

Youth Engagement Strategy 2014 to 2019



OUR PEOPLE

OUR CITY

OUR FUTURE

Wodonga Council would like to acknowledge and thank all of the young people who contributed their opinions and ideas, and generously gave up their spare time to assist in the development of this document.



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Introduction

The easiest way to think about youth participation is: nothing about us without us!

There are many definitions of youth participation, but all of them acknowledge the invaluable contributions that young people make to communities when they are encouraged and empowered to participate in matters that affect them and they are passionate about.

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) uses the following definition of youth participation:

“Youth participation involves young people being active in decision making processes and issues that affect them.”

St John Ambulance defines youth participation as follows:

“Youth participation is about developing partnerships with young people so that they may take a valued position and role within our community and are able to be actively involved in decision making processes that affect them.”



Purpose

The goal of the *Youth Engagement Strategy* is to:

- Strengthen relationships between the council and young people aged nine to 24. By allowing for clear and honest communication, improving the understanding of each other's opinions, concerns, restrictions and strengths;
- Help encourage young people's sense of ownership over strategies, projects and decisions to support long-term sustainability of projects and initiatives;
- Develop an understanding of the make up, characteristics, needs and priorities of young people; and,
- Search for solutions, information and opportunities that contribute to the development of strategies and policies that consider young people.



Strategic context

The *Wodonga Council Plan 2013-2014 to 2016-2017* outlines the key strategic priorities that the council will deliver over the life of the plan.

One of the key strategic objectives within the council plan is: “We will ensure young people are consulted and considered in matters that directly impact them.”

As outlined in the *Community Relations Strategy*, the council uses community engagement to:

- Strengthen relationships between the council and the community by allowing for clear and honest communication, and improving the understanding of each other’s opinions, concerns, restrictions and strengths;
- Help encourage ownership within the community over strategies, projects and decisions to support long-term sustainability of projects and initiatives;
- Develop an understanding of the make up, characteristics, needs and priorities of the community; and,
- Search for solutions, information and opportunities that contribute to the development of strategies and policies.

The *Wodonga Youth Strategy 2014-2015 to 2016-2017* states actions including:

- Increasing the number of young people participating in community consultations and decision-making, especially through social media channels; and,
- Providing training for council officers to use “Yerp”, the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) youth engagement toolkit.

A commitment to youth consultation and participation as an integral part of council planning will ensure a more engaged community into the future.





The opinions and ideas of more than 800 young people were gathered through surveys (530), focus groups (65), consultation walls (115), suggestion boards (85) and casual conversations (25) conducted across Wodonga between March and October, 2013. Young people told the council that the best way to provide them with information was by Facebook, followed by email, followed by text message and finally radio and television. They also said that the best way to get in touch with them was by email, text message and finally by phone.

Young people were also consulted in relation to the council's 2013 Customer Satisfaction Survey with 11.5 per cent of respondents being 18 and 20 years of age. Overall, respondents to the survey concluded that medium and long-term plans for the future of the city are not communicated well. The public's opinion is not sought before big decisions are made. When a decision is made then it, and the reasons for it, are not communicated effectively. Respondents were unsure of the council's advocacy and lobbying priorities.

When it comes to consulting young people, the most appealing methods as reported by young people include online polls or forums, casual conversations, surveys, peer interviews and graffiti walls or idea boards.

Young people also told the council that barriers to participation include time, age, a perceived exclusivity of opportunities, not being aware of opportunities, a perceived apathy of the council to hear opinions and feeling that the way opportunities for consultation are offered tend to be adult centric and therefore 'uncool' or overwhelming.

In the consultation young people made it clear that technology should play an important role both in addressing the barriers to participation, but also in the council's methods of consultation to ensure inclusivity and access.

Why the focus on young people?

Participation is a human right. Under the *United Nation's convention on the Rights of the Child*, all Australian young people are entitled to have a say in decisions that affect their lives. Involving young people in decision making will develop skills which will provide benefits to the community in the future.

Young people are often dismissed as simply the future of the community or a group that are developing into adults. But they need to be acknowledged as active citizens who have current needs and strong opinions about their community.

The focus on including young people in decision making is not because they should have greater influence than other groups within the community, but rather adults often underestimate the skills of young people or think they know what young people want or need. Young people are one group that Wodonga Council has an obligation to involve in consultation and decision making.

Benefits to the council

Relevant council decisions;
Inclusive public policy;
Resilient, diverse, engaged communities; and
Retention of young people through fostering a sense of community connectedness.

Benefit to young people

Having a say in community decisions that affect them;
Development of skills;
Increased self confidence;
Connection to community and networks;
Sense of value and respect from community;
Ability to challenge stereotypes about young people; and
Being part of the solution to community issues.



What is community engagement?

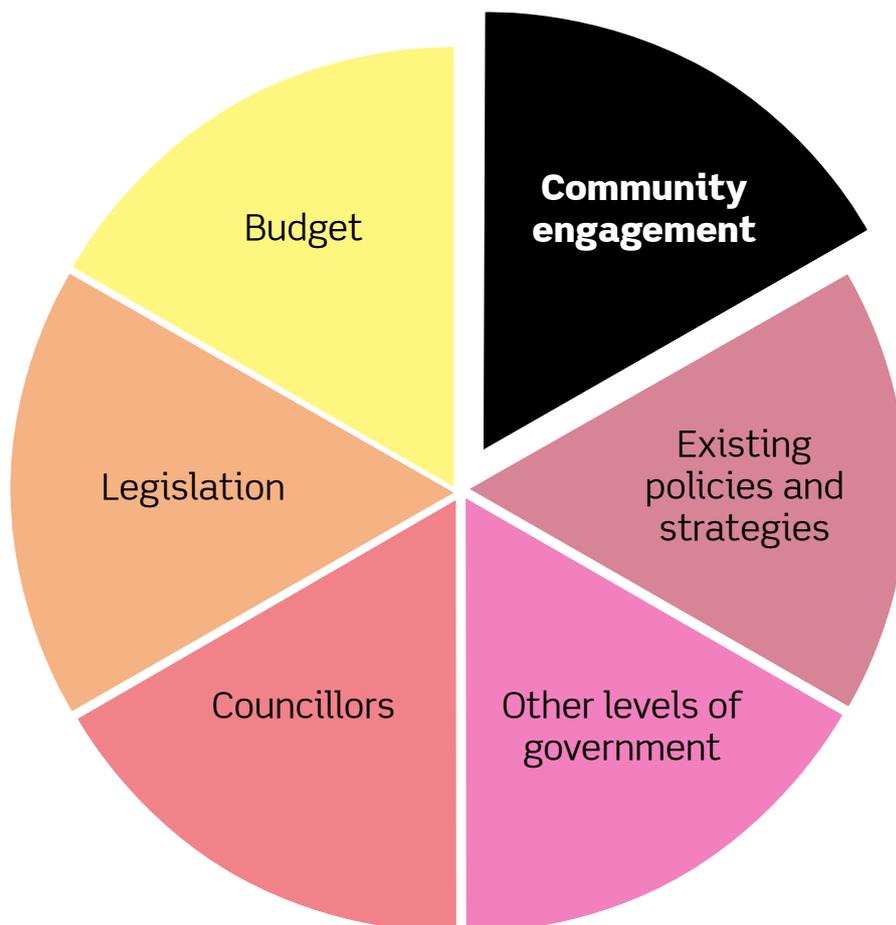
Community engagement is a planned process with the specific purpose of working with identified groups of people, whether they are connected by geographic location, special interest, affiliation or identity, to address issues affecting their well-being.¹

Effective community engagement allows the council to tap into wider perspectives, sources of information and potential solutions to improve decisions and services.

It also provides the basis for productive relationships, improved dialogue and deliberation, and ultimately, better democracy.

More importantly, perhaps, those involved in the process may have had a new experience of positive involvement with the council and public decision-making which may have taught them to distinguish between their private interests and concerns and issues of the greater public good².

Community engagement is not the sole determinant in a decision-making process. There are many other stakeholders and factors that need to be taken into consideration. Some of these are shown in the chart below.



¹ Queensland Department of Emergency Services (2001) Charter for Community Engagement, Community Engagement Unit, Strategic and Executive Services

² Brackertz, N, Zwart, I, Meredyth, D and Ralston, L (2005) Community Consultation and the 'Hard to Reach': Concepts and Practice in Victorian Local Government, Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology

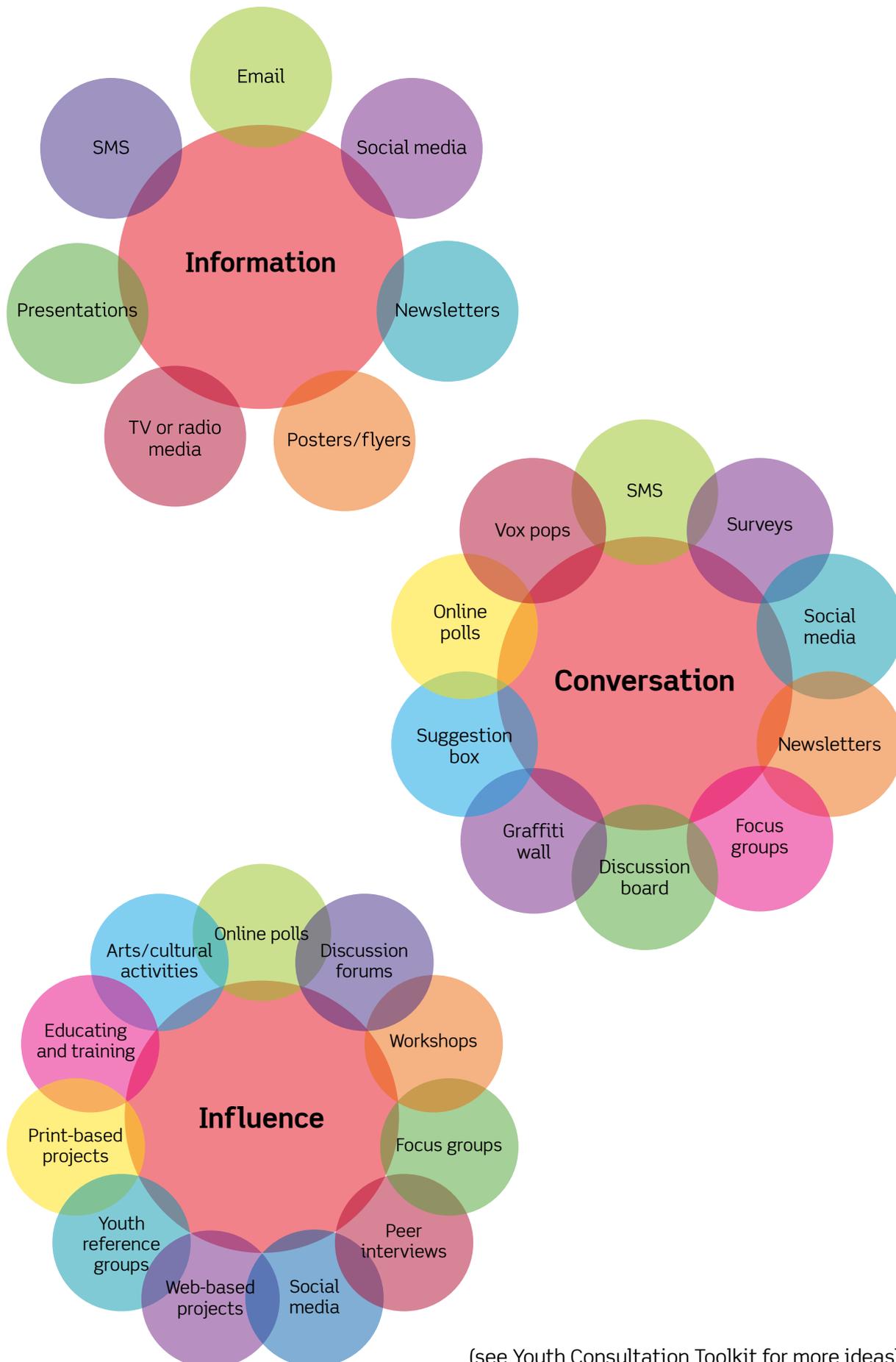
What types of community engagement are there?

Wodonga Council has developed its own model of community engagement, based on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's three-level engagement model³.

	Objective	Critical factors	Desired outcome
Provide information to the community	To ensure community members have access to information that is accurate, relevant, appropriate, easy to access and easy to understand.	Community members must have easy, equitable and timely access to information and the method of delivery must be appropriate for the issue and the intended audience.	Community members are better informed about the council's policies, programs and services, and about how to access information and services.
Engage the community in conversation	To seek and receive the views of community members on issues that directly affect them or in which they may have a significant interest.	There must be clarity about the goals of seeking feedback, the roles and responsibilities of the council and community members, and their level of influence (if any). There should be stated mechanisms for feedback.	Greater involvement of community members in the council's activities, greater understanding of council policy and decision-making processes, and better community outcomes. More effective policies, programs and services that represent the diverse needs of community members.
Enable the community to influence decision-making	To develop relationships that enable community members to influence the development and evaluation of policies, programs and services, but where the council retains the responsibility for final decisions.	There must be clarity about the extent to which the input of community members will be taken into account in decision-making processes. There should be stated mechanisms for feedback.	Greater involvement of community members in the council's activities, greater understanding of council policy and decision-making processes, and better community outcomes. More effective policies, programs and services that represent the diverse needs of citizens and communities.

³Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2005), Evaluating Public Participation in Policy Making

Youth specific consultation mechanisms under each level of engagement



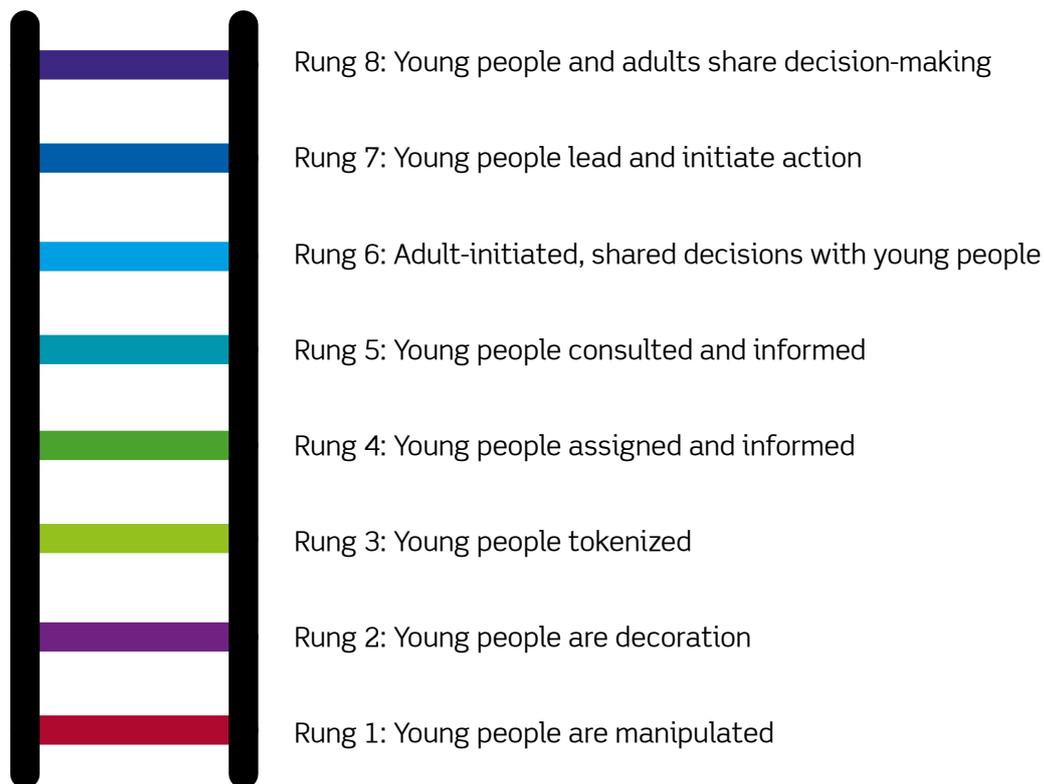
(see Youth Consultation Toolkit for more ideas)

Hart's Ladder

Hart's Ladder is the model of youth participation that is used by the Victorian Government. It clearly outlines levels of participation and non-participation and encourages climbing above the lower levels by thinking of ways to engage young people. According to this model, the first three rungs of the ladder refer to non-participation and the top five rungs refer to true participation.

In implementing the key strategic objectives within the *Council Plan* of: "We will ensure young people are consulted and considered in matters that directly impact them", the council strategies, plans and activities focus on the upper levels of the ladder, as demonstrated in the table below.

Rodger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation



Adapted from Hart, R. (1992). *Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.



Rung	Definition	Examples
8) Young people-initiated, shared decisions with adults	This occurs when projects or programs are initiated by young people and decision-making is shared between young people and adults.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involves equity between adults and young people, for example, youth adult partnerships.
7) Young people-initiated and directed	This step is when young people initiate and direct a project or program. Adults are involved only in a supportive role.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth leadership program; • Community projects; and • Youth activism.
6) Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people	Occurs when projects or programs are initiated by adults but the decision-making is shared with the young people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • REDfest; • Red Carpet Youth Awards; and • Youth forum about road safety funded and initiated by the council, but jointly organised by young people.
5) Consulted and informed	Occurs when young people give advice on projects or programs designed and run by adults. The young people are informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of the decisions made by adults.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skate park design consultations; • Central business area plan consultations; • Youth consultations; and • Youth advisory councils.
4) Assigned but informed	This is where young people are assigned a specific role and informed about how and why they are being involved.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people invited to be part of committees as a 'youth voice'; and • Young people given an opportunity to volunteer.
3) Tokenism	When young people appear to be given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about what they do or how they participate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people are used inconsequentially by adults to reinforce the perception that youth are involved. For example, a young person is asked to be part of a panel to represent youth without giving them opportunity to consult from a wider range of young people.
2) Decoration	Happens when young people are used to help or "bolster" a cause in a relatively indirect way, although adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by young people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The presence of youth is treated as all that is necessary without reinforcing active involvement. For example; young people given a script to present on youth issues to a conference.
1) Manipulation	Happens where adults use young people to support causes and pretend that the causes are inspired by young people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May happen when young people feel forced to attend an event/ forum/consultation without regard to their interest or willingness to participate; and • Young people's quotes, drawings or pictures are used in a document that they have had nothing to do with.

The following action plan has been developed and informed by the council's engagement strategy and the information gained from Rodger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation. The action plan will assist the council to:

- Strengthen relationships with young people;
- Understand the needs and concerns of young people;
- Encourage young people's sense of ownership of decisions affecting them;
- Search and find solutions and opportunities that consider young people; and,
- Keep accountable and continuously improve the council's engagement with young people.



What the youth strategy will do (action plan)	Youth Engagement Strategy actions	Council Plan			
		Year one	Year two	Year three	Year four
Increasing the number of young people participating in community consultations and decision making, especially through social media channels.	Collaborate with the communications and marketing department to provide social media training to council departments annually.	x	x	x	x
	Develop database of young people and groups for consultation.	x	x	x	x
	Youth services to work with departments to assist them to engage young people in their planning and decision making.	x	x	x	x
	Biennial interviews with departments.		x		x
	Further develop youth services Facebook page to improve dialogue.	x			
	Feedback provided to councillors via annual CARMS report summarising outcomes.	x	x	x	x
Provide training for council officers to use Yerp, the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) youth engagement toolkit.	Biannual "engaging with youth people" training offered.	x	x	x	x
	Opportunity for additional training sessions for individual departments if requested.	x	x	x	x
	Provide a link to youth engagement resources and strategy on council intranet.	x			

Evaluation measures and key targets from youth strategy

Increase in levels of young people participating in community consultation through the youth inclusion engagement tool.

Source: Youth report on the number and breadth of young people consulted during the life of the plan, with a goal of 33 per cent achieved at the end of the plan.

Increase in number of team leaders and managers participating in youth engagement training.

Source: Youth report on the number of individuals completing the training, with a goal of 50 per cent of team leaders and managers participating by the end of the plan.

