

Case Study: The Blue Mountains Weigh in on Waste

Community-led strategy development

Introduction

Blue Mountains City Council wanted to go a step further when reviewing its Strategic Waste Action Plan (2005).

In addition to a traditional waste options review, Council sought community input through an extensive consultation and engagement program to ensure the revised strategy met both community and council expectations.

Background

Blue Mountains City Council is a city within a World Heritage Area. The community lives in close proximity to the natural environment and for this reason environmental sustainability is a high priority for Council and its residents.

In 2013, the Blue Mountains sought to revise its Strategic Waste Action Plan (2005) in order to meet the future needs of the community, and to align with the City's 2025 Vision to build a more sustainable Blue Mountains.

A key objective of the revision process was to reduce waste going to the near-capacity landfill site at Blaxland (expected to close by 2030).

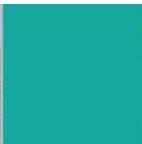
Opening a new landfill within the Blue Mountains local government area (LGA) is not possible nor desirable due to the area's World Heritage status.

Blue Mountains City Council was aware that improved waste practices would require innovative thinking and an increased investment from Council.

It was also apparent that behavioural change from residents would be essential to reducing the amount of waste going to landfill.

In the first instance, Blue Mountains City Council undertook a technical waste options review to identify the most appropriate suite of actions and investment to reduce waste being buried at Blaxland and improve the cost effectiveness of waste management for the community.

To compliment the outcomes of the technical review, Council also decided to embark on a community consultation program to gauge resident expectations regarding a new waste service and increase community understanding of local waste management and sustainability issues.



The program

Blue Mountains City Council contracted a specialist consultant to develop an engagement and consultation program called 'Weigh in on Waste'.

The aim of this program was to achieve informed involvement from the Blue Mountains community in order to credibly advise the development of Council's long term waste strategy.

The Weigh in on Waste engagement program had two main objectives:

Community education

- Educate residents about the need to think strategically about waste and the options available.
- Inform the community about the operational issues associated with waste management including cost and finite resources.
- Highlight residents' individual capacity to reduce waste through behavioural change.

Community feedback

- Establish which aspects of waste management were most important to the community.
- Gauge respondents' willingness to deal with certain changes, given that Blaxland landfill will be full by 2030.
- Gather an indication of how long residents would be willing to wait for a new waste management response, and how much they would be prepared to pay.

The consultation was conducted through three key engagement touch points:

- **Survey** - online and hard copy offered
- **Three face-to-face workshops**
- **Face-to-face at the Springwood Festival**

Each of these three touch-points included an educational component, such as a talk or information booklet, followed by an opportunity for participant feedback.

Where face to face engagement was not feasible, a 10 page Weigh in on Waste booklet offered residents information on the need for a long term waste strategy and some of the options available.

Whether completing a workshop or online survey, all Weigh in on Waste participants were asked a number of questions to identify which of the following criteria they considered most important:

- **Technical risk**, does the waste management technology have a successful track record?
- **Market risk**, is there a viable end market for products produced?
- **Planning risk**, is there a suitable site and lead times for approvals?
- **Integration with current waste systems**
- **Community convenience**
- **Local jobs**
- **Long term solution**
- **Landfill space saved**

SAMPLE SURVEY QUESTIONS

How important is it that:

1. The Blue Mountains reduces the amount of waste it sends to landfill?
2. The Blue Mountains manages its waste locally rather than sending it to another LGA?

Knowing that Blaxland landfill will be full by 2030, how willing are you to:

1. Change the way you manage waste at home to reduce landfill?
2. Have your garbage collected fortnightly IF your food scraps and organics are collected weekly?

The Weigh in on Waste consultation was supported by a suite of awareness-raising initiatives, such as flyers, media articles, targeted invitations and a schools awareness program, which encouraged residents to complete the survey or sign up for a workshop.



Following this initial consultation period, Blue Mountains City Council offered residents a further opportunity for feedback in the form of a public exhibition of the draft waste strategy.

Feedback

The consultation program allowed council to directly engage with almost 500 community members.

This included a fairly even spread of respondents across all Blue Mountains postcodes thanks to a good geographical mix of engagement activities.

Demographically, 55 percent of respondents were women and there was a significant skew towards older age groups (51 percent were over 56 years and 22 per cent were aged between 46 and 55 years).

Overall, responses showed that the Blue Mountains community saw improved resource recovery, long term viability and greenhouse gas emissions as the major issues to be addressed as part of a new strategic waste action plan.

Technical risk and planning complexity were perceived to be the least critical issues, with the community being quite open to new and innovative waste management practices.

Council found that residents generally had a strong sense of responsibility with regards to their own waste generation. Most indicated that waste products should be dealt with locally rather than sent elsewhere.

Similarly, residents indicated they were willing to change their domestic habits in order to reduce the amount of waste going to landfill.

Residents were found to be both price and time sensitive, however waste managers were surprised to find that a large proportion of the community

would accept increases of up to \$100 per year for a better service.

Finally, most residents wanted action within two years, with little tolerance for longer time frames.

A post engagement survey found that workshop participants were generally positive about the consultation process and council's willingness to ask residents for their input on the issue of waste management.

Residents indicated they were willing to change their domestic habits in order to reduce waste going to landfill.

Comments from the workshop included requests for further information on specific topic areas and more time for discussion; indicating a strong level of engagement with the subject matter.

Informing the strategy

Following the consultation, data from residents was collated to identify which of the criteria addressed in the consultation were most important to the community.

This community feedback data was then overlaid on the original waste management options review in order to give the raw technical scores for each potential waste option a qualitative weighting.

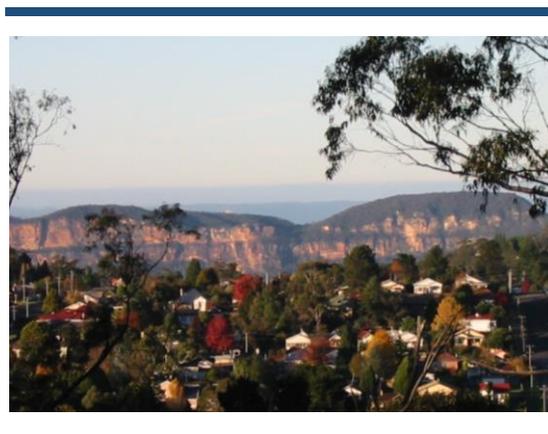
Using community feedback to weight technical scores allowed waste officers to analyse a range of waste management options and assess their capacity to meet both council and community needs.

The community consultation added weight to the possible introduction of a 'green bin' service for garden waste, and reaffirmed the need to continue community education on resource recovery and reuse.



The community's preference for long-term solutions and open-mindedness towards cutting-edge waste management methods has also given council staff freedom to explore new partnerships and technologies for the future.

Finally, the community's willingness to accept a modest fee increase for improved services helped determine which three specific services were put forward as final options to choose from in further communications with every ratepayer and resident.



Learnings from the project

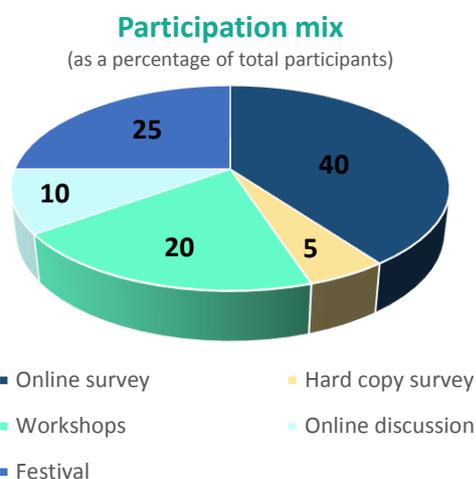
Blue Mountains City Council offers the following advice to others wishing to conduct their own consultation.

Mix it up

Having a variety of engagement options was important for ensuring that all members of the community could participate in the consultation.

As indicated by the chart below, the online survey was by far the most popular option for residents, however it is important to offer other opportunities for engagement in order to capture a good demographic spread of participants.

Future engagement programs in the Blue Mountains will look to adopt a range of engagement methods to suit different members of the community.



Structure is important for results

The Weigh in on Waste workshops were quite structured to ensure that council was able to gather the information it needed on each of the key waste management issues.

A tight structure ensured that discussions stayed on topic and that qualitative data could be easily overlaid on existing quantitative data.

Engaging younger residents can be difficult

73 per cent of residents who participated in the engagement survey were over 46 years of age.

This was not overly surprising as it was expected that waste management would be of higher interest to home owners; a higher proportion of whom are in this age bracket.

Fortunately Blue Mountains City Council's Youth Council was available to offer feedback on behalf of younger residents.

Incentives may be necessary

In order to ensure responses were received from a wide cross section of the community, Council offered incentives to appeal to 'unengaged' members of the community who have less interest in sustainability or waste management issues.

A tablet and shopping gift vouchers were chosen as prizes for this purpose.

Some criticism was received from more sustainably-minded community members due to the 'consumerist' nature of these prizes, however compost bins or native plants would not have been an effective incentive for the target group.



Engaging builds understanding and appreciation

The Weigh in on Waste consultation was a valuable opportunity to engage with the community.

Asking residents to consider what they wanted from council waste services and the real-world cost of this, increased the level of understanding and appreciation of council services.



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