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GREATER CLARITY NEEDED WHEN GOVERNMENT AGENCIES INVOLVE THE COMMUNITY IN THEIR DECISION-MAKING, SAYS AUDITOR GENERAL

WA government agencies' efforts to develop effective public participation strategies, though in a few cases being recognised internationally as leading edge, have considerable scope for improvement.

A report from Acting Auditor General Colin Murphy tabled in Parliament today has found that whilst there are pockets of excellent practice in Western Australia, these tend to be isolated examples.

In an environment of relatively low confidence in public institutions, it was particularly important that agencies were clear on why they are involving the community, that they make clear how community involvement will influence agency decisions, and follow through on the agreed approach, states Mr Murphy in his overview to the report.

"Demonstrating that their efforts to involve the community are genuine is an important means of building trust," he says.

The report examined the nature and extent of public participation conducted by state government agencies, and involved a detailed review of seven examples of recent public participation conducted by agencies and a broad overview of public participation activity across government in 2005-06.

Primarily, it finds that agencies need to be clearer about why they are involving the public (including the level of involvement they want the public to have), be more accountable for the time and resources spent in involving the public, and keep better records of the costs and benefits of public participation activities.

Mr Murphy's findings included:

- Most public participation involves informing and obtaining feedback. Examination of a large sample of public participation by government agencies in 2005-06, indicates that most public participation in WA aims to inform or obtain feedback on analysis, alternatives, or decisions – none of the 59 public participation projects registered with the Office of Citizens and Civics offered participants more than the opportunity to provide feedback on pre-existing analysis, alternatives, and/or decisions.
- Agencies are not always clear about why they are using public participation. The examination observed an absence of clear objectives, including lack of evident agreement between decision-makers about the reasons for involving the public, with little groundwork to establish and agree the level of influence participants will have over a decision. It also found cases where it was not clear what action agencies have taken as a result of the public participation.
- Agencies typically use traditional methods to identify participants and need to adopt strategies to obtain the views of people who tend not to be involved in public discussion but who may be affected by a decision.
- Record keeping was generally poor, and in the absence of good records:
 - Some agencies could not demonstrate that the public participation represented the views of the community or that resulting decisions were based on community views.
 - Agencies have not retained corporate knowledge about what worked and what did not.
 - Agencies do not know the full cost of public participation activities.

In a first in the reporting of the results of Auditor General's audits and examinations in WA, under the new Auditor General Act proclaimed on 1st February this year, seven agencies were given the opportunity to formally respond to Mr Murphy's findings and recommendations and have these published in his report.

All agencies' responses were positive, agreeing with the findings and indicating it was likely recommendations would be acted upon by these agencies in the future where relevant.

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