Community Engagement Policy development 2023

Community feedback findings report – June 2023

Contents

Executive summary

Council has had a documented commitment to community engagement via a policy for over 10 years. The most recent policy is due for review, and Council has developed a new draft.

Council's revised draft policy was developed in response to existing community input relating to engagement experience and preferences. It ensures clarity of Council's ongoing commitment to engagement, and continued alignment with the requirements of the Local Government Act 2020.

The development of the draft also included the completion of a Gender Equity Impact Assessment (as required under the Gender Equality Act 2020), and consistency with Council's Child Safe standards.

At the April 2023 Council meeting, Council endorsed the draft policy for public exhibition. A broad range of communications was undertaken to ensure community members knew of the opportunity to provide feedback.

Council received 66 submissions from community members/groups. This is a large number of respondents for a policy document and therefore we have a useful sample size from which to draw conclusions. The feedback highlighted some key themes, including;

- clear project scope and transparency relating to decision making processes,
- a desire for increased community influence over outcomes and decisions,
- broad support for aims and principles presented in the policy,
- requests for action that aligns with the principles outlined in the policy
- current lack of trust in the willingness of Council to take on the views of communities, and
- the need for diversity in communications and engagement methods to support broad participation.

Introduction

Council has recently reviewed and updated its Community Engagement Policy.

A draft policy was developed using a range of existing community perspectives and input – refer to *Attachment A* for an overview of this background information.

At the April 2023 Council meeting, Council endorsed the draft policy for a period of public exhibition.

The draft policy was on exhibition for a 4 week period, ending on 24 May 2023. We shared information about our draft Community Engagement Policy, and the opportunity to provide feedback, in the following ways:

- Local publications, including Surf Coast Times and Winchelsea Star
- Social media posts
- Email to community network groups
- Email to over 3500 community members who had previously provided feedback on community engagement
- Direct contact with key stakeholder groups

During the exhibition period, we received feedback from 66 community members/groups.

Council utilised the existing Country Plans of both Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation and Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation in developing the draft policy, and sought feedback on the draft from both groups. Council will continue to work with Traditional Owner groups and First Nations people across the shire through the implementation of our community engagement approach.

The following provides a summary of community input received, key findings, and a response to feedback received.
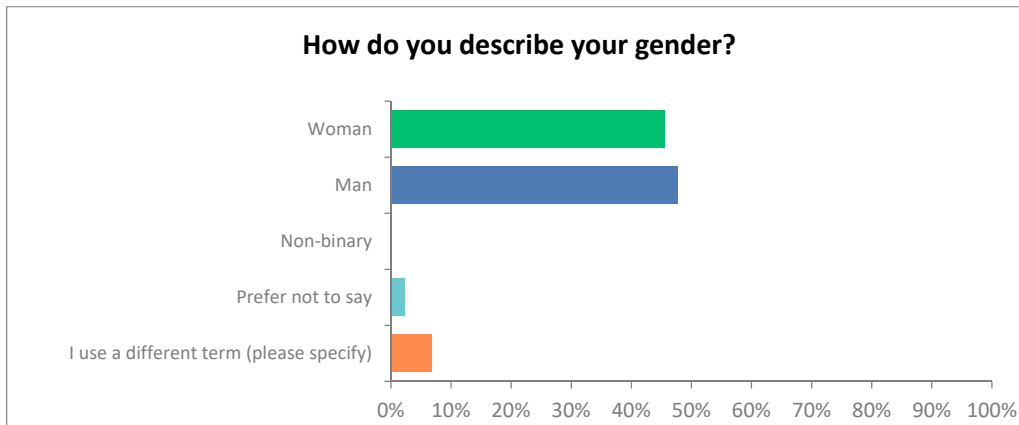
Who we heard from

We received 66 submissions on the draft plan, including representation from all four wards. Below is a summary of respondents by gender, age and township/ward.

Gender
Feedback from this submission process returned an almost equal number of responses from men and women.

When reviewing all responses, it was noted that there were only minor differences in responses by gender. One instance of these differences is people's interest in participating in a phone survey; for example, only 10% of men have previously participated in a phone survey, compared to more than 30% of women respondents, and 60% of men indicated they would participate in the future, compared to around 40% of women. This type of data reinforces the need for Council to provide a variety of options for communications and engagement methods, to suit people of all genders.

How do you describe your gender?

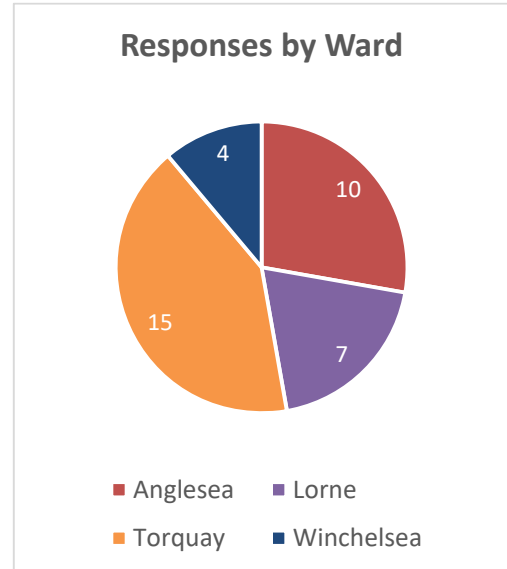| Category	
Woman	~46%
Man	~48%
Non-binary	0%
Prefer not to say	~2%
I use a different term (please specify)	~6%

Age
Of the 66 people who provided feedback, two thirds provided their age. We received most feedback from 55-69 age group, followed by those 40-54 year and 70+.

It is common that our surveys receive minimal response from younger age groups, and we continue to work with younger people within the Shire through our Youth and Early Years teams, as well as on a project basis. Engagement from younger people is often much higher for design and implementation of specific projects. For example, Council worked closely with local young people on the redevelopment of the Bob Pettitt bike park design, resulting in a high level of involvement from local bike riders and users of the park.

What is your age?

Category	
18 and under	0%
19-24	0%
25-39	~9%
40-54	~23%
55-69	~44%
70+	~23%
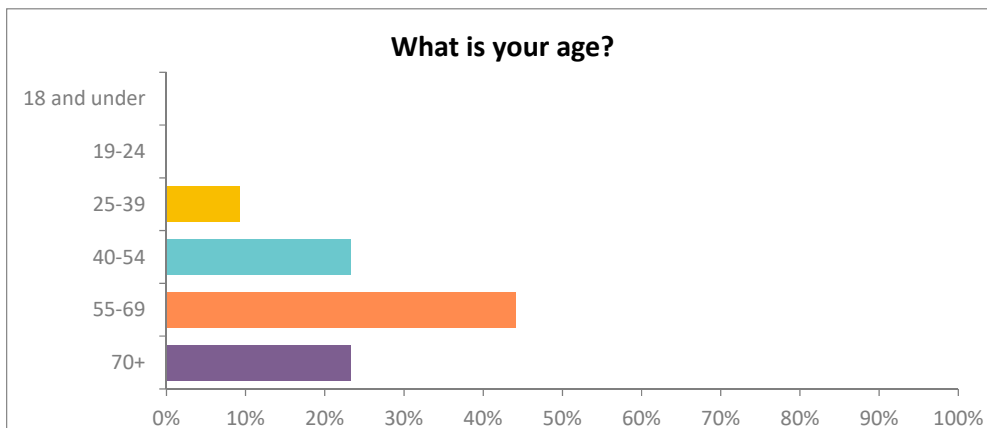
Townships and Wards
Feedback was received across all wards. There was similar feedback received across townships, including support of engagement principles, seeking more community influence, and some examples of both successful and undesired engagement experiences.

Response by township

Legend:
- Aireys
- Anglesea
- Deans Marsh
- Lorne
- Moriac
- Torquay/Jan Juc
- Winchelsea
- Other

Values: 3, 7, 2, 5, 2, 15, 1, 3

Responses by Ward

Legend:
- Anglesea
- Lorne
- Torquay
- Winchelsea

Values: 10, 7, 15, 4
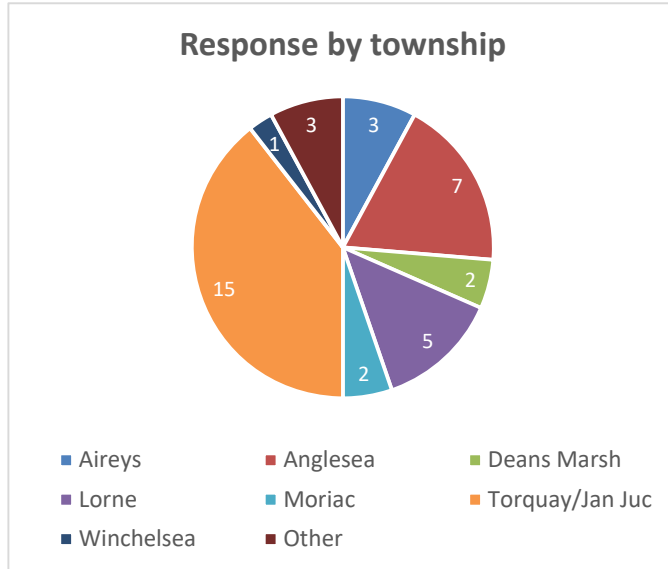
Feedback on community engagement experience and preferences

The submission form included a series of questions seeking feedback on respondents' experience and preference relating to community engagement.

Have you been involved in, or are you interested in, these types of engagement?
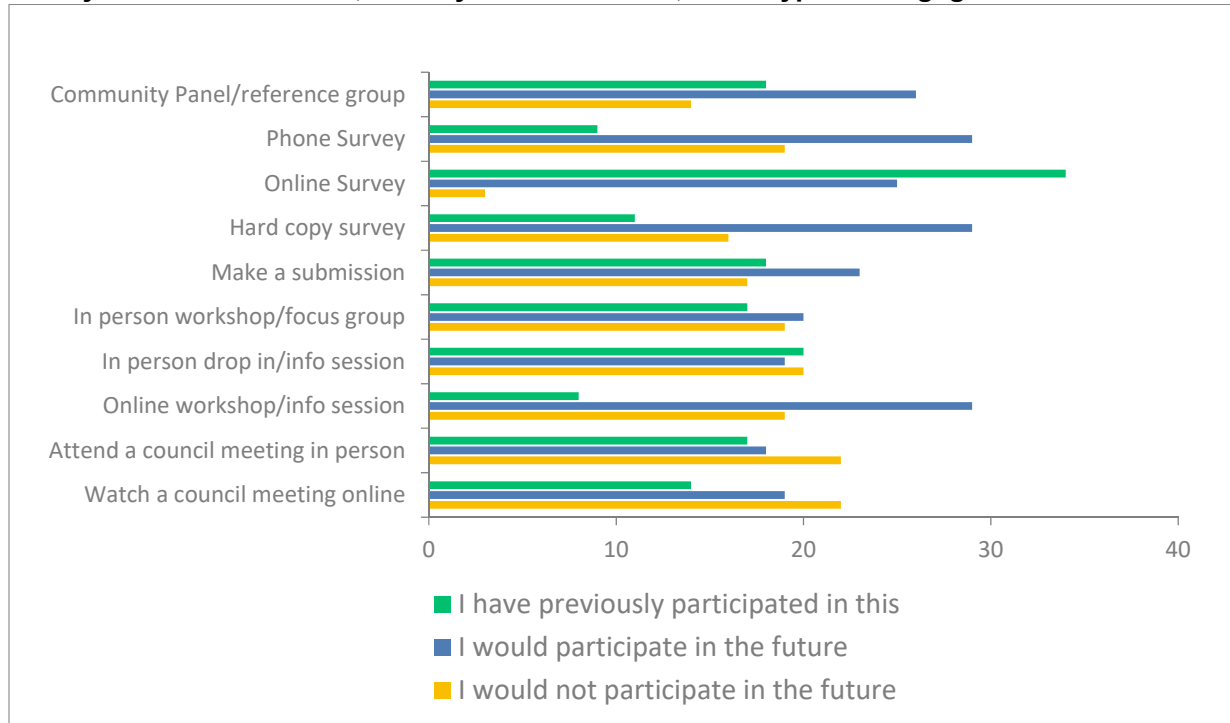
There are a range of preferences for future engagement opportunities; in person and online, and one-way (eg surveys) as well as interactive options. There were many comments highlighting the need for communities to feel confident that their feedback would be listened to in order to participate, regardless of the method of engagement.

Community comments

"I would participate in most things if I thought council was actively listening and responsive - otherwise pointless"

"I find I am rarely told of opportunities to be involved in giving feedback on the needs of the community. I would very much like to be involved and I know many members especially young families who would also like to be involved."

"Opportunities to ask questions at council meetings would be advantageous to transparency"

"I am not a group person so would participate from home."

What influences your decision to participate in engagement activities?
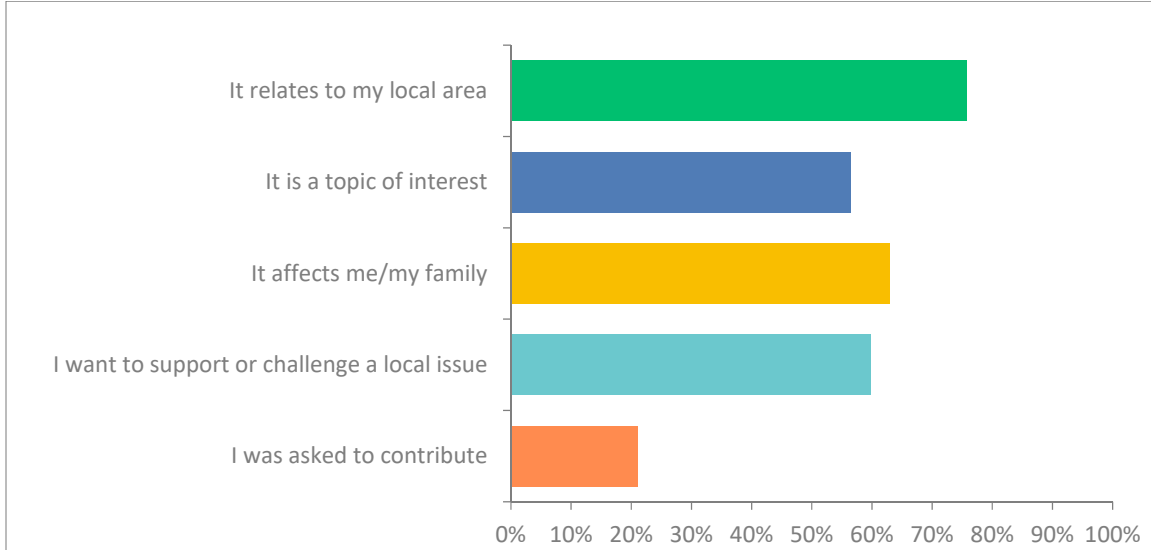
In addition to the options listed, additional influences included some people feeling there is a community benefit to contributing local knowledge, a feeling that Council is not listening to communities, or disagreeing with something Council is doing.

Community comments

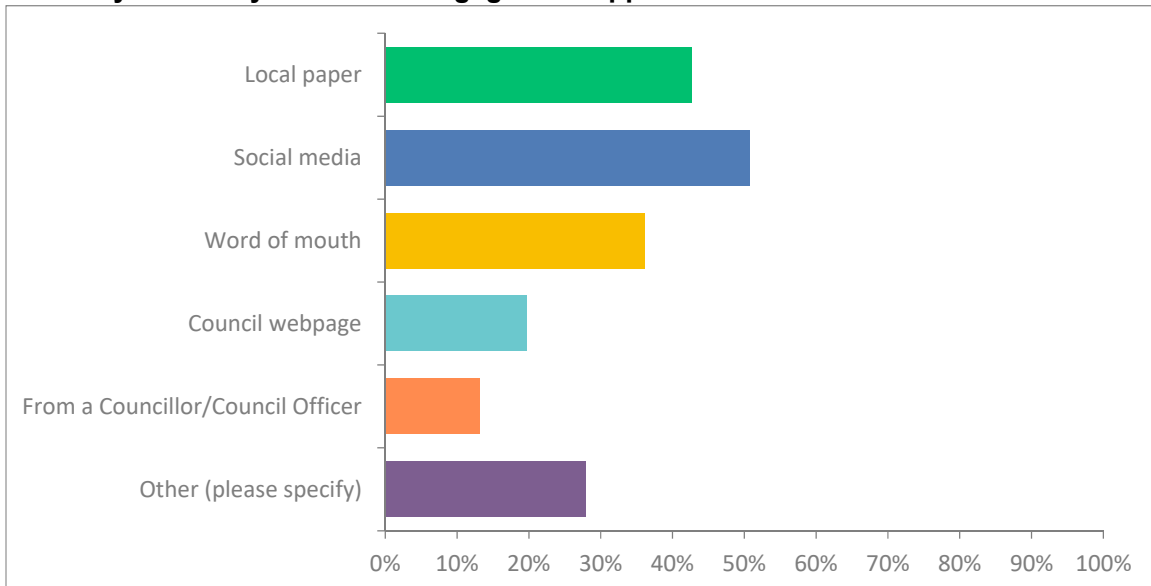"I believe communities have valuable knowledge"

"We should give input, it is to our advantage in the future"

"Feeling my community voice is ignored"

"Council not doing something well"

How do you usually hear about engagement opportunities?

Email, local social media pages, and through local networks and community groups were also listed as other popular ways to hear about engagement opportunities. Some people noted that they found out about opportunities in ad hoc ways, which didn't always allow time for them to contribute.

The below graph provides an example of how people's preferences/use of different communications methods differ by age groups.

By age: How do you usually hear about engagement opportunities?


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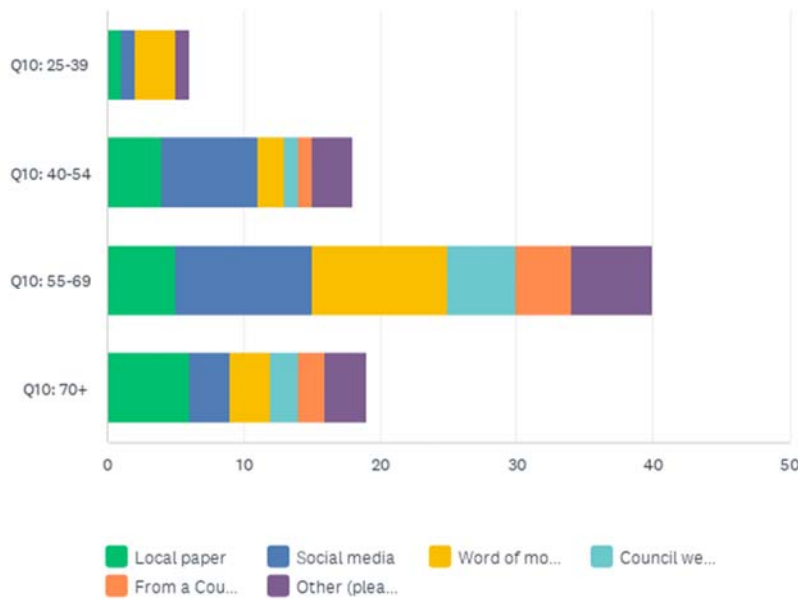
Community comments

"All rate payers should be notified via email!"

"The community team have been amazing to support our community representative group in emailing initiatives and coming in person to our community meetings"

"I hear by accident/word-of-mouth or by initiating myself for community groups that I represent"

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What factors may limit your involvement in future engagement opportunities?
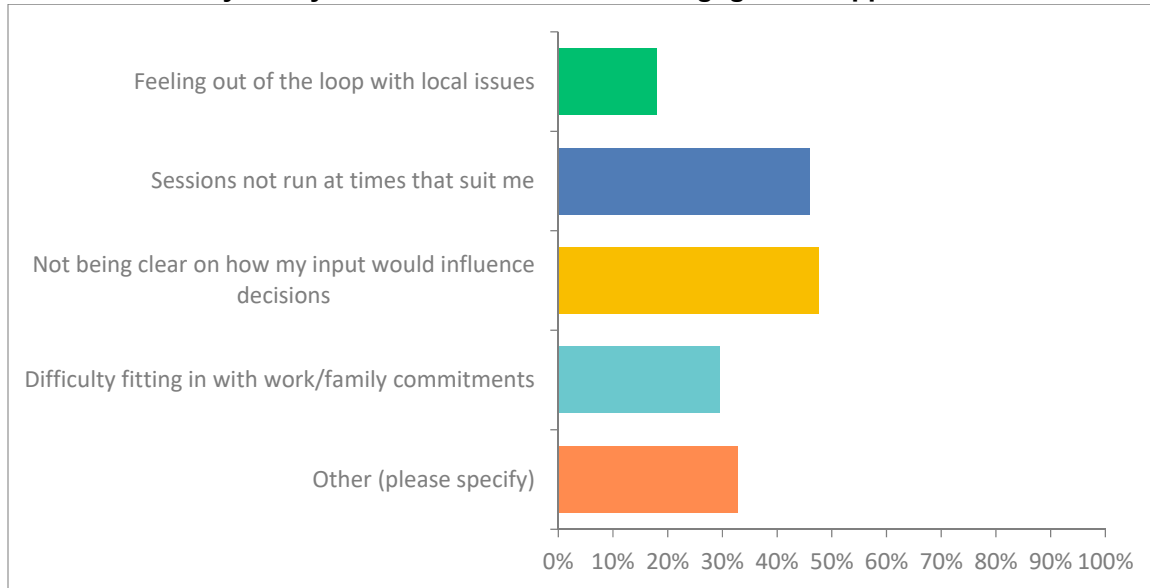
Other factors noted included the level of interest in the project/topic; time, family or health constraints, not have enough advanced notice, or not feeling like feedback will be taken seriously.

The below graph provides an example of how people's preferences/use of different communications methods differ by age groups.

By gender: What factors may limit your involvement in future engagement opportunities?
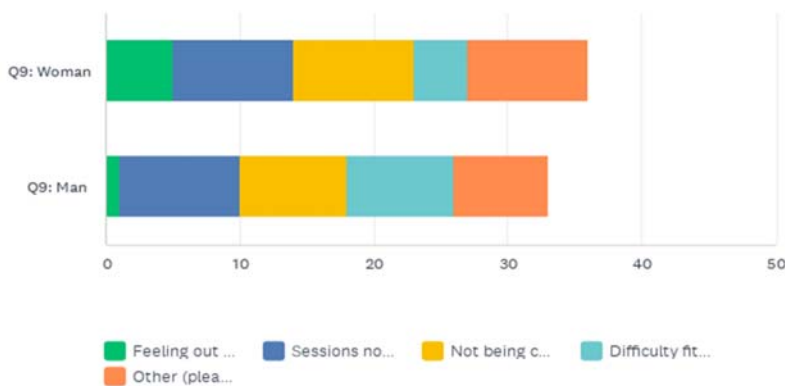
Community comments

"The council makes it difficult for the community to find out about upcoming projects/changes and does what they want regardless of how it affects the community"

"The feeling that SCSC officers never listen to what is being said to them, that they only ask after decisions have already been taken and that Council operatives DO NOT want community feedback if it differs from their own views"

"I don't want to be in a social setting, ie. an active group"

From the community: additional feedback on engagement experiences and preferences

We received 27 comments providing additional insight into community experience and preferences relating to community engagement. These covered a wide range of topics and perspectives, including support for Council's engagement efforts, distrust in Council's engagement approach, clear process for influencing decisions, and diverse options for participation.

Community Comments

"I am a keen supporter of the Shire's obvious intention to be more consultative with its communities so always available to participate in efforts to establish transparent and trusted relationships between communities and Shire officers."

"The total reorientation towards digital communication methods constantly excludes a significant portion of our community. Many older people and some others simply DO NOT use digital …Therefore this method of feedback process on community engagement will NOT capture them at all."

"I would like to be given more notice to participate."

"It would be good if my views actually changed something but I don't believe council listen."

"I would love to participate in a process that was genuinely consultative, not one skewed towards the SCSC's own often oblique 'objectives' which are NEVER transparent, clear or real."

"Online questionnaire is ideal but it needs to be clear and concise and easily understood for all. These give everyone an opportunity to participate if they wish to."

"Highly encourage to continue online options, use the quarterly council flyer that is sent with rates for those not online. A big shout out to the community team for joining after hours events in community. Sharing information via email for on sharing is also greatly appreciated."

"Surveys make it easy to contribute, prefer place based options."

"Sometimes there are a lot of engagements but there are so many considerations for council - good we are being asked to collaborate."

Feedback on the draft policy

We received 32 comments directly relating to the policy document, including 3 submissions uploaded and 1 returned hard copy submission form. The following themes relating to the draft policy were identified from the feedback.

Access and inclusion
Access and inclusion are important, and should be implemented in ways that ensure everyone feels safe, respected and represented.

Action and implementation
Need to use the principles and intentions outlined in policy to drive action though the implementation process.

Clarity of scope
Clear definition of project/issue scope. Identify what is in and out of scope, and how this has been identified.

Communication
Request for diverse, and where possible direct, methods of communication, to ensure people are advised of opportunities to participate in a timely way.

Influence
Level of influence available needs to be clearly stated, including a rationale for the level chosen. Informed, representative and diverse community views to be listened to and used to inform decisions.

Participation methods
Request for diverse methods of engagement, including online and in person, and group and individual participation opportunities.

Principles and intention
There was broad support for the principles and concepts presented in the policy.

Transparency
In instances where community engagement cannot be undertaken – eg. due to legislative or safety reasons - community needs to be informed of this, and the supporting rationale.

Community comments

"Seems a good start. I like the definitions of the different engagements. Many times it seems we are in the 'inform' and 'consult' phases rather than empower etc."

"Please add some KPI's/metrics that quantify aspects like impacts, complexities, and… expected turnaround times for different sized consultations or suggestions."

"I think what has been presented seems clear and reasonable and fit for purpose."

"Seems good on paper, however while Reconciliation is worth striving for it can't be at the expense of making others feel left out. Tricky!"

"The Draft Community Engagement Policy is a joke. My very recent experience with SCSC officers and councillors … has been a travesty of process and [no] outcome."

"This looks like a good policy and very inclusive. I would hope it is actioned as it is planned."

"Sad that it has all come to such a documented procedure. Red tape and backside covering."

Response to feedback

Theme	Description/request	Response
Access and inclusion	Access and inclusion are important, and should be implemented in ways that ensure everyone feels safe, respected and represented.	Council has a commitment to inclusivity, including gender equality, Reconciliation with First Nations people and ensuring a safe, respectful and accessible opportunity to patriciate for all people in our communities. Following a Gender Equity Impact Assessment (GEIA), Council has commenced the collection of gender based data on our surveys and submissions.
Action and implementation	Need to use the principles and intentions outlined in policy to drive action though the implementation process.	The policy will be implemented across the organisation, governed by a Community Engagement Management Procedure, and a program of staff training.
Clarity of scope	Clear definition of project/issue scope. Identify what is in and out of scope, and how this has been identified.	The draft policy requires the development of individual community engagement plans, which will outline the scope of the project, including negotiable, and non-negotiable elements, along with a rationale.
Communication	Request for diverse, and where possible direct, methods of communication, to ensure people are advised of opportunities to participate in a timely way.	Continued use of diverse communications methods, acknowledging that people receive information for many sources. Ongoing use of targeted emails where available, along with ongoing use of online, print and local network distribution. Access to hard copies will be offered for engagement processes. Specific communications plans will consider available resourcing.
Complexity guidelines	Guidelines to assess aspects like impact and complexity, and expected timeframes for different sized projects/engagement processes.	Council's engagement planning process include the use of a complexity matrix to provide an indication of the level of possible impact and scope (time/ resources) of project.
Influence	Level of influence available needs to be clearly stated, including a rationale for the level chosen. Informed, representative and diverse community views to be listened to and used to inform decisions.	The draft policy requires the development of individual community engagement plans, which will include commitment to a relevant engagement level(s), based on a detailed assessment of the project, based on defined scope and Council, community

		and stakeholder needs, requirements and limitations.
Participation methods	Request for diverse methods of engagement, including online and in person, and group and individual participation opportunities.	The draft policy requires the development of individual community engagement plans for projects and issues, allowing for targeting methods. Deliberative processes are mandated for some key topics.
Principles and intention	There was broad support for the principles and concepts presented in the policy.	All principles in the policy have been maintained.
Transparency	In instances where community engagement cannot be undertaken – eg. due to legislative or safety reasons - community needs to be informed of this, and the supporting rationale.	The policy commits Council to providing feedback on how community input influenced decisions. A line was included to ensure Council will communicate when a decision is made that is exempt from an engagement process for safety or legislative reasons.

Attachment A

Review of community feedback – summary of existing data (2022-23)

Developing the draft

In recent years, Council has sought detailed feedback and input from Surf Coast communities and stakeholders around their experience, expectations and preferences relating to Council's community engagement processes.

This existing community input has been reviewed and used to refine an updated draft Community Engagement Policy document.

The summary of key issues and ideas below have been gleaned from the following engagement processes and documents:

- **Communications and Community Engagement Strategy 2022-25**
    o Phase 1 included 349 responses to a communications and engagement phone survey, 138 online surveys about engagement experiences, and 17 general feedback submissions.
    o Phase 2 resulted in 51 submissions received during a 4 week exhibition period.
- **People Place Future: Community Vision and Council Plan**
    o Phase 1 included almost 1200 survey responses
    o Phase 2 included a 30 person community panel spending over 900 hours hearing from experts, analysing data, deliberating on important topics, and preparing principles and recommendations.
    o Phase 3 included 50 submissions received, providing feedback on the draft document.

Key finding and insights:

- Surf Coast Shire communities are active and engaged, with a high level of interest in local issues
- Traditional Owner voices and perspectives need 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, though some feedback also suggested minority views should not be given additional weight in decision making processes.
- Information and processes should be inclusive and accessible
- Traditional, print based communications methods are still relevant and should be continued

Further details can be found at:

- People Place Future: [Community Engagement Findings report](#) from Phase 1 (Participatory Phase, Jan-Feb 2021)
- People Place Future: [Community Panel's report](#) from Phase 2 (Deliberative Phase, Mar - May 2021)
- People Place Future: [Community Engagement Report from Phase 3](#) (Submissions on draft documents, Jul - Aug 2021)
- Communications and Community Engagement Strategy [Phase 2 Community Findings Report](#)
- Communications and Community Engagement Strategy [Phase 1 phone survey results](#)

We also referred to the following documents when preparing our draft policy document:

- ***Paleert Tjaara Dja***, Let's make Country good together 2020-2030 - Wadawurrung Country Plan
- **Meerreengeeye ngakeepoorryeeyt** (meaning, *Our Country, far seeing*), Eastern Maar Country Plan