

Community Engagement

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1. Purpose

Towong Shire Council (Council) is committed to participatory democracy and providing community members with the opportunity to engage in decision making in relation to matters that affect them. The purpose of this policy is to describe how Council engages the community in order to inform decisions.

Key objectives include:

- Ensuring that Council decision-making reflects the interest of the community;
- Providing a consistent, transparent and proactive approach to community engagement;
- Building community confidence and empowerment in regard to matters that affect them;
- Fostering community ownership of solutions to problems or plans for the future;
- Build the community's sense of belonging, connection, involvement and resilience; and
- Meeting Council's legislative obligations.

2. Scope

This policy applies to all community engagement activities undertaken by Council. It is binding upon Councillors, Council employees, volunteers, contractors, consultants and members of Council committees.

3. Policy Details

3.1. Principles

In line with the community engagement requirements of the *Local Government Act 2020* (LGA 2020), the following principles will underpin all engagement activities undertaken by Council:

- Council's community engagement activities will have a clearly defined objective and scope, being clear on what is and is not able to be influenced;
- Community members will have timely access to objective, relevant and easy to understand information to inform effective participation

- Participants in community engagement will be representative of the persons and groups affected by the matter that is the subject of the community engagement;
- Council will allow time and diverse engagement methods to reach people and for them to respond;
- Council values all participants' knowledge, expertise and experiences, acknowledging that everyone has different views and needs;
- Council will ensure that participants in community engagement activities are informed of the ways in which the community engagement process will influence Council decision-making;
- Council will build the community's trust through transparency, following through, closing the loop, saying what we are doing and doing what we say we will do.

It is important to understand that community engagement is not always the sole determinant in a decision-making process. Other factors also require consideration, including:

- Legislation
- Budget
- Other levels of government
- Existing policies and strategies
- Councillors
- Council expertise and experience.

3.2. When we engage

Council will undertake a community engagement process when:

- A decision will significantly affect the way services are provided;
- A decision has the potential to significantly affect the community or a segment of the community;
- A decision is likely to generate significant community concern or interest;
- Additional information is required by Council to make an informed decision;
- Engagement is mandated by legislation, policy or other agreement.

In this context a decision may include, for example, the adoption of a policy, strategy, program, plan or project, the approval of a design, proceeding with an action, or the ruling on an issue.

Where possible community engagement will take place in the early stages of decision making so that community members have the full opportunity to assist in identifying options, rather than simply 'tweaking' a decision which appears to already have been made.

Council will plan community engagement activities with due regard to community availability and will group consultations to avoid 'consultation fatigue' where appropriate.

Other considerations that help shape how and when Council undertakes engagement are outlined below.

3.2.1 Legislative

Council will undertake engagement where prescribed under the relevant legislation or regulations. The engagement will be undertaken to ensure statutory obligations as well as the commitments outlined in this policy as met.

3.2.2 Council Elections

Council is required to avoid public consultations during the Council election period and will not undertake community consultation on topics which may influence the outcome of the election. Should community consultation be considered necessary during this time, the results will not be reported to Council until after the election.

3.2.3 Reasons for limited engagement

There are times when Council's level of engagement with the community and key stakeholders will be limited. Examples include when:

- An immediate resolution is required;
- A time limited funding opportunity becomes available;
- Technical or other expertise is required;
- An initiative involves confidential or commercial information;
- There are clear and defined legislative responsibilities that must be met;
- Developing or reviewing internal policies and procedures;
- Council is responding to an emergency; or
- There is a risk to public safety.

In certain circumstances, Council may only be able to inform the community and stakeholders of Council's decisions and actions.

Where engagement is limited due to the timing of a funding opportunity, further detailed engagement will be undertaken if the funding application is successful, noting that the scope of engagement may be limited by the conditions of the grant.

It is noted that decisions involving confidential or commercial information are rare and Council endeavours to maintain public transparency wherever possible.

3.3. Who we engage with

Council will engage with people and groups that are impacted by or interested in a project or Council decision. This can include anyone who lives, works, plays, visits, studies or has an interest in the Towong area.

For each engagement process, the communities or stakeholders impacted will be identified and Council will seek to engage with them to ensure representative feedback to guide decision making.

When there are barriers to participation Council will seek to understand these barriers and apply mechanisms to enable participation.

3.4. Type and level of engagement

The type and level of engagement undertaken by Council will be determined by:

- The scope and complexity of the matter;
- The number of people impacted and the degree of impact;
- The strategic importance of the subject matter;
- Legislative requirements;
- The level of community interest;
- The resources available to Council;
- Prior consultation undertaken that is relevant to the matter; and
- The community's ability to impact decision making.

Management tools will be put in place to govern the engagement approach used, aligned to the International Association for Public Participation¹ (IAP2)'s Spectrum of Public Participation. The table below has been adapted from the IAP2 Spectrum, and shows the increasing level of possible community and Council involvement from the 'inform' end of the spectrum through to the 'empower' end of the spectrum.

1. INFORM	2. CONSULT	3. INVOLVE	4. COLLABORATE	5. EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL				
To provide the public with balanced information to assist them understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions	To obtain public feedback and analysis, alternatives and/or decisions	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and identification of preferred solution	To place final decision making in the hands of the public
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC				
We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will seek your feedback on drafts and proposals. We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives	We will work together with you to formulate solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

¹ <https://www.iap2.org.au/Home>

		developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.		
EXAMPLES				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FAQs • Information sheets • Updates on Council websites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveys • Focus groups • Community Panel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshops • Information sheets • Deliberative opinion polling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Reference Groups • Consensus building • Participation in decision making • Co-designing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delegated decision making (e.g. community makes the decision) • Community ballot

The engagement approach used will be reflective of the needs of the people and groups being consulted. Council will use plain language that is easy to understand and encourages interaction.

Some consultations may involve a mix of channels such as electronic surveys and face-to-face discussions. The process of community engagement may be dynamic and involve movement back and forth through the different levels as a matter is considered and developed.

It is recognised that Councillors as the elected representatives of the community play a key role in engagement processes, particularly in relation to high impact and strategic decisions.

It is recognised that community members may sometimes have different views and that regardless of the type of engagement undertaken, consensus may not be possible. Councillors play a key role in making a final decision which they believe represents the best interests of the community.

3.5. Feedback to the community

Council understands and values the importance of closing the loop with community engagement participants and the broader community. Council will advise participants and the broader community (as relevant) as to how feedback was considered in the decision making process and the end outcome.

3.6. Engagement resources for staff

To ensure Council can deliver on its commitment of consistent and proactive community engagement as outlined in this policy, staff will be supported with resources, budget and advice to support the development and implementation of suitable and appropriate engagement practices.

3.7. Monitoring, evaluation and review

Council will put in place feedback mechanisms to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of its community engagement practises on an ongoing basis.

4. Roles and responsibilities

Responsibility	Role / Position
Champion the commitment and principles for community engagement through leadership and decision-making	Councillors Chief Executive Officer
Champion behaviours that foster engagement and lead the implementation of this policy	Chief Executive Officer Directors Managers and Coordinators Communications and Engagement Officers
Adhere to community engagement principles, this policy and associated requirements as appropriate to role and function	Councillors Committee members All employees
Monitor implementation and adherence to this policy	Director Corporate and Organisational Development

5. Breaches

Failure to comply with Council policy, supporting procedures or guidelines, will be subject to investigation which may lead to disciplinary action.

6. Human Rights Charter compatibility

This policy has been assessed as being compatible with the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 [Vic]*.

7. Supporting documents

This policy should be read in conjunction with all other relevant Council policies and procedures, as well as relevant legislative requirements.

Other related legislation includes:


- *Local Government Act 1989;*
- *Local Government Act 2020;*
- *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006;*
- *Disability Act 2016;*
- *Equal Opportunity Act 2010;*
- *Planning and Environment Act 1987;*
- *Road Management Act 2004.*

Other related guidelines or policies include:

- *Towong Shire Council Governance Rules;*
- *Towong Shire Council Privacy Policy;*
- *Towong Shire Council Public Transparency Policy.*

8. Definitions

Community	People of the municipality, including individuals or groups who live, work, play, study, visit or invest in the municipality.
Community engagement	The range of opportunities for public involvement in Council decision-making. Community engagement is achieved when the community is and feels part of the decision-making process.
Deliberative engagement	Deliberative engagement empowers the community to partner with Council to come to a decision after considering relevant information and identifying options. It typically involves discussion and may involve consensus, although it is recognised that consensus may not always be achieved.
IAP2	The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) is an international organisation that advances the practice of public participation. IAP2 supports people who implement or participate in public decision-making processes.
Stakeholder	An individual or group with a special or particular interest in an issue; may incorporate the broader community as well as Council staff and Council stakeholders.

Authorised by: 

Juliana Phelps
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