Alternative virtual engagement options for the QCoast$_{2100}$ program

25 March 2020

Context

The QCoast$_{2100}$ program is in the final year, and many Councils are progressing towards completion of some or all Phases of developing a Coastal Hazard Adaptation Strategy (CHAS) by October 2020.

The current and emerging situation with the COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to result in a halt or postponement in face-to-face meetings and engagement for several months, and potentially through to the QCoast$_{2100}$ program completion.

For many councils, a change in stakeholder participation (including communication and engagement) approach may be needed to enable technical work and adaptation strategy development to progress.

There are a range of alternative engagement tools and techniques that can be employed to assist with ensuring the CHAS work can continue to progress as planned. Some of these tools may also enhance engagement outcomes beyond the more conventional face-to-face meetings and workshops. Many of these tools and techniques are already being adopted by councils and consultant teams.

This summary note has been prepared to assist all councils and consultant teams with deciding how best to adjust engagement approaches to meet the needs of each CHAS project in light of the current COVID-19 situation.

CHAS engagement needs

The development of a CHAS is following an eight Phase process (Figure 1, http://www.qcoast2100.com.au/). The specific engagement approach and needs of each CHAS are set out in the Phase 1 summary report completed for each project.

At a high level, common purposes for engagement at different phases of the CHAS process include to:

- Create awareness and interest in the project

- Develop a shared understanding of coastal values and coastal hazards

- Inform and shape key elements of the technical work, including the risk assessment and adaptation options

- Inform and shape the final strategy and actions

- Create collaborative partnerships for CHAS implementation.

Figure 1. Project phases
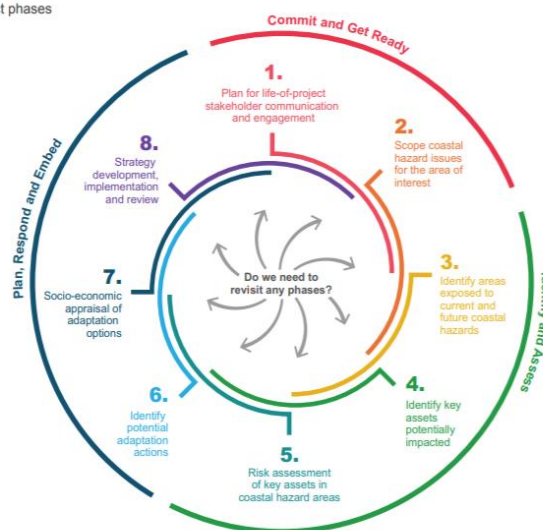
The specifics will vary for individual projects, however common face-to-face engagement activities that are included in the process include:

- Regular meetings and briefings with council and key stakeholders

- Workshops with key stakeholder groups and individuals

- Community events and activities.

Often these engagement activities are supported or complemented with a range of communication tools and resources, including fact sheets, post cards, project updates communicated through web-based, social media and print media forms.

Steps to keep the participatory process moving

In the absence of face-to-face options for engagement, Councils and project teams can adjust their approach detailed in the various communication and engagement plans to keep the CHAS work progressing and deliver quality stakeholder engagement outcomes. Key steps to assist with this include the following.

Review purpose, approach and tasks	1. Review the purpose of stakeholder participation and engagement objectives for each Phase – what outcomes are we seeking from engagement process and what does success look like in context of coastal hazard adaption planning?
	2. Review the original engagement actions and approaches – identify what approaches are no longer appropriate or viable.
	3. Review the priority of each of the objectives and actions, and determine which are a) essential and high priority to undertake, b) important / medium priority, or c) optional / low priority. It may be appropriate that the extent of participation and engagement initiatives (i.e. the optional and low priority) have to be postponed or cancelled.
Select alternatives	4. Propose alternatives that meet the engagement objectives – how can we still achieve the same outcome we are seeking?
	5. Consider the potential limitations and benefits of alternative methods – will there be gaps/limitations, and/or will there be added benefits from these methods?
	6. Select options that are fit-for-purpose for each Phase objective and CHAS context – what will provide the most value for Council and for the CHAS process?
Continue to adapt	7. Continually review the delivery methods during implementation and be open to learning and adapting. Seek feedback on how the alternative consultation approaches are being received – is the approach delivering the outcomes needed to progress the CHAS work? Adjust the approach accordingly.

Alternatives to face-to-face participatory approaches (e.g. interviews, workshops and meetings)

Examples of alternative options for communicating and engaging with your stakeholders along with some pros and cons are provided below. Many Councils, including those in remote areas, already use many of these methods in the CHAS process, as well as for other projects.

Video conferencing and webinars

Video conferencing (with audio and visual connection) can be readily used for small or large virtual meetings and can be complemented with presentations, polls, breakout discussions and online chats. Webinars often use the same platforms but reply primarily on audio connection with participants and commonly comprise a primary presenter or speaker and presentation. Both techniques are increasingly being adopted with the current COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in place.

There are a range of platforms available for use, including freeware versions and subscriptions. Examples include Microsoft Teams™, Zoom™, Skype for business™, Google Classroom™, Go To Meeting™ and many others.

Video conferencing and webinars			
Functionality / benefits	Challenges / limitations	Tips and tricks	Example applications
- Face-to face visual and audio - Shared viewing of documents and presentation - Access via computer or smart device - Specific smart device apps exist for most platforms - Dial in (no video) option if needed for some participants - Record meeting functionality – enables others to get up to speed later if they missed the meeting/workshop - Q&A panel/features.	- New technology for some participants - Firewalls may be problematic for some platforms - Different platforms have different functionality - Limited by the number of people that have visual contact at the same time	- Agree on a preferred platform for the project - Ensure a meeting facilitator and support person or moderator is appointed - Check everyone's audio and visual before the start - include a virtual registration time for people to check in and test) - Ask everyone to use mute (or facilitator mute everyone) when not talking - Tell people about how the meeting/presentation will run and the rules of engagement - Pause at end of each agenda item/presentation section to field questions and discussion. Check in one by one with each participant - For large meetings, have a dedicated contact person that people can call direct if they are having trouble, without impacting the broader meeting/workshop - Record the meeting if useful (generally for larger meetings and workshops or webinars). - Speak slowly and succinctly.	Regular Council and project team updates Stakeholder briefings Risk and adaptation workshops Webinars on specific topics for knowledge sharing (e.g. coastal hazards, adaptation options).

Online tools

A range of online tools can be employed to help facilitate engagement during the CHAS projects. These include the following. Note this is not an exhaustive list.

Online tools	Functionality / benefits	Challenges / limitations	Tips and tricks
Interactive website /engagement platforms (examples – Engagement Hub, Haveyoursay, bangthetable). https://environment.douglas.qld.gov.au/building-a-resilient-coast-for-the-douglas-shire https://haveyoursay.sunshinecoast.qld.gov.au/our-resilient-coast https://burdekincoast.engagementhub.com.au/our-coast-our-lifestyle	A place to host all project information and interactive tools Hosted externally, linked to Council web page Enables whole project team to manage (those with admin rights) Subscribe tool allows stakeholders to follow the project Closed and open group options IT support provided Various templates and 'widgets' to allow for different tools and plug ins e.g. surveys, mapping tools, forums, Connects with social media Commonly have an CRM integrated into the platform to enable easy dissemination of regular email updates, newsletters and other communication Provides you with some analytics to assist with monitoring and evaluation	Requires some training on functionality Some initial set up costs including subscription in some cases Not as flexible as a website for communicating lots of content	Appoint key admin person to support design and coordination Update regularly to remain live and relevant Explore how to use any available widget options
Online surveys (examples – Survey Monkey, survey tools on interactive websites) 	Seek feedback on specific issues of interest Easy to provide feedback via computer or phone Can set open and close dates Enables easy data analysis and reporting Can integrated corporate templates and styles Surveys can be printed in .pdf formats and emailed or posted to individuals – data can then be manually entered and integrated with online data	Different functionality across different tools	Tailor questions to direct needs of project Keep survey to 5 – 10 minutes max Provide feedback on how the outcomes informed the project Use social media to recruit participants (depending on target audience)
Polls (examples – interactive website tools, facebook, other)	Quick to do – enable people to quickly express a preference for a specific issue. Can be embedded as part of a virtual meeting, webinar and presentation	Limited to a very specific question.	Use to generate interest in the project, and to seek feedback on a very specific issue/question Use social media to recruit participants (depending on target audience)
Interactive maps (examples – google earth/maps, interactive website tools, other) 	Allows stakeholders to communicate and share personal views on values, issues, comments relating to specific locations on the map. Provides a means to collate input/feedback. Enables knowledge sharing as people can see what others have added.	Requires moderation People may be hesitant to share publicly	Ensure online maps are user friendly and easy to add to.

Online tools	Functionality / benefits	Challenges / limitations	Tips and tricks
Visualisation tools (examples – interactive website tools, other) https://missionbeach.cassowarycoast.qld.gov.au/#/ https://www.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=7d7e95f1a926456f8e0368b1bc727afa#	Helps people visualise what the information means/looks like Can include mapping and/or before and after scenarios Allows people to focus on areas of interest, view and comment online	Requires clear explanation of the information to avoid mis-interpretation May require moderation	Ensure information is user friendly and easy to understand and navigate.
Forums/blogs	Allows stakeholder discussion and knowledge sharing.	Requires moderation	Ensure good moderation and clear direction on discussion questions. Use social media to recruit participants (depending on target audience)

Additional communications materials

In some cases, producing addition communications material can be of benefit to:

1. Keep people informed and invite feedback
2. Direct people to the online tools or other ways to provide feedback
3. Support the use of other virtual and on-line communication and engagement initiatives as well as used in a print media or hard copy formats.

Examples of written communications include:

- Targeted updates for online platforms (website, social media, other)
- Project update flyers/summaries
- Fact sheets on issues of interest
- Posters, postcards, hard copy media
- Newsletters and eNews.

Many of the Councils undertaking the CHAS process have examples of these materials on their websites.

Some other tips

Break it down - In some cases, there may be a need to adjust the approach to numbers of people in meetings and workshops, even in the online environment. It can be worth considering if larger meetings and workshops might be better undertaken as a series of smaller briefings, a survey, program of 1:1 virtual discussions or interviews or other alternatives that best suit the needs of the individuals involved.

Seek help – there are many Queensland-based companies and sole traders that are very experienced in the design and delivery of innovative engagement and communication approaches using on-line or virtual methods. If you don't feel comfortable designing and implementing something new or your activity requires slightly more sophisticated skills, reach out to an expert.

Be visual – pictures are worth a thousand words and good visualisation helps to communicate effectively and allow for focussed discussions. Invest in the development of conceptual models, frameworks and illustrations that help to make sense of complex information. You can also use graphic or visual recorders to document conversations even if they are online.

Benefits of keeping the process moving

The world is adapting quickly to online and alternative approaches to keep engagement and conversations in a whole range of project contexts. Using the range of techniques and tools available to keep the CHAS process moving will have a range of benefits including:

- Maintaining the momentum in delivery of technical work and strategy development

- Ensuring engagement effort to date is not lost / stalled

- Allowing these projects to progress and ensure Councils continue to be well prepared for coastal hazard adaptation needs

- Generating new approaches and skills that can provide added value to the CHAS process.

For more ideas and resources go to:
IAP[2] – International association for public participation, https://iap2.org.au/.