspect of our work. For example, for the City of Melbourne, Mount Alexander Shire and City of Melton we designed and delivered internal workshops to gather ideas, issues and build understanding of the potential for a strategic approach to heritage and environment respectively. Such processes also build commitment. Learning opportunities can form part of this approach: on the Knox Liveable Streets project we held a learning day for staff from across the council’s departments, with interesting external speakers, followed by an ‘ideas workshop’ focused on designing a liveable street that asked participants to reflect from their own life experience of where they live, rather than just their technical expertise.
Consensus building methodologies

Consensus is often seen as unachievable, but consensus building techniques offer the opportunity to move towards consensus and away from polarisation. We are aware of and seek to apply methods that build respect, support open sharing of information and look for mutual benefits. There are examples of this approach throughout our projects, and particularly where we are involved in a longer-term community engagement.

Chris Johnston is working with the Getty Conservation Institute and Consensus Building Institute in preparing a publication of case studies and methods of consensus building in relation to cultural heritage.

Oral history

Oral history may not seem like a community engagement technique, but in fact it is often a wonderful way to engage with communities and individuals. Rather than asking for an opinion, oral history is framed around respect for people’s life experiences and knowledge.

Recent project examples include Moreland Remembers, where consultation with key local groups combined with documentary research enabled a powerful exhibition and book to be created around Moreland’s World War I history. Working with the City of Darebin and Heritage Victoria, Context also interviewed people associated with selected Darebin places and these formed a rich oral account of aspects of the post-World War II migration experience.

THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TEAM

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