

FIRST NATION WOMEN'S ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

Connecting Lives – Building Lives



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander users are warned that this document may contain may contain images of deceased persons.

We acknowledge and pay our respects to the traditional custodians of the Kamilaroi, Gamilaraay, Gomeri Country and recognise Aboriginal Elders past, present and future.

Abstract

The aim of the National Rural Women's Coalition's Connecting Lives – Building Lives project is to develop a framework and strategy for engaging with First Nation women. The framework will aid community groups and government to engage more effectively with these women and assist in strengthening the women's voices for change. It will ensure consistency in the way engagement is planned, supported and enhanced by the women themselves and associated consultants and groups across the community and government.

Introduction

This engagement strategy has been developed out of learnings from three forums supported by the National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC) Connecting Lives in 2015, Celebration of Success International Women's Day 2016 and Building Lives in 2017, championed by our Aboriginal Board Director, Lisa Shipley and supported by the NRWC President Alwyn Friedersdorff.

The NRWC found that the Gomilaroi women we engaged with preferred to share information in more traditional manners, through story-telling and dance as well as singing. This proved to relax the communication channels and encouraged participation from more participants by providing comfortable forms of communication rather than being forced to communicate in a more formal manner. Much of the conversations were held outside, in the natural environment, and this also provided the sense of connection and comfort required for First Nation women to open up and communicate their needs.

The aim of these forums was to develop a framework and strategy for engaging with First Nation women. The framework will aid community groups and government to engage more effectively with these women and assist in strengthening the women's voices for change. It will ensure consistency in the way engagement is planned, supported and enhanced by the women themselves and associated consultants and groups across the community and government.

This strategy will assist policy makers, influencers and community groups to understand how to effectively engage with First Nation women, what the expectations of communication are, what culturally safe practices are and how to respectfully gain the information required whilst working within a culturally safe environment. This document will also identify a set of principles that shape how groups can effectively engage with First Nation women. These principals will also encourage local communities and government partners to play an active role in planning for the future of First Nation communities by addressing the most important needs of each community effectively and in a timely manner.

Our engagement aims

The aim of this strategy is to provide a framework that enables First Nation women, policy makers, community groups, Government and NGO's to build cohesive and sustainable relationships through meaningful, informed and genuine participation across all levels of decision making. It will draw from contemporary models of community engagement and ensure local decision-making processes are in keeping with Indigenous women's community expectations.

The overall aims of this strategy are to:

- Establish a framework to ensure meaningful, informed and genuine community participation is active in all First Nations related decision-making;
- Establish an environment in which the local community can exchange views, ideas and information in a safe and culturally safe environment;
- Provide a consistent approach across communities and ensure that all consultation processes and community engagement activities are focused and effective – using active listening to gain insights into the actual needs of the communities;
- Strengthen partnerships between local First Nation communities, the broader community, local organisations, government stakeholders and service providers;
- Be proactive and open to new and innovative ways to consult and maintain ongoing engagement with all First Nations people.

Learnings

It is important to create an environment that is safe, empowering, non-threatening, and comfortable. It is important to ensure that diversity of the group is managed including delegates mobility requirements.

The women needed to feel free to move around, an outside area is required for those wishing to not remain indoors for the duration of discussions. A combination of inside and outside consultation seemed most effective.

When will engagement occur?

- New government initiatives – the community should be included in discussions about the direction of initiatives through planned discussions;
- Policy development and implementation;
- Significant programme developments and/or changes;
- Notification of legislative initiatives;
- When the community have matters to raise and wish to make a submission to government about urgent needs/issues.

Principles for Effective Engagement

To be effective, engagement must be based on openness, trust, integrity, and mutual respect for the legitimacy and point of view of all participants. How to effectively consult and engage with First Nations women must be considered in the initial stages of planning for any policy, project and/or activity.

Effective engagement is a sustained process that provides First Nation women with the opportunity to actively participate across all stages of planning from the initial issue identified through to development, implementation and evaluation.

The NRWC has learnt that all engagement must be undertaken with an understanding and appreciation of the diversity of First Nation women and grounded within an historical and cultural context.

The following principles are a guide to how this engagement should occur:

(1) Inclusiveness and Diversity

Valuing and recognising the diversity of the community in which you are engaging is the most important start to a successful engagement strategy. The different strengths of each group and the individuals in each group must be recognised, drawn out and used for successful information gathering.

First Nation women need to feel safe and empowered to have their voices heard through effective, appropriate and culturally safe consultation practices. When engaging it is important to proactively reach out to individuals and seek to widen participation by taking steps to be accessible and inclusive.

Learnings

Ensure cultural protocols are followed during introductions. It was noted that an Auntie started this at the campfire on the first night and it was mentioned again the next day. It allows the women to understand where they are related and if not related where others are from. It is about connection.

(2) Openness, Respect and Accountability

All communication should begin in an open and respectful manner, with clear lines of accountability. This does not mean that consultation will always lead to agreement or that decisions are subject to consensus; however, it should lead to a better understanding of the issues, a mutual respect for different points of view and contribute to informed, workable solutions. The outcome of any engagement or consultation should not be pre-determined.

All engagement and consultation with First Nations women should be conducted with integrity, transparency and mutual trust to preserve credibility of the engagement. The agenda and process should be clear from the beginning and communicated to **all** participants to ensure that they feel comfortable and any constraints should be considered from the outset of any project.

Learnings

In any engagement it is important to accommodate the intergenerational way that Aboriginal women pass on knowledge and create community strength. At both engagement events women often came supported with at least one other related person. An Elder with a granddaughter, a mother with a daughter, an aunt with a niece.

(3) Leadership

Leadership is not about telling others what to do. Rather it is the ability to support and facilitate discussion through best practise consultation and engagement to represent the wider community interests and ensure that recommendations do not only represent specific sectional interests.

It is important to ensure that if a leader is appointed to speak within a group of First Nation women that all of the women are comfortable with this person being a leader and speaking for them. The leader should also be aware that whilst the group at times would prefer them to take the lead that sometimes when they need to speak the leader needs to recognise this, and facilitate the communication. Often using open ended questions and throwing back to the group can ease the participants back into the conversation.

Leadership amongst First Nation women is also closely related to cultural hierarchy within the community and this is of great importance in the developing stages of any consultation or engagement strategy.

An effective engagement strategy will successfully create a strong partnership with the community and be able to translate this into further advocacy after the engagement. This also helps to build capacity between the community and stakeholders and creates a shared ownership and commitment to specific process.

Learnings

The choice of timing for engagement is important – media interest assists in gaining momentum and interest within the community to ensure attendance.

Ensure facilitation of travel for Elders to attend and ensure that cultural hierarchy is respected in who arrives first and how the elders are provided with food, accommodation and communicated with.

Purpose

It is critical that a clear purpose is established for all community consultation and engagement activities. This should be clearly explained and shared amongst the community early, and as often as possible, on as many different mediums as possible, to ensure that the whole community is aware of the engagement project.

This approach provides a sound foundation for the planning, review and evaluation of all projects, and ensures that the types of consultation methods employed are appropriate to the cultural group and required project outcomes.

Having a clear purpose provides direction and guidance for the local community and key stakeholders as to the reasons for the consultation being conducted. When clearly communicated to all participants, it also provides realistic expectations, understanding and transparency of the process.

Information Sharing

Providing clear, 'jargon-free' information in a timely manner is the basis of quality engagement and effective consultation with the Indigenous women's community. Well communicated information can motivate, increase interest and create a willingness to be engaged in a specific project.

Critical to making informed decisions, information shared and gathered should be as accurate as possible. Information sharing must be reciprocal and relies on the involvement of participants in maintaining a flow of information and the commitment to be open to different views and issues.

Information can be provided in a number of formats such as written and verbal communication; through group discussions; e-consultation; statistical information; maps and plans; graphs; photographs; narratives – story-telling and art.

Learnings

In any engagement music is an important element to create a relaxed and open atmosphere, it creates a time of sharing and of memories - nostalgic, sad & happy. Singing is a way of telling stories and having fun.

The campfire is also a centre piece for many – a place to feel comfort, share stories and be together.

Feedback and Evaluation

Closing the 'consultation loop' and informing participants how their opinions and information have contributed to outcomes is very important. Providing participants with feedback is important in respecting the partnership and maintaining ongoing engagement with the local community.

The views and comments of participants specific to the consultation process itself is a valuable learning tool. Candid evaluation at the conclusion of each consultation program will ensure that each engagement opportunity continues to improve how consultation is carried out in the future. It should include questions regarding the values of the process; whether the stated objectives and purpose was clear and achieved and whether the methods used were suitable for each community involved.

Resourcing and Timing

Building capacity may take time, particularly in engaging those who are “hard to reach” and disengaged. It is vitally important that the local community is provided time to develop relationships, and any consultation methods and approach must consider this.

It is important that participants have a realistic idea of how much time consultation is likely to take in the overall preparation and implementation of the specific project. Timing of consultation also ensures quality feedback and engagement with the local community. In terms of gaining maximum participation possible, the local community should be advised of any consultation at the earliest possible stage of the project. It is important that the timing of any consultation process must consider previous, current and future engagement activities of other interest groups to avoid consultation fatigue by the local community.

The specific financial costs involved in conducting consultation must be understood when planning any consultation process or activity. The sharing of information and resources can provide a reduction in financial costs while still achieving positive outcomes and wide participation. Often it may be worth considering multiple consultations with various interest groups to avoid consultation fatigue.

Learnings

NRWC has developed a kit for engagement including invitations, logos, event run sheet, photographic consent forms, registration forms and accident forms. Further the attached checklist and range of other support documents would be useful to develop as future projects.

What didn't work

The National Rural Women's Coalition has learnt variously that:

- Hurried consultation developments, that are organised without First Nation women's input and do not take into account specific social, cultural, emotional and spiritual needs will fail;
- Appropriate and culturally acceptable facilitators should be sourced;
- Not recognising the diversity of First Nation women is a failure point as if this is poorly managed there is difficulty in achieving any outcomes due to conflict management;
- Managing issues and possible conflicts within the community need to be dealt with in the community and external engagement parties should remain uninvolved;
- It is important to note that communities of First Nation women share different families, (some linked to the land by birth, some historically and some by marriage), clans, nations, languages and hierarchy – there will be a complex mix of people with over-lapping rights and interests – if these matters are not identified and managed then outcomes will be delayed;
- Trying to tame the chaos and complexity of communications will not be effective, the groups must be allowed to manage their way through the communication in a

culturally appropriate manner – it is vitally important to understand the protocols of First Nation women’s communication styles.

Focus Areas

It is important that engagement has the source of First Nation women’s culture at the heart of all practices and initiatives and ideally will focus on the following areas:

<p>1. Acknowledgement and Respect</p>	<p>Acknowledge and respect the diversity and history of First Nation women every time the community meets.</p> <p>Increase awareness and recognition of culture and history through practices and service delivery.</p> <p>Ability to tune into the cultural nuances of each woman’s community and the ability to be adaptive and responsive to emerging issues is paramount to successful engagement.</p>
<p>2. Relationships and Engagement</p>	<p>Establish social and professional networks to provide more opportunities that will build on the strengths of First Nation women</p>
<p>3. Community Development & Capacity Building</p>	<p>Increase participation, promote a collaborative approach to responding to local needs and build skills that create opportunities to support First Nation women to achieve self-reliance and sustainability and economic security</p>
<p>4. Continuous Improvement</p>	<p>Learn from experiences and share progress of First Nation women’s engagement strategy across the community and with government through an outcomes based approach.</p>

(1) Acknowledgement and Respect

All engagement should be based on a commitment to forging stronger relationships through mutual respect and understanding of the historical contexts of First Nations women in Australia. Practices and service delivery must acknowledge and respect the diversity of First Nation women while respecting and valuing the roles they play within their communities.

Objective: To increase the awareness and recognition of First Nation culture and history through practices and service delivery.

What will we do?	How will we measure this?
Acknowledgement of traditional custodians of the land at all engagement gatherings and occasions.	Record of acknowledgement of traditional custodians of the land in any minutes taken.
Develop Cultural Protocols to provide effective and respectful manners of communication with First Nation women including Welcome to Country, Acknowledgement of Country and Elders. Management of appropriate cultural hierarchy in any engagement occasions.	Cultural Protocols will be recorded for future reference and use. Cultural Protocols briefing conducted at all engagement occasions and with all related consultants and participants.
Traditional Owners invited to conduct a Welcome to Country at all engagement occasions.	Budget allocation for engagement occasions to include a Welcome to Country. A comprehensive record of the number of Welcome to Country ceremonies delivered by Traditional Owners kept by relevant engagement parties.
Interpretative signage included in engagement documentation where appropriate.	Level of recognition of culture and natural heritage in all engagement documentation.

(2) Relationships and Engagement

All engagement participants should acknowledge that relationships with First Nation women build over time and form the foundation to achieve positive outcomes. Engagement participants should be committed to building mutually respectful relationships between First Nation women and other Australians that foster working relationships to solve problems and generate success that is in everyone's best interest.

Objective: To build and maintain effective social and professional networks to provide more opportunities that may lead to better outcomes for First Nation women within our towns.

What will we do?	How will we measure this?
Where possible establish First Nation women's Advisory Groups to provide ongoing consultation with community and	Draft a Terms of Reference for First Nations Women's Advisory Group. Establishment of a First Nations Women's

Government/Consultants/Policy Makers and Influencers.	Advisory Group with representatives from various regions across Australia.
Communicate partnership opportunities with Indigenous corporations – developed from engagement opportunities.	Number of Indigenous Corporation connections made.
Engage with representative Indigenous groups in considering land matters that may affect women’s interests, as well as responsible use of resources for environmental sustainability from a women’s perspective.	Record of invitation to consult and consultation with Indigenous representatives in Land Management.
Conduct feasibility study of supplier diversity policy, promoting use/engagement of Indigenous corporations/companies.	Report with recommendations regarding supplier diversity policy.

(3) Community Development and Capacity Building

Community organisations play an important role in developing a cohesive and vibrant community, celebrating diversity and creating a sense of place and connection. A commitment should be developed to supporting indigenous women’s community organisations to provide programs and projects that respond to indigenous women’s local needs and make a positive contribution to indigenous community development.

Objective: To increase community participation, promote a collaborative approach to responding to First Nation women’s needs and build skills and opportunities to support the community to achieve self-reliance and sustainability.

What will we do?	How will we measure this?
Facilitate opportunities for Indigenous groups to network in the community.	Number of First Nation women’s groups represented at engagement and networking activities and meetings.
Seek opportunities to develop partnerships with First Nation women’s organisations and community groups to deliver programs, services and projects.	Number of partnerships formed to deliver programs, services and projects including cultural events.

(4) Continuous Improvement

Embedding First Nation Women’s Engagement initiatives will be a core operational outcome in all engagement activities. To ensure inclusive service delivery and culturally safe engagement progress will be monitored by the Independent Aboriginal Director through annual reporting on the First Nation Women’s Engagement Strategy through National Rural Women’s Coalition (NRWC).

Objective: To learn from experiences and share the progress of First Nation Women’s Engagement Strategy across the community.

What will we do?	How will we measure this?
Conduct an annual review and refresh of the First Nation Women’s Engagement Strategy.	Completed report on progress of Indigenous Engagement initiatives.
Report progress on First Nation Women’s Engagement Strategy to the Office for Women and alliance partners.	Progress reported through NRWC Board, to Government and via social media.

First Nation Women's Engagement Checklist

First Nation Women's Engagement Title:	Engagement Partner / Consultant:
Start Date: 00 / 00 / 00	Finish Date: 00 / 00 / 00
Brief Description:	

Start Up	Check
Define the objectives and scope of the engagement:	
Compile all background and previous engagement information/ report:	
Assess the level of engagement / impact:	
Compile a detailed list of all internal and external stakeholders:	
Create a detailed list of what level of engagement will be conducted with each stakeholder; and how (the methods) they will be engaged:	
Develop a detailed Indigenous Community Engagement Plan:	
Develop a list of tasks: [who, what, when & status] (remove, change or add more as required)	
Communications	Check
Draft all communication documents (media releases, fact sheets, etc):	
Proofread all documents before approval/ signing off:	
Coordinate the print and upload documents to appropriate social media:	
Organise the distribution of documents and information:	
Review and update contact information of stakeholders:	
Evaluate the Communications tasks and make improvements as required: (remove, change or add more as required)	
Community Engagement	Check
Organise community interactions depending on techniques chosen:	
Set-up internal communication channels to maintain flow of information	

Coordinate documents, activities for community engagement with time frames Book meeting venues, equipment, catering etc :	
Contact key stakeholders begin and maintain dialogue:	
Workshop selected engagement techniques if required:	
Prepare for collation of feedback from communities:	
Evaluate the engagement tasks and make any necessary improvements: (remove, change or add more as required)	
Recording	Check
Collate and analyse feedback:	
Respond to enquiries from stakeholders and record any new information Evaluate the recording tasks and make any necessary improvements: (remove, change or add more as required)	
Feedback	Check
Draft Feedback Report:	
Develop an implementation Plan:	
Distribute feedback report to all interest parties and stakeholders:	
Evaluate the feedback and reporting tasks and make any necessary improvements: (remove, change or add more as required)	
Final Evaluation	Check
Effectiveness of the community engagement process assessed:	
Document key areas of improvement for each set of tasks and feedback any recommendation for improvement of future engagements: (remove, change or add more as required)	