

INQUIRY INTO COMMUNITY CONSULTATION PRACTICES

Organisation: Wellington Shire Council

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WELLINGTON
SHIRE COUNCIL

Submission to the Parliament of Victoria Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices

Funding to meet growing expectations

Local Government is uniquely placed to lead authentic, place-based engagement under the Local Government Act 2020. However, increasing engagement requirements must be matched with sustainable and adequate funding.

Regional councils in particular face heightened challenges and stretched resources. Without the necessary investment, the risk is that councils like Wellington Shire are forced to outsource engagement, compromising the quality and long-term relationships that are foundational to trust and reputation.

Specifically, we support the Municipal Association of Victoria's (MAV) position on the risks of outsourcing and recommend ongoing, dedicated funding for community engagement, potentially including formal liaison roles between levels of government to support coordination.

Regional challenges require regional solutions

The engagement challenges facing regional councils differ markedly from those in metropolitan areas. Factors such as geography, low population density, digital literacy and access, and limited public transport require unique approaches and greater resourcing to ensure equitable participation.

Without recognition of these barriers, state-led consultation can become ineffective or even counterproductive. A prime example is the VicGrid Victorian Transmission Plan, where poor consultation timelines and unclear processes has resulted in some community concern for those impacted throughout our municipality. Councils like ours were left to manage these challenges despite not leading the engagement, placing additional strain on local government resources and reputation.

Examples of Poor Practice

Stratford-Maffra Road speed reduction

In early 2025, the speed limit on Stratford-Maffra Road was reduced from 100 kph to 80 kph without any consultation with local communities or commuters. Council supported a motion calling on the Minister for Roads and the Department of Transport to explain the lack of engagement and decision rationale. This decision, made without transparency or community input undermined trust and further highlighted the disparity in how rural road users are engaged. It also exemplifies a pattern where community consultation is seen as an afterthought rather than an essential part of decision-making.

Maffra and District Early Learning Centre

The Victorian School Building Authority recently announced a new Early Learning Centre will be built and managed by the State Government in Maffra. The project is being delivered under planning provisions that exempt it from community engagement requirements, meaning there was no obligation for community consultation prior to the announcement or planning. Council only became aware of the decision not to complete community consultation through an ad-hoc stakeholder update meeting, and only after a Council officer specifically asked how engagement would be undertaken.

To date, there has been no formal engagement with the broader community. The project is expected to proceed with a broad communications strategy and notification to immediate neighbours once construction begins. However, this approach highlights the critical distinction between communication (information) and engagement.

Providing information is not a substitute for genuine community consultation, particularly when it comes to facilities that directly impact neighbourhoods, families, and local service networks. This example demonstrates the risks of bypassing community input and the resulting strain it places on local government, which is often expected to manage community sentiment and feedback despite having no role in the planning process.

Rate cap notification timing

A recurring issue impacting councils across Victoria is the timing of the official rate cap notifications, which are critical to budget and financial planning processes. In both 2023 and 2024, formal advice regarding the annual rate cap was provided to Councils after midday on Christmas Eve, a time when council offices are closed for the holiday period, and Councillors and key staff are often on leave.

This has left councils with limited or no opportunity to properly consider the financial implications of the cap before returning in the new year to rapidly progress draft budgets and long-term financial planning. Specifically, last year's notifications were received on the following dates and times:

- Essential Services Commission (ESC): Monday 16 December 2024 at 11:33am
- Local Government Victoria (LGV): Tuesday 24 December 2024 at 1:47pm

The year prior followed a similar pattern:

- LGV Notification: Friday 22 December 2023 at 11:57am

In both cases, the communication was sent only to the CEO, creating a further delay in internal dissemination during a period when senior officers and Councillors are often away. This example [REDACTED] communication and meaningful engagement or collaboration.

[REDACTED] financial information without sufficient notice or opportunity for discussion undermines the ability of councils to plan effectively or consider alternative financial scenarios in consultation with their communities. It also reflects a lack of appreciation for the operational and governance realities of local government during peak holiday periods.

Example of Best Practice

Future Wellington engagement process

Wellington Shire Council's Future Wellington engagement has been a strong example of well-planned, meaningful, and community-led consultation. Stage one received thousands of responses through surveys, roadshows, and pop-up events, providing robust, place-based insights into what matters most to our community.

The next stage involved establishing the Future Wellington Think Tank, a representative working group of 25–30 community members reflecting the diversity of the region; across age, gender, culture, identity, ability, and lived experience. Supported to participate either in person or online, the group took part in a series of interactive workshops designed to shape Council's long-term strategic direction. Importantly, this group has successfully developed a new Community Vision Statement and six guiding principles to support the Council Plan and other key strategic documents.

Both the Vision and guiding principles were unanimously endorsed by Wellington Shire Councillors, reinforcing the legitimacy and strength of this type of community-led process. This model demonstrates the value of deliberative, inclusive engagement and the kind of investment required to build genuine community ownership in decision-making processes.

Engage Victoria platform

While Engage Victoria has potential, its visibility and impact remain limited. It is not well known among the public, and its effectiveness would be enhanced through improvements in accessibility, language translation, and outcome transparency. There's a sense that the platform itself now needs engagement, on how it can better meet the needs of all Victorians.

Conclusion

Wellington Shire Council appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry. We support the core themes identified by the MAV and encourage Parliament to consider both the challenges and opportunities for strengthening community consultation practices across Victoria.

We would welcome further discussion or participation in any future engagement processes associated with this review.

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