



Community Engagement Policy





Endorsements and revisions

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Approval authority	Council
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Next review date	March 2026
Responsible position	Manager Corporate Strategy
Responsible Director	Strategic and Organisational Performance
Version	2.0

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to outline Council's commitment to informed, representative and supported engagement with the community of Baw Baw Shire.

We want this policy to:

- provide the basis for community to have an active voice in contributing to Council decisions.
- outline to the community our genuine intention to consider their input.
- increase transparency of the decisions that impact the community.
- build the community's trust in Council's decision making process; and
- contribute to better outcomes for the community.

Maintaining our community focus remains a core value for Baw Baw Shire Council. This policy supports that commitment and provides a framework to guide Councillors, staff, and consultants in achieving successful outcomes.

Council is committed to implementing this policy and reviewed its engagement activities against the purpose statements in the policy in February 2022. The Community Engagement Policy has been improved to reflect these learnings.

The policy will be reviewed every four years.

Scope

This policy applies to community engagement activities led by Council for the community in Baw Baw Shire. The policy applies to Councillors, staff, and consultants supporting Council's community engagement activities.

The policy does not apply to public participation in meetings of Council, including public submissions, questions on notice, and petitions. The specific conditions for these types of engagement are publicly available in Council's Governance Rules.



Legislative context

This Community Engagement policy has been prepared in accordance with the *Local Government Act 2020* (the Act). Under section 55 of the Act, Council must adopt and maintain a community engagement policy, which gives effect to the principles of community engagement under section 56.

All community engagement and public exhibition will be carried out in accordance with this Community Engagement Policy, except where there are specific requirements under separate legislation including those listed below.

The following Acts are also relevant to this policy:

- Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006
- Equal Opportunity Act 2010
- Freedom of Information Act 1982
- Gender Equality Act 2020
- Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014
- Planning and Environment Act 1987

Objectives

The objectives of the policy are to:

- Define the organisational use of community engagement for Council decision making, including Council's strategy and policy development and the making of Local Laws.
- Establish the criteria for using deliberative engagement practices.

This Community Engagement policy has been prepared under the *Local Government Act 2020*. Council commits to evolve the policy to meet the specific needs of the community.

Key concepts

What do we mean by 'community engagement'?

Community engagement is defined by a meaningful, respectful exchange of information and ideas. It is a planned process that provides a range of opportunities for Council and the community to enhance decision making through participation.

Councils actions are guided by the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2), which is regarded as the international standard for community engagement. Actions may be as simple as providing essential information about Council activities, through to more involved engagement where Council and community share the ability to make decisions. The IAP2 Spectrum informs the way we participate in relation to our goals, as discussed later in this policy.

What do we mean by 'deliberative engagement'?

Deliberative engagement is a form of community engagement that places people closer to the decision making of a democratic society, without taking away from the decisionmaking powers of the elected Council. It is informed, representative and supported.

Deliberative engagement occurs when a representative sample of the community is provided with the opportunity, information, and time to reach a joint position or preferred solution. Time, complexity, impact, and available resources influence the methods of deliberative engagement.

How does engagement benefit the community?

A vibrant and empowered community is one that is represented in decision making processes. Participation in meaningful engagement recognises the community as a partner and supports ownership of Baw Baw's direction and values. Good community engagement builds respectful relationships, appreciates diversity and supports both social equity and democratic governance.

How does community engagement benefit Council?

Informed, representative, and supported engagement enables Council to make considered decisions about the needs of the community. Greater community understanding of the decision making process also supports transparency and sustainable governance.

Definitions

Community Engagement

The meaningful, respectful exchange of information and ideas. It is a planned process that provides opportunities for Council and the community to communicate, improve services, and enhance decision making through participation.

Community

Is used to describe people who live in the shire; people and groups who are ratepayers of the Council; traditional owners of land in the shire; and people and groups who conduct activities in the Baw Baw Shire.

Deliberative engagement

Occurs when a representative sample of the community is provided with sufficient information and time to reach a joint position or preferred solution through considered discussion.

Deliberative elements

Elements of deliberative engagement are the types of activities that may be used including representative discussion panels and co-design workshops. Time, complexity, impact, and available resources influence the deliberative elements used for engagement.

Participant

A participant is a stakeholder who is involved in a community engagement activity.

Public Participation

Council interprets the terminology of public participation and community engagement to be interchangeable.

Public Participation Spectrum (IAP2)

The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum helps Council define the public's role in any public participation or engagement process.

Stakeholders

Sections of the Baw Baw community who may be impacted by or interested in an outcome, or who have a responsibility to deliver an outcome. These may be individuals, groups, internal or external organisations, or government.

Representative Sample

Is a group of people selected by their demographic characteristics to best represent the affected community. Common demographics used include gender, age, owner or tenant and location.

We will also aim to include people of all abilities and/or identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and/or are culturally and linguistically diverse, based on their proportion in the community.

Community engagement principles

This policy gives effect to five basic principles in the Act. The principles establish a defined, informative and representative process that is supported to enable influence. In addition to these principles, Council commits to provide processes that are transparent, accountable, and meaningful.

Why we engage

The best decisions are informed decisions. By engaging with the community we're engaging with local needs, knowledge, and experience to make informed decisions for Baw Baw Shire. We know that supporting a meaningful exchange of information with genuine intention, builds transparency, trust, and better outcomes.

How we engage

Community engagement principle:
A community engagement process must have a clearly defined objective and scope.

To support this principle, for each engagement activity, we will:

- Let the community know upfront what Council is wanting to achieve and the purpose and scope of community engagement activities.
- Provide participants with accurate, project specific information that is accessible and easy to read.
- Be open about key issues or constraints which may influence the engagement and decision making, such as budget or legislation.
- Support participants where digital engagement is used for deliberative engagement, by providing opportunities to practice, test or problem solve before participation if required.

At minimum, Council will carry out the following steps in the design, delivery and evaluation for Category 1 (deliberative engagement) activities:

1. **Define** – the objective and scope of the activity
2. **Understand** – stakeholder interests and values to identify opportunities while considering Council resourcing strengths and weaknesses
3. **Design** – processes that fit the needs of the stakeholders and take advantage of identified opportunities
4. **Deliver** – genuine engagement with an intent to recognise outcomes of that engagement
5. **Review** – and interpret outcomes
6. **Apply** – outcomes to decision making
7. **Evaluate** – engagement success
8. **Report** – and provide feedback on the engagement process

When we engage

Community engagement principle:

Participants in community engagement must have access to objective, relevant and timely information.

Planning for engagement should begin during project development and if necessary, activities should continue until the outcome has been achieved.

To support these principles, for each engagement activity, we will:

- Provide a reasonable timeframe for engagement activities, considering the importance of the issue to the community, and the urgency of the item being consulted on. We will ensure deliberative engagement activities are provided with enough time for deliberation and discussion.
- Be flexible to adapt if unexpected barriers arise.
- Provide information that is accurate, easy to read, and understand. We'll use plain language and avoid jargon where possible.
- Avoid public and culturally significant holiday periods. This ensures the transparency of our intentions and supports the increased capacity for community involvement.

Who we engage

Community engagement principles:

Participants in community engagement must be representative of the persons and groups affected by the matter that is the subject of the community engagement.

Participants in community engagement are entitled to reasonable support to enable meaningful and informed engagement.

To inform decision making, Council will seek a diversity of opinions relevant to the matter and identify the most appropriate engagement activities for both the issue and the stakeholders being engaged with.

To support these principles, for each engagement activity, we will:

- Identify those who are likely to be affected by the matter, and as part of engagement planning, identify targeted ways to engage with representative individuals and stakeholder groups as appropriate.
- Make use of existing opportunities, such as Council Advisory Committees, community and business groups, and events.
- Seek diversity of opinion and strive to identify and address potential barriers to community input, including but not limited to; gender, geographic location, age, culture, ability or health.
- For activities that have a direct and significant impact on the Community, the opportunity to undertake a Gender Impact Assessment will be considered in line with Council's procedures, which meets the *Gender Equality Act 2020*. If undertaken, the results may inform the how, who and when we engage.
- Recognise the effort required from the community to contribute. Assistance to participate may be required and should be considered when determining the type of engagement conducted, the resources used or the timing of activities.

The provision of financial support in recognition of time, and or knowledge, may also occur for more intense, deliberative engagement activities.

How we 'close the loop'

Community engagement principle:

Participants in community engagement are informed of the ways in which the community engagement process will influence Council decision making.

To support this principle for each engagement activity, we will:

- Provide consistency with response, handling, and publication of submissions. This will be clearly stated with each engagement process and will align with our Governance Rules, Privacy Policy, and Public Transparency Policy.
- Make clear how the community can be involved, how input will influence decision making, who will be making the final decision, and the general timeframe before a decision can be expected.
- Inform participants about any constraints which may influence the decision, and what participants can and can't influence during the process and final decision.
- Provide information on any outcomes and decisions, the reason for the decision, and how community input has been considered. Where possible, this will be done within 15 business days of a decision being made.

Designing Community Engagement

Our approach and commitment

Council is making a commitment to understand the needs and views of the Baw Baw community. We know that the community plays an important role in shaping its future direction. Partnering with the community makes Baw Baw Shire the vibrant, thriving place it is.

The skills and experiences of those in the community should be sought. Council aims to strengthen its partnership with the community by supporting and valuing the community's contribution. Meeting 'on the ground' in the community where appropriate; and recognising the effort and time required for a community member to provide feedback are two of the ways we aim to do this.

Level of engagement model

The following table represents the Baw Baw Shire Level of Engagement model that has been developed to provide a consistent approach to community engagement. It is based on the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation framework, which identifies five levels of engagement:

1. **Inform**
2. **Consult**
3. **Involve**
4. **Collaborate**
5. **Empower**

The model provides excommunity. All levels of engagement can be supported by methods from the previous level. Deliberative engagement occurs at **involve**, **collaborate**, and **empower** levels of the spectrum.

Categories of engagement

Council recognises that many activities may need more than one level of engagement and is guided by the five levels of participation. The level or levels chosen will depend on the project stakeholders, scope, impact, and available resources. Council will also evaluate the complexity, and likely impact of a decision against the significance of the outcome when developing community engagement activities.

The following table guides this evaluation.



Our Commitment to the Community

Increased level of Community Participation					
	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Role of Council	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities, and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on 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 the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
Role of the Community	Listen	Contribute	Participate	Partner	Partner or lead
How we do this	Presentations, displays and exhibits Website information On-site signs Progress reports Fact sheets Newsletters Letters, emails, text messages and phone calls Media releases, advertisements and social media	Have Your Say public comment Surveys Public meetings or forums* Focus groups Community group consultation	Workshops* Deliberative Polling	Citizen advisory committees* Participatory decision-making*	Deliberative panels (Citizen Juries)* Delegated decisions
How we categorise this	Category 3: Matters which are of lower impact or interest to the community, or where the community's ability to influence is limited.		Category 1: Matters which require deliberative engagement under the Local Government Act 2020 or other matters identified by Council or similar.		
			Category 2: Matters which are of higher or long-term impact and significant interest to the community.		
			*Deliverable in-person or online.		

Criteria for designing community engagement

To meet the community's needs across various engagement topics, Council activities and decisions have been classified into three categories. However, Council may elevate matters to a higher category where community feedback indicates this is appropriate.

The categories described below show examples under each engagement level. Each level can be supported by activities from lower levels.

For example, fact sheets may be used during *Collaborate*.

Category 1: Matters which require deliberative engagement under the Local Government Act 2020 or other matters identified by Council or similar.

We will engage at deliberative levels of community engagement using approaches and methods of *Involve* and *Collaborate* as appropriate. For certain matters, Council may choose to *Empower* where it decides that the community should have decision making authority. As a minimum, Council will use deliberative engagement in the development of:

- the Community Vision,
- Council Plan,
- Financial Plan, and
- Asset Plan (10 year), as legislated under the Act.

Category 2: Matters which are of higher or longterm impact and of significant interest to the community

We will engage using the approach of Consult, Involve and Collaborate as appropriate. This may also involve deliberative engagement elements. Matters which are of high or longterm impact and of significant interest to the community include:

- Annual Budget and Long-term Infrastructure Planning (LTIP), Municipal Public Health & Wellbeing Plan, Precinct Structure Plans, significant strategies and policies, and the making of local laws.
- Complex or high impact projects, such as major capital projects and significant public space changes.
- Activities that significantly impact the natural environment.
- Activities or projects that significantly affect town and community centers.

Category 3: Matters which are of lower impact or interest to the community, or where the community's ability to influence is limited.

We will Inform and Consult for day to day activities, urgent matters or following earlier, higher intensity engagement:

- Urgent decision making such as emergency management.
- Unexpected changes to service due to emergency or pandemic.
- Decisions by external authorities that impact us.
- Routine infrastructure repairs or works.
- Land sales and acquisitions.
- Public submissions as set out in the Governance Rules.

Public exhibition

Council will place matters on public exhibition in accordance with relevant Acts or Regulations.

Unless otherwise specified, a public exhibition will be open for a minimum of 21 calendar days.

Council commits to placing draft documents resulting from the following, on public exhibition before Council endorsement;

- a deliberative engagement process (Category 1); or
- a matter of high or long-term impact and of significant interest to the community (Category 2)

Outcomes of the public exhibition process will be considered by Council at a Council Meeting. Council may also choose to hear public submissions at a Council Meeting, particularly for items which are identified as higher or long-term impact and are of significant interest to the community, in accordance with the Governance Rules.



Related policies and documents

Baw Baw Shire Council's:

- Governance Rules
- Public Transparency Policy
- Information Privacy Policy
- Advisory Committee Policy
- Customer Service Charter
- Complaints Handling Policy

References

International Association for Public Participation

<https://www.iap2.org.au/>

Victoria's draft Public Engagement Framework – Department of Premier and Cabinet

<https://engage.vic.gov.au/draft-public-engagement-framework>

Deliberative Engagement for Victorian Councils – Mosaic Lab

<https://www.mosaiclab.com.au/news-all-posts/free-guide-local-councils>

Community Engagement Toolkit for rural communities – Rural Councils Victoria

<https://ruralcouncilsvictoria.org.au/community-engagement-toolkit-for-rural-communities/>



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Baw Baw
Shire Council

-
T +61 3 5624 2411
F +61 3 5622 3654

-
E bawbaw@bawbawshire.vic.gov.au
w bawbawshire.vic.gov.au

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PO Box 304
Warragul
Victoria 3820
