

From conference to communities: Australia's decade of hard choices needs engagement in the room

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Australia is entering a decade of rapid demographic change. Sustained immigration. Millennials settling into their outer suburb 'forever homes'. A sharp rise in aged-care demand. And global population growth offering Australia unprecedented opportunities in agribusiness, logistics and renewables – *if* our governments can plan now for the major builds needed ahead.

These were the themes that launched the **Engagement Institute's Annual Conference**, hosted this week in Melbourne, and the takeaway was clear: these shifts will only succeed with strong community engagement, embedded where decisions are made.

Keynote speaker Bernard Salt AM set the tone with *Australia 2035 & Beyond*, linking population growth, migration and economic opportunity to the need for social cohesion. Salt underscored the role of community engagement and social licence in maximising these opportunities – and in clearing the hurdles that come with them.

This sentiment was strongly reinforced by Engagement Institute CEO Marion Short, who set a strategic roadmap for what needs to change.

"If Australia is going to grasp the big, bold opportunities that lie ahead, we will need strategic, expert engagement to build legitimacy and deliver with durability," she said. "We need to seat engagement professionals at the centre of decision-making – both in the boardroom and on technical panels."

Across two days, the 400 attendees – comprised of practitioners, policy leaders and researchers – examined the realities of delivering major projects or reforms in today's environment. Keynote speaker Becky Hirst talked to the challenges

that come with polarised politics, misinformation and the amplifying effects of social media and a video-camera inbuilt into every phone.

While speakers acknowledged communities rarely achieve complete agreement on complex topics, the conference reaffirmed a shared principle: through authentic engagement, communities can contribute, better understand differing views and see that their voices matter.

Momentum from the annual conference culminated in the Engagement Institute's prestigious **Engagement Excellence Awards**, honouring outstanding achievements in engagement across Australasia. This year's awards recognised **16 exceptional finalists**, with **four Engagement Excellence Awards** presented on the night. **Latrobe Health Assembly** was named *Organisation of the Year*, while *Project of the Year* was awarded to **WA's Causeway Link Alliance and partners** for their inspiring initiative, *Boorloo Bridge: Building a Bridge Between Two Cultures*. *Excellence Awards* were also presented to **Byron Shire Council and the Federal Village Masterplan Steering Group** for the *Federal Village Masterplan*, and to **Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire Council, Circ Design, Meridian Urban and the Queensland Government** for their collaborative *Doomadgee Future Planning Project*.

The Institute also used the event to celebrate its recent launch of **EngageMark**, the sector's first certification and maturity assessment tool. As the organisation works to elevate the role of engagement, **EngageMark** provides governments, decision makers, project teams and engagement practitioners themselves with access to a clear benchmark against contemporary best practice.

Delegates walked away with a clear imperative: Australia will need bold, community-backed decisions over the next ten years. Elevating engagement to the C-suite and technical advisory tables is how we build trust, surface trade-offs, and deliver – together.

For more information, visit engagementinstitute.org.au

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ABOUT THE ENGAGEMENT INSTITUTE

The Engagement Institute is Australasia's leading authority on stakeholder and community engagement – and the exclusive regional partner of the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2).

As a trusted authority, we empower professionals with the skills, connections, and advocacy needed to create meaningful change. We challenge outdated approaches, embed engagement in decision-making, and deliver better outcomes. Evolving from a collective of passionate practitioners, we are now a dynamic and influential network of over 15,000 members.