

DRAFT Community Engagement Policy

September 2025



EAST GIPPSLAND
SHIRE COUNCIL

Acknowledgement of Traditional Custodians

East Gippsland Shire Council acknowledges the Gunaikurnai, Monero, Bidwell, Nindi-Ngujarn Ngarigo Duduroa Dhargal, Jaithmathang people as the Traditional Custodians of the land that encompass East Gippsland Shire, and their enduring relationship with country.

The Traditional Custodians have cared for and nurtured East Gippsland for tens of thousands of years. We value their living culture and practices and their right to self-determination.

We pay our respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in East Gippsland, their Elders, past, present, and future.

IMAGE: Cann River

Endorsement and revisions

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Administrative updates: Minor amendments to this document may be required from time to time. Where amendments do not materially alter the intent of a document, they will be made administratively and approved by the document owner.

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Contents

Purpose	4
Scope	4
Context	5
Objectives	5
Community engagement in East Gippsland	7
Why we engage	7
When we will engage	8
Who is responsible	8
Who we engage	8
How we engage	9
Roles and responsibilities	10
Our commitment to the community	11
Deliberative engagement	11
Increasing levels of participation	12
Community engagement – our categories	13
Closing the loop	14
Supporting information	15
Applicable legislation	15
Council documents	15
References and resources	15

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to outline East Gippsland Shire Council's (Council) commitment to community engagement. It applies across the work that Council delivers, from strategic planning to community development, service delivery and legislative requirements.

It provides guidance to:

- » Prioritise a voice for the community through genuine engagement and active listening
- » Demonstrate transparency of decision making
- » Develop trust in the engagement process and Council's decision making
- » Recognise the variety of places, people and divergent needs within East Gippsland
- » Ensures genuine, authentic, informative, and inclusive engagement with the community and key stakeholders

This approach supports our commitment to put the community at the centre of our engagement activities and decision making ... because community matters.

Scope

This policy applies to community engagement activities and projects led by Council - Councillors, Council staff, contractors and consultants.

The principles of community engagement under the *Local Government Act 2020*.

- » A community engagement process must have a clearly defined objective and scope.
- » Participants in community engagement must have access to objective, relevant and timely information to inform their participation.
- » 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.
- » Participants in community engagement are informed of the ways in which the community engagement process will influence Council decision making.

A commitment by Councillors, Council staff, contractors and consultants to plan early for community engagement, using the five principles above, is critical to the success of effective community engagement in East Gippsland.

This 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.

Context

The policy has been developed within the framework of the *Local Government Act 2020*. The policy is reviewed every four years.

The Act specifies that the policy must be applied to the development of key strategic plans and decisions.

All community engagement and public exhibition will be carried out in accordance with this policy, except where there are specific requirements under separate legislation.

A review of Council community engagement was undertaken in 2024. The review considered engagement practices, policies and capabilities. Recommendations from the review have been included in the development of this policy.

Objectives

The objectives of this policy are to:

- » Establish the process for decision making used by Council based on community sentiment, legislative frameworks and budgets.
- » Increase consideration of place-based, First Nations people and interest groups in community engagement activities.
- » Establish the criteria for using deliberative engagement practices.
- » Raise awareness of Council's community engagement practices and the different types and levels of engagement required for different projects.
- » Provide Council employees with the framework and to plan and execute community engagement projects.
- » Acknowledgement of the need for cultural safety, respect and trust in all engagement processes.

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 East Gippsland.

Public participation

Council interprets the terminology of public participation and community engagement to be interchangeable. The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum helps Council define the public's role in any public participation or engagement process.

Participant

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

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 include people of all abilities and/or identify as First Nations people and/or are culturally and linguistically diverse, based on their proportion in the community.

Deliberative engagement

A process used to reach an outcome or decision for complex issues. 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.

Stakeholders

Sections of the East Gippsland community who may be impacted by or interested in an outcome, or who have a responsibility to deliver an outcome. These may be Traditional Custodians and First Nations communities, children, ratepayers and renters, emergency services, culturally and linguistically diverse people, politicians and funding bodies, and many more.

Place-based

An approach that acknowledges the uniqueness and diversity of our individual communities and builds strong connections with local stakeholders, community organisations, groups, leaders and individuals to strengthen and support local places, spaces and people.

Community engagement in East Gippsland

We are committed to actively listening and understanding the needs and views of East Gippsland, because our community matters. We place a high value on the effort and time required for a community member to be engaged in Council activities and provide input.

When we are planning, delivering a project or making a decision that significantly impacts you, we want you to have the opportunity to participate and be heard. Participation in meaningful engagement recognises the community as a partner in Council's direction and values.

We want to hear the community's voice, unearth opportunities and explore challenges and solutions to inform decision making.

What do we mean by 'community engagement'?

Community engagement in East Gippsland is a planned process to work with individuals and groups to encourage involvement in decisions that affect them or are of interest to them. This means better decisions that result in improved policy, facilities and services, as well as greater community satisfaction and wellbeing.

"Public participation based on the belief that the people affected should have a right to be involved in the decision-making process or informed of outcomes."

(IAP2 Australasia Core Values)

- » Our 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.
- » Considers 'place' and a 'place-based approach' when framing and designing engagement campaigns.
- » Understanding and using the skills and experiences of our communities strengthens partnerships and supports better decision making.

Why we engage

By engaging with the community directly we're including their needs, knowledge, and experience in our decisions. Through a meaningful exchange of information, we build transparency, trust, and better outcomes.

- » Improved ability to make informed decisions that are supported by community.
- » Hearing different voices that represent our varied places in East Gippsland.
- » If there are decisions to be made that could benefit from input by the people in East Gippsland.
- » Improved communication and transparency with residents about decisions made in the community's interest.
- » Greater community understanding of the decision-making process, which supports transparency and sustainable governance.

When we will engage

Planning should begin during project development, continue to completion and feedback should be provided to participants and the community.

- » We will not rush engagement and will allow enough time to complete annual planning for projects.
- » We will provide timely and relevant information.
- » We will be flexible and adaptable if unexpected delays occur.
- » We will engage early with Traditional Owner groups/organisations and First Nations people to allow time for meaningful engagement.
- » We will use existing meeting schedules as a forum to present new ideas or information and provide feedback.

Who is responsible

Council officers and Councillors are responsible for providing opportunities for community members to be involved in community engagement on decisions that affect them.

- » Councillors, Council staff, contractors or consultants working on or responsible for a project that affects community.
- » Specialist staff can provide support with mentoring, planning and delivery.
- » Councillors can champion engagement processes and attend relevant engagement sessions.
- » Councillors should have sufficient understanding of and confidence in the engagement undertaken to make decisions on that basis.

Who we engage

A diversity of opinions should be sought that are relevant to the project or matter.

- » Participants in community engagement must be representative of the people and groups affected by the subject of the community engagement.
- » The target audience for engagement should be identified early in planning.
- » First Nations people and Traditional Owner groups/organisations should have relevant information provided at agreed locations and times.
- » Any barriers for community should be identified including gender, geographic location, age, culture and health.
- » 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.
- » Council's place-based community plans include a detailed community profile of the people living in the local community drawing on demographic data and community feedback and can be utilised, as a starting point, to develop the target audience for place-based engagement.

First Nations people

Our Reconciliation Action Plan supports prioritising the building and maintaining respectful, mutually beneficial relationships with First Nations people stakeholders.

We commit to continue to build on trusted relationships with First Nations people and to start the engagement conversation and planning early. Through these trusted relationships and knowledge, we will create shared engagement opportunities and outcomes with our First Nations communities that are culturally safe.

We will work in partnership with Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to co-design engagement processes. These partnerships will be based on mutual respect, shared decision-making, and cultural safety, in alignment with the Victorian Aboriginal and Local Government Strategy.

Young people

As a child safe organisation, we are committed to empowering children and young people to have a voice on decisions that impact them. In any engagement planning process, we will consider ways to design and deliver age-appropriate methods in focus areas.

Communities of interest

Communities of interest are groups of people who share a common passion or interest, engaging in discussions and activities centered around that topic or activity. They may not be easily defined by a particular geographical area. Examples include people with interests in the arts, environment, heritage, sport etc. When planning engagement, we will consider all the groups that may have a special interest in the project.

Communities of place

East Gippsland spans a large area with diverse landscapes from the mountains to the coast and lakes. Many of the communities in these towns and areas have differing socio-economic needs and priorities. Place-based engagement targets a place or location, to build on local strengths or respond to a complex social problem. We will consider the specific circumstances of a place and engage local people as active participants in the development and implementation of place plans and projects to share decision-making.

How we engage

Community engagement should be a planned process with a clearly defined objective, scope, negotiables/non-negotiables and activities.

- » Engage early before decisions are made and leave enough time for digesting information, hearing views and providing final feedback.
- » Let the community know upfront what Council is wanting to achieve, how the engagement process will influence decision making, and the purpose and scope of community engagement activities.
- » Be open about key issues or constraints which may influence the engagement and decision making, such as budget or legislation.
- » Provide accurate, easy to read or understand information – it may be words or diagrams. We will tailor it to the group or individuals we are engaging with and listening to.
- » If using digital platforms also consider other options for community members who may not be able to access digital information, such as displays at public buildings or face-to-face sessions.
- » We will provide reasonable support to enable meaningful and informed engagement for all participants as required under the *Local Government Act 2020* and outlined in the Ministerial Good Practice Guideline.

Roles and responsibilities

The following teams or positions have direct and/or supporting responsibilities associated with this Policy.

Community, business, government and other stakeholders

- » Support community engagement processes and Council decision-making by seeking information, actively participating in engagement activities, putting forward ideas and promoting consultation opportunities to other stakeholders.

Mayor and Councillors

- » Champion the principles of quality engagement through demonstrating leadership and modelling good practice.
- » Stay informed of engagement activity.
- » Attend engagement activity as appropriate.
- » Balance the range of community and stakeholder views, concerns and opportunities on an issue as part of the decision-making process.
- » Undertake community engagement training as part of Councillor induction.

Executive and Strategic Leadership Teams

- » Manage teams and projects to ensure community engagement is undertaken consistent with this policy and that staff are appropriately resourced, trained and supported.

Community Engagement Team

- » Build organisational capacity and practice through provision of advice, training and mentoring, resources and tools, as well as building and maintaining place-based relationships with community.

Council staff

- » Ensure their community engagement planning and delivery is consistent with this policy and as appropriate to their role and function.
- » Use the internal toolkit, engagement planning and supports available in designing and delivering their engagement.

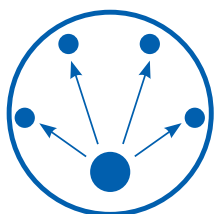
Consultants and contractors

- » Responsible for ensuring they are working with community on projects as advised by Council.

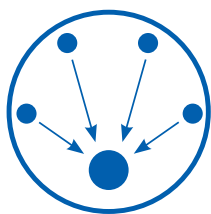
Our commitment to the community

We are making a commitment to understand the needs and views of our community and strengthen partnerships. We value the community's contributions.

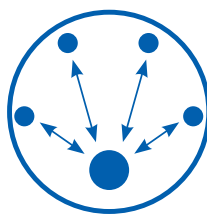
Our spectrum of engagement model provides a consistent approach to community engagement. It is based on the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation framework, which identifies five levels of engagement:



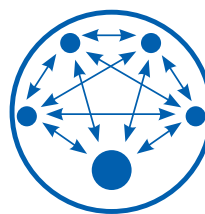
Inform



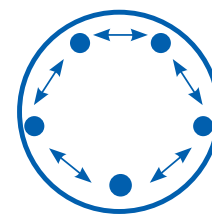
Consult



Involve



Collaborate



Empower

The level/s chosen will depend on the project stakeholders, scope, impact and available resources. We will also evaluate the complexity and likely impact of a decision against the significance of the outcome when developing community engagement activities.

Deliberative engagement

Deliberative engagement is a process used to reach an outcome or decision for complex issues, such as the community vision and Council Plan. Deliberative engagement brings together a mix of voices to work through and consider issues in a supported environment. It is an inclusive and transparent process where support, time, information and purpose must be available to the people involved.

Deliberative engagement requires locals, experts, Councillors and employees to be engaged in informed discussion. It should enable a diverse range of people in our community to be highly involved, including those most impacted by the decision.

Matters requiring deliberative engagement can be determined by Council, but as a minimum must include:

- » Community Vision
- » Council Plan
- » Financial Plan
- » Asset Plan

Deliberative engagement occurs at involve, collaborate and empower levels of the engagement spectrum (Category 1). Examples of deliberative practices are:

- » Working with advisory groups.
- » Online proposals and ideas are discussed by a panel of community members.
- » Participants are asked to consider and prioritise ideas.
- » A community-representative group takes part in a series of sessions of information exchange to reach a consensus.

Our commitment - increasing levels of participation

Inform

Consult

Involve

Collaborate

Empower

Community engagement goal

To provide balanced and objective information to build community awareness of something that has happened or will happen	To listen to the community's feedback on ideas, alternatives, and proposals to inform our decision making	To listen and seek input to identify issues, concerns, and aspirations to inform decision making and show how that input has informed the decision	To listen and work with our community to develop a detailed understanding of all the issues and opportunities and identify agreed solutions at every step of the process	To build the capacity of our community to identify solutions and/or lead change
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Our promise to the community

We will keep you informed	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how your input influenced the decision	We will work with you to hear your concerns and aspirations, which are reflected in the alternatives developed, and provide feedback on how your input influenced the decision	We will look to you for advice and innovation in developing solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions as best as possible	We will work with you to identify options that will influence the final decision
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Role of the community

Listen	Contribute	Participate	Partner	Lead
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Engagement category

Category 1				
Category 2				
Category 3				
Engagement methods				
Media releases	Your Say public comment	Workshops	Workshops	Independently governed reference groups
Advertisements	Surveys	Advisory groups	Community panels	Citizens' juries
Community displays	Focus groups	Online forums	Advisory groups	Representative deliberative panels
Signage	Public exhibition	Co-designing	Online forums	Deliberative decisions
Fact sheets	Ideas boards	Detailed online mapping, ranking and prioritising tools	Co-designing	
Newsletters	Community groups conversations		Detailed online mapping, ranking and prioritising tools	
Public notices	Creative projects			
Social media	Online pin dropping map tools			
Websites	Face-to-face interviews and discussions			
Letters, email, text and phone calls				

Community engagement - our categories

We have categorised our activities and decisions into three categories to support a better understanding of the types of engagement and when they are used.

Some matters may be elevated to a higher category where Council or community feedback indicates this is appropriate. Each level can be supported by engagement methods and activities from lower categories. We aim to communicate the level of engagement proposed with the community at each stage.

Category 1

Matters which require deliberative engagement under the Local Government Act 2020 or as 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.

- » Community Vision
- » Council Plan (includes the Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan)
Financial Plan
- » Asset Plan
- » High impact, complex projects like major park upgrades, precinct masterplans, multi-year projects

Category 2

Matters which need community input, higher or long-term impact and significant interest to the community. This may also involve deliberative engagement elements.

Annual Budget

- » Long-term infrastructure planning
- » Major land rezoning, structure plans and Planning Scheme amendments
- » Significant strategies and policies
- » 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
Proposed ongoing changes to services/service levels

Category 3

Matters which are low impact or interest to the community, public safety, or where the community's ability to influence is limited.

- » Routine infrastructure repairs or works
- » Public submissions as set out in the Governance Rules
- » Land sales and acquisitions
- » Routine Planning Scheme amendments / planning permit applications
Decisions in managing emergencies / unplanned service changes in an emergency or pandemic
- » Decisions by external authorities

Closing the loop

Throughout the stages of engagement it is critical to close the loop with our contributors and community. We want the community to know they have been heard.

Participants in community engagement will be informed of the ways in which the community engagement process will influence Council decision making and how their input will be used. We will:

- » At the beginning of each engagement process provide a timeframe for submissions and feedback.
- » Inform community where and how they can access the feedback.
- » Update the community and stakeholders throughout the life of the engagement.

How we will report on engagement

Methods for reporting back to community could include, but are not limited to:

- » Council's website
- » Updates on our Your Say engagement portal
- » Council's *Community Matters* newsletter
- » Social media
- » Public notices and newspaper/newsletter advertisements
- » Media releases
- » Printed materials in service centres and community facilities
- » Direct communication, such as letters, emails, phone calls and meetings with the involved people and groups

Public Exhibition

We will place matters on public exhibition (open for public feedback) 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, as a minimum, to placing draft documents resulting from the following, on public exhibition before Council endorsement for:

- » A deliberative engagement process (Category 1)
- » 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.

Supporting information

Applicable legislation

- » *Victorian Government Local Government Act 2020*
- » *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*
- » *Gender Equality Act 2020*
- » *Freedom of Information Act 1982*
- » *Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014*
- » *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005*

Council documents

- » Council Plan 2025-29 incorporating the Municipal Health & Wellbeing Plan
- » Council's Community Vision 2040
- » Reconciliation Action Plan
- » Strategic documents that provide the framework and direction for Council's work

References and resources

- » [International Association of Public Participation \(IAP2\) Quality Assurance Standard – Core values and spectrum of engagement](#)
- » [International Association for Public Participation \(Engagement Institute\)](#)
- » [Deliberative engagement for Victorian councils – Mosaic Lab](#)
- » [Community Engagement Toolkit – Rural Councils Victoria](#)
- » [Victorian Aboriginal and Local Government Strategy](#)
- » [Ministerial Good Practice Guideline and General Guidance for Councils Engaging with Aboriginal Victorians](#)
- » [Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018–2023](#)
- » [Victorian Treaty Process](#)
- » [Victorian Closing the Gap Implementation Plan](#)
- » [Victorian Government Public Engagement Framework 2021-2025](#)

