Colac Otway Shire Council

2.5: Community Engagement Policy

COUNCIL POLICY

1. PURPOSE

This policy outlines the principles and commitments that underpin Council's approach to community engagement.

Policy Principles

The *Local Government Act 2020* Section 56 establishes five community engagement principles applicable to Council. As required by Section 55 of the Act, this policy gives effect to these principles.

Principle 1: A community engagement process must have a clearly defined objective and scope.

Council will:

- Develop community engagement plans in accordance with this policy.
- Identify and document the purpose of community engagement processes and the benefits sought.
- Allocate appropriate funding and time to engagement planning and implementation.

Principle 2: Participants in community engagement must have access to objective, relevant and timely information to inform their participation.

Council will:

- Provide accurate and impartial information about intended projects or decisions for consideration.
- Provide information with sufficient notice for community members to consider how they may be affected by proposed decisions or plans and to make arrangements to be involved in engagement processes.
- Provide opportunities, as appropriate, for community members to come together to learn and share information, and have meaningful and informed deliberations.

Principle 3: Participants in community engagement must be representative of the persons and groups affected by the matter that is the subject of the community engagement

Council will:

- Make reasonable endeavours to identify stakeholders at the commencement of all relevant projects and determine the level to which different groups may be affected by decisions or plans.

- Select communication methods which will ensure relevant parties are informed about engagement activities and opportunities to influence council decisions.

- Encourage and support the inclusion of a diverse range of perspectives, and ensure the consideration of all relevant interests including minority groups and those people belonging to socially, culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Principle 4: Participants in community engagement are entitled to reasonable support to enable meaningful and informed engagement.

Council will:

- Make reasonable adjustments to remove barriers to participation in engagement processes, including consideration of accessibility needs, information formats, communication channels, language and a variety of engagement methods and opportunities.

- Use supportive communication such as media releases, advertisements, social media, executive summaries and face-to-face conversations to precis and explain more complex Council documents that are subject to community engagement.

Principle 5: Participants in community engagement are informed of the ways in which the community engagement process will influence Council decision making.

Council will:

- Identify the appropriate level of engagement according to the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) Framework.

- State the level of influence available, and highlight the negotiable and non-negotiable elements of any community engagement process.

- Articulate how community perspectives will be incorporated into decision making and the nature of decisions to be made. This will include being responsive to community needs and feedback, which at times might necessitate amendments to community engagement design.

- Be open to community-led engagement or engagement that takes a partnership approach with community groups.

- Share what has been learned and what actions or decisions have resulted from an engagement process.

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2. OBJECTIVE

The objective of this Policy is to formalise Council's commitment to the community on the principles and values that guides its community engagement.

This ensures:

- Better project and service delivery outcomes.

- Improves the quality of policy being developed.

- Builds a more resilient relationship with the community.

- Enhances reputation and checks that council is meeting local needs.

- Increases understanding of community issues.

- Better shared partnerships and networks.

- That complex issues and emerging issues are dealt with effectively.

- The opportunity for a diversity of voices to be heard.

- Communities are able to identify priorities for themselves and own the solutions.

3. SCOPE

This policy provides direction on formal (including legislated) and informal community engagement activities undertaken by, or on behalf of, Council, including, but not limited to, the:

- Development and review of key strategic plans such as the Community Vision, Council Plan, Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plan, Financial Plan, Asset Plan, and Road Management Plan.
- Making of local laws.
- Development of annual budgets.
- Development of Council policies that directly impact the community.
- Planning and delivery of projects that create new assets or change service levels.

This policy applies to all community engagement activity undertaken by Council, including work undertaken by consultants and volunteers.

Community engagement relating to planning permit applications and planning scheme amendments is outside of the scope of this policy, as these processes are governed by the Planning and Environment Act 1987 and associated regulations.

4. DEFINITIONS

In this Policy, the following words and phrases mean:

"Act" means the *Local Government Act 2020*.

"Chief Executive Officer" includes an Acting Chief Executive Officer.

"Municipal community" includes-

   (a) people who live in the municipal district of the Council; and

   (b) people and bodies who are ratepayers of the Council; and

   (c) traditional owners of land in the municipal district of the Council; and

   (d) people and bodies who conduct activities in the municipal district of the Council."Municipal District" means the district under the local government of a Council.

"Council" means Colac Otway Shire Council.

"Community Engagement" means the process in which Council and the municipal community connect with each other to exchange views, ideas and information to (i) inform decisions (ii) build capacity and (iii) strengthen relationships.

"Deliberative Engagement" is the process of consulting/engaging with communities by providing them with:

   1. the information they need to come to an informed view about the relative merits of potential future; decisions, actions, projects and/or programs that will or may affect them;

   2. a forum in which to consider and discuss the issues and options associated with the above;

   3. an opportunity to make their considered views known to the individuals and organisations ultimately responsible for the decisions, actions, projects and/or programs that they have been consulted about.

"International Association for Public Participation Australasia (IAP2)" IAP2 is a leading organisation in public engagement practice and has a series of tools which support the delivery of engagement, specifically core values, public participation spectrum, code of ethics for public participation practitioners, and quality assurance standards.

"IAP2 Spectrum of Participation" defines the level of participation and the publics role in an engagement process ranging from inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower.

"Municipal District" means the municipal district of Council.

"Officer" means a member of Council staff, and includes the Chief Executive Officer.

5. POLICY STATEMENT

Colac Otway Shire Council is committed to ensuring that community engagement is integrated into Council core business to support decision making, build relationships, strengthen communities and seek improvement opportunities in collaboration with the community.

This includes a commitment to ensuring staff are appropriately trained and resourced to carry out community engagement in line with this policy, the Local Government Act 2020 and the IAP2 principles.

The need and scope of community engagement should be assessed at the planning stage of any project or initiative, when:

- a change in service, activities, user group or major infrastructure is considered

- an issue is raised and requires a decision
- more information or evidence is required

- there is an opportunity for stakeholders to influence a Council project or its outcome.

Council will determine the level of community engagement based on a wide range of factors, including but not limited to:

- Who is impacted by the project or decision.
- The extent of the impact on the community.
- Consideration of community concerns and priorities.
- Consideration of project timeframes and resources.
- An identified genuine need to engage.
- Legislative, mandated or regulatory requirements.

Other factors may also influence the level of community engagement undertaken such as budget limitations and need for urgent decisions in times of emergency.

Public Exhibition

A period of six weeks will be the standard public exhibition time for council documents requiring community feedback, unless determined otherwise by Council.

The implementation of this Policy will be through the Colac Otway Shire's operational Community Engagement Framework.

This framework will assist Council to:

- Understand local community needs and desires.

- Better meet those needs.

- Tap into local knowledge and expertise.

- Have a more informed community.

- Encourage and enable the community to participate in decision making.

- Develop partnerships with local communities and organisations.

- Meet the requirements of legislation, policies and procedures.

Deliberative engagement practices

Colac Otway Shire believe that all community engagement should be based on the following principles:

Inform our community

It is essential when engaging our community that they have sufficient information to enable participation. This could include providing specific information about a project or broader information about Council's priorities or responsibilities.

It could also include information on the constraints such as budget impacts or time. Providing this type of information will help our community to understand the reasons Council makes certain decisions in current and future projects. When informing the community, it is important to write in plain English, without the use of technical terms or jargon.

Consult before decision making

For much of the work Council does it is important to talk to the community before decisions are made. If decisions have already been made it is important that we inform the community of the reasons why the decision was made. This in turn, will assist the community to understand issues faced by Council when developing or implementing projects.

Do not over-consult

There may be times where sufficient research and consultation has already occurred about the project. In this instance you need to be careful not to over-consult and you need to inform people about the work that was previously undertaken and the findings.

Over-consultation often results in the comment: "we've already told you what we want, why are you asking us again?"

This can be avoided by utilising existing research and findings of other consultations that Council or other agencies have conducted. It may still be appropriate to confirm the needs or issues you are already aware of.

In many instances it may also be appropriate to undertake joint consultations with other areas of Council or other agencies to minimise repeat consultations.

Be upfront and open

Be clear about intentions, the decision making processes and be open about issues and constraints. Share this information with community members so they can be more involved in the process. A transparent process allows the project to stand up to scrutiny from the community and Council throughout the project.

Ongoing communication

Communicate regularly to keep the community informed on progress with a project: delays, issues or milestones. It is also important to always explain the process and why and how it was decided. In all communication be careful not to create unrealistic expectations.

Provide clear explanations of the nature of the project including constraints and decision making steps.

Provide feedback

It is essential to provide feedback to our community after consulting with them. People have given their time and knowledge and it is important to recognise this by keeping them updated.

Community members appreciate feedback about how their input is to be utilised; the next steps of the project and if there is further opportunity for input. This is particularly important when there are vastly different opinions within our community.

In many instances, we will need to provide feedback through various stages of the project. To be able to provide feedback to people who have been involved it is essential to keep accurate records of participants and to utilise this information throughout the life of a project.

Evaluate

Evaluation is always important. It allows us to see what we did well and/or what things we could improve for the future. Did we get the information we needed? Did the community feel they were listened to? Did both Council and the community feel it was a positive experience?

Evaluating a project allows us to improve our planning and implementation for future projects. It is always extremely useful to share the evaluation results with other Council staff so we can learn from the experience. This helps to build capacity within the organisation and helps Council to avoid repeating mistakes.

Be representative

Colac Otway Shire has a diverse population, including large numbers of young families and people from non-English speaking backgrounds. Any work you do with the community should be representative of the total community (unless targeting a specific community / age / gender etc).

Council will undertake deliberative engagement in the following circumstances:

1. Where it has a legislated obligation (including Community Vision, Council Plan, Financial Plan and Asset Plan); or

2. Where it resolves that it wants its decision-making on a matter or initiative to be informed by this model of community engagement.

There is no single design for deliberative public engagement. Therefore, Council's deliberative engagement practices will be tailored in accordance with this policy to meet the:

- specific aims and objectives of the engagement
- needs of participants
- needs of the decision or policy-makers
- requirements of any relevant regulations.

Once designed, the deliberative engagement elements will be documented in a community engagement plan, and will include the following as a minimum:

- The purpose and objectives of the exercise (why and how);

- The intended outcomes (what will be achieved);

- The people who should be involved (specialists, decision-makers and public participants), and their

- potentially different needs and aspirations; and

- The context (social, political, historical, policy) into which the process will fit.

Where Council is undertaking deliberative engagement, the community engagement plan will be available on Council's website.

As part of Council's commitment to effective deliberative engagement practices, Council will:

- Provide a clear remit to the deliberative group.

- Ensure participants have access to neutral, balanced information from a range of different sources, to allow in depth conversation and understanding of this issues involved.

- Ensure the process is representative.

- Allow the time needed to deliberate on complex information, and weigh up options and ideas.

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- Give the deliberative group a high level of influence over outcomes or decisions.

- Embed community engagement practices into the organisation and ensure that all Councillors and Council have received appropriate professional development in community engagement.

6. REFERENCES

- *Local Government Act 2020*
- *Planning and Environment Act 1987*
- *Essential Services Commission Act 2001*
- *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008*
- *Road Management Act 2004*
- *Victorian Disability Act 2006*
- *Equal Opportunity Act 2010*
- *Gender Equality Act 2018*
- *Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*
- *Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Amendment Act 2016*
- *Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010*
- *Multicultural Victoria Act 2011*
- Department of Premier and Cabinet – Public Engagement Framework (2020)

7. HUMAN RIGHTS CHARTER

This Policy has been assessed against the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* as being consistent with that Act and, in particular, as promoting the rights of members of the Community:

13.1   not to have their privacy interfered with (section 13); and

13.2   take part in public life (section 18), by having the opportunity to:

13.2.1   participate in the conduct of Council's affairs; and

13.2.2   have access to Council and Council Information.

8. MONITORING, EVALUATION AND REVIEW

Council will review this Policy periodically to ensure that it continues to reflect the expectations of the Community with respect to the availability and accessibility of Council Information.

9. DOCUMENT CONTROL

Policy owner	Manager, Healthy Active Communities	Division	Development & Community Services
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