

Community Engagement Methodology and Results

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Community Engagement Methodology and Results

Overview

From the outset of the development of a new Communications and Community Engagement Strategy, our approach was to seek a wide range of feedback and input on engagement and communications experiences and preferences.

Our engagement plan consisted of two phases, outlined below.

Phase 1: March – April 2022

Council sought input on engagement and communications preferences from residents, ratepayers, businesses and stakeholders.

Community and stakeholder input from phase one was used to develop a draft strategy document.

During phase one, we received input from: 349 participants in a phone survey focusing on communications preferences, 138 online surveys about engagement experiences, along with 17 general feedback submissions.

Phase 2: July/August 2022

Council endorsed the draft Strategy document for public exhibition, seeking feedback via a submissions process.

51 submissions were received during a 4 week exhibition period.

In addition to the feedback received specifically for this project, we also referred to the broad input, feedback and suggestions received from across the municipality in the recent People Place Future project.

Feedback summary and insights

A diverse range of views came through the two phases of engagement, in relation to both communications and engagement.

The number of people accessing news and updates via Council's website and people preferring electronic information has risen significantly compared to surveys undertaken in 2015 and 2018. We are, however, also seeing a significant number of respondents indicating their ongoing interest in 'hard copy' options of news and updates.

Similarly when it comes to engagement, while the majority of respondents throughout the survey mentioned their preference for online options, it is worth noting that hard copy and phone surveys, as well as in person sessions also rate highly as preferred future methods of engagement.

Respondents showed an interest in attending Council meetings, with support for both in person and online options, and there is also interest in being involved in a future community panel or reference group.

This indicates that in both disciplines - communications and engagement - there is a need to provide a variety of options, to promote access and participation.

We will update our final strategy to include an updated 'what we heard' section, which will highlight our response to community feedback.

Our response will include updates or clarifications on the following topics, based on feedback received:

- The focus on First Nations reconciliation has been established by the Council Plan and related community input
- Seeking out minority groups is primarily about removing barriers and giving fair access to all. It will not give more weight to the views of any particular cohorts within our communities.
- We will update wording to ensure our intention and offer at each engagement level is genuine and clear. We commit to being transparent about the defined scope of an engagement process in advance.
- It is noted that 'innovation' was not seen as a high priority to respondents. We will keep that in mind as we develop our action plan
- Some revision to the principles/commitments will be made to ensure they align with the principles listed in our Engagement Policy (as required by the Local Government Act). These revisions also align with community feedback received during phase two relating to suggested principles

Methodology - Phase One

Seeking broad input on engagement and communications preferences

March – April 2022

The following activities comprised Phase One:

- **Communications survey**

This was an independent phone survey, conducted by consultant Metropolis Research, using a random sample from Council's rates database as well as a renter's database. This method was selected to avoid the bias of using existing communications methods to seek community preferences and feedback.

- **Community Engagement Survey**

This online survey was targeted specifically to people who had participated in some form of community engagement over the past two years, though was also open to anyone who wanted to provide feedback. An email was circulated inviting participation, and social media and local newspapers were also used for promotion. The survey was online, with an option to contact Council for a hard copy survey.

- **Open feedback form**

An opportunity for anyone wanting to contribute ideas, suggestions or feedback on communications or community engagement. Provided online, with an option to contact Council for a hard copy form.

- **Targeted stakeholder discussions**

In order to seek specific input, a number of groups and representatives were contacted directly:

- Wadawurrung Traditional Owners
- Eastern Maar Traditional Owners
- Positive Ageing Committee
- All Abilities Advisory Committee
- Young people
- People Place Future Community Panel

Results - Phase One

Communications Survey Overview

Council employed consultants Metropolis Research to conduct a communications phone survey. The methodology followed that of surveys undertaken in 2015 and 2018 to enable comparison of results over time. In the 2022 survey, a total of 349 telephone interviews, of approximately eight minutes duration, were undertaken with residents and non-resident ratepayers.

- Torquay (159 surveys)
- Jan Juc / Bellbrae (72 surveys)
- Rural districts including Deans Marsh & district, Winchelsea, Moriac & district (69 surveys),
- Other coastal including Aireys Inlet, Fairhaven & district, Anglesea, and Lorne (50 surveys).

The sample was drawn from a list of ratepayers, as well as a random sample of residential telephone numbers (both mobile and landlines) from across the municipality, to ensure that non-ratepaying residents (i.e., residents renting their homes) were included in the sample. The sample reflected all townships and localities that comprise the Surf Coast Shire.

The consultants received a response rate of those invited to participate of 34.1%, which according to Metropolis Research is a strong response rate for telephone surveys of this type, suggesting a reasonable degree of engagement by the residents and ratepayers in the activities of the Surf Coast Shire Council.

Communications Survey Key Findings

Current methods of receiving information from Council

Compared to previous surveys there was an increased preference for respondents to receive information through electronic media. This can be partly explained by there being a higher representation of younger people in the 2022 survey compared to previous editions. It may reflect changes in the community more broadly.

The pandemic may have influenced preferences as well. At times official coronavirus information changed more quickly than could be accommodated through the weekly print cycle of local news media, leading to digital media, especially official social media channels, being the source of most up to date information

Method	2022	2018	2015
News pages in Surf Coast Times	52.1%	71.8%	66.1%
Council's Facebook pages	36.7%	8.5%	2.3%
Newsletters delivered to home	35.5%	69.4%	45.8%
Council's website	31.2%	15.6%	24.3%
Surf Coast Corner page in Surf Coast Times	25.5%	47.9%	33.9%
Geelong Advertiser	14.9%	28.2%	31.1%

Participation in selected consultation methods

There was a noticeable increase in use of Council's website as a medium to engage with the Council. Likewise there was a significant increase in lodgement of CRMs both of which align with Council's policy position on managing customer requests.

An increase in use of email is in keeping with results recorded by the consultants elsewhere in Victoria and Tasmania and is understood by Metropolis Research to be a consequence of the pandemic, which restricted movement and led to closures of face to face customer engagement opportunities.

Engagement levels generally are high, with, for example, one in five respondents (20.3%) having made a written submission to Council and 18.3% having participated in a consultation process. This latter result is slightly down on previous years' surveys likely as a result of the pandemic, which limited engagement opportunities all together but effectively prevented in-person engagement for extended periods.

Method	2022	2018	2015
Visited Council's website	62.2%	41.8%	32.8%
Contacted Customer service line	57%	52.1%	29.9%
Emailed Council about an issue	42.7%	28.5%	23.7%
Contacted a Councillor regarding an issue	36.7%	49.1%	31.1%
Lodged a customer request	23.2%	8.2%	0.6%
Wrote a submission to Council	20.3%	21.2%	19.2%
Participated in a consultation process	18.3%	19.7%	20.9%

Preferred technology channels

Response	19 to 39	40 to 59	60 plus
Website accessed via phone/tablet	70.9%	63.6%	46.8%
Website accessed via a computer	71.8%	67.4%	58.6%
Dedicated Council App	25.2%	22.7%	11.7%
Access via social media	48.5%	25%	17.1%

A question new to the 2022 survey sought to gauge respondents' preferences for technological channels, in the light of a planned exploration of a Council App.

Interest in an App was strongest amongst the youngest age group at 25.2%. This same demographic group scored other media higher however, including social media at 48.5% and web accessed via phone (70.9%) and web accessed via a computer (71.8%). It is noted that generally respondents tend to rate options they are familiar higher than options not currently available to them. This needs to be taken into account when determining the future for a dedicated Council app. Additional research is recommended.

Involvement in Surf Coast Shire issues

Respondents were again in 2022, asked to rate their agreement with four statements about engagement with Council and their interest in Council-related issues.

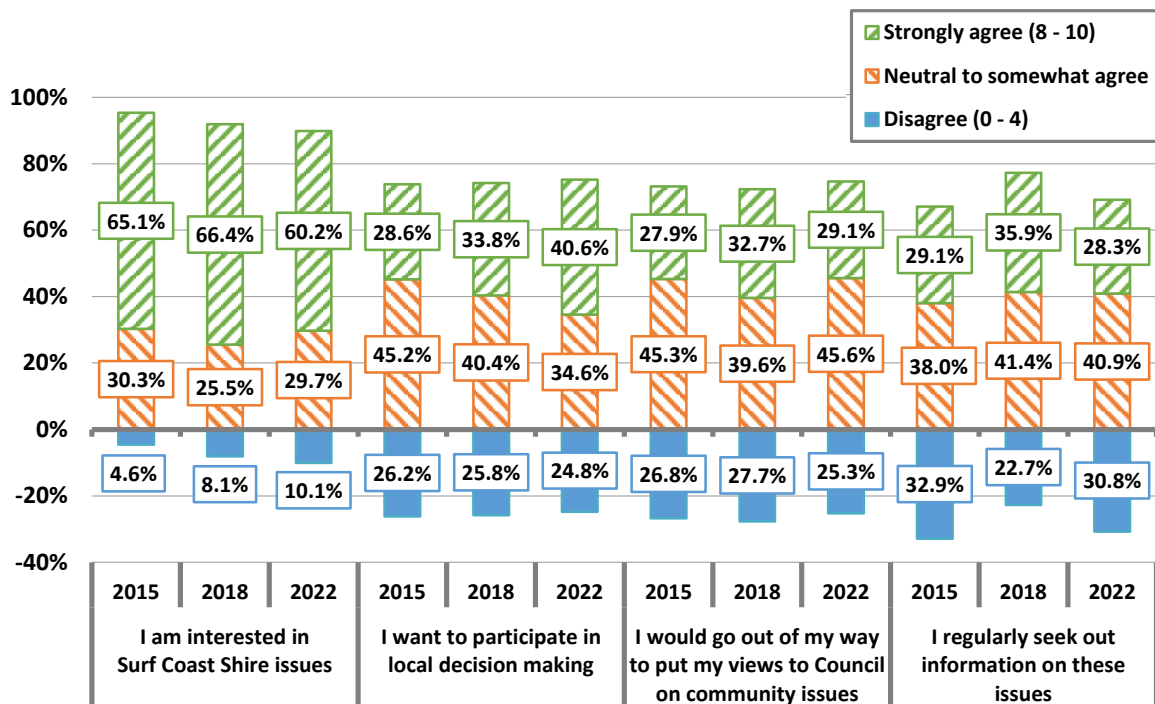
The average agreement, on a scale from zero (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree) is outlined in the following graph.

Metropolis Research noted the results show there is strong interest in Surf Coast issues amongst respondents. The interest in participation in local decision making is moderate and declines further when respondents were asked if they would go out of their way to put their views to Council.

Older residents were more inclined to be interested in Surf Coast issues than younger age groups but there was no measurable difference in level of interest between permanent and non-permanent residents.

The below graph shows the change over time in response to four key questions relating to interest and participation with Surf Coast issues.

Responses to statements about interest and participation in local issues



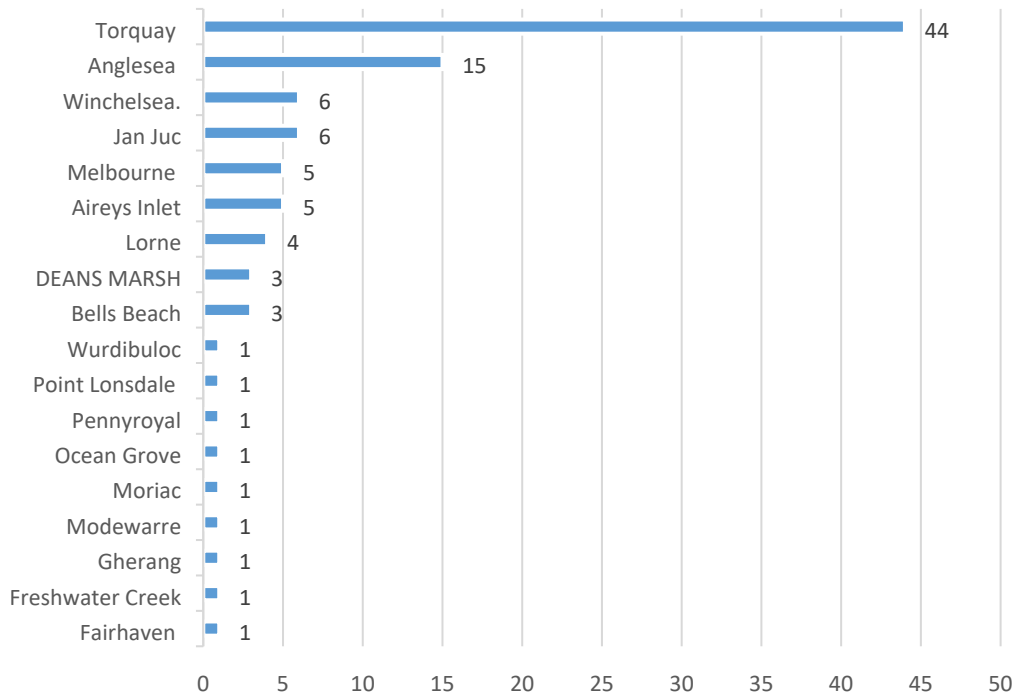
Age, gender and resident status all impacted response rates, with older respondents (aged 60 years and over), female respondents and permanent residents more likely to regularly seek out information on these issues.

Community Engagement Survey Overview

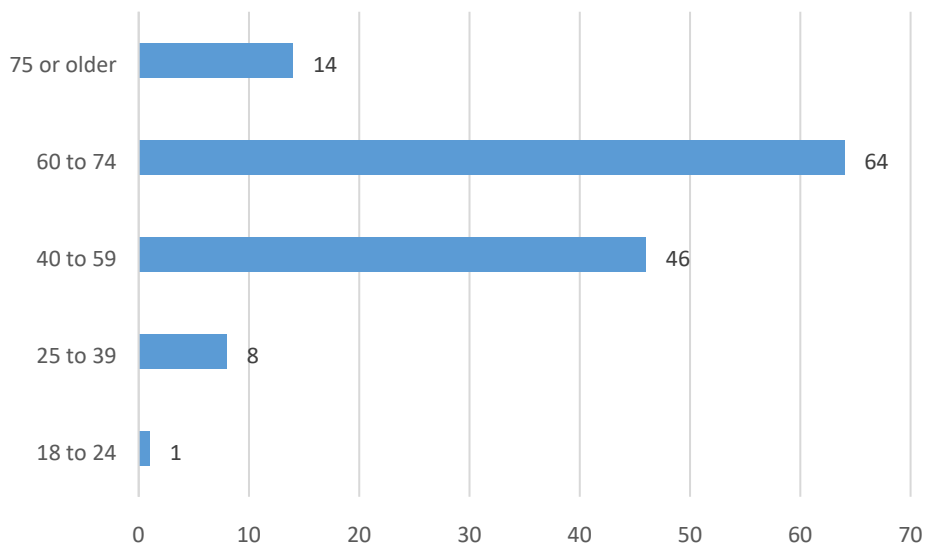
This online survey was targeted specifically to people who had participated in some form of community engagement with Council over the past 2 years. Questions focused on people's experience of prior engagement, and their preferences for future engagement opportunities.

137 surveys were completed during the 4 week period in March/April 2022.

Responses by Location



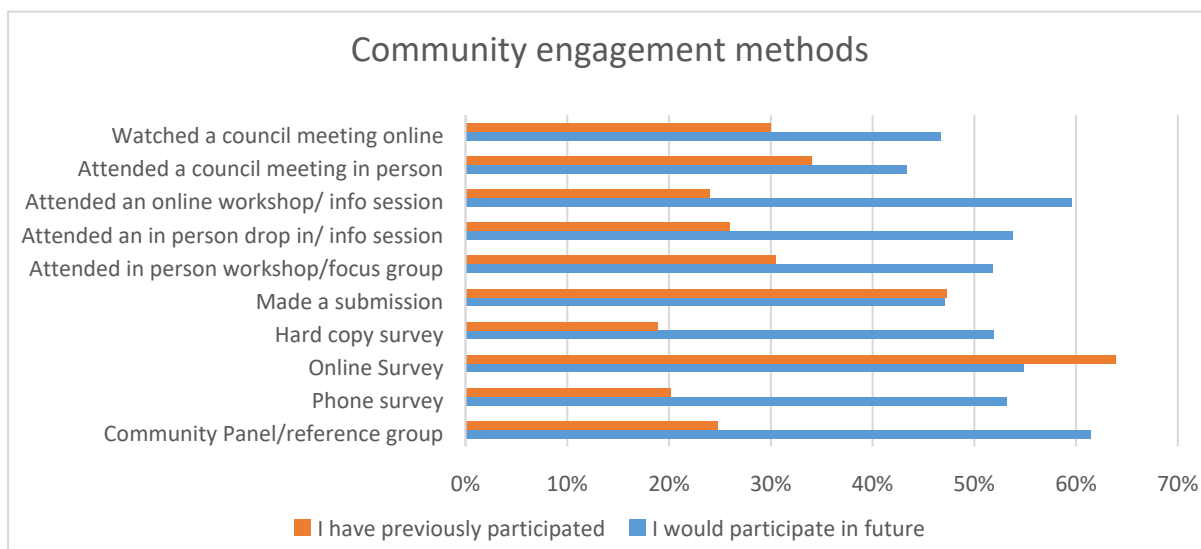
Responses by age



Community Engagement Survey Findings

Preferred engagement methods

The below graph outlines previous and future preferences for participating in engagement.

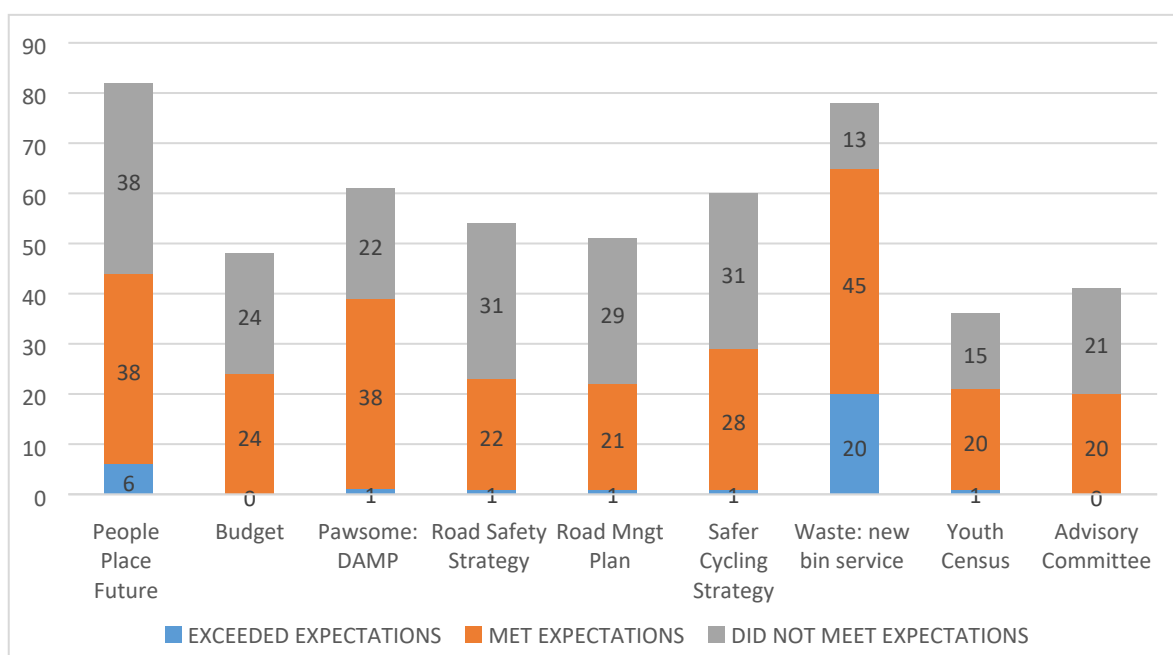


Given this survey was targeted to people who have recently been involved in some form of community engagement, the relatively high levels of participation across a range of engagement methods is to be expected.

Interest in council meetings – either attending in person or online – is high among respondents, as is an interest in being involved in a future Community Panel or reference group. While many respondents throughout the survey mentioned their preference for online options, it is worth noting that hard copy and phone surveys, as well as in person sessions also rate highly as preferred future methods of engagement.

How would you rate your experience of the following engagement processes?

Participants were asked to rate their experience of the engagement process for a number of recent major projects.



The Waste/New Bin Service project, People Place Future project, and the Pawesome; Domestic Animal Management Plan performed best in terms of meeting or exceeding participant expectations. These projects had dedicated communications and engagement resources, and relatively high levels of influence from community input.

The Road Safety, Road Management and Safer Cycling projects all scored over 50% in 'did not meet expectations'. There was a high level of diversity among community views in these projects. In some instances where there were high ratings of 'did not meet expectations', participant comments indicated dissatisfaction with the project outcome, or a sense that engagement input was not used to inform the final decision.

Reasons for participating in engagement activities

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
It related to my local area	73.53%
It was a topic of interest	62.50%
It affects me/my family	57.35%
I was asked to contribute	23.53%
Other (please specify)	12.50%
Total Respondents: 136	

Some of the key topics listed in the 'other' reasons included:

- wanting to hold Council/ to account and/or build closer shire/community relationship
- wanting to contribute in community
- hoping to create change
- to be a voice for the environment

Potential barriers to participation in engagement activities

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Feeling out of the loop with local issues	22.48%
Sessions not run at times that suit me	39.53%
Not being clear on how my input would influence decisions	48.84%
Difficulty fitting it in with work and family commitments	26.36%
Other (please specify)	27.13%
Total Respondents: 129	

Some of the key topics listed in the 'other' reasons included:

- only being able to attend if online
- wanting to avoid potential confrontation with people who have different views
- not believing my views will influence outcomes
- unaware of engagement opportunities.

Open feedback summary

In addition to the communications survey and community engagement survey, a form was available for community members and stakeholders to provide general input or feedback in the strategy development.

A total of 17 individual submissions were received during April 2022; received from Lorne (4), Torquay (3), Anglesea/Aireys (5), and 5 from other areas.

Communications

Feedback on communications noted that email and local papers worked well for updates and information about Council related issues, however, more frequent contact with ratepayers directly is preferred overall. Three comments were received about a lack of follow up responses following a community enquiry.

Community Engagement

Feedback on community engagement was mixed, with some people appreciating the opportunity to participate and others feeling that consultation was not authentic and transparent.

People want engagement processes that seek out wide community input, rather than targeting the same people every time. Outcomes should be shared so participants can understand how their input affects decisions.

Face to face workshops are valued, and there was a request for locations other than Torquay to be included.

A request for a new Surf Coast Shire app was noted, along with a suggestions for a 'what's on' listing of engagement opportunities.

➤ **Wadawurrung Tradition Owners**

Input from Wadawurrung Traditional Owners came via direct discussions with Corrina Eccles, Wadawurrung Traditional Owner and Registered Aboriginal Party representative.

Key points raised during discussions included:

- Place naming to start with Traditional Owner consultation, look at joint names for townships, and seek opportunities to return to traditional names and stories.
- Ensure visible and coordinated signage to recognise areas of significance, and to promote traditional language.
- Take a collaborative and partnership approach to development of new policies and strategies – consider how Traditional Owners perspective can underpin key principles and be represented.
- Acknowledge days of significance in collaboration with Traditional Owners.
- Seek Traditional Owner perspectives to include in communications and media about local projects or issues.
- Provide guidance to Councillors and Officers with best practice in Acknowledgements of Country

For both Wadawurrung and Eastern Maar Traditional owners additional input will be incorporated into the strategy based on their respective Country Plans:

Koling wada-ngal Paleert Tjaara Dja – Let's Make Country Good Together Wadawurrung Healthy Country Plan 2020-2030

Eastern Maar Country Plan: ***Meerreengeeye ngakepoorryeeyt.***

➤ **Positive Ageing Advisory Committee**

Discussion was held with the Positive Ageing Committee members at their meeting in April 2022. Members asked Council to consider more localised, in-community options for information distribution. Noticeboards, local newsletters and distribution via local community groups and networks is an effective way to share important communications. Online options are not always suitable for everyone in this age bracket, so a diverse range of communication options are needed. Ensure feedback loop is closed so people are aware of outcomes.

Telephone, face to face, hard copy mail are necessary options for people who do not use online options. It was also suggested to work with the Positive Ageing team to communicate key opportunities in their regular discussions with clients.

➤ **All Abilities Advisory Committee**

The survey was circulated to the All Abilities Advisory Committee to seek committee members views. The draft survey was also sent to the Committee during Phase 2.

➤ **Young People**

On the advice of Council's Youth Coordinator, Council Officers attended drop in sessions at Council's Youth Lounge at the conclusion of the school holidays to conduct informal engagement conversations.

Additional input will be incorporated via the recently completed Surf Coast Youth Census, which was conducted in partnership with Surf Coast Youth, Youth Gurus and the Surf Coast Shire Council in 2021. In total 1,084 young people aged between 10 and 25 years of age completed the online survey.

72% of young people said they have a strong connection to their community, and 52.5% of young people were unsure if they would be living, working or studying on or near the Surf Coast in ten years' time.

What would make surf coast better for young people?

Improved recreational opportunities was the number one way young people think we can make the Surf Coast Shire better for young people. This was raised by 738 respondents, which is more responses than received on the next five topics combined. The desire to have increased mountain bike facilities was the standout suggestion with young people throughout the shire consistently speaking about the need for more jumps and tracks with great passion and excitement. Parks, playgrounds, skate/scooter parks, pools and splash parks as well as organised sports and music/arts/culture events were all identified as priorities for young people in their local community.

What is the biggest issue for young people in the community?

Young people in the Surf Coast Shire have told us they are upset by amount of rubbish left on our beaches, foreshores, parks and playgrounds. They are extremely passionate about protecting our natural environment and want to be better resourced to take climate action on both a local and global scale. Young people reported they struggled with safety because of discrimination, cyber-bullying or the threat of violence / sexual assault on our streets from eshays and 'creepy' or 'drug affected' men. Drug and alcohol use was identified as a big issue in the community, especially the youth vape culture, with higher rates of drug use reported by the older youth cohort. Young people are also concerned about the rate of urban growth and its impacts on the natural environment and our community and a lack of affordable housing, which forces young people to leave the shire before they are ready to leave.

➤ People Place Future Community Panel

Input from the People Place Future Community Panel was received via the panel's Recommendations Report 2021 and from a Panel Recall discussion on 7 April 2022.

Community Panel Recommendations Report

Communication and engagement was mentioned numerous times in the report prepared by the People Place Future Community Panel. It featured specifically in Principle 7 and the panel identified a number of actions relating to communications and engagement, including the introduction of a dedicated Council app and an annual survey to 'take the pulse' of communities in the hinterland, in coastal townships and in the Torquay Jan Juc urban area.

Principles 7: Accountability through timely, consultative and transparent communication about proposed council decisions.

It is very important to be informed and engaged in advance (through accessible open communication) about upcoming decisions (particularly fiscal).

As a diverse community, we want continued and improved opportunities to participate in the decision making process.

Follow up People Place Future panel discussion

Council officers invited all Community Panel members to a follow up engagement session to discuss priorities for Council's Communications and Community Engagement Strategy. The session was held as an on-line evening workshop on 7 April 2022.

Summary of ideas/comments from session:

- Authentic and deliberative options for engagement.
- Provide a summary version of upcoming council items (eg. agenda) so community can follow topics of interest
- Work with local community networks to connect with grassroots action/ communication/engagement opportunities.
- Ratepayers and community email address database to allow for direct communications
- Increased opportunity for partnership approach and collaboration with community. Inviting innovative community ideas in projects and decision making

Methodology - Phase Two

Seeking submissions on a draft Strategy document

July/August 2022

The following activities comprised Phase Two:

Promotion of draft Strategy and submission process

This included the following activities:

- Email to database of interested community members.

An email was sent to 3839 recipients, made up of community members and stakeholders who had previously indicated an interest, or participated in Phase One. Of these, 2,388 (63%) opened the email, and 452 clicked through to the draft strategy and submission form links.

- Promotion via local media including Surf Coast Times, Winchelsea Star, Lorne community newsletter and via local networks.

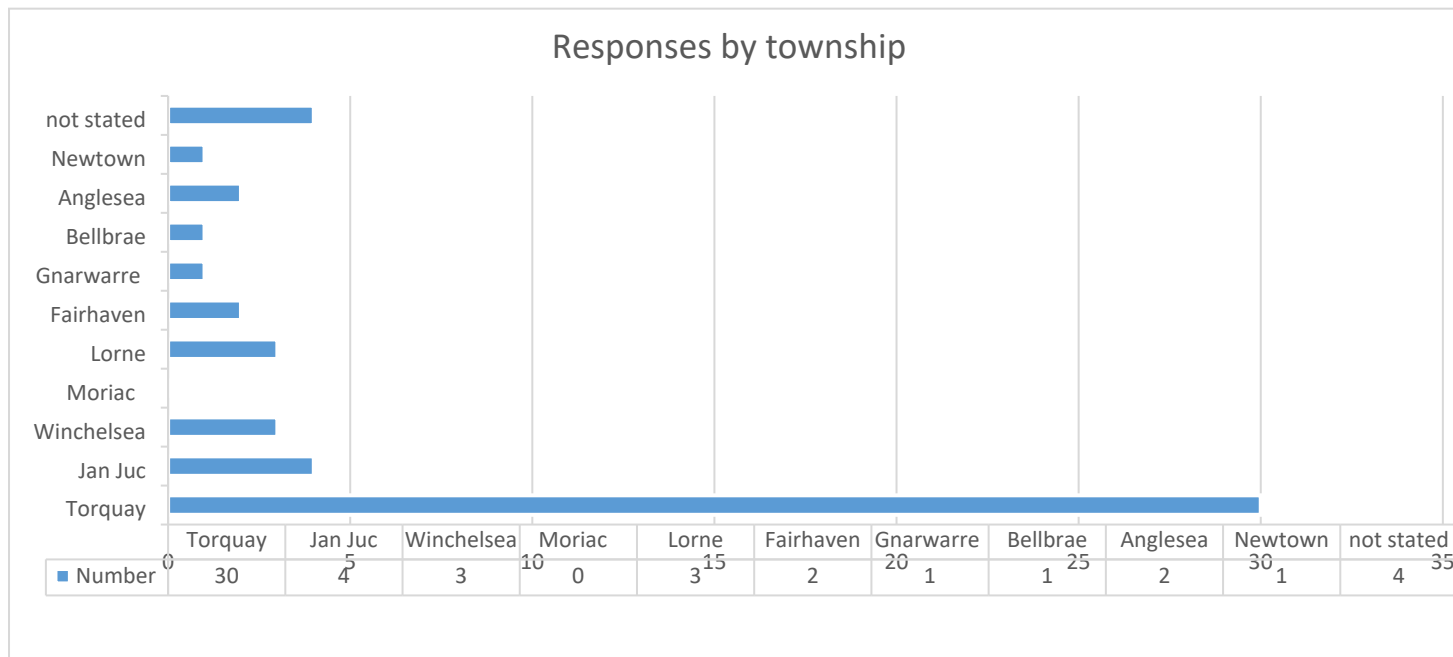
Submission process

- Online submission form
- Option to upload separate submissions
- Option to contact council for hard copy form

Results - Phase Two

Community submissions

Over a four-week period in July and August, 51 community submissions were received. A submission form sought feedback on the proposed principles, commitments and strategic directions, and any open comments/suggestions. In addition, three submissions were uploaded.



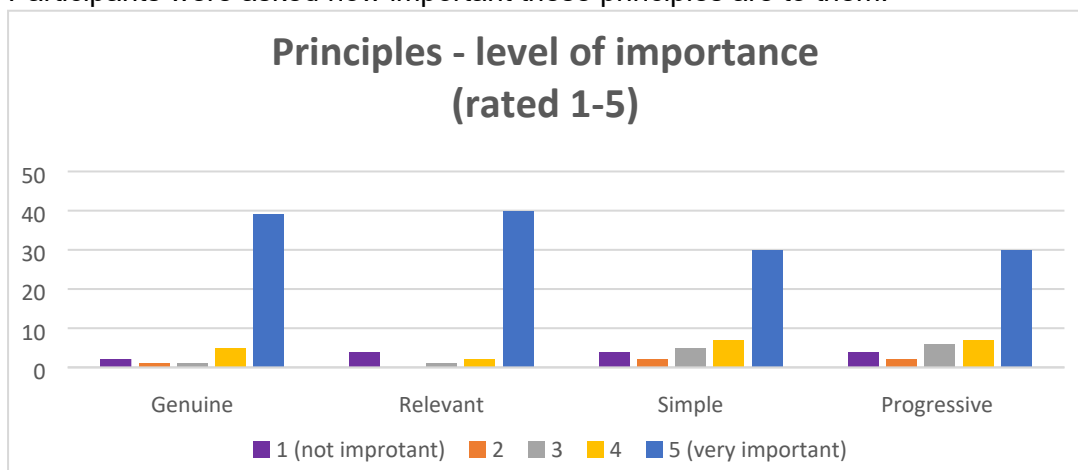
Principles

The draft strategy contained four principles to govern our communication and engagement work. These were:

- **Genuine:** We believe citizens have a right to know about and contribute to decisions that affect them.
- **Relevant:** We will communicate to you promptly about issues of importance, and when we seek your feedback, we will ensure it is in time to inform our decision making.
- **Simple:** We will use plain language when we communicate with you.
- **Progressive:** We will be innovative where doing so can improve understanding, encourage deliberation and allow for shared responsibility for decision making.

Feedback on the Principles

Participants were asked how important these principles are to them.



The following comments and suggestions were received in relation to the principles:

- There was support for action/implementation of these principles
- Some respondents suggested additional principles, including:
 - Open
 - Transparent
 - Ethical
 - Influential
 - Integrity
- Requests for early and influential engagement
- Respondents want to see Council acting on community feedback/input, and providing updates on this
- Respondents want to understand who decides what is 'relevant' or important, and who sets the agenda, especially on values-based causes or topics that might not be specifically within the role of local government
- Respondents want to understand how much weight/influence is given to community views in decision making, and who decides this
- Council should only focus on 'progressive' if core business is of high standard

Commitments

A series of five commitments were outlined in the draft strategy:

- We commit to communications and community engagement practices that are transparent and fair.
 - We will engage early, and with a genuine commitment to listen to and use community and stakeholder input.
 - We will seek out views from minority groups within the community to ensure everyone has an opportunity to have a voice and make a contribution.
 - We will use simple and inclusive language, and reduce barriers to participation in our processes.
 - As an organisation we commit to ongoing learning and continuous improvement in our communications and engagement approach.
-

Feedback on the Commitments

The following comments and suggestions were received in relation to the Commitments:

- Some requests for themes listed in commitments to be moved into principles
- Multiple requests to not over-emphasize the minority viewpoints
- Interest in what type of processes would be used to seek out minority views
- Request for an external audit process to monitor these commitments and ensure accountability
- Ensure a feedback loop regarding how input has influenced decisions

Strategic Directions

The strategy includes 6 strategic directions. These are:

Strategic Direction 1: Working with First Nations People

Strategic Direction 2: Accessibility and representation

Strategic Direction 3: Building relationships and trust

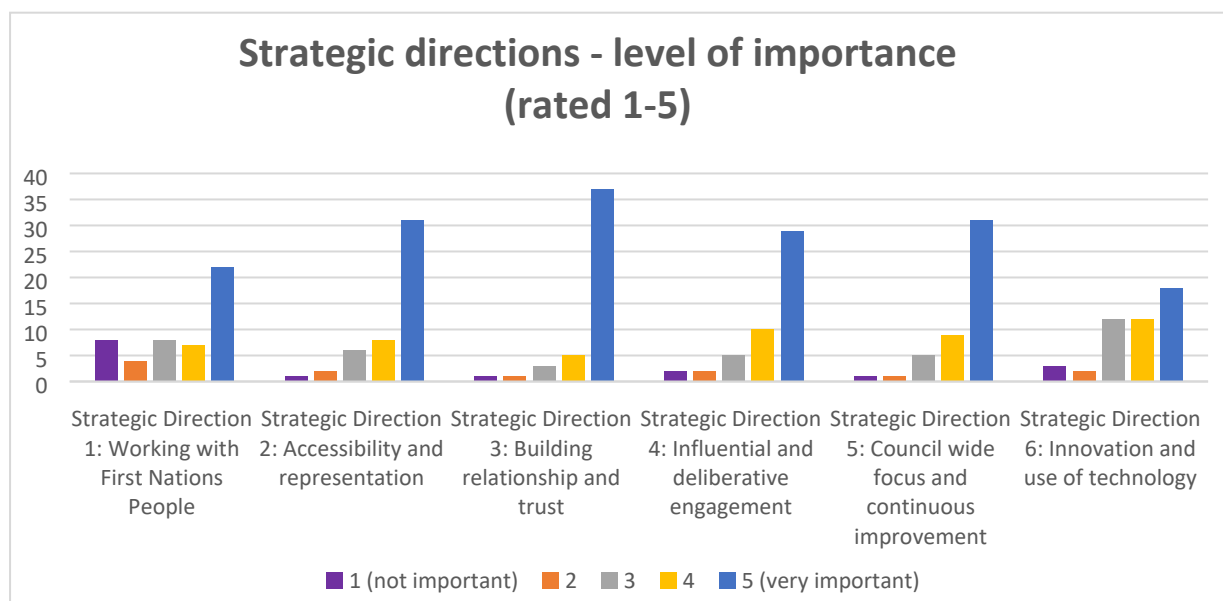
Strategic Direction 4: Influential and deliberative engagement

Strategic Direction 5: Council wide focus and continuous improvement

Strategic Direction 6: Innovation and use of technology

Feedback on the Strategic Directions

Participants were asked how important these strategic directions are to them



Across all six areas, results indicate that the majority of respondents considered the strategic directions to be of high importance.

Strategic Direction Three (Building relationships and trust) was deemed most important, followed by Strategic Direction Two (Accessibility and representation) and Five (Council wide focus and continuous improvement). Strategic Directions One (Working with First Nations People) and Six (Innovation and use of technology) were lowest overall.

Much of the commentary from the submissions highlighted a need for:

- genuine communications and engagement that people could trust
- confidence that input would influence outcomes and decisions
- striking the balance between seeking minority views whilst also listening to majority views

Additional submissions

Three additional submissions were received, uploaded via the online form.

Key themes included:

- Support for inclusion of minority views
- Lack of representation or mention of culturally and linguistically diverse communities
- Importance of access in its various forms
- Ensuring input can impact a decision or outcome – specific focus on the use of ‘pre-determined outcome’ within a level of engagement. (Note: this is discussed further below – the intention was to indicate that a project has a defined scope, within which community and stakeholders would have influence. Strategy will be updated to more accurately reflect the intention)

Feedback was also received from the All Abilities Advisory Committee suggesting some refinements to the accessibility requirements.

General feedback and issues to consider

Direction setting

The Council Plan and Health and Wellbeing Plan outline key focus areas for the coming four years. This plan was developed by Council with a high level of community input and will be the guiding document when it comes to determine what priorities, values and actions are supported during this Council term.

Level of influence

Some feedback was received that questioned the level of influence available for any given project/issue.

Scope and outcomes

The draft strategy used the phrase 'pre-determined outcome' in relation to the INVOLVE engagement level. The intention was to indicate that the existence of a project may be pre-determined (eg. Council is building a new playground), but that the engagement process would seek community input into decisions relating to the project (eg. playground design, access and age requirements, theme and colour scheme etc)

Council's community development work supports community initiated, community led projects. By comparison, community engagement processes are most often designed to seek feedback, input, influence, and/or decision making about a proposed project or topic.

Diversity and access

Following the work of the People Place Future Panel, and the survey undertaken during Phase One, there was strong support for engagement processes that seek out diverse views.

The intention in including a focus on minority viewpoints is to ensure that all individuals and groups within the community have an opportunity to contribute their views, and that being a part of a minority within our communities should not be a barrier to participation.

Proposed changes to strategy:

Our response will include updates or clarifications on the following suggested changes:

- The focus on First Nations reconciliation has been established by the Council Plan and related community input
- Seeking out minority groups is primarily about removing barriers and giving fair access to all. It will not give more weight to the views of any particular cohorts within our communities.
- We will update wording to ensure our intention and offer at each engagement level is genuine and clear. We commit to being transparent about the defined scope of an engagement process in advance.
- It is noted that 'innovation' was not seen as a high priority to respondents. We will keep that in mind as we develop our action plan
- Some revision to the principles/commitments will be made to ensure they align with the principles listed in our Engagement Policy (as required by the Local Government Act). These revisions also align with community feedback received during Phase Two relating to suggested principles
- Other minor edits for clarity or correction.