# Demystifying Myths of Deliberative Engagement webinar – part 2

## Questions from the webinar answered.

**Q1. In an era when everyone is time poor, and when working in regions with small populations, spread across a large geographic area, how do you ensure the right representation for deliberative processes? Without having the 'same old' characters who have an interest/agenda?**

I think firstly it is about knowing who your community is; both in terms of demographics but also the other things that make a community unique, for example local networks and interests. Secondly, Council needs to educate their community about the benefits of participation and deliberative engagement. And finally, you need to create a plan to 'recruit' people into the process. How will you find these people? Which 'doors' do you need to knock on? How are you going to support them? How are you going to break down barriers? How are you going to build their interest in the process? – Amy

**Q2. Interested in your thoughts about how we conduct deliberative engagement to influence our community engagement policy, whilst working within COVID-19 restrictions and not being able to conduct face to face engagement? Is this even possible? This seems to contradict the purpose/rationale of the relevant mandated requirements within the new Act.**

It is very possible, and sometimes much more successful. From experience, much more planning is required to make the process smooth for all involved. The engagement process may not be dominated by large scale face-to-face forums, instead it may involve a number of smaller sessions and activities. For example webinars to build knowledge and ask questions; virtual focus groups to dive into content; and digital polling to capture views.

My advice for Local Government - don't try and replicate a face-to-face process into the digital / virtual world. In a world of COVID-19, we need to rethink our engagement processes and the participating journey of our community members.- Amy

### Q3. How can we stop Councils creating one 'journey framework' for groups and repeating it over and over again instead of designing new ones each time?

Demonstrate the value of different types of experiences for participants. The best way to demonstrate the value is by evaluating the engagement and seeking feedback from the aforementioned groups. - Amy

### Q4. How do we know where the threshold between genuine and window-dressing in (allegedly) deliberative processes? Especially with ideas like co-design which being bandied around a lot ATM but the deliberative element is as best superficial.

In my experience there has always been variation in standards of practice. It's important to note there is no universal agreement about what great practice actually means. It's fair to say some have a fairly 'fundamentalist' view about what it means, but it is not shared. For me what makes a deliberative process genuine is the following:

- The remit is substantial enough to make it worth the effort for all concerned (in other words; there is something worthwhile on the table that is 'influencable' by the process
- There is genuine commitment on the part of ultimate decision-makers to consider the recommendations from the process, and a willingness to explain publicly if they decide not to adopt some or all of those recommendations
- There is a very diverse range of participants that can be regarded as a reasonable 'mini-public' (this may involve random selection, a combination of random and invited, self-selected)
- There is sufficient time and information for the participants to do their job - to adequately consider 'evidence', options, trade-offs, apply critical thinking skills
- The process is viewed as worthwhile and robust and not biased; from the perspective of stakeholders, broader public and internal stakeholders
- There is evidence that broader engagement is connected to the deliberative process

I have written a blog that goes into a bit more detail - you can check it at
http://maxhardy.com.au/debunking-myths-about-deliberation/

The comment about co-design is a curious one. I would say the very best deliberative processes I have facilitated have been an example of deliberative co-design. There is, of course, a wide range of processes referred to as co-design. A deliberative co-designed process involves not just co-designing and deliberating on potential solutions, but also co-designing the process with stakeholders (internal and external). It is especially important when trust is really low, and when a community may be outraged about a certain situation.

Obviously the person asking this question has seen co-design undertaken in a superficial manner. I would say ANY community engagement method/approach can be done poorly. If people are interested in more information about authentic (deliberative) co-design I would encourage you to join a community of interest by visiting https://www.authenticcodesign.com/ (I am declaring an interest in this having co-produced a self-paced training course promoted at this site; though you can join the 'community of interest' around authentic co-design free of charge at this site). - Max

### Q5. Policies, frameworks etc. are fundamental to success but at the end of the day, deliberative processes are often only as good as the skill of Council officers available to advocate for and facilitate them. How do we support and drive skill development for Council officers, especially in small, financially constrained councils?

True, policies and frameworks are fundamental for setting out Council's priorities, commitments and how it expects to work, but we all know that things can get a lot messier at the implementation stage. Support and skill development can happen through professional development programs, but it can also be just as useful to focus on experiential knowledge – there is so much learning that happens through doing, and making mistakes, which we often don't take the time to reflect on or capture. Council Officers have to report on the statistics and outcomes of an engagement process, but space could also be made to reflect the process itself - what went well? What could have been done differently? Did people engage in a way that was unexpected? How do we capture the learnings so they don't get lost the next time we implement a process? How can we share these learnings across the organisation and with peers in a way which is not going to make us feel exposed? Embedding this type of reflection into processes, creating spaces for open discussions such as a Community of Practice both within council and with peers can be very beneficial. Making the time for this can be hard, however, not only is it important for skill development, it might even save time and issues down the track for the next engagement process. – Emanuela

### Q6. Can you talk about the characteristics of an effective question for the participants to deliberate on?

One of my favourite questions! A great question, or remit (deliberation jargon term), is one that:

- Is one the sponsor and 'community of interest' believe is worth answering
- Is substantial - in that there is something worthwhile on the table (worth the effort for all concerned)

- Is one that invites curiosity and exploration, as opposed to a question that is more likely to polarise the community
- One that is possible to answer in the time provided; to have sufficient information, time and thinking time to work toward a potential solution or answer.

I have written a couple of blogs about questions, http://maxhardy.com.au/community-engagement-process/ and http://maxhardy.com.au/channelling-fran-peavey-generating-strategic-questions-for-those-who-sponsor-community-engagement-and-collaboration/ and also given a Tedx talk, Questions Change Everything. - Max

## Q7. How do you create a space that helps people leave their personal agendas at the door and develop their ideas together with the groups so 'unstuckness' happens/ the group evolves to come to a perspective/position together?

It is practically impossible to bring together a group of people that don't already have some existing inclination about a topic – whether deep-rooted or not, whatever the topic, there is going to be some bias and it's important to acknowledge it. Although people may not be able to leave their personal agendas at the door, they can be made more aware of their own conscious, or unconscious, bias and then be encouraged to be open minded and willing to change their opinion. Organisations like newDemocracy have suggested discussing personal biases as the first step in a public deliberation, you can find information and videos about this here https://www.newdemocracy.com.au/2017/03/17/enhancing-citizen-jurors-critical-thinking-capacity/ - Emanuela

## Q8. Interested in the balance between inviting community engagement from people who are not specialists and with LG staff who are paid for their expertise and knowledge.

A question, or something similar, I've heard many times. The presupposition of the question, I think, is there is a limited about of knowledge and expertise to go around; that the more the community is involved, the less LG knowledge and expertise will be valued. For me, an aim of any robust engagement process is that we become collectively wiser; that we all learn something from each other. What I have found is that the more curious internal subject matter experts are about what the community knows and thinks, the more the community becomes interested in, and respects, the expertise of LG people.

It is a concern for me that some processes don't value the expertise of local government officers. Sometimes the dynamic set up is one of finding out what the community wants, and then inviting the sponsoring organisation to do what they can to satisfy them. A more mature

process, I believe, is one where we value everyone's knowledge and expertise; when we acknowledge that all involved play a valued part in the 'community of interest'.

For me it's not about getting a balance; it is about being determined to extract as much expertise from all concerned in order to arrive at wise solutions/recommendations. – Max

The premise of deliberative engagement is that the people deliberating aren't necessarily 'subject-matter experts' but that they evaluate and reflect on the information that is provided to them in order to come to a collective understanding about what is in the best interests of their fellow citizens. The two entities, community members and subject matter experts, have two very different roles, so it isn't so much a matter of balance as much as it is of reciprocal respect for each other's contribution to the process. Added to this, formal expertise and knowledge around subject areas is of course essential, but so is the lived-experience that community members sometimes bring which gives a more nuanced and very localised level of expertise to the subject - both types of expertise need to be valued. – Emanuela

**Q9. How can deliberation work to resolve issues which arise by taking a simple majority approach to decision-making? I see this all the time where a 49/51% split ends up being a contentious way to make decisions.**

In deliberative engagement our process normally involves the participants determining what an acceptable majority would be for a recommendation to be put forward. A 'majority' typically sits at about 60%, while a 'super majority' is 70%. - Amy