

5.4 MONASH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT POLICY

Responsible Manager: Jo Robertson, Executive Manager Communications

RECOMMENDATION

That Council adopts the Monash Community Engagement Policy 2020 as an interim policy subject to review in August 2021.

INTRODUCTION

The *Local Government Act 2020* has reformed community engagement on plans, policies and decision-making. The new legislation requires Council to develop and maintain a Community Engagement Policy. The Policy must, among other things, replace the public submission process prescribed by Section 223 of the previous Act (1989). This is a major change for matters such as the Council Plan and Budget. Council is required to adopt and implement a Community Engagement Policy by 1 March 2021.

A policy and supporting framework have been developed in consultation with Council staff and representatives of Council's advisory and ambassador groups.

The policy documents were developed promptly in order to provide timely guidance on the forthcoming community engagement on the Community Vision, Council Plan and Financial Plan, also prescribed by the Act.

The policy builds on the organisation's current community engagement practice; takes up the recommendations of the Victorian Auditor General on public participation; and applies the principles and other requirements as prescribed by section 55 of the Act.

BACKGROUND

Section 55 of the Act empowers councils to decide on the best methods of engagement on anything that has a significant impact on the whole community (policies and plans etc.) or on a specific community (e.g. play space upgrades; cycle paths). The main provisions to this new power are that Council must apply 'deliberative' processes for certain strategic plans; must set out its engagement commitment for these and other matters in its

Community Engagement Policy; and must give effect to the prescribed principles.

The Community Engagement Policy (s55) must specify 'deliberative engagement practices' for the Community Vision, Council Plan, Financial Plan and Asset Plan.

The policy does not apply to statutory processes prescribed by another Act, such as planning matters covered by the *Planning and Environment Act*, nor does it apply to unplanned interactions with Council such as service requests or complaints.

DISCUSSION

There are two documents presented with this report, a policy and a framework. The policy needs to clearly provide guidance to Council and staff on the intention of community engagement and compliance with the Act. Although the policy will be available for the public to view, engagement with community members and staff uncovered a need for a separate community-friendly document that supports the policy while providing more meaningful information for community. A third document or set of documents, the Guidelines, will be developed once the policy and framework have been adopted, to provide more detail, examples and templates to assist staff.

The Policy

The Act specifies a policy that meets the requirements set out in section 55(2). Consistent with that provision, the draft policy will, if adopted:

- a) Be capable of being applied to the making of local laws
- b) Be capable of being applied in relation to Council's 'budget and policy development'
- c) Describe the type and form of community engagement proposed, having regard to the significance and complexity of the matter and the level of resourcing required
- d) Include 'deliberative engagement practices'
- e) Give effect to the community engagement principles outlines in s56, and
- f) Specify a process for informing the municipal community of the outcome of the community engagement.

The Framework

The framework assists community understanding of the roles in public decision making and the levels of influence. It supports the policy by providing examples and encourages public participation by explaining the processes. Importantly, the framework was informed by community engagement. In particular the interpretation of the principles and the commitments reflect community expectations of Council.

The Guidelines

The existing guidelines will be updated to assist staff to plan, deliver, and close community engagement in accordance with the new policy. Local Government Victoria are working with Councils at present to develop a shared set of resources but what these will look like is unknown at this stage. In the meantime, work will commence by Communications to develop internal resources to support good community engagement. The internal guidelines will reflect and expand on the recommendations the Victorian Auditor General's Office made to State and Local Government in its report *Public Participation in Government Decision-Making, 2017*.

The implementation of the policy will be accompanied by ongoing staff training on IAP2 and the community engagement steps in the policy.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The key impacts the Act and new policy will have on community engagement at Monash are:

- a) Deliberative engagement practices must be employed when consulting on the key four-year and longer plans specified by the Act: Community Vision, Council Plan, Financial Plan and Asset Plan.
- b) Good quality and measurable engagement practice will be applied across Council, including clarity, planning, implementation, reporting and evaluation.
- c) Council is obliged to inform the community of the results of the engagement including the influence it had on the decision of Council.

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Good community engagement practice fosters trust in Council. Enabling and strengthening civic participation in the community are closely associated with the liveability of an area and community wellbeing.

HUMAN RIGHTS CONSIDERATIONS

The Community Engagement Policy is consistent with the Human Rights Charter, in particular by promoting the rights of members of the community to take part in public life.

CONSULTATION

Community engagement on the policy, as a requirement of the Act, took place during the COVID-19 pandemic via online platforms. The engagement took place at the 'Consult' and 'Collaborate' levels of the IAP2 spectrum.

Stage 1 Community Survey May 2020

A representative sample of the community comprising 800 residents were questioned on aspects of community engagement as part of the Annual Community Satisfaction Survey. The survey found that one in four residents

is willing to participate in community engagement and there was a strong preference for survey and other online style of engagement.

Stage 2 Facilitated Workshops June 2020

Two workshops were held with staff who have responsibility for community engagement and two workshops were held with community members who are members of a Council advisory group or ambassador group, to co-design the policy and framework. There was strong consensus on the need for the policy and framework to demonstrate good practice and transparency.

Stage 3 Testing and refining the draft documents July 2020

The community participants in the earlier workshops were provided with a report of the outcomes of the two workshops in which they participated and invited to provide recommendations on the draft framework via an online survey.

Staff across Council participated in a two-hour workshop to review the community feedback and the draft policy and framework. Recommendations were provided to add clarity to the draft documents. A session was also held with Councillors to review the new accountabilities imposed by the Act and the draft policy.

Legal advice was obtained to ensure the draft policy was compliant with the Act.

There was a Councillor briefing workshop to introduce changes relating to community engagement within the Local Government Act 2020 and to explore the role of councillors within compliance of the new act.

A report on the three stages of community engagement is attached.

CONCLUSION

The Monash Community Engagement Policy has been developed in accordance with section 55 of the *Local Government Act 2020*. The policy is supported by the Monash Community Engagement Framework which was informed by a process of community participation.