



# Community Engagement Program

## 2025/26

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# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1 Background**

Ararat Rural City Council recognises that the involvement of the community in making decisions and plans is fundamental to good governance. The Ararat Rural City community is culturally diverse and engaged, rich with experience and expertise, whose participation is valued by Council.

The Council Plan 2025-29 strategic objective number 6.3 is to “Continuously improve Council’s community engagement process and practices in line with deliberative engagement practices, while ensuring that Councillors’ roles as elected community representatives are understood and reflected in decision-making.”

To achieve this objective, Council will develop a regular program of face-to-face community engagement opportunities, as identified in Action item 6.3.2 in the Annual Plan 2025-26.

## **1.2 Purpose**

This Community Engagement Program will deliver proactive and meaningful engagement with the wider community, and also assists Council to effectively manage risks. This Program supports Councillors to fulfill their role as defined by the Local Government Act 2020. Councillors represent the interests of the municipal community in their decision making and in their contributions to the strategic direction of the Council.

Councillors are already well connected to their communities, and bring with them their lived experience as residents, farmers, business owners and active members of their community. However, some members of the community may not be engaged in the groups and communities that Councillors interact with. There are also new residents relocating to Ararat who have not met other locals yet, or there are existing residents who become socially isolated for various reasons. This Program supports Councillors to continually maintain their awareness of the sometimes dynamic and diverse interests and needs of the municipal community. This Program can also help to support social inclusion and connectedness in our communities and support outcomes from the Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2025-29.

The purpose of this document is to outline how Ararat Rural City Council will engage with the community. It is a living document that will be updated in response to the outcomes of engagement activities, stakeholder feedback, risk analysis and monitoring and evaluation.

## **1.3 Objectives**

The objectives of this Community Engagement Program are:

1. To provide Councillors with opportunities to engage with community, which helps inform the Councillors’ decision making and contributions to the strategic direction of the Council
2. To provide opportunities for community to ask questions, raise concerns and meet Councillors and key staff at the Council.
3. For Council to provide regular and transparent updates on budget initiatives, projects, processes and outcomes to the wider community.
4. For Council to discuss potential projects and ideas, their purpose, objectives, expected benefits, potential impacts, and gather feedback from community and stakeholders.

## 1.4 Approach

Ararat Rural City Council will be guided by its Community Engagement Policy and the following principles in their communication and engagement with the community:

Table 1

Principle	Our Commitment
The community engagement process has a clearly defined objective and scope.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All community engagement is planned by clearly identifying the purpose, scope and objectives of the community's participation, in the community engagement plan.</li> <li>We will communicate the reasons for engagement with participants.</li> </ul>
Participants in community engagement will have access to objective, relevant and timely information to inform their participation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We will ensure the community has the information necessary to participate meaningfully in the engagement activities.</li> <li>We will endeavour to provide information that is objective, relevant, timely and easy to understand.</li> </ul>
Participants in community engagement will be representative of the persons and groups affected by the matter.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We will identify the people, communities and stakeholders who are affected by and interested in the topic of engagement.</li> <li>We will reach out to our community to involve and hear from participants that represent the affected and interested groups.</li> </ul>
Participants in community engagement are entitled to reasonable support to enable meaningful and informed engagement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We will reduce physical, social and cultural barriers to participation.</li> <li>We will consider the needs and perspectives of all groups that may want to be involved in the process.</li> <li>We will seek to obtain the views of a broad cross section of the community, especially when there is a quiet majority.</li> <li>We will allow sufficient time for review of information and participation in varied engagement activities.</li> </ul>
Participants in community engagement are informed of the ways in which the community engagement process will influence Council decision making.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We recognise the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) as the international standard for effective community engagement. We will be guided by IAP2 recommendations.</li> <li>We will inform participants of the level of influence they will have, as described in the IAP2 spectrum's promise to the public, and we will ensure they know the outcomes of any decisions made.</li> </ul>

Ararat Rural City Council's stakeholder engagement approach is also informed by the Public Participation Spectrum developed by the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2). Each community or stakeholder group or individual will have different communication and engagement needs and expectations over the course of different initiatives and projects. Their participation level on each initiative or project will depend on their interests at the time. The table below provides a general overview of the different participation levels.

Table 2

Participation Level	Participation Goal
Inform	To keep stakeholders informed and raise awareness and understanding.
Consult	To seek feedback from stakeholders and report back on how their input has informed decisions.
Involve	To involve stakeholders in key decisions where appropriate to address their priorities and concerns.
Collaborate	To partner with stakeholders and incorporate their advice and recommendations into all aspects of decision making.
Empower	To hand decision making over to stakeholders and implement what they decide.

## 2. Engagement Plan for 2025/26

The table below outlines the general schedule and topics that will be discussed at the community engagement sessions in 2025/26. These topics are not restrictive. Additional topics for discussion, consultation and engagement may arise from time to time, and can be included in the engagement program. Some of these sessions will be informal in structure, but others, such as for the Budget, will have more structure to present the key messages.

Table 3

Timeframe	Key Topics	Indicative Locations (TBC)
December	Community Engagement Program, promote Snap Send Solve, VicEmergency App	Ararat, Buangor, Elmhurst, Lake Bolac, Mininera, Moyston, Pomonal, Willaura
March	Council Budget, Annual Plans	Ararat, Buangor, Elmhurst, Lake Bolac, Moyston, Pomonal, Tatyoon, Willaura
June	Budget outcomes, upcoming initiatives and projects	Ararat, Lake Bolac, Moyston, Pomonal, Streatham, Warrak, Wickliffe, Willaura

The schedule of engagement sessions will include a mix of day time and evening sessions to provide a variety of options for community members to attend. The engagement sessions will aim to coincide with other community events and activities, or locate the sessions in places where people may wish to visit. This is in recognition of the value of people's time and travel costs, and enables community members to achieve multiple activities in the one journey.

A suitably friendly and informal name will be developed for the engagement sessions to help community members, who may be hesitant to attend these types of events, to feel more comfortable to attend. For example, if the session is during the day, it may be called a "Community Cuppa" or if in the evenings in a hospitality venue, it may be called "Cheers & Chats". Attendees from Council will include at least one Councillor and at least one senior Council officer. The community engagement sessions will be held in the following townships at least once in 2025/26, with the goal to visit twice a year.

The exact times and locations will be confirmed with the venues and published on the [Engage Ararat](#) website, in print newspapers and shared on social media.

## 3. Risk Analysis

The table below outlines general engagement risks that may be involved. Mitigation strategies or controls have been identified for each risk before a risk rating is applied. The organiser of the community engagement sessions will be the risk owner in most circumstances; however, this will be reviewed as this Program progresses.

Table 4

Risk Matrix		Severity				
		Insignificant	Minor	Moderate	Major	Severe
Likelihood	Almost certain	Medium	High	Very High	Very High	Very High
	Likely	Medium	High	High	Very High	Very High
	Possible	Low	Medium	High	High	Very High
	Unlikely	Low	Low	Medium	Medium	High
	Rare	Low	Low	Low	Low	Medium

Table 5

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Mitigation Strategies (controls)</b>	<b>Risk Rating (after controls)</b>
Mismatched or unmet expectations	Community or stakeholder disengagement due to unmet expectations.	Develop clear and consistent messaging about what the scope and purpose of the community engagement sessions. Ensure any queries are follow up and responded to, even if the outcome is not what the community was seeking.	Low (Unlikely/ Minor)
Change in council resources	Staff turnover or reduced capacity to deliver engagement program.	Take a collaborative approach to engagement, with shared roles and responsibilities where possible. Ensure good documentation and information management for engagement sessions, processes, and resources. Review regularly.	Medium (Possible/Minor)
Lack of engagement	Lack of stakeholder engagement due to engagement fatigue or other barriers.	Involve local groups and aim to co-locate engagement sessions with existing events and activities. Promote via a range of digital and traditional methods. Monitor and review attendance patterns regularly and adjust accordingly.	Low (Unlikely/Minor)
Staff safety	Physical injury or exposure to abusive language/behaviour while conducting engagement activities.	Ensure council OH&S policies and procedures are known and followed. Identify and discuss any known risks prior to conducting engagement activities and implement preventative or precautionary measures.	Low (Unlikely/Minor)

## 4. Monitoring and Evaluation

To ensure effective stakeholder and community engagement, and continuous improvement, the following monitoring and evaluation activities will be conducted alongside implementation of this engagement program.

Table 6

<b>Objectives</b>	<b>Measures of Success</b>	<b>Methods of Measurement</b>
1. To provide Councillors with opportunities to engage with community, which helps inform the Councillors' decision making and contributions to the strategic direction of the Council	1.1 Councillor satisfaction with the engagement sessions and program	- Feedback from Councillors
2. To provide opportunities for community to ask questions, raise concerns and meet Councillors and key staff at the Council.	2.1 Community satisfaction with the engagement sessions and program	- Feedback from attendees - Council officer observations - Community Satisfaction Survey results for Consultation & Engagement
3. For Council to provide regular and transparent updates on budget initiatives, projects, processes and outcomes to the wider community.	3.1 Number of initiative and project updates provided 3.2 Number of stakeholders reached/engaged	- Register of topics presented, attendee numbers and responses

	3.3 Stakeholder responses ( <i>qualitative</i> ).	
4. For Council to discuss potential projects and ideas, their purpose, objectives, expected benefits, potential impacts, and gather feedback from community and stakeholders.	4.1. Number of proposed initiatives and projects discussed 4.2. Number of stakeholders reached/engaged 4.3. Quality of stakeholder input ( <i>qualitative</i> ).	- Register of topics presented and attendee numbers - Examples of how stakeholder input has informed decisions

## 5. Reference List

1. IAP2 International Federation, *IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation*, 2018, International Association for Public Participation, Available from: <https://engagementinstitute.org.au/resources/iap2-public-participation-spectrum/>
2. Ararat Rural City Council, 2025, Council Plan 2025-2029, [https://www.ararat.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-05/Council%20Plan%202025-29\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.ararat.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-05/Council%20Plan%202025-29_FINAL.pdf)
3. Ararat Rural City Council, 2021, Community Engagement Policy, <https://www.ararat.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-11/Community%20Engagement%20Policy%20February%202021.pdf>