



# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT POLICY

*feedback*



## OUTCOMES REPORT FEBRUARY 2021

# INTRODUCTION

This outcomes report summarises for Council the community engagement process undertaken by the City of Greater Geelong to determine its new Community Engagement Policy.

This process is part of the City's requirement to meet its engagement obligations with the community, as described under sections 55 and section 56 of the Local Government Act 2020 (Vic).

In a sense, the process undertaken to develop an engagement policy highlights the value of community engagement itself. The valuable insights and expertise contributed by members of the community has ensured that future community engagement endeavours receive richer information to drive better decisions for those who live and work in the region.

# PROCESS

In order to develop a Community Engagement Policy that is truly reflective of the needs and desires of the greater Geelong community, Council commenced a process of engagement in August 2020.

There was thoughtful consideration by Council to provide various methods to collect feedback to ensure the process was inclusive and accessible to the diverse Geelong community, recognising the importance of equity, access and inclusion in engagement.

Two online surveys through the Have Your Say website encouraged community members and staff members to contribute to the conversation.

Following receipt of this feedback, in December 2020 Council endorsed a draft Community Engagement Policy to be shared with the community for review and feedback.

Council encouraged all of its community members to participate and to provide feedback. Five written submissions were received, and an online survey had 11 responses, with community members giving the draft policy an average score of 3.7 out of 5.

In order to more deeply explore the extent to which the draft policy reflected the community's preferences for Council engagement, two virtual workshops were held in January and February 2021. The virtual workshops attracted 13 participants representing diverse aspects of the Geelong community. The workshops were independently facilitated by Melbourne Leadership Group, who have a team of online facilitation experts with experience in community engagement.

The workshops were structured to enable community participants to provide both written and verbal feedback on the main structural elements of the proposed community engagement policy, as well as giving them an opportunity to reflect upon the feedback previously provided by the community through online surveys and earlier workshops.

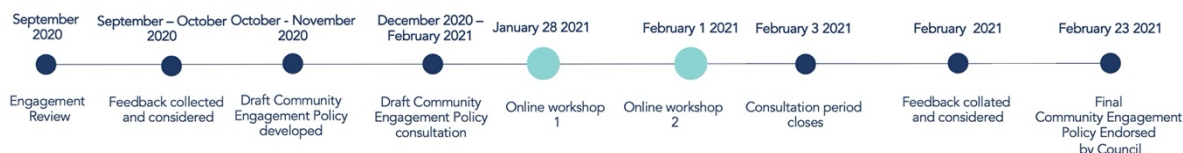
Objectives for the virtual workshops set a clear and aligned purpose for the workshops and its participants. The workshop objectives were to:

- Review the main themes of community feedback and test whether the draft policy is in line with community expectations
- Identify any specific gaps in when, how and with whom Council proposes to engage and how that engagement is reported back to the community
- Propose changes to the engagement policy for Council consideration

Participation in the virtual workshops was strong, with attendees engaging enthusiastically and providing thoughtful and reflective suggestions to further strengthen Council's draft community engagement policy.

An internal staff workshop involved 11 participants, who provided particularly helpful implementation feedback about how engagement may work in different parts of the organisation.

A timeline of the community engagement process for the policy is detailed below:



## WHAT WE HEARD

Community members acknowledged the positive step Council was making in seeking to genuinely improve its community engagement process.

They participated enthusiastically and genuinely in the engagement process, and demonstrated great passion for future involvement in the decision-making processes of their local Council.

Feedback on the policy document was positive and broadly consistent across online survey respondents, virtual workshop participants and written community submissions.

Participants acknowledged the general simplicity and readability of the document, whilst encouraging Council to ensure it continued to use concise, plain English. For this reason, much discussion centred around what level of detail should be in the policy, and what should be reserved for more detailed supporting documents.

The section of the policy which generated most discussion was that centred on Who should be engaged. Community members were adamant that rigorous identification and selection of representative members of diverse parts of the community was absolutely critical to the success of the engagement process.

Linked to this idea, in the Victorian context of Treaty and self-determination, participants noticed the absence of reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the policy. Council was strongly encouraged to have discussions with traditional owners of country to establish appropriate, meaningful, and more formalised arrangements for engagement.

There was, however, much enthusiasm for the idea that this engagement policy could represent something bold, ambitious and transformative. Rather than engagement being something that Council did to the community to fulfil a legislative requirement, it could instead be something community did *with* Council to generate better outcomes for the region. This may be an idea that builds momentum as the Council and community develop more sophisticated methods of engagement over time.

Specific pieces of feedback on each section of the document follow hereafter.

*"After reviewing a few different local government policies currently open for review, this document is great and the best example I have seen. Its strengths include its use of language, ease of reading and a clear and well-structured layout."*

## PURPOSE

The feedback on this section of the policy was positive. Participants recognised the need for the Community Engagement Policy to have a clear purpose, and felt it needed to indicate not only that Council was required by law to engage with the community in certain situations, but also that there was a tremendous value to Council in connecting with the community.

Acknowledging the diverse experience, knowledge and expertise of the Geelong community in this section would help to explain the value of community engagement and the rich benefits to Council and the community it serves.

*"Authentic and genuine engagement is vital to this policy. It's not merely ticking a box to say 'we engaged' when there was not genuine effort to reach those affected community members. The community should be collaborative partners rather than stakeholders on a checklist."*

## WHAT IS ENGAGEMENT?

Participants acknowledged the need for a clear and concise definition of community engagement. However, they also wished to incorporate references to the value that collaboration can bring to the decision-making of Council.

Placing reference to the skills and experience of the community at the heart of this section of the policy would make it clear that engagement is not something that Council 'does' to the community in a one-way communication effort, but rather is a two-way process of working with each other, in a spirit of partnership.

There was also considerable conversation about the need to reference the IAP2 spectrum in this section of the document, however this needs to be balanced against the desire expressed by many people to keep the policy simple and concise. To ensure that the document contains an appropriate level of detail, more sophisticated references to the IAP2 principles, frameworks and tools might be better reflected in internal Council documents that guide Council staff in the recommended methods for undertaking community engagement.

Finally, participants wanted a strong acknowledgement that engagement was more than simply seeking feedback. Seeking feedback was seen as a passive or 'least-we-can-do' option, whereas the community desires authentic, genuine engagement in a partnership that goes beyond simply seeking the community's view.

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The feedback on this section of the document was very positive. Some participants felt that some of the sentiments in this section would be valuably expressed in the earlier Purpose or What sections of the policy. This led to some discussion that the appropriate order for the sections of the policy might be Purpose, followed by Why, followed by What. However, we believe most readers will find the current layout of the policy sections logical and understandable.

Participants liked the reference to authenticity and trust, and encouraged Council to consider how a robust community engagement process also helps to build confidence in the strength of local democracy. More than just enriching outcomes, it can also serve to build greater confidence in the leadership of the city and the future direction of the region. Best practice community engagement creates the ability for residents to play an influential role in decisions that affect where they live.

*"The reasons for community engagement are well summarised, though more could have been said about why it matters to the community, versus its utility to Council – that is, the sense of being heard, empowered, engaged in decisions, and countering vested interests and organised lobbyists."*

## WHO WILL WE ENGAGE WITH?

The overwhelming reflection from participants about this section of the policy was the strong need for Council to engage groups who are hardest to reach, 'under-involved' or not typically engaged.

Participants questioned how Council intended to identify and select appropriately representative groups and individuals for engagement, and what methods would be used to best engage them. There was a strong caution to staff not to make assumptions about which people would be interested in a given policy, but rather to have vigorous methods for identifying broad groups of people who might indicate their interest in being engaged on particular Council decisions.

In order to assist with this, staff were encouraged to make use of existing, non-Council sponsored networks such as the Geelong Food Relief Network, Barwon Health's advisory committees, or local neighbourhood houses.

Alternatively, participants pointed out that existing community organisations could be funded to engage with community on specific topics, as they have trusted relationships with key members of the community. That level of trust and rapport could be crucial in uncovering valuable community advice, particularly from groups that may not traditionally engage with Council.

Council might also wish to make greater use of its own existing advisory committees for specific engagement purposes. This series of suggestions might best be incorporated in implementation guidelines for staff.

There was also a very strong theme in the discussion to bring the acknowledgement and involvement of traditional owners of country to the heart of the policy, rather than thinking of Aboriginal people as simply another stakeholder group to engage. Participants encouraged Council to have discussions with traditional owners of country in a spirit of self-determination to design appropriate, meaningful and more formal means of engagement.

Whilst acknowledging that Council is well-practised at including those people who have easy and regular access to Council information, bridging the digital divide was front of mind for the whole group. Lack of access to technology, or lack of comfort and confidence using Council websites or social media, was seen as a potential barrier for Council hearing valuable feedback and insights from the full breadth of the community.

In order to bridge this digital divide, the group encouraged Council to consider a wide range of engagement tools to ensure that diverse views can be heard. This might include non-digital means of engagement, including informal morning teas, home visits, flyers, and drop-in meetings at local community locations, including libraries and neighbourhood houses.

The feedback from the group specifically called out the need to ensure participation from groups that may find it more difficult to engage, including people with disabilities, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, renters, and people beyond the strict city boundaries who are nonetheless impacted by Council decisions.

Ultimately participants felt that Council must place great rigour in getting the right people to participate engagement activities in order to harness the expertise and knowledge for the good of the whole community. The spirit of “go where community are, don’t expect them to come to you” underpinned much of the mood of our workshop conversations.

*“A good start to valuing community. To date this has not been done well and only those with loud voices have been heard. The importance of community engagement is captured well but more needs to be done to make sure all sectors are heard.”*

*“Apply intersectional praxis rather than inclusion, as inclusion tends to centre whiteness and those privileged in community engagement. Reframe inclusion being mindful of groups and majorities.”*

*“This section mentions barriers to engagement, however genuine engagement should be about breaking down those barriers to reach community members. My experience is engagement is really only sought from those who are active in providing feedback regularly or already motivated. This should have a target of new engagement participants to ensure barriers really do come down.”*

## WHEN WILL WE ENGAGE?

This section of the policy document was broadly welcomed by the participant group. It received the highest satisfaction scores in the online survey, and the least amount of feedback.

Of most interest to workshop participants were the circumstances in which Council may not engage with the community. Whilst encouraging Council to be broad in its application of engagement, participants acknowledged that Council cannot engage over every small decision that may be made.

However, a useful discussion centred around an important distinction in emergency management. Whilst participants acknowledged that during a live emergency engagement was not likely to be possible, participants felt that the planning phase of emergency management was an area where the community could provide valuable feedback. Further, a longer running emergency, such as a pandemic, provides many opportunities for community groups to be engaged to give valuable advice and insight to Council.

Participants also discussed whether Council should engage on discrete topics if asked to do so by the community or by one of its advisory committees. Council may like to give further consideration to this idea in future.

An interesting insight to emerge from these discussions was the idea that the policy could better reflect how Council might engage at different points of the decision-making process and be flexible in changing its method of engagement based on the feedback it receives along the way. For example, Council may commence an engagement initiative, realise that the issue at hand had a deeper intensity of feeling within the community than expected, and might then extend its consultation reach to more members of the community in response.

Retaining flexibility in the timing of engagements might also extend to changing the nature of the engagement process – moving from participatory methods early in the engagement process to more deliberative methods later, for example.

## HOW WILL WE ENGAGE?

Participants felt this section of the policy was dense and repetitive. Council was encouraged to simplify the expression of the community engagement principles and consider how much detail on engagement processes needed to be documented in the policy. Several discussions supported the view that methods for engagement and details of engagement processes were more helpful to include in an implementation guide that might be used by Council staff.

In choosing the best engagement processes, Council was encouraged to learn from other best practice examples. It was pointed out that there may be best practice multicultural engagement examples that exist in other jurisdictions, such as New Zealand, and that even local organisations, such as Barwon Health, have robust and effective engagement processes that Council could learn from.

Council was encouraged to be very clear on which elements of Council plans and policies are negotiable and which are not. Acknowledging that there are limits to what can be achieved with consultation, participants felt that a spirit of honesty and authenticity created the obligation for Council to let people know how influential or powerful their voice would be in the ultimate decision-making process.

Some participants pointed out the inherent flexibility of some of the language used in this section of the policy, and the need, during its implementation, for Council staff to be conscious that different people in the community give different meanings to different terms. For example, what is genuine, appropriate, inclusive and accessible for one person may be very different to another. This makes the evaluation of community engagement methods critical to ensuring that they meet the expectations of all members of the community.



Several discussions focused on the value of including overt references to the IAP2 framework, principles and code of ethics. It was acknowledged that this framework is central to the underpinning philosophies of the new Local Government Act 2020 (Vic), and have also been core to long-established practises of community engagement undertaken in previous Council terms.

Some participants, however, felt that the IAP2 framework and tables unnecessarily duplicated other information already explained in the policy, or were complicated and pitched at a level that community members may not need or understand. Ultimately, the desire for brevity and simplicity in the policy means that specific references to the IAP2 framework might be best incorporated in implementation guidelines for Council staff rather than in the policy itself.

*“Perhaps a supporting procedure and template to support Council staff in stepping through the engagement process would be valuable. Including some tick-box questions to ensure that the engagement principles have been taken into account, as well as information of the different engagement methods available.”*

*“This section should include how to reach participants, not just the tool mentioned but to advertise to participants, the request to engage/provide feedback. For example, when seeking engagement, the channels are important to reach participants effectively. There needs to be a mix of channels - digital, traditional, face to face etc. Older people aren’t generally going to see a social media post (as was used recently during engagement on local library opening times).”*

## HOW WE WILL REPORT ON ENGAGEMENT

Participants felt that this section of the policy was highly valuable. They recognised that reporting back to the community builds confidence in both the value of the engagement process and the decisions reached by Council.

They encouraged the incorporation of notions of accountability, wanting Council to feel true ownership of and commitment to the engagement process. Demonstrating a real obligation to report back to the community and explaining how community advice and insights had been incorporated into Council thinking and decision-making would strengthen the sense of partnership between Council and the community.

Participants also encouraged Council to make reporting back to the community a regular part of day to day operations. They saw tremendous value in the data and learnings arising from community engagement being shared with the community, but not only after decisions have been made. If feedback was reported to the community *during* the engagement process, it may be possible to listen to the community's reaction and change the nature of the community engagement process accordingly.

Recognising the digital divide which creates technological barriers to participation for some people, Council was encouraged to consider non-digital forms of reporting back, including notices in libraries and neighbourhood houses, and direct feedback via letters, phone calls and meetings with engagement participants and affected residents.

*"How is feedback to be delivered? Honesty is promised, but what if Council completely ignores the inputs? Is this really made public? On what grounds might suggestions - or a consensus - be rejected or adopted or partially adopted?"*

*"It is important that feedback is clear, honest and in a form relevant to the participants."*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **1. Create Implementation Guidelines**

A detailed policy implementation framework would be very valuable for staff, and indirectly increase community confidence in Council's engagement processes. It should set out how community engagement might be carried out for a variety of situations, based on the principles and code of ethics of the IAP2 framework. Standard templates and tools could be listed for particular styles of engagement. Matrices to assess level of community feeling or risk might also be helpful. Specific lists of stakeholders to be considered should form part of the guidelines.

### **2. Train staff in community engagement**

In order to ensure continuous improvement in the breadth and quality of community engagement, relevant Council staff will need ongoing refresher and upskilling opportunities to deepen their familiarity with the policy and contemporary engagement techniques. This would also help to ensure consistency across the organisation in the form of engagement undertaken.

### **3. Consider the involvement of advisory committees**

Council may like to give further consideration to the use of its existing advisory committees and examine whether they may have a useful or more frequent role to play in selected community engagement activities.

### **4. Ensure accessibility of the final document**

The final document should be published in formats that enable screen readers to accurately read tables and headings for people using those devices. Hyperlinks which connect the reader to external resources would also be helpful.

### **5. Consider more ambitious approaches over time**

As Council broadens and deepens its engagement practice through implementation of this policy, it might consider opportunities to be bolder and more transformative. After 12 months, for example, the growing sophistication and proficiency of Council staff in

conducting engagement processes might allow the next iteration of the document to be bolder and more transformative. This might include, for example, writing the document from the perspective of the community member, incorporating a central role for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the spirit of self-determination, or setting targets for a certain percentage of community feedback to be incorporated into final decisions of Council.

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