

Community Engagement

Narration Script

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Slide 1 — Title — Community Engagement

Welcome to Community Engagement, part of the Huon Valley Council Candidate and Councillor Knowledge Series.

Engagement is not something Council does alongside its real work. It is written into the Act as part of how Council performs its functions at all, and the law is about to make that considerably more explicit.

This module covers the duty to engage, the times when an Act prescribes exactly how it must be done, and how Huon Valley Council goes about it the rest of the time.

Slide 2 — Before You Begin

Engagement at Council has three layers, and keeping them apart makes the whole subject easier to hold in your head.

The first is the general duty. The Act requires Council to consult, involve and be accountable to the community in performing its functions. New provisions passed by Parliament strengthen that considerably.

The second is statutory engagement. For certain decisions an Act sets out precisely what notice must be given, who may respond, how long they have, and what Council must do with what it receives. Those requirements are mandatory.

The third is everything else, which is most of what Council does. That is guided by Council's Communication and Engagement Policy and the Community Engagement Framework, both built on the international IAP2 model.

Running through all three is the councillor's part — facilitating communication between Council and the community is a statutory function.

Slide 3 — The Duty to Engage

Start with the duty as it stands. Section 20(2) requires a council, in performing its functions, to consult, involve and be accountable to the community.

That is three obligations, not one. Consult means asking. Involve means bringing people into the process rather than collecting views at the end. Being accountable means explaining what was decided and why.

The duty is not limited to particular decisions or projects. It applies to the performance of Council's functions generally — about as broad as a statutory duty gets.

It is also the legal foundation of Council's own documents — the Communication and Engagement Policy names section 20(2) as its source of authority.

And it is about to change. The Local Government Amendment (Targeted Reform) Act 2026 repeals section 20 and puts something more specific in its place.

Slide 4 — The Community Engagement Strategy

The new section 70DA is the centrepiece, and it converts a general duty into something documented, consulted on and reviewable.

Council must have one. A council must establish and implement a strategy for engagement with the community when developing its plans, policies and programs, and for determining its major activities.

Council's Framework falls due for review, and rather than treating that as separate work, the review will be brought together with meeting the new requirement — one process producing a document that satisfies both.

The community helps shape it. Council must consult when preparing or reviewing the strategy — Council must engage about how it engages.

Its contents are prescribed: strategies to ensure the community is informed about and can contribute to Council's decisions, activities and services; the principles and procedures Council will follow; and any prescribed matters.

And it has teeth elsewhere. Strategic plan consultation must follow the strategy, the strategy joins the documents Council must review, and the Minister may set minimum contents. The provisions commence on proclamation.

Slide 5 — When an Act Requires Consultation

Sometimes the engagement is written into the legislation itself, and where an Act prescribes the process, the steps are mandatory.

The Act sets the terms. It specifies what notice must be given, who is entitled to respond, how long they have, and what Council must do with what comes back.

There is no choosing a level of participation and no tailoring the approach. None of it is discretionary, and getting the process wrong is not merely poor practice — it can invalidate the decision itself.

Council's own documents recognise this. Both the Policy and the Framework state they do not apply where consultation is undertaken under statutory requirements — but adds they are still to be considered where practical.

So the statute sets the floor, not the ceiling. Meeting the legislated minimum is not the same as engaging well, and Council can always do more than the Act requires.

Employees administer these processes. The councillor's part is knowing they exist, knowing roughly when they apply, and understanding that Council must genuinely consider what the community sends in.

Slide 6 — Examples of Statutory Consultation

Some examples. This is not a complete list, and the point is recognition rather than recall.

Under the Local Government Act: developing the strategic plan; making a separate rate or charge; making an averaged area rate for a locality; making a by-law; and the sale or lease of public land. Several also require an absolute majority before the process can begin.

Under the Dog Control Act: developing and reviewing the Dog Management Policy, and declaring areas under that Act.

Under the Land Use Planning and Approvals Act: the making of the Local Provisions Schedule and amendments to it, which is a process run by Council. And the advertising of discretionary development applications, where any person may make a representation.

Each carries its own notice requirements, timeframe, and obligation on Council to consider what it receives. If a matter might attract one of these processes, ask early — discovering it late is expensive.

One caution before we move on. Representations on a development application are evidence in a decision Council makes as a planning authority. A councillor who takes a public position before the application is determined puts that decision at risk. The planning authority module covers this in depth.

Slide 7 — Council's Engagement Principles

Outside the statutory processes sits everything else Council does, and that is where the Policy and Framework take over.

The Policy is explicit: Council is committed to an approach that goes beyond the basic legal obligations. Six principles carry it.

Participation and inclusiveness. Council will involve stakeholders and show respect for them, and use techniques that effectively and meaningfully engage the community.

Accessibility and communication. Easy access to the process and to information from inception to conclusion, with information in plain English and accessible in multiple forums.

Consideration and transparency. Council will demonstrate that concerns and aspirations raised have been considered, and choose tools that reflect the demographics of those who might be impacted.

Underneath sit five values — honest, open, timely, clear and consistent — delivered by informing, listening and responding.

Slide 8 — The IAP2 Spectrum

Council's approach follows the International Association for Public Participation spectrum — five levels of increasing impact on the decision, each carrying a promise.

Inform. Balanced and objective information to help people understand the problem and the options. The promise is that we will keep you informed.

Consult. Obtain feedback on analysis and alternatives. The promise is that we will listen to and acknowledge concerns, seek feedback on drafts and proposals, and report back on how public input influenced the decision.

Involve. Work directly with the public throughout. The promise is that we will work with you to ensure your concerns are directly reflected in the alternatives developed, and provide feedback on how input influenced the decision.

Collaborate. Partner with the public in each aspect of the decision. The promise is that we will formulate solutions together and incorporate your advice and recommendations to the maximum extent possible.

And empower. Place final decision making in the hands of the public. The promise there is the strongest — we will implement what you decided.

The point of the spectrum is honesty. Choosing a level is a commitment, and the promise attached is one Council has to keep.

Slide 9 — Deciding When and How

Not every decision needs an engagement plan, and pretending otherwise wastes everyone's time. The Framework sets a test.

Two questions. Will there be a change in the level of existing environment, space, accessibility, convenience, or the actual provision of services? And, or, is there opportunity for stakeholders to influence the project or its outcome?

If yes, develop a community engagement plan. If no, there may be no need for one — but it may still be necessary to inform people, particularly where there is a perceived change. Perception alone is enough to warrant telling people what is happening.

In choosing the level, Council weighs complexity, community interest, political sensitivity, legislative requirements, and time and budget.

And honesty is built in. Council commits to communicating any constraints affecting the process, and clarifying how much the community may actually influence the decision. Overstating influence is the fastest way to destroy trust.

Slide 10 — Closing the Loop

Asking is the easy part. What separates real engagement from a tick-box exercise is what happens afterwards.

Council follows the IAP2 quality assurance standard process: problem definition, agreement of purpose and identification of the negotiables and non-negotiables, level of participation, stakeholder identification and project requirements.

From there: develop and approve the plan, execute it, provide feedback — then evaluation and review, monitoring, and documentation of evidence.

That second step matters. Agreeing what is negotiable before engagement starts is what lets Council be straight afterwards about what was ever open to change. Skipping it is how communities end up feeling consulted at rather than consulted with.

And if someone disputes the process, the Policy sets a path. Raised during engagement, it is reviewed against the plan; raised afterwards, against the engagement report. The Policy is candid that Council and the person may agree to disagree.

Slide 11 — Engage Huon Valley

Most of Council's consultation now runs through Engage Huon Valley, an online engagement hub built on the Social Point platform.

Residents can explore, follow and comment on Council projects. Following a project means updates arrive rather than having to be hunted down.

Projects are searchable by category — planning, environment, transport, health and wellbeing, youth — and by locality, from Cygnet and Dover through Huonville to Southport. Someone who only cares about their own part of the valley can find just that.

It carries more than surveys: forums and information sessions, the Liveability Framework, neighbourhood portals, interest groups, and the biannual Community Views survey results.

Note where the Framework places it. Online platforms are listed for consult, involve, collaborate and empower — not merely informing. It is a two-way channel.

And Council used it on itself. The Framework was shaped through a Social Point ideas wall, information sessions and workshops before adoption.

Slide 12 — Forums and Ongoing Listening

Engagement is not only project by project. Council maintains channels that run all year, whether or not anything is out for consultation, and the Policy groups them as inform, listen and respond.

Council holds community forums through the year. The best known is the annual forum on the annual report, held ahead of the Annual General Meeting, which has its own module.

Then the formal channels. Public question time at Council meetings, petitions, presentations to Council, written submissions, and the Annual General Meeting itself, where an elector can put a motion directly to Council.

And the everyday ones. Customer requests, the website, social media, special committees, community suggestions, and people contacting councillors directly.

The Framework also commits Council to something less visible — maintaining ongoing relationships through networking, community groups and advisory committees. Relationships built before a controversy make engagement during one far easier.

And responding closes the loop. Media releases, the website, recorded meetings, minutes, the topical issues register and correspondence all report back on what Council heard and did.

Slide 13 — The Councillor's Role

Facilitating communication between Council and the community is not a courtesy. Section 28 makes it a function of every councillor acting as an individual councillor.

The Framework puts it plainly. Councillors and employees must have a clear understanding of, and commitment to, engaging about decisions that affect people's lives.

The function runs both ways. Carrying the community's views into the chamber matters as much as carrying Council's decisions back out — and the second is often harder, especially when explaining a decision the councillor voted against.

Be clear about influence. Telling someone their view will shape a decision when it will not is worse than the truth at the outset.

And know the limits. Some matters sit with the State or the Commonwealth, and saying so early is more useful than letting expectations build. On planning applications the limit is firmer — councillors keep their position open until the decision is made.

And use the channels that run all year — community forums, public question time, petitions, presentations to Council, advisory committees, and the Annual General Meeting, which has its own module.

Slide 14 — Five Things to Remember

Five things to take away.

One. Engagement is part of performing Council's functions, not an add-on. The Act requires Council to consult, involve and be accountable to the community.

Two. A community engagement strategy is coming. Section 70DA will require Council to establish and implement one, consult on it, and include prescribed contents.

Three. Statutory processes are mandatory. Where an Act prescribes consultation, the notice, the timeframe and the duty to consider are all set by law.

Four. Choosing a level of engagement is making a promise. Inform, consult, involve, collaborate, empower — each carries a commitment, and the commitment has to be kept.

Five. Councillors facilitate communication both ways. Into the chamber and back out again, and honestly about how much influence there really is.

Engagement done well is slower at the start and faster at the end — the difference between a decision the community argues with and one it recognises as its own.