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| Local Government Act 2020 – Principles Community Engagement |

The *Local Government Act 2020* is a principles-based Act, removing unnecessary regulatory and legislative prescription.

## Community engagement

The *Local Government Act 2020* (“the Act”) has, at its core, the aim of ensuring all Victorians have the opportunity to engage with their council on local priorities and the future of their community.

As the level of government closest to the community, councils have both the opportunity and the responsibility to enable participatory democracy. Many citizens now want a stronger voice in shaping their community’s future. Community support for and involvement in consultation is only likely to intensify in coming years as technological advances provide a greater range of tools to enable engagement across a broader audience in each municipality.

Community engagement seeks to better engage the community to achieve long-term and sustainable outcomes, processes, relationships, discourse, decision-making, or implementation. To be successful, it must encompass strategies and processes that are sensitive to the community-context in which it occurs.

The principles for community engagement refer to **deliberative engagement practices** (s.55(2)(g)). The Act does not prescribe what are deliberative engagement practices, however a broad interpretation should be taken. The key characteristics of deliberative engagement are considered to be: authentic engagement with the community; good 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. Transparency is key to an effective process.

The process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people is a powerful vehicle for bringing about positive change that a community is invested in. It often involves partnerships and coalitions that help mobilise resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as a catalyst for changing policies, programs, and practices.

Community engagement encompasses a range of practices and processes, from a simple online poll, through to elaborate citizen juries. The Act does not define any type of community engagement that councils must employ; however it does ensure that, at a minimum, a council use and deliberative engagement practices in developing certain documents and processes, including strategic and financial plans.

Community engagement, when well-planned and genuine, can be a positive and productive practice. The intent of the Act is to encourage this by assisting councils to build capacity in deliberative engagement and for it to become usual practice, rather than an exceptional exercise.

## What it means

The Act says that a council must adopt and maintain a community engagement policy. The policy must, amongst other things, be developed in consultation with the community and give effect to the community engagement principles listed in the Act.

Section 56 of the Act lists the 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.

## Expectation

Councils must, at a minimum, apply their community engagement policy in the development of the following:

* planning and financial management
* community vision
* council plan
* financial plan
* revenue and rating planning
* asset plan

Many other council requirements, under this Act and other legislation, would benefit from councils considering the use of deliberative engagement activities.

When applying deliberative engagement practices in the development of council plans, documents, policies and procedures, councils should also be aware that all principles within the Act should also be applied, where relevant. For example, financial management, public transparency, strategic planning and service performance principles must also be considered.

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