

Creating *Creative Communities and Cultural Places*

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Embarking on a new strategy, plan or policy is never an easy undertaking. Cultural Planning is particularly fraught as the first conversation is usually the one about defining what cultural development actually is – what is in the scope and what is not.

In a rapidly growing municipality like Wyndham, planning for cultural development requires a bigger strategic vision than just responding to the local issues right now. We need to plan for a community that hasn't arrived yet, and we can only predict who they might be according to who has come before them.

We also want to discover how to embed arts and culture into the business of Council – where are the connection points and the potential internal partnerships? How might we leverage the many resources of Council to get the best arts and cultural outcomes?

And most importantly, we need to understand what our community needs from us as brokers, not producers, of cultural development. What can we do to support them as they build their own capacity as artists and cultural actors?

So we asked a lot of questions. Firstly through online surveying of the community and the professional practicing artists that call Wyndham home. We asked the community and artists to focus groups to help us nut out some solutions to local issues and the things we hadn't thought of. We asked about what we do well, what we don't do well, what is missing and what we can do to fix that. We asked our community what they really want from us, we asked them to be honest – brutally if necessary, but we asked for the truth.

And then we took a look at ourselves. What are we doing well? What do we need to let go of? Who can we partner with better? And we asked our colleagues from across the organization what they thought too. We ensured that decision-makers from all levels of the organization were invested in the outcome.

Throughout the process we asked the Councillors, as the public face of Council about their vision for arts and culture in Wyndham. We asked them about what they think we need to do better, what is missing and what they see as the long term place of arts and culture in shaping Wyndham's character as a city.

None of these processes are any different to the ways cultural policy has been developed in the past, there's still a consultant, a number of reports and a clearly defined pathway to gain agreement from all of the decision-makers at each step of the process.

The real difference is in the level of engagement that already existed before we began the process. Because good policy is not a one-time thing. To get to the heart of what a community wants and needs a long term investment in continuous relationship building is the real key. For public policy to represent the truth of a community it needs to be reflective of it. For a community to invest in telling

you it's truth it needs to trust you. For communities to trust you, they need to have a relationship with you that lasts beyond consulting them periodically for a strategy or policy or plan.

We continued this conversation through the public comment period by holding a "Community Validation Party" – this event was styled and communicated as not only an opportunity to take a look at the strategy and give feedback, but also as a celebration of the community's own hard work in bringing the strategy into being.

The strategy's nine pages of actions were printed up onto A0 sized sheets and lined up together. Attendees were then invited to use ticks and crosses to validate or invalidate the actions outlined, as well as being able to give more specific written feedback by either directly writing onto the strategy document or by capturing their comments on a pair of "wishing trees". Arts and Culture staff were present alongside Management, Executive and Councillors to talk through concerns and questions about the strategy – this demonstrates the commitment that Council is making to the process and the strategy itself.

Beyond the public comment period, the arts community have been regularly updated about progress on the strategy through the dedicated Wyndham Arts eNews, with further networking/reporting events scheduled to keep the community involved in the process. Actions from the Arts and Culture strategy have also been embedded into Wyndham's City Plan – ensuring that investment into Arts and Culture is viewed as a key part of Council's core business.

Some key thoughts for cultural planners and policy makers to consider are:

1. *Be relevant to where you are* – this happens when you understand the local issues and needs in the context of how a community is evolving.
2. *Create organizational buy-in* – create the conditions where Arts and Culture is embedded in Council business and is supported by decision-makers at all levels of the organization.
3. *Give an opportunity to validate* – the community needs to know that what they have told you is represented in the final document. This is vital not only to build trust, but also to build capacity in a community to be self-actualizing; we as policy makers validate community input as the community validates that what we have said is what they have asked for.
4. *Keep the communication flowing* – without existing relationships, consultation will only happen with those parts of the community that are already empowered enough to be vocal. For a community to be engaged in a process, communication is two-way and continuous. Ideally it is a natural extension of existing relationships, but it can be a process that invites deeper engagement that is sustained beyond the cycle of making a strategy or policy document.

We're really pleased with how *Creative Communities and Cultural Places* has taken shape, and we know that our emerging arts community is too. We know this, because they have told us, and we are still listening.