

3.17. I&E - 28/01/2025 - LEEP Communications and Engagement Strategy**Strategic Context for this matter:**

Strengthening Our Economy To provide for sustainable and planned growth through the diversification of the economic base, the development of diverse job opportunities and the provision of a broad range of formal and non-formal educational services.

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to inform the Council of the proposed engagement and communications approach for the Lithgow Emerging Economy Plan (**LEEP**) program and seek endorsement of the proposed strategy.

The report was put to the Ordinary Meeting of Council held on 25 November 2024. At that meeting, Council resolved to defer consideration of the report until the January 2025 meeting, in order to provide Councillors adequate time to review this document and make comment and recommendations for change prior to it going on public exhibition (Min. No. 24-260).

Administration's Recommendation

THAT Council endorse the LEEP Engagement Plan before it is released to the public.

Attachments

1. Draft LEEP Engagement Plan [3.17.1 - 28 pages]

Reference to any relevant previous minute

- Min. No.: 23-70 – Ordinary Meeting of Council held 24 April 2023 (LEEP – Public Exhibition)
- Min. No.: 23-216 – Ordinary Meeting of Council held 27 November 2023 (LEEP – Endorsement and Preferred Governance Model)
- Min. No.: 23-217 – Ordinary Meeting of Council held 27 November 2023 (LEEP – Interim Action Plan)
- Min. No.: 24-33 – Ordinary Meeting of Council held 26 February 2024 (LEEP – Suggested Governance Model)
- Min. No.: 24-260 – Ordinary Meeting of Council held 25 November 2024 (LEEP – Communications and Engagement Strategy)

Background and discussion**1. LEEP Engagement Strategy****Context**

The Lithgow Emerging Economy Transition Plan sets out the priorities and activities most likely to place the Lithgow economy in the best possible position to meet the challenges of the future due to the pending closures and scale-down of coal mining and coal-fired power in the LGA.

Because the LEEP affects the entire Lithgow LGA, wider community engagement and involvement is vital to ensure the community has opportunity to add value to the LEEP program of work. The proposed approach to engagement is set out in our Engagement Plan, which is included as an attachment to this report.

The LEEP engagement approach is guided by the IAP2 (International Association of Public Participation Australasia) Framework and IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum, to articulate the broad level of participation invited from each group. Additionally, the document adopts the guiding principles of timeliness, respect, transparency, inclusiveness, and continual improvement.

LEEP Engagement Goals

Engagement is critical to LEEP in ensuring that Council harnesses the expertise and insights of the community and local organisations to help shape a healthy, prosperous and sustainable future for Lithgow.

As such, this engagement strategy is focused on:

- ensuring that those directly and indirectly impacted by the Lithgow economic transition have a fair opportunity to engage and shape the LEEP process, and
- maximising collaboration with people and organisations who have interest and capacity to contribute to the LEEP tasks.

Collaboration is key to a successful economic transitions management process. Although the State Government has primary responsibility for structural economic adjustments, it requires participation from actors and resources that reach beyond it, including:

- impacted coal mining and power generation businesses, as well as unions working collaboratively to manage the impact on workers through whole-of-family support and adjustment programs, and worker transfer schemes, and on local supply chains,
- schools, the VET sector, universities, industry, business and government collaborating on building the regional workforce's adaptive capacity, training the workforce of the future and re-skilling and redeployment of workers in transitioning sectors,
- government, at all levels, attracting investment and supporting new industry growth with well-planned and sequenced infrastructure, and
- industry, knowledge providers and government collaboratively building a region-wide culture of innovation, investment, business acceleration and scaling.

Community Consultation to Date

The LEEP Report was publicly exhibited in June-July 2023. There were 14 submissions received about the LEEP Transition Plan document, providing valuable feedback which was used to inform the LEEP Action Plan.

In summary, the feedback indicated a collective desire for a balanced approach to development that prioritises community involvement, environmental sustainability, economic diversification, and robust governance in Lithgow's future planning.

More specific commentary is included below:

1. *Community and Inclusivity*: Emphasis on the compassionate and welcoming nature of Lithgow's community, with a focus on engaging residents in decision-making processes that are transparent and inclusive.
2. *Innovation and Economic Diversification*: Support for development, alongside a call for economic diversification beyond coal-based industries, particularly into renewable energy sectors.

3. *Educational Infrastructure and Skills Development*: Acknowledgment of deficiencies in educational pathways and the need for skill development to align with emerging industries, especially in renewable energy.
4. *Urgency in Implementation*: A call for quicker action in the initial phases of the LEEP project, stressing that plans must translate into tangible results in a timely manner.
5. *Governance and Accountability*: Criticism of the lack of defined governance structures and clear accountability in planning processes. Calls for action within a 3 year, rather than a 5- or 10-year timeframe.
6. *Sustainability and Environmental Concerns*: Strong advocacy for preserving the environment, including the protection of natural habitats and Aboriginal heritage sites, alongside suggestions for eco-friendly tourism and conservation initiatives.
7. *Tourism and Recreation*: Emphasis on leveraging natural beauty for tourism, including birdwatching, sports recreation and eco-tourism, while ensuring that tourism does not harm the environment.
8. *Aged Care and Employment Opportunities*: Recognition of aged care as a significant employer, with potential for expanding high-quality, affordable services.
- 9.

Identifying Our Stakeholders

As the economic transition over the next 10 to 15 years in the Lithgow region is likely to have a significant impact on everyone in this community, it is recognised that, to some extent, everyone and every business in our community is a LEEP stakeholder.

Those who are affected by the LEEP are known as the LEEP transition stakeholders. The Engagement Plan identifies and outlines a program for engaging with the key LEEP transition stakeholders in support of the delivery of the LEEP Action Plan.

In creating the Engagement Plan, staff considered a range of engagement activities for each stakeholder group, which will be tailored to address the impacts they may experience, their issues and ideas, preferences for engagement and their role in and ability to contribute to the transition category. Particularly, staff considered the nature of the transitions management impact on each category and the potential resources, capabilities and outcomes hoped to be achieved from people and organisations within each category.

There are four stakeholder categories identified in the LEEP Engagement Plan:

Stakeholder	Detail
THE LEEP COMMUNITY	Everyone - every organisation and business in the region.
LEEP ACTORS	Members of the LEEP Community who wish to be more deeply involved in the transition process.
LEEP KEY COLLABORATORS	Organisations, groups and individuals who have technical expertise and insights to contribute to the design and delivery of LEEP projects focused on effecting community-wide change, such as workforce planning, land use planning, and education and skills development.
LEEP DELIVERY PARTNERS	All levels of government, the knowledge sector, and directly impacted industry and their workforce unions.

Suggested Engagement Approach

One of the key recommendations of the LEEP Report was the formation of the Future Jobs and Investment Authority as the leading governance model for the LEEP implementation. The FJIA is to be tasked with advising the NSW Government on regional priorities and local investment opportunities, and providing strategic advice to the Minister for Natural Resources to ensure the government's approach is community-centred and driven by local needs. The FJIA's proposed role was outlined in an Issues Paper published by the Department of Regional NSW and released for Community consultation in May 2024. It is anticipated that the follow-up report (pending) to the Issues Paper will provide guidance for the establishment of the FJIA.

In the interim, an early iteration of this group has been established by Council to govern and drive the initiatives outlined in the LEEP Report - the Future Jobs and Investment Committee. Information about the Future Jobs and Investment Committee - including meeting minutes - can be found on the LEEP website: www.leep.lithgow.com

In addition to the over-arching Future Jobs and Investment Committee, other working groups and networks being established include:

- Emerging Economy (Internal) Committee,
- Transport and Logistics (formerly Hydrogen and Rail Fleet Renewable Electrification) Working Group,
- Land Use Planning and Industrial Precincts Working Group,
- Adaptive Skills Network (formerly STEAM and Innovation),
- Engagement and Communications Network,
- The 'Heart of Lithgow' Place Network (from July 2025), and
- Health and Ageing Network (from July 2025).

These groups have been identified and prioritised with an effective method to engage and activate the key transition stakeholders to support the delivery of our Action Plan in an effective and efficient way.

Engagement with First Nations communities to create a shared engagement protocol based on values including respect, transparency and cultural acknowledgement will be undertaken separately, to ensure First Nations voices are an integral part of the LEEP transition management process.

Engagement Activities

Participatory processes will shape the vision and implementation of the LEEP, which will evolve in line with community input and feedback. To involve our stakeholders in the LEEP transitions management process, the LEEP team proposes to deliver a series of engagement activities and events:

- A regularly updated website – www.leep.lithgow.com, housing the LEEP Action Plan, reports, minutes of working group meetings, e-newsletters, progress updates, FAQs,
- Regular e-newsletters sent to the LEEP stakeholder database,
- Social media posts,
- Print advertising,
- Information displays and presentations,
- Enquiry and complaints handling,
- Consultation opportunities / surveys,
- Resourcing and capacity building opportunities, such as transitions management and community empowerment short courses,
- Regular LEEP breakfast speaker events,
- Annual community workshop ,

- Working Groups and Networks in key transition areas such as Adaptive Skills, Planning and Industry Precincts, Transport and Logistics, the 'Heart of Lithgow' Place Makers Network, Health and Ageing Network, Engagement and Communications and the Economic Development Committee, and
- Regular meetings of the Future Jobs and Investment Committee; and with other key transition stakeholders.

Each of these activities is designed to allow LEEP stakeholders to play a meaningful part in the LEEP initiative and have an active role in determining the future of the LGA.

2. LEEP Communications Strategy

The Communications Strategy outlines the wider communications approach we will take in support of achieving the LEEP program.

LEEP Vision

The working 'vision' for the Lithgow economy, as contained within the LEEP, is:

Lithgow LGA is an economy and community that builds on its heritage as an industrial innovator, to lead innovations in energy, advanced manufacturing, and in health and ageing.

Lithgow is a critical interchange for green transport, servicing road and rail networks to facilitate the movement of residents, workers, visitors and freight across the state. Its natural wonders and dynamic, inclusive community are a drawcard for residents and visitors alike.

The decline of coal mining and associated power generation is an opportunity for the community and the diversification of the economy is well-planned and equitable, offering a just transition to workers, ensuring infrastructure and natural resources are repurposed and rehabilitated as future economic and community assets, and engaging workers, the community and other stakeholders.

Lithgow's economy has sectoral diversity and businesses that attract and retain the workforce they need. Lithgow's community is diverse with more families and young people who are drawn by the quality of life, affordable and accessible housing, and good education-to-employment pathways.

Secondary Messaging

The Vision Statement contains the primary key messages for LEEP communications, with the secondary messaging as follows:

The LEEP Transition Plan (LEEP Report) is based on extensive analysis of Lithgow's unique position, including economic trends such as demographics, demonstrated historical advantage, regional endowments, economic opportunities, and policy and program priorities.

The Lithgow Emerging Economy Plan seeks to position Lithgow as a global example of a city that successfully transitions to a broad-based, modern economy with a diversity of resilient job opportunities.

The LEEP Transition Plan (LEEP Report) shows that the greatest opportunities lie in making most beneficial use of Lithgow's energy infrastructure and geographics positioning, particularly transmission lines, land, solar and water resources, to facilitate the switch to renewables production locally, as well as to enable electricity supply from the Central-West Orana Renewable Energy Zone to greater Sydney.

Council is committed to supporting the Lithgow community and has already completed several key projects and initiatives to help with the region's sustainable growth.

With these overarching messages in mind, it should be noted that negative feedback which emerged from the July 2023 public exhibition of the LEEP Report were a lack of understanding around governance and accountability, vague and unaccountable timelines, and a lack of tangible recommended actions (but rather a requirement for more research).

LEEP communications and messaging will need to address this feedback. In the first instance, this will be done through the communications surrounding the release of the LEEP Action Plan, which will be more formally released in late 2024. The Action Plan document outlines the actions planned for 2025-2026, many of which address feedback received in the public consultation. Community feedback, including the governance structure, will also be addressed in the Engagement Plan, which will be released in the same timeframe. The administration will reach out to the relevant Minister to support the Action Plan and contribute to its launch.

Empowering the Community

Both the Communications Strategy and the Engagement Plan reflect an underlying approach of empowering the community, featuring Lithgow's stakeholders prominently – giving them their own voice – through the Council's communications materials and video cameos on social media. LEEP events will be used as storytelling and story-gathering opportunities, capturing individual stories which contribute to the over-arching LEEP narrative, and connecting the community with a deeper understanding of the benefits of the LEEP program.

As part of this community empowerment approach, there is a focus on upskilling the community with an extensive training offering. This is both directly – through a free community capacity building offering (including a series of micro-credential courses that can contribute to a diploma or degree) – but also indirectly, through the annual community workshop, which will be hosted by transitions management experts such as the Monash University Sustainable Development Institute. The goal is to provide the community with opportunities to build adaptive capacity to support a successful transition. The delivery of these courses will also demonstrate that LEEP is delivering tangible, positive benefits to the community.

Communications Objectives and Strategy

The following objectives and tactics form the strategy which will support the engagement goal of optimising the cumulative opportunities of the emerging economy, while managing and mitigating the risks, to achieve social licence for the transition. More specific and detailed communications, engagement and project plans will be developed for specific elements of the LEEP program, for example, STEAM, First Nations.

- 1. To educate the community about the LEEP program and establish an active flow of information about the program and its progress through communications streams including the LEEP website, social media and newsletters.*

- a. Use the LEEP website as the primary source of truth for all LEEP information.
 - b. Establish social media channels to share LEEP success stories and updates.
 - c. Distribute regular media releases, and - where appropriate - joint media releases and announcements with key partners including the Commonwealth, State and local governments, the Mining and Energy Union, Western Sydney University, Centennial Coal and Energy Australia.
 - d. Create LEEP informational posters, fact sheets and flyers.
 - e. Paid advertising in the Lithgow Mercury and Village Voice to build awareness, as appropriate (for example, when milestones are achieved or to promote upcoming events).
 - f. Deliver an annual report detailing the LEEP program's progress every year.
2. *To encourage a healthy, prosperous and sustainable future for our community by stimulating the enthusiasm and activation of business, industry, unions and government stakeholders to progress LEEP Transition Management goals, and promote the resilience and diversification of Lithgow LGA's economy.*
- a. Support the development and activity of Working Groups to actively progress LEEP transition management goals. Support transparency by posting meeting minutes online, promoting broad community understanding.
 - b. Active in-person networking and promotion of the LEEP program with local business and the Lithgow Chamber of Commerce.
 - c. Build credibility and foster networking opportunities by holding regular (approx. 6 per year) weekday "Key Collaborators Breakfasts".
 - d. Offer a series of free capacity-building and community empowerment courses which deliver target skills, many of them micro-credential courses which can provide credit towards full diplomas or degrees.
 - e. Position Lithgow as a thought leader and showcase the potential of a successful transition by bringing together leading actors in transitions, renewable energy, circular economy, and other related fields for an event such as a Coal Communities in Transition Conference.
3. *To engage the local community in the future plans for the Lithgow LGA, encourage a sense of ownership and genuine enthusiasm for the LEEP initiative, ensure there is opportunity to understand the potential the transition presents, and regular opportunities to participate and engage.*
- a. Attend suitable Council and community events with a LEEP Listening Station and Information Stand.
 - b. Hold an annual community workshop / focus group to galvanise the community and continue to develop and progress the LEEP vision.
 - c. Identify and engage with potential ambassadors who will positively promote the LEEP program as spokespeople or ambassadors.
4. *To engage Councillors and Lithgow City Council staff in the LEEP initiative, ensure they understand the opportunities the LEEP presents, have opportunity to input and participate in the LEEP program, and harness their support in achieving LEEP Transition Plan goals.*
- a. Regular reporting to, and engagement with Councillors, via the Economic Development Committee Meetings, and also Reports / Briefings / Memorandums.
 - b. Presentations about the 2025 LEEP program to Council groups such as the Tourism Advisory, Women's Advisory, Sports Advisory, Youth Advisory Committees.

- c. Develop relationships / regular meetings with Lithgow City Council staff to ensure synergies between the LEEP program delivery and existing Council work programs are identified.
- d. Deliver specific training opportunities for Lithgow City Council staff to equip them with skills to navigate transitions management, such as management and adaptive capacity.

Monitoring and Evaluation

By measuring engagement with the project website, community feedback, media releases, social media, email updates, newsletters, consultation and interaction throughout the project process, the project team can monitor, review and instigate changes to project/communication plans as required.

The Communications Strategy and the Engagement Plan will be reviewed regularly to assess the effectiveness of the communications and engagement, with outcomes used to refine the approach to better serve stakeholders and the community.

Consultation and Communication

Once the LEEP Engagement Plan is finalised, it will be released to the public, along with the LEEP Action Plan 2025-2026, and associated media release and social media promotion.

Policy

This proposal aligns with the outcomes proposed within the Council's endorsed *Lithgow Evolving Economy Plan*. Those actions to which the LEEP Engagement and Communications Strategy relates are interwoven through the entirety of the document. Effective implementation of engagement and communications is critical for the successful delivery of the LEEP.

Legal

Not otherwise than as set out in this Report.

Financial

- Transitions Management budget approved (2024/25 SRV funded) - \$1,141,400
- Transitions Management draft budget (2025/26 SRV funded) - \$1,187,926.74
- Budget to be approved (2024-26 Commonwealth-funded Adaptive Skills Hub grant) - \$830,000
- Cost centre - 100888
 - Expended to date - Actuals: \$41,889
 - Commitments: \$149,234 (Transitions Management expenditure)
\$260,000 (Halloween + Branding Strategy)
- Future potential impact – Full expenditure of the Transitions Management budget