

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

2021

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**ALONE WE CAN DO SO LITTLE;
TOGETHER, WE CAN DO SO MUCH**
[HELEN KELLER]

Wellington Shire Council acknowledges the Gunaikurnai people as the Traditional Owners of the land now known as Wellington Shire. We pay our respects to Elders both past and present.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2017 we came to the community with the promise that Wellington Shire Council is committed to genuine and effective community engagement in council planning and decision making. This has not changed as we update our Community Engagement Strategy in 2021 to meet the requirements of the *Local Government Act 2020*. Good engagement allows Council and those with whom it engages to understand wider perspectives and aspirations of communities and to look at alternative solutions. Community Engagement processes also provide the basis for productive relationships, improved dialogue and deliberation, and ultimately, better democracy.

This Community Engagement Strategy applies to all of Council's work – our projects, services, programs, infrastructure, facilities, and spaces – and guides those working within Wellington Shire Council to design appropriate community engagement. The deliberative engagement approach included in the strategy particularly applies to the development of our community vision, council plan, financial plan, asset plan and financial management including revenue and rate planning. Deliberative engagement principles and the varied engagement approaches outlined in this strategy apply to all the ways Council reaches out to our community.

Alongside this strategy will sit a refreshed set of tools to assist Council staff in planning, preparing, implementing, and reporting on community engagement processes.

Wellington Shire is home to over 44,000 people who live across more than 30 communities that range in size from a handful of people to 14,000 in the major centre of Sale. The needs of these people and communities differ and must be considered in different ways.

The *Local Government Act 2020* outlines principles for community engagement and tasks Councils to be 'deliberative' about how they engage in a two-way conversation with their community. It is up to each Council, in partnership with their community, to define how this will look and feel.

In reviewing the Strategy for 2021, it was recognised that Wellington Shire Council has already built many of the best-practice expectations of engagement into our existing approach. However, some of the key learnings over the past four years have been the importance of:

- 1. Ensuring that decisions are not 'pre-decided' before the community is consulted. There must be a meaningful ability to influence the outcome of the consultation for it to be valuable.**
- 2. Closing the feedback loop in community engagement processes, and;**
- 3. The development of and commitment to consistent community engagement practices across the organisation.**

OBJECTIVES

The Objectives of the Community Engagement Strategy are to:

- Strengthen representation in decision-making.
- Ensure the community understands how, when, and why they can expect Council staff to engage with them on issues of importance to them.
- Ensure all Wellington Shire Council staff understand and can deliver on the commitment by Council to involve the public in the decision-making process about issues that affect them.
- Ensure all Wellington Shire Council staff operate under the same code of conduct and set of guiding principles thereby bringing consistency and understanding to any community engagement process.

This Strategy acknowledges that many of Council's engagement activities are dictated by statutory requirements e.g., minimum public notice requirements for permit applications. Where statutory requirements and Community Engagement Strategy requirements come into conflict, statutory requirements will be followed.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), the recognised international leader in community engagement, provides the following definition:

Community engagement is ‘any process that involves the public in problem solving or decision-making and uses public input to make decisions’.

Section 56 of the *Local Government Act 2020* gives further definition around community engagement.

- a) a community engagement process must have a **clearly defined objective and scope**;
- b) participants in community engagement must have **access to objective, relevant and timely information** to inform their participation;
- c) participants in community engagement must be **representative of the persons and groups affected** by the matter that is the subject of the community engagement;
- d) participants in community engagement are entitled to **reasonable support to enable meaningful and informed engagement**;
- e) participants in community engagement are **informed of the ways in which the community engagement process will influence Council decision making**.

Depending on the situation, engagement can be formal or informal, direct or indirect, with the community or within the organisation.

IAP2 has developed core values for community engagement, which Council has adopted and are committed to using in the development and implementation of community engagement processes.

WHAT IS 'DELIBERATIVE' ENGAGEMENT?

The *Local Government Act 2020* requires councils to use deliberative engagement to consult with the community on key strategic documents like the community vision, council plan, financial plan, asset plan and financial management including revenue and rate planning.

Deliberative engagement is not defined in the Act as it is not a fixed notion. Instead, it is grounded in the community engagement principles and is an authentic and transparent commitment to involve the community in decision-making around significant documents and strategies.

Deliberation is an approach to decision-making where citizens consider facts from multiple points of view, talk with each other to think critically about options and enlarge their perspectives, opinions and understandings.

Deliberative engagement places a greater expectation on Council to collaborate with the community and to have a two-way conversation. However, this is balanced by the greater responsibility the community bears in the co-design of strategies, plans and projects.

Wellington Shire Council commits to using deliberative engagement principles as described in the tables on pages 11 and 12.

WHY IS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT?

It is now widely recognised that community engagement is an effective way of doing business, leading to better outcomes for the organisation and community.

When using community engagement as our primary approach in working externally and internally, Council:

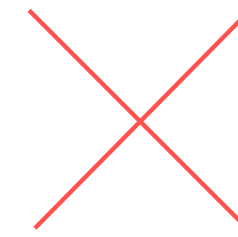
- Enables our community to work together and respond on issues that matter to them.
- Provides opportunity to build stronger relationships between Council and the community it serves.
- Builds on the communities understanding of Council's role and responsibilities as well as our financial and legislative requirements.
- Improves outcomes through the early identification of issues.
- Improves the quality of service delivery and policy development, to ensure they reflect the needs, interests, and values of community.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT DOES/ DOES NOT



Community engagement **DOES**:

1. Assume that the community have a right to be involved in decisions about actions that could affect their lives.
2. Include the promise that the community's contribution will influence the decision.
3. Promote sustainable decisions by recognising and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.
4. Seek out and facilitate the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
5. Seek input from participants in designing how they participate.
6. Provide participants with the information that they need to participate in a meaningful way.
7. Communicate to participants how their input will affect the decision.



Community engagement **DOES NOT**:

1. Take away decision making powers from councillors or the organisation. It adds value to the process by increasing understanding of the issues and adding local context knowledge.
2. Involve gaining community input where a decision has already been made or where the community cannot effectively influence a final decision.
3. Engage on matters that are outside the scope of influence of the community. Constraints, limitations, and non-negotiables will be made clear from the start.
4. Involve a process that expects participants to agree. Instead, it is an open process that creates opportunities to explore and discuss options, alternatives, needs and requirements, problem solve and reach consensus.
5. Apply a rigid model or approach to every project. Community engagement must be flexible, open, and responsive, and should be tailored to each project.

WHO DO WE ENGAGE WITH?

To ensure that all voices are heard on a given topic, it is important that Council is mindful of the varying communities of interest that may be impacted by a decision. The table below identifies the different groups Council may engage with:

INDUSTRY AND BUSINESS Those that are in a business or are involved in an industry which is directly affected or have an interest in Council decisions, projects, and plans.	COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS Those identified as being directly affected by the decision or those with an interest in a plan, project or decision made by Council.	FUNDING PARTNERS Organisations that provide sponsorship or funding to support the delivery of programs, services, capital projects and other initiatives.	COMMUNITY The people who live within the shire including individuals that work, visit, and invest in the municipality.
COUNCIL STAFF Anyone who is involved in community engagement activities including Councillors, council management and officers, contractors and consultants associated with Council.	GOVERNMENT AND NON-GOVERNMENT AGENCIES Including health, education, aged care, family services, emergency services, various government departments, youth, disability services, child support services and Aboriginal services.	COMMUNITY GROUPS AND ORGANISATIONS Those that provide a local service or work directly with community groups and organisations representing the views of their sector including sporting groups, special interest groups and place-based interest groups.	 The general public includes residents, ratepayers, landowners, service users, workplace communities, ethnic and religious communities, Aboriginal communities, age-based groups, people with a disability and those who have an interest in Wellington Shire Council.

DECISION-MAKING






Decision-making in Local Government is the responsibility of elected Councillors. Councillors by the very nature of the *Local Government Act 2020* are ultimately responsible for the decisions of Council and to that end are unable to assign full decision-making responsibilities to non-elected individuals. Wellington Shire Council believes that our community can experience the level of ‘empower’ (or empowerment) in decision-making, when it elects Council every four years.

Council engagement is therefore focussed in four out of the five IAP2 engagement levels – inform, consult, involve and collaborate. In all engagement processes Council will be clear in naming the level of engagement that will be used.

Deliberative engagement practices, where two-way conversation to strongly inform decision-making takes place, will be used for significant documents like the community vision, council plan, financial plan, asset plan and financial management including revenue and rate planning.




IAP2 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SPECTRUM

The IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum developed by the International Association for Public Participation gives an indication of the methods and circumstances by which an engagement process with the community will be undertaken.

	INCREASING LEVEL OF PUBLIC IMPACT				
	Inform 	Consult 	Involve 	Collaborate 	Empower 
Public Participation Goal	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/ or decision.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public issues and concerns 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 your concerns and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and issues are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for direct 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.
Example Tools	Fact sheets, websites, open houses, social media	Public comment, focus groups, surveys, public meetings, submissions, listening posts	Workshops, deliberate polling, participants consider and prioritise ideas, detailed online mapping	Representative citizen advisory committees, consensus-building, participatory processes, online community panel discussions, regular reports back to the community, co-designed solutions	Citizen juries, ballots, delegated decisions
Role of the Community	Listen	Contribute	Participate	Partner	Decide
<div> <div>←----- Participatory</div> <div>Deliberative -----→</div> </div>					

LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT

Different issues and situations will call for different engagement methods. The table below shows a scalable approach to engagement, demonstrating examples of the different levels of engagement and associated methods that might be used. Engagement may be conducted online or in person depending on the issue and the people being engaged with.

Level of Engagement	Example of projects	Possible engagement methods
High level strategic work <i>(Involve, collaborate)</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Vision • Council Plan • Financial Plan • Asset Plan • Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online discussion forum tools • Project steering groups • Working groups/ special interest/ user groups • Representative advisory committee • Workshops • Public ‘drop in’ sessions or meetings
Medium level strategic work <i>(Consult, involve)</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local laws • Policy and strategy development e.g. Gender Equity Policy • Budget • Selling or exchanging land • Large projects e.g. Wedge redevelopment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project steering group • Round table discussions, possibly a representative panel • Online survey or discussion forum tools • Public ‘drop in’ sessions • Neighbourhood meetings • Seek public submissions • Focus groups
Local or small-scale projects <i>(Inform, consult)</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recreation reserve re-developments • Special charge schemes • Australia Day awards • Hard waste collection schedule 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letters and emails to residents • Meetings with stakeholders • Online project update or survey tools • Wellington Matters • Wellington News • Social media updates • Shopping centre displays

Deliberative ----->
 <----- Participatory

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

A draft of this strategy was released for a 7-week public consultation between December 2020 and February 2021. Community members had detailed discussions and provided feedback on the strategy and Council's engagement practices via an online survey, two online discussion sessions and three in-person discussion sessions held in Maffra, Sale and Yarram.

There was a low response to the engagement, with 25 people completing the survey and 9 people attending the discussion sessions. Some of the reasons for this low response could be:

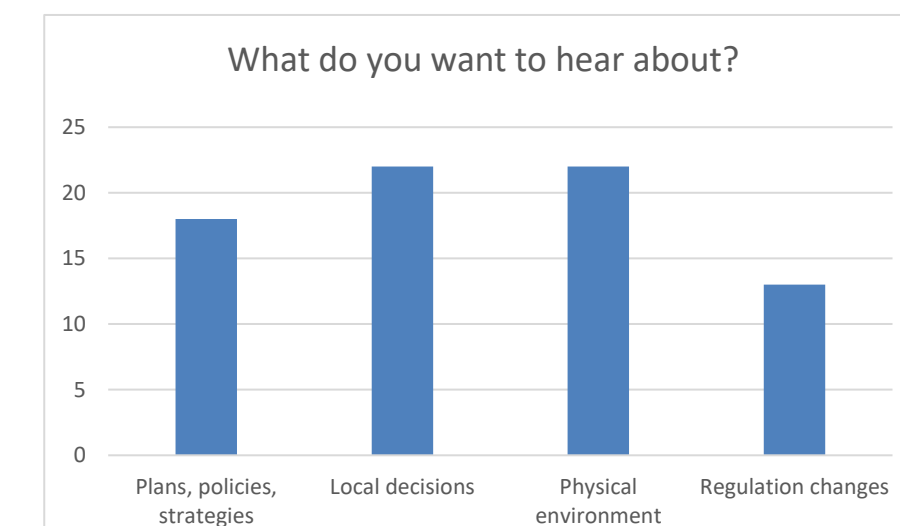
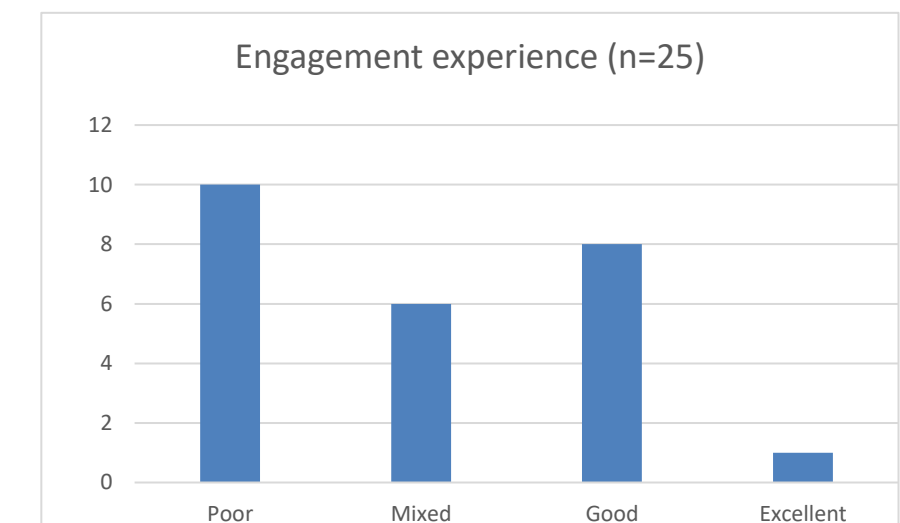
- Time of year (exacerbated by a long experience of COVID-19 lockdowns having been lifted for summer)
- Content (engaging about engagement may not have seemed meaningful or applicable for some people, in the same way discussing an infrastructure project does)
- People who attended the discussions indicated some in the community do not feel they will be listened to by Council and so would not bother attending.

We heard that Council should:

- Seek me out
- Interact throughout a project not just at the start, and follow up with what happened to feedback, even if it's not implemented.
- Make consultation easy and informal: Strategies should be presented simply; with short summaries the community can understand. Council should also advertise the content and significance of Council meetings in a way that is easier to understand.
- Listen and use community feedback: Don't engage if decisions are already made and don't just listen to the loudest voices. Start with a blank slate and give us the constraints; don't bring a design or plan to the community that's already been decided on
 - The community should have more input than small tweaks
 - Local lived experience is valuable
 - People stop engaging when they don't feel listened to. They don't trust enough to come next time.
- Ensure facility developments consult with the broader community, not just user groups
- Link projects together, so the community can see the bigger picture or wholistic view for their place into the future
- Be present and talking to the community regularly, not just for specific projects
- Make sure smaller towns are listened to as well

We heard that the community is responsible for good engagement too, not just Council. This means we all need to leave our emotions at the door and community members need to seek out opportunities to be involved in discussion and make sure they are open to other people's ideas and priorities.

Some members of the community expressed their disappointment that Community Planning Groups are no longer supported by Council.



CHANGES BASED ON FEEDBACK

Much of the feedback the community gave during the consultation period reflected the principles and values that are already captured inside this strategy. This helps to give confidence that the strategy is on the right track and reflects community expectations about how Council should be communicating with them and involving them in decision-making.

It is important to make sure that the approach of every Council officer matches the commitment made by Council inside this strategy. To support that, the focus for change will be on additional training and support for Council staff to be able to understand and deliver on good engagement, as outlined above.

Key changes:

1. Provide leadership to support staff to have a more collaborative approach to decision-making:
 - Emphasise that asking for feedback when you've already decided the outcome makes people feel disempowered.
 - Where possible, officers should start with conversations about issues, include constraints and move to solutions *with* the community
 - Support staff to understand when it is appropriate to 'inform' that a decision has been made and when it is more important to 'consult' and 'collaborate' to arrive at a decision together with the community.
2. Refresh process training with staff around the key stages of engagement:
 - Identify all affected people and groups and provide information they can access
 - Put yourself in the shoes of the community and communicate in a way everyone can understand, providing clear, timely information about the project and what role the community have
 - Understand the value of local knowledge and lived experience and support people to have a meaningful and informed conversation
 - Close the loop on what is happened after consultation to ensure the community understand how their feedback has impacted decision-making.

KEEPING ENGAGEMENT AT THE FRONT OF COUNCIL ACTIVITY

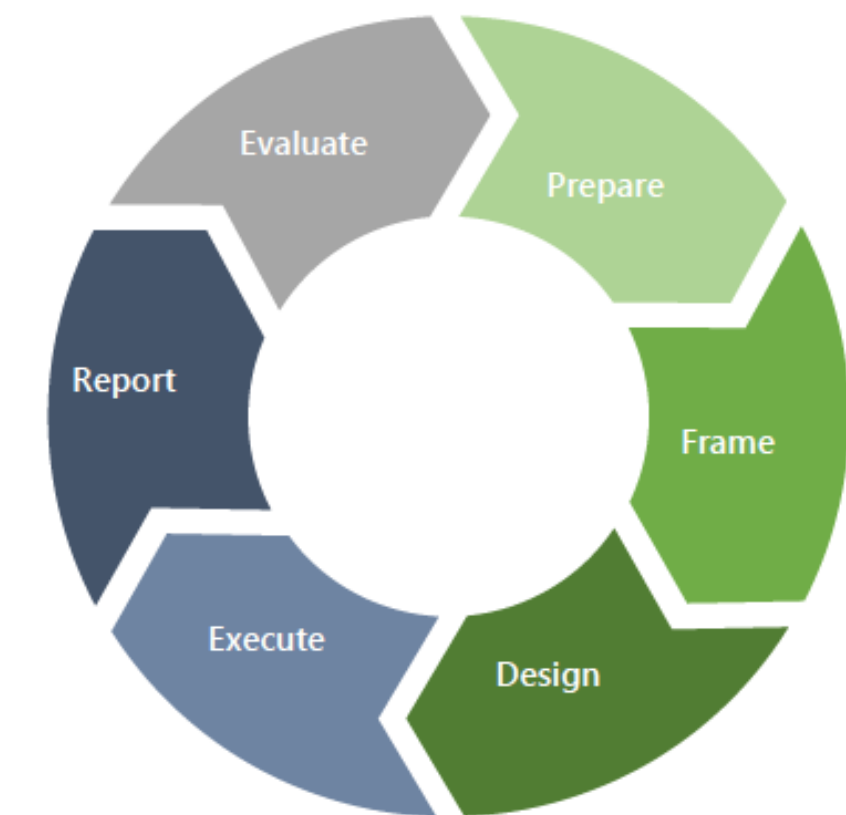
A toolkit and action plan will support the delivery of genuine and effective community engagement across council. It will follow a six-step process to allow us to prepare, frame, design and execute the engagement process. After that we will report back to the community about what was decided and why and then evaluate the results of that engagement to ensure we can learn from what occurred.

Essential to the successful implementation of the strategy will be the training and development of Council staff in the processes of community involvement. Processes will be re-defined during 2021 to ensure that Council is able to appropriately meet both the spirit and the delivery of this strategy.

Measuring success

To be successful, this strategy must lead to improvements in Community Engagement practice.

Strategic objectives	Measure through
Strengthen representation in decision-making.	Improvement against the annual Community Satisfaction Survey 2020 results benchmark: Community decisions: 58 Consultation and engagement: 57
Ensure the community understands how, when, and why they can expect Council staff to engage with them on issues of importance to them.	
Ensure all Wellington Shire Council staff understand and can deliver on the commitment by Council to involve the public in the decision-making process about issues that affect them.	% of staff completing engagement training annually. Annual audit of community engagement plans against all relevant projects delivered across Council. Areas of focus: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Was appropriate planning conducted?• Was the appropriate level of engagement used?• Was the outcome reflective of the engagement?
Ensure all Wellington Shire Council staff operate under the same code of conduct and set of guiding principles thereby bringing consistency and understanding to any community engagement process.	





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Used in the development of this strategy we recognise the work of:

- Rural Councils Victoria and Projectura
- City of Monash
- International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)
- Launceston City Council
- Engaging Canberrans: A guide to Community Engagement
- Warringah Council



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