Draft revised Community Engagement Policy.
Community engagement summary, March – May 2024.

Project background:

Yarra Ranges Council (YRC) is reviewing their current Community Engagement Policy (the Policy). The final consultation on the changes proposed in the Draft Revised version was open between 27 March – 5 May 2024.

The purpose of the engagement was to seek feedback about the Draft Revised Community Engagement Policy. A summary of the consultation process and feedback received is provided below.

Methodology:

The table below outlines the various methods and techniques used to inform the changes in the policy and engagement activities.

Phase one: Desktop review and targeted engagement

Method /technique	Stakeholders engaged
Desktop research	Reviewing over 30 Community Engagement policies from both local government and industry.
Internal focus groups	3x focus groups with internal staff from across Council.
Projects delivered under the current policy	Insights gained from the over 230 projects delivered since April 2021. The focus was on feedback related to community engagement processes and suggestions for improvements.
Consultation with Council Advisory groups	Youth Advisory Group (x1) and Disability Advisory Committee (x2)
Council pop-ups	Feedback from 36 Roadshow activations
Questions to Council	Consideration of questions to Council meetings, related to community engagement.

Phase two: Broad engagement

Method /technique	Stakeholders engaged
Project page on Shaping Yarra Ranges	- 2,190 members of Shaping Yarra Ranges received a project launch email. - 241 people visited the project page
Online feedback form	- 10 contributions were submitted, by 9 people
Social media	- Two Facebook posts: reaching an average of 3,656 people - Two Instagram posts: reaching an average of 400 people
Council newsletters	- Included in the fortnightly e-newsletter 3 times, with over 11,000 recipients

The level of feedback for phase two was comparable with similar engagements on Council policies. Changes proposed are based on community sentiment, professional expertise and industry standards.

Summary of Feedback:

Below is the summary of the formal feedback received in phase two, and how it has been incorporated into the policy.

#	Submission	Response
1	As a long-term resident who is interested and involved in my community, I feel there is a strong bias toward online engagement including knowing popups, for example, are happening only through online promotion. The data gained will always be biased against those who don't engage in this way.	Thank you for recognising the importance of communications, when informing the community about opportunities to get involved. Your feedback has been noted and shared with the Communications team. The method of communication used for each project is outside the scope of this policy. However, the significance of communications in community engagement is recognised and it has been added to the Draft policy, under the section 'How Council will engage', pg. 12.
2	I may have missed this, but I didn't see any reference to how YRC will train, upskill and support their staff in understanding and applying community engagement principles in their everyday work. It is not a given that staff know how to do this, which strategies to employ at any given circumstance and how to communicate well with stakeholders.	Thank you for your feedback concerning building the capability of Council officers to plan and deliver effective community engagement. This is a priority for Council and a key role of the function of the Community Engagement team. Recognition of this has been added to the 'Scope' section, pg. 5.
	In theory the policy sounds good but unfortunately isn't practiced. In my experience, community engagement is a purely box ticking procedure. By the time community engagement is sought, countless amounts of hours, money, have already been spent & the council representatives sent to "engage" have little to no interest & quite often, no knowledge of the area(& it shows). No information is taken & its basically just a chat. If YRC truly wanted to engage with the local communities, there would be more meetings held in local halls to listen to & take notes of what the community wants.	Thank you for your contribution. The policy is Council's commitment to meaningful and transparent community engagement. We have definitely heard from our community that we must improve. Capability building of staff across the organisation has been included in the 'Scope' section, pg. 5. Specific methods of community engagement, i.e. town hall meetings, are outside the scope of this policy. We do acknowledge a strong desire across Yarra Ranges for localised engagement on local issues. Therefore, considerations made when selecting methods of engagement for

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	I live out at East Warburton & there's a desperate need for basic infrastructure (drains, roads etc), work crews sent to perform tasks, DON'T but no-one is interested. YRC needs to get back to basics as you don't build a structure from the roof down but rather from the foundations up.	projects will be incorporated into future reporting on projects.
3	Hello, I've read through the Community Engagement Policy and think that it is fundamentally a good working and reference document - I have circulated it to my local [redacted] group for their individual review and comments. However, I'm frustrated by the power exerted over Councils now by politically and/or activist motivated groups/individuals that seem to distract councils from their day/day ratepayer focused activities and wonder if you can include something in this document that would help you/us all, to help control/contain their views, such that they cannot become the overriding focus of any engagement with community (or indeed in any in council debates)?? thanks	Thank you for your contribution and for sharing the document within your networks to broaden the opportunity for people to get involved in providing feedback. We appreciate your concerns about hearing from 'louder voices' in community engagement over others. Identifying key stakeholders and impacted communities is an important consideration when planning and delivering engagement activities. Encouraging more members of the community to get involved, by signing up for notifications (Shaping Yarra Ranges, enewletters etc) is one way to get broad feedback and involvement. In addition, the revised Draft has a new section, 'How does community engagement contribute to Council decision making?', pg. 7. This section highlights the many considerations that go into decision making at Council including the balance of legislation, data, research, insights and engagement feedback.
4	Reads as a mix between guidelines and policy. The two should be split for clarity.	Thank you for your feedback. This draft revised policy has far fewer operational notes than the current policy. Please feel free to forward any specific examples you have for consideration in future updates of the policy.
5	You have missed people experiencing homelessness in your list of people you will engage in the policy. You may think it is easy to add them to the socially disadvantaged, but not everyone homeless is socially disadvantaged. It would be best if you	Thank you for your feedback. 'People experiencing homelessness' has been added, 'Who Council will engage', pg. 11.

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	started recognising this demographic in our region, as it is increasing.	
6	Council engagement needs to be seen as more than a "box-ticking" exercise. It needs to hold proper "sit down" community meetings on issues/projects (pop ups are useless), held in the respective towns as many don't have the means to travel to Lilydale & the region goes a lot further than the public transport network. Meetings need to held at various times to be accessible to all members of the community. (people work & have other responsibilities) Big project/issue? Saturate the town, letterbox drop information & hold a week of community meetings morning, afternoon, evening to enable each & every person the opportunity to attend & provide feedback. Having satellite store front set ups in the more remote areas where people can drop in to voice a concern/raise issues & look over documentation for upcoming projects in their area.	Thank you for your contribution. Specific methods of community engagement, i.e. town hall meetings, are outside the scope of this policy. We do acknowledge a strong desire across Yarra Ranges for localised engagement on local issues. Therefore, considerations made when selecting methods of engagement for projects will be incorporated into future reporting on projects. Thank you also for recognising the importance of communications, when informing the community about opportunities to get involved. Your feedback has been noted and shared with the Communications team. The method of communication used for each project is outside the scope of this policy. However, the significance of communications in community engagement is recognised and it has been added into the Draft policy, under the section 'How Council will engage', pg. 12.
7	It would be great if when the public engaged with Council through the Council website, email etc, enquirer received an email acknowledgement with a reference number which could then be followed up. It wouldn't be hard to set up. It would be beneficial to both Council and the enquirer.	Thank you for your contribution. This feedback is outside of the scope of the policy. Many of our systems, particularly requests through our Customer Service team, do generate a reference number. In order for any reference number or email response to be provided, we must collect contact details. This is not done on Council's main website unless you complete a web form for a particular action/event or activity. Council's engagement website, Shaping Yarra Ranges, uses a variety of ways to reach people. Some consultations include registering interested participants via email however this can be a barrier for some people from providing feedback, so Council offers a variety of ways of reaching and seeking feedback for various consultation projects which does not always involve

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		collecting email addresses. When we haven't collected an email address on Shaping Yarra Ranges, there is unfortunately no way to reply to a submitter.
8	Some opportunities to improve the policy: - it is very focused on informing decisions and highlights that when there is no level of influence you don't engage. This is concerning as engagement can also be about capacity building and building trust and a relationship with community. A decision can hugely impact community with little to no opportunity to influence but it is important we are still taken along the journey and have the opportunity for 2 way conversation to either build our understand or trust on government. - it would be good to see how level of impact is considered in determining the engagement approach of effort. To the point once made above I recognise that council can't engage us on everything and they do need to think about appropriate allocation of effort but my view is that impact on community should be considered as part of that alongside level of influence. If impact is high but it is still sitting at the inform level then a letter is not a good enough form of communication. - it would be good to see some indicators in the evaluation section so build some transparency around how you evaluate and be able to then report back on the implementation of the policy.	Thank you for your feedback. Through community development, service delivery and project teams, officers work continually to build relationships with the community and stakeholders, to inform the work of Council. However, within the scope of the policy, it is important to define community engagement at Yarra Ranges Council as 'An intentional, planned process to provide opportunities for people to have a say on decisions by Council that will have an impact on them now or into the future'. This assists in managing expectations of both the practice and outcomes of formal community engagement activities. The level of impact on the community and stakeholders is considered in the planning. Supporting improvements in identifying impact and reporting against it, is part of the capability building program for staff. Reference to training staff for continuous improvements has been added to the 'Scope' section, pg. 5. The 'Evaluation and performance' section, pg. 16, of the Draft has been expanded to include a stronger commitment to evaluating the processes and outcomes of community engagement activities at Yarra Ranges, and the application of the policy at an organisational level.
10	For households who have more than two people, council must bring in large red topped general rubbish bins. This will stop people dumping rubbish. Kind regards.	Thank you for your contribution. This feedback is outside of the scope of the policy. Council is currently preparing an informal review of recent waste changes. As your feedback is directly relevant to Waste Services, this submission has been forwarded to the relevant team for further consideration.

Next steps:

Following the endorsement of the revised Policy by Council, the Community Engagement team will continue to support the application of the policy across Council. This will be achieved by providing advice, training and practice resources available for all staff.

The new policy will be added to Council's website and Shaping Yarra Ranges.

The Policy will be formally reviewed in 2027-28.

Continuous improvement in community engagement practice at Yarra Ranges Council, based on internal and community feedback, will be incorporated into processes and documented for future reviews of the policy.