

Darebin Community Engagement Policy

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Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Darebin City Council acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung people as the Traditional Owners and custodians of the land and waters we now call Darebin and affirms that Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung people have lived on this land for millennia, practising their customs and ceremonies of celebration, initiation and renewal. Council acknowledges that Elders past, present and emerging are central to the cohesion, intergenerational wellbeing and ongoing self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. They have played and continue to play a pivotal role in maintaining and transmitting culture, history and language.

Council respects and recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' values, living culture and practices, including their continuing spiritual connection to the land and waters and their right to self-determination. Council also recognises the diversity within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities have had and continue to play a unique role in the life of the Darebin municipality. Council recognises and values this ongoing contribution and its significant value for our city and Australian society more broadly.

(Extract from Darebin City Council's Statement of commitment to Traditional Owners and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 2019)

Purpose and scope

Darebin City Council is committed to building a fair, inclusive and equitable city, which is why we put residents, business owners and the community sector at the heart of our decision-making.

This policy ensures we conduct our community engagement in a way that includes all voices in our community by actively seeking to remove the barriers people and groups in the community might encounter, and is open and transparent to ensure the community can trust the decisions we make as caretakers of this city.

This will be achieved through:

- Our community engagement principles and our commitment to the community, which underpins and guide our approach to community engagement.
- Our clear minimum standards of conducting meaningful, equitable and inclusive engagement, taking into consideration the significance and complexity of projects and matters, and level of interest, impact and influence that the stakeholders have on decisions being made.
- Consistent application of this policy to all planning, implementation and evaluation of all community engagement processes and activities at Darebin undertaken by Council, including work undertaken by consultants and volunteers.

This policy also provides direction on our legislatively required community engagement practices.

What is Community Engagement and why we engage

Community engagement is a planned process that provides individuals and groups the opportunity to be involved meaningfully in service planning, delivery and decision-making which may affect them or are of interest to them. Community engagement seeks to build trust and strengthen relationships.

Community engagement is a key step in forming decisions and developing policies, services, programs, places and spaces that continue to be relevant and responsive to changing needs and expectations. Maintaining and improving the wellbeing of our community depends on effective and transparent decision-making, that has considered the diversity of community views in an equitable, inclusive, open and authentic way.

Meaningful, equitable and inclusive community engagement is essential as highlighted in one of the principles of our Towards Equality – Equity, inclusion and human rights framework 2019-2029.

International research shows that the decision-making of governments is improved when communities are involved (Parvin 2018). It makes local government: respond better to the diverse needs of the community; design better services; and best of all, use the ideas of our community to respond to change. It also builds trust in government as people become involved in, and therefore see themselves reflected in it.

Our two aims for engaging are:

- To strengthen representation in decision-making
- To make sure we fulfil our commitments to community in line with our engagement principles and ensure the decisions and actions Council makes are transparent and well explained to our community

The first aim is to strengthen representativeness in decision-making by ensuring Councillors and staff have access to information that reflects the diversity of the needs and lived experiences in our community, not just the opinions of the loudest voices. There is a widening “participation gap” in who gets their views heard in government decision-making (Dalton 2017). If not thought through carefully, new methods of community engagement only give people with the skills and resources more ways to have a say, further widening that gap (Dalton 2017). Focusing on representativeness will improve the quality of our community engagement, ensuring we generate a balanced set of perspectives to incorporate into discussions about action and outcomes. It is important that we provide more ways for a broader range of residents, businesses, and community representatives to have a say, and to experience and build an understanding of local government.

The second aim is to ensure we fulfil our commitments to community in line with our engagement principles and widely provide open and transparent feedback on decisions, to allow public scrutiny, and to make sure the community understands the reasons for our decisions (Parvin 2018). Fulfilling our commitment to the community is essential for good community engagement. This means always “closing the loop” by going back to the community post-engagement, so people know how their feedback was considered and what decisions were made as a result.

This aim also aligns to the principles in the *Local Government Act 2020* to ensure the transparency of Council decisions and actions (governance principle), and to ensure that Council decision making processes are transparent. An exception is when the Council is dealing with information that is confidential by virtue of this Act or any other Act (public transparency principle). Engaging our community in the decision-making process is at the

heart of transparency in Council’s decision making processes.

Bolstering the representativeness of information used to make decisions and feeding decisions back to community is not always easy. But well-planned community engagement means we can lead meaningful, open and transparent conversations about policy challenges and options. It means we can deliver the types of services and facilities our community needs and wants and address undue influence of skilled interest groups by balancing needs and perspectives. Ultimately, it allows our elected representatives to make decisions that create better communities, in increasingly complex environments.

Our Principles and Commitment to the community

The following six principles underpin community engagement at Darebin. They are the guiding rules for all engagement processes and activities undertaken, and ensure our community engagement is purposeful, representative, and is easy to be involved in.

Council has built on these six principles to include our commitment to our community against each of these principles.

Principles	Our Commitment
A genuine opportunity to shape the way our local government works (respectful)	We set clear objectives and scope for our engagements to ensure participants have clear expectations of what they can influence and how their feedback will be used.
Focused on providing input to solving challenges (action oriented)	We recognise that better decisions will be made with community feedback and input.
Representative (focused on justice and equity)	We ensure all community members have opportunities to contribute and benefit, no matter their preferences, abilities, cultures or where they live. We recognise there are barriers for some groups and will use suitable methods, and build our relationships across our community, to remove those barriers and ensure everyone’s voices are heard
Build on our relationships with the community which are essential to trust in our work	We value the insights of our community and respect the time and effort they give towards informing our decision making. We will be collaborative, consistent, transparent and will keep the community informed in our engagement approach
Accessible, easy, and enjoyable (inclusive)	We focus on productive and meaningful sessions that suit the community and are enjoyable and culturally relevant. We want those involved to learn about complex issues, hear a range of perspectives, and have their own experiences and needs heard.
Fed back to the community (integrity)	We are committed to sharing the findings with participants and to ensuring our decisions are reported back widely to the community.

How we engage – Minimum standards, Level and Type

Minimum standards of engagement

Council will endeavour to reach all sections of the diverse community and provide an opportunity to give feedback and be involved when forming decisions and developing policies, services and spaces in a way that is accessible, appropriate and welcoming. It is important people who participate are supported and made to feel safe and comfortable in the process so they can have their say, whatever their background or life experiences. Specific consideration must be given to encourage feedback from those who experience disadvantage, marginalisation or those who Council traditionally finds hard to reach.

We apply the lenses of people, places and experiences from our Towards Equality Framework to consider the diverse needs of our community and how they should be included in the engagement process. We also apply minimum standards of engagement that reflect the ratios of diversity in the community, to all our engagements in order to achieve maximum representation in our engagement approach.

We are particularly committed to supporting the rights of people and groups who experience discrimination and disadvantage, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; children; young people; older people; culturally and linguistically diverse people; migrants and refugees; women and girls; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ+) people; people with a disability; and people experiencing poverty, including intergenerational disadvantage in the context of historical and growing inequalities.

Council is committed to high quality, open and respectful engagement with all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. Council acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' right to self-determination and community-control principles. These principles have special significance for the way in which Council engages with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Council also recognises the diversity of views and opinions within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities have been deeply harmed by the policies and actions of past governments, which means trusting relationships may not exist or may need time and resources to establish and build.

In all of Council's engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, Council will ensure that there are culturally appropriate opportunities for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to be involved and strive to establish and sustain collaborative relationships: working together, giving recognition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community decision-making and, importantly, supporting the on-going aspirational efforts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples themselves towards justice and community well-being.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must always have the authorising voice in any thinking and decisions in matters which will affect them and their communities. This is usually where there is a higher level of community influence in the decision-making.

A comprehensive guide of how to apply these standards are explained in our *Community Engagement Toolkit*.

Level of Community Engagement

Engagement opportunities provided by Council will vary in level and type depending on the significance, complexity of projects, and level of interest, impact and influence that the stakeholders have on decisions being made.

At Darebin Council, we use the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation to guide our engagement approach. The Spectrum, as adapted and shown below, describes five different levels of engagement each with a different level of influence that the community should expect to have, and the related promise that we make to the community.

The levels of engagement are identified during the engagement planning process, but they can change throughout the course of projects due to factors like political impact, nature of the project, scope, resources, and influence from communities of interest.

Council will assess the following when identifying the levels of engagement and related engagement activities:

- Level of impact on the community
- Level of influence communities of interest have on the decision being made
- Complexity and associated risks of the issue, project or topic
- Resources available

Council will also assess our demographic data and identify the community groups that need to be targeted during the engagement planning process.

Our policy requires the collection of personal information from participants of all engagements undertaken with the community such as name, an email address or postal address and postcode. However, we recognise that not all participants will be able to provide such details, and as such Council will make reasonable adjustments as required.

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Participation goal	To provide well balanced and objective information to assist our community to understand or make them aware of the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions	To seek community feedback on analysis, alternatives, and proposed decisions	To work directly with the community throughout the process to ensure that their concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the community in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and identification of preferred solution, and work together toward a jointly agreed outcome.	To place decisions in the hands of the community, and build their capacity to deliver change
Our promise to the community	We will keep you informed	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations and provide	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations	We will work together with you to formulate solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations	We will implement what you decide or recommend, or we will provide reasons if

		feedback on how community input influenced the decision.	are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how community input influenced the decision.	into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	Council amends a decision or recommendation
Example methods and practices	Information sessions Media releases Social media posts On-site signage Direct mail Project updates	Surveys (online and hardcopy) Ideas collection Drop-in sessions Opinion poll Submission processes Pop-up sessions	Advisory groups Workshops Deliberative polling Elements of deliberative engagement practices	Citizen advisory committees Participatory decision making Community ownership project governance Elements of deliberative engagement practices (i.e. deliberative panels)	Citizens' jury/ panel/ assembly Deliberative budgeting Consensus Conference Representative deliberative panels
Engagement Type	Consultative		Deliberative		
Minimum standards of engagement	<p>Engaging with our diverse community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying community engagement principles and commitments to community in practice • Ensuring accessibility: language, location, format, platform and time • Making sure there is translated materials and interpreters/ multilingual facilitators (languages other than English including Auslan) • Identifying demographics and priority groups: to ensure representativeness of the diverse community • Providing enough time and resources for engagement (planning and time for responses) <p>Engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a first principle, Council will lead engagement activities with the Traditional Land Owners, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation, on all matters of key importance • Culturally appropriate opportunities provided • Views and guidance must be sought from the earliest stages of an idea or proposal before moving into scoping and planning • Advice cannot be sought and then ignored • Advice must be integrated without adjustment or censorship. • Advice may need to be sought and integrated successively, at each stage of a project or initiative. • When engagement type is deliberative engagement there must be a partnership decision-making process 				

Type of Community Engagement

Engagement practices can largely be considered as ‘consultative’ or ‘deliberative’. Consultative engagement is where the engagement level is at ‘inform’ or ‘consult’ on the IAP2 Spectrum and deliberative engagement is where the engagement level is at ‘Involve’, ‘Collaborate’ and ‘Empower’.

Consultative Engagement

Consultative engagement includes:

- Information provided to the community to help them to understand a project or a matter
- Feedback sought from the community such as ideas, thoughts and insights which are considered by Council and the outcome of the engagement is reported back to the community

Deliberative Engagement

Deliberative engagement is a process that involves an informative and engaging dialogue with an inclusive, diverse and genuine representation from our community, where considered views and joint outcomes can be developed. Participants are provided with a breadth of inputs, information and enough time and opportunity to engage and discuss issues in depth in a welcoming and respectful environment, then provide recommendations and feedback which is reviewed and considered for adoption by Council.

Council will undertake deliberative engagement in the following circumstances:

1. Where it has a legislated obligation (including Community Vision, Council Plan, Financial Plan and Asset Plan) or
2. Where it is assessed as appropriate to undertake this engagement approach for projects or processes, and meet the level of influence and promise required

Example of deliberative methods and practices are shown in the table above. Council will use some of these methods and practices to meet the legislative requirements in the Act.

Legislative environment and requirements

There are some areas where our community engagement work is guided by legislation. Under the *Local Government Act 2020*, there are five community engagement principles that Council’s Community Engagement Policy need to give effect to, and four principles that need to be applied to the engagement undertaken for strategic documents and plans such as the four-year Council Plan, Community Vision, Financial Plan, and Asset Plan.

Community engagement principles

- 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

Principles of deliberative engagement

- authentic engagement with the community;
- accurate representation of the community in engagement activities;
- clear demonstration of how all views have been considered;
- accessible and relevant information available to the community to ensure the decision-making process and the community's level of influence is clear in each instance and that participants are fully informed.

The following is a guide of how Council will meet the engagement requirements as outlined in the Act.

Strategic document, plan or process	Engagement type
Council Plan	Deliberative Engagement
Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plan	Deliberative Engagement
Community Vision	Deliberative Engagement
Financial Plan	Deliberative Engagement
Asset Plan	Deliberative Engagement
Making of local laws.	Consultative Engagement
Budget	Consultative Engagement
Governance Rules	Consultative Engagement
Acquiring, purchasing, selling, exchanging or leasing land	Consultative Engagement
Electoral structure review	Engagement type to be decided upon assessing the intricacies of the matter
Other Council policies, strategies and plans that directly impact the community	Engagement type to be decided upon assessing the intricacies of the matter
Projects that create new assets or change service levels	Engagement type to be decided upon assessing the intricacies of the matter
Submissions process – replaces section 223 of the Local Government Act 1989	Follow the provisions in the Local Government Act 1989

This policy also meets the Victorian Auditor General's Office recommendations for community engagement practices (VAGO 2017).

All of our community engagement processes and practices comply with the letter and spirit of the Charter of Human Rights and responsibilities Act 2020. The following rights are particularly relevant to community engagement:

- right to recognition and equality before the law (section 8), which implies that special measures can be taken to assist groups who are disadvantaged by discrimination
- right to freedom of expression (section 15) stating that people are free to say what they think and want to say, and have the right to find, receive and share information and ideas
- right to taking part in public life (section 18) stating that every person has the right to take part in public life
- right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief (section 14)

- cultural rights (section 19), notably Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural rights
- right to protection of families and children (section 17)
- right to privacy (section 13) - Every person has a right to enjoy their private life free from interference.

Community engagement relating to planning permit applications and planning scheme amendments is outside of the scope of this policy, as these processes are governed by the *Planning and Environment Act 1987(Vic)* and associated regulations. However, these processes should be interpreted in accordance with human rights principles as mandated by the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic)*.

Putting community engagement into practice – planning, implementation and evaluation

Council follows five steps to put community engagement into practice and undertake a successful engagement. This easy-to-use, step-by-step approach is applied to all community engagements undertaken at Darebin regardless of the complexity or scale.

Each of these steps align with the principles of this Policy, which allows a consistent application of the principles to our engagements.

Step 1 – think about what information you need to solve your problem or challenge (objective, background, scope engagement levels and type)

Step 2 – identify the community members and groups you need to talk to (who to engage)

Step 3 – identify the best engagement methods

Step 4 – get the right data from your engagement, including for evaluation and ensure the information is housed accordingly for future use

Step 5 – report back to the community: this is where Council will inform the community of engagement outcomes, which is usually via the Your Say Darebin online engagement platform, Council website, and directly to the participants who were involved and have provided contact details

The steps of this policy will help staff consider:

- if they need to engage
- how they can generate robust, useful, representative data, and
- how they can report results of decision-making back to the community.

Council staff can use the five steps to write their *Community Engagement Plan*, which is part of the *Community Engagement Toolkit* and has detailed information on how to apply these five steps.

Responsibilities

We have principles, commitments and approaches that ensure our community engagement is meaningful, equitable and inclusive.

The implementation of the Community Engagement Policy is the collective responsibility across all teams and staff members at Darebin.

Responsibilities for ensuring this policy is implemented as intended is as follows:

Who	Roles and responsibilities
Councillors	Ensure that there has been meaningful and inclusive engagement, and support the community mandate
Executive Management Team	Ensure policy is being applied to the community engagements when reviewing reports and presentations Champion best practice community engagement
Managers Group and Leadership Group	Ensure policy is being applied to community engagements being undertaken by their teams
Staff	Ensure policy is being applied to community engagements undertaken

Definitions

The following definitions have been used for the purposes of this policy.

Community Engagement	A planned process that provides individuals and groups the opportunity to be involved meaningfully in service planning, delivery and decision-making which may affect them or are of interest to them. Community engagement seeks to build trust and strengthen relationships.
Community	A term used that includes residents, businesses/workers, community leaders/representatives, and community groups and organisations in Darebin.
Consultative Engagement	A term used to describe engagements at the level of 'inform' or 'consult' on the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation, with the related promise of keeping the community informed or seeking feedback on strategies, policies and plans.
Deliberative engagement	Deliberative engagement is a process that involves an informative and engaging dialogue with an inclusive, diverse and genuine representation from our community, where considered views and joint outcomes can be developed. Participants are provided with a breadth of inputs, information and enough time and opportunity to engage and discuss issues in depth in a welcoming and respectful environment, then provide recommendations and feedback which is reviewed and considered for adoption by Council.

Public Participation	A term used by IAP2 meaning the involvement of those affected (interested or impacted) by a decision in the decision-making process. We use the term interchangeably with Community Engagement, Stakeholder Engagement or Consultation.
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