

Community engagement policy

1. PURPOSE

Effective community engagement allows us 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.

Wodonga Council commits to using community engagement to:

- Strengthen relationships between the council and the community by allowing for clear and honest communication, improving the understanding of each other's opinions, concerns, restrictions and strengths.
- Help encourage ownership within the community over strategies, projects and decisions. This community ownership can support long-term sustainability of projects and initiatives.
- Helping the council develop an understanding of the make-up, characteristics, needs and priorities of the community.
- Searching for solutions, information, and opportunities that the council could not develop on its own. There is a wealth of information within the community and engagement allows the council to access this for the development of strategies and policies.

It is important that the community understands that there are many factors that impact on a council decision being made.

Factors such as financial and resource considerations, political directives and environmental and social concerns all play important roles in the decision making process.

The level of engagement that was selected for the process will also impact on how the data is used within the council and the decision-making process.

If a difference occurs between community input and the council's final decision, the reasons will be clearly and unambiguously stated.

2. SCOPE

2.1 When will community engagement be used?

Different issues and situations will require different engagement levels and methods. Different levels of decision making requiring different approaches to consultation include:

Site specific – matters about a particular site such as a change in use or sale of a property, excluding matters that need to be decided under the Planning and Environment Act.

Area improvement – Matters that affect people in a specific area or neighbourhood. For example, a change in service delivery, township strategy or structure plans.

Service planning for entire municipality – To develop or improve a service that would see a significant change in the level of service.

Policy development – To develop or improve policies or the council's position on particular matters. This does not include internal operating matters.

Key strategic issues/major development – A project that, because of its size, could impact on the finances or the future of the whole municipality.

Strategic plans for the city – Establishing the decision-making framework for the council. For example, the Council Plan.

Legislative requirements – this refers to all prescribed activity under the Local Government Act (1989) and any other relevant Acts.

2.2 Community engagement methods

The five levels of engagement used within the Wodonga are based on the IAP2 spectrum for public participation and are detailed below;

Inform

Goal: To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions

Promise: We will keep you informed

Examples: Fact sheets, websites, open houses, media campaigns

Consult

Goal: To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives, and/or decisions

Promise: We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision

Examples: Public comment, focus groups, surveys, public meetings

Involve

Goal: To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered

Promise: 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

Examples: Workshops, deliberative polling

Collaborate

Goal: To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives, and the identification of the preferred solution

Promise: 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

Examples: Citizen advisory committees, consensus- building, participatory decision-making

Empower

Goal: To place final decision making in the hands of the public

Promise: We will implement what you decide

Examples: Citizen juries, ballots, delegated decision

3. POLICY

The council **must** use community engagement methods when:

- It is required by legislation
- An issue may have potential impacts on the health, safety or well-being of any community member

Wodonga Council **should** use community engagement methods when:

- Any proposed changes will impact on current users or customers of a council service or facility;
- Any proposed changes which will affect the rights or entitlements of community members, including minority groups;
- There is potential impact on surrounding neighbours;
- It wants to identify community issues, needs and priorities;
- It wants to monitor customer satisfaction with council's services facilities;
- There is a level of controversy or conflict or sensitivity about a particular issue;

The council is committed to ensuring that all community engagement processes will be delivered in a manner that allows community members to identify the issue and input into the process.

The official consultation period, during which the council will receive submissions on documents, strategies and policies, will be a minimum of four weeks and a maximum of six. This is in addition to the community engagement period that is conducted prior to the development of the document.

The community will receive a minimum of two weeks' notice for any community engagement methods that requires them to attend or participate in events outside their ordinary routine.

Where appropriate, community engagement methods will be held at various locations throughout the municipality.

We commit to the following level of engagement appropriate for each circumstance.

	Strategic plan	Policy development	Site specific	Service planning	Area improvement	Legislative requirements
Inform	1	3	1	2	1	1
Consult	2	3	3	2	2	3
Involve	3	3	3	3	3	3
Collaborate	4	4	4	4	3	5
Empower	5	5	5	5	5	5

- 1 – Every time
- 2 – In most circumstances
- 3 – depending on program/issue/timing
- 4 – On the odd occasion
- 5 – Very rarely

Wodonga Council is also committed to ensuring that data and information gathered via community engagement methods form a vital component of its decision-making process.

3.1 Use of information and data

There are many factors that impact on a council decision being made. Factors such as financial and resource considerations, political directives and environmental and social concerns all play important roles in the decision making process.

The level of engagement that was selected for the process will also impact on how the data is used within the council and the decision-making process. If a difference occurs between community input and the council’s final decision, the reasons will be clearly and unambiguously stated.

As part of its commitment to the effectiveness of engagement, the council’s associated decision-making process will be evaluated after a final decision has been made.

Community engagement information and data will also be used within the organisation where appropriate. This is of course except for information that is restricted due to privacy considerations.

4. RELATED POLICIES

Media policy

5. RELATED LEGISLATION

5.1 Planning and Environment Act

Wodonga Council has a number of obligations under to advertise or 'give notice' of planning permit applications and amendments to the Wodonga Planning Scheme which as set out under the Planning and Environment Act 1997.

Some examples of documents for consultation and minimum timeframes under the Planning and Environment Act 1997 include:

Amendments to Planning Scheme – 28 days minimum timeframe

Planning Permits – 14 days public notice; 16 days adjoining neighbours; 28 days referral authorities

5.2 Local Government Act

Section 223 of the Local Government Act outlines provisions for the rights if people to make submissions to Council.

The minimum requirement for submissions from the date of publication of a public notice inviting submissions has recently increased to 28 days.

Some of the documents governed by Section 223 include:

- Council Plan
- Council Budget
- Local Laws
- Road Closures
- Road Discontinuance
- Intention to Sell
- Intention to Lease

Section 163 of the Local Government Act requires the council to give public notice of its intention to declare a Special Charge at least 28 days before making the declaration.

6. REFERENCES

Community engagement procedural guidelines

7. REVIEW

This policy will be reviewed two years from the date of adoption, with operational amendments as required in accordance with the council's/CEO's approval.