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# Can design thinking techniques drive citizen engagement in public sector consultation?

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## Abstract

Human-centred design gains ever more traction within the Australian
public sector.

But what of the application of design thinking in driving citizen engagement
in public sector consultation? Which techniques add the most value?

In a behind-the-scenes look at a design-led public consultation, we
(Splendid Studio) evaluate our choice of techniques and review project
challenges.


Keywords: human-centred design, service design, public consultation,
design thinking.

## The ask

The City of Ballarat is the largest regional city in western Victoria with a population of 105,000.

The Council's Ballarat is Open project will deliver a 'Ballarat Prosperity Framework', comprising of:

- A vision for the City which describes what Ballarat stands for and aspires to as a city.

- A range of ideas and suggestions from the community about how they might play a part in demonstrating this 'brand' for Ballarat.

The framework seeks to deliver:

- Higher economic value for Ballarat.

- Greater population retention, resident and business attraction, and tourism visitation.

- Enhanced community resilience, empowerment and inclusion for all.

The Council was keen to employ a design-led approach to the citizen engagement portion of this project.

They requested 10 two-hour sessions for 20 participants, open to any interested Ballarat community member, and a six-hour session for an invited audience of 40 community and business leaders.

Sessions would be in a variety of locations.

## Methodology

We devised activities with flexible running times which required no background knowledge or preparation by participants.

One activity set, more 'current state' focussed, evaluated previous council activities, and explored perceptions of the City. We examined what was valued in both a regulatory and community sense and pinpointed perceived roadblocks. There was some exploration of perceived solutions.

The second set was more exploratory, teasing out citizens' vision for the future and encouraging concepts to deliver on this vision.

Here are our choices:

## Current state analysis

### Bullseye diagramming

A review and evaluation of key statements from the project discussion paper was required. Bullseye diagramming (see Figure 1) invited groups to prioritise statements. Follow-up conversations, from which we captured key feedback and verbatim quotes, drilled into the 'why' behind the selections.
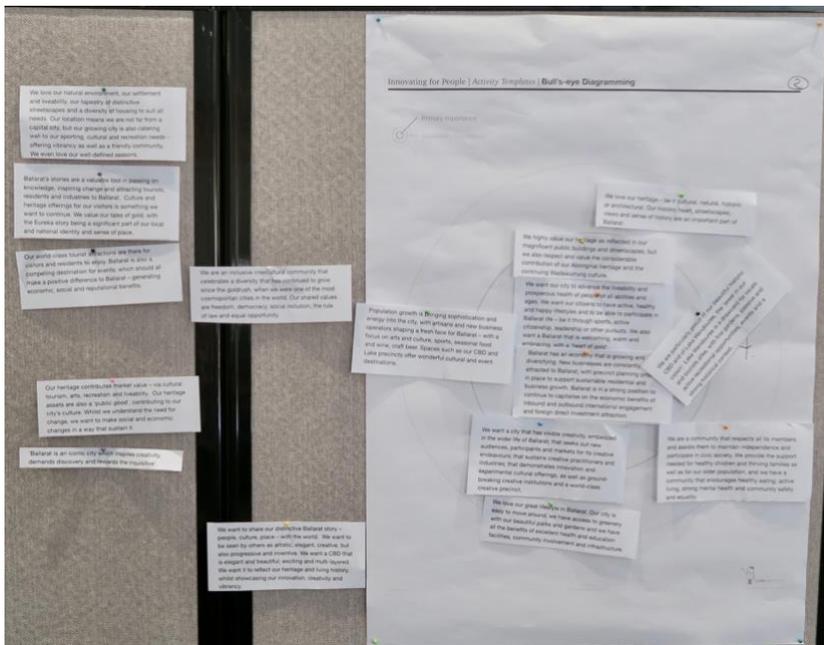


Figure 1: Bullseye diagram

## Boat and island game

We adapted the speedboat game (see Figure 2), a technique in the book Innovation Games (Hohmann, n.d.) to identify roadblocks, and to explore

aspirations. Groups placed post it notes on the following elements of a drawing:

- The boat: symbolising the City of Ballarat.

- The island: representing where we want to head.

- The anchors: representing the elements holding us back.

Each group affinity-mapped their submissions. Again, follow-up conversations explored the 'why' behind the submissions.



Figure 2: Boat and Island game

## Brand personality

The Council wanted to define a current and future 'brand personality' for the City based upon Faber and Meyer's 12 brand personality archetypes, as explored by Candice Roberts at East Tennessee State University (Roberts, 2010).

We selected three descriptors from each 'personality', displaying them on 'now' and 'future' posters and inviting dot voting (see Figure 3).

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Figure 3: Brand poster

## Future Vision

### Creative matrix and concept posters

Our creative matrix exercise (Figure 4), based upon a Luma Institute technique (Mural, n.d.), invited groups to generate creative solutions at the intersection of 'how might we….' questions and 'solution enablers' such as technology and digital media.

We used dot voting to shortlist ideas, and concept poster production (Figure 5) for these shortlisted ideas, adapting from another Luma technique (Mural, n.d.).
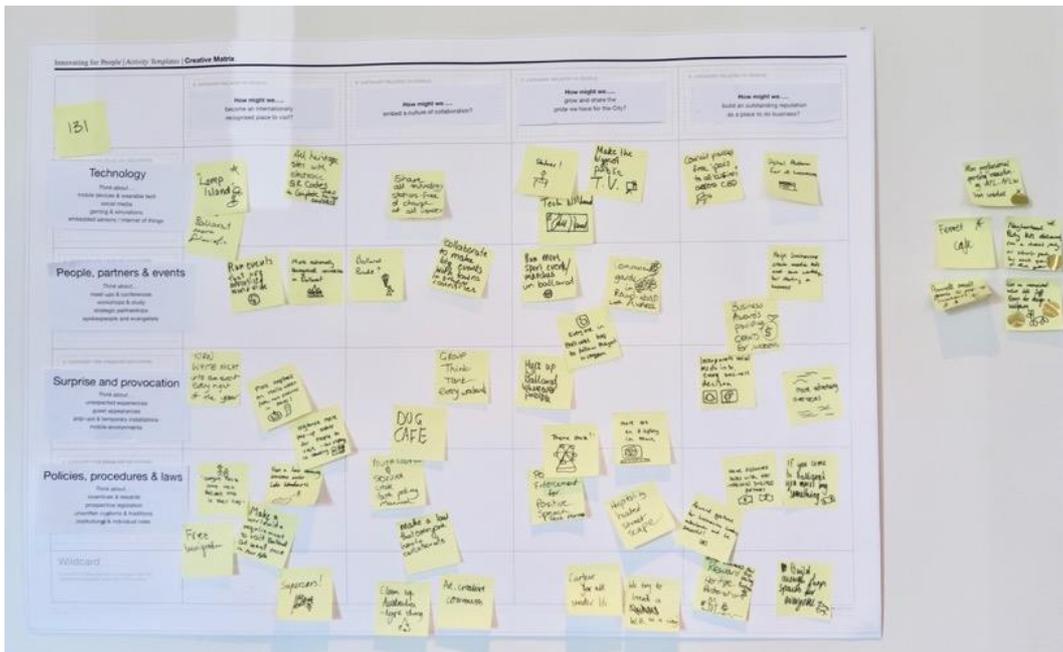
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Figure 4: Creative Matrix


Figure 5: Concept poster

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## Key Learnings and Outcomes

### Recruitment and participation

Sessions were publicised through the local press (Attwooll, 2019), TV and via the Council's website and social media.

Despite a range of dates, times and locations, initial public response was mixed. Citizens in lower socio-economic areas, younger people, and CALD citizens were under-represented in the responses.

The Council consulted with a number of representative bodies to address this, but gaps remained.

Future enhancements could include:

- Offering financial incentives to attend (as we do with customer research projects).

- 'Going where the people are' (fetes and shows, shopping centres etc).

- Running shorter sessions to lower the barrier to entry.

- Proactive dialogue with community groups to aid recruitment.

### Format and choice of exercises

The format and exercises were highly effective in engaging citizens.

The statements used in the bullseye diagramming exercise were overlong and confused some participants. Judicious editing would have helped.

We encouraged individual working within teams before sharing. This ensured everyone had input and we didn't stifle divergent opinion.

Group discussion at the end of each exercise added more context and depth to our findings by quickly revealing and building upon key themes. It also gave us a 'safe' space to check out areas where opinions differed.

It is clear that strong facilitation, thoughtfully structured follow-up questions and rigorous note taking are extremely important in ensuring success.

Despite warm-up exercises, we found a small minority of participants snapped back into 'pet ideas', presenting concepts they already liked or were working on.

Raising the level of challenge through more abstract 'enablers' and adding constraints (such as 'no apps allowed') would potentially have driven even higher levels of creativity.

## Reporting

We used 'light touch' synthesis, grouping comments and verbatim quotes thematically by session.

There was a high level of quality among the non-shortlisted creative matrix ideas, so we transposed all exercise outputs.

## Outcomes and feedback

Over 680 unique ideas were generated. The final framework highlighted 59 of the concepts.

Our engagement also informed the overarching principles of the framework, which are:

1. Our appetite for innovation, entrepreneurship, and technology.

2. Our innate creativity.

3. Our heritage.

4. Our future sustainability.

5. Our resilient and supportive community.

We've received the following client feedback:

> "It was one of our first attempts at using creative design thinking for a strategic and city-wide conversation. Splendid provided us with the

inspiration and confidence we needed to push on into the uncertainty and produce the outcome we are so happy with. Every workshop was greeted with positive feedback from the participants, who found the engagement method refreshing and fun. Splendid built a good rapport with their reassuring, open and inquiring style.  Their recording of the sessions was thorough and enabled a high level of thematic analysis to produce the final Ballarat Prosperity Framework."

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