

CREDUCATION

Community Participation in Decision Making: The Deliberative Engagement Approach



We pay our respects to the Traditional Custodians, Ancestors, and Elders past, present, and emerging. Our team is proud to live, learn and thrive in the place we now call Australia. We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded. Always was, Always Will Be Aboriginal Land. As embedded in our values, we are committed to building connected, healthy, and resilient communities and creating purposeful outcomes that reflect our deep appreciation for the peoples and cultures that make us who we are and shape where we are going - together as one.

CRED CONSULTING ACKNOWLEDGES THE TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF THE LANDS ON WHICH WE LIVE AND OPERATE.

DISCLAIMER

This Guide is part of CRED's CREducation series. It is informed by CRED Consulting's research and engagement with diverse communities across Australia and reflects the knowledge, perspectives and insights shared through this work. While it provides a general resource to support engagement, it does not claim to represent all experiences or offer prescriptive solutions. The Guide should not be relied upon as a substitute for context-specific research, consultation, or professional advice.

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WHY WE CREATED THIS PUBLICATION

People deserve to be genuinely enabled to participate in the decisions that shape their lives, their neighbourhoods, and their futures. Right now, that feels more important than ever.

Across Australia, trust in government and institutions is declining, and a sense of disconnection is growing -between communities and decision-makers, and sometimes between each other. At the same time, the issues we face are becoming more complex. Housing pressures, climate risk, recovery and resilience, and rapid change all require more than quick feedback loops. They require deeper listening, shared understanding, and decisions that people can see themselves in, even when the outcomes are hard.

This is why community participation in decision making matters.

Deliberative methods enable this. They create the conditions for people to learn, reflect, listen to one another, weigh up trade-offs, and work through complexity together. They don't replace elected decision-making, but

strengthen it, by bringing community voice into decisions in a way that is informed, considered, and grounded in lived experience.

Full citizens' juries and intensive deliberative models are the gold standard and absolutely have their place, particularly where decisions are complex, contested, or carry significant community impact.

For deliberation to have real impact, it has to be accessible.

For many organisations, particularly councils working under real constraints, deliberative engagement can feel daunting, complex, expensive, risky, or too hard to get internal or political buy-in.

Deliberative principles can be trialled successfully at smaller scales: a shorter workshop, a single well-designed session. What matters is not the label on the method, but whether the process is built on the foundational principles of deliberation. Those principles are what make people feel heard, build empathy across difference, help communities gain voice and influence and grow trust.

This guide is written for people working in government, and for emerging engagement practitioners who want to do engagement differently, in a way that is practical, credible, and grounded in the real world. My hope is that it helps more people feel empowered to try deliberative methods, at whatever scale is right for their context and to design processes that genuinely listen to the voice of community.

Because when people are supported to participate meaningfully, trust is built and democracy becomes something we do together, not something that happens to us.

I welcome you to lean into deliberation with curiosity and courage and to help create the conditions for deeper listening, stronger decisions, and more connected communities.



Jen Guice,
Executive Director,
CRED Consulting

INTRODUCTION

Why community participation in decision making and deliberative engagement matters now

Across Australia, communities are navigating rapid change, and so is the way they engage with the decisions that shape their lives. Trust in government continues to decline. Engagement fatigue is real. And emerging technologies, including AI, are transforming how people participate, submit feedback and express their views.

Against this backdrop, we need to embrace engagement approaches that nurture meaningful conversations, make space for deeper listening, help people build the knowledge and capacity to participate meaningfully and rebuild trust.

Deliberative engagement offers exactly that. It is about listening deeply and giving people the structure, evidence and support they need to think together. When done well, it leads to stronger decisions, more legitimacy and more connected communities. It is not about handing over decision-making, rather providing an evidence driven, community-led input to support decisions.

Recent research by the Centre for Deliberative Democracy at the University of Canberra shows that Australians want a say in decisions and highlights a strong appetite for more meaningful and deliberative forms of participation. (University of Canberra, 2025).

“Deliberative democracy is not merely a scholarly ideal: it resonates with the public as a credible and desirable way to narrow the distance between citizens and political leaders.”

THE CENTRE FOR DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA



Only 1 in 3 (33%)

Australians trust the Federal Government – with trust declining further for regional Australians and those under financial pressure.



Only 1 in 2 (51%)

Australians are satisfied with how democracy works, with satisfaction significantly lower among younger people, regional Australians and those under financial pressure.



**2 in 3 men (62%) vs
1 in 3 women (35%)**

feel confident to participate in political discussions highlighting a significant gender gap in levels of confidence during political discussions.



Nearly 1 in 2 (48%)

Australians believe political decisions should be made through dialogue with citizens and affected groups, and only 9% think decisions should be left to elected representatives without any public input.

The purpose of this guide

This publication is an accompanying guide to CRED's CREducation webinar: *Deliberative engagement: principles, practice and real-world lessons* – one of our most popular webinars to date.

If you haven't already, we recommend watching the webinar to enhance this resource. It provides the context, practitioner perspectives and real project experiences that sit behind this guide. Hearing directly from engagement practitioners helps ground the principles in lived experience.

“You need to know where the community stands, what's valued, what's tolerable, what crosses the line and you need a representative cross-sector of the community to do that. The community deliberation panel really helped us understand what the social thresholds were.”

CRE EDUCATION WEBINAR PANELIST

Watch our CREducation webinar

Deliberative engagement: principles, practice and real-world lessons with speakers:

- Jen Guice, Executive Director, Engagement, CRED
- Phoebe Schumacher, Manager Engagement and Culture, CRED
- Prue Foreman, Corporate Strategy and Engagement Manager, Inner West Council
- Peta Collins, Senior Advisor, Collaboration and Community, Digital Health CRC and;
- Yvette Andrews, Manager of City Engagement, City of Sydney



Scan the QR code to find out more!

DELIBERATIVE ENGAGEMENT PRINCIPLES, PRACTICE & REAL-WORLD LESSONS

CRE EDUCATION

Wednesday, 15 October 2025, 12pm – 1pm (AEDT)

Register with the link in the caption

WEBINAR



Jen Guice
CRED Consulting



Phoebe Schumacher
CRED Consulting



Peta Collins
Digital Health CRC



Prue Foreman
Inner West Council



Yvette Andrews
City of Sydney

A practical guide grounded in real experience

At CRED, enabling community participation in decision making is at the heart of what we do. Our IAP2 certified and award-winning team has delivered hundreds of engagement processes across Australia, designed and led community panels and deliberative forums for issues as diverse as disaster resilience, community visioning, service reviews and long-term strategic planning. Our team brings deep experience working alongside councils, state agencies and communities to design processes that build trust and connection, amplify diverse voices and lead to well-informed decisions.

While well established and mandated in some states like Victoria, where it is supported by legislation, institutional investment and a decade of practice-building, it's still an emerging method across the rest of the country, used sparingly.

There is no shortage of guides on deliberative engagement. Many are excellent, extensive and drawn on as useful resources by our team. We have linked to some of these on page 20.

Rather than duplicate these resources, this guide is intended as a practical companion for practitioners, offering insights into how deliberative engagement works on the ground.

It draws on real examples from CRED's work and reflects the voices and experiences of practitioners who design, facilitate and deliver deliberative processes in real-world contexts - our team and our expert collaborators we work alongside.

This guide offers peer-to-peer lessons:

- What works in practice
- What to consider
- How to prepare organisations for deliberation
- How to support communities to participate meaningfully regardless of their background or confidence level.

We hope our webinar and this accompanying guide helps you build the confidence, clarity and capability to bring deliberative principles into your own work - and to do it in a way that works for your community, your organisation and the decisions you are facing.



Photo credit: Tom Payne

WHAT DELIBERATIVE ENGAGEMENT IS (AND ISN'T)

Deliberative engagement is a deeper, more considered form of engagement that creates the conditions for communities to learn, think, talk, listen and weigh up issues together.

It aims to bring the community closer to the decisions that impact them and support decision makers with well-informed and considered advice.

Unlike traditional engagement methods - which often capture top-of-mind views through surveys, drop-ins or focus groups - deliberative processes slow things down. It takes a little more planning and commitment, but it gives people time, information and support to move beyond quick opinions to well-informed recommendations.

Deliberative processes bring together a diverse and representative group of people, build their understanding through balanced information and expert input and support them to reflect collectively before forming recommendations.

Although deliberative engagement would be considered to be at the further end of the IAP2 spectrum - closer to collaborate and empower - it doesn't replace the ultimate decision-making powers of elected representatives.

How does deliberative engagement differ from traditional engagement?



Traditional engagement

- Many voices
- Top of mind
- Quick input



Deliberative engagement

- Diverse voices
- Capacity building
- Deeper discussion
- More considered feedback and advice

Figure 1 - IAP2 spectrum of engagement





Photo credit: Honeydiou Photography

THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF DELIBERATIVE ENGAGEMENT

Deliberative engagement is guided by a set of core principles that create the conditions for fairness, balance and meaningful influence.

While deliberative processes can take different forms and operate at different scales, these principles remain consistent and essential ingredients.

These principles are drawn from best practices and resources that are listed at the end of this guide.

Diversity & inclusion



Deliberation works best when the people in the room represent a 'mini public'.

Bring together a randomly selected, demographically representative (as much as is practicable) cross-section of the community, not just the loudest voices.

Participation should be fair and accessible - think about timing, location, payment of stipends, catering, childcare support, transport support and cultural safety.

“When we asked people Is this familiar to you? Is this your community? - Everyone was nodding, saying, yes, this is a microcosm of my community. I recognise who I’m seeing here.”

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Learning



Participants need balanced, accessible and credible information to make informed choices.

This includes in-depth information and access to experts allowing them to hear different perspectives, weigh up trade-offs and formulate balanced advice.

“We were really keen to make sure that the technical assessments informed the community discussions, and likewise, the community responses and discussions then iterated the technical assessments, so that qualitative information we were getting from community was really central to the process”.

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Time



Deliberation requires time for people to absorb information, hear different perspectives and reflect on their views.

The process cannot be rushed. Time is what allows people to shift from top-of-mind reactions to thoughtful, collective judgment.

“You can overcome issues that we see in other engagement, where you don’t get the diversity of voices, or don’t have the time to have considered input.”

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Respectful dialogue



Deliberation is built on trust, openness and fairness.

Independent facilitation supports a respectful and balanced process where all voices are heard and disagreement is handled constructively. It's important to create an environment where participants feel safe to express uncertainty, ask questions and change their mind.

“There’s often a burning desire from public servants’ to step in and manage a conversation that may be feeling like it’s going awry - but you have to step back and trust the process.”

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Transparency



Be clear about the purpose, the process and how the outcomes will be used in decision-making.

Start with a clear remit - a plain English question or challenge so participants understand the task and the influence their recommendations will have.

Make it clear what is negotiable, what isn't, and how their advice will be used in the decision-making process.

Reporting should reflect the groups own words and sentiment.

“You have to be crystal clear about what’s in and what’s out of the scope of what you’re asking people to do.”

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Influence



Deliberative processes must have real influence.

Participants need to know their recommendations will be genuinely considered and responded to, even though elected representatives remain the final decision-makers.

“You need to be laser-focused and honest about what your promise is and what you’re going to do with the recommendations or the feedback that comes back. There’s nothing that erodes trust more than promising that this will have a huge impact, and then just filing that report on a shelf.”

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DIFFERENT SCALES OF DELIBERATIVE ENGAGEMENT

From workshops to citizens juries

There are several ways to design a deliberative engagement process, from full citizens' juries to single-session workshops. What matters most is that the process aligns with the core principles of deliberation and gives people the time, structure and support to think deeply, hear different perspectives and form well-considered advice.

The best format for your project will depend on:

- The complexity of the issue
- The depth of insight needed
- Available time and resources
- Organisational readiness
- Community context and expectations.

There are many forms of deliberative engagement to explore. *The Centre for Deliberative Democracy Guidebook for Deliberative Engagement: Key Features and Practical Insights* lists the following:

- Citizens' Jury
- Citizens' Assembly
- Participatory Budgeting
- Deliberative Opinion Poll
- Deliberative Town Hall
- Citizen Initiative Review
- Kitchen Table Conversations
- Deliberative Workshop
- Planning Cell
- Deliberative Mapping

CRED has partnered with a range of government clients to design and deliver deliberative processes - from one-day mini-publics to multi-session community panels that build capacity, confidence and shared understanding over time.

The table on the following page provides a simple guide to the three most common deliberative formats and when to use each.

**56% of Australians
report they would be
likely to participate in
a deliberative forum
if invited**

UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA, 2025

	Citizens' Jury	Deliberative Community Panel	Deliberative Workshop / Mini-Public
Who	30-50 randomly selected, demographically representative participants	10-30 participants, independently recruited and representative	20-50+ participants (random selection where possible)
Duration	Full days over weeks or months	Multiple sessions (e.g. 2-4 half or full days)	One day or short series
When to use it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complex decisions with significant trade-offs. • Issues with major community impact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic planning, visions, policy work • When time or resources are moderate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medium-scale issues where decisions are important but not as far-reaching. • Limited time or budget. • Organisations “testing the waters” with deliberation.
Why it works	Provides the deepest level of learning, reflection and consensus-building, producing detailed recommendations.	Still deliberative, but more focused and flexible than a full citizens jury.	Makes deliberation more accessible, while still producing thoughtful, representative insights.



PRACTITIONER REAL-WORLD TIPS

These practical tips are drawn from practitioners delivering deliberative engagement across local and state government, as shared in our CREducation webinar.

01

Use broad early engagement phases to “seed” your panel

Consider recruiting your community panel from early engagement participants. This can enable a level of knowledge and readiness to go deeper on the subject.



Photo credit: Cassandra Hannagan

02

Let participants interrogate experts

Invite experts in and enable community panel participants to interview them and ask questions that help clarify complex content and build credibility and trust.



Photo credit: Fancy Boy Photography

03

A clear remit makes complexity accessible

Use a simple, focused question to guide the work of the panel. This will help to provide structure to broad and complex topics, help participants stay focused, weigh up trade-offs and work toward an actionable set of recommendations.



Photo credit: Honeydieu Photography



04

Make knowledge exchange two way

A community panel can help to develop tricky policy. Iterate over a number of sessions so subject expertise and community insight strengthen each other.



05

Make complexity digestible and interactive

Present content visually, in bite-sized chunks and use interactive and fun ways for people to engage with it. This will help make the information more accessible without oversimplifying the challenge.



06

Embed First Nations expertise early and with purpose

First Nations experts bring lived, cultural and intergenerational knowledge that grounds conversation in place. Making space for these perspectives enriches a panel's understanding of resilience, care and responsibility.

07

Use a low-commitment format to test deliberation

Try a lower scale engagement process, like a one/half day workshop to “test the waters”. A lower time commitment can reduce barriers to participation and make it easier for organisations to trial a new approach without the commitment and intensity of a multi-day panel.

08

A condensed format can work at scale when the design is right

A large one or half-day deliberative forum can still deliver depth when participants are demographically diverse and the process is well structured. Breakout groups, roaming facilitators and clear prompts can ensure that considered insights are gathered.

09

Identify and support your internal champions

Trialling a new engagement approach often depends on having people inside your organisation who are willing to advocate for doing things differently.

THE REAL WORLD BENEFITS OF DELIBERATIVE ENGAGEMENT

Deliberative engagement is a deeper form of participation that supports better decisions and more meaningful community participation. When people are given the time, information and support to think together, it delivers value for decision-makers and is, by all accounts, a satisfying and empowering experience for participants.

What decision-makers gain

Greater legitimacy and confidence

Advice from a representative community panel carries weight. Decision-makers can be confident that recommendations reflect the broader community, not just the loudest voices.

Better-quality advice and insight

Deliberation produces thoughtful, balanced recommendations that go beyond surface-level opinion. When designed right, the outputs are grounded in evidence, lived experience and an understanding of trade-offs.

Clear understanding of community values and thresholds

Deliberation helps decision-makers understand what communities value, what they will tolerate and where the lines are.

Stronger foundations for implementation

Decisions informed by deliberation are often easier to communicate and implement, because the rationale has been tested and shaped with the community.

**More than half (54%)
of Australians view
deliberative forums as a
sign that politicians are
responsive – that they
value input and ideas of
ordinary people.**

UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA, 2025

“The biggest benefit for government is that they can have confidence in their own decision making. It’s an amazing experience to be part of. It offers legitimacy of a project or process, especially a complex or contested one. And there’s a real confidence that comes with that.”

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What communities gain

A meaningful role in shaping decisions and increased trust in the process

Participants move beyond reactive feedback to actively shaping advice that matters. Transparent, respectful processes help rebuild trust, even when final decisions don't align perfectly with individual preferences.

“Decision-makers are still the final decision-makers, but what they are doing is empowering the community to make the strongest possible recommendations.”

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Confidence, capability and civic pride

Many participants describe deliberation as empowering - gaining confidence in their ability to contribute and a stronger connection to their community.

Time and space to learn and reflect

Deliberative processes allow people to understand complex issues, ask questions and consider different perspectives before forming views.

Connection and empathy across difference

Hearing from others with different experiences often shifts perspectives and builds mutual understanding.

“I liked the cross section of people from the LGA who attended and liked hearing the various views on important issues were - even if I did not agree with them.”

DELIBERATIVE ENGAGEMENT FORUM
PARTICIPANT (LED BY CRED)



Photo credit: Tom Payne

PRACTITIONER CHECKLIST: DESIGNING EFFECTIVE DELIBERATIVE ENGAGEMENT

There is no single “right” model for deliberative engagement. What matters is designing a process that is aligned to the principles and grounded in the realities of your organisation and community.

This checklist provides a starting point to designing a deliberative process that enables community participation in decision making.

1. Start with the right issue

- Is the issue complex or contested? If yes, would deeper understanding improve decision-making?
- Is deliberation appropriate, or would traditional engagement suffice?

2. Be clear about purpose and influence

- Can you articulate the challenge in plain English?
- Have you committed to how recommendations will be considered and responded to?
- Is it clear what is negotiable and what is not?

3. Choose the right scale

- Does the format match available time, budget and organisational readiness?
- Do you need deep, consensus-based advice (jury or panel) or would a shorter or lower-commitment format suffice?

4. Create the conditions for learning

- Is information being presented balanced, accessible and credible?
 - Are there opportunities for participants to interrogate experts and ask questions?
 - Who are the subject matter experts? (also considering lived experience especially First Nations peoples)
 - Are there opportunities for participants to consider and share their lived experience?
-

5. Build in time for deep thinking

- Does the process allow time to absorb information and reflect? Avoid rushing to outcomes.
- How much time is there between sessions? (enough to allow contemplation but not too much to lose momentum.)
- Are participants able to revisit and refine their views?

6. Design a strong participant experience

- Is the process structured, well-paced and expertly facilitated?
- Are materials clear and accessible?
- Are you using different ways of learning and interactive formats? (videos, games, drawing, writing, storytelling and fun prompts)
- Are there activities for group-building to build trust and connection?
- Does the environment support respectful dialogue and safety?
- How will you create a culturally safe and accessible space?

7. Independence and facilitation quality

- Are facilitators neutral and experienced in deliberation?

8. Close the loop visibly

- Are outcomes reported in participants' own words?
 - Will decision-makers publicly respond to recommendations?
 - Will participants be told how their advice influenced decisions?
-

Want to design more meaningful community participation?

If you're exploring how to bring deliberative engagement into your work - or want to strengthen how your community participates in decision making - let's talk.

At CRED, enabling community participation in decision making is at the heart of what we do. Our team designs and delivers deliberative processes that build trust, amplify diverse voices and support better, more informed decisions.


We work alongside councils, state agencies and communities across Australia to:

- design deliberative engagement processes tailored to your context
- select the right scale and approach - from workshops to community panels
- support organisational readiness and internal alignment
- facilitate inclusive, well-structured and meaningful participation
- translate community insight into clear, actionable outcomes.




Photo credit: Fancy Boy Photography

Get in touch!

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USEFUL RESOURCES & REFERENCES

University of Canberra (2025), [Guidebook for Deliberative engagement: Key features and practical insights](#), Centre for Deliberative Engagement, University of Canberra, 2025

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Photo credit: Fancy Boy Photography



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