

Community Engagement Playbook

Best practices for driving community participation in your grant programs.

Introduction: The Power of Participation

A council grant program is more than just a mechanism for distributing funds; it is a powerful tool for building a stronger, more connected, and more resilient community. The success of your grant program is not just measured by the projects you fund, but by the breadth and depth of community participation you inspire. This playbook provides a practical framework for embedding genuine community engagement into every stage of your grant program lifecycle.

Phase 1: Program Design & Promotion

Co-Design Your Program

Host community forums, workshops, or online surveys to gather input on the goals and priorities of your grant program. Ask residents what they believe are the most pressing needs and opportunities in their local area. Co-design builds a sense of ownership and ensures the program is relevant.

Promote Widely and Creatively

Don't rely on your council website alone. Use a multi-channel approach: local newspapers, community radio, social media, library noticeboards, and newsletters of local community organisations. A diverse promotional strategy ensures you reach all corners of your community, including CALD groups, seniors, and young people.

Create Clear and Accessible Information

Write your grant guidelines in plain English. Avoid jargon and bureaucratic language. Consider creating a one-page summary or an explainer video. Complex and intimidating application processes are a major barrier to entry, particularly for grassroots organisations and first-time applicants.

Phase 2: Application & Support

Host Information Sessions

Run free workshops (both online and in-person) that walk potential applicants through the guidelines, offer grant writing tips, and provide a forum for questions. Information sessions demystify the application process and give applicants the confidence to apply.

Be Available and Responsive

Provide a dedicated contact person (phone and email) for all grant-related enquiries. Set a clear service standard for responding to questions (e.g., within 48 hours). A simple clarifying question can be the difference between a completed and an abandoned application.

Partner with Community Leaders

Engage with established community leaders, networks, and cultural organisations. Ask them to act as ambassadors for your grant program. These leaders have trusted relationships and deep connections within their communities, allowing you to reach groups that council may struggle to engage directly.

Phase 3: Assessment & Decision-Making

Establish a Community Assessment Panel

Recruit a diverse panel of community members to assess applications and make funding recommendations. Provide clear training and a scoring rubric to ensure consistency. A community panel brings local knowledge and lived experience to the decision-making process.

Communicate the Process Clearly

Be transparent about how decisions are made. Publish the names of your assessment panel members and the criteria they will be using. Transparency builds trust in the fairness and integrity of the program.

Provide Feedback to All Applicants

Provide constructive feedback to both successful and unsuccessful applicants. A simple phone call or a few personalised dot points can make a huge difference. Feedback helps unsuccessful applicants learn and improve, encouraging them to apply again in the future.

Phase 4: Celebration & Storytelling

Celebrate Your Grantees

Host a small awards ceremony or morning tea to publicly congratulate your successful grantees. Announce the results in a media release and on your council's social media channels. Public recognition validates the work of community organisations and inspires others to get involved.

Become a Storyteller

Work with your grantees to collect stories, photos, and videos that showcase the impact of their projects. Share these stories throughout the year on your website, in newsletters, and in your annual report. Stories are the most powerful way to demonstrate the value of your grant program.

Create a Feedback Loop

Survey your grantees and unsuccessful applicants at the end of each funding cycle. Ask for their feedback on the process and what could be improved. A commitment to continuous improvement ensures your grant program remains relevant, effective, and user-friendly.