

# 2014 BBS Community Engagement Survey Report

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**BBS COMMUNICATIONS GROUP** has conducted a survey of organisations and practitioners to gain a better understanding of the latest community engagement practice in Queensland.

Community engagement plays a critical role in diverse projects throughout the state. By understanding the needs and opinions of community engagement practitioners, and the organisations they work within, we can hone our own community engagement services, and provide greater insight and guidance to those within industries that use community engagement.

This year's survey involved more than 50 Queensland respondents, across government, private sector and consultancy.

BBS is an award-winning community engagement provider, and one of Queensland's most experienced communications consultancies.

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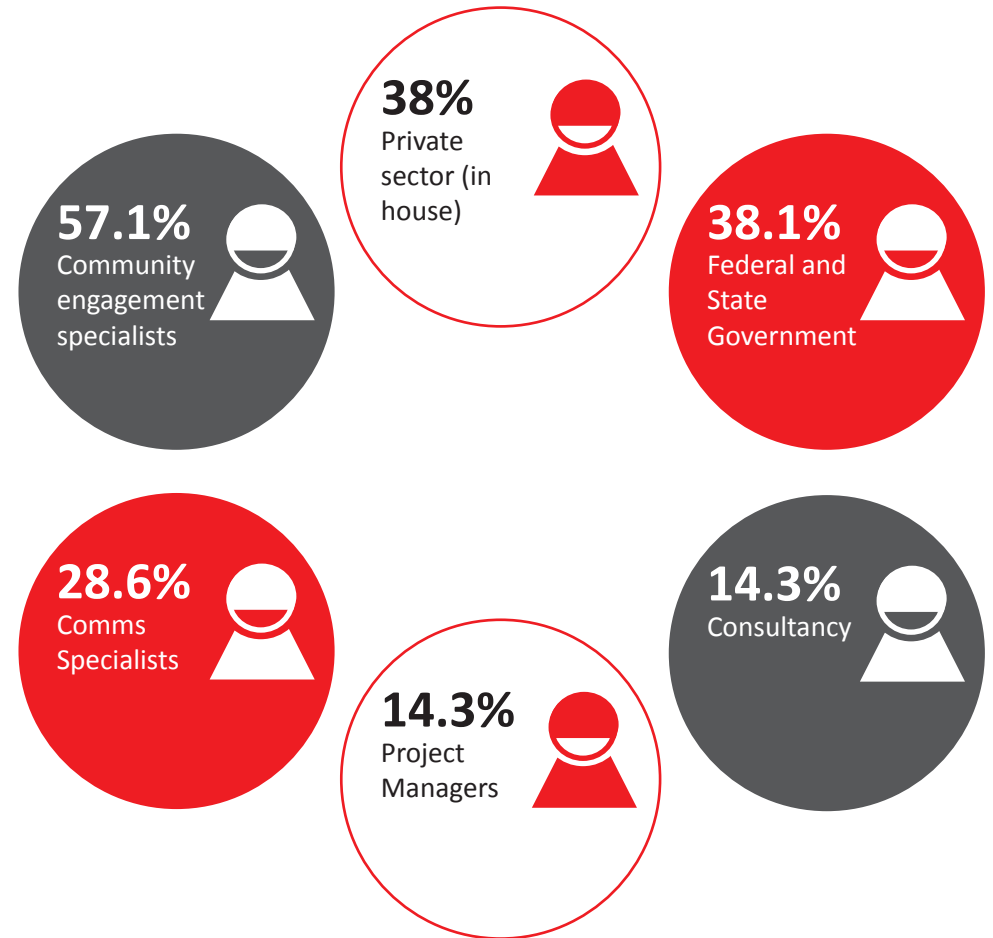
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## The Results

1. Internal support is critical
2. Engagement goals don't match engagement reality
3. Techniques must be fit for purpose
4. Organisational culture is key for internal buy-in
5. Government direction defines engagement
6. Ask first, strategise later
7. We can improve
8. Wanted! Training and evaluation
9. The future of engagement

## Who we surveyed



## 1. Internal support is critical

The worst outcome of a community engagement process is the need to repeat it. Almost half of our respondents have had to repeat an engagement process, at least once, after not receiving the appropriate level of internal support.

Without internal support, respondents said the engagement process was negatively impacted as they commonly received less funding or time (42%), or were unable to release the appropriate information to stakeholders (42%).

## 2. Engagement goals don't match engagement reality

Many respondents indicated that their organisation did not realise the community engagement goals it set for itself. Most commonly, organisations failed to achieve their goals to involve and consult with the public, instead, only providing the public with information.

## 3. Techniques must be fit for purpose

No single community engagement technique can be used effectively on its own. One-on-one briefings, tours and field trips, workshops, and newsletters and direct mail were considered to be the most effective engagement techniques. However, respondents strongly indicated that techniques cannot be used in isolation, and must be matched to the particular characteristics of the project and the community.

## 4. Organisational culture is key for internal buy-in

Organisations that implement effective community engagement systems, and foster an organisational understanding of community engagement, are rewarded with significantly higher buy-in from decision makers.

## 5. Government direction defines engagement

Government direction is the most important factor influencing an organisation's commitment to community engagement (87%), followed by statutory requirements (83%). Without the support of relevant federal, state, or local government, organisations are far less likely to commit time and resources to a project and its outcomes.

## 6. Ask first, strategise later

Respondents said the single biggest barrier to effective community engagement was decisions being made at a strategic level before communities had been consulted. This is a clear indication that community engagement needs to be included in the strategic planning phase of a project, or development.

## 7. We can improve

Respondents indicated that the overall quality of the engagement work their organisation performed, and their ability to evaluate their engagement performance, could improve significantly.

Only 58% of respondents said they were satisfied with the quality of the community engagement their organisation had undertaken.

## 8. Wanted! Training and evaluation

Respondents said they would like to undertake more engagement training, and improve the evaluation of the community engagement work they undertake. Only 52% of respondents said they were happy with the way their organisation evaluated its community engagement work, and despite 72% indicating they would like to undertake further professional training, only 41% believe they have the time or resources to take up opportunities.

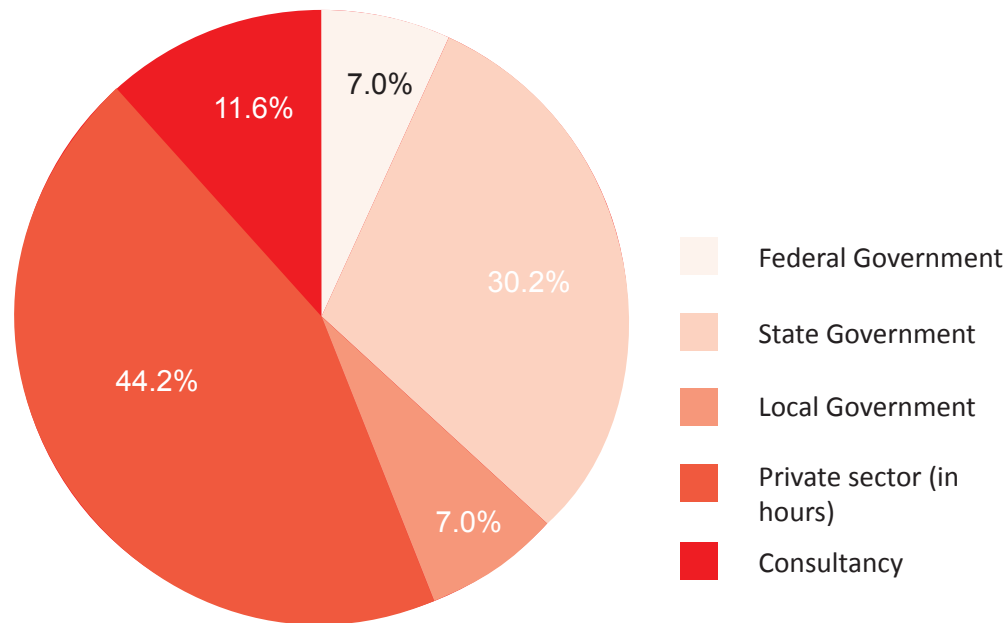
## 9. The future of engagement

A majority (82%) of respondents indicated that within the immediate future community engagement would continue to play a valuable role in an organisation's decision making.

When asked to identify the key trends in engagement over the next 12 months, respondents identified the development of more meaningful, authentic and direct engagement, and growth in the use of online and social media channels as key trends.

## What sector do you work in?

The largest concentration of community engagement practitioners (44%) surveyed hold in-house roles in the private sector. The remainder work in State Government (30%), consultancy (12%), Federal Government (7%), and Local Government (7%).



## How would you describe your role?

Of the respondents surveyed, 49% described their role as “communications specialists”, 42% described themselves as “community engagement specialists” and 9% as “project managers”.

## Have you ever undertaken any formal community engagement training?

Reflecting the increasing professionalisation of community engagement practice, 72% of respondents said they had undertaken formal community engagement training. International Association for Public Participation Australasia (IAP2) courses, such as the Certificate and Emotion, Outrage and Public Participation (EOP2), were the most commonly completed community engagement courses.

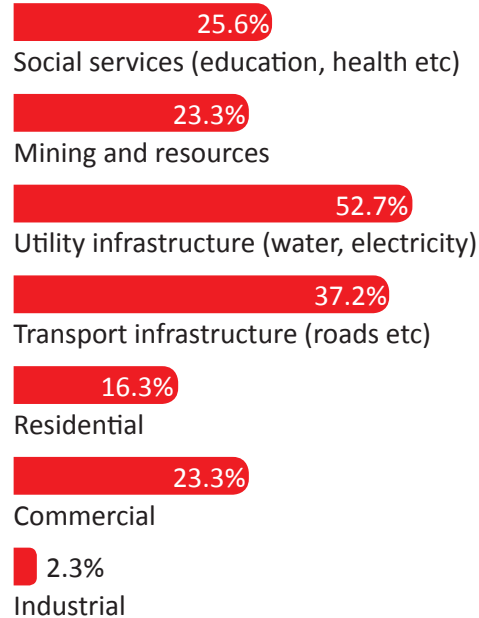
## How many community engagement projects have you worked on?

Respondents’ community engagement experience varied greatly, however, relatively inexperienced practitioners who had worked on between zero and five projects were most common, accounting for approximately 40% of those surveyed.

Practitioners (21%) had worked on between six and 10 projects, 16% had worked on between 11 and 20 projects, and almost one-quarter (23%) had worked on more than 21 projects.

## What type of projects do you undertake community engagement for?

The most common type of projects respondents were engaged in were transport infrastructure (39%) and utility infrastructure (37%).



## Do you belong to a formal or informal network of community engagement practitioners?

One-quarter of respondents (25%) said they were part of a formal, or informal network, including:

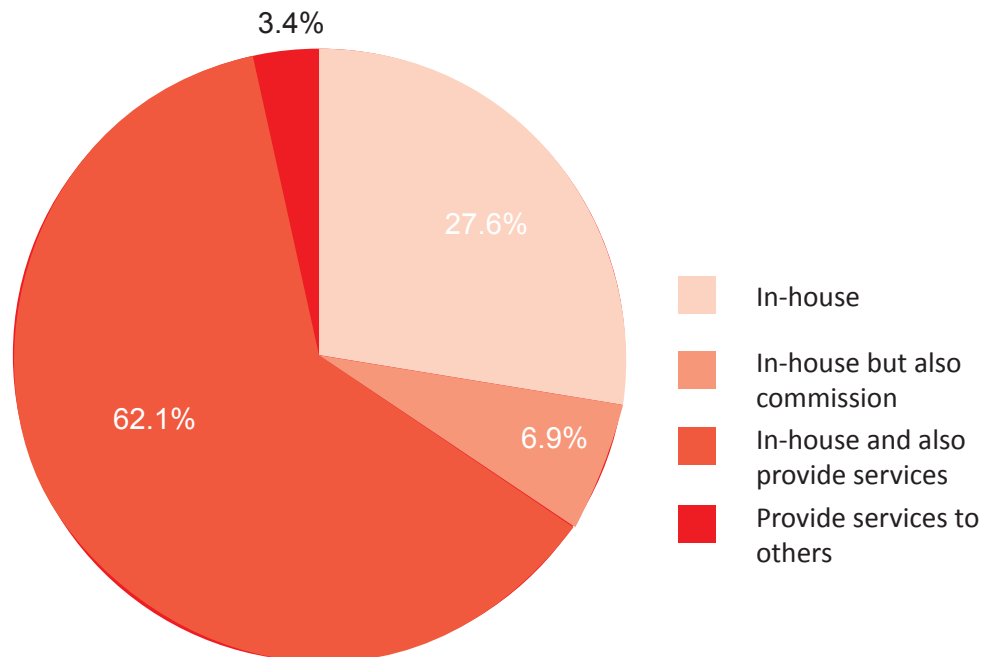
- LinkedIn
- The National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC)
- Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA)
- Australian Institute of Management (AIM)
- International Association for Public Participation Australasia (IAP2)
- Business Communicators Queensland

## Which of the following statements best describes your organisation's approach to community engagement?

The majority of organisations (62%) conduct community engagement as part of their work, but also commission work to specialist providers.

Just over a quarter (27%) of organisations said they never commission other organisations to undertake community engagement on their behalf, only performing the process in-house.

A small number of organisations (7%) undertake in-house communications projects and provide community engagement services, and only a fraction of respondents (3%) provide community engagement services to others.



## How important is community engagement to informing the outcome of a project?

An overwhelming majority (93%) of respondents indicated that community engagement was important to informing the outcome of a project. Of these, more than two-thirds said it was very important.

When asked to provide additional comment, respondents indicated that community engagement is important to project outcomes because it builds open and honest relationships, informs stakeholders and gives the project a 'social licence' to operate. Through this process, the community and the organisation build a project that is mutually beneficial to both parties.

"As a stakeholder and community engagement practitioner, my experience shows that when there is effective community engagement, at any level of the spectrum, project outcomes are improved. Building honest and open relationships with your community of interest and keeping stakeholders informed and/or engaged really does help deliver better outcomes for everyone involved with the project."

"Clients expect community expectations are met to ensure there is no impact to their social licence to operate - in particular major infrastructure (road/rail) and the oil and gas sectors."

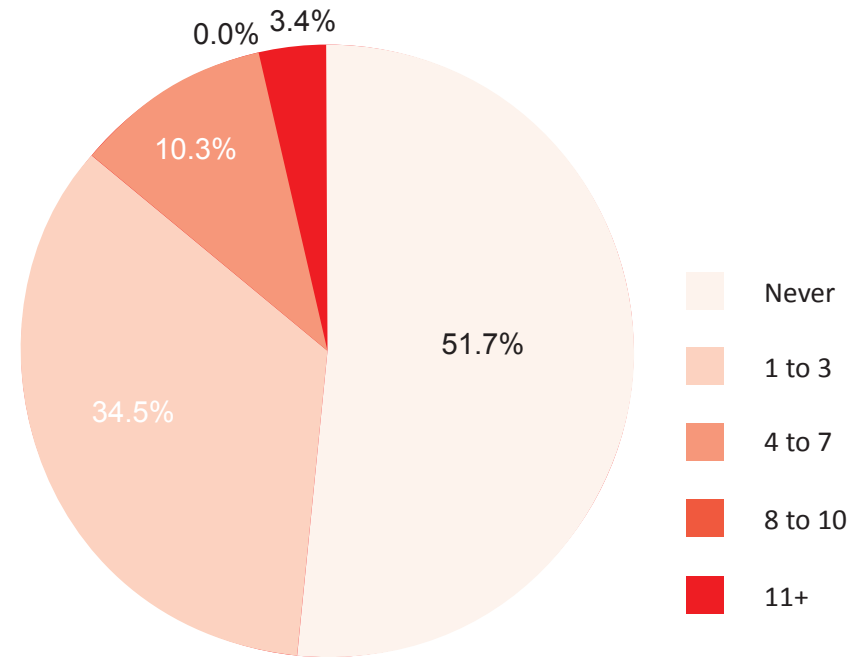


## Within the past five years, how often have you had to repeat an engagement process after not receiving the appropriate level of internal support?

Almost half (48%) of respondents said they have had to repeat an engagement process at least once, and more than one-in-eight respondents said they have repeated an engagement process on four or more occasions.

This indicates that a lack of internal support for engagement is common, and organisations who continually do not provide the appropriate level of internal support have a high risk of repeating engagement processes.

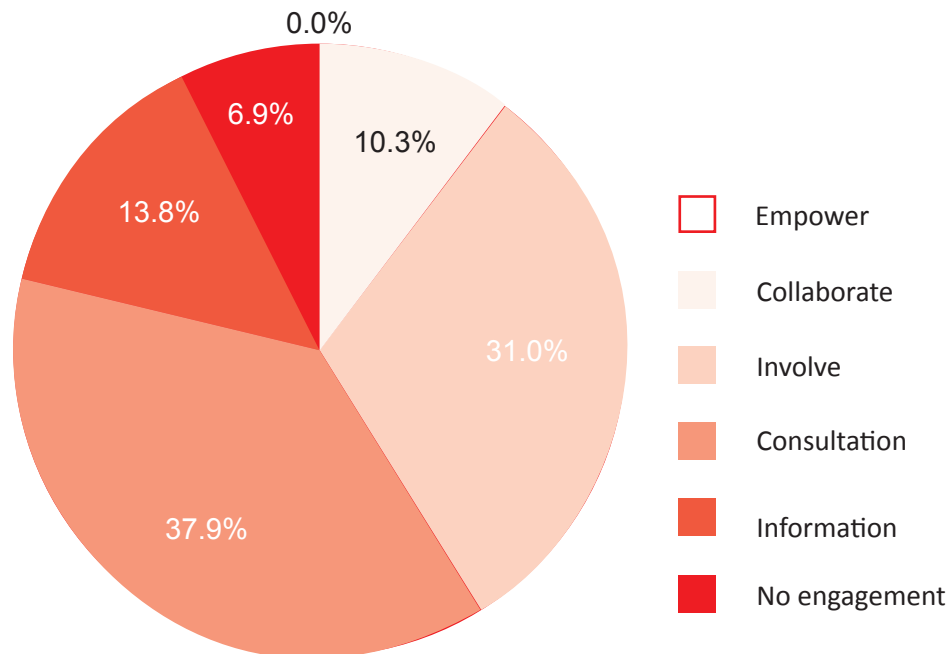
An engagement process being repeated suggests that although internal buy-in for engagement did not occur initially, decision makers within the organisation realised community engagement was an important part of the project and implemented a second round of engagement.



**Which of the following approaches to community engagement best describes what your organisation is often striving and able to achieve in its work?**

There is a large difference between organisations' community engagement goals, and the reality of the actual community engagement work they perform. More than two-thirds (68.9%) of respondents said they were trying to either 'involve', or 'consult' with the public in their community engagement work, however, less than half (44.8%) said their organisation was able to achieve those goals in its work.

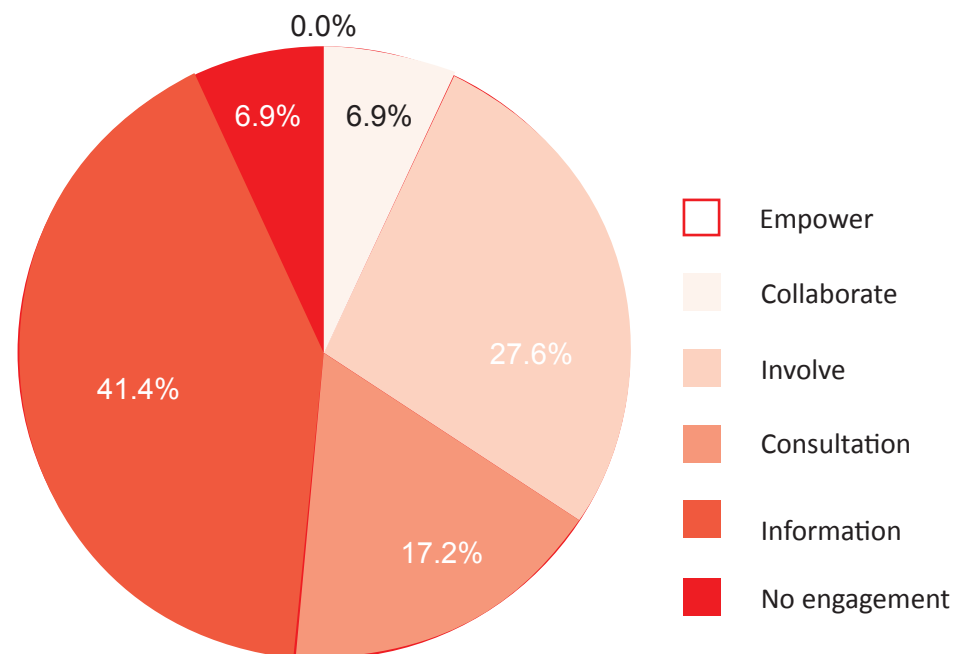
**Striving to achieve**



The survey data indicates that community engagement professionals are diverted away from their goals of 'involving the public', and 'consulting with the public', towards 'providing information to the public'.

Only 14% of respondents said 'providing information to the public' best described what their organisation was striving to achieving, yet 40% said this was what they actually achieved.

**Able to achieve**



## The most effective community engagement techniques

	Very effective	Effective
One-on-one briefings	68.97%	27.59%
Tours / field trips	27.59%	34.48%
Workshops	10.34%	44.83%
Newsletters	20.69%	31.03%

## The least effective community engagement techniques

	Very effective	Effective
Public meetings	6.9%	20.69%
Open houses	6.9%	20.69%
Hotlines	10.34%	24.14%
Surveys	6.9%	31.03%

Respondents said the most effective community engagement techniques were:

- One-on-one briefings (97%)
- Tours / field trips (62%)
- Workshops (55%)
- Newsletters / direct mail letters (51%)

By this same criteria, the least effective techniques were:

- Public meetings (27%)
- Open houses (27%)
- Hotlines (34%)
- Surveys (37%)

Although respondents indicated that one-on-one briefings are very effective, several respondents noted they were extremely time and resource intensive, and could only be used as part of a mix of community engagement techniques.

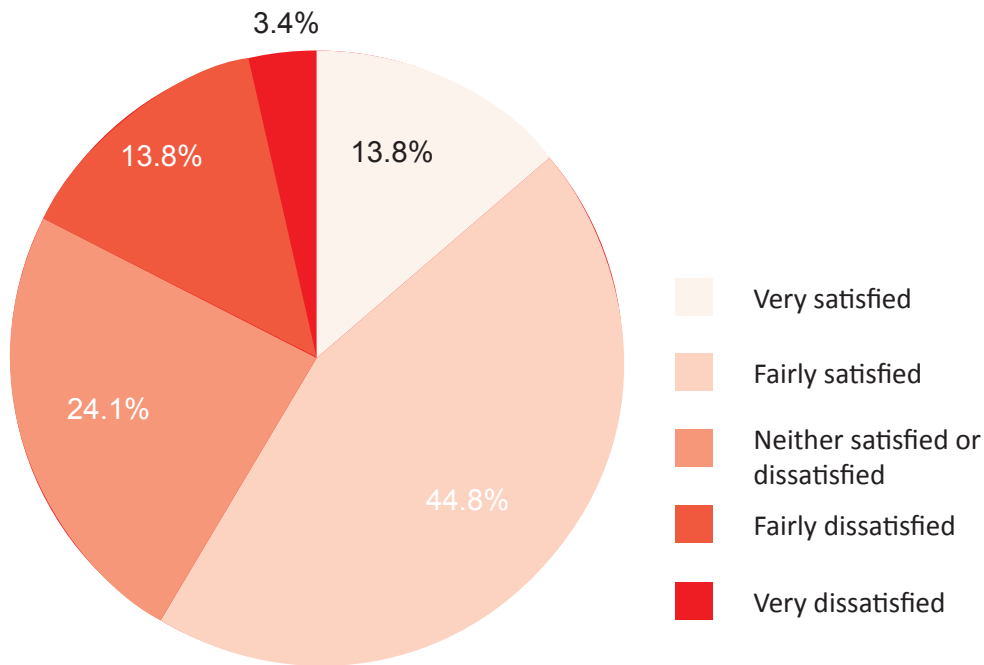
Many respondents noted community engagement techniques should not be evaluated in isolation of the particular project they were being applied to, or the budget and culture of the organisation undertaking the engagement process.

Further, many respondents said any community engagement technique could be effective, if used appropriately, and under the right conditions.

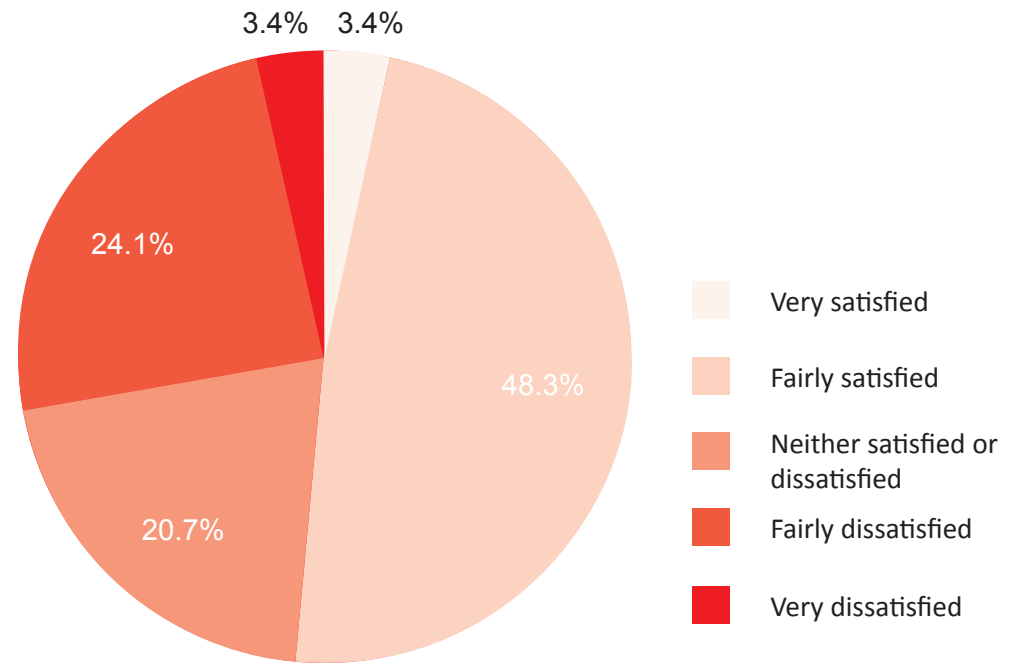
“...if you’re using it well and appropriately – the right technique for the right project – then it’s effective.”

“Social media is an emerging trend for engagement, however, nothing works better than face to face engagement”.

How satisfied are you with the quality of community engagement your organisation undertakes?



How satisfied are you with the way in which your organisation evaluates its community engagement work?



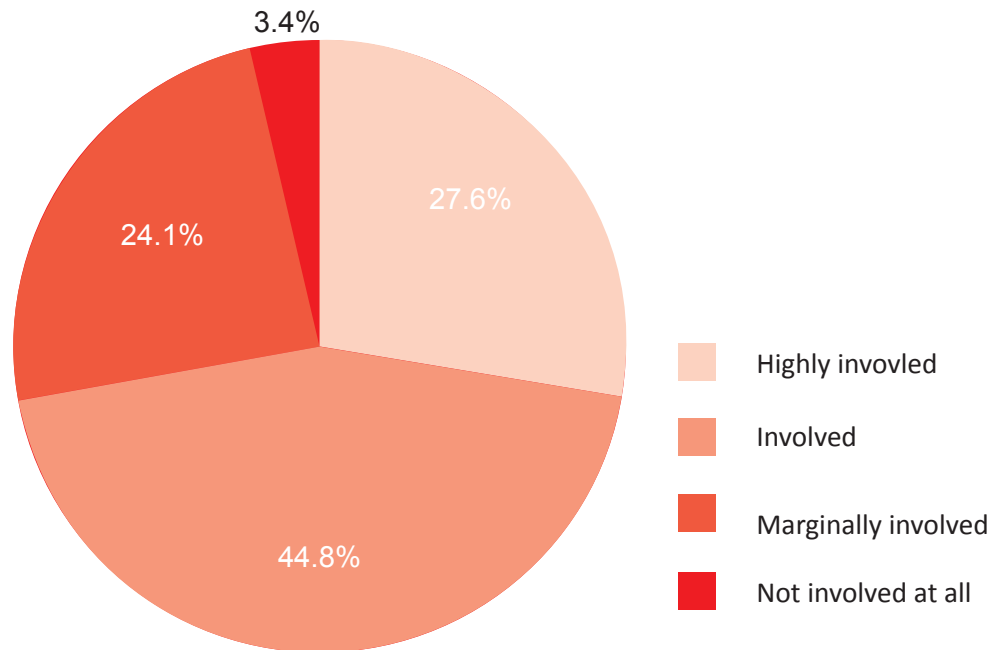
Only 14% of respondents were very satisfied with the quality of the community engagement work their organisation undertakes.

The largest proportion of respondents (45%) indicated they were fairly satisfied with their organisation's community engagement work, and just over 17% of respondents said they were fairly dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied.

Respondents reported a high level of dissatisfaction with the evaluation of their community engagement work, with more than one-quarter (28%) reporting dissatisfaction. Only a very small proportion (3%) were very satisfied, and almost half (48%) were fairly satisfied with their organisation's evaluation.

Respondents have clearly demonstrated that there is room for improvement in the overall quality of their organisation's community engagement work, and evaluation processes.

**How involved are the internal decision makers (i.e. non-community engagement focus) throughout the community engagement process?**



Positively, three-quarters (75%) of internal decision makers were involved, or highly involved, in their organisation’s community engagement process.

In almost one-quarter (25%) of organisations, respondents said their internal decision makers were only marginally involved.

The high cost of internal decision makers not being involved in the community engagement process make it essential to the process to increase their levels of involvement.

Not surprisingly, respondents who said their internal decisions makers were involved or highly involved were more likely to be satisfied with the quality of their community engagement and more likely to have not repeated an engagement process.

**What would you say is a contributing factor to the (high/low) level of buy-in from decision makers in your organisation?**

Organisational culture, system and processes (62%) was identified as the greatest contributing factor to buy-in from decision makers.

Respondents also identified that there was a great need to educate decision makers about the community engagement process, saying the second-greatest contributing factor is a level of understanding about community engagement.

## How does lack of internal support impact your engagement process?



Without internal support, respondents indicated they did not receive enough money, resources, or time (42%), they weren't able to release appropriate information to stakeholders (42%), and they were limited in the engagement techniques they can use.

Without internal support, community engagement practitioners have a significantly diminished ability to perform their roles.

"Although we have quite a high level of support from internal stakeholders, we are sometimes still limited"

"We do have good internal support but not always on everything"

"No direction = no decision"

## In your opinion, to what extent do the following factors influence your organisation's commitment to community engagement?

The biggest influence on an organisation's commitment to community engagement is the government's direction for the project or program, followed by the applicable statutory requirements.

- 87% of respondents said government direction (whether federal, state or local), exerted either a strong or moderate influence on community engagement.
- 83% said statutory regulations influenced the community engagement process.

## Factors that influence your organisations' commitment to community engagement

	Exerts a strong influence	Exerts a moderate influence	Exerts a minor influence
<b>Federal / State / Local Government direction</b>	58.62%	27.59%	6.9%
<b>Local community members views and needs</b>	27.59%	48.28%	13.79%
<b>Statutory requirements</b>	55.17%	27.59%	10.34%
<b>Elected Government representative views / beliefs</b>	37.93%	20.69%	37.93%
<b>Local regeneration program (eg neighbourhood management and renewal)</b>	0.00%	20.69%	44.83%



## What professional development opportunities do you see as being available to you?

Three-quarters of respondents feel they have easy access and good knowledge about learning opportunities, as well as good support from their organisation to access these opportunities.

Even though 72% of respondents said they would like to undertake training opportunities, only 41% feel they have the time to take up opportunities.

## What do you think the future has in store for the practice of community engagement?

Respondents (65.5%) felt the single biggest barrier to effective community engagement work was that decisions had already been made at a strategic level before communities had been consulted.

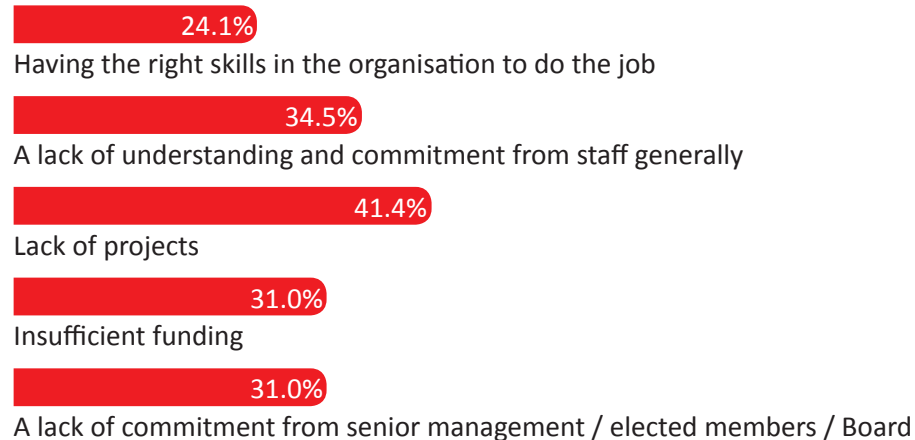
Respondents said there was a need for communities to be engaged earlier in the strategic process, in order for community engagement to be more effective.



## Over the next couple of years, what do you think will be the biggest challenge to the community engagement work you or your organisation does?

More than 40% of respondents said that the lack of projects was the biggest issue facing their organisation.

A lack of understanding and commitment from non-engagement staff (34.5%), a lack of commitment from senior management / board members (31%) and insufficient funding (31%) were all identified by respondents as significant challenges.



## Thinking about the immediate future, to what extent do you agree/disagree with the following statements?

When asked about the immediate future of community engagement, the majority of respondents (82%) said that community engagement would continue to play a valuable role in decision making, and that public demand for community engagement would increase in the immediate future (82%).

The same number of respondents (82%) believe it will be increasingly important for community engagement projects to be able to evaluate their impact.

Very few (4%) respondents believe that community engagement will become less important for organisations, and less than one-third (32%) said they think that funding for community engagement services by organisations will diminish.

## What do think will be the key trend in engagement for the next 12 months?

The top three predictions for the future of community engagement identified by respondents are:

1. An increase in more meaningful, authentic and direct engagement between organisations and community groups.
2. An increase in online engagement, including the use of social media channels.
3. An increase in the importance placed on building meaningful partnerships and relationships, through both direct and online channels.

“Build relationships or perish.”

“A swing back towards more engagement as Governments in particular begin to understand the costs associated with insufficient engagement.”

“We are already seeing a shift from community engagement to meaningful partnerships. ‘Goodwill’ funding is now replaced with more strategic, mutually beneficial partnership agreements.”

“Social Media - online channels.”

“Increase in social media rallying community groups.”