![Ararat Rural City logo]

Ararat Rural City

Community Engagement
Policy

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Introduction

Ararat Rural City Council is committed to listening to and understanding our community. We consider community engagement and public participation to be an essential component of good governance and leadership. The Ararat Rural City community is culturally diverse and engaged, rich with experience and expertise, whose participation is valued by Council.

This policy provides the community engagement and public participation framework for engagement activities undertaken by Council. It also outlines our commitment to provide the community with genuine opportunities to contribute to and inform projects, strategies, services and decisions that affect them.

Council is committed to:
- offering opportunities for the community to contribute to the decisions made by Council
- effective communication of information between Council and the community
- ensuring effective community representation
- decision making that is transparent and works in the interest of the community, considering our diverse stakeholders
- ensuring effective community engagement planning.

Policy

The objectives of the policy are to:
- articulate Council's commitment to engage with the community on decisions and development of plans and policies that affect them
- improve understanding of community and stakeholder engagement
- outline how community engagement is integrated into Council activities in order to support decision making and strengthen relationships and partnerships.

Scope

This policy applies to the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of community engagement activities as directed by Council, recommended by staff, or legislated by the Victorian Local Government Act 2020. Community engagement is the responsibility of all Council service areas, teams and employees. It also applies to contractors and consultants undertaking work on behalf of Council.

The policy does not apply to community engagement processes that are subject to prescribed processes imposed by other Victorian legislation such as land-use planning applications or other Council processes such as service requests or complaints.

What is community engagement?

Community engagement is about having conversations with people who are potentially impacted by Council decisions. It can also involve discerning issues that are important to the community, or to groups within the community, in order to advocate to state and federal government and other bodies that have influence in our area. In our engagement we listen, we consult, we act and we report back to our community.

Community engagement is a planned process with the specific purpose of working with identified groups of people, connected by geographic location, special interest or affiliation, or issues affecting their wellbeing. Engagement must be inclusive and accessible, reflecting the diversity that exists within our community.

Community engagement is a part of public participation and is often used interchangeably with that term. "Participation" implies more than just communication, participation means being involved in decisions.

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) defines the public participation as "the involvement of those affected by a decision in the decision making process. We use the term public participation to describe these situations, though the same activities are also described as community or stakeholder consultation, engagement and participation.

Principles and Council's Commitment to the Community

Council adopts the following principles and commitments which will inform all community engagement processes. These principles are set out in Section 56 of the Local Government Act 2020. Council has built on these principles to describe our commitment which reflects the values and expectations of the Ararat Rural City community as determined in consultation with the community.

Principle	Our Commitment
The community engagement process has a clearly defined objective and scope.	• All community engagement is planned by clearly identifying the purpose, scope and objectives of the community's participation, in the community engagement plan. • We will communicate the reasons for engagement with participants.
Participants in community engagement will have access to objective, relevant and timely information to inform their participation.	• We will ensure the community has the information necessary to participate meaningfully in the engagement activities. • We will endeavour to provide information that is objective, relevant, timely and easy to understand.
Participants in community engagement will be representative of the persons and groups affected by the matter.	• We will identify the people, communities and stakeholders who are affected by and interested in the topic of engagement. • We will reach out to our community to involve and hear from participants that represent the affected and interested groups.
Participants in community engagement are entitled to reasonable support to enable meaningful and informed engagement.	• We will reduce physical, social and cultural barriers to participation. • We will consider the needs and perspectives of all groups that may want to be involved in the process. • We will seek to obtain the views of a broad cross section of the community, especially when there is a quiet majority. • We will allow sufficient time for review of information and participation in varied engagement activities.
Participants in community engagement are informed of the ways in which the community engagement process will influence Council decision making.	• We recognise the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) as the international standard for effective community engagement. We will be guided by IAP2 recommendations. • 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.
The community engagement process has a clearly defined objective and scope.	• All community engagement is planned by clearly identifying the purpose, scope and objectives of the community's participation, in the community engagement plan. • We will communicate the reasons for engagement with participants.

Leadership of
Community Engagement

Council will call for different levels of engagement, having regard to the significance, complexity and anticipated level of impact of what is being proposed, and the stakeholders we need to target.

This policy adopts the International Association for Public Participation's (IAP2) Public Participation Spectrum to guide the range and extent of participation at each of the five levels. The five levels of engagement outlined on the IAP2 spectrum shown below will be utilised in every instance to meet our commitment to the community:

Leadership of
Community Engagement

Inform

To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.

Consult

To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.

Involve

To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.

Collaborate

To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and identification of the preferred solution.

Empower

To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.

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www.iap2.org

The levels of community engagement will be identified on the IAP2 spectrum at the project planning stage following an analysis of the desired outcomes (see Appendix A). The community engagement plan will identify the most appropriate communication tool and timeframes to ensure the particular target group(s) are well informed of both the issue and the engagement opportunities.

Ararat Rural City

Type of Community Engagement

Community engagement may include multiple levels of public participation, both at different stages of the process and because different stakeholders will choose to engage at different levels. The type or form of engagement practices undertaken can be broadly described as either deliberative or participatory. Many of Council's community engagement projects are likely to include both types of practice.

Deliberative Engagement

Participatory Engagement

Deliberative Engagement

Deliberative practices take place at the highest three levels of influence on the IAP2 spectrum, 'Involve', 'Collaborate' or 'Empower'. Deliberative engagement allows for discussion and the possibility of consensus if needed. The key features of a deliberative process are to come to a decision after considering all information and prioritising and weighing solutions. By its very name, it requires a level of engagement that is measured, considered and has the involvement of others. Deliberation can be scaled to fit the size and impact of the project. Some projects may require skilled facilitators to ensure a fair and equitable process.

Examples of deliberative practices are
- working with advisory groups
- online proposals and ideas are discussed by a panel of community members
- participants are asked to consider and prioritise ideas
- a representative group participates in a series of sessions of information exchange in order to reach consensus.

Projects most suited to a deliberative approach include those where the outcome will have a far-reaching or long-term effect, and issues where there is considerable community concern or division about the alternatives.

Participatory Engagement

Participatory practices take place at the first two levels of influence on the spectrum, 'Inform' and 'Consult' and involve one-way information exchange either from Council to community or community to Council. Participatory engagement typically occurs when feedback is invited on ideas, alternatives or draft documents.

Examples of participatory practices are
- Surveys
- Polls, ideas gathering
- Submissions

Participation at this level can be very broad, including by stakeholders who choose to track the project but offer no direct input.

Submissions process

On matters where the only form of community participation is an invitation to make submissions, and engagement on the matter was formerly governed by section 223 of the Local Government Act 1989, Council will continue to proceed in a manner modelled on section 223 of the Local Government Act 1989.

Statutory Requirements

Some elements of community engagement are directed by statutory requirements. Under the Local Government Act 2020 Council has a statutory obligation to develop a long-term Community Vision, Financial Plan and Asset Plan, as well as a four-year Council Plan. Under the Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008 Council has a statutory requirement to develop a four-year Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan. Council will meet its statutory obligations by ensuring the community will have an opportunity to participate in the development of these plans.

Community Engagement Planning, Implementation and Evaluation

To ensure effective community engagement, Council implements the following eight steps to design, deliver and complete community engagement.

1. Clearly define the purpose and scope of the community engagement.
2. Understand stakeholder and community interests.
3. Design an appropriate community engagement process.
4. Deliver genuine and respectful engagement.
5. Review and interpret the engagement data.
6. Apply the outcomes of the engagement to inform the decision-making process.
7. Evaluate the community engagement process for improvement.
8. Close the loop on the community engagement.

Informing the Community of Outcomes

Reporting of outcomes and updates will always be available online through Council's Have Your Say engagement platform, as well as provided directly to those who asked to be kept informed and have provided contact details.
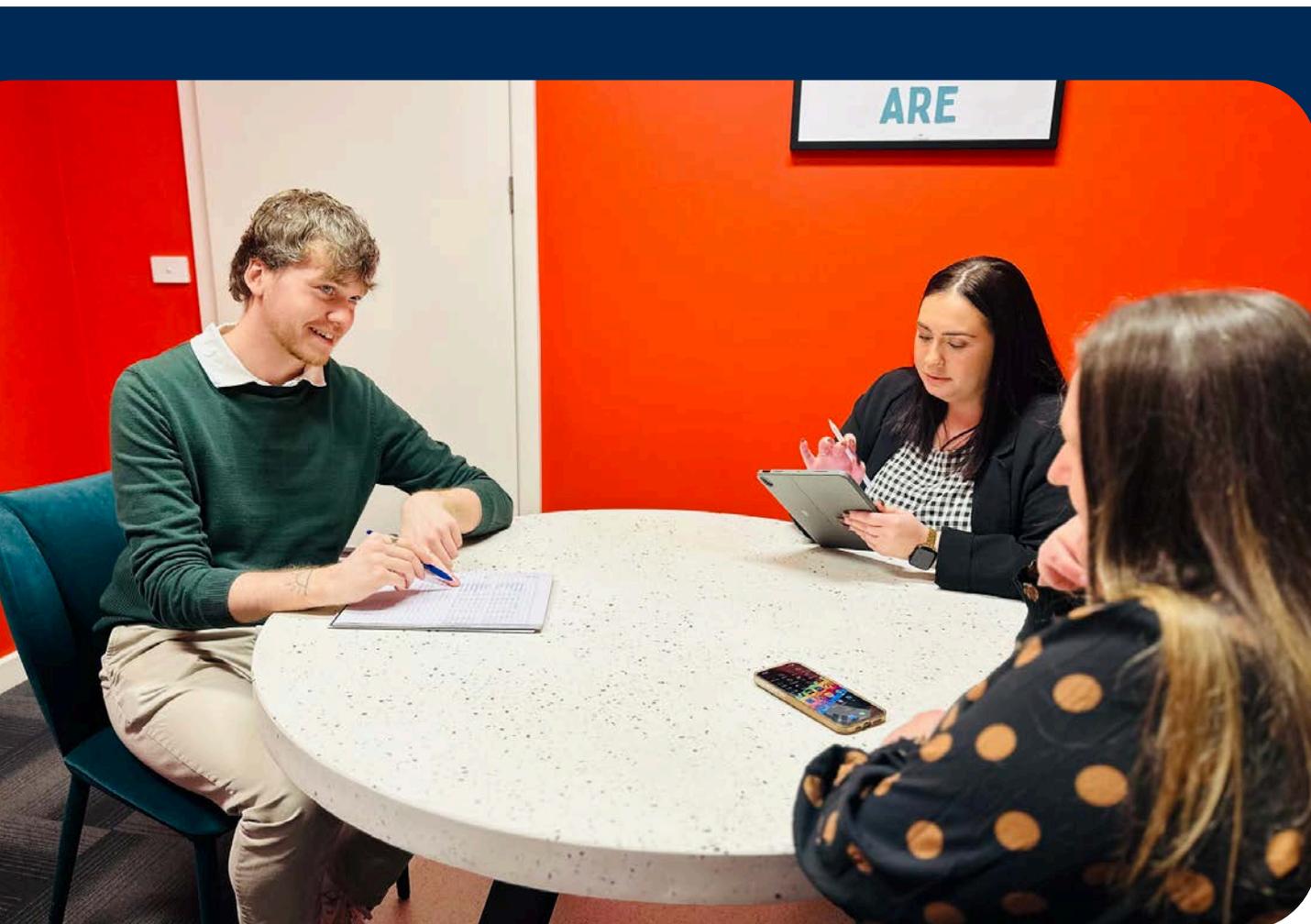
Community Engagement
Definitions

Community	Refers to the people who have a stake and interest in the Ararat Rural City and includes people who: • Live, work, study or conduct business or are involved in local community groups or organisations in the municipality • Visit, use or enjoy the services, facilities and public places located within the municipality
Community engagement	Community engagement is a planned process with the specific purpose of working with individuals and groups to encourage active involvement in decisions that affect them or are of interest to them.
Consultation	The activity of seeking input on a matter.
Deliberation	Deliberation is an approach to decision-making in which citizens consider relevant facts from multiple points of view, converse with one another to think critically about options before them and enlarge their perspectives, opinions, and understandings.
Process	A relationship between key steps, activities, tasks, policies and / or resources. Public participation A term used by IAP2 meaning the involvement of those affected (interested or impacted) by a decision in the decision-making process. We use the term interchangeably with Community Engagement, Stakeholder Engagement or Consultation.
Stakeholder	An individual or group with a strong interest in the decisions of Council and are directly impacted by their outcomes.

Human Rights Charter

This Policy has been assessed against the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 as being consistent with that Act and, in particular, as promoting the rights of members of the Community:

- not to have their privacy interfered with (section 13); and
- take part in public life (section 18), by having the opportunity to:
  - participate in the conduct of Council's affairs; and
  - have access to Council and Council Information.

Responsbilities

Party / Parties	Roles and Responsibilities
Councillors	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.
Chief Executive Officer and Senior Management	·Consult with councillors to establish the engagement process to be used. • Champion better practice community engagement through policy, process and leadership. • Monitor implementation and compliance with this policy.
Managers	Manage areas of responsibility to ensure community engagement is consistent with this policy.
Staff	Undertake to make community engagement activities consistent with this policy.

Monitoring,
Evaluation and Review

Council commits to monitoring processes, information sharing and decision making to understand the overall level of success in the Policy's implementation. A periodic review of this policy will be undertaken to ensure any changes required to strengthen or update the policy are made in a timely manner.

References

Public Transparency Policy
Privacy Policy
Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006
Local Government Act 1989
Local Government Act 2020
Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014
Equal Opportunity Act 2010
IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation
Rural Councils Victoria – Community Engagement Checklist

Appendices

Appendix 1
IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participati8on that define the public's role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and it is found in public participation plans around the world.

	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 concerns and aspirations are understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of a preferred solution.	To place the 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.

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Appendix 2
Community Engagement Template

Project Summary:

Item	Details
Project name	
Project Manager	
Project Details	
Project Purpose	
Start Date	
End Date	

Engagement Summary:

Item	Details / Actions	Start Date	End Date
Purpose of Engagement	*What is Council engaging on and why?*		
Key Stakeholders	*Who will be impacted by any decision?*		
Target Audience	*Who will engagement be conducted with?*		
Engagement Design: • Method/s • Value/s • Time/s • Location/s • Resource/s	*How will the engagement be undertaken?* *List, expand and repeat for all planned activities*		
Engagement findings	*How will the information gathered be used?*		
Outcomes of engagement	*How will the community be updated or informed?*		

Appendix 2 CONT....
Community Engagement Template

Other relevant information for the engagement:

May include stakeholders, multiple phases of engagement, questions, methods of promotion, etc.

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_____

_____

_____

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Appendix 3
Engagement Checklist

Stage 1: Prepare

Preparation is integral to developing a relevant, targeted, and successful engagement program that is tailored to the expectations and needs of those affected by the subject matter.

Stage 2: Frame

Your engagement should have a robust framework, identifying key issues, internal and external stakeholders, and performance measures.

Stage 3: Design

The design of your engagement plan brings together the key decisions you make in Stages 1 and 2. The design will impact the evaluation and reporting elements of the project.

Stage 4: Execute

The execution of your engagement plan relies on your planning and preparation.

Stage 5: Report

The purpose of this stage is to advise participants, stakeholders and decision makers about the findings of the engagement and how the input has been used to make decisions.

Stage 6: Evaluate

Reflective practice allows us to refine and continually improve our practices. Evaluation is an important element of any engagement activity.

Appendix 3
Engagement Checklist

Stage 1 - Prepare	Addressed
Preparation is integral to developing a relevant, targeted, and successful engagement program that is tailored to the expectations and needs of persons and groups affected by the subject matter. A thorough understanding of the subject matter will set a strong basis for framing and design.	
Research and understand the context, scope and purpose of the Plan, Strategy or Project. Also conduct research into industry trends, best practice examples and drivers.	
Be aware of any legislative compliance matters including reporting and deadlines for the completion of the project.	
Review the Council community engagement policy to understand the underlying approach, principles, and governance structures.	
Identify Council resources including human, equipment and technology that will be required to take part in the project.	
Research current Council plans, strategies and projects that are interlinked to your project to ensure consistency.	

Appendix 3 CONT
Engagement Checklist

Stage 2 - Frame	Addressed
Your engagement should have a robust framework, identifying key issues, internal and external stakeholders, and performance measures. Building your framework will increase transparency and the level of participation as you will have clarity of scope when discussing the engagement with participants.	
Convene a project control group including Council officers you have identified through your resources review and allocate responsibilities.	
Collaborate with the project control group to define the problem and articulate: • Issues that need to be addressed/answered/resolved. • Negotiables and non-negotiables. • Who the final decision maker is. • The decision makers ideal outcome	
Prepare a stakeholder analysis to identify internal and external stakeholders with an interest in the subject matter. Identify issues and the best communication channels for stakeholder groups.	
Conduct a risk assessment including identification of internal and external parameters.	
Determine the desired level of public participation, and the weighting their input will have on decision making (you may choose to use the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation as a guide).	
Set key performance indicators regarding level of engagement, satisfaction with engagement methods and outcomes of engagement.	
Confirm your engagement budget for the project.	

Appendix 3 CONT
Engagement Checklist

Stage 3 - Design	Addressed
The design of your engagement plan brings together the key decisions you make in Stages 1 and 2. How you design your engagement will impact the evaluation and reporting elements of the project.	
Extend the problem definition work already conducted. Consider the best way to seek input from the public including: • What is the purpose of the question? Am I seeking data or more in-depth feedback? • What engagement tools will be most effective for the stakeholders I am seeking to engage? • How will I record the feedback? (Survey link? Post its? Written form?) • Is this question understandable and free of jargon? • Is the question relevant and related to an aspect of the project that the community will influence through their feedback?	
Develop an engagement plan that is tailored to promote the inclusion, participation, and accessibility of stakeholder groups by: • Identifying engagement tools and techniques that will be used to maximise participation. • Considering a design thinking approach that outlines the phases and timeframes for key milestones including, • The release of information in a format that is easily accessible to stakeholders, • The rollout of engagement activities. • Providing feedback to the project control group, engagement participants and the community. • Dates for submission and approval of key documents. • Reporting requirements for key performance indicators. • Identify the resources that will need to be used at each stage of the engagement.	
Your engagement plan should be complemented by a communications strategy which outlines: • Deadlines for the provision of information to engagement participants, the project control group and decision makers. • Channels to communicate with potential participants (social media, newspaper advertisements, media releases, mailing lists, engagement platforms, webinars, seeking the assistance of stakeholder groups to distribute information). • How you are going to measure the reach and effectiveness of communication channels.	
Reach out to stakeholder groups and leaders to seek their input into the engagement design.	

Appendix 3 CONT
Engagement Checklist

Stage 4 - Execute	Addressed
The execution of your engagement plan relies on your planning and preparation.	
Test any platform you will be using, particularly for online engagement. Develop comfort with its functionality and be sure to provide basic trouble shooting advice to participants.	
Consider occupational health and safety when you are packing, transporting, and setting up engagement activities. Also check if there are any permit or site-specific requirements to address.	
Conduct a pre engagement brief with your engagement representatives. It is important that participants know that representatives are informed and understand the key issues that are affecting them. The briefing should also identify any potential 'hot topics' and provide representatives with the tools to discuss them in a constructive manner with the community.	
When talking with participants: • Acknowledge the scope of the engagement and any limitations or constraints. o Be clear about participants level of influence decision making. • Be open to new ideas, connections and partnerships that may be established through engagement – exciting! • Ask questions that extend the thoughts and ideas of participants to test robustness. Don't be afraid to ask the 'what if' or 'have you considered' questions. And don't be afraid of answers that don't meet your own values • If you are unsure you have understood the input, check back in by rephrasing the participants thoughts to make sure you understood them correctly. • Remember, you do not have to provide a solution to every issue that is raised on the day. The important thing is to hear what a participant is saying and respond with authenticity and an open mind. • Have a mechanism for referring issues that do not relate to the engagement that participants raise on the day. It is important to bring participants back to the subject at hand while giving them concrete pathways to follow up their other concerns.	
Take the time to pack down neatly. Trust us – you will thank us later!	
Conduct a debrief straight after the engagement to ensure you are able to identify key learnings and areas for further exploration or follow up.	

Appendix 3 CONT
Engagement Checklist

Stage 5 - Report	Addressed
The purpose of this stage is to advise participants, stakeholders and decision makers about the findings of the engagement and how the input has been used to make decisions. This part of the engagement plan is often referred to as 'closing the loop'.	
Examine the findings of your engagement and determine: • Major themes from feedback. • Any data trends that are evident. • Any contrary views, what level of support they have, and how can they be compared to the support of major themes. • What projects, propositions or idea have strong or weak support. • Areas for further investigation. • Difference in feedback between demographics (gender, age, income, education). • Difference in the feedback offered by different townships and regions.	
Feedback the findings to participants, stakeholders and decision makers through mechanisms identified in your communications plan. Present the analysis in a format that is understandable to a broad audience, and provide an avenue for participants, stakeholders and decision makers to offer clarification if required.	
Record the analysis of engagement and articulate how it has been used in determining scope, content and direction of the piece of work.	

Stage 6 - Evaluate	Addressed
Reflective practice allows us to refine and continually improve our practices. Evaluation is an important element of any engagement activity.	
Seek feedback from participants, stakeholders and decision makers about the process.	
Measure your progress against the KPI's you set during stage 2 regarding level of engagement, satisfaction with engagement methods and outcomes of engagement.	
Ensure any changes in practice align with your Councils continuous improvement mechanisms.	

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