Community Engagement Policy

Purpose

The Community Engagement Policy outlines the council's commitment to engaging and consulting its community through appropriate, timely, effective and inclusive practices.

This policy replaces the 2019 policy to meet the requirements of the *Local Government Act 2020* having been developed in consultation with the community and giving effect to the community engagement principles listed in the Act.

Objective

Community engagement is critical to effective, transparent and accountable governance in the public, community and private sectors.

It is defined as the range of opportunities and activities that allow for public involvement in council's decision-making.

Meaningful community engagement seeks to address barriers and build the capacity and confidence of people to participate in, negotiate and partner with, institutions that affect their lives.

This policy will embed a consistent approach to community engagement within the council and ensure it is well-integrated into council processes and activities to support decision-making and strengthen relationships and partnerships with our community and key stakeholders.

The principles and council's commitment aim to ensure its engagement with its community is genuine, authentic, informative and inclusive.

Scope

This policy applies to all councillors, employees of the council, volunteers, external consultants and contractors employed as representatives of council who organise, convene and facilitate council community engagement and consultation activities.

This policy does not replace processes relating to permit applications and planning scheme amendments governed by the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* and associated regulations.

It does not apply to other council processes such as service requests or complaints.

In making a decision, the council takes all opinions into consideration, often from differing viewpoints, while weighing up a range of factors.

Community engagement is not the sole determinant in a decision-making process. There are many other stakeholders and factors that need to be taken into consideration. These include existing policies and strategies, other levels of government, legislation and budget.

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Definitions

Advocacy	Public support for or recommendation of a particular cause or policy.
Community	Refers to the people who have a stake and interest in the city of Wodonga and includes the following. • Those who live, work, study or conduct business in the municipality • Those involved in local community groups or organisations • Those who visit, use or enjoy the services, facilities and public places located within the municipality • Those who share an interest, a sense of identity or a shared common goal
Community Engagement	Community engagement is a planned process with the specific purpose of working with individuals and groups to encourage active involvement in decisions that affect them or are of interest to them. It seeks to better engage the community to achieve long-term and sustainable outcomes, processes, relationships, discourse, decision-making or implementation. It must encompass strategies and processes that are sensitive the community context in which it occurs.
Consultation	The activity of seeking input or feedback on a matter or topic.
Deliberative Engagement	The Local Government Act principles for community engagement refer to deliberative engagement practices (s.55(2)(g)). The Act does not prescribe these practices. For the purposes of this policy the key characteristics of deliberative engagement are considered to be: authentic engagement with the community; good representation of the community in engagement activities; clear demonstration of how all views have been considered; accessible and relevant information available to the community to ensure the decision-making process; and, the community's level of influence is clear in each instance and that participants are fully informed. Deliberative process should be designed to meet the needs of our council and our community and be consummate with our resources. The form of deliberative engagement will be relevant to the situational context.
Policy	Sets out the council's views with respect to a particular matter. It includes a set of principles or rules that provide a definite direction for the organisation.
Stakeholder	An individual or group identified with a strong interest in a particular topic in regards to the decision-making of the council and are directly affected by an outcome.

Policy

Principles and council's commitment

Wodonga Council commits to the following six principles for community engagement which are based on those outlined in section 56 of the *Local Government Act 2020*. Against each principle, the council has outlined its commitment which reflects the expectations of the community as determined through consultation in developing of the policy.

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Principle	Council's commitment
Each process will have a clearly defined and communicated objective and scope	• Engagement is planned in line with this policy and identifies the purpose, scope and objectives of the community's participation • Reasons for the engagement will be communicated to the community early in the process through multiple platform and communications tools. • Available resources will be allocated to engagement planning and implementation • Identify at the start of the process the level of community influence and the parameters of the consultation and inform the community across all engagement materials and activities, whether online or in person. • Any changes throughout an engagement process should be communicated early and clearly.
The community will have access to objective, relevant and timely information	• Provide the community with the information necessary to participate meaningfully in the engagement including constraints and opportunities • Information provided will be balanced, objective, relevant to the engagement, and promptly available • Information will be clear, easy to understand and provided in a way that is accessible for all members of the community • Where possible, provide advance notice of council's intent to review key policies, strategies and plans.
Participants will be representative of the persons and groups affected	• Identify people, communities and stakeholders directly and indirectly affected by and interested in the topic of engagement • Reach and undertake targeted activities to involve and hear from participants that represent the affected and interested groups • Undertake activities that seek to hear from a cross-section of the community • Increase inclusiveness and reach by using existing networks and safe, trusted spaces • Partner, where appropriate, with other organisations to maximise collective effort, impact and the opportunities to

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	engage with the community but not to the detriment of others
The community will receive reasonable and effective support to enable meaningful and informed engagement	• Design engagement that is inclusive by minimising any physical, social, financial and cultural barriers • Seek to obtain the views of, and feedback from, a broad cross-section of the community • Provide the time and opportunities through various methods of engagement for anyone affected by a council decision to provide input and feedback • Allow sufficient time for members of the community for the review of information and participation in varied engagement activities
Each community engagement process details at the outset the ways in which the feedback will influence council decision-making.	• Identify the appropriate level of engagement as outlined in this policy • Outline as part of the engagement scope how community input, feedback and perspectives will be incorporated into the council's decision-making • Communicate what other factors will influence the decision-making process
Outcomes following the engagement process will be reported back to the community.	• Share the outcomes of the engagement and how the community and stakeholder views were taken into account • Include verbatim feedback from comments and submissions from participants (unless defamatory or inappropriate) • Detail the reasons and factors that have been considered in the final outcome • Evaluate activities in terms of participation, reach, effectiveness for engaging the audience and the quality of information.

Engaging the community

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The council will engage the community throughout the various stages when planning for changes to, or the introduction of, new services, facilities, policies or local that impact the community.

This engagement should occur early in the planning stage to ensure the community has the time to influence decision-making and outcomes.

In some instances, work will be undertaken to include information such as technical research and feasibility of options before seeking community input to ensure the community is appropriately informed.

The council commits to engaging the community in any of - but not limited to - the following situations.

- Legislative requirements
- Potential significant impacts on the health, safety or wellbeing of the community
- Proposed changes will impact on current users or customers of a council service or facility
- Proposed changes will affect the rights or entitlements of community members
- Potential impact on surrounding neighbours
- To identify community issues, needs and priorities
- Proposed changes that are inter-generational in nature
- To monitor customer satisfaction with council's services and facilities
- Where there is a level of controversy, conflict or sensitivity about a particular issue

Types of community engagement

Community engagement can include multiple levels of participation, at different stages of the process and as different stakeholders choose to engage at different levels.

The level of community engagement will be in regard to the significance, complexity and anticipated level of impact of what is being proposed, and the stakeholders that will need to be targeted. It will also give regard to any legislative requirements.

This policy broadly outlines three approaches to community engagement and where they may be applied in the legislative, strategic and operational context. The council can use one or a combination of approaches in its community engagement.

Deliberative: This practice has the highest level of influence. This type of engagement is measured and considered. A deliberative process involves a diverse representation of participants; allows time and space for people to weigh up important, useful information from a range of sources; and, where decision-makers respond transparently to that input. The key feature of a deliberative process is to come to a decision after considering all information and prioritising and weighing solutions. It can be scaled and targeted to fit the size and impact of the project.

Participatory: This has a lower level of influence and involves a one-way exchange of information from the council to the community or vice versa. It is the invitation to provide feedback on ideas, alternatives or draft documents. The level of community participation and representation can be very broad.

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Formal submissions: Where previously governed by the section 223 process of the Local Government Act 1989, the council will take a formal submissions approach. This approach will be complementary to the participatory and deliberative approaches.

The formal submissions process will include the following.

- Advertisement of the item in appropriate channels for a 21-day period to allow the community or stakeholders to make a written submission. The period will begin from publication on council channels.
- Make available a template for submissions which includes permission to publish
- Ensure all written submission under this process are provided to all councillors before any decision is made
- Make available the submissions to the public - excluding personal details - unless otherwise notified by the submitter

As a guide, the approach for community engagement for the council's statutory requirements is set out below.

Matter	**Engagement Approach**
Community Vision	Deliberative engagement
Council Plan	Deliberative engagement
Financial Plan	Deliberative engagement
Asset Plan	Deliberative engagement
Budget	Participatory engagement
Making of a Local Law	Formal submissions
Acquiring or selling land	Formal submissions
Other statutory and non-statutory plans, strategies or policies, service planning and capital works projects	Level to be selected depending on the complexity of the matter.

Roles and responsibilities

Everyone has a role to play in the activities that shape the places where we live, work, visit and invest. Community engagement is a shared responsibility across community, councillors and council staff.

The council recognises community engagement does not replace appropriate decision-making by elected representatives but decisions can be enhanced through understanding the needs of the community and the impact of these decisions.

Community engagement is the responsibility of all council service areas and staff as appropriate to their role and function. Engagement of the community should be central to the consideration by the council in the delivery of any service, development of any project or building of any relationship. The effective application of principles and processes outlined in this policy is effectively the responsibility of staff across the organisation.

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Who	Responsibilities
Councillors	Champion the commitment and principles of engagement through leadership, modelling best-practice and decision-making. Record feedback on open consultations for inclusion by staff in the relevant feedback reports Encourage community to engage with the consultation process by providing feedback through online channels or submissions Ensure that matters under consideration are informed by the planned level of community engagement. Balance the range of stakeholder views and concerns on an issue when making a decision.
Executive	Champion better practice community engagement through policy, process and leadership. Monitor implementation and compliance with this policy.
Managers	Manage areas of responsibility to ensure community engagement is consistent with this policy.
Staff	Undertake to make community engagement activities consistent with this policy.

Reasons for limited engagement

There might be times when community engagement activities do not occur or the opportunity for engagement might be limited.

It can be expected there will be instances that the level of engagement could be at the base inform level where the council must make a decision in the best interests of the community without undertaking consultation.

This could include situations related to health and safety, where work relates to operational matters or where there is an unacceptable risk to the community that requires immediate action.

Examples where there might be limited engagement include but are not limited to:

- Where the council isn't the leading agency;
- Where specialist knowledge or expertise is required;
- An initiative which involves confidential or commercial information;
- Where there are clear and defined legislative responsibilities that must be met;
- The development or review of internal policies and procedures;
- Where the council is responding to an emergency; or,
- Where there is a risk to public safety.

If a project or decision will impact members of the community but there is no opportunity for community input then, wherever possible, the council will work to ensure that information is provided in a timely manner.

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For the duration of the election period as governed by Local Government Act 2020 and in line with the council's Election Period Policy, consultation should be avoided.

Keeping the community updated

As outlined in the sixth principle, the outcomes of the engagement and how feedback was taken into account will be shared with the community. Reporting of outcomes and updates will always be available online on the council's website as well as provided directly to those who asked to be kept informed and have provided contact details.

The reasons and factors that have been considered in reaching a final outcome should be communicated to the community as part of the reporting process.

Monitoring and evaluation

The council will continually monitor the processes, information sharing and decision-making to understand the overall level of success in the policy's implementation.

A periodic review of this policy will be undertaken to ensure any changes required to strengthen or update the policy are made in a timely manner.

Attachments

Nil

Note: The implementation of this policy is supported by planning and implementation tools for staff.

Related policies

Governance Rules
Public Transparency Policy

Related legislation

Planning and Environment Act 1987
Subdivision Act 1988
Local Government Act 2020
Local Government Regulations 1990
Health Act 1958
Equal Opportunity Act 2010
Transport Integration Act 2010
Information Privacy Act 2000
Building Act 1993
Age Discrimination Act 2004
Disability Discrimination Act 2004
Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006

References

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Local Government Act 2020 Principle of Community Engagement

Review

Council may review this policy at any time but unless otherwise requested at least every four years from date of adoption. Minor amendments to the policy may be authorised by the CEO at any time where such changes do not alter the substance of the policy eg: typographical errors, a change to the name of a related policy, or a change to the name of legislation.

Title:	Community Engagement Policy
Reference No:	To be completed after adoption
Business Unit:	Communications, Marketing and Customer Focus
Category:	Policy
Approved By:	
Next Review:	June 2026

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