

# RESPECTFULLY ENGAGING WITH RURAL COMMUNITIES

Investing in relationships that help you understand the unique strengths and challenges of each community is critical to the success of any project or initiative.

## COMMUNITY IDENTITY

Rural communities are often celebrated for being strong, adaptable and resourceful in ways that enable them to solve problems and overcome challenges. Whilst this is true, it is important to note that no two rural communities or towns are the same. Each community has their own sense of identity and is made up of a diverse range of people.

When times are tough, rural communities are often among the most heavily impacted. Any adversity can have far reaching impacts through communities where work, school, sporting and social networks often overlap.

*What do we achieve  
by listening?*

- A better understanding of the unique and diverse needs of each rural community.
- Adequately recognise and value existing strengths and the contribution of rural people within their community.
- A shared understanding, respect and commitment.
- Support the hope of rural people within their community.
- Recognise and respect the diversity of cultures, in particular First Nations People.

*A guide for groups and  
organisations working with  
rural communities*



## COLLABORATE WITH COMMUNITY

Rural communities welcome genuine offers of support, additional resources and the interest of agencies. However, it is important to listen to people who live and work in that community to understand how you can provide maximum benefit to that community. Some places to start consultations could include:

- Rural Adversity Mental Health Program (RAMHP)
- Department of Primary Industries (DPI)
- Local Land Services (LLS)
- Rural Financial Counselling Service (RFCS)
- Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations and Aboriginal Land Councils
- Health and Welfare Interagency groups
- Local councils
- Local clubs and associations like Rotary etc.

This guide has been developed in partnership between the Rural Adversity Mental Health Program and the NSW Department of Primary Industries.



[DPI.NSW.GOV.AU](http://DPI.NSW.GOV.AU)



[RAMHP.COM.AU](http://RAMHP.COM.AU)

# TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL ENGAGEMENT

## ...before you go

- **Be aware** – What has gone on prior to your visit? What is going on at the same time as your visit? Be aware of communities feeling used.
- **Plan carefully** – Engagement in rural areas might take more resources and time than in urban areas. Review existing guidelines and protocols from government and other key organisations.
- **Invite local First Nations participation** – Actively support Indigenous cultures and decision making with a focus on strengths and building capacity.
- **Be clear and transparent** about your purpose and be accountable to that. What are you offering and what do you need? Be clear how your project/activity will benefit the community, enrich their lives and build community capacity.
- **Do your research** – Don't assume rural people have a problem. Talk less, listen more.
- **Know your audience** – Identify and contact local networks.
- **Leave city comparisons behind** – no two rural communities are the same and one size does not fit all.

## ...while you're there

- **Communicate clearly** – Be clear about your purpose. Use simple and positive language. Share who you are and use existing local networks. Aim for a collaborative partnership with community.
- **Rural people are busy** – Give advance notice for any activities and give people more than one chance to engage. Be flexible.
- **Consider confidentiality** – Many rural communities are small and anonymity can be reduced, so be respectful and use discretion.
- **Take time** – Build solid relationships and connections, don't rush, be genuine and attend local events.
- **Value equity and diversity** – Seek many different voices and perspectives and value them.
- **Think outside the box** – To encourage people to engage with you, provide transport options or go to them.
- **Consult** – Determine the best time, date and location for the community – not all towns will be the same.
- **Buy local** – Use local experts and services, i.e. speakers, workshops, transport, catering, venues, media, etc.

## ...once you're gone

- **What will you leave behind?** – What will be your legacy in this community? Share findings and show that you valued the community's input. What opportunities are there for sustainability? Consider follow up and ongoing consultation within the community.
- **Keep in contact** – As well as being respectful towards the community, you never know when you will be back, so maintain contacts and check-in where appropriate. ...once you're gone.
- **Link people** to local services and supports that are ongoing. Avoid just referring them to national and statewide phone numbers and websites.