Yarra Ranges Council

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT POLICY

MEANINGFUL | AUTHENTIC | RESPONSIVE

Empowering our community through meaningful, authentic and responsive engagement

Yarra Ranges Council

Issued 2021

Yarra Ranges Council respectfully acknowledges the traditional owners, the Wurundjeri people, as the custodians of this land. We pay respect to all Aboriginal community Elders, past and present, who have resided in the area and have been an integral part of the history of the region.

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1. What is the purpose of this policy?

Community engagement at Yarra Ranges Council includes a wide range of activities aimed at involving the community in Council's decision-making processes.

While community engagement is a legislative requirement under the Local Government Act (2020), more importantly it plays a critical role in ensuring Council decisions reflect the needs and expectations of the community and other stakeholders.

Our community has made it clear that, as a Council, we need to improve the way we engage with them. We recognise and accept that we haven't always got it right. This policy is our first step in improving the way we engage with the Yarra Ranges community. It outlines who we engage with, and why, how and when we will engage, to ensure that as an organisation, we apply a coordinated and consistent approach, and keep the community at the heart of our decision making.

It reflects our commitment to engaging in a meaningful way about decisions that affect our community. It also reflects the value we place on our community's feedback and their right to be involved in Council's decision making processes.

We are thankful for the feedback from community members who have helped shape this Community Engagement Policy.

We are also committed to testing this policy out over the next 12-18 months on key community engagement projects including the Council Plan and Budget, to name a few. This policy will be regularly reviewed to ensure it continues to meet the engagement needs of our community.

2. Scope

Adhering to the Community Engagement Policy is the shared responsibility of all employees, Councillors, contractors and external consultants acting on behalf of Council.

This policy applies to the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of community engagement activities as directed by Council, recommended by staff, or legislated by the Local Government Act 2020.

It does not apply to consultation activities that are subject to prescribed processes imposed by other legislation, such as those related to planning permit applications and planning scheme amendments governed by the Planning and Environment Act 1987, or those required by section 223 of the Local Government Act 1989.

3. What is Community Engagement?

Community engagement provides an opportunity for the community to shape the plans and decisions that affect their current and future needs. It helps inform Council's vision, strategic direction, planning and decision making, while also providing Council with a better understanding of community priorities.

The objective of community engagement is to understand the collective view rather than individual feedback. It is a purposeful, planned process of working with identified groups of people, whether connected by geography, demography or affiliation to build relationships, inform decision making and strengthen community.

Levels of engagement

Our level of community engagement is guided by the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum, illustrated in the table below. This identifies and defines five levels of engagement and details our promise to the community for each level of engagement ensuring that both the community and Council have shared expectations.

	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/or 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.
Role of the community	Listen	Contribute	Participate	Partner	Lead
Our Commitment to the community	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 extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.
Example initiatives	Emergency management	Playground redevelopment Property sales	Public submissions	Lilydale Structure Plan	Yarra Glen's People's Panel
Possible methods	Website Social media Advertisements Media Letters Email SMS Phone Newsletter Public Notices Social media Videos Publications Displays	Surveys (pop up, online and phone) Public meetings Online forums Written/email submissions Exhibitions	Advisory committees Workshops Focus groups Deliberative polling Field trips	Advisory committees Community Summits Stakeholder meetings	Citizen jury Ballots

*This table is based on the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum of engagement.

In cases where the form of engagement is an invitation to make submissions and to be heard at panel hearings, Council may also decide to proceed in a manner modelled on Section 223 of the Local Government Act 1989 and in line with the engagement principles above.

Community engagement should be fit for purpose according to the size, scale, impact and complexity of a project or decision. It may include varying levels of public participation during different stages of the process and can broadly be described as either participatory or deliberative:

Participatory engagement

Participatory engagement is a one-way process that enables participants to provide feedback but doesn't necessarily involve a conversation or dialogue with Council. It is valuable for reaching and hearing from a broad range of people and groups.

This typically involves either informing the community using methods such as fact sheets, information sessions or website updates or consulting with community using methods such as surveys, inviting submissions, drop-in sessions, public meetings and polling.

Examples of situations where we may engage in participatory engagement includes inviting community ideas or views, seeking feedback into draft plans, designs or documents, understanding satisfaction with services, seeking support for a proposal or asking community for local knowledge.

Council will typically use participatory engagement when setting the budget, in the making of a Local Law and in property transactions such as acquiring, leasing or selling land.

Deliberative engagement

Deliberative engagement is a tailored process that can bring participants closer to decision makers than other forms of engagement, or in some instances, enable them to be the decision makers. Deliberative practices traditionally take place at the highest three levels of the IAP2 spectrum - involve, collaborate and empower. A deliberative process typically involves a representative group deliberating on an issue in depth, over time, before coming to an informed consensus or decision. Deliberative engagement should be conducted when participants can have a high level of influence over, or impact on, the outcomes or decisions to be made.

Deliberative engagement methods include advisory committees, workshops, community panels, focus groups, citizen juries and ballots.

Council will use deliberative engagement when developing the Community Vision, Council Plan, Asset Plan, Financial Plan and other projects or initiatives as considered appropriate.

The Communications & Engagement Team is available to support Council officers in designing the appropriate level of engagement for their project.

4. Community Engagement Principles and Commitments

All community engagement that falls within the scope of this policy will be guided by the five community engagement principles as set out in Section 56 of the Local Government Act 2020. We have built on these principles to demonstrate our commitment to community engagement and reflect the expectations of the Yarra Ranges community.

OUR ENGAGEMENT COMMITMENTS ARE

| TRANSPARENCY + TRUST | INCLUSIVE + EQUITABLE | RESPONSIVE + IMPACTFUL | BUILDING CAPACITY |

Community engagement principle	Yarra Ranges commitment
A community engagement process must have a clearly defined objective and scope.	**Clarity of Purpose** We are clear about what, how and why we are engaging with community. All engagement is planned by clearly identifying the purpose, scope and objectives for the community's participation.
Participants taking part in community engagement must have access to objective, relevant and timely information to inform their participation.	**Building capacity** We will be proactive to ensure the community is consulted in a timely manner and that they have access to clear, unbiased, easy-to-understand information.
Participants taking part in community engagement must be representative of the persons and groups affected by the matter that is the subject of community engagement.	**Equitable** We will ensure that those who are affected by a decision will be given an opportunity to inform that decision. Engagement initiatives will be inclusive, equitable, accessible and seek a diverse range of perspectives.
Participants taking part in community engagement are entitled to reasonable support to enable meaningful and informed engagement.	**Inclusive** We will seek to obtain the views of a broad cross section of the community and will use a variety of engagement methods to reduce any physical, social and cultural barriers to participation. We will consider the needs and perspectives of all groups that may want to be involved in the process and provide accessible information to support meaningful participation.
Participants taking part in community engagement are informed of the ways in which the community engagement process will influence Council decision making.	**Transparent** We will be upfront about how much opportunity there is for community to influence a decision. Community understand what is happening and how their input is being used. We will inform participants of the level of influence they have, as described in the IAP2 spectrum, and we will let them know how their views have influenced the outcome.

5.   Why we engage?

Community engagement enables Council to understand the needs, aspirations, concerns and ideas of the community while providing community with the opportunity to be involved in planning and decision-making. Benefits of community engagement include the ability to:

• Gain a better **understanding of the needs and priorities** of our diverse communities and stakeholders

• Build a **strong evidence base** for informing Council decision making

• Strengthen community's **confidence and trust** in Council

• Increase understanding and **transparency in the decision-making process**

• Facilitate **greater understanding** of, and commitment to, Council projects and initiatives

• **Identify and mitigate** potential risks

Beyond guiding Council planning and decision making, the community engagement process itself can benefit the community by:

• **Enhancing community cohesion and connection**

• Generating a sense of **positive community spirit**

• Strengthening a sense of **civic pride**

• Building **community capacity** with skills such as critical thinking, debate and cooperation

• Reflecting the **value of local knowledge**, including Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing.

6.   Who we engage?

Community engagement will seek to connect with a diverse range of community members and stakeholders to create a balanced and inclusive engagement process, ensuring those impacted by council decisions are given the opportunity to be heard.

While some of the projects we engage on might impact the whole community, other projects or decisions might impact more specific parts of our community.

Engagement processes should be designed to ensure feedback captured represents the people or groups that will be impacted by a decision. Stakeholder mapping is a key part of the planning process for any community engagement process, and must be undertaken to ensure we reach all groups and individuals in the community, including those whose views are less often heard, or who are more difficult to reach through traditional engagement approaches, including:

• children and young people

• senior citizens

• First Nations people

• people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

• people who live with a disability and their carers

• people who are geographically isolated

• people experiencing social isolation or socio-economic disadvantage.

It is also important to understand that some groups in our community may have barriers to engaging with us such as language, abilities, work commitments, age or technology literacy and access. To ensure we hear a full range of perspectives, we will design engagement processes so that everyone has an opportunity to participate and provide their input.

The following are examples of the many community groups and stakeholders we may engage with:

• Advisory committees	• Media
• Arts and culture community	• Neighbouring Councils/Not-for-profit organisations
• Business owners and workers	• Other government agencies
• Carers	• Parents and guardians
• Children & young people	• People experiencing homelessness
• Community groups	• People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
• Community service providers	
• Commuters	• People with a disability
• Council employees	• Ratepayers (including non-resident ratepayers)
• Diverse groups such as the LGBTQI community	• Service users
• Emergency Services	• Sporting, leisure and recreational clubs and groups
• Environmental groups	• State & Federal Government (including local MPs)
• Families	• Students
• Heritage societies	• Visitors
• Indigenous community	• Volunteers

7. When we engage?

We will engage with the community when:

• Making plans - such as developing major capital works and infrastructure projects.

• Changing something – for example, changes to a service where those changes may have an impact on the community.

• Decision making – where a decision is likely to impact the community in terms of health and wellbeing, environment, lifestyle or economy

• Designing and delivering new and existing services.

• Statutory obligations - when we are directed to do so under the Local Government Act 2020 such as developing a long-term Community Vision, four-year Council Plan, Financial Plan and Asset Plan or a Health and Wellbeing Plan under the Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008.

• Addressing a sensitive or divisive community issue that requires Council action or response.

We may also seek to engage with community when Council:

• requires more information and evidence to make an informed decision.

• requires assistance to identify community needs or aspirations.

• Identifies that the broader community has raised, or expressed an interest in, a policy, initiative or service

• seeks new, or wishes to strengthen, existing relationships with the community.

Community and stakeholders will be engaged early in our planning process. This will provide the opportunity to influence decisions by participating in a more meaningful way. Timely engagement also enables us to identify opportunities and challenges early in the planning process and respond accordingly.

Community and stakeholders will also be given adequate time to participate in engagement initiatives. Wherever possible, engagement will take place during times most convenient to community and stakeholders, taking into consideration limitations such as working hours and holiday periods.

What constitutes enough time will depend on the complexity and scale of the engagement initiative.

There are occasions where it is not appropriate to engage with the community, with some examples of this being:

• During the time immediately before a Council election, in line with our Election Period Policy.

• When decisions need to be made immediately whether due to an emergency or for occupational health and safety reasons.

• When decisions relate to Council's day-to-day organisational operations.

• Where Council does not have the decision-making power, or where legal or commercial restrictions prevent it.

8. How we engage?

When planning engagement initiatives, there are some factors that may influence the form of engagement we choose. We will be guided by the five community engagement principles included in the Local Government Act 2020 (as outlined on page 9 of this policy) and our community engagement commitments.

01 DESIGN + PLAN

• **Establish purpose** – Clearly define the purpose of the engagement

• **Design scope** – Document the project scope, engagement objectives, timelines, budget and the decision to be made. Identify any risks and consideration for relevant legislation.

• **Identify participants** – Identify stakeholders who are impacted by, interested in, or who can help inform the decision.

• **Confirm levels of engagement** – Determine expectation of the level of participation on the IAP2 spectrum and design an appropriate community engagement process.

• **Select most effective methods and tools** – Consider if there are barriers to participation that need to be removed to ensure an appropriate balance of views. Identify the preferred methods for most effective engagement.

02 ACTION + DELIVER

• **Develop a communications plan** – Plan inclusive and accessible communications and methods to support the engagement process.

• **Confirm roles and responsibilities** – Ensure that participants understand their role and level of influence on the decision-making process. Identify the skills and resources needed to ensure an effective community engagement.

• **Launch and implement engagement** – Deliver genuine and respectful engagement, ensuring all activities are inclusive and accessible. Be clear about the purpose and level of engagement.

• **Collate community and stakeholder input** – Collate and review the data from each engagement activity and identify any limitations to the appropriate balance of information.

03 REVIEW + RESPOND

• **Analyse data and capture findings** – Analyse the data to identify themes, priorities and preferences.

• **Close the loop on the community engagement** – Share the outcomes of the engagement with the community including how feedback contributed to the decision through updates on Council's engagement platform 'Shaping Yarra Ranges' and by making this information available at Council's Community Links for people who prefer printed communications. Report back to participants to ensure correct understanding of engagement process and communicate next steps of the project.

• **Review and evaluate success of engagement process** – Council commits to ongoing evaluation and monitoring of our engagement processes. Annual measures of success include:

- Community satisfaction with engagement and consultation captured by an annual survey
- Number of participants
- Number of engagements
- Representation of hard-to-reach communities
- Percentage of deliberative and participatory engagements
- Average timelines for reporting back to community

9. Other Statutory consultation

Council makes decisions under a variety of legislation and for some of these, we need to follow the process set out in section 223 of the Local Government Act 1989 when we consult with the community. This affects decisions on the following matters:

• determining mayoral and councillor allowances
• making and amending a Local Law
• changing the Council's system of land valuations for Council rates
• declaring a special rate or a special charge
• property transactions such as acquiring, leasing or selling land
• the powers of Council over roads and traffic

As the Local Government Act 2020 is being implemented in stages, some of the decisions listed above will no longer require Council to use section 223 of the Local Government Act 1989 to engage with the community. When these changes occur, engagement will be undertaken in accordance with this policy.

This policy does not apply to consultation activities governed by the Planning and Environment Act 1987, such as those related to planning permit applications and planning scheme amendments.

10. Charter of Human Rights

Council must act in a way that is compatible with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006. This policy has been assessed as being consistent with that Act and promotes the rights of the community to:

• not to have their privacy interfered with (section 13)

• have freedom of expression (section 15)

• take part in public life (section 18)

11. Protection of privacy

Council views the protection of an individual's privacy and the appropriate use of their personal and/or health information as a demonstration of its commitment toward openness, accountability and integrity in all of its activities and programs. We have adopted a Privacy & Health Information Policy which outlines how we will collect, use, disclose and store personal and health information and this will apply to all community engagement activities undertaken by Council.

12. Definitions

Community engagement means the process Council undergoes to exchange information with the community, using data, insights and ideas to inform decisions or solve problems.
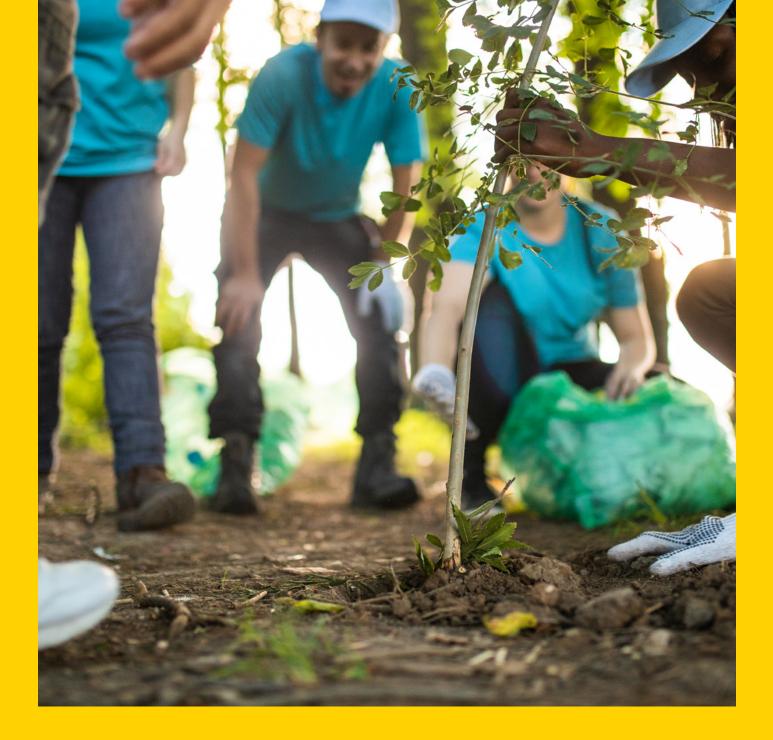
Council means Yarra Ranges Council

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Hard-to-reach means individuals and groups that are more difficult to involve in community engagement and have multiple barriers to engagement.

IAP2 refers to the International Association for Public Participation Australasia. IAP2 is an international member association which seeks to promote and improve the practice of public participation or community and stakeholder engagement, incorporating individuals, governments, institutions and other entities that affect the public interest.

Stakeholders means individuals or organisations that would be affected by, or highly interested in, a decision made by Council.

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Yarra
Ranges
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