Mount Alexander Shire Council

Start by asking

Communications
and Engagement Strategy

Working together for a healthy, connected shire

Mount Alexander
Shire Council

Acknowledgement of country

Mount Alexander Shire Council acknowledges that the traditional custodians of this land, the Dja Dja Wurrung and Taungurung peoples, proudly survive. We acknowledge their continued practise of custom and their close cultural, spiritual, physical, social, historical and economic relationship with the land and waters that make up their country, which includes Mount Alexander Shire.

Council recognises the Victorian Government's Recognition and Settlement with both the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation and the Taungurung Land and Waters Council.

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Inside cover acknowledgement artwork by local artist Daikota Nelson.

Mayor's message

Councillor Rosie Annear
Mayor
Mount Alexander Shire Council

I'm excited to present Mount Alexander Shire Council's Communications and Engagement Strategy.

This strategy outlines Council's plan to improve the ways in which we communicate with our community, as well as how we can better support our community to engage and participate in Council decision-making.

We'll "start by asking" is our vision for this strategy and we've carried this vision with us throughout the project – from initial community consultation, to our draft document, and now to our final strategy.

The strategy was informed by extensive community consultation and feedback, gathered through pop-up sessions, a month-long survey, and face-to-face workshops.

We received amazing feedback from the community during this consultation process, with over 700 detailed and passionate comments.

It's these comments that led us to 10 key themes, which our strategy is structured around:

1. Methods
2. Channels
3. Content
4. Councillors
5. Transparency
6. Genuine
7. Reputational Issues
8. Make all feedback count
9. Motivation
10. Timely

We heard that residents want to speak directly to Councillors and staff, so we'll be exploring opportunities for more face-to-face conversations, as well as working to demystify Council's decision-making processes.

We know there's confusion about Council's roles, responsibilities, and limitations, so we'll be working to make it easier for everyone to understand what we can and can't do.

We heard that community members want to know more about the end result of Council projects and decisions, so we'll be working on closing the loop more often, and communicating outcomes more clearly.

Importantly, we want to reach and hear from as many different people as possible, ensuring that the incredible diversity of our towns and communities is reflected in our projects and initiatives. We want to get better at letting our community know when their input can influence Council's decision-making.

There are some instances, where community input can't change Council's decisions, and we want to be clear when this happens, and why.

We always try our best to be open, transparent and communicative with our community; we want conversations to be a two-way street.

We value all community interest and feedback. It's our community that makes Mount Alexander Shire the beautiful and unique place that it is, so we're committed to getting better at communicating and engaging.

Thank you to all community members, Council staff, and Councillors who have supported this strategy. I encourage everyone have a read and learn about what Council aims to achieve in the coming years.

About this strategy

The first principle of our Council Plan 2021-2025 is that we are "engaging genuinely with the community". The second and third state that we are "always improving", and "delivering together".

This strategy sets out an approach to community engagement and communications which puts these principles front and centre.

With this strategy, we have a roadmap of continuous improvement, and collaboration with our smart, engaged community. The community talked to us about their desire to work with us. They highlighted our commitment to working with them, and identified barriers to us doing that more effectively.

With this strategy, we will build on our successes, and learn from our errors.

We are committed to effective communications and meaningful community engagement. We have great stories to share that demonstrate the volume and depth of our work that serves the community, and we strive to put the community's best interests at heart in all our decisions.

This strategy has been developed in consultation with the Mount Alexander Shire community, Councillors and Council staff.

It is the first of its kind for Council and applies to the whole organisation – from Council staff and Directors, to the CEO and Councillors. It will set a benchmark for how we communicate and engage from this point on.

It is an aspirational document that refines our principles and sets new priorities for us to continue to excel in our engagement with the community we serve.
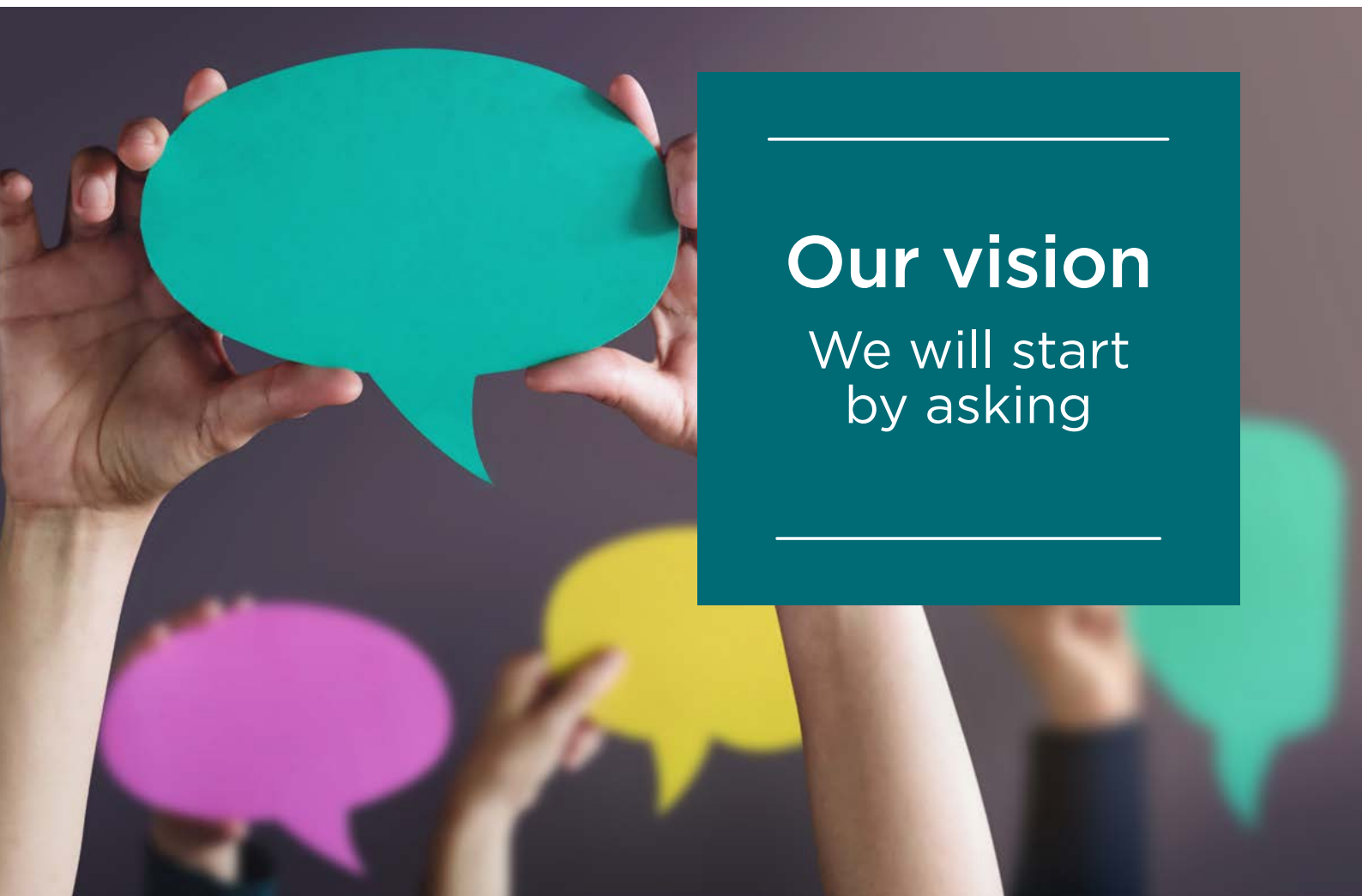
Our vision
We will start by asking

> "Community engagement is vital for the effective operation of Council."

Why communications and engagement matter

Strong engagement and clear communication with the community are essential to building trust and confidence.

If the community engages well on Council projects, those projects are stronger, and the community commits to them. If the community trusts their Council, it will engage more deeply on those projects.

Clear communication of Council work is central to building that trust.

By fully incorporating the needs, desires and local knowledge of the shire's residents, effective community engagement will mean:

- better project and service delivery
- more resilient relationships between Council and community, and within the community
- improved reputation of the shire among the Australian community
- increased understanding of community issues
- a greater ability for partnerships to form within the community
- a greater ability for Council and community to address complex and emerging issues
- previously unheard parts of the community are better supported, and their (often serious and poorly understood) concerns addressed
- communities are able to identify priorities and solutions for themselves, increasing commitment to implementing those solutions.
- We use the widely-used spectrum developed by the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) to define how we engage with the community at various levels.

  iap2.org.au/2018_IAP@_Spectrum

Council's role

This strategy is a key objective of the Council Plan 2021-2025.

The consultation which informed the plan was a success story which has informed this strategy. In it, the community made clear the importance of genuine engagement and clear communications.

Under the Local Government Act 2020, we are obligated to deliberately engage with the community on four major projects:

- The Council Plan
- The Community Vision
- The Financial Plan
- The Asset Plan.

We strive to go beyond this. Our community are engaged, enthusiastic and keen to contribute to democracy - and this Council aims to harness that energy. Meaningful and genuine collaboration between community and Council will lead to better outcomes for all.

This strategy is guided by the pillars, objectives and strategies identified in the Council Plan 2021-2025. We also recognise the vision, "Working together for a healthy, connected shire," and in particular strive towards our key principles of:

1. We are engaging genuinely with the community
2. We are always improving
3. We are delivering together.

> Keep asking us questions and listen to not just the loud community but the quiet ones too.

How we engaged

It was critical that community engagement was the first step in developing this strategy, and that their input was the principal factor in shaping our actions.

To that end, we engaged with the community in the following ways:

- We hosted eleven pop-up consultation sessions across the shire.

- We ran an online survey for one month which was promoted through all available channels.

- We distributed hard copy versions of the online survey.

- We held two targeted workshops with the Get Lost Creative Network and the Youth Advisory Group.

- We hosted three staff pop-ups consultation sessions.

- We held two targeted workshops at an all-staff meeting and with Council's internal engagement community of practice.

- We held one targeted workshop with Councillors.

- This resulted in 471 contributions from the community and Councillors, and hundreds more from staff. This provided an enormous body of evidence on which to base our recommendations.

Beyond that engagement effort, we also:

- consulted our colleagues at other Councils around Victoria for advice and existing knowledge

- consulted external and internal communities of practice

- incorporated information from the Local Government Community Satisfaction Survey 2022.

Images: Mount Alexander shire residents having their say on Council's communications and engagement

Who we heard from

We are enormously thankful to all staff, stakeholders and community members that took part in this engagement. All input has been collated and is directly linked to the actions will we take, and the evaluation we will conduct throughout the life cycle of this strategy.
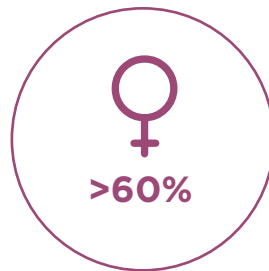
Demographic information from the online survey showed:

90%

Nearly 90% of the people we heard from are ratepayers and residents within Mount Alexander Shire

With the exception of Chewton, the location of contributors generally aligns with local census data

>60%

More than 60% of contributors are female

The age profile of contributors generally aligns with local census data aside from people under the age of 15, who were underrepresented

For a detailed breakdown on who contributed, please read the Draft Communications and Engagement Strategy Community Consultation Report April 2023.

Key themes

Over the course of consultation, ten key themes emerged.

They are listed below (in order of importance).

Theme	Description
1 **Methods**	The community wants to see more face-face opportunities to chat and engage, a broader range of ways to provide input during consultations and more targeted engagement and communications so we capture all voices (not just the loud ones).
	"Make it as easy as possible for a range of people - like this engagement had multiple ways to be involved, and the best option for me was this survey."
2 **Channels**	The community wants to see continued use of both traditional and digital channels, more face to face and physical options (word of mouth, posters etc) and more variety in face to face opportunities (forums, listening posts etc).
	"I love and appreciate emails I receive from Council and it is good to see them getting more approachable and interesting."
3 **Content**	The community wants to see information that more clearly explains the role, responsibilities and processes of Council; that is easy to read and understand and that is provided at the right time and consistent in all place.
	"De-corporatise the language - we are NOT consumers OR customers."
4 **Councillors**	The community expressed a desire to see and hear more from their Councillors, which aligns with an overall request for more face-to-face engagement.
	"Get Councillors out at listening posts."
5 **Transparency**	The community wants to see clearer explanations of our engagement processes. higher levels of influence and more information on how any feedback is used in decision-making.
	"Feedback on the impact of community feedback on council decisions would be appreciated."

Theme	Description
6 Genuine	The community wants to be more involved, to better understand why we are engaging, what the ask is and what the impact will be.
	"Set expectations – be clearer around what the community can and can't influence."
7 Reputational issues	Community members frustrated by other experiences with Council are less likely to value our engagement efforts.
	"Councillors and Council employees are working for the community. We are not the enemy."
8 Make all feedback count	Five per cent of feedback was not related to communications or engagement activities. How do we capture and redirect this feedback so it still counts?
	"A site for key resident proposals and the ability of other residents to support, oppose or build on such would open the agenda."
9 Motivation (why people engage with us)	Mount Alexander Shire communities are active and engaged, with a high level of interest in local issues. There is a perception that Council only hears from and listens to the loudest voices.
	"Input is needed from all citizens to achieve the community vision and keep council accountable to community."
10 Timely	Some community members are concerned there is not enough time to provide considered or meaningful input.
	"Make sure there are adequate timelines for projects, especially for consultation periods rather than ticking boxes quickly to meet a Council deadline."

> " Show the journey, not just the destination. "

Strategy principles and objectives

Guided by feedback we have developed four overarching principles to guide all Council communications and community engagement activities moving forward.

In addition, we have developed a set of strategic objectives that respond to each principle, to assist with strategy implementation.

Finally, we have created a draft Ongoing Action Plan that will help us monitor and evaluate the delivery of this strategy.

Principle: Genuine

Deliver genuine communications and engagement. Value the community's input and believe every community member has the right to know about and contribute to decisions that affect them. We commit to consultation which will inform our planning and decision making. We also commit to 'closing the loop', letting the community know how input was used.

Objectives:
- Improve internal capacity to plan and deliver effective communications and engagement
- Fewer, bigger engagements
- Increase understanding in community of Council's roles and responsibilities
- Improve customer service
- Prioritise community needs (and feedback) in our routine communications
- Improve pathways for community to speak with Council
- Demystify Council's decision-making processes.

Principle: Relevant

Communications and engagement are timely, and relevant to community needs. We will make our content easy to read and access, and ensure it accurately represent diverse views. We will make our information available through appropriate methods to reach the right people, at the right time.

Objectives
- Reduce barriers to participation
- Better use of existing advertising spend across all channels
- Increase community awareness around key messages
- Improve relevance of communications and engagement content
- Ensure messaging for long-running projects remain relevant.

Principle: Together

We deliver communications and engagement together. Good communications and engagement should be a shared goal and responsibility for Councillors, staff and the community. We recognise the power and willingness of the community to help drive greater engagement across the shire.
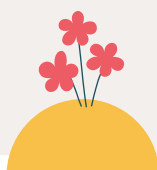
Objectives:

- Build relationships and networks to broaden the reach of our communications and engagement materials

- Increase opportunities to access Councillors and staff involved in consultations

- Improve internal communications

- Ensure face-to-face engagement is safe and respectful

- Foster a culture of continuous improvement around communications and engagement.

- Explore opportunities to increase diverse voices in engagement, in alignment with Council priorities.

Principle: Accessible

Accessible, open and transparent communications and engagement. As owners of important information and decisions that impact the community we will ensure communications and engagement activities are accessible, open and transparent. We will meet, and aim to exceed, all accessibility standards, in line with our Disability Inclusion Plan.

Objectives:

- Partner with the community to collect a cross section of views

- Increase delivery of face-to-face engagement

- More inclusive language and content

- Be timely

- Council meetings are open and accessible to all.
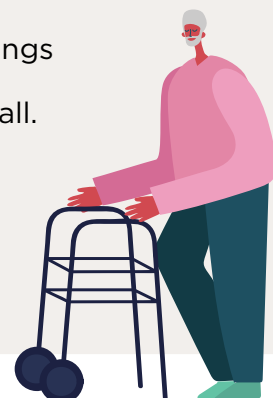
Our context

In consulting other sources (2022 Local Government Community Satisfaction Survey, consultations with other Councils and pro bono advice from engagement consultants), these are the key points:

Internal factors

Engagement is of critical importance to reputation

Fewer, better engagements

Given resource constraints, the growing consensus among Councils is to focus resourcing on major consultations which can deliver high-value information. This information should be applicable across various parts of Council's work, enabling us to apply the knowledge effectively, and efficiently communicate the results back to the community who contributed.

Similarly, there is enormous benefit in focusing our limited communications resources on larger, more sustained campaigns which will resonate more deeply with the community and ensure the most important messages cut through.

Community input is one part of the decision making process

While engagement is critically important, and we are committed to 'starting by asking', it is vital to note that most Council decisions have other considerations to weigh alongside community demands. A good example is when community desires for built infrastructure cannot be delivered in line with State or Federal Government guidelines.

Councillor presence matters

The community considers the Councillors to be an essential channel of communication and engagement, and expect to see them regularly, and in a structured way.

Councillors need to be well-supported in their community-facing efforts by Council, and clear channels for them to feed back from the community to Council staff need to be maintained.

Establishing the scope of engagement is important, but good engagement is the best solution to community education.

However, evidence is mounting that organisations which bring the community into the engagement process effectively are also organically increasing community understanding of how engagement works. This should be a focus of our efforts.

External factors

Funding constraints

This strategy is being presented in a financially constrained environment, one being felt by Councils and other institutions nationally. In our case, rate capping is still in place during a period of increased costs. This will create regular challenges to expansions of our engagement capacities.

Post-COVID communications and engagement needs

Online tools have opened up the possibilities for engagement, and have proven both successful and cost-effective. People also want more face to face connection after a couple of years of living digital. Any efforts to expand and improved communications and engagement must balance these needs.

There is no one size fits all

People have very clear preferences in how they wish to hear from and engage with their Council. These preferences vary substantially. This means that major engagements and projects require comprehensive campaigns which utilise all available channels and methods. Smaller projects must make all efforts to target their audiences in ways that are appropriate and affordable.

We can't please everyone

Most Council activities, but particularly larger projects, will find opposing views in the community. It is unlikely that effective communications and engagement will remove these. However, as we continue to improve in these areas, we hope to see greater awareness in the community of what they can influence and why decisions were made. Likewise, ensuring that all affected community members feel they have been adequately engaged is the single most effective way to manage community concerns around outcomes they disagree with.

Review and evaluation

Annual audits of actions in this strategy will be undertaken to ensure continued progress.

The strategy will be formally assessed on a four-yearly basis, beginning at its adoption by Council.

This will ensure that current issues, community feedback and any new and emerging communication and engagement trends and methods can be appropriately captured and reflected in the strategy.

Building an organisation-wide culture of engagement, and building the deep connections required for successful engagements will take time. This is an aspirational document which is contingent on collaboration from across the shire.

The final action plan will incorporate a section on our desired outcomes to identify success.

We will also develop an evaluation framework to help us measure our performance against our objectives. This will include evaluating existing data sources such as website traffic and social media engagement to track improvement, using existing data as a baseline, and other Councils as a benchmark.

> " No point growling about a decision or outcome if I haven't contributed how I feel. "

Mount Alexander
Shire Council