



WHITEHORSE
CITY COUNCIL

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT POLICY

BACKGROUND

Council is committed to effectively engaging locally in regard to initiatives, programs, projects and policy that have an impact on the community.

Council has had in place the Whitehorse Community Engagement framework that has assisted cross Council departments in their engagement activity, however, the Whitehorse Community Engagement policy takes Council's commitment to engaging with the people of Whitehorse to another level.

The policy sets out Council's commitment to engaging with our community and explains the role of Council and how the community can expect to be involved in decision making. It establishes a clear standard of engagement, and encourages a consistent approach, including evaluation, review and feedback to continually improve our processes which lead to more effective outcomes.

The Whitehorse community is rich, with a diversity of life experience, expertise and cultural influence. Council values everyone's participation and seeks to hear a diversity of opinions, thoughts and views. We are committed to engaging with our community, key stakeholders and internal staff in an inclusive, genuine and appropriate way to inform key decisions, actions and strategies.

Our engagement practice will be informed by the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) model which details a spectrum of engagement which recognises that in some instances this may be simply "informing" the community and in others "empowering" the community to make decisions.

For the purposes of this Policy Council define the Whitehorse Community as including everyone who lives, works, studies, visits, recreates or invests in the City of Whitehorse.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2020 REQUIREMENTS

The Local Government Act (Vic) 2020 requires all Councils in Victoria to develop a Community Engagement Policy (Section 55).

The Act is principles based which means that while it is a Local Government requirement to produce a Policy, each Council's policy will look different so as to respond to local requirements. The Policy will be developed with community input and will define how Council intends to engage with the community in ways that align with best practice principles.

The policy will be applied to how Council makes its local laws, develops its budget, policies and plans which enables the community to have input into and influence a range of initiatives across Council.

THE ROLE OF THE MAYOR AND COUNCILLORS

The Mayor and Councillors have many important roles including the process of decision making to represent the best interests of the community.

Council acknowledges that the most effective and transparent decision-making processes rely on sound evidence, community input and representation of community priorities. Information that is gathered through community engagement activities will be utilised, giving consideration to other data, advice, strategies and/or legislation that is relevant to a particular matter, when making decisions.

Furthermore, it is prescribed within the Local Government Act 2020 that the Mayor plays an important role in engagement with the municipal community on the development of the Council Plan (s18c). The Mayor will also have a role in working with officers to open/introduce deliberative engagement processes as well as closing the loop with the community and feeding back relevant and appropriate information.

Councillors are responsible for adopting the Community Engagement Policy as well as championing our community engagement commitment to the community. Often, Councillors will also be identified as key stakeholders within engagement plans and therefore be involved in project specific engagement activities.

Councillors are accountable to their community and need to demonstrate effective leadership to meet challenges and develop long-term visions and goals that guide their municipalities' futures. Councillors are required to participate in a wide variety of activities, both as an elected representative of the community and as a member of the governing body of council (Municipal Association of Victoria 2021). Representing the entire community requires councillors to weigh and balance all relevant factors without bias or prejudgement. The decision-making processes of the council must be open, accessible and transparent except in limited circumstances when confidentiality is required (Municipal Association of Victoria 2021).

WHAT IS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

Community engagement refers to the many ways Council connects to and with our community in day-to-day interactions and in the development and implementation of initiatives, policies, programs, projects and services.

Specifically, the City of Whitehorse defines Community engagement as a planned process that gives individuals and groups a voice in decisions or actions that may affect or interest them.

Engagement can range from the simple provision of information (informing) through to empowering the community to make a final decision. How much influence participants will have on the decision or outcome varies depending on the project.

Common methods of engagement includes but is not limited to: surveys, workshops, pop-up stands, focus groups and online forums, but it can also involve a range of other approaches like reference and advisory groups, co-designing initiatives, community panels and citizens juries. Depending on the initiative, project, program, policy or plan, different engagement activities will be planned so that the most relevant and effective community engagement process is implemented.

WHY IS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT?

Community engagement is about harnessing a range and diversity of views and opinions, experience and expertise within our community to help us make better, more informed decisions. It can develop and improve relationships, build capacity and strengthen communities.

The benefits of effective community engagement includes:

- Giving our community and key stakeholders the ability to contribute to and influence decisions and actions that directly affect them
- Assisting Council to understand the aspirations and priorities of the community which in turn informs our strategic planning
- Assisting Council to deliver services, programs and infrastructure that meets the specific and evolving needs of our community
- Helping to improve connections and understanding between Council and our community
- Making decision making more open and transparent and enhancing accountability and trust
- Contributing to participants having a stronger sense of belonging and connection to the local community
- Informing and building evidence for Council's advocacy agenda

THE POLICY SCOPE

The Whitehorse Community Engagement policy provides direction regarding formal (including legislated requirements) and informal community engagement activities undertaken by, or on behalf of Council, including but not limited to the:

- Development and review of key strategic documents/plans such as, but not limited to: the Community Vision, Council Plan, Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan, Long Term Financial Plan, Asset Plan and Road Management Plan.
- Making of Local Laws
- Making amendments to the Planning Scheme or deliberating on planning applications under the Planning and Environment Act 1987
- Development of annual budgets
- Development of Council policies that directly impact the community
- Upgrades to Council venues and playgrounds

Some Council decisions will affect the whole community, but most often affect some people or groups more than others. We also recognise that some people or groups face barriers to engaging with us. We will focus our efforts on engaging with the most directly affected members of our community and use methods that reduce barriers to participation. The handbook which will be developed after the adoption of the policy will explore and document how to best engage with different cohorts of people in Whitehorse, including the hard to reach.

As part of our planning process we will identify the people and groups that may be affected by or interested in the decision, action or strategy being made or developed. This may include the Whitehorse community, associated key stakeholders and staff or teams internal to our organisation.

We may identify or define those in our community who are most affected or interested by place, interest, demographics or hard to reach.

The policy applies to all community engagement activity undertaken by Council.

CITY OF WHITEHORSE ENGAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

Council's engagement principles have been developed through engagement with the people of Whitehorse, input from Councillors and officers as well as research into best practice standards and consideration of the public participation principles set out in Section 56 of the Local Government Act (Vic) 2020.

Our principles underpin how we will design and deliver community engagement, across all stages of engagement and meet the requirements of the Local Government Act 2020 and the Victorian Auditor General Office's (VAGO) Better Practice Guide: Public Participation in Government Decision-making.

The City of Whitehorse's engagement principles are:

1. Inclusion, access and constructive participation

Participants in engagement will be representative of the persons and groups affected by the matter at hand.

Council will work with the community to remove barriers to participation and ensure access to objective, relevant and timely information to inform their participation.

Council will ensure the process is conducive to constructive conversation between the community and Council.

2. Clarity of purpose and scope

The engagement process will have a clearly defined objective and scope.

Participants in engagement processes will be informed of the ways in which the community engagement input and feedback will influence Council decision making and Council will share the results and outcomes of the process with the community.

3. Transparency, Informative and Clear:

Participants in engagement activity will have access to objective, relevant and timely information to inform their participation.

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

Ensuring that those participating in the community engagement activity understand the scope of the engagement, the decision-making process and any constraints on the process.

4. Integrity, Caring and Responsiveness

Council is committed to demonstrating a caring approach to community engagement.

Approaching engagement with honesty and clarity and communicating results in plain English.

The potential impacts of a project on the community will be identified, discussed and addressed within the scope of the engagement process.

Challenges and opportunities related to participation in engagement opportunities are identified and addressed.

Input is responded to in a timely and constructive manner.

Officers are responsible for undertaking appropriate evaluation of engagement activities as part of their engagement plan.

THE IAP2 SPECTRUM

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) is an international organisation advancing the practice of public participation. IAP2 supports people who implement or participate in public decision-making processes. The Whitehorse Community Engagement policy and handbook will focus its practice of engagement on the IAP2 model where by a spectrum or continuum of engagement is available to assist in planning effective community engagement. The beginning of the spectrum talks about “informing” the community, all the way to the other end which is about “empowering” the community. No one point on the spectrum is “better” than another, it is more about thorough planning of community engagement activity and why a particular engagement point on the spectrum has been chosen.

Council will use varying levels of engagement depending on the scale, complexity and anticipated impact of the decision being considered. The level of engagement may vary for different parts of the community or stakeholders, and different stages of the engagement process. When planning engagement activity Council Officers are responsible for determining the level of engagement suitable for each engagement activity.

The following will be taken into consideration when making this decision:

- The Local Government Act 2020
- Councillor Direction
- The outcome having significance and complexity
- The level of resourcing required
- Other Legislation

When planning engagement activity Officers are responsible for documenting the level of engagement chosen to be implement and why.

LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT

Whitehorse City Council will use the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum (table 1) to define our levels of engagement and the amount of influence participants can expect to have in the process.

All levels of engagement on the spectrum play an important role when engaging with the community. IAP2's Public Participation Spectrum is designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any community engagement program (IAP2 2021). The Spectrum show that differing levels of participation are legitimate depending on the goals, time frames, resources and levels of concern in the decision to be made. The Spectrum sets out the promise being made to the public at each participation level (IAP2 2021).

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Goal	To provide balanced and objective information to assist in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with our target participants throughout the process to ensure that their concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with our target participants 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 our target participants
Promise to target participants	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 work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.
Role of target participants	Listen	Contribute	Participate	Partner	Partner or Lead
Examples of methods	<i>Participatory engagement</i>		<i>Deliberative engagement</i>		
	Fact sheets Whitehorse News Website Social media Open houses Email (when available)	Surveys Submissions Focus groups Meetings Listening posts	Workshops Deliberative polling Advisory Committees Ranking and prioritising Co-design Community panels		Citizens Juries Ballots Representative deliberative panels

Source: IAP2 <https://iap2.org.au/resources/spectrum/>

MANDATORY ENGAGEMENT

There are some decisions that require a greater level of engagement. In these cases, legislation sets out the minimum engagement requirements. Council will meet all legislative engagement requirements but can also decide to extend its engagement in regard to these requirements.

The Local Government Act 2020 and other legislation sets out some minimum levels of engagement for key decisions which are summarised below:

Type of decision	Level of engagement
Community Vision	Deliberative engagement (Collaborate – Empower)
Council Plan, Financial Plan, Asset Plan, Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan	Deliberative engagement (Involve – Collaborate)
Annual Budget	Participatory engagement (Consult)
Making a Local Law	Participatory engagement (Consult)
Buying Council land	Participatory engagement (Inform)
Selling Council land	Participatory engagement (Consult)
Leasing Council land	Participatory engagement (Inform)
Making amendments to the Planning Scheme or deliberating on planning applications under the Planning and Environment Act 1987	Participatory engagement (Consult) unless within exemptions under the Planning and Environment Act 1987
Other services, facilities, strategies, plans and policies	To be determined based on the scale, complexity and anticipated impact of the decision

WHEN INFORMING MAY BE APPROPRIATE

There are circumstances when an “informing” level of engagement may be appropriate. In these cases, Council will inform the community, key stakeholders or internal staff about the decision or outcome. Examples include:

- When there is nothing about the decision that can be influenced
- Emergencies and when immediate action is required
- Items of a confidential or commercially sensitive nature
- If there is a risk to public safety

DELIBERATIVE ENGAGEMENT

Deliberative engagement is a particular approach to involving people in decision-making. It is different from other forms of engagement in that it is about giving participants time to consider and discuss an issue in depth before they come to a considered view.

Deliberation is one form of ‘high influence’ community engagement. The expectation is that Council will implement the recommendations to the greatest extent possible. However, it does not replace or take away from the decision-making powers of elected representatives.

Council will undertake deliberative engagement:

1. Where it is a legislative requirement (including Community Vision, Council Plan, Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan, Long Term Financial Plan and Asset Plan).
2. Where Council resolves that it wants its decision-making on a matter or initiative to be informed by this model of community engagement.
3. Where the matter has a certain level of complexity and/or significance to the community.

As part of Council’s commitment to effective deliberative engagement practices, Council will:

- Provide a clear scope to the people involved in the deliberative process
- Ensure participants have access to information to facilitate conversation and understanding of issues
- Ensure the process is representative
- Allow the time needed to “deliberate” on complex information, weigh up options, ideas and ask questions
- Give the deliberative participants a full understanding of their level of influence over outcomes or decisions.

YOUR SAY WHITEHORSE

The “Your Say Whitehorse” platform is the mandatory portal for all engagement activities. All Council engagement will have a presence on our platform irrespective of the engagement type, as a way of providing a transparent record of engagement for the community.

OUR APPROACH TO ENGAGEMENT

Council will thoroughly plan out its engagement activity and Council Officers will be supported to implement engagement in line with the Policy via an internal Handbook that will provide a suite of tools and resources. The handbook will be developed in collaboration with the community and cross-Council departments from March-October 2021.

Our approach to engagement will be tailored to the type of decision as well as the members of our community, stakeholders and internal teams that may be affected. We will also consider factors such as time, resources, budgets and any legislative requirements.

While the methods and tools we will use will vary, our engagement activities, particularly those that are more complex and include a deliberative element will follow the same four-step process:

1. Plan
2. Do
3. Share
4. Review

Council is committed to reporting back to participants the findings of the engagement process and how they have influenced the decision or outcome, ensuring the method/s are inclusive and accessible.

REVIEW OF THE POLICY

The Whitehorse Community Engagement policy was reviewed 12 months after its adoption, and will now be reviewed every two years.

RELATED POLICIES & LEGISLATION

Our engagement approach is primarily driven by the requirements of the Victorian Local Government Act 2020 (LG Act 2020), however a range of other legislation also applies, which is summarised below:

Legislation	How it relates
Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities 2006	Recognises every individuals’ right to freedom of expression, participation in public life and to have their privacy maintained
Victorian Planning and Environment Act 1987	Sets minimum consultation requirements for planning permit applications and changes to the Planning Scheme

Victorian Subordinate Legislation Act 1994	Sets minimum consultation requirements for making local laws
Victorian Public Administration Act 2004	Promotes high standards of public service, integrity, and good governance
Victorian Equal Opportunity Act 2010	Promotes inclusive workplaces where everyone can participate free from discrimination
Victorian Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005	Sets clear standards in relation to protecting the safety of children (and their involvement in public life)
Road Management Act 2004	
Land Acquisition & Compensation Act 1986	Council is an acquiring authority and the principles of the Land Acquisition & Compensation 1986 apply to Council purchases and compulsory acquisitions.

As we deliver engagement in line with this Policy, we will also consider other related Council policies, including:

- Media Relations Policy
- Digital Strategy
- Social Media Guidelines – Councillors
- Information Privacy Policy
- Employee Code of Conduct
- Councillor Code of Conduct
- Whitehorse Health and Wellbeing Plan (incorporating a number of social plans including: Diversity, Disability, Healthy Ageing, Reconciliation, Community Participation, Youth & Early Years Plan)