COMMUNICATIONS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY 2022 - 2025 DRAFT

Bushfire Plan?

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Surf COAST SHIRE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Surf Coast Shire spans the traditional lands of the Wadawurrung Peoples, and the Gulidjan and Gadubanud Peoples of the Maar nation. We Acknowledge their Ancestors who cared for the land, rivers and sea - and all of its creatures - for thousands of generations. We pay our Respects to Elders past, present and future who continue on this path.

Australian Aboriginal culture is the oldest living culture in the world. Reconciliation with First Nations people is a fundamental and pressing need if we are to advance toward a fairer, more inclusive, society.

Surf Coast Shire Council is seeking to build strong relationships with our Traditional Owners and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in our community. Council is working towards ongoing partnerships with Traditional Owners, that are respectful of their culture and traditions and supports their respective strategic goals. Our Communications and Community Engagement Strategy will further support our ongoing commitment to reconciliation and relationship building.

Throughout this document we refer to:

- **Traditional Owners**, a term which refers to the two Registered Aboriginal Parties in our region. These are the Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation, and Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation, and

- **First Nations People** - refers to all Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander people in our communities.

ABOUT THIS STRATEGY

We are committed to effective communications and meaningful community engagement at Surf Coast Shire Council. We value the contribution that your voice brings to local decision making, we aim to provide easy access to information, to explain our actions with clarity and to make decisions that are informed by an understanding of the needs of our local communities.

This strategy seeks to be inclusive of all people within Surf Coast Shire. We aim for communications and engagement that is welcoming, safe and inclusive for all segments of our communities, including First Nations People, members of the LGBTQI+ community, and for people of all ages and abilities.

This strategy has been guided by community and stakeholder input and has been developed to provide overall direction for our communications and engagement over the next three years.

This strategy is not intended to list all communications and engagement activities undertaken by Council, but to draw attention to our key focus areas for the coming three years.

ABOUT COMMUNICATIONS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Communications and community engagement are Council-wide activities and can include information sharing; one-off or regular interactions with individuals or groups; and large-scale decision making processes.

Council communicates in a variety of ways. Our first step when we communicate is to seek to understand our audience. Communication can be through direct mail and email, on our website and social media accounts, via local newspapers and other media outlets and through signage, and printed material.

Engagement processes provide opportunities for community and stakeholders to participate in local decision making.

These can be formal processes that are required by law, or informal processes that are designed to best meet the needs of the relevant community community, project or issue.

Engagement can have a broad definition. For this document we are referring to a process that is designed to understand community sentiment and capture community views to shape a council decision or activity.

The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) – the community engagement peak body - describes engagement like this:

Community engagement refers to a planned process with the specific purpose of working across organisations, stakeholders and communities to shape the decisions or actions of the members of the community, stakeholders or organisation in relation to a problem, opportunity or outcome (IAP2).

POLICY CONTEXT

Council's approach to community engagement and communications is guided by the work of the **IAP2**, and our **Community Engagement Policy**. These underpin our day to day work as we plan and implement our engagement activities.

The Local Government Act 2020 includes specific requirements for engagement, and establishes community engagement principles applicable to Council. These principles introduce requirements for deliberative and representative engagement, as well as providing guidance on the provision of timely information, reducing barriers to engagement, and ensuring participants have access to information about their role in decision making processes.

IAP2 SPECTRUM OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

This industry standard spectrum helps to shape our engagement planning and delivery.

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
Description	Provide news and information to the community to help them understand issues	Ask for feedback on a matter	Invite participation toward an outcome pre-determined by Council.	Work together with the community toward a jointly agreed outcome.	Place final decision making in the hands of the public and build their capacity to deliver change
Promise to community	Council will keep you informed.	Council will listen to and acknowledge your contribution.	Council will work with you to ensure your concerns and aspirations are considered in the decision making.	Council will look to the community for advice and innovation, incorporating into decisions where possible.	Council will help you implement our mutual goals.

Adapted from IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

COMMUNITY VISION

The Community Vision, as developed by the People Place Future Community Panel in 2021, and adopted by Surf Coast Shire Council is:

"From the hinterland to the coast, from the first peoples to the children of the future, we are an active, diverse community that lives creatively to value, protect and enhance the natural environment and our unique neighbourhoods. We will leave the Surf Coast better than we found it."

SUPPORTING THE COUNCIL PLAN

Council's work is underpinned by the Surf Coast Shire Council Plan 2021-2025. This Communication and Engagement Strategy aligns with the Council Plan, as well as the work of the People Place Future Community Panel in, which was convened to advise Councilon community needs and aspirations.

This is a strategy that applies to the whole of Council. It guides and supports all Councils departments as they work to achieve their aims. Equally, this strategy will have a direct influence on the seven themes and 19 strategies contained in the Council Plan.

COUNCIL PLAN THEMES

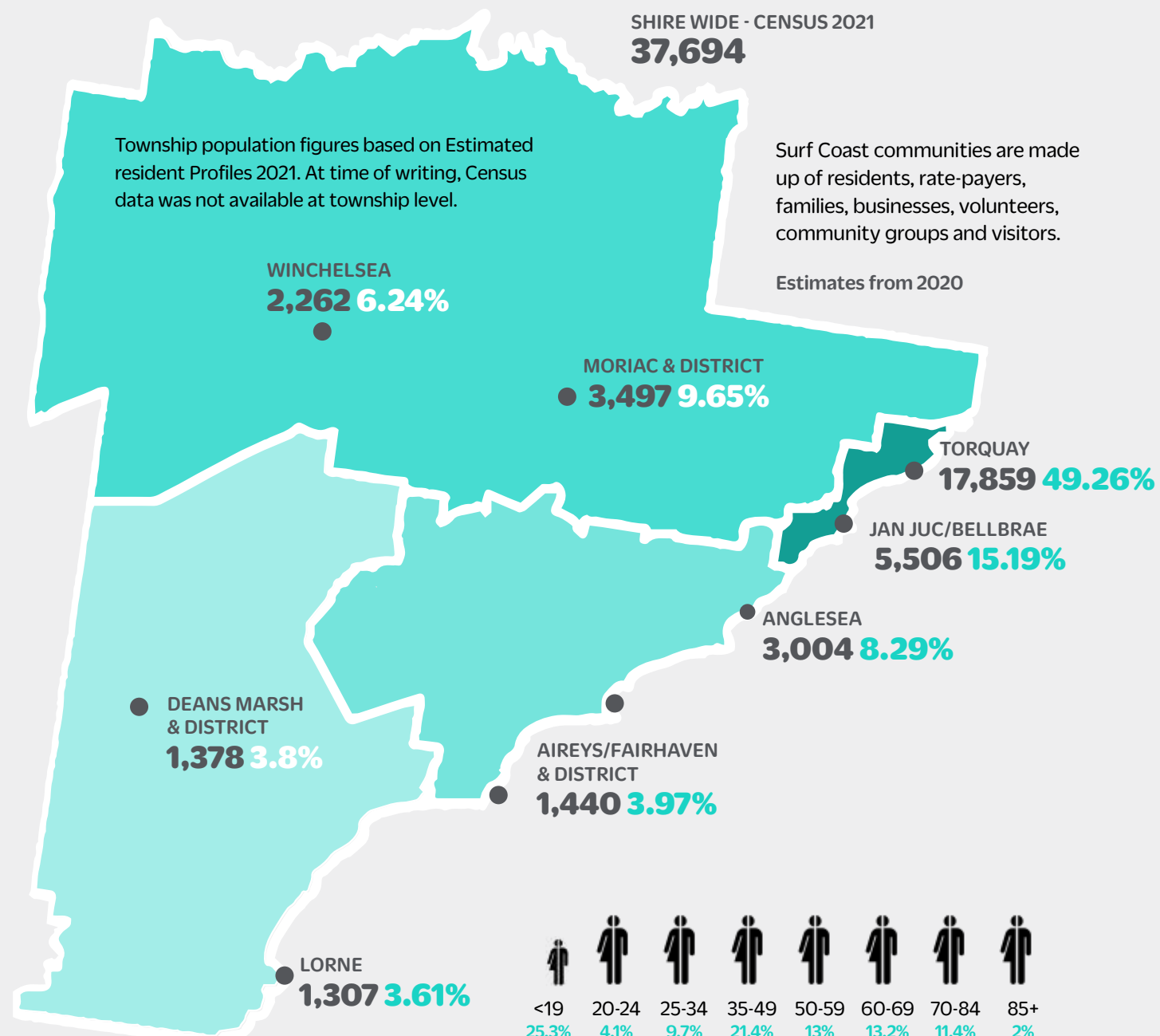|	
Theme One:	First Nations Reconciliation
Theme Two:	Healthy Connected Community
Theme Three:	Environmental Leadership
Theme Four:	Sustainable Growth
Theme Five:	A Robust and Diverse Economy
Theme Six:	Arts and Creativity
Theme Seven:	Accountable and Viable Council

ABOUT THE SURF COAST

The Surf Coast Shire is located in south-western Victoria, 120 kilometres from Melbourne and 21 kilometres south of Geelong. The landscape is a mix of coast, natural forest, urban settled areas and rural environments including land dedicated to agricultural production.

Surf Coast Shire comprises many individual townships, including Aireys Inlet, Anglesea, Bellbrae, Deans Marsh, Fairhaven Jan Juc, Lorne, Moriac, Torquay and Winchelsea. Each is a unique community with a sense of its own identity and a strong desire to protect what they cherish, including township character and the natural environment.

The region's natural beauty makes it a popular destination for tourists and day trippers, with tourism a cornerstone of the regional economy.

Other attractions include the Great Otway National Park and Bells Beach, which is the best known of many outstanding surf breaks in the shire.

SHIRE WIDE - CENSUS 2021
37,694

Township population figures based on Estimated resident Profiles 2021. At time of writing, Census data was not available at township level.

Surf Coast communities are made up of residents, rate-payers, families, businesses, volunteers, community groups and visitors.

Estimates from 2020

WINCHELSEA
2,262 6.24%

MORIAC & DISTRICT
3,497 9.65%

TORQUAY
17,859 49.26%

JAN JUC/BELLBRAE
5,506 15.19%

ANGLESEA
3,004 8.29%

DEANS MARSH & DISTRICT
1,378 3.8%

AIREYS/FAIRHAVEN & DISTRICT
1,440 3.97%

LORNE
1,307 3.61%

<19	20-24	25-34	35-49	50-59	60-69	70-84	85+
25.3%	4.1%	9.7%	21.4%	13%	13.2%	11.4%	2%

SEEKING YOUR INPUT

Our approach for the development of this strategy has been to seek feedback and input on our community's engagement and communications experiences and preferences.

We contacted people who have engaged with us recently, we selected a random sample of people for a phone survey about communications, we advertised widely to seek views, and we sought out the views of stakeholder and advisory groups.
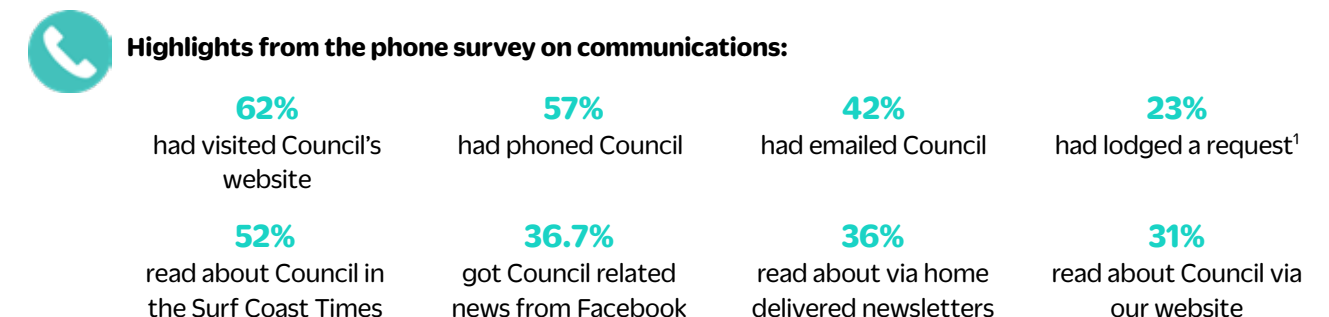
During our initial engagement phase (March/April 2022), we sought your views in the following ways:

Communications survey
349
responses received

Engagement survey
137
online surveys completed

Open feedback form
17
feedback forms completed

Focus groups/meetings
with Traditional Owners, Advisory Committees, young people, People Place Future Community Panel

Review of existing community input
Including People Place Future Community Panel Report, and the Youth Census.

Councillor and staff workshops

WHAT YOU TOLD US

Your input confirmed that we need to continue to provide different options when it comes to communications and engagement methods. Online communications are popular, but traditional print media and hard copy options are still the preference of many people.

Input received across different engagement methods indicated there was a wide range of preferences for both communications and engagement:

Highlights from the phone survey on communications:

62%
had visited Council's website

57%
had phoned Council

42%
had emailed Council

23%
had lodged a request[1]

52%
read about Council in the Surf Coast Times

36.7%
got Council related news from Facebook

36%
read about via home delivered newsletters

31%
read about Council via our website

Highlights from the online engagement survey:

- Hard copy (52%) and phone surveys (53%) were considered almost equally popular to online survey options (55%), though the comments sections frequently requested more online options[2]

- Both in person (54%) and online (60%) options were supported for engagement sessions[2]

- 61% of people indicated an interest in participating in future community panel or reference groups[2]. (NB: People could choose more than one option so results don't add up to 100%)

[1] Communications phone survey, 2022
[2] Community engagement online survey, 2022

ACROSS ALL ENGAGEMENT INPUTS, THE FOLLOWING TOPICS WERE HIGHLIGHTED:

- Surf Coast Shire communities are active and engaged, with a high level of interest in local issues

- Traditional Owner voices and perspectives need more focus

- Communication and engagement should start as early as possible for any given project

- Engagement processes should be transparent and allow for high levels of influence

- A range of options for community contribution should be provided – both online and in person/hard copy options

- Outcomes should be shared so participants can understand how their input affects decisions

- People and groups who may be harder to reach should be targeted to ensure their perspectives are included

- Information and processes should be inclusive and accessible

- Traditional, print based communications methods are still relevant and should be continued

- Website and social media are primarily used for up to date information about specific topics

For more information on our engagement methodology and findings see our **Engagement Findings Report** and **Communications Survey 2022**.

A second phase of engagement in August 2022 will seek community and stakeholder feedback on this draft version of the Communications and Community Engagement Strategy.

ASPIRATIONS AND CHALLENGES

In preparing this strategy we kept sight of the context in which our communications and engagement occurs. Following is a brief glimpse into a complex topic.

The world has undergone profound change and it goes without saying COVID will leave a lasting legacy. In amongst the loss and pain there have been some positive consequences of the pandemic. Flexible working conditions are almost certainly here to stay. As workers are now less tied to the cities that host their work, desirable lifestyle locations like Surf Coast Shire have undergone a population boom. Between 2016 and 2021 the Surf Coast Shire population increased by 28%.

Many people report having a greater sense of purpose or perspective with a renewed appreciation for family and wellbeing. Work life balance is an even more powerful aspiration.

At a practical level, online meeting tools have opened up participation for people who, due to family or work commitments, or prohibitive travel times, could not previously participate in civic activities like an engagement workshop.

To understand these changes is also to recognise that the reverse is true. Some people are heartily sick of living life via a computer screen and crave the opportunity to bounce ideas off others in person. Likewise the big city exodus brings talent, ideas and expenditure to our communities but population growth needs careful management if it's not to detract from our way of life.

We are acutely aware a one size fits all approach won't work. A theme of the feedback received so far is that people have strong preferences on how we should communicate and engage with them and that these preferences vary widely. Online vs face to face. Digital vs print. Daytime vs after-hours. We will do what we can to accommodate all, knowing it's a balancing

act that must also take into account the limits of our resources.

Another important theme is how do we support people, whose views are important, but who don't necessarily conform to a mainstream norm? We'll be seeking to tailor our approach to make sure there's equitable access for everyone and to understand how the different ways people experience life can influence their readiness and ability to participate in civic activities.

We know Council can be complex – dare we say bureaucratic at times. We will make sincere efforts to simplify our language and our processes. There won't always be a quick fix, especially where we are obliged to consider legislative rules, but clarity and simplicity is our goal and a central theme of this strategy.

There will be times when Council won't be able to please everyone. This is a simply reality of any government, or any democratic process. When there's a strong case for opposite courses of action we might seek to find a middle way. Other times the decision might be clear and require leadership to achieve change. Our commitment is to be open-minded, consider fairly and then explain how and why we arrived at our decision.

PRINCIPLES

We base our communications and community engagement activities on four fundamental principles.

- **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.

OUR COMMITMENT

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.

STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

Based on your input, and to focus our efforts over the next three years, we have developed six strategic directions for communications and engagement. 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

Each of these strategic directions has a number of priority areas that will guide Council's work in communications and engagement.

A yearly action plan will be developed to support the delivery of these priority areas.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 1
WORKING WITH FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE

Working in partnership with, and being led by, Traditional Owners across communications and engagement is an opportunity for learning and cultural awareness. This is an important step on the path towards Reconciliation.

GOAL

Our communications and community engagement practices will recognise and celebrate First Nations People, their languages and cultures.

Priority 1 — **Include a Traditional Owner focus in our communications**

Traditional Owner perspectives will be included in our policies, strategies and projects.

Priority 2 — **Working with Traditional Owners on place naming and language use, to celebrate and raise awareness of local Aboriginal languages and culture.**

Traditional languages will be included in signage, promotion and other communications to celebrate the language, culture and stories of Traditional Owners.

Priority 3 — **Celebrating and acknowledging First Nations culture**

We will establish and implement an approach to acknowledging and celebrating First Nations culture through days of significance, and through the every day work of Council.

MAJOR INITIATIVES

- **Represent Traditional Owners voices and perspectives in Council communications**
- **Ensure visible and coordinated signage to recognise areas of significance, and to promote traditional language.**

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 2

ACCESSIBILITY AND REPRESENTATION

To improve access and inclusion we need to ensure our content is easy to read and access. We also need to seek out and accurately represent diverse views and otherwise reduce barriers to participation.

GOAL

First Nations people, people with disabilities, young people, people in the LGBTIQA+ community, as well as other minority groups within our community, will have equal opportunities to participate in local decision making, and to receive inclusive, accessible communications.

| Priority 1 | Ensure Council communications are easily understood and that accessible options are readily available |
| | Council process and activities will be communicated in plain English |

| Priority 2 | Reduce barriers to engagement participation |
| | A range of participation options will be available for community engagement processes, to ensure people with access requirements (including physical requirements, family or work commitments, financial or other barriers to participation) can contribute. |

| Priority 3 | Represent and listen to diverse voices, including LGBTIQA+, people with disabilities, young people. |
| | Targeted inclusion of people in under represented groups, with appropriate and safe processes. |

MAJOR INITIATIVES

- Share different voices, representing different groups within our communities
- Ensure visual representation of diversity in our communications

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 3

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND TRUST

Working together with community and stakeholders to share information, create opportunities for collaboration and improve understanding.

GOAL

We will work with existing networks within our communities to ensure communications and opportunities to participate are broadly shared.

| Priority 1 | Localised communications – working with local networks and existing groups to share information |
| | Communities will have access to local and Council based information via their existing networks, in addition to Council's own communications methods. |

| Priority 2 | Foster a partnership approach with agencies and stakeholder groups (eg. GORCAPA, neighbouring Councils, Barwon Water, DEWLP, etc) |
| | Increase understanding of local issues and projects and coordination amongst agencies working in Surf Coast Shire communities |

| Priority 3 | Provide timely, relevant information to local media |
| | We will work with media outlets, proactively and responsively, in the understanding that Council activities are newsworthy and important to our community. |

MAJOR INITIATIVES

- Showcase our community's talents, resourcefulness and success stories to inspire others
- Amplify our communications and engagement through our existing relationships and their networks.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 4

INFLUENTIAL AND DELIBERATIVE ENGAGEMENT

Community and stakeholder input is vital to Council's decision making processes. Council will be clear about the level of influence available for a given engagement activity, and will pursue more opportunities for dialogue and deliberation within engagement processes.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 5

COUNCIL WIDE FOCUS AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Most areas of Council have a responsibility to communicate and engage with our community. The Communications and Community Engagement Team will work with all relevant staff to assist them to develop their knowledge, skill and understanding. We will seek continuous improvement through training, evaluation and process reviews.

GOAL

Our engagement activities will include the perspectives of a diverse cross section of our communities, and participants will see and understand the role their input has in decision making.

Priority 1: **Deliberative engagement - explore and trial innovative opportunities for deliberative process for small, large and complex issues.**

Increased use of deliberative processes, providing more opportunities for deeper, informed dialogue.

Priority 2: **Extend participation of engagement activities and provide clarity about level of influence**

We will be clear about how community input will impact the decision making process.

We will consider barriers to participation in our planning and implementation to ensure early and genuine opportunities for community influence.

Priority 3: **Online and live streaming – increase accessibility of engagement processes through regular interactive online options.**

We will offer a mix of in person and online options for engagement.

Priority 4: **Investigate options for an ongoing engagement panel**

A diverse and committed group of community members to provide regular feedback on issues of importance

MAJOR INITIATIVES

- Explore and trial innovative opportunities for deliberative processes
- Research and review options for in person/online panels

GOAL

All areas of Council have the understanding, skills and capacity to plan and deliver effective communications and engagement.

Priority 1: **Continue to grow the organisation's understanding of the role and importance of engagement in reaching sustainable and locally relevant decisions.**

A commitment to improving skills and a widespread understanding of the value of good communications and engagement

Priority 2: **Build the organisation's capability to communicate well and to design and deliver effective engagement.**

Staff will feel empowered to plan and implement inclusive and influential communication and engagement processes.

Priority 3: **Coordination of communications and engagement at township level to ensure activities are efficient, don't clash and are combined where appropriate.**

Work across Council departments to share local knowledge of activities/events/issues within townships. We will identify opportunities for collaboration and resource sharing.

Priority 4: **Monitoring and evaluation framework**

We understand the effectiveness of our communications and engagement processes and refine these over time.

MAJOR INITIATIVES

- Training and support to be provided to officers to refine skills in plain English writing
- Seek feedback on our engagement process

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 6

INNOVATION AND USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Explore how technology and innovation can improve communications and encourage greater and more meaningful participation in engagement.

GOAL

Innovation, including the use of new technology, leads to greater and more meaningful participation in engagement and a wider reach for our communication activities.

Priority 1: **Explore additional digital communications options, especially those that are engaging to young people**

Content is delivered via technology platforms that are convenient and suitable for a growing digital audience

Priority 2: **Experiment with the use of technology to increase access to engagement opportunities**

Technology options are available to improve access to engagement and to increase understanding of the topic for which views are being sought

Priority 3: **Review how Council's social media can best serve our community, including different age groups**

Council's use of social media is strategic, and accounts and content, are tailored to suit targeted audience segments

MAJOR INITIATIVES

- **Investigate the development of a Council specific App**
- **Develop online content and channels that appeal to young people**