

Community Engagement Policy Review

Communications and Engagement

Results

September 2026

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Executive Summary

Our Community Engagement Policy was due for review.

We are reviewing the policy to make sure it reflects community expectations and supports good engagement practices.

We've created a working draft, which updates the existing policy into Plain English, aligns it with the *Local Government Act 2020*, includes First Nations informed engagement principles, and incorporates the key features of a separate Capital Works Engagement Policy, so that the two policies can be consolidated as one.

We asked the community what good engagement looks like, how people want to be involved in Council decisions, and what Council can do better. We received 55 survey responses.

Overall, respondents want Council to:

- engage early, before decisions are made,
- listen to community feedback,
- clearly explain what people can influence,

- communicate decisions and outcomes,
- use a mix of online and face-to-face engagement methods, and
- ensure all communities have a chance to be heard.

Community feedback supported the overall direction of the working draft and helped strengthen several areas. This included stronger commitments to:

- early engagement,
- reporting back on outcomes,
- clearer decision-making information,
- broader community participation, and
- local engagement opportunities.

The Community Engagement Policy, incorporating changes made as a result of this feedback, will now be presented to Council for consideration in September 2026.

Purpose

The purpose of the engagement was to gather feedback from the community to help inform the review of Council's Community Engagement Policy.

As the policy itself sets out how Council engages with the community, it was important to seek community input early in the review process to understand what effective community engagement looks like, how people would like to be involved in Council decision-making, and what improvements they would like to see in the future.

The feedback gathered through this engagement is intended to inform the review process and any future draft policy changes will be presented to Council for consideration through the formal decision-making process.

In some cases, feedback received via the open text boxes in the survey, while acknowledged, was outside the scope of this review.

This report summarises the key feedback themes and provides an officer response to each one.

The engagement was undertaken from Tuesday 7 July to Tuesday 4 August 2026. During this period, we collected the following statistics:



How we engaged

We received feedback from community via:

- An online survey on Council's [Your Say](#) page.
- Reactions to social media posts on Council's [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) pages.
- Via direct email from Council Advisory Groups.

To get the word out about the project and encourage feedback we prepared the following communications:

- Direct email to 552 Your Say followers (7 July 2026) and reminder (31 July 2026).
- Direct email to Positive Aging Advisory Committee, Disability Advisory Committee, Community Houses and Surf Coast Secondary College.
- [Media release](#) (10 July 2026) picked up by Colac Herald (13 July 2026) and Geelong Independent (17 July).
- Social media post (27 July 2026) shared to community pages.
- Advertisement in the Surf Coast Times (24 July 2026).
- Mayor's Column (31 July 2026).
- Country and Waters e-newsletter (30 July) to 5,933 email addresses resulting in 9 clicks.

How engagement influenced the outcome

Community feedback supported the overall direction of the working draft Community Engagement Policy and helped us strengthen parts of the policy.

Based on community feedback we:

- strengthened our commitment to engage early, before key decisions are made;
- improved our commitment to report back on what we heard and how feedback influenced decisions;
- made it clearer who makes decisions and what influence the community can have;
- added stronger commitments to hear from a wider range of people and provide local engagement opportunities;

- committed to using a mix of online, printed and face-to-face engagement methods; and
- broadened the definition of "community" to include the many people, groups and organisations affected by Council decisions.

Community feedback also confirmed the importance of clear communication, listening to community views, being inclusive, and showing how feedback informs decisions.

Some suggestions were outside the scope of the policy review because they related to specific projects, services or operational matters. These suggestions have not been included in the policy. Other suggestions will be considered through a forthcoming Community Engagement Framework (explaining how we will bring the policy to life in practice) and future engagement activities.

We updated the Community Engagement Policy to make it easier to read and understand. We aligned it with the *Local Government Act 2020*, added First Nations informed engagement principles, included requirements from the Capital Works Engagement Policy, and identified the need for a Community Engagement Framework to support how we engage with the community.

Your Say survey results

"As this policy will guide Council's engagement with the community for the next decade, it is essential that it promotes genuine, transparent and inclusive consultation with the whole community."

We had 55 contributions to the survey. Overall, the feedback shows that people want Council to listen more, be clear and open, and show how community feedback helps shape decisions.

Respondents want more chances to have their say, both online and in person, and they want to hear about projects earlier so they can be involved before decisions are made. They support community engagement but want it to be more genuine, visible, and effective.

Questions with 'drop down' responses

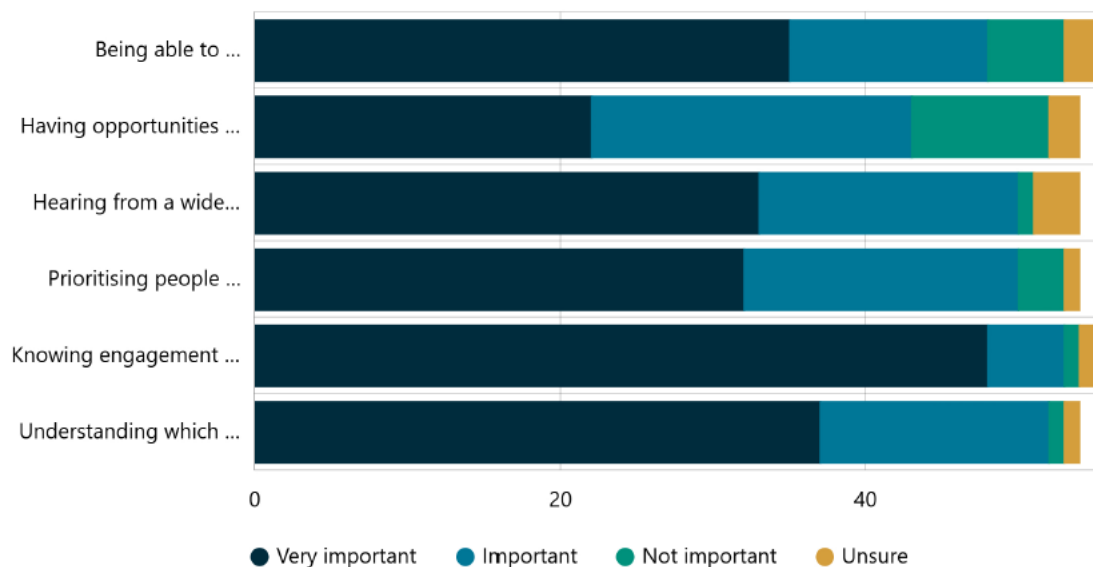
More than half of the people (56%) who answered the survey have taken part in one of our community engagement projects. About one-third (33%) have not taken part, and 11% are not sure if they have participated.

Q4. How Important are the following aspects of community engagement?

When asked about a range of aspects of engagement, respondents want community engagement to be genuine, clear, and inclusive. Almost 9 in 10 people (87%) said it is very important to know that we are listening, while around two-thirds value understanding their influence on decisions (69%) and being able to participate online (64%).

4. How important are the following aspects of community engagement to you?

Matrix | Skipped: 0 | Answered: 55 (100%)



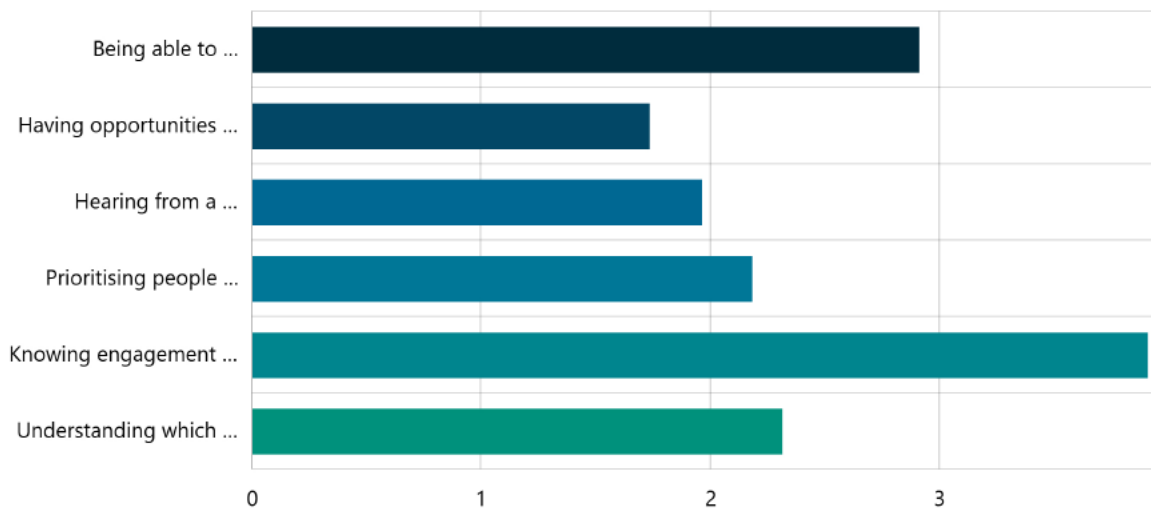
- Being able to participate online.
- Having opportunities to participate face-to-face.
- Hearing from a wide range of community members
- Prioritising people who will be most impacted
- Knowing engagement is genuine and we are listening
- Understanding which decisions I can and can't influence from the outset.

Q5. Which three aspects of community engagement are most important?

Respondents ranked knowing that we are listening as the most important aspect of community engagement. It was the most common choice in people's top three priorities. Being able to participate online also ranked highly. Understanding which decisions can be influenced and prioritising people most affected by decisions were other key priorities.

5. Which three aspects of community engagement are most important to you?

Ranking | Skipped: 0 | Answered: 55 (100%)



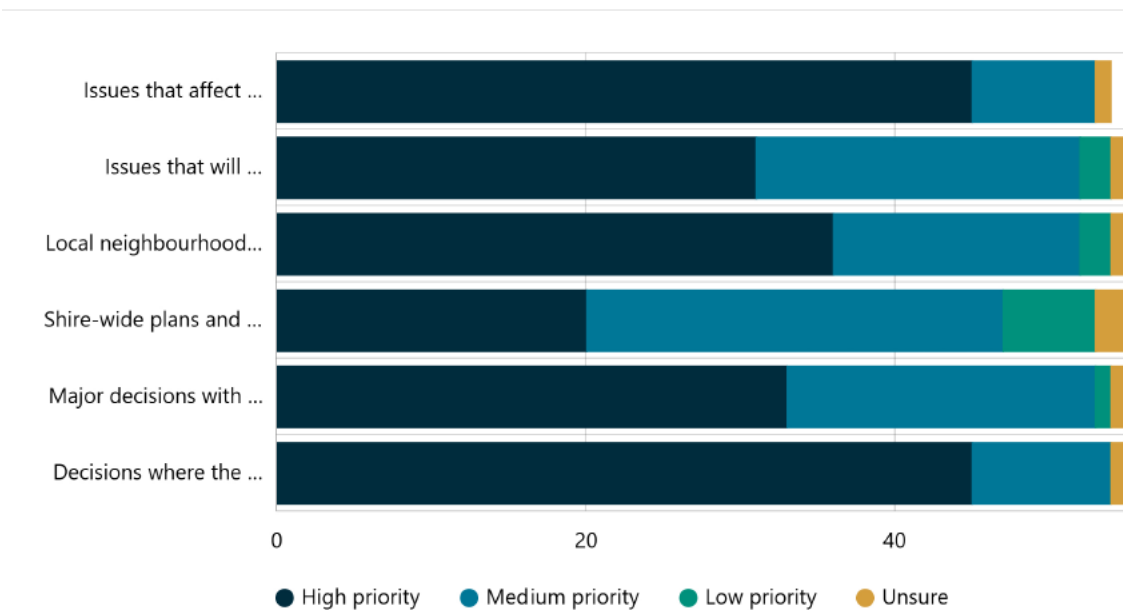
- Being able to participate online.
- Having opportunities to participate face-to-face.
- Hearing from a wide range of community members
- Prioritising people who will be most impacted
- Knowing engagement is genuine and we are listening
- Understanding which decisions I can and can't influence from the outset.

Q 6. Where should we focus engagement?

Respondents want engagement to focus on issues that affect people now and on decisions where the community can directly influence the outcome. More than 8 in 10 respondents (83%) rated issues affecting people now as a high priority, and 82% said the same for decisions the community can influence. Many respondents also prioritised local neighbourhood projects (65%) and major decisions with long-term impacts (60%).

6. Where should we focus engagement?

Matrix | Skipped: 0 | Answered: 55 (100%)



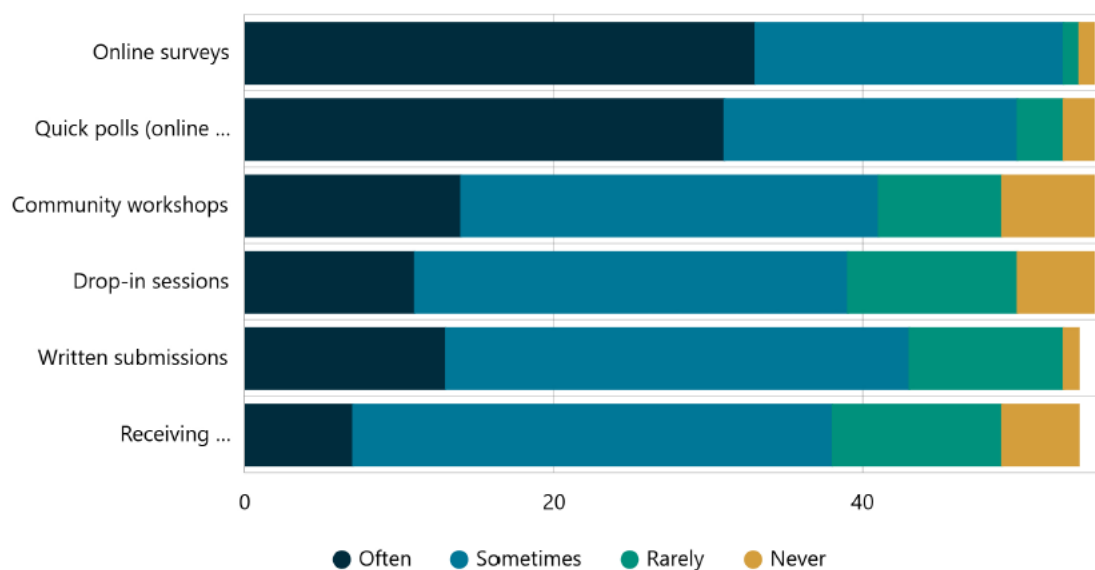
- Issues that affect people now
- Issues that will affect future generations
- Local neighbourhood and township projects
- Shire wide plans and strategies
- Major decisions with long-term impacts (land development, football oval versus art gallery)
- Decisions where the community can directly influence the outcome

Q 7. How would you prefer to be involved in Council decisions?

Respondents prefer simple online ways to be involved in Council decisions. Six in ten (60%) would often take part in online surveys, and 56% would often participate in quick online polls. Community workshops, drop-in sessions, and written submissions were also popular, but people generally preferred to take part in these sometimes rather than often.

7. How would you prefer to be involved in Council decisions?

Matrix | Skipped: 0 | Answered: 55 (100%)



- Online surveys
- Quick polls (online voting)
- Community workshops
- Drop-in sessions
- Written submissions
- Receiving information only

Q 8. How much community presence do you want from our team?

Respondents want a strong community presence from the engagement team. More than half (53%) said they want to see the team out and about in the community as much as possible, while 31% prefer a mix of casual check-ins and formal consultation. Only 16% want contact from the team only when feedback is officially required.

It's worth noting that respondents preferred online surveys and polls as their main way to participate. This may simply mean that people want the team to be visible and approachable in the community, even if they prefer to provide most of their feedback online.

"Keep up the appearing at meetings, gathering and being available."

Questions with open ended responses**What is your understanding of community engagement?**

"Building genuine, two-way relationships with the people a project/decision affects. It involves listening to community members, providing clear and accessible information and creating opportunities for meaningful feedback."

Respondents generally understood community engagement as a process of informing, consulting and involving the community in decisions that affect them. Key themes included

providing opportunities for meaningful input, listening to community feedback, maintaining open and transparent communication, and demonstrating how feedback influences decisions. While many respondents described engagement as a genuine two-way process, some expressed concern that consultation can sometimes feel like a "tick-box" exercise if the impact of community feedback is not clearly demonstrated.

How do you normally find out about an engagement opportunity?

"More recently, social media. I would prefer an email, e.g. an email connected to my rates."

Respondents most heard about engagement opportunities through Council emails, social media and local print media, particularly the *Surf Coast Times*.

Many respondents relied on multiple communication channels, including word of mouth, community groups and local networks.

While the results suggest email remains the most effective communication channel, feedback highlighted the importance of maintaining a mix of online, print and community-based approaches to maximise reach. Some respondents also said engagement opportunities could be promoted earlier and more broadly.

What can we do to improve how we engage with the community or the draft Community Engagement Policy?

Feedback focused strongly on the importance of genuine, transparent and inclusive engagement. Respondents want Council to engage early, listen to a broad range of community perspectives and clearly demonstrate how feedback influences decisions.

Many respondents called for greater transparency, clearer communication about decision-making and more opportunities for face-to-face engagement.

Respondents also highlighted the importance of maintaining a visible presence in the community, using a variety of communication methods and ensuring smaller townships and diverse stakeholder groups are included in engagement activities.

"Provide feedback stating if our time was wasted, or if you heard what we said and if it made an impact on the outcome or not."

1. Respondents want genuine engagement, not "tick-box" consultation

"It all feels a bit like 'we made a survey, we engaged, now let's do what we were going to do anyway'."

The strongest and most consistent theme was a desire for Council to genuinely listen to community feedback and demonstrate how that feedback influences decisions. Many respondents expressed concern that engagement can sometimes feel like consultation occurs after key decisions have already been made.

2. Close the feedback loop

"Able to clearly see outcomes of engagement."

Respondents repeatedly asked Council to show what happened after engagement activities. They want to know whether their feedback was considered, how it influenced decisions, and why particular decisions were ultimately made.

3. Increase transparency and provide clear information

"Be clear and specific with details, genuinely listen. Ensure material and information is not presented in a way to validate a council preferred outcome."

Many respondents called for clearer communication about projects, decision-making processes and the reasons behind Council decisions. Transparency, evidence-based decision making and providing upfront information were recurring themes.

4. Engage earlier and more broadly

"More early community publicity and time for whole community to be engaged in the decision."

Respondents wanted engagement to occur before decisions are made and to involve a wider cross-section of the community. Several comments highlighted concerns about overreliance on selected stakeholder groups, while others emphasised the importance of hearing from all residents, ratepayers and affected community members.

5. Maintain a visible community presence

"Be a physical presence in the community! Listen to people address their concerns because the community is who you represent."

Many respondents valued face-to-face engagement and wanted Council staff and councillors to be more visible in the community through meetings, drop-in sessions, community events and informal conversations.

6. Use multiple communication channels

"Use other forms of communications too. Not just social media. e.g. posters/signs, emails, print, via community groups."

Respondents recommended continuing to use a mix of communication methods, including email, social media, print media, community organisations and local networks, to ensure engagement opportunities reach a broad audience.

7. Ensure smaller communities are heard

"Hold drop-in sessions in Aireys Inlet. Our community feels that actions are focused on Torquay and surrounds."

Some respondents from smaller townships expressed concern that engagement is concentrated in larger centres and requested more local engagement opportunities within their own communities.

Demographics

Results

Respondents were predominantly older adults. The largest age group was 40-54 years (36%). Younger people were underrepresented, with only 5% of respondents aged under 40.

Responses were evenly split between men (48%) and women (44%), with 7% preferring not to say.

More than half of respondents identified as a parent or guardian (56%). Smaller numbers identified as a person with disability (4%), a carer (2%), a migrant (2%) or LGBTIQ+ (2%). No respondents identified as First Nations.

Most respondents identified as ratepayers (57%) or residents (26%). Smaller numbers worked (9%) or volunteered (4%) within the shire.

Responses were received from across the Surf Coast Shire, with the highest participation coming from Torquay (45%), followed by Anglesea (18%), Winchelsea (9%) and Fairhaven (9%). Most respondents (78%) identified Surf Coast Shire as their primary place of residence.

Analysis

The survey provides insight into the views of engaged residents and ratepayers, particularly those aged 40 years and over. The views of younger people and several priority groups are less represented.

Responses were consistent across demographic groups. Regardless of age, respondents consistently prioritised genuine engagement, clear communication about decision-making and opportunities to provide feedback.

A notable finding was the strong support for online engagement across all age groups, including older respondents. This suggests online engagement remains an important participation method for a broad cross-section of the community along with face-to-face opportunities.

There was little difference between resident and non-resident respondents. Both groups emphasised genuine engagement, transparency and opportunities to influence decisions. Some comments highlighted the importance of including non-resident ratepayers and other stakeholders in engagement processes where Council decisions may directly affect them.

While engagement preferences were generally consistent across townships, smaller communities want local engagement opportunities and reassurance that their views are considered alongside those of larger population centres like Torquay.

What else we heard

As well as feedback from the Community Engagement Policy survey, we reviewed feedback from other recent engagement activities to identify common themes and test whether the proposed policy aligns with community expectations.

Council Plan engagement

The Council Plan engagement showed that people want to be involved in decisions that affect their communities. They want Council to listen, share clear information and explain how community feedback influences decisions.

The feedback highlighted the importance of making it easy for people to participate, involving them throughout the decision-making process and reporting back on outcomes. These actions help build trust and strengthen relationships between Council and the community.

Local Government Community Satisfaction Survey

The independently conducted Community Satisfaction Survey highlighted the importance of clear communication and responsive customer service. People want timely responses, easy ways to contact Council and information they can understand.

The feedback also showed that people value two-way communication and want to see evidence that Council follows through on its commitments.

"Low trust if you don't do what you say then next time people won't believe you will do that either."

The findings reinforced the importance of communicating clearly, responding consistently and keeping people informed about progress, decisions and outcomes.

Youth Survey

The Youth Survey highlighted the importance of engaging young people in ways that are accessible, relevant and appropriate for different age groups. Young people were most engaged when discussing issues that affect their daily lives and wanted a greater say in decisions that impact them.

"Involve us in more decision about us."

Young people also highlighted the importance of providing opportunities to participate through places and activities they already use, such as schools, community groups and youth programs.

"Get a younger local say in the council."

The findings reinforced the importance of tailoring engagement approaches to different audiences and showing young people how their feedback has influenced decisions.

What this means for the Community Engagement Policy

Although these projects focused on different topics, they shared many of the same messages about community engagement.

Across all three projects, people said they want engagement that is accessible, inclusive and meaningful. They want opportunities to contribute to decisions that affect them, to be engaged through channels and settings that suit their needs, and to understand how their feedback has influenced outcomes.

The findings from the Council Plan engagement, Community Satisfaction Survey and Youth Survey were broadly consistent with the feedback received through the Community Engagement Policy review. While the feedback did not identify any significant gaps in the proposed policy, it reinforced the importance of early engagement, clear communication, inclusive participation, transparency in decision-making and closing the feedback loop.

These themes are reflected throughout the revised working draft Community Engagement Policy, providing confidence that the policy aligns with community expectations for how Council engages with the community.

Response to key themes raised through engagement

Theme raised by community	Details	Council Response.
1. Respondents want genuine engagement, not "tick-box" consultation	Respondents want community engagement to be genuine and meaningful. Many expressed concern that consultation can feel like a "tick-box" exercise if decisions appear to be made before engagement occurs.	We will strengthen the policy commitment to engage early, before key decisions are made, so community feedback can help shape outcomes.
2. Close the feedback loop	Respondents want to know what happened after engagement activities and how their feedback influenced the final decision.	Strengthen commitments to report back to the community by explaining what was heard, what was learned and how feedback helped shape decisions.
3. Increase transparency and provide clear information	Respondents want clear information, evidence-based decision making and transparent communication throughout the engagement process.	The working draft policy commits to providing timely, accurate and accessible information and explaining the reasons behind decisions.
4. Maintain a visible community presence	Respondents want Council staff to be visible and approachable within the community, not only during formal consultation periods.	Strengthen the policy by committing to creating opportunities for face-to-face engagement and maintaining a visible presence across the shire.
5. Use multiple communication channels	Respondents prefer online surveys and polls but also value workshops, drop-in sessions and other face-to-face opportunities. Respondents hear about engagement through email, social media, print media and community networks, and want opportunities promoted earlier and more broadly.	The working draft policy commits to using a mix of online, print and face-to-face engagement methods appropriate to each project. Strengthen the policy commitment to using a range of communication methods to reach different community members.

Theme raised by community	Details	Council Response.
6. Engage earlier and more broadly	Respondents want engagement to include a wide range of community members and avoid overreliance on a small number of stakeholder groups.	The working draft policy includes commitments to hear diverse voices and make extra efforts to reach people who are less likely to participate.
7. Ensure smaller communities are heard	Respondents from smaller communities wanted reassurance that their views would be heard alongside larger population centres.	Add a commitment to provide local engagement opportunities when decisions have significant impacts on particular towns or communities.

Next steps

- Finalise the working draft Community Engagement Policy.
- Present the Community Engagement Policy and engagement findings to Council in September 2026.
- Seek Council adoption of the Community Engagement Policy.
- Review MPR-028 (Community Engagement Procedure).
- Develop the Community Engagement Framework to support implementation of the Policy.