

## **Action Research for Better Community Engagement**

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### **Introduction**

Western Power is the state government-owned entity responsible for the transmission and distribution of power throughout the south west of Western Australia. Increasing demand for power through population growth and increasing use of high power-using appliances such as air-conditioners and plasma screen televisions means that there is a constant need for Western Power to upgrade as well as maintain the network of high voltage transmission lines, distribution lines, and substations.

However, Western Power's new infrastructure projects often attract opposition and outrage from local communities. The reasons for opposition are usually cited as visual impacts, loss of local amenity, environmental impacts through vegetation clearing, and a lack of opportunity for meaningful involvement in Western Power's project planning processes. The impact of this opposition on Western Power can be significant. In some cases the ability to deliver infrastructure projects on schedule has been curtailed; extensive resources have been invested in responding to correspondence from members of the community in accordance with Government requirements; and staff morale has been undermined.

It is increasingly recognised internally that meaningful community and stakeholder involvement in decision-making is essential to maintain Western Power's organisation's licence to operate, as well as to ensure timely project delivery. It also acknowledged that opposition to projects indicates that Western Power is not consistently meeting community expectations in this area. It is perceived that two main factors underlie this situation: lack of internal capacity to facilitate effective public participation in project planning, resulting in community disempowerment and mistrust of Western Power, coupled with a broad lack of understanding amongst the general community of Western Power's role in the energy sector in Western Australia and the context within which infrastructure planning is undertaken.

While community opposition to projects is often attributed to 'NIMBYism' (Not in My Back Yard) with implication of selfishness and ignorance on the part of the community, research suggests that place attachment (Devine-Wright 2009) and a general decline in trust of public institutions and their technical experts are key factors (Petts 2003, Fischer 1999). It has been argued that effective community engagement processes must be based upon concepts of justice (Smith and McDonough 2001) and trust (Bauer et al 2007).

An opportunity has been identified to progress the development of the Western Power community engagement model through a programme of action research integrated with the delivery of the Eastern Corridor Project Suite (ECPS). The aim of the programme is to facilitate a process of engagement, education and change both internally and externally. This paper presents an overview of the ECPS Strategy and Research programme and the preliminary findings from the situational analysis and Phase 1.

### **The ECPS Strategy and Research Programme**

The Eastern Corridor Project Suite (ECPS) comprises a number of individual projects that are related through geographic and infrastructure links throughout the Perth Hills and foothills in Western Australia. Several projects within the Hills area have been the subject of highly organized opposition campaigns organized by local action groups. These projects will be managed as a suite of projects, particularly with respect to stakeholder engagement, to maintain consistency, maximise transparency and build better relationships with community and stakeholders.

The overarching aims of the ECPS Strategy and Research Programme are:

- To deliver the projects within the suite effectively through building stronger relationships with an aware and engaged community;
- To develop an effective project community engagement model for Western Power into the future, based upon experience and insights gained through the ECPS process.

A comprehensive longitudinal research programme is central to the implementation of the ECPS Strategy. The research aims both to evaluate the effectiveness of the Strategy in achieving its goals and objectives, and to contribute to knowledge and understanding of community education and engagement processes more generally. This type of research, which has both outcome- and knowledge-based objectives, and which emphasises reflection and experimentation, is known as action research (Ladkin 2004). The experience-based learning (Kolb 1984) of the part of the ECPS project team within Western Power is an essential component of the approach and organisational learning and change is thus another goal of the research programme.

### *Situational Analysis*

The first step in developing the ECPS Strategy was to document Western Power's perceptions of the situation that currently exists in terms of the relationship between Western Power and the Perth community. The situation has been characterised as follows:

- Western Power's role within the Western Australian energy sector is not well understood or differentiated by the community and other stakeholders;
- The link between personal behaviour at the household level and the need for ongoing development of power infrastructure is not well understood;
- The community has a low level of trust in Western Power, particularly Western Power's ability to plan infrastructure;
- There is strong opposition to Western Power infrastructure from the communities within which the infrastructure is located;
- Interested sectors of the community believe that Western Power's previous community engagement has been inadequate and possibly manipulative. These sectors want to play a more active role in Western Power's decision-making processes;
- Large sectors of the community have no interest in Western Power or energy issues generally and may be difficult to engage.
- Lack of interest is likely to be related to lack of awareness and knowledge about Western Power and power issues more generally and to generally low levels of engagement within some communities;
- There is a subset of the community living in certain parts of the Hills that is more engaged than in other parts of the Perth community, and characterised as highly educated, resourceful, and mistrusting of government;
- Western Power's communication in the past has been intermittent, one-way and limited in its effectiveness.

The first step in the research programme was therefore to undertake situational analysis designed investigate the extent to which these assumptions can be verified, as input to the ongoing development of the Strategy. In practice, several aspects of the situational analysis are integrated with the implementation of Phases 1 and 2 of the Strategy.

The situational analysis activities undertaken to date include:

- Desk-top community profiling, using census data;
- Community surveys;
- Phone surveys of 350 people within the extended ECPS area;
- Informal conversations with individuals at Community Outreach Sessions.

It is also intended to conduct semi-structured interviews with a Research group to be identified through the community surveys and phone surveys.

Analysis of the community and phone survey data has not been completed at the time of writing, but preliminary results from survey questions in which respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with certain statements are presented in Table 1.

<b>Statement</b>	<b>% disagree or strongly disagree</b>	<b>% unsure</b>	<b>% agree or strongly agree</b>
Western Power provides reliable power supply in my area	15	3	82
Western Power communicates openly with the community and stakeholders about new infrastructure projects	33	25	42

Western Power listens and responds to the views of the community about its projects	25	38	37
Western Power is committed to minimising the environmental impacts of its activities	24	25	51
Western Power is committed to minimising any detrimental impacts of its infrastructure on the local community	20	22	58

**Table 1: Preliminary results of community and phone survey data**

Detailed analysis of community profiling and survey data will be undertaken to explore relationships between:

- Previous level of interest or involvement in Western Power projects;
- Suburb of residence;
- Education levels and affluence;
- Attitudes towards Western Power (as reflected in Table 1)

The ECPS Strategy itself comprises three broad phases, designed to bridge the gap between the existing situation, and the ultimate aim of the implementation of an effective Western Power community engagement model through the successful delivery of the projects within the ECPS.

*Phase 1: Community education and initial engagement*

Phase 1 commenced in August 2009 and is nearing completion at the time of writing. The main activities undertaken were:

- 7 Community Outreach Sessions held in the ECPS area;
- Briefings with Local Government Authorities;
- Community surveys completed by attendees at the Community Outreach Sessions
- Development of project websites for individual projects within the ECPS
- Launch of the Western Power Projects Blog

The goals and initial Phase 1 results are summarised in Table 2.

*Phase 2: Project community engagement and ongoing communication*

Phase 2 of the Strategy focuses on the individual projects within the ECPS and the specific community engagement projects developed for each of these, and will run for 1-2 years. The Research Group identified in Phase 1 will be contacted throughout this period to monitor perceptions of Western Power's ongoing project communications.

The goals of Phase 2 are:

- To facilitate community participation in project decision-making and evaluate the effectiveness of different project community engagement processes (through concepts of justice and trust building);
- To continue to communicate openly with the broader community in relation to these projects and to Western Power activities in general.

*Phase 3: Development and implementation of Western Power community engagement model*

Phase 3 has a timeline of 2-5 years with the goal of building upon experiences in Phase 2 to further develop the Western Power community engagement model and nurture a culture of organisational learning.

**Conclusion**

Western Power has developed a three-phase Strategy to deliver the projects within the Eastern Corridor Project Suite, incorporating an action research component designed to facilitate organisational learning and capacity-building towards improved community engagement processes. Phase 1 has been successfully implemented and the first steps taken towards building trust between the organisation and the community in which it operates.

GOAL	RESULTS	OBSERVATIONS
To attract community members, particularly those who have not previously been involved in Western Power projects, to attend community outreach sessions	A variety of communication activities were undertaken to attract members of the community to the sessions: Over 28,000 invitations were sent to targeted residential areas: Approximately 260 community members attended the community outreach sessions. This total represented a mix of individual members of the community; resident groups; action groups and conservation groups.	Despite the heavy promotion of the community outreach sessions, general attendance was low. It was only at outreach sessions that specifically focused on potential planned projects that attracted a larger number of community attendees.
To develop databases of community members interested in specific projects and other aspects of the research programme (identifying preferred means of communication);	63 contact names were listed on a specific data base	This represented a small number therefore further efforts will be undertaken to increase contacts in the database
To gain active support/involvement of local governments in community engagement processes	Met with 6 Local Government authorities. These meetings included representatives from planning; sustainability; community relations and Public Relations.	All Local Government Authorities were supportive of Western Power's initiative however declined to collaborate or work with Western Power to host a session.
To increase community awareness about: - Western Power's role as the power network custodian and the nature of the decisions that need to be made on an ongoing basis to ensure that demand can be met and network security maintained;  - Individual responsibility for managing power usage and the implications that has on the network	Given the low turn out to the general outreach sessions, increasing community awareness about Western Power's role and promoting shared responsibility for power usage was limited.  However posting over 27,000 information postcards, coupled with local and state press advertising did contribute to Western Power's profile in the community.	
To understand the community's preferred modes of communication	Utilising the results of the Guildford to Southern Terminal targeted outreach (140) sessions, residents overwhelming preference of communication methodology was email notifications.	Interestingly residents preferred email communications rather than face to face participation
To investigate the use of social media for community engagement	A blog site was created to encourage an open and transparent dialogue with community and stakeholders. The blog posts focus on Western Power planned and approved infrastructure projects. The blog was launched mid way through the first phase of the research project. Initial unique page views were	Social media hosted by a corporate or public organisation is still a relatively new concept in Western Australia. Increasing internet usage and the growth in social media as a source of information

	approximately 200. However there were limited comments and no detail dialogues focusing on community and infrastructure development	was the impetus for creating the blog site. Blogging is designed to encourage a 'conversation' between the organisation and between the communities.
To present the 'human face' of Western Power	On average 5 Western Power representatives were present at each outreach session..	Outreach session was structure was based on knowledge café style. This allowed more time for one to one discussions and a more amiable engagement environment

**Table 2: Phase 1 outcomes**

## References

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