



Leading the Agenda in September 'Wrap Up'
Addressing Systemic Barriers to Councils' Community Engagement
[Video Link](#)

Presented in partnership with *Leading the Agenda* sponsors Pitcher Partners on Thursday 19 September 2019
September *Leading the Agenda* co-presented with Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria (ECCV)

Moderated by **Ross Barnett**, Multicultural and Aboriginal Strategic Planner, City of Whittlesea, the panel included: **Mehak Sheikh** - Founder, U-Learn Life Skills & Emotional Intelligence Workshops; **Sheena Watt** - Executive Manager, Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Policy Programs, AFL SportsReady and **Lilian Topic** - Secretary, Legal & Social Issues Committee, Parliament of Victoria.

Ross Barnett introduced topic and panel

The *Local Government Bill 2018* (new Bill pending) specifies that councils have a community consultation and engagement strategy. Typically, local government says the right things, but doesn't always have the substance, so tonight's panel will investigate systemic barriers and solutions.

Sheena has spoken to eminent Aboriginal leaders who say they don't have anything to do with local government, so something is very wrong. Councils have made commitments to issues affecting Aboriginal communities and have set up advisory committees; some councils are doing it really well and others have a long way to go. It shouldn't make a difference for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people which council area they live in.

Mehak works in community management with youth, migrants and refugees. Community engagement is relationship building. What kind of investment do we make in getting to know people? People are at the core: they need to be included and have their needs heard. Then they can be involved in decisions that affect them.

Lilian: Parliament is the most risk-averse organisation there is. When developing policy, if you don't talk to people affected by it, their lives can be ruined. When parliament takes risks, there can be excellent results. There was an open mic session for a recent inquiry on criminal convictions – this was a first – and such a great success people had to be turned away. The situation for some people will not change, but they wanted to ensure better outcomes for others. Nothing is better for parliamentarians than meeting people face to face. People ask, why do an inquiry into homelessness, there is no solution. The challenge is actually how to talk to people who have no address. Direct consultation is the best approach: via social media engagement, online or written submissions, come to a hearing, site visits, etc.

How can we improve the relationship between community and Local Government?

Mehak: What allows people to reach their potential? Empowerment and information to support decision-making. This is the piece that is missing for youth in the community in the Western suburbs. They are told, you must *sit* on this committee or *fit* into this framework, rather than here is a mentor, or let's have young people supporting each other. Let's throw a ball around and talk about ideas. Don't underestimate a 23-year-old! We

don't facilitate enough spaces for communities to acknowledge and build on their strengths. We should bring that wisdom to the mainstream conversation.

How can marginalised people have a voice?

Sheena: The last local government advisory committee she was on included a diverse group of young people. Sheena was expected to represent the views of Indigenous Victorians, which included intersections that she had not experienced, i.e. homeless young people and people with disabilities. Sometimes the door is opened a tiny crack – one “representative” invited – and she needs to decide if she can carry the expectations for her whole community on this issue, be their voice. Sheena is regularly seen as the designated Aboriginal voice on boards or advisory committees, but this is not the case. She often gets to be there because she is known and trusted, so if she can't bear the burden of being that voice, there is not necessarily another Aboriginal person behind her to take that place.

Often, it's not helpful to be the only woman, or the only young person, or the only Aboriginal person in the room. This needs to be more widely understood.

Lilian: Parliamentarians feel a certain terror about meeting people with lived experience, but then discover they are “normal people” with a bad experience or some damage in their life.

Mehak: Everyone talks about “co-designing” strategy and programs. This means that the person who is the end user was there when you first decided to create it. This is often not the case. *Multiple* people with lived experience need to be in the room.

Lilian: Innovation: ask people how they want to be consulted!

How is feedback incorporated; how do we move into a collaborative space?

Sheena: It's important to value the lived experience and knowledge of community groups, not dismiss it. Sheena has had to walk away from advisory groups in local government (as recently as two weeks ago), because her insights, personal experience and intergenerational trauma were disclosed and then dismissed out of hand.

Mehak: Community engagement needs to be in the space of the community and on their terms. You can't invite young people into a boardroom. If it's not working, it may not be the right question, or power may not be shared.

Do we need to reframe the whole idea of consultation?

Lilian: We need to make it more layered, by making sure we are talking to diverse groups, in different regions. Every issue or story has layers. Success is much more likely if parliamentarians go out, rather than inviting groups in. We can't be in a desperate hurry, despite short timelines (often 3 or 5 months to develop policy and legislation); it's vital to take the time to build relationships.

What measures does local government need to take to address these barriers?

Sheena: Diversify councillor ranks – there is only one Aboriginal councillor in Victoria. Diversify the decision-making rooms, not just the advisory. Sheena has been the first Aboriginal person on nine or ten boards, which is the first time these boards have asked, what will be the impact on Aboriginal people of this policy, and often had their ideas challenged.

Mehak: Jim Dees from the US has spoken of *consultation fatigue* – going to the same people repeatedly. Diversify the people and the way consultations are done. Risk pays off. We have created the structures of government, so we can change them.

Lilian: We are willing to take one risk every ten years! Parliament has a clear role: democracy and law. Perhaps local government has to see itself as having a different role: also *educational*, so people feel they are part of local government.

Are we scared of real consultation, of what we will hear?

Lilian: Yes, absolutely, because thinking and policy have to change.

Sheena: Go into consultation with the attitude that this will change us – not a rubber stamp exercise. Engage in consultation not to confirm what we think we know, but to be genuinely informed.

Q&A

Q: Communities have opinion leaders who are the loudest and swallow up all the oxygen in the room. How can Local Government move beyond these groups?

- The same people are always asked. We need to reframe what a community leader looks like. Probe whether young people, for example, are being reached.
- Leadership works differently in different communities. Consider how a woman might present her opinion in a room, or a young person? How are you weighing these contributions? Don't make the loudest voice the most valid, because this disadvantages women, young people, CALD and people with trauma.

Q: Can a group be randomly selected for consultation, and then not be given a predefined set of questions?

- The best evidence-based policy should be the goal, not what the government wants. We often find ourselves in an echo chamber hearing the same things from the same people. Policy makers like control, to set the agenda and have focus when people are invited to give advice.
- The pre-work involves themes and more open discussions, relationship building. Ideally this happens before the consultation. It is important for those setting budgets and resources to remember this. If no one is coming to your community consultation event, ask whether it is relevant to them, whether they have something to say.
- Whittlesea is now taking a more ethnographic approach and talking to people about their lived experience – not a question, or what should we do, but how is your life?

Q: How do you decide if you can represent a diversity of voices from your community?

- These are overwhelmingly voluntary positions. An Aboriginal person is expected to come in knowing what the majority view is without any funding to do their own research. At best, you can pull together a few people or make a few phone calls. Sheena tries to assess these risks and mitigate them, do some initial engagement, ask whether she has some community support before taking on a role (e.g. VicHealth). She doesn't make these decisions alone.
- Allow the community not only to find a solution, but also to identify the problem. Councillors lose empathy as they move up the ranks, even when they start with passion.
- Information can often help communities know what their problems are.
- Self-determination is vital in defining the problem, developing solutions, and delivery. Beware burnout by consultation. (We don't need to engage the CEO of the state peak on how to design a local library.)

- See the work of the Koori Youth Council – they have resources on how to allow groups to be self-determining.

ENDS

Leading the Agenda in October

Please join the VLGA and Pitcher Partners for our next *Leading the Agenda: **One Year Out***, an informative discussion on the governance procedures for the 2020 local government election.

Facilitating the discussion will be Chris Eddy and Bo Li. Chris is a former Local Government CEO and Bo is Senior Policy Advisor, VLGA.

Wednesday 23 October

12pm to 2pm

Pitcher Partners

Level 13, 664 Collins Street Docklands

Lunch will be provided.

[BOOKINGS](#)