

OFFICIAL

Strathbogie Shire Council Community Engagement Policy

June 2023



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Community Engagement Policy

Document ID:	578876
Effective Date:	18 June 2019
Last Review:	September 2022
Current Review:	May 2023
Date Adopted by Council:	
Next Scheduled Review Date:	May 2025
Responsible Officer:	Executive Manager Communications and Engagement

PART 1 POLICY

1. PURPOSE

The Community Engagement Policy provides the scope and commitments of Strathbogie Shire Council's community engagement practices and responsibilities.

We want to encourage participation. To support open, honest and meaningful conversations with our community. This will ensure community members' priorities and expectations are reflected in Council activities and decision making.

This policy has been revised 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.

2. POLICY STATEMENT

Our Community Engagement Policy is underpinned by the following engagement objectives:

- Create a consistent best practice approach to Strathbogie Shire Council's engagement
- Ensure Council has a clear purpose and objectives for its community engagement activities
- Deliver deliberative engagement that meets our community's needs
- Increase community participation in Council's decision making processes, ensuring better decisions that reflect community input
- Improve knowledge about the role of Council and the democratic decision-making process
- Improve community confidence in Council and the decisions it makes

- Clearly communicate how feedback is used to guide Council outcomes or decision making, and
- Meet our legislative requirements under *the Local Government Act 2020*.

3. APPLICATION OF THIS POLICY

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.

4. ACCOUNTABILITY AND RESPONSIBILITIES

For Council to maximise its investment into a Communications and Engagement Team and to ensure planned engagement, the following roles and responsibilities have been defined in detail, these include:

4.1 Role of Council Communications and Engagement Team

- To promote and implement the core principles of this policy and its associated procedures.
- Will determine if a plan is required, or if it fits into the day to day operational services the Team provides to the organisation and can just be 'executed'.
- Can include but may not be limited to researching, developing, implementing, evaluating plans and/or engagement activities. The degree of involvement may depend upon the project and need.
- Will always seek approval for a plan, or activity from the Director, Executive Manager, Manager or delegated nominee prior to implementation.
- The Executive Manager Communication and Engagement will approve all Communication/ Marketing/ Stakeholder Engagement Plans prior to implementation.
- Will maintain a central repository of all graphic design, internal communications, media releases, images and other intellectual property created for the organisation as required by the *Public Records Act 1973*.

4.2 Role of the Council Business Units

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.

- Will engage the Communication and Engagement Team in the early stages of project or initiative planning where possible.

- Prior to engagement of the Communication and Engagement Team, Council Officers will need to ensure they have support and approval for their initiative from their Director, Executive Manager or delegate.
- To commence planning, Council staff will request a meeting to brief the Executive Manager Communication and Engagement to discuss the project and outcomes sought from communication or engagement activities.
- Upon the completion of an agreed plan as a part of a collaborative process, Directors, Executive Managers, Managers, or their delegated nominee will be required to approve the final plan.
- Approval of a plan means the Director, Executive Manager or their delegated nominee approves and agrees with all strategies to be undertaken, agrees the messages are accurate, and the budget is appropriate and will be funded by the relevant organisational area.
- All activities within the plan will be implemented together, and the Communication and Engagement Team will provide an ongoing project manager role through to the completion of the project or plan.

4.3 Role of the Chief Executive Officer and Councillors

The Council recognises community engagement does not replace appropriate decision making by elected representatives, but better decisions are made through understanding the needs of the community and the impact of these decisions.

Where a Communications Plan is in line with the Chief Executive Officer or Mayor’s priorities of the day, the Communications and Engagement Team will seek feedback and final approval of the plan prior to implementation from the Chief Executive Officer or Mayor. These will be determined on a case by case basis.

Role	Responsibilities
Council/Councillors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final approval of this Policy • 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 Leadership Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Champion better practice community engagement through policy, process and leadership. • Monitor implementation and compliance with this policy.
Executive Manager and Communications and Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To communicate the requirements of this Policy to all Council employees • Ensure the Communications and Engagement team fulfil the role and responsibilities within this Policy.

<p>Council Staff and contractors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To adhere to the Policy • Undertake to make community engagement activities consistent with this policy.
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5. POLICY COMMITMENT

At Strathbogie Shire Council we are committed to working with our community. To ensure their thoughts, feedback, advice and expectations are reflected in the decisions we make.

We know that working together will ensure better decisions for our community.

We are committed to significant change when it comes to engaging with our community. Gone are the days of decisions being made behind closed doors and consultation being a 'tick the box' exercise.

Wherever possible we will be seeking community input into our decision-making process. We will be brave in doing this. Not shying away from telling the truth and having difficult conversations.

We want our community to trust we're making decisions with them. To ensure we are delivering the projects and services that remind our community every day that we are lucky to live in Strathbogie Shire.

5.1 Policy Intent

The Communication and Engagement Policy ensures that:

- Communication and engagement plans are developed to support proposed, new or existing projects, programs or initiatives within Council
- All communication and engagement activities undertaken within Council are appropriately researched and planned by the Communications and Engagement Team to effectively target the right audience and achieve the desired outcome for Council
- Community engagement is a core process that underpins the Community Vision, Council Plan, Financial Plan and Asset Plan
- Community needs and aspirations are considered in developing and implementing Council's strategic directions and priorities, and
- Messages are consistent with the short term and long-term goals of Council across all communications.

Through the adoption of this policy, the Council Communications and Engagement Team will ensure that all:

- Communications and engagement activities are effective and of high quality.
- Activities are a derivative of an approved communications and or engagement plan
- All aspects of Council are considered when preparing communication and engagement activities
- Activities planned are considered, and where possible cost efficiencies are identified through streamlining or consolidation to avoid duplication or to maximise impact or the opportunity
- Directors, Executive Managers, or their delegated nominee, approves any communication activities prior to implementation
- We conduct all community engagement within legislative requirements

- Our community engagement practices are in line with Council's values, and
- We undertake evaluation processes to continually improve our approach to community engagement.

6. PRINCIPLES

We have developed a set of minimal requirements and objectives that our community engagement must adhere to. These are our engagement principles.

Genuine and transparent: We will be open and honest in our engagement approach. Our scope will be outlined, the purpose clear and we won't shy away from telling the truth – even when it is hard.

Inclusive and accessible: We will be approachable. We will create an environment where diversity of opinion is welcomed and everyone is heard.

Responsive and flexible: Our engagement approach will be adaptable to ensure it meets its purpose and generates participation. There is no one-size-fits-all approach so we will be watchful and ready to change.

Listen and learn: We will evaluate and monitor our engagement and consultation to ensure we continually improve.

7. TYPES OF 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 depth of community engagement will set relating 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, while recognising public involvement brings more information to the decision. It is the invitation to provide feedback on ideas, alternatives or draft documents. The level of community participation and representation can be very broad.

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 minimum 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 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

7.1 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

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.

6.1 Depth of Engagement

Council delivers community engagement under the International Association Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum. IAP2 is an international organisation that focuses on the advancement of practice of public participation.

IAP2’s Public Participation Spectrum is designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public’s role in any community engagement program.

The Spectrum shows that differing levels of participation are legitimate depending on the goals, time frames, resources and levels of concern in the decision to be made. However, and most importantly, the Spectrum sets out the promise being made to the public at each participation level.

The table below provides the five levels of engagement outlined by the IAP2 framework.

Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Public Participation Goal				
To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
Promise to the Public				
We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.
Examples				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Newsletters Updates on Council websites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public Comment Focus Groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workshops Deliberative Polling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advisory committees Deliberative forums 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Citizens juries

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fact sheets • Media release • Paid advertisement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveys • Social media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public Meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community panels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delegated decision making
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8. DEFINITIONS

Term	Meaning
Council	Means Strathbogie Shire Council, and includes all employees, consultants and contractors engaged on behalf of the organisation, Committees and Councillors.
Communications	The professional practice of creating a visual, written or spoken message for a specific target audience and delivering it through a pre-determined communication channel.
Communications and Engagement Team	An internal communication and engagement service team.
Community	A real or online group of people united by at least one common characteristic such as geography, shared interests, experiences, values or attitudes.
Deliberative Engagement	<p>Describes a series of engagement practices that demonstrate the following features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influence - Promise of influence over policy and decision-making (Involve/Collaborate/Empower using the IAP2 Levels of Engagement) • Inclusion - Participation that is representative of the community and inclusive of diverse viewpoints and values • Deliberation - open dialogue and discussion, access to information and movement towards consensus.
Engagement	The professional practice of staging a two-way interaction with a specific, target audience, in order to learn about people’s values, beliefs, opinions or ideas, in support of building relationships and involving them in a decision of <i>Council</i> , that affects them.
International Association Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum.	IAP2 is an international organisation that focuses on the advancement of practice of public participation.
Public Participation	The involvement of those affected by a decision in the decision-making process.

Stakeholder	A person, group or organisation that may be affected by, have a specific interest in, or influence over, a council decision or issue under consideration.
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9. RELATED POLICIES AND LEGISLATION

Legislation

- *Local Government Act 2020*
- *Planning and Environment Act 1987*
- *Subdivision Act 1988*
- *Equal Opportunity 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*
- *Public Records Act 1973*

Council Related Documents

- Strathbogie Shire Council Plan 2021-2025
- Strathbogie Shire Council Liveability Plan (Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan)
- Community Engagement Strategy 2019-2022
- Media Policy and Protocols
- Social Media Policy
- Customer Service Charter

10. POLICY REVIEW

This policy will be reviewed annually and may change at any time, subject to a Council resolution.

Council may review this policy at any time and at least two years from the 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 (e.g. a change to the name of a related document, or a change in legislation).

11. CHARTER OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES ACT 2006 AND THE EQUAL OPPORTUNITY ACT 2010

The Council acknowledges the legal responsibility to comply with the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* and the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010*. The *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* is designed to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens. The Charter gives legal protection to twenty fundamental human rights under four key values that include freedom, respect, equality and dignity.