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Talking to your local Government

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Ever wonder how to talk to Local Government? Struggled with finding or knowing the best person to talk to about your project? Before you start stressing about who and how and when, you should first remember that local government officers, Managers, Directors and CEOs are people just like yourself. They have interests in certain areas, and expertise in others and it's their job as local government representatives to service their communities and talk to you. Most of the time they will be thrilled that you have taken the time to talk to them about what you are doing.

Before you approach though, you should think about the staff member in the Council department that might be most relevant to your project. What benefits will your work or project have to the people in the community that the particular department is servicing? If you are not sure, then you can either take the plunge and contact the reception staff and get their advice or do some research.

Have you ever read a Council Plan? Maybe now is the time to cosy down with a cuppa and read about your Council's vision. And, if your Council has an Arts or Cultural Policy, then you should definitely read that as well! Most of them are available on Council websites. These documents will give you a firmer idea of the direction that your Council takes in arts and, even if there is no arts policy or if the arts are not addressed within the plans, there is certain to be an area within the Council Plan that your project WILL address. It could be that your plans fit in with community health and well-being goals; it may sit within the aims of the Children and Family Services areas or you could be planning an event that could be a great tourism boost for your town.

Find out what your Council dreams of doing and how they might plan to achieve their goals. And then think about how what you are doing might help them reach their objectives. Find the department or departments within Council that are most relevant to what you are planning. If the Council Plan says that they will work to strengthen their communities, think about how your work will achieve this and in which area and then find out which staff are the contact points within those departments. Call them to arrange a meeting time that's suits you both and before the meeting send them some documentation by email about what it is you are planning on discussing with them. Don't send too large a document. Make it brief, succinct and to the point. **What is your project, how does it address their goals and what would you realistically expect to receive from the Council?**



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When preparing the documentation or preparing for the meeting, you should also **think about the language you need to be using**. Tourism departments will want to know if you are going to attract people to the town. Will they spend money in shops and cafes, will they stay overnight etc. Social services type departments will want to know how your work will impact their constituents and so on.

Support from Council may come in various forms. Budgets are set in advance so most funds are allocated a year in advance but there are various types of support that your Council may be able to give and these could include:

- **Funding support.** Many Council's run one or more funding / grants programs. These could range from arts, events, community planning, parks and leisure and mayoral grants.
- **In-kind or discounted support.** This could include things like the supply of equipment's (bollards, signage etc), assistance with gaining permits, road closures, venue hire etc.
- **Advice or mentoring.** Invaluable is the support of the right Council staff member who is able offer you strategic support and advice by pointing you to the right people, funding, departments, networks etc and who becomes a champion for you and your work simply by understanding what you do.

Some tips to remember:

- **Be patient** when dealing with Council. There are definite policies and procedures that staff have to follow in order to be transparent and some of these can be slow processes. Things can take time so plan for that. Learn what the processes are so that you can plan accordingly.
- **Be polite.** Don't go into Council and tell them all the things that they aren't doing for you but talk about the things you could achieve together.
- **Develop authentic relationships** that foster mutual respect.
- **Invite staff** to share in your events, projects and plans where possible.

As artists and arts workers, we always believe in our projects and think that they are going to be beneficial and poignant. You can help to improve your community by building a cohesive and mutually beneficial relationship with your local Council and helping them to understand, support and advocate for the arts.