



Community Engagement Policy

Responsible Officer	Adoption Date	[Choose date]
Director Community Wellbeing	Approved By	Director
Authorising Officer	Review Date	[Choose date]
Chief Executive Officer	Policy Type	Choose an item.

Statement and Purpose

This policy outlines the scope and commitments of Council's community engagement practices and responsibilities.

The new Local Government Act 2020 (the Act) has the aim of ensuring all Victorians can engage with their council on local priorities and the future of their community. The Act does not define any type of community engagement that councils must use; however, it does ensure that at a minimum, council uses deliberative engagement practices in developing certain documents and processes, including our strategic and financial plans.

Scope

This policy applies to all Councillors, Council employees and agents of Council.

Policy

Our community is connected, sustainable and contemporary. We are the place where good things grow.

Our Community Promise

We promise that we will work our hardest to be a team you can be proud of. We will not settle for just being seen as the level of government closest to the community - because we see ourselves as part of the community. We will respond to the challenges that face us both as an organisation and as a community, and we will be courageous when hard decisions need to be made. We will lead when our people need us to, and we will work with others to help get the

things that really matter happening. We will not be shy to celebrate our success and the success of people in our community – we are proud of what we achieve.

We may not always be able to give you the answers that you want to hear but we promise we will always tell you the truth. We will take the time to talk to you, to listen to you and to help you, and we will always keep you informed of the things you need to know. We will respect the past, and the things that have come before us – whilst being excited and focused on the future. We will look after your tomorrow.

We will acknowledge and respect our position as decision makers, rule enforcers and fee collectors, but we will do so with a humble and responsible approach. We will deliver the things that remind you every day why it's great to be part of our community.

As a team we will continue to look for ways to create, to imagine and to improve. We will focus on understanding ways we can be better at what we do, easier to work with and deliver our services more efficiently. Above all we promise that we will remain driven by the desire to work with you to build an exciting, prosperous and sustainable future.

Introduction

Community engagement is about involving people in the decisions that impact their lives, and it's an important element of the democratic process. Community engagement seeks to better engage the community to achieve long-term and sustainable outcomes, processes, relationships, discourse, decision-making, or implementation. Our community has extensive knowledge, experience and expertise about a whole range of the things. Most especially, our community understands what is important to them, how they want to live, and how they want their neighbourhoods and towns to develop.

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Why is community engagement important?

Community engagement helps to achieve better outcomes for both Council and the community and should form an integral part of any significant project planning and decision making. However, it can also be used as an opportunity to build relationships and trust, to generate

understanding and participation in an issue or cause, to establish common goals and direction, and to formally acknowledge what is possible, and also what is not.

Effective community engagement helps to identify and understand priorities and opportunities, and it can also reveal possible risks and challenges and determine potential solutions. One of the biggest benefits of effective engagement is the capacity it offers to establish common ground and understanding between Council and the community.

Engaging with the community is a part of everybody's role at Council, our ability to give and respond to information in a way that is clear, accurate and respectful can be a significant factor in the outcome of a service, project or decision – and importantly how people feel about the process.

What is community engagement?

When we talk about 'community' it can mean different things. A community is generally acknowledging a point of connection and commonality between people – either geographically (a neighbourhood or town) or through characteristics and interests (culture, age, sporting groups, etc).

Community engagement is a broad term that encompasses the ways in which organisations both actively and responsively seek out and incorporate the views and priorities of community members and stakeholders into decision making. For Council, our commitment to community engagement is a recognition that it is in partnership with our community, and with a collective view of an issue, we can achieve the best possible outcome.

Community engagement can be a deliberate act and is often used to allow Council to understand the thoughts of the community on specific issues or projects. It can be organised and targeted to ensure appropriate representation of opinions. Methods like surveys, meetings, on-line conversations and advisory committees all help Council to build an informed view of an issue. The key characteristics of strong deliberative engagement are considered to be authentic engagement; good community representation; consideration of all views; accessible and relevant information; and transparency across all stages of the engagement.

Community engagement can also be reactive and responsive. Issues can arise quickly, or the community can make the opportunity of moments with Councillors and Council Officers to express their views without prompting. This feedback can be equally important and insightful.

This policy applies to all elements of Council's operations and should be considered by both Council Officers and Councillors. Community engagement processes are used to inform and guide all parts of our business – from strategic and financial operational planning, to land use and infrastructure development, and the delivery of services and projects.

When we engage

In broad terms, Council engages with the community to establish direction or understanding across three main areas:

1. Strategic direction

Council regularly establishes a strategic position or direction on a major element of the municipality. Things like future economic growth, public health and wellbeing priorities, and township planning all require input and feedback from our community.

2. Major projects and initiatives

Major projects are components of Council's work that are very specific and have a clear scope. Major projects are considered to be contained in size and timeline but will have a significant impact on the community. Major projects may include infrastructure developments, development of strategic documents, and service reviews.

3. Daily significance

Council will often engage with the community about the way in which we conduct our business, how we will implement projects or services, or policies and procedures that give direction to our daily work. We may engage with the community when there will be a direct impact on them, or when their insights will help achieve the best outcome.

Mandatory engagement

Apart from our commitment to undertaking community engagement for the benefit of our community – to build knowledge and improving the capacity of effective decision making – Council is often required to implement community engagement as part of our legislative requirement. The Act mandates the time and situations of when Council is required to invite the community to review documents and input into decision making processes. Whilst the act identifies the minimum requirements for each situation, often Council will expand this and develop engagement processes to reach the best outcomes for each individual situation. Specific matters where Council is required to engage under the Act include:

- In the performance of its role Council must
 - engage the municipal community in **strategic planning and strategic decision making**
 - take into account the community engagement principles
- a process of community engagement is followed in developing or amending its **Governance Rules** unless Council is developing and adopting or amending a Governance Rule that only adopts a good practice guideline issued by the Minister

- making or amending a **local law** in accordance with its community engagement policy
- maintaining a **Community Vision** that is developed with its municipal community in accordance with its deliberative engagement practices
- preparing and adopting a **Council Plan** for a period of at least the next 4 financial years after a general election in accordance with its deliberative engagement practices
- developing, adopting and keeping in force a **Financial Plan** in accordance with its deliberative engagement practices
- developing, adopting and keeping in force an **Asset Plan** in accordance with its deliberative engagement practices
- developing the **budget** and any **revised budget** in accordance with its community engagement policy
- **purchasing or compulsorily acquiring any land** which is or may be required by the Council for or in connection with, or as incidental to, the performance of its functions or the exercise of its powers must be undertaken in accordance with the Council's community engagement policy
- before **selling or exchanging any land**, the Council must undertake a community engagement process in accordance with its community engagement policy
- where Council proposes to **lease land**, where the lease is for one year or more and either the rent for any period of the lease is \$100 000 or more a year or the current market rental value of the land is \$100 000 or more a year; or where the lease is for 10 years or more and the lease proposal was not included as a proposal in the budget, the Council must undertake a community engagement process in accordance with the Council's community engagement policy in respect of the proposal before entering into the lease.

Note that **deliberative engagement practices** are mandated for development of a Community Vision, a Council Plan, a Financial Plan and an Asset Plan.

The Act sets out the **requirements for the community engagement policy**, which must:

- be developed in consultation with the municipal community; and
- give effect to the community engagement principles; and
- be capable of being applied to the making of the Council's local laws; and
- be capable of being applied in relation to the Council's budget and policy development; and
- describe the type and form of community engagement proposed, having regard to the significance and complexity of the matter and the level of resourcing required; and
- specify a process for informing the municipal community of the outcome of the community engagement; and
- include deliberative engagement practices which must include and address any matters prescribed by the regulations for the purposes of this paragraph and be capable of being applied to the development of the Community Vision, Council Plan, Financial Plan and Asset Plan and

- include any other matters prescribed by the regulations.

The **community engagement principles** include:

- a community engagement process must have a clearly defined objective and scope;
- participants in community engagement must have access to objective, relevant and timely information to inform their participation;
- participants in community engagement must be representative of the persons and groups affected by the matter that is the subject of the community engagement;
- participants in community engagement are entitled to reasonable support to enable meaningful and informed engagement;
- participants in community engagement are informed of the ways in which the community engagement process will influence Council decision making.

The **role of a council** is set out in the Act and includes the following elements.

- To provide good governance in its municipal district for the benefit and wellbeing of the municipal community
- Good governance is achieved if Council performs its role in accordance with the overarching governance principles:
 - Council decisions are to be made and actions taken in accordance with the relevant law
 - priority is to be given to achieving the best outcomes for the municipal community, including future generations
 - the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the municipal district, including mitigation and planning for climate change risks, is to be promoted
 - the municipal community is to be engaged in strategic planning and strategic decision making
 - innovation and continuous improvement is to be pursued
 - collaboration with other Councils and Governments and statutory bodies is to be sought
 - the ongoing financial viability of the Council is to be ensured
 - regional, state and national plans and policies are to be taken into account in strategic planning and decision making
 - the transparency of Council decisions, actions and information is to be ensured
- In giving effect to the overarching governance principles Council must take into account the following supporting principles:
 - the community engagement principles
 - the public transparency principles
 - the strategic planning principles
 - the financial management principles
 - the service performance principles
- Good governance is also achieved by each councillor:

- considering the diversity of interests and needs of the municipal community
- supporting the role of the Council
- acknowledging and supporting the role of the Mayor
- acting lawfully and in accordance with the oath or affirmation of office
- acting in accordance with the standards of conduct
- complying with Council procedures required for good governance

The **Mayor** has a focal role in community engagement through the requirements that the Mayor is to:

- be the principal spokesperson for the Council, and
- lead engagement with the municipal community on the development of the Council Plan

All of these roles are strongly reliant on our capacity to engage with and understand the needs and priorities of our community.

When we can't engage

There are many things that happen within our municipality that Council may not be able to engage with the community about or may not be able to engage in a way that provides the opportunity for the community to participate in developing the way forward.

These situations include:

- When another level of government has within their authority determined the timeframe or methodology for a project.
- When the consultation surrounding an issue is led by another level of government. Whilst Council will support consultation in this instance the parameters may be beyond our influence.
- When a situation requires an immediate response and time does not allow for engagement. These times may include natural, social or economic disasters.
- When an initiative involves confidential or commercial information.
- When specified in legislation.

Who do we engage with?

The Rural City of Wangaratta is a diverse community. It is important that we reflect that diversity when we engage with our community. Our community is defined as people who live, work, play, visit, study, or invest in our municipality.

We consider a person, business, group or organisation a stakeholder if they will be impacted by, involved with, or interested in Council's decision making.

Engagement Commitments

The following commitments reflect how we will engage with our community, and they all form part of Our Community Promise. These commitments will ensure that engagement is both effective and respectful.

1. Communication

- We will be transparent and forthcoming with information.
- We will make sense and communicate in a way that is clear and easy to understand.
- We will communicate in a way that suits you – not just us.
- We will be consistent – you will get the same message from us regardless of who tells it.

2. Inclusiveness and involvement

- We will be respectful of everyone – you all have the right to participate in conversations with us.
- We will encourage everyone to tell us their views – even if you don't agree with a decision we have made or a project we are delivering.
- We will give you a reason to involve yourself in our projects, discussions and plans – you will see how working with us can help benefit the way you live and how our community develops.

3. Honesty and respect

- We will tell you the truth even when we know it's not what you want to hear.
- We will be clear about what is possible and what is not – you will know the boundaries of what we do and what we can deliver

4. Accountability

- We will talk to you about the things that matter, decisions that will affect you and changes that may happen.
- We will learn from our mistakes – we will acknowledge and be accountable and seek ways to make sure they don't happen again.
- If you ask us a question, we will answer you – in a way that is clear, honest and thorough. You will walk away understanding what is said.

5. Decision making

- We will put people at the centre of how we make decisions and how we will deliver projects and services.

- We will be thorough and considerate in how we make decisions – we will look at all the information and make sure we understand the options, impacts and potential outcomes.
- We will tell you the reasons we have made the decisions and the information we have based them on – we won't have secrets. We know that we are here to make decisions that affect people's lives and the long term development of our community and we take that responsibility very seriously.

Implementation

Section 56 of the Act lists the following principles:

- All community engagement process must have a clearly defined objective and scope;
- Participants in community engagement must have access to objective, relevant and timely information to inform their participation;
- Participants in community engagement must be representative of the persons and groups affected by the matter that is the subject of the community engagement;
- Participants in community engagement are entitled to reasonable support to enable meaningful and informed engagement;
- Participants in community engagement are informed of the ways in which the community engagement process will influence Council decision making.

The Rural City of Wangaratta delivers community engagement under the IAP2 (International association for public participation) framework. IAP2 is an international organisation that focuses on the advancement of practice of public participation. The framework acknowledges the levels of engagement that can be delivered and their different impacts on the community and the decision making process.

The IAP2 framework is underpinned by seven core values that are aimed at ensuring organisations make better decisions that reflect the interest and concerns of potentially affected people and stakeholders. These values are:

1. Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.
2. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
3. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognising and communicating the needs and interest of all participants including decision makers.
4. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
5. Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.
6. Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
7. Public participation communicates participants how their input affected the decision.

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Public participation goal	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and solutions	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution	To place final decision making in the hands of the public
Promise to the public	We will keep you informed	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum amount possible	We will implement what you decide

Our engagement practice

To make sure we get the most out of our engagement processes, and that we achieve our objective of informing decision making and building a trusting and honest relationship with our community, the following steps should be followed in designing and implementing your engagement process.

1. Understand what you need

At council, we don't do engagement just for the sake of it. It must have purpose and scope. Take the time to understand what information you need to gather, and who you need to gather it from. Think carefully about the scope you need to cover and the objective of your engagement - you often won't have the chance to do it again.

You also need to make sure that you identify your stakeholders. Who will be affected by the decision you are informing. Make sure they are at the core of the design of your engagement.

2. Develop Community Engagement Plans

Community engagement plans must be developed for every Council led engagement process – the Community Engagement Framework has the necessary template and information to complete this. It is vital that before the project is delivered that the most appropriate level of engagement is established, and that the relevant people within the organisation are aware of their role and the timeline for the process. Each project may use different aspects of the IAP2 spectrum at different times and with different individuals and groups depending on the level of potential impacts on the community.

The plans must clearly identify:

- The objective of the engagement
- The timelines and stages of the project
- The level of engagement required (as per the IAP2 framework). This may be different at different stages of the engagement.
- Communications plan
- How the decision will be made and fed back to the community

3. Take it to the Community Engagement Working Group

All community engagement processes need to be presented to the Community Engagement Working Group. This group will help to coordinate the delivery of community engagement processes across Council and ensure effective and consistent delivery. The group will also ensure that the information gathered from community engagement processes is appropriately responded to and considered.

This group reports directly to the Corporate Management Team and acts as an internal expertise for engagement development, delivery and response. They will meet fortnightly to make sure engagement processes can progress without delay.

4. Get the team on board

Effective consultation requires the insight and support of many people. At Council, we have a range of people with strong and specific skills, experiences and contacts that will help to implement your engagement. Get them involved early to make sure that you have enough time to properly utilise their expertise.

5. Make sure the people who need to know, know

Engagement is a public and often high profile process and it's important that Councillors and CMT know when things are happening. There are many reasons why it needs to be clear what is happening, when it's happening and why it's happening:

- There may be the opportunity for Councillors, and senior officers to help promote the process through their networks and contacts, through social and main stream media and in their conversations with community members
- Often Councillors and CMT are involved in the decision making process that the community engagement will be informing – it's important that they understand how the community has been involved
- Councillors and CMT have a wide and strategic view of the organisation and the community and may be able to inform you of other considerations that should be made to support you engagement process – it may be the history of a project, other events or groups that should be considered or key people that should be contacted.

If you need Councillors or CMT to be involved, make sure they are notified of details at least 2 weeks before a process starts.

6. Communicate and promote your engagement

To have strong engagement and participation, you need people to know what you are doing and how to get involved. It's vital that you allow enough time to promote your process, and people need to clearly understand what you will be asking, why you will be asking it and what will be expected of them to participate.

There are so many methods through which you can promote your engagement. Social media, contact lists, networks, mainstream media and promotional material can all generate knowledge and interest for your engagement.

Remember to allow plenty of time to promote your process. Don't expect that people will have heaps of time to get involved. Importantly - make it exciting, participating in consultation should can actually be fun.

7. Deliver your engagement

This of course, is where it all comes together. The planning and preparation leads to the execution of an engagement process that helps to deliver you insights and information to support strategic decisions and provide direction for our work.

Some considerations as you deliver your engagement:

Be positive – how you interact with people, the way you deliver the message, how you represent Council will leave a lasting impression and greatly impact how you make people feel.

Listen with intent - you want people to leave an engagement process feeling as though they have been heard and acknowledged.

Don't take it personally – we are part of an organisation that often has to make hard decisions that don't make everyone happy. Or perhaps people have had an interaction with Council in the past that has been negative. They may not be satisfied with a service or a piece of infrastructure or the quality of our roads. These things are often raised during an engagement process (even if they have nothing to do with the topic being discussed). Try not to take it personally. Instead, offer to take a note and feed it back (through CRMS) to the relevant officer. If it is to do with the engagement topic, note it down, thank the person for their input and acknowledge that their views have been heard and will be considered – it might provide you with some valuable insights.

Don't take up too much time – people don't have hours to spare. If you want people to engage, keep it concise and efficient. And if you make a time commitment, stick to it. Don't promise a 10 minute survey that takes 30 to complete. Don't say a meeting will end at 5.00pm and still have people there at 6.00pm.

Go to where the people are – make it convenient and make people comfortable. If engagement is about an issue facing a neighbourhood, then go there. If it's about a precinct in the CBD, then activate the space to ask the questions. Make sure you always consider your own safety – when appropriate and possible, make sure you have a team member with you and only go where you feel safe to be.

Use place based prompts to help - People are much more likely to be able to give you detailed perceptions when they are in the place, so if you can, be where you want people to talk to you about. Where possible, use visual prompts to allow people to imagine what is possible or to understand what you are explaining. Make sure you have information available that will give context to places – how many people visit, or what needs to be considered in design.

Be creative – engagement doesn't need to be boring, in fact you are much more likely to get strong participation and quality information from processes that are enjoyable and interesting. There are lots of ways to make engagement fun and still productive – involve children, have a street party, use friendly language in your survey. If you aren't sure, take your engagement planning to the Community Engagement Working Group for some suggestions.

8. Internal engagement

All engagement processes need to include relevant and appropriate internal staff. Staff should be informed of the objective of the engagement and given enough time to meaningfully participate. Provide an opportunity for staff to be on cross-departmental working groups related to plans, strategies, policies etc

It is also important that the outcomes of engagement are communicated across the organisation. This achieve multiple benefits including:

- The community comes to trust that we value and respect the information that they give us and the time they take to give it.
- Planning and decision making throughout the organisation is more informed and reflective of the needs and priorities of the community.
- The community does not experience 'consultation fatigue' from multiple processes that happen within a short period of time.
- Council establishes a strong understanding of the profiles and priorities of the community.

9. Collate your information

It is important that when decide what kind of information you need; you also think about how you need to represent it. This will help you decide the most appropriate method of engagement. Do you need statistically valid data, do you need an in-depth analysis of options, or do you need a vote that will show you one preferred option.

When you collate your data remember that everything is relevant and important. Reviewing all of the information you collect will help to show you trends and highlight things that you may not have been aware of.

When you are collating and analysis qualitative data (information that can't be validated – comments and conversations make sure you are conscious of your natural bias and your own personal view. This is not an exercise in confirming your own personal preference.

Present your information in a way that is clear and easy to understand. Visual representation of statistical data can help to make it easier to interpret. When it comes to qualitative information, try to validate it by using an analysis of how many people represented certain views or ideas, and what the key issues and opinions were.

It is often useful to give a high level analysis of the information at the beginning so that people can get to an understanding of the main points and findings.

10. Use it to inform your decision

Make sure you use the information you gather in the right way. Analyse it without bias and consider everything that you were told that is relevant to the topic. However, also make sure that you use it in context – if you only had ten people from a neighbourhood of two thousand participate, you need to keep their input in perspective.

You may find that when you implement an engagement process it generates attention in the mainstream and social media areas – consider this but don't let it drive your decision making. This can often be a very narrow reflection of how people feel about an issue.

Make sure you take the information you find to the right level to make a decision or design a project. Councillors, CMT, senior managers and project managers will all find your information insightful. Make sure you also share the information when appropriate with our partners and networks if they are involved in the decision or project.

11. Share your data

Your data and information is likely to be valuable to many teams across the organisation. It is important that we utilise the information that the community gives us in the most effective way possible, and that means sharing it.

There is a WIM folder that houses all of the engagement information – everything should be stored there.

12. Evaluate and review

Evaluating your engagement process will help to determine if you have been successful in engaging with the community and if you have achieved your objectives of your engagement process. It is very important, and will help make sure that we continue to deliver processes that achieve what we and our community need them to.

There is an evaluation template in the Community Engagement Framework for you to use.

13. Close the loop

An important step of any engagement process is getting back to people – make sure you close the loop! People have contributed their time and effort and it's important that they get to see how it contributed, even if it means what they told you isn't actually what happens in the end.

Also make sure that you tell people internally – staff and Councillors what the outcome was and how it was used to inform the decision or project.

Engagement methods

There are many different methods that can be implemented. Choosing the right one can depend on many different factors - your target participants, the nature of the decision/situation, the history of the situation, and the time and resources you have available. Below is an overview of some possible methods. There are more examples and case studies within the Community Engagement Toolkit.

Inform

- Advertisements
- Fact and information sheets
- Social media posts (Facebook, Instagram, etc)
- Media releases
- Newsletters
- Website posts and updates

Consult

- Focus groups
- Public exhibition of documents, plans, strategies, etc
- Surveys and questionnaires
- Comment boards
- Visual mapping

Involve

- Advisory committees
- Deliberative voting on project options
- Workshops

Collaborate

- Consensus building
- Participatory decision making
- Participant led workshops

Empower

- Facilitation of networks and partnerships
- Practical skills workshops

Community Engagement responsibilities

This policy has been developed for all staff and Councillors. Whilst every officer is responsible for ensuring their projects, strategies and decisions incorporate the appropriate community engagement, it's important we work as a team and deliver a collaborative and coordinated approach to our engagement.

We are an organisation that undertakes regular and diverse engagement processes, and we often have several happening at once. To make sure we don't over consult our community, or miss out on opportunities to join up and simplify processes, there are some commitments we all need to make.

1. All engagement needs to be included into the Community Engagement calendar – which is kept on Sharepoint.
2. All engagement processes need to have a project plan completed – its quick and will help scope and deliver the process. This project plan needs to be sent through to the Community Engagement Working Group which meets fortnightly and helps to coordinate our organisational approach to community engagement.
3. All engagement reports (the consolidated information from large engagement processes) need to be made available for other Council teams. It should be collated and kept centrally in WIM.
4. Council needs to be made aware of what community engagement processes are happening.