Mount Alexander Shire Council
Start by asking
Communications and Engagement Strategy Community Consultation Report

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.

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.

L-R: Mount Alexander Shire 'Get Lost' Creative Network workshop and the Taradale Festival pop-up

L-R: Council staff at the Civic Centre and Town Hall having their say

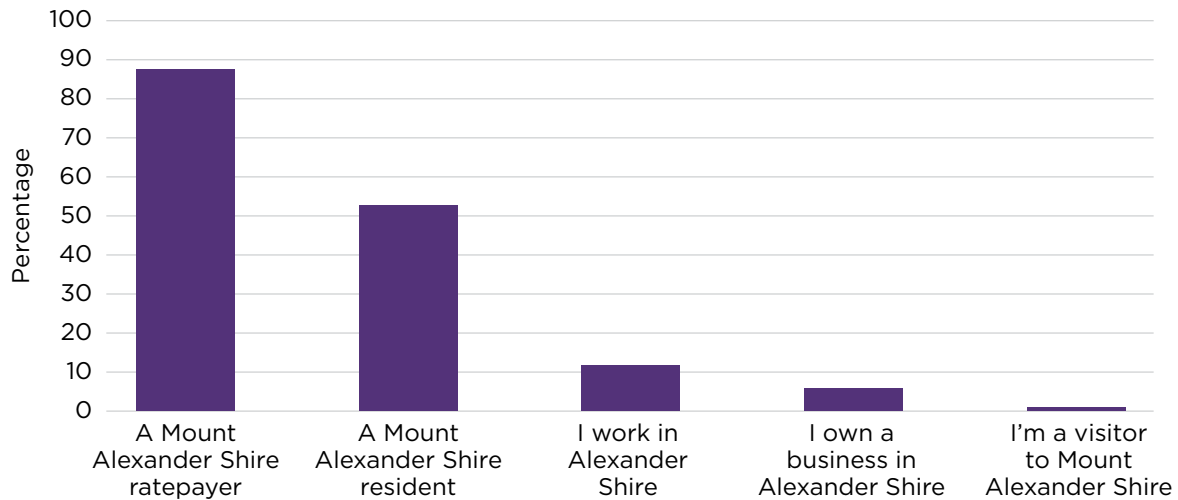L-R: Council staff at the Depot having their say and the Newstead community pop-up

L-R: Councillor and the Youth Advisory Group workshops

Who we heard from
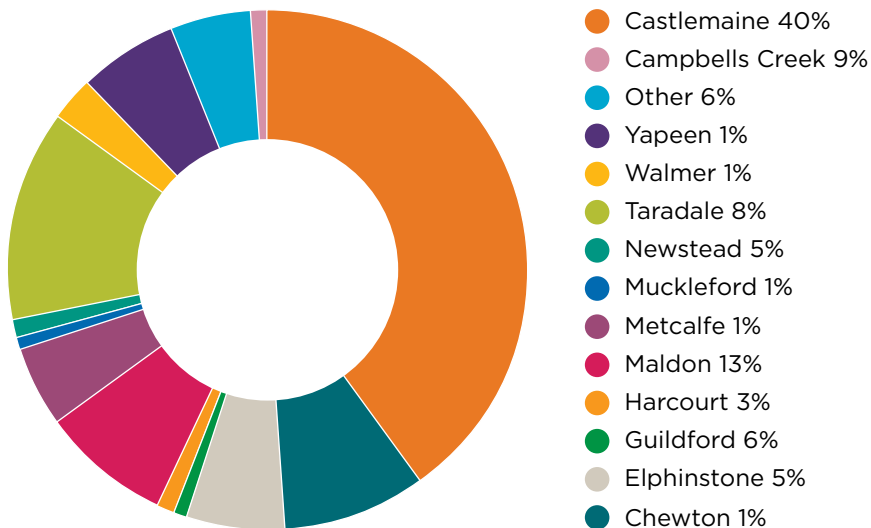
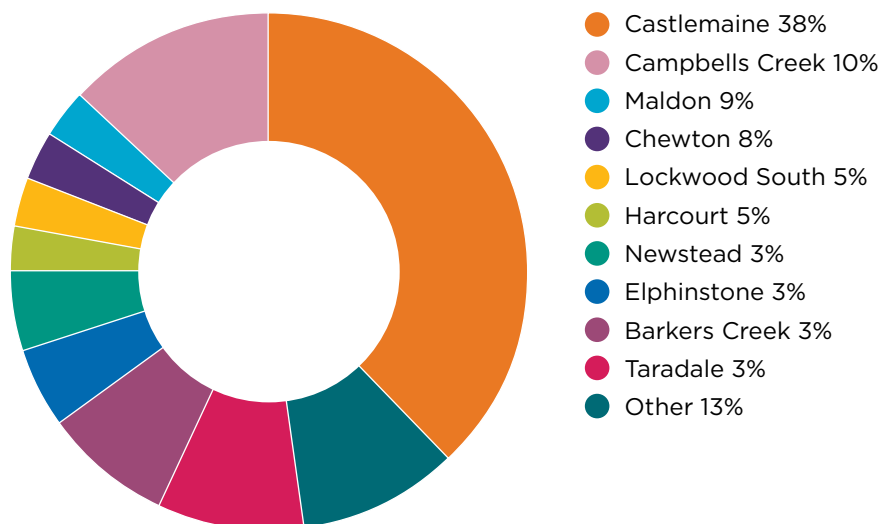Survey demographics breakdown

Connection to Mount Alexander

L-R: The Guildford community pop-up and staff from Communications and Engagement team.

Where do you live?

All contributions by location

- Castlemaine 40%
- Campbells Creek 9%
- Other 6%
- Yapeen 1%
- Walmer 1%
- Taradale 8%
- Newstead 5%
- Muckleford 1%
- Metcalfe 1%
- Maldon 13%
- Harcourt 3%
- Guildford 6%
- Elphinstone 5%
- Chewton 1%

Population (2016 census)

- Castlemaine 38%
- Campbells Creek 10%
- Maldon 9%
- Chewton 8%
- Lockwood South 5%
- Harcourt 5%
- Newstead 3%
- Elphinstone 3%
- Barkers Creek 3%
- Taradale 3%
- Other 13%

We are broadly satisfied that the location breakdown of contributions aligns with census data - Chewton being the one location we feel is underrepresented.

How do you identify your gender?
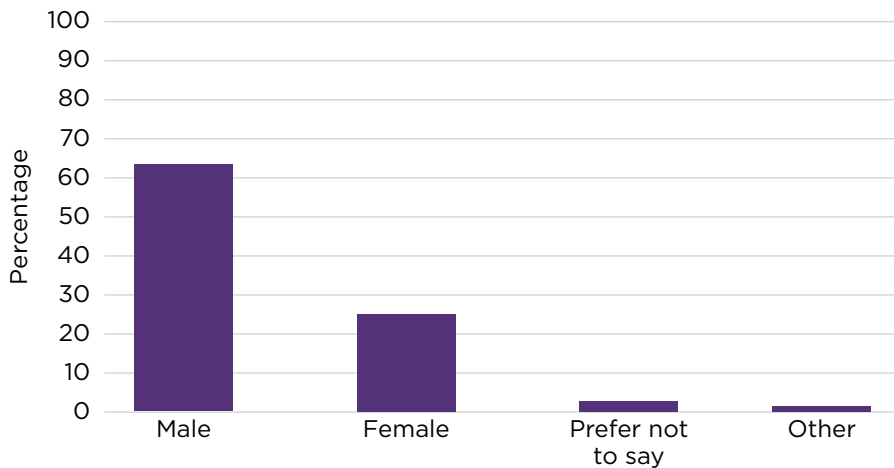
Women and people identifying as female are overrepresented in the engagement data. This is consistent across most engagements - the need to increase participation by men is incorporated in our strategy.

What is your age?

The age spread of contributors skews older than the census data of the shire. Our consultation with the Youth Advisory Group was an effort to overcome this, but as with the overrepresentation of women and females in our data, the difficulty in reaching younger audiences is a key focus of this strategy.

Age spread - all contributors
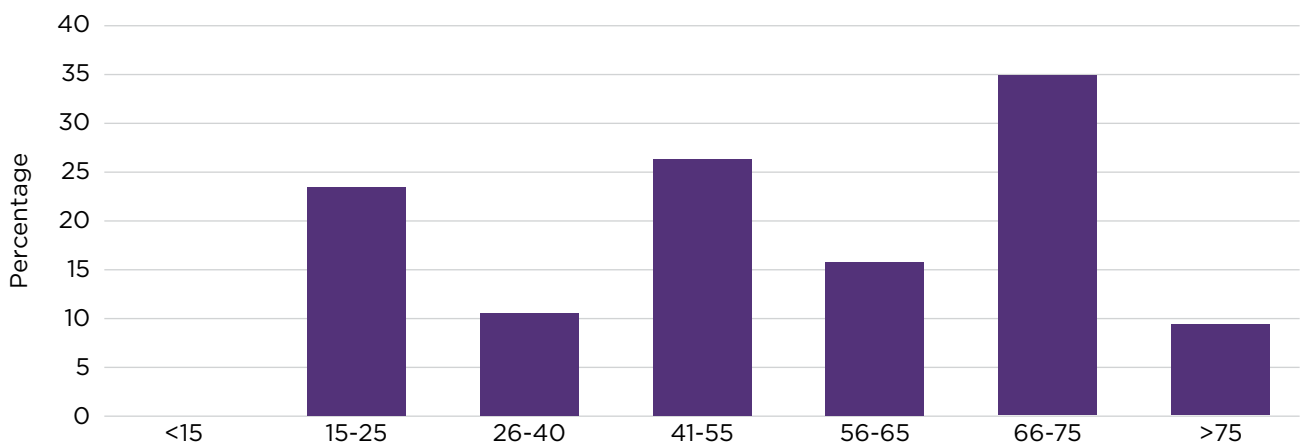
Population spread (2016 census)
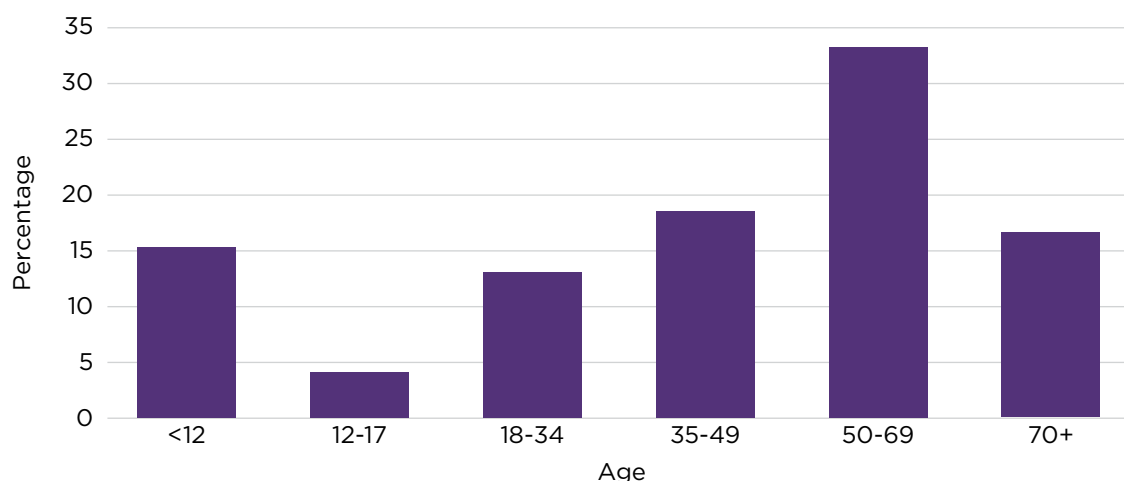
Our engagement with the Youth Advisory Group meant our young adult representation was strong, however, we failed to reach the youngest age group. There was, however, a better-than expected representation of parents, which we hope allows for some views of children's needs to be incorporated. Beyond this, we are satisfied that our consultation reached a broadly representative cross-section of the community.

On a scale of 1 – 10 how much does the information you get from Council matter to you?
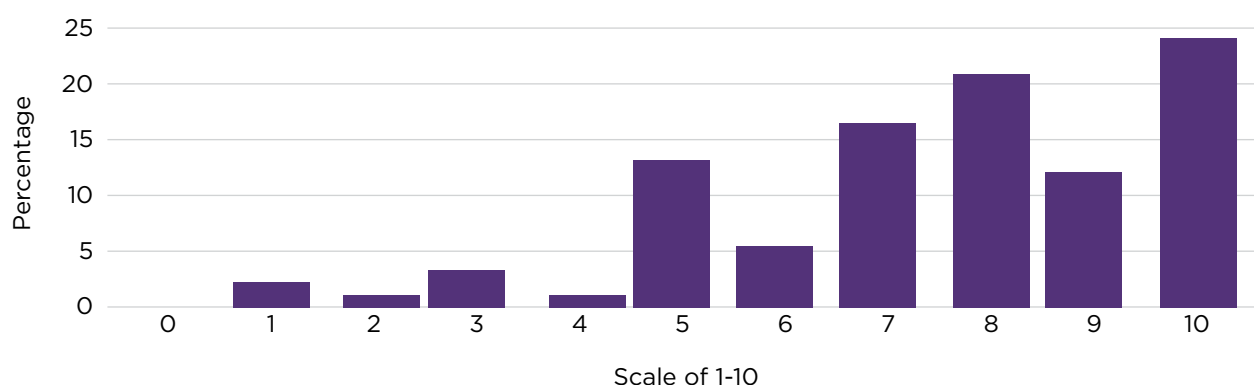
We are enormously thankful to the huge number of community members who took part in this engagement. Their input has been collated and is directly linked to actions we will be taking through the life of this strategy. It will also inform our measurement and evaluation of the success of the strategy.

What we heard

Our consultation featured two key questions - where can we improve in engaging with the community, and how can we encourage community participation?

Those responses, plus additional comments provided, were collated and coded into ten key themes.

These themes are outlined below, and our actions in this strategy all seek to address one or more of them.

How can we encourage you to take part in our communications and engagement activities?
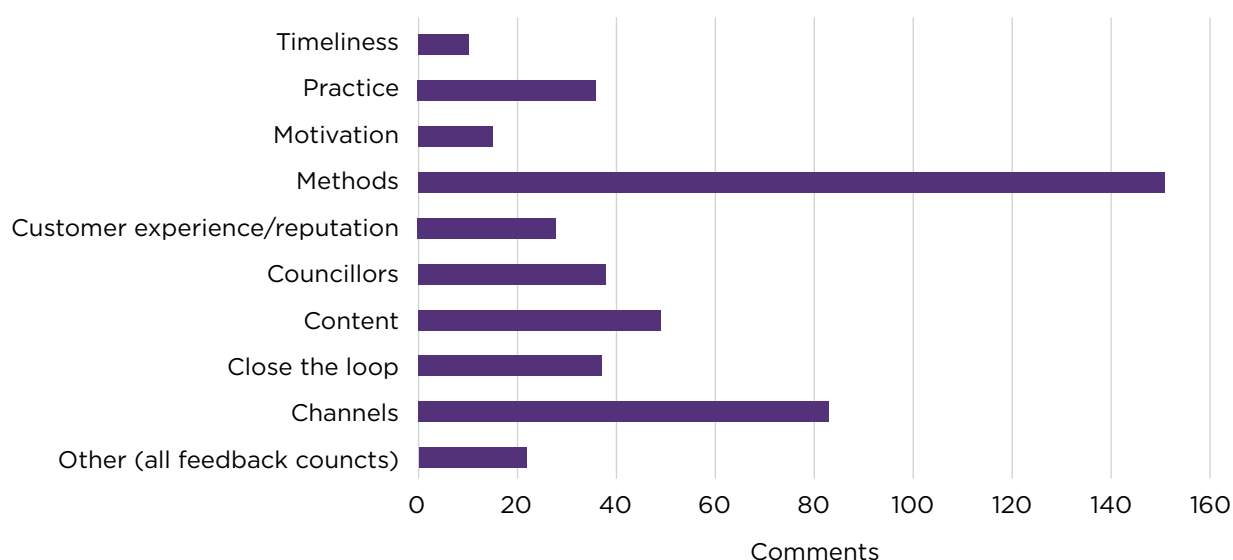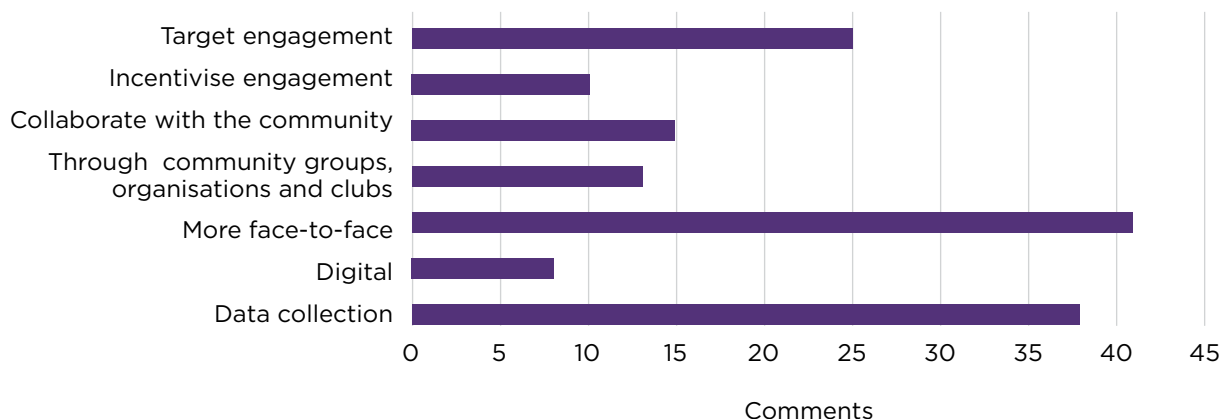

Harcourt Applefest pop-up

Key themes

① Methods

We received the most feedback regarding the methods we used to deliver communications and engagement activities.

Methods breakdown

There was strong support for more face-to-face communications and engagement, noting the richer information shared, and the potential for an improved relationship between Council and the community.

Methods should be inclusive and accessible with easy data collection, and should include both online and in person/hard copy opportunities.

People and groups who may be harder to reach should be targeted to ensure their perspectives are included, and to make sure we are not just hearing from the loud voices in the community.

In delivering communications and engagement, there is strong support for more collaboration with local community groups, associations and organisations.

> **"**
>
> Establish a culture of positive engagement with community assisting consultative/collaborative approaches, rather than the 'us and them' approach.
>
> Sincerely listen and take on board what residents say because too often Council seems so focused on a predetermined outcome that it doesn't hear or value the knowledge and experience that is available to it from the outside."
>
> Come out to the community, rather than expecting the community to come to you.
>
> Face to face interaction reeks of sincerity and not 'lip service'. Rate payers are educated and smart and should be perceived as that.
>
> **"**

“

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.

More face to face meetings and regular feedback sessions (quarterly) in townships themselves, not just in Castlemaine.

A space for key resident proposals and the ability of other residents to support, oppose or build on would open the agenda which is currently tends to be set by council.

How do you avoid the pressure of narrow interest groups?

Active outreach to where people are at - say sports clubs, Salvation Army, St Vincent De Paul, community lunch, community picnics etc.

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2 Channels

The second most important area of feedback related to the channels we use to communicate and engage with the community.
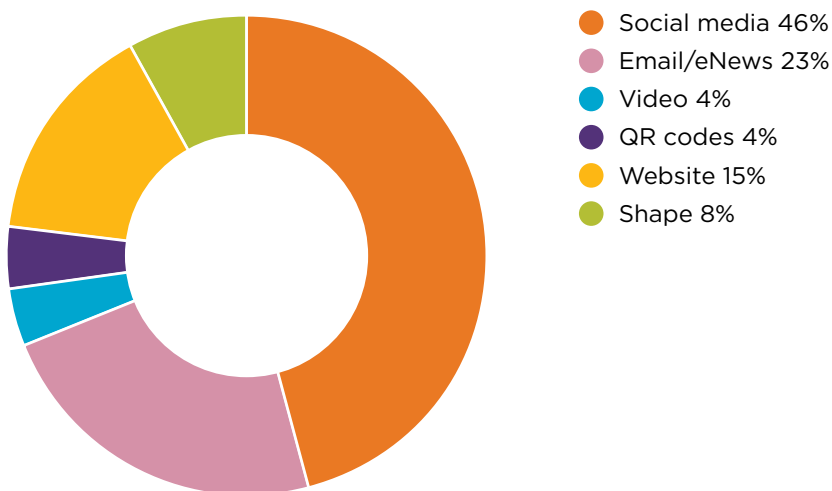
Based on the input we received, people use a range of channels when it comes to communications and engagement but there is a definite preference for physical channels as well as digital.

In particular there is a desire for more face-to-face and physical (i.e. posters, leaflets, flyers) communication, beyond newspaper, radio and digital communication. Likewise, face-to-face means community events, meetings, pop-ups, town halls, forums, festivals, and listening posts.

Preferred channels

- Digital 35%
- Traditional media 27%
- Face to face 25%
- Other physical channels 13%
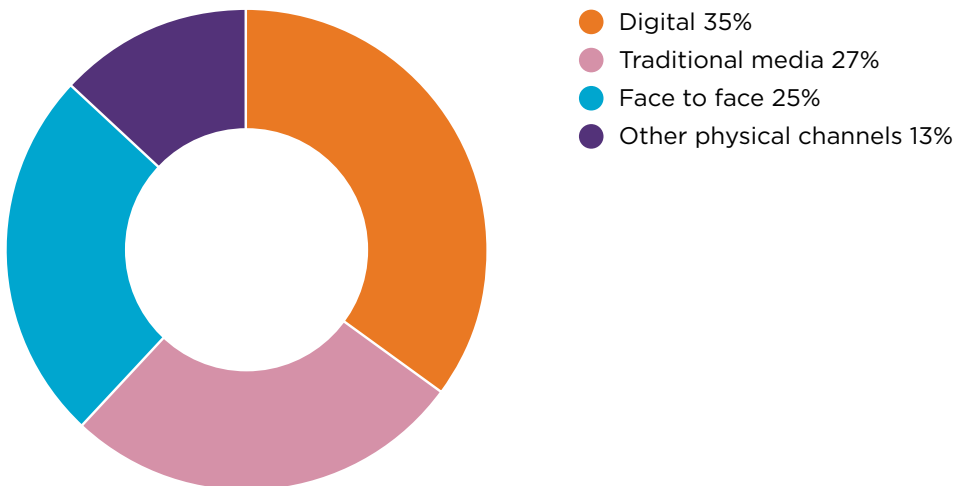
Digital channel preferences

- Social media 46%
- Email/eNews 23%
- Video 4%
- QR codes 4%
- Website 15%
- Shape 8%

Question

If you were Mayor of Mount Alexander Shire for the day, which three channels would you use to provide important information to the community?

Popular responses

22.7%
Local
newspapers

20%
Email/
eNewsletters

11.9%
In
person

11.8%
Social
media
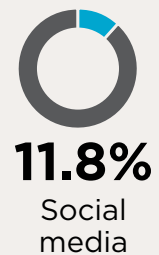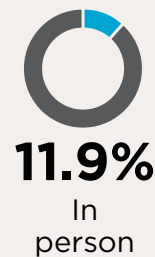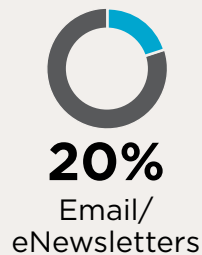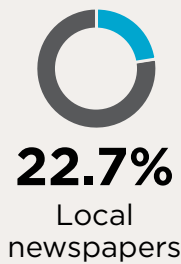
With traditional channels there is an equal need for print and face-to-face communications and engagement.

There was a wide range of digital preferences with the community using social media, email/eNews, Council's website and Shape Mount Alexander.

In short, the community has a broad variety of ways they would prefer to hear from us. Communication is ideally tailored to an audience through channel, and content.

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I love and appreciate emails I receive from Council and it is good to see them getting more approachable and interesting."

The Shape website has been good as I get emails when new community consultation is happening.
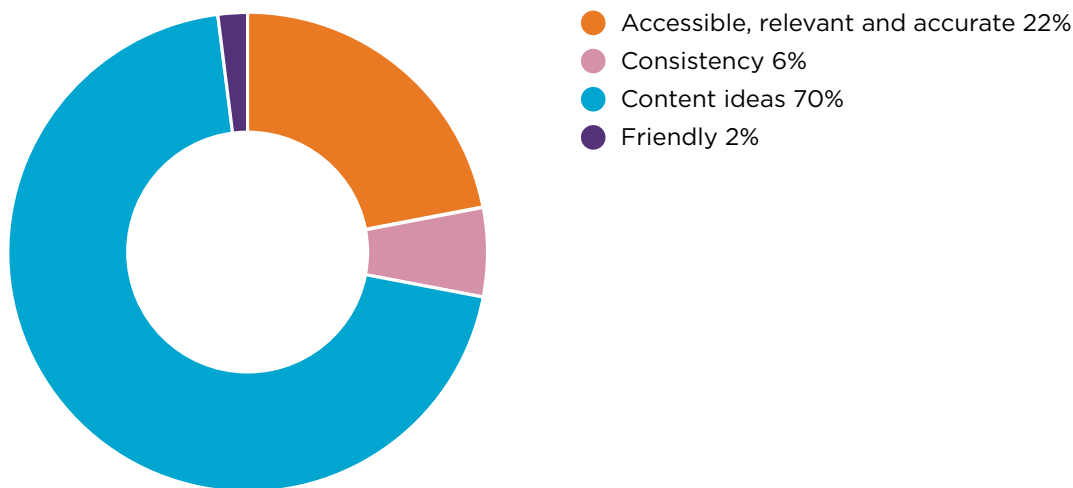
Find a way to work with the 'word of mouth' network

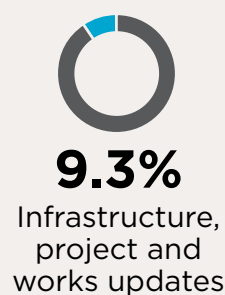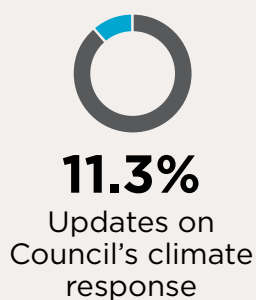Please stop prioritising social media and online surveys.

"

3 Content

How can we improve our content?

- Accessible, relevant and accurate 22%
- Consistency 6%
- Content ideas 70%
- Friendly 2%

Question

If you were Mayor of Mount Alexander Shire for the day, what top three pieces of information would you share with the community?

Popular responses

11.3%
Updates on Council's climate response

11.3%
Explain Council's decision-making processes

9.3%
Infrastructure, project and works updates

9.3%
How we are spending the budget on a day to day basis

The community wants communications that are accessible to a broad range of people irrespective of age, cultural or social backgrounds. Plain English should be used to deliver timely, relevant and accurate information.

Consistency of information is needed between corporate communications and Council staff.

When it comes to content topics, key areas of need include:

- explain the role, responsibilities and processes of Council
- explain 'who's who' within Council and if there are any key staff changes
- engagement opportunities
- clear explanations of the scope and impact of Council's work.

" De-corporatise the methods and language - we are NOT consumers OR customers.

Jurisdiction - what is council responsible for? Nobody seems to know.

Show the journey not just the destination.

We need clearer communications on what Council does/is responsible for.

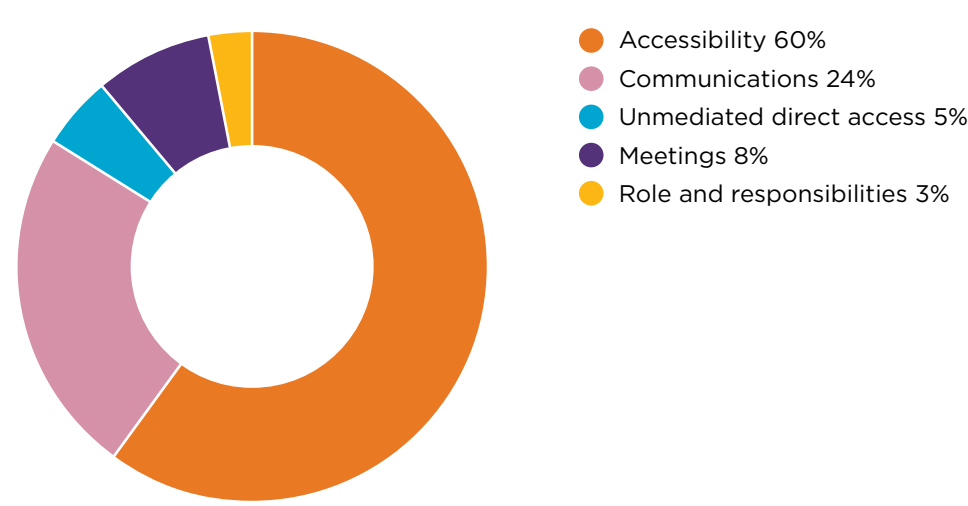What is a plan? What is a strategy? Define the difference. "

4 Councillors

The fourth most important theme identified for community and staff is more direct engagement with Councillors.

How can we improve engagement with Councillors?

- ● Accessibility 60%
- ● Communications 24%
- ● Unmediated direct access 5%
- ● Meetings 8%
- ● Role and responsibilities 3%

The community expressed a desire to see and hear more from their Councillors. This aligns with the desire for more face-to-face engagement.

Internally staff are keen to better understand the relationship between Councillors and community engagement projects.

"

Learn to use microphones during meetings, otherwise there are huge chunks of meetings that cannot be heard and I end up feeling I wasted my time engaging and travelling to the meeting.

Our local Councillor should have better access, or at least be contactable.

Direct access to councillors is mediated which is unacceptable.
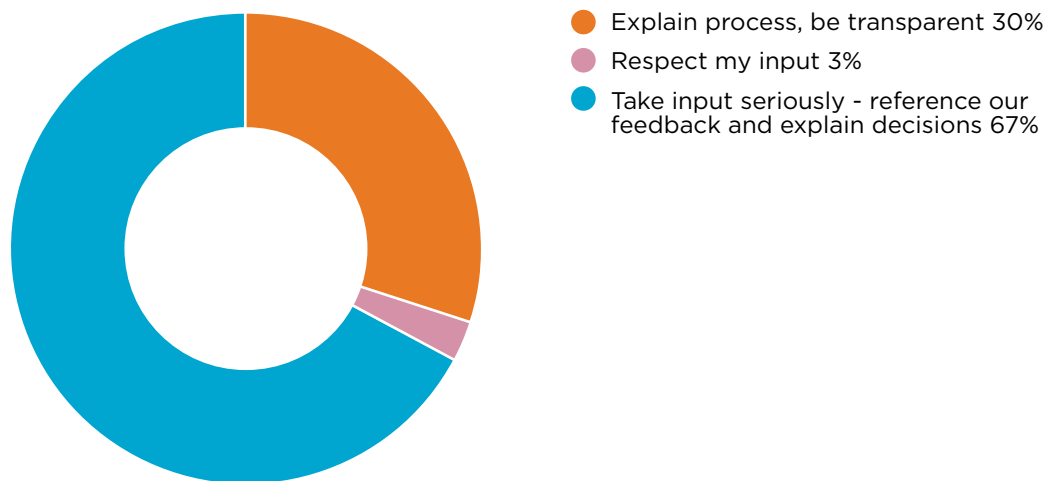
Where are the Councillors voices?

"

5 Transparency

The community made clear that they want to know how their feedback is used in Council decision-making.

People want transparent engagement processes that allow for high levels of influence, along with information on outcomes. Changes in these areas will enable people to learn how their input affects Council decision-making. It will also encourage future good-faith engagement.

Internally, staff recognised the importance of closing the loop on communications and engagement initiatives, and want more time and support to do this.

How can we improve transparency?

- Explain process, be transparent 30%
- Respect my input 3%
- Take input seriously - reference our feedback and explain decisions 67%

"

Explain how community feedback is being used, particularly during the course of a project.

Provide more feedback about community responses, for example were they weak or strong, and explain why ideas might be discounted.

I'd like to know my feedback has not disappeared in to thin air!

Sometimes I feel patronised, fobbed off - I'm just wasting my time trying to talk to people who don't seem to hear or care about what I'm saying.

Feedback on the impact of community feedback on council decisions would be appreciated.

Actual response and positive action from Council would be a great incentive to provide feedback.
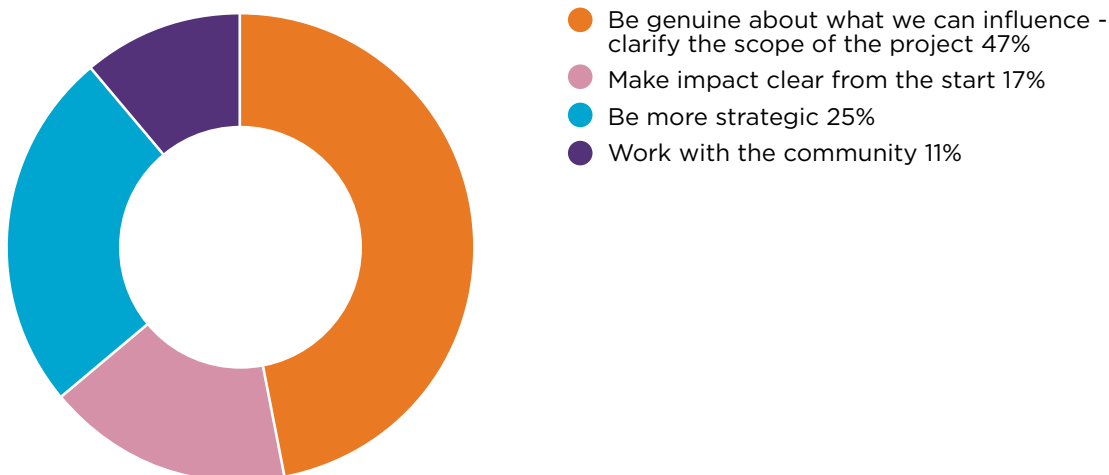
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6 Genuine

The community expressed a need to understand more about Council's practice of engagement, why we are engaging, understanding the scope of engagement, and the end impact to the community.

Feedback was focused across four key areas:

- Be clear about the scope of engagement and what can and can't be influenced.
- Articulate project impacts from the beginning of a project so the community understands what is involved.
- Partner with the community – citizens are engaged and have a high level of interest in local issues.
- Be strategic about community engagement – support staff to deliver best practice engagement activities.

How can we improve our practice of community engagement?

- Be genuine about what we can influence - clarify the scope of the project 47%
- Make impact clear from the start 17%
- Be more strategic 25%
- Work with the community 11%

" Encourage staff through strong leadership and opportunities for staff development so that they are more confident and tooled up to deal with difficult issues and people heavily invested in the issue.

Set expectations – be clearer around what the community can and can't influence.

Remind the community of what was originally said or requested.

Make sure the community understand that the engagement is finite - after the decision/project has been made/completed we can't go back and rehash.

Be clear from the start about how feedback will be used – for example, in some cases it's not the quantity of submissions that will make a difference.

Clearer management of community expectations. Helping to highlight the reality of limited resources so we don't overtax the staff. "

7 Reputational issues

The community made clear that poor customer experiences with Council impact their perceptions of our engagement efforts.

Frustrations around Council interactions unrelated to engagement lead to a loss of trust and a lack of belief in Council capabilities. This, in turn, greatly lowers motivation to provide input into Council decisions and processes.

Examples include calls not being returned, getting 'the run-around', and delays in responses or actions being taken.

How can we encourage you to take part?
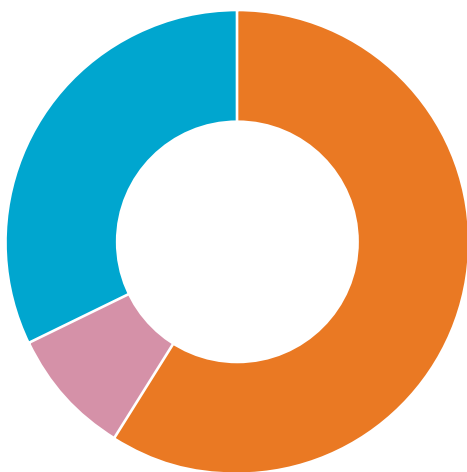
- Acknowledge and return related correspondence 59%
- Internal communications 9%
- Value my feedback by acknowledging or investigating it appropriately 32%

8 Make all feedback count

Nearly 5% of feedback provided by the community was not related to the issue at hand. Instead, people took the opportunity presented by a Council employee to request specific actions, focussed on Local Laws, planning issues, Council management, governance, tree planting, graffiti management and assets.

"

No response, it's very frustrating, let me assure you.

If I write or communicate with Council, then get back to me. Act like it matters...

You should respond to emails with a proper reply addressing the points raised.

Councillors and Council employees are working for the community.
We are not the enemy.

Please take all the various levels of feedback good and bad, and use the information wisely.

Rate payers are educated and smart and should be perceived as that.

"

The community will use engagement and communications opportunities to provide feedback on any issues that matter to them – how do we capture this feedback and make sure it is redirected?
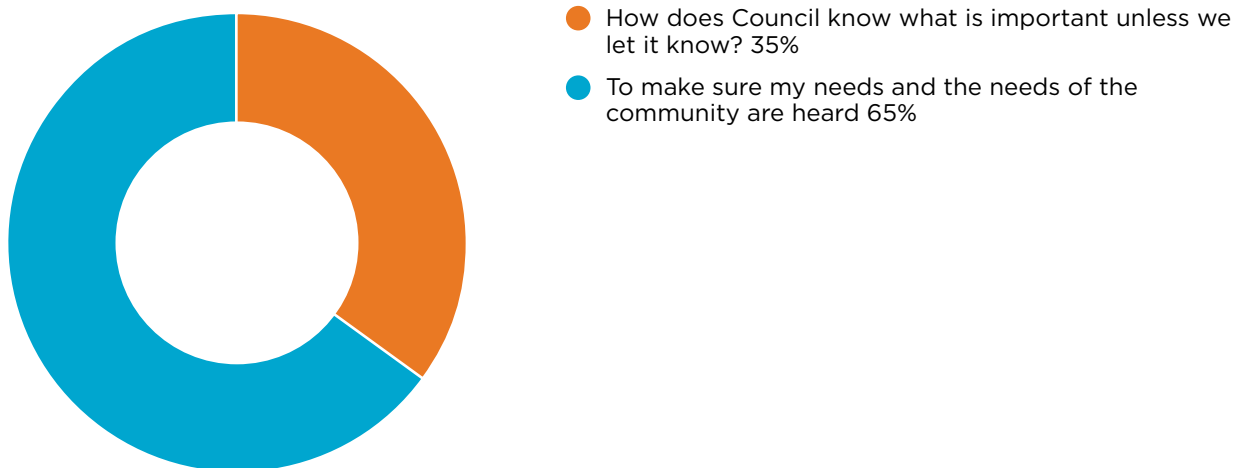
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A site for key resident proposals and the ability of other residents to support, oppose or build on such would open the agenda

"

⑨ Motivation (why people engage with us)

Mount Alexander Shire communities are active and engaged, with a high level of interest in local issues.

Why do you participate in consultation?

- How does Council know what is important unless we let it know? 35%
- To make sure my needs and the needs of the community are heard 65%

Community members made clear that they participate because Council cannot know what is important to every member or group of the community without their input.

But mostly there was a desire to make sure Council properly understands and responds to their needs those of their community. This is connected with the previous issue around perceptions of Council competence. Community members believe that without community input, decisions will be flawed or poorly implemented.

There is also a concern that we are only listening to the loud voices, that minority groups and disengaged community members aren't being heard from.

"

Actual response and positive action from Council would be a great incentive to provide feedback.

Community engagement is vital for the effective operation of council.

I don't want to be a passive member of this community. Everyone has good ideas and they should be shared.

Council doesn't know unless you talk to it.

To help shape an inclusive community that cares for people and place.

"

“

If you don't let people know what you need and want, you can't complain if you don't get what you want and need!

Need to make sure it's not just retirees with lots of time that are providing the feedback. Council needs to hear from younger people and families too.

Many of these changes have a significant impact on the community, and I'm genuinely concerned that a minority of engaged community members pass for the majority on most days of the week.

This is our community and input is needed from all citizens to achieve the community vision and keep council accountable to community.

”

10 Timely

A modest percentage of community feedback noted that the amount of time allowed for engagement can impact the perception of how genuine our engagement efforts are.

Stakeholders and community group partners said there is not enough time to properly target the engagement opportunity.

People 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.

Give residents more visibility of the planning that's happening around them, often it's too late to say 'no we don't want that,' or 'what about the impact on this?' as decisions have already been made.

There has been far too much Shape Mount Alexander material coming on line with very little time between them and forcing the community to make too many choices about where they will put their efforts.

The consultation period too short for Neighbourhood House to properly support. By the time we get the info, there's often just one week to reach the right internal clients.

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Mount Alexander
Shire Council