



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT POLICY

Adopted 20 October 2008

MAROONDAH'S VISION: Maroondah will be a **vibrant** city. It will have an **active community**, a **strong local economy** and a **diverse cultural life** in a prosperous and sustainable environment.
(from Maroondah 2025: A Community Planning Together)

1. POLICY PURPOSE

Maroondah City Council (the 'Council') recognises that residents and other members of the Maroondah community have the right to have a say in decisions that affect them. The engagement of the community is an essential component in responsible governance and key to the development of a vibrant local democracy.

Council is committed to strengthening and engaging the Maroondah community in democratic governance. The Community Engagement Policy is a formal expression of Council's commitment to engaging the Maroondah community in decision making processes through the use of appropriate, effective and inclusive practices. The Policy also seeks to improve Council's engagement processes and outcomes through encouraging a consistent approach and continual learning through evaluation, and through expanding the range of engagement methods used.

The Policy builds on the preceding Maroondah Community Participation Policy by defining five levels of engagement and providing clear guiding principles for community engagement. The Community Engagement Policy also identifies the main challenges for Council in effective community engagement and specifies commitments to address these challenges.

Through establishing a consistent framework for participatory practices, the Policy is a means by which Council can achieve its stated Vision which expresses the aspiration for Maroondah to be "a place for opportunity, diversity and inclusion...where both residents and businesses feel a strong sense of belonging and place" which is reinforced by "a spirit of caring and control over our own destiny". The practical implementation of this Policy will be supported by the development and application of a Community Engagement Resource Guide.

This Policy applies to activities initiated by Council, including statutory processes, service provision, projects, strategic planning and policy development, and other key activities that will have appreciable impacts on the Maroondah community.

2. THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The objectives, roles and functions of local government in Victoria are governed by the *Local Government Act 1989* (Vic.). Section 3C(3) of this Act states six core roles of a council, being:

- (a) acting as a representative government by taking into account the diverse needs of the local community in decision making
- (b) providing leadership by establishing strategic objectives and monitoring their achievement
- (c) maintaining the viability of the Council by ensuring that resources are managed in a responsible and accountable manner



- (d) advocating the interests of the local community to other communities and governments
- (e) acting as a responsible partner in government by taking into account the needs of other communities
- (f) fostering community cohesion and encouraging active participation in civic life.

Clearly, the engagement of the community is indispensable to Council's achievement of all six roles.

Local councils in Victoria are legally required to conduct public consultation, through a prescribed process, on specific matters, such as:

- setting councillor and mayoral allowances
- adopting a council plan
- making a local law
- changing the council's system of land valuations for council rates
- adopting a budget
- declaring a special rate or a special charge
- selling, exchanging or leasing land
- entering into a regional library agreement
- deviating or discontinuing a road
- making amendments to the Planning Scheme under the Planning and Environment Act 1987.

Public consultation and engagement is not limited to these matters and councils also engage the community in other matters. Each council usually has its own processes for inviting, receiving and responding to public input.

Providing information to and seeking feedback from the community about key local issues will also ensure that Council complies with the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities 2006* (Vic.), particularly section 15 (Freedom of Expression) and section 18 (Taking Part in Public Life) of the Charter. As a public authority, Council has an obligation to act in a way that is compatible with the human rights enshrined in the Charter.

3. INTRODUCTION

Council continues to be committed to effective and inclusive community engagement and has carried out engagement practices in accordance with the 2001 Community Participation Policy. Consistent with the 2001 Policy, Council has actively involved the community in relation to Council programs and activities, statutory processes, and policy and strategy development. This has occurred through a range of measures including surveys, public forums, focus groups and targeted consultations.

In recognising that community involvement is critical to responsible governance and delivers many important benefits for all stakeholders, the Community Engagement Policy 2008 enriches Council's existing commitment and aims to enhance Council's performance in this area. This Policy outlines a set of principles which are supported by a number of definitions and commitments that form the operational means for the implementation of the Policy.



4. DEFINITIONS

This section clarifies the meanings of key terms as they will be applied in this Policy.

Community

Broadly defined, a community is characterised by interacting individuals or organisations that have something in common.

In the context of this Policy, there are two key types of communities:

- *Geographical communities* are defined by a physical area and can consist of people who live, work or study in the area, people who own property in the area, people who visit the area (eg for recreational purposes or to use services and facilities located in the area), community groups and service agencies whose catchment covers the area, businesses based in the area and government representatives of the area.

Some examples of geographical communities are the Eastern Metropolitan Region, the Maroondah community, the community of a particular suburb, or the community of a particular neighbourhood area.

- *Communities of interest* share a common interest or attribute. These communities are not necessarily confined to a specific geographical area.

Some examples of attributes or interests that can define communities of interests are age groups (eg young people aged 12 to 24 years), lifestyle situations (eg families with children, retirees, renters, carers), physical attributes (eg people with a disability), cultural attributes (eg indigenous people), industries of work (eg business owners, retail workers, tradespeople), or personal interests (eg bushland volunteers, issues-based action groups, coin collectors). Communities of interest can include individuals, service providers, community groups and other forms of organisation.

Engagement

Community engagement refers to a broad range of practices characterised by two-way communication between Council and the community affected by the issue. Through involvement in the engagement process, the community has a level of influence on the decision that is made.

Engagement practices vary in their objectives, the stage at which the community is actively involved in the decision making process, the degree of influence the community has on the decision and the extent to which decision making powers are delegated to the community.

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) identifies five levels of engagement: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, empower (refer to Table 1). Each level along the spectrum represents an increased degree of community engagement in the decision making process. The Community Engagement Spectrum provides a model for determining the level of engagement that is most appropriate for the purpose and forms the basis of the Council's community engagement framework.



Table 1. Community Engagement Spectrum (Adapted from the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum)

Engagement Goal
<p>INFORM To provide the community with information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives and/or solutions; to keep the community informed of the issue and decision.</p>
<p>CONSULT To obtain public input on issues, draft documents and/or decisions; to acknowledge and consider public concerns.</p>
<p>INVOLVE To work directly with the community to determine public concerns and opinions and ensure that these are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and decision made.</p>
<p>COLLABORATE To work in partnership with the community on each aspect of the decision making process, including understanding of the issues, developing alternatives and identifying the solution.</p>
<p>EMPOWER To fully delegate control of the decision making process to the community; Council participates in this process as one of the stakeholders and works with the community to implement the decision.</p>

Increasing Level of Community Engagement
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Stakeholders

The term ‘stakeholder’ encapsulates all individuals, organisations, agencies and groups that are affected, either directly or indirectly, by the issue under consideration. Stakeholders have a ‘stake’ in the issue and are usually a part of the community. They vary in the degree to which they are affected by the issue and this can influence the level to which they are engaged in the decision making.

Responsible Governance

“Good governance is achieved when local governments are responsive to communities’ needs and communities are engaged in governance activities.”¹ To achieve responsible (good) governance, Council must ensure that the community has suitable opportunities to be involved in making decisions about issues that affect them, and act in a way that considers community needs and opinions. Transparency and accountability are also vital aspects of responsible governance.

5. BENEFITS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Genuine, inclusive and consistent community engagement processes can bring about numerous benefits for Council, individuals, organisations and the local community as a whole. The key benefits of effective community engagement are:

- **A stronger democracy** – Active citizenship can be encouraged through providing adequate opportunities for communities to be heard and to influence relevant decisions.

¹ Victorian Local Governance Association. *Community consultation resource guide*.



- Greater **accountability** and **transparency** – Open engagement with the community and reporting on engagement outcomes can enhance community understanding of how decisions are made and priorities are set.
- A stronger and more **connected community** – Community engagement provides a means for the government, business, non-government and community sectors to work collaboratively, thereby enhancing positive social connections.
- More **inclusive** decisions and services – Effective community engagement seeks to involve the broadest section of the community as possible by removing barriers to involvement and ensuring that the engagement methods used are appropriate to the target group, issue and context. In this way, Council can capture the views of a wider range of people, including those who tend to be excluded in government and community decision making processes (examples of such groups include young people, people with disabilities and non-English speakers).
- Greater community **ownership** – Directly involving the community can increase community support for and ownership of projects/policies. As a comprehensive engagement process usually enables community concerns to be addressed during the development phase of the project, community engagement can prevent potentially costly delays arising from community opposition and facilitate better project outcomes.
- More **effective** and **relevant** solutions and services – Community engagement leads to better quality and more pertinent solutions so that the decisions made are truly reflective of the needs of those who are affected.

These benefits of effective engagement are core components of a sustainable community – a community in which citizens are informed, involved, connected and empowered and in which government is accountable, inclusive and responsive.

The many benefits of community engagement have been regularly demonstrated and the necessity for governments to engage their communities is now generally accepted. Accordingly, recent discourse in the area of community engagement has largely shifted from exploring the need to engage (*why* engage) to a focus on the practice of engagement (*how* to engage).

6. PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Nine principles underpin the Community Engagement Policy and will direct the design, conduct and evaluation of any community engagement activity initiated by Council. These principles are as follows:

- **Inclusiveness:** Council will seek to identify all stakeholders and will design community engagement activities and processes in such ways that minimise barriers and provide all those affected with equal opportunities for involvement. Council will employ methods appropriate to each target group and circumstance and, where possible, will use multiple methods of engagement. Council will strengthen the community's ability to be involved in engagement processes through maximising access for individuals, organisations and groups to engagement opportunities.
- **Capacity Building:** Council will support the capacity, confidence and willingness of the community, Council staff and other stakeholders through creating fulfilling and positive experiences of community engagement and providing necessary training and information.



- **Appropriate Engagement:** Council will apply the engagement goals and engagement methods that are most appropriate to each project and circumstance. This determination may be affected by variables such as the scope for community influence, legislated requirements, available time and resources, and key stakeholder groups.
- **Informed Comment:** Council will provide accessible and relevant information on the issue under consideration and the opportunities for community input to all affected groups, and allow sufficient time to enable the community to gain a full understanding of the issue.
- **Sufficient Time:** Council will ensure that stakeholders have sufficient time to be informed about the issue under consideration, be notified of engagement opportunities and be involved in the engagement process, and for community contributions to appropriately inform decision making.
- **Receptivity:** Council will respect all ideas that arise from the engagement process and will make decisions that are reflective of and responsive to expressed community views.
- **Transparency and Feedback:** To ensure transparency in Council’s decision making processes and in recognition of the contribution of participants, Council will provide feedback, in a timely manner, to participants on the results of the engagement process and on how these results have been taken into consideration in decision making.
- **Privacy:** Council’s community engagement practices will comply with the Maroondah City Council Information Privacy Policy. Specifically, Council will only collect personal information that is necessary for the particular activity and will inform participants about the reasons for information collection and use of the collected information.
- **Evaluation:** Council will gather and analyse appropriate information to evaluate the engagement process. Cumulative evaluation results will inform the review of this Policy and continual improvements to Council’s overall engagement practices and outcomes.

7. CHALLENGES FOR EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Council acknowledges that the local government sector faces several challenges in planning and conducting effective community engagement. These difficulties are largely related to resource issues, governance approaches, barriers, and community and Council attitudes towards roles and relationships.

Table 2 details the main challenges and Council’s commitments to overcome these potential difficulties.



Table 2. Challenges Associated with Community Engagement

Challenges and Examples	Council's Commitment
<p>Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timing constraints • Financial constraints • Staffing constraints • Lack of skills/knowledge among staff. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A Resource Plan is an integral part of any Community Engagement Plan and must identify, at minimum, timelines for the project and engagement process, associated costs and any plans to hire external expertise (eg consultants). 2. Council will develop a Resource Guide to support the implementation of this Policy. The Resource Guide will provide Council staff with relevant information and tools, as well as a consistent approach for planning and evaluating community engagement. 3. Council will ensure that relevant staff receive appropriate training in order to advance their knowledge, skills, confidence and experience. 4. Council will seek to work with stakeholders and share resources where appropriate.
<p>Governance Approaches</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsible and effective governance involves all stakeholders in an open, respectful and reciprocal partnership. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Council recognises that effective engagement is a two-way dialogue and that the community has the right to directly influence decisions that affect them. Council also respects that the local community possesses a wealth of expertise and experience about local issues and that this is an invaluable resource. Council's overall goal is shared decision making between Council and all stakeholders. 6. Council's role is to provide opportunities and mechanisms for the community to express views, concerns and solutions. It is important that Council follows up on the views expressed by the community in a meaningful manner.
<p>Barriers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some methods of engagement tend to favour certain groups and alienate other groups. • Community engagement can be restricted by a number of factors such as lack of time, transport, childcare, interest and adequate information. • Inappropriate venues and limited opportunities can hamper participation in community engagement opportunities. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Council will ensure that the most appropriate approaches are used for the identified target groups, the issue under consideration and the circumstances of the project. 8. Engagement is about being creative with the approaches used and providing multiple, diverse avenues for people to be involved. Where practicable, community engagement activities will include a variety of engagement methods. 9. In planning and conducting community engagement, Council will actively consider the needs of population groups that tend to be absent from such processes and will endeavour to address the needs wherever possible in order to maximise the involvement of these population groups.



Challenges and Examples	Council's Commitment
<p>Community Attitudes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distrust of government and/ or engagement methods and outcomes. • Consultation 'fatigue'/ overload which can occur when engagement occurs too frequently. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Council will seek to cultivate an environment within the community that encourages community engagement and authentic, trusting relationships. This Policy is a step towards this objective and provides a transparent declaration of Council's commitments, principles and goals. 11. Council will implement appropriate systems and processes to record, monitor and report on community engagement activities and outcomes. This will provide for public accountability of this Policy and inform continuous improvements to Council's community engagement practices. 12. Council will implement a system to coordinate, streamline and minimise duplication in community engagement.
<p>Council Attitudes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community engagement can delay the project process if not appropriately planned. • The outcomes of community engagement can be difficult to predict and the process can be difficult to control. • Negative previous experiences conducting community engagement. • Engagement may lead to raised expectations regarding the project decision and outcomes. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 13. Project planning needs to allow sufficient time for community engagement and feedback. Engaging the community prior to making a decision can ensure that issues are identified and resolved prior to the finalisation of plans, thus avoiding costly delays. 14. Council will ensure that there is understanding within Council of the benefits and principles of effective community engagement 15. Through reflecting on and evaluating community engagement processes, Council will continually improve engagement practices. Evaluation is a fundamental component of this continual learning and improvement objective. 16. It is crucial that Council provides accurate and timely information to the community that clearly states the scope and purpose of community engagement , the ways that community input will affect decision making, and identifies any aspects that are not-negotiable (ie areas that are already determined).

8. LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT

The level of community engagement that will be most appropriate in each circumstance will depend on the issue under consideration, the nature of the information sought, the scope for community influence in decision making, timelines and the objectives of the particular community engagement process.

Table 3 identifies the levels of community engagement that Council can undertake for specific Council activities. The Community Engagement Resource Guide (to be developed) provides details on some engagement methods appropriate to each level of engagement.



Table 3. Levels of Community Engagement for Specific Council Activities

COUNCIL ACTIVITY TYPE AND EXAMPLES	LEVELS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT					
	None/ Limited	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Internal Council Operations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Human resources</i> • <i>General asset maintenance</i> • <i>Operational/Financial management</i> 						
Statutory Processes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Statutory Planning</i> • <i>Re-zoning/Land sales</i> • <i>Best Value</i> • <i>Council Plan & Annual Budget</i> • <i>Annual Report</i> 						
Policy & Strategy Development - Review of existing policy with no substantial changes						
Projects, Programs & Activities (substantial community impacts) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Substantial changes to services</i> • <i>Significant facilities/infrastructure issues</i> • <i>Other key Council projects and activities</i> 						
Policy & Strategy Development - New policy or review of existing policy with substantial changes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Disability Policy</i> • <i>Open Space Strategy</i> • <i>Town Structure Plans</i> • <i>Sustainability Strategy</i> 						
Key Strategic Plans <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Maroondah Vision</i> • <i>Municipal Strategic Statement</i> • <i>Municipal Public Health Plan</i> 						

9. POLICY REVIEW

This policy will be reviewed every four years, or earlier as required.

Policy Endorsed	20 October 2008
Policy to be Reviewed	20 October 2012
Policy Reviewed	

