

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT POLICY



BULOKE
SHIRE COUNCIL



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INTRODUCTION

Buloke Shire 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.

COUNCIL ADDRESSES ITS KEY VALUES THROUGH:

- Good communication
- Transparency in decision making
- Accountability for actions
- Working collaboratively with partners
- Taking responsibility
- Being responsive and timely

Community engagement and participation is an important element of the democratic process. An empowered community is one that actively participates to influence decisions that affect their lives.

We understand our community is diverse and facing many geographical and demographical challenges.

By strengthening relationships and listening to our community, we ensure that we can make better, more informed decisions and therefore deliver value to the public in all aspects of our work.

This policy document provides the community engagement and public participation framework for engagement activities undertaken by Council.

This policy also outlines our commitment to provide the community with genuine opportunities to contribute to and inform projects, strategies, services and decisions that affect them. It will underpin sound planning and project development and will help us meet our legislative requirements.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Buloke Shire Council acknowledges the Wotjobaluk, Jaadwa, Jadawadjali, Wergaia and Jupagalk Nations and the Dja Dja Wurrung people as the traditional owners of parts of the land now known as Buloke. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and value their ongoing contribution to our heritage and our community.

Buloke has significant number cultural heritage places including an Aboriginal historical place, burials, artefact scatters, earth features, low density artefact distributions, scarred trees and a stone feature.



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. The scope is broad with the focus on the collective, rather than on the individual. 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 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."

UNDERSTANDING OUR COMMUNITY

Understanding our communities of identity, place and interest supports targeted engagement and outreach to those groups. Our research undertaken as part of compiling this policy tells us that currently, the top three sources of local news and information for our residents are:

 Social media **63%**

 Local newspaper **56%**

 Direct contact with Council **44%**

We also know that unique aspects of our community as well as changes in technology and expectations require us to routinely adapt, refresh and update our approaches.

Council's Inclusiveness Plan outlines that Council will work towards community engagement to involve everyone in the decisions that affect them and facilitate finding their own solutions towards a vision of liveable communities for all.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics 39% of Buloke's population is aged 60 and over, 20% of those are aged 70 or over. The median age is 50.7 years. In addition to this, we are getting older. 34% of residents live in lone person households.

By 2031 it is projected that the number of residents in Buloke aged 65+ will grow by 10% and the number of residents aged 0-19 years old and 20-64 years old will each decrease by 5%.

Source: Victoria in Future, 2016, Buloke Shire Profile.

OUR APPROACH AND PRINCIPLES

Community engagement enables the public to participate in decisions that impact on their lives. Councillors will make decisions based on legislative requirements, the expert advice of Council officers and community inputs gathered through formal and informal engagement.

OUR PRINCIPLES

Council adopts the following principles and commitments informing all community engagement processes. These principles are set out in Section 56 of the Local Government Act 2020. These principles are aligned to the strong values of our community; the expectations our communities will continue to underpin our engagement processes. To that end, our community engagement will have a clearly defined objectively and scope.

PARTICIPANTS IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WILL:

- Have access to objective, relevant and timely information to inform their participation.
- Be representative of the persons and groups affected by the matter.
- Are entitled to reasonable support to enable meaningful and informed engagement.
- Be informed of the ways in which the community engagement process will influence Council decision making.

OUR ENGAGEMENT VISION

Buloke is a significant part of Victoria's true agricultural heartland. It is liveable and harmonious because the community participates in decisions that impact on their quality of life. We are inclusive, respect diversity and engage in a variety of ways across the organisation. Our values are evident in all our public interactions. We listen, we consult, we act and we report back to our community.

Our engagement is considered and coordinated and our Council officers have the tools they need to engage effectively and meet the expectation of our community.

ENGAGEMENT CONTEXT

Our community engagement activities can be categorised according to the following:

1 THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2020 OUTLINES A SET OF FIVE OVERARCHING PRINCIPLES THAT ARE CENTRAL TO OUR ENGAGEMENT PRACTICE.

These broadly outline the need for community engagement to be transparent, accountable, meaningfully informed and representative. The Act also outlines the process for developing a Community Vision. Other relevant documents and legislation are listed in this policy.

2 ENGAGEMENT AROUND MAJOR STRATEGIC AND POLICY ISSUES

Strategies such as the Council Plan and the Integrated Community Plan may require establishing or use of advisory groups and steering committees or special one-off forums/conferences to be a part of appropriate engagement.

3 ENGAGEMENT CONCERNING LOCAL ISSUES

Local issues including site specific master plans, community plans, or specific issues such as emergency awareness may require specific engagement plans. We will be flexible according to the scale of the project. Engagement processes may include community forums, working groups, surveys or other engagement tools.

4 ENGAGEMENT LINKED TO DAY TO DAY BUSINESS

We will identify and manage community engagement activities associated with core business and projects approved in Council's budget. We will only consult on those aspects of core business that are negotiable and where the community can have meaningful input.

OUR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

We commit to ensuring that those who are affected by a decision will be given the opportunity to inform that decision.

The framework for determining the level of involvement in the decision and the methods we use is the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum.

The IAP2 Spectrum identifies and defines each of the five levels of engagement. It details our promise to the public for each level of engagement ensuring that both Council and the community have shared expectations. Decisions on the level of engagement will be made according to the scale, complexity and strategic importance of projects.

Our framework is supported internally by the Community Engagement Strategy and a suite of tools available to Council officers.

THE OBJECTIVES OF THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK ARE TO:

- Ensure Councillors and Council staff (including external contractors and consultants) engage with the community in a meaningful way about decisions that affect them
- Provide a consistent approach to community engagement
- Assist in selecting the method and level to engage the community in projects or the decision to be made
- Increase trust and community confidence by fostering positive relationships between Council and communities of interest.

IAP2 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SPECTRUM

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. It clarifies the role of the public (or community) in planning and decision-making, and how much influence the community has over planning or decision-making processes.

	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 your feedback, 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 decision to the maximum extent possible	We will implement what you decide
EXAMPLE TECHNIQUES	Community Updates Website Social media	Focus groups Surveys Public Meetings	Workshops Community Forum Summits Listening posts	Advisory Committees Project Control Groups	Local Government Elections Delegated decisions

WHY WE ENGAGE

Community engagement provides decision makers with better opportunities to make informed decisions. By engaging the expertise and experience of the community, Council is better able to understand local issues and needs.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT CAN HELP DECISION MAKERS BY:

- Gathering information, meaningful feedback and diverse points of view prior to making decisions
- Fostering community partnerships
- Increasing trust and community confidence
- Gathering inputs from stakeholders who are impacted by Council decisions
- Identifying risks and gathering workable inputs on mitigations
- Building understanding of, and commitment to, projects and strategic decisions
- Enhancing accountability and transparency through open and genuine consultation and feedback on public participation outcomes.

WHO WE ENGAGE

We engage with a broad range of people, all with differing interests. For the purpose of this framework we identify the community as anyone affected by Council's decisions. This includes individuals or groups identified but not limited to residents, ratepayers, business owners, customers, community groups, sporting groups, youth, agencies, funding bodies, developers, internal stakeholders and culturally and linguistically diverse groups.

WHEN WE ENGAGE

If there is a decision to be made by Council that will impact and affect the community and other key stakeholders then community engagement is usually required.

We will plan for community engagement early in our project planning process.

We are committed to informing the community and key stakeholders during the early stages of project development to provide real opportunities for the community to influence decisions. Doing this gives the community the ability participate in a meaningful way and allows us to discern opportunities and constraints early in the planning process.

We will provide the community with sufficient time to participate in any engagement activity. Wherever possible we will set the engagement at suitable times for stakeholders; for example not over significant holiday periods or at times of the day when participants will find it difficult to be involved.

What constitutes sufficient time will depend on the scale and/or complexity of the project and the number of people who will participate in the engagement activity. As a general rule, two to four weeks should be allowed from the time of notification until the close of time for comment by any stakeholder group. For some projects, there are legislative requirements that will need to be considered.



HOW WE ENGAGE

Successful community engagement is well planned, inclusive and accessible to those people that may be affected by the decision. Effective engagement relies on Council being clear about the purpose of the engagement, key stages and timelines and the respective roles, responsibilities and expectations throughout the engagement process.

Deliberative engagement requires a higher level of participation.

When planning engagement methods we reference our framework and the IAP2 Spectrum. We are also careful to adhere to our engagement principles, set clear engagement objectives, and to consider statutory processes, community interest, political sensitivity, time, resources and budget constraints.

TO ENSURE THE ENGAGEMENT IS WELL PLANNED, WE HAVE A ROBUST ENGAGEMENT PROCESS FEATURING A THREE STAGE APPROACH:

- Plan (developing the engagement plan)
- Do (implementing engagement activities and receiving input)
- Report (providing feedback on level of engagement and participation outcomes).

Our engagement will respect the rich diversity of our local community. We will recognise the long Indigenous heritage of our area and respect the insights of the original owners across all engagement areas. We will make sure that, where possible, our engagement is community driven and responsive to the hopes and needs of our community.

We will value accessibility and engage in a manner that is inclusive of the cultures and language groups that make up our municipality as well as being aware of the diversity in ages, gender, abilities and the range of socio-economic perspectives and aspirations. We will take special care with the young and the vulnerable, acknowledging their voice and engaging in safe and respectful ways. We will adhere to the Victorian Government's policy on conducting research in schools.

EVALUATING OUR ENGAGEMENT

We measure our engagement performance in order to test that we are delivering public value to our community.

We measure the level of engagement or number of interactions, submissions made, surveys completed, participants in a workshop, letters distributed, calls taken and more.

We also measure participation outcomes. How were the decisions that we made influenced by community inputs? When we listened and consulted, did we act on what we heard and understood?

Effective evaluation of community engagement activities can provide considerable benefits including:

- Improving community engagement practice by identifying achievements and providing evidence of how effective engagement works
- Identifying and articulating lessons learned and improving current practices
- Assisting in developing an evidence base for community vision, concerns and aspirations
- Meeting our requirements for the Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

RESOURCES AND TOOLS TO SUPPORT OUR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

INDEPENDENT RESEARCH

Community satisfaction and preferred methods of engagement are captured in regular independent research. This is based on a randomly selected sample of citizens and delivers statistically reliable results that can be compared across years and in some years across Councils.

The Local Government Community Satisfaction Survey is facilitated by the State Government on behalf of all Victorian councils.

The results of the survey are reported to Council and made available to the public. These results inform the 'Know Your Council' website which enables comparison of our customer satisfaction ratings with other Victorian councils and benchmark our performance from year to year.

OUR COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

To encourage and invite our community and stakeholders to participate in community engagement activities, we may promote the opportunities in a range of different ways.

SOME OF THE COMMUNICATIONS CHANNELS AND TOOLS THAT CAN BE USED TO SUPPORT OUR ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES INCLUDE:

- Council Meetings and Briefings
- Weekly Community Updates in local newspapers
- Our Say Buloke engagement platform
- Buloke Shire Council website
- Social media including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube
- Print promotions such as letters, posters or flyers
- Drop in sessions, site visits and open days
- Focus groups, workshops and stakeholder briefing sessions
- Media promotion including media releases and/or advertising
- Community Forum Summits
- Weekly Customer Service Information sheets
- Regular radio appearances
- Community Support Meetings
- Face to face Customer Service
- Buloke Library Service
- Attendance at Community Forum Meetings



TRAINING

Training will be provided to staff to increase understanding of our Community Engagement Framework, processes and tools, and to build capacity in order for staff to deliver sound engagement activities across the organisation.

INTEGRATED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

We have several legislative requirements to engage, and are often managing several large projects across different parts of the organisation at any one time. Council is committed to being respectful of the community's time in our engagement activities. We will coordinate and integrate our large scale community engagement where possible in the interests of efficiency.

DEVELOPMENT OF THIS POLICY

THIS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT POLICY 2020 WAS DIRECTLY INFORMED BY:

- Community Engagement Policy Survey
- Consultation with our ten Community Forums
- A Community Engagement period as part of the development of the Policy
- A review of existing Council plans and strategies including the Inclusiveness Plan
- Requirements under the Local Government Act 2020

RESPONSIBILITY

This policy is led by Chief Executive Officer, Director Community Development and Manager Customer Engagement. All staff are expected to comply with the letter and spirit of this policy.

RELATED DOCUMENTS

Council Plan 2017-21
Social Media Policy
Information Privacy Policy
Councillor Code of Conduct
Staff Code of Conduct
Customer Service Strategy
Project Management Framework
Inclusiveness Plan
Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006
Local Government Act 2020
Subordinate Legislation Act 1994
Public Administration Act 2004
Equal Opportunity Act 2010
Child Safe Safety Act 2015

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