

REVISED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT POLICY

Report Author: Coordinator Community Engagement
Responsible Officer: Director Corporate Services
Ward(s) affected: (All Wards);

The author(s) of this report and the Responsible Officer consider that the report complies with the overarching governance principles and supporting principles set out in the Local Government Act 2020.

CONFIDENTIALITY

This item is to be considered at a Council meeting that is open to the public.

SUMMARY

Council endorsed the current Community Engagement Policy (the Policy) on 27 April 2021.

Since adopting the Policy, Council has planned and delivered over 240 formal community engagement projects, aligning with the Policy. The lessons learned from these projects, feedback from the community, internal focus groups and consultation with advisory groups, have informed the revised Community Engagement Policy.

Council approved the release of the Draft Revised Community Engagement Policy (the Draft) for public engagement on 26 March 2024. The draft was open for feedback between 27 March and 5 May 2024. Feedback was considered and changes were made where relevant.

Council officers are now seeking consideration by Council to approve and adopt the revised Community Engagement Policy.

RECOMMENDATION

That Council approve and adopt the revised Community Engagement Policy.

RELATED COUNCIL DECISIONS

The current policy was endorsed by Council on 27 April 2021. At the Council meeting on 26 March 2024, Council endorsed the public exhibition of the draft revised Community Engagement Policy for approximately six weeks, ending on 5 May 2024.

DISCUSSION

Purpose

This report provides an overview of proposed changes made to the current Policy, based on community feedback and officer recommendations, that have informed the draft policy for Council consideration.

The outcome of the policy revisions is a clearer Policy for the organisation and community, outlining Council's commitment to meaningful, transparent, and appropriate community engagement.

The draft revised Policy meets Council's legislative requirement under the *Local Government Act 2020* s.3.1.55.1 stating, 'A Council must adopt and maintain a community engagement policy.' It also strengthens Council's commitment to meaningful, transparent, and appropriate community engagement, and clarifies the roles and responsibilities of Council in seeking community input to inform decision-making.

Background

In the lead-up to the development of the new Council Plan and the 2024 Council elections, the lessons from the last three years of Policy implementation and project delivery have been considered and addressed in the draft revised Policy.

The key changes to the draft revised Policy include:

- Addition of clear roles and responsibilities for implementing the policy.
- Clarity on the definition of community engagement at Yarra Ranges and when Council will conduct formal processes.
- Highlighting the role of community engagement in Council decision-making.
- Stronger and clearer alignment with legislative requirements.
- Removal of the process detail for planning and delivering community engagement. Related practical guidelines and information have been developed and are available for Council officers internally.

Following community feedback during March and April 2024, additional changes have been made to the revised draft (Attachment 1), including:

- Including the role of communication to support community awareness of engagement opportunities.
- Introducing a commitment to improved transparency on how decisions on planning community engagement and resource allocation are reported to the community.

- Including people experiencing homelessness as a cohort of people to consider when planning engagement.
- Highlighting the role of continuous improvement, training and capability building within Council to improve practice and outcomes for the community.

Recommended option and justification

Officers recommend that Council approves and adopts the revised Community Engagement Policy as per Attachment 1 to meet the *Local Government Act 2020* requirements.

FINANCIAL ANALYSIS

There are no immediate financial implications from considering the revised policy.

However, as the policy reinforces Council's commitment to meaningful community engagement, departments must consider allocating sufficient engagement budgets to identified projects.

In addition, due to high levels of community interest in Council's formal engagement activities, it is recommended that teams quantify the resourcing, excluding officer time, expended in communications and engagement, in their reporting.

Also, to support the commitment to improve the measuring of the effectiveness and impact of Council's engagement activities, resources will be allocated from existing budgets to conduct an external evaluation of identified community engagement projects in the next financial year.

APPLICABLE PLANS AND POLICIES

The Policy contributes to each of the five strategic objective(s) in the Council Plan by ensuring that Council decisions in all areas are informed by the community where relevant.

The specific action in the Council Plan relates to:

High Performing Organisation: Improve the community's connection with Council through more meaningful and inclusive community engagement and innovative approaches to communication.

No regional, state or national plans and policies apply to the recommendation in this report.

RELEVANT LAW

The *Local Government Act 2020* s.3.1.55.1 states 'A Council must adopt and maintain a community engagement policy.' This review will ensure that the policy is being maintained and meeting the needs of the organisation and the community.

The review had a gender lens applied and the Community Engagement team worked closely with the Gender Equity team to ensure relevant legislation is reflected in the updated policy.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

This policy supports the organisation to plan and deliver more meaningful and transparent engagement practises across Council. Effective community engagement builds trust and strengthens Council's relationship with the community, assists with determining community priorities and supports better decision-making.

There are no direct economic or environmental impacts associated with this policy.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Input into the revised policy came from the following phases of engagement:

Phase one:

- Benchmarking and research into industry standards.
- Consultation with the Disability Advisory Committee.
- A workshop with the Youth Advisory Group.
- Three internal focus groups with participants ranging from high users to those who had never applied the Policy.
- Community sentiment from community engagement projects and conversations with officers during the 36 Community Engagement Roadshow activations in 2023.
- Professional expertise within the Community Engagement team, considering lessons learnt from supporting over 240 projects since April 2021.

Phase two:

The draft revised policy was available for feedback from the community on the Shaping Yarra Ranges web page from 27 March to 5 May 2024.

Ten submissions were received during the engagement period. The reach of the communication, interactions with the activities, submissions and responses are

compiled in Attachment 2 – Engagement Summary Report for Draft Revised Community Engagement Policy.

COLLABORATION, INNOVATION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The review of the Policy demonstrates strong continuous improvement. The review looked at the implementation of the Policy since its adoption in 2021. Officers from all directorates were consulted regarding how the Policy could be improved to better support meaningful and transparent community engagement practice at Yarra Ranges.

The review aligns with the strategic work the Community Engagement team is undertaking to improve community engagement outcomes across the organisation. The associated Community Engagement Guidelines and Toolkit will be released internally in 2024 to strengthen the implementation of the Policy and related practices by all departments.

RISK ASSESSMENT

Since the beginning of 2023, there has been increased scrutiny of Council's community engagement activities by some sections of the community. The changes in this revised policy aim to increase community understanding and support Council with clear roles and responsibilities related to formal community engagement.

Community expectations may be managed more effectively with support from the Community Engagement team and all identified levels of Council, to consistently apply the policy and improve related practices across the organisation.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No officers and/or delegates acting on behalf of the Council through the Instrument of Delegation and involved in the preparation and/or authorisation of this report have any general or material conflict of interest as defined within the *Local Government Act 2020*.

ATTACHMENTS TO THE REPORT

1. Revised Community Engagement Policy
2. Engagement Summary Report for Draft Revised Community Engagement Policy