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Figure 2D
Typical content of public participation staff guides

Content	Ballarat	Cardinia	Maribyrnong	Maroondah	Murrindindi
Community engagement checklist	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓
Community engagement framework	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
Community engagement planning	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
Community engagement templates	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Engagement and communications plan	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗
Engagement reporting	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗
Engagement tools and techniques	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Engaging hard-to-reach groups	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Evaluation plan	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓
How to engage	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
IAP2 model	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Stakeholder mapping	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Who to engage	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Why we engage	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗
When to engage	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: ✓ = element is present, ✗ = element is not present.
Note: Mitchell Shire Council did not have a staff guide.
Source: VAGO.

2.3 Council budget

Section 127 of the *Local Government Act 1989* (the Act) requires councils to prepare a budget each financial year. Councils' budgets must detail the services and initiatives to be funded in the budget and outline how they will contribute to councils' strategic objectives.

We found that the community consultation conducted as part of developing councils' budgets was generally more of a compliance exercise than an opportunity for the community to meaningfully engage with the budget.

2.3.1 Statutory obligations

Section 129 of the Act states that, as soon as is practicable after a council has prepared a budget, it must notify the public by advertising in a newspaper and on its website. This recognises the importance of the budget in directing the council's activities.

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The six councils we examined fulfilled their legislative obligations for public participation in the council budget. These obligations are to:

- put the budget on public exhibition in council offices, public libraries and other council facilities, and on the council website, for 28 days
- call for submissions through a public notice in local newspapers, council newsletters and other publications—members of the public have a right to make a submission under section 223 of the Act on any item contained in the proposed budget
- allow community members to address the council at a meeting, before approving the annual budget.

These requirements set out the conditions for minimum compliance, and do not incorporate better practice principles for public participation. Consequently, even when councils have complied with the requirements of the Act, they may not necessarily have engaged meaningfully with the public.

Our examinations of the six audited councils' proposed and final budgets showed little evidence that councils' budgets have been changed based on public feedback. Only one council demonstrated some minor budget changes as a direct response to submissions received.

The tight statutory time frames for the process allow very little time for councils to meaningfully consider feedback and incorporate change into the budget before the end-of-financial-year deadline. Consultation on the budget typically falls into the Inform end of the IAP2 participation spectrum. This means that a decision has already been made and councils want to either communicate that decision to the public, or seek opinions on the decision.

2.3.2 Better practice examples

We found three examples of councils engaging meaningfully with the community during the budget process. These examples illustrate opportunities that other councils might consider when preparing their budget.

Ballarat City Council

In 2015–16, Ballarat went beyond the mandated process and time frame and adopted a unique approach to public participation in the budget process. The council selected 16 projects worth $15 million and put them to the community for consultation. The available budget was $4.5 million, so the community was asked to select which projects were of greatest importance.

Councillors received the data collected from the community before they made their final decisions. Of the 16 projects, 11 were funded, including four out of seven projects the community had identified as top priorities. The council received around 700 responses—half from a paper survey and half from an online survey. This was a positive example of a council demonstrating meaningful public participation and considering feedback in the budget process.

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Cardinia Shire Council

Cardinia went beyond the basic public exhibition of its 2016–17 budget by running the 'Big Budget Brainstorm'. The council asked residents to nominate the most important priorities for the council and what the council's focus should be when preparing the budget.

During consultation, an online forum generated 223 ideas, 3 860 votes and 140 comments, and four community forums attracted over 50 residents. The council and the community discussed the top 10 ideas with the most votes at a 'response event', hosted in the council chambers, and the council was able to fund some of these projects from the existing budget.

Maribyrnong City Council

Maribyrnong used an innovative way to consult on the proposed 2016–17 council budget. The council's aim was to engage meaningfully with residents, as the municipality was undergoing significant and rapid change. The council ran a live Facebook question-and-answer session that took place between community members and the council's directors and chief executive officer. This was a new way for the public to raise concerns, ask for clarification and communicate with the council on one of its most important documents.

The live Facebook event reached a sizeable audience—about 4 500 Facebook users—and enabled meaningful interaction between community members and key council decision-makers. The online consultation had 17 participants and generated 40 questions and comments. There were also 13 written submissions presented to a special council meeting, compared to two written submissions the previous year.

This event enabled entirely new groups of participants to be involved, including those unable to attend weekday or weekend forums, households with young children, individuals with access and mobility issues and disabilities, and those who feel intimidated by public speaking or daunted by the level of expertise that might be expected of a participant. This is a good example of how to consult with a wider portion of the council's community.

2.3.3 Rate capping

Councils use the rates paid by ratepayers to fund local infrastructure and services. Victoria has a rate capping system that restricts how much councils can increase their rates in a financial year. Councils must apply to the Essential Services Commission (ESC) if they want an exemption from the rate cap.

Councils must demonstrate to ESC that they have used a strategic, planned approach to consulting ratepayers and the community, and have taken their views into account. Councils also need to show that community members and ratepayers understand that the higher cap represents good value for money, that trade-offs have been considered and that the decision to apply for a higher cap fits into the council's long-term planning. ESC's key principles for engagement are shown in Figure 2E.

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Figure 2E
Key engagement principles for councils
wishing to apply for a rate cap exemption

Principle	Description
Principle 1	The engagement program must contain clear, accessible and comprehensive information and follow a timely process to engender feedback from the community.
Principle 2	The engagement program should be ongoing and tailored to community needs.
Principle 3	The engagement program should prioritise matters of significance and impact.
Principle 4	The engagement program should lead to communities becoming more informed about council decision-making.

Source: VAGO, based on Essential Services Commission, *Fair Go Rates System: Community Engagement—reference material,* www.esc.vic.gov.au.

Two of the audited councils—Ballarat and Murrindindi—applied for an exemption to the rate cap in 2016–17.

Ballarat was unsuccessful in its application. ESC was not satisfied that Ballarat demonstrated how it took into account the views of its ratepayers and the community in forming its application for a higher cap. Ballarat did not clearly show that the community had been presented with clear options such as increased short-term borrowings, or trade-offs between rate increases and service levels. ESC was concerned that the proposed higher cap and supporting capital works plan diverged from what had been previously presented to the community.

Murrindindi was successful in gaining a partial exemption. It received an exemption for funding the infrastructure renewal reserve but not for maintaining current service levels. ESC found that Murrindindi demonstrated sufficient public participation for the infrastructure component and insufficient public participation for the service component. Participation included a range of community consultation meetings over a five-year period, including discussion of six options.

During its planning for its 2016–17 council budget, Mitchell consulted with the community to test whether it would accept a low, moderate or higher rate increase, in order to maintain and increase services. The council targeted different groups in the community through a variety of communication methods designed to reach as many community members as possible—including newspaper advertisements and articles, posters, postcards, Facebook, Twitter, community newsletters, the council website, surveys, radio segments, community events, interviews, forums and internal communication. As a result of the consultation, the council did not seek an exemption to the rate cap due to a lack of support within the community.

2.4   Council plans

The council plan is a council's key medium-term strategic plan. It should reflect the vision and aspirations of the community and capture the character and identity of the municipality. The current council plans cover the period 2013–2017. Although the council plan is supposed to reflect the community's vision and aspirations, the six councils we examined do not proactively consult with their communities.

Under section 125 of the Act members of the public have the right to make a submission on the council plan. In a process similar to one used for the council budget, the council must publish a public notice and make copies of the plan available for inspection for at least 28 days after the publication of the notice. These minimum consultation requirements recognise the importance of public participation in councils' planning processes.

All of the audited councils met their minimum compliance requirements under the Act to allow feedback on their annual review of the council plan. However, there was typically little or no feedback on the council plan, other than in the first year when it was being developed, and none of the councils sought to improve feedback by conducting extra consultation activities.

The consultation that councils conducted on council plans were compliance exercises rather than opportunities for meaningful participation. These activities represent the Inform end of the participation spectrum. This is a missed opportunity for councils to properly review the council plan and ensure that it reflects their community's needs and aspirations.

2.5   Community plans

Although not a legislative requirement, the council plan can also be informed by long-term plans such as a community plan. A community plan describes the community's long-term vision and aspirations and is a way of directly involving the community before the preparation of the council plan begins.

Two councils had conducted major community consultation activities to develop a visionary community plan.

In 2013, Ballarat conducted a large-scale community conversation initiative, Ballarat Imagine, outlined in Figure 2F. The council employed a diverse range of community engagement options to involve and motivate all residents. This initiative was supported by a strong media and communications campaign, and community submissions on the council's website and social media. The campaign resulted in 1 000 conversations with the Ballarat community, more than 6 500 completed responses and 98 residents volunteering to join the community reference group. Ballarat Imagine informed the new council plan for 2013–2017, the 2013–14 budget and the Ballarat strategy.

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Figure 2F
Case study: Ballarat Imagine

The City of Ballarat began developing 'Today Tomorrow Together: the Ballarat Strategy' by conducting Ballarat's largest ever community conversation, Ballarat Imagine. It began in late February 2013 and asked the community to respond to three main questions:

- The things I love about Ballarat are …
- The things I imagine for Ballarat are …
- The things to retain in Ballarat are …

The council released a discussion paper to help community groups, businesses and government agencies have their say on the issues affecting Ballarat's future.

A key factor in the initiative's success was the many ways community members could respond, including:

- by mailing back a postcard that was distributed through events, community groups, shops, cafes and council facilities
- by mailing back a card that was attached to *My Ballarat*, a publication sent to every home and many businesses in Ballarat
- through the council website
- through Twitter and Facebook
- by talking to councillors and council officers at events and stalls across Ballarat
- by filling in the full-page form in the *Courier Mail* and sending a photo
- by writing on the chalkboards placed at events and council facilities
- through schools, which had their students draw or write about their ideas for Ballarat's future
- by making a written submission on the discussion paper, which was posted to hundreds of community groups, businesses and government agencies
- by organising a meeting with council staff.

Importantly, the council demonstrated how the results of Ballarat Imagine informed its vision and planning for the future. The strategy will guide much of the council's work over the next decade. For example, it will:

- guide the future growth of the city by answering questions like 'which areas will grow and which will not'
- guide infrastructure and service delivery to make sure it is coordinated with growth
- help the council to respond to the important social, economic and environmental challenges Ballarat will face up to 2040.

Source: VAGO.

Public participation in council activities

Maroondah similarly worked with the community to develop the Maroondah 2040 Community Vision, outlined in Figure 2G.

Figure 2G
Case study: Maroondah 2040 Community Vision

In 2013–2014, Maroondah City Council worked with the community to develop the Maroondah 2040 Community Vision, a shared long-term vision for the municipality. The council conducted an extensive program of community engagement to ensure that community voices guided the formulation of strategic directions to help shape Maroondah. This enabled thousands of locals to have their say on the future of Maroondah.

As a first step, a Maroondah 2040 engagement team took to the streets, community centres, libraries and shopping centres with a survey and video camera asking the community what they loved and what they wanted to change about Maroondah. This was followed by stakeholder workshops, a children's artwork program, focus groups, online discussion forums, an Imagine Maroondah community day and a presence at the Maroondah Festival.

Source: VAGO.

These large-scale participation activities represent the Involve and Collaborate end of the participation spectrum and are considered better practice. In both cases, the councils worked with the public to ensure they understood concerns and aspirations. Ballarat and Maroondah showed a genuine commitment to working with the public to exchange information, and to seek advice and ideas from the community. They used many different communication strategies with the aim of maximising participation across different community groups. Importantly, they used the stakeholder feedback to inform their decisions and shape the outcome.

Maroondah evaluated the process and outcomes of its Maroondah 2040 Community Vision project. Key lessons learnt are outlined in Figure 2H. Notably, the evaluation found that council employees could benefit from additional guidance for planning and implementing community engagement, perhaps in the form of a guide or handbook. The council has since developed a handbook for community participation.

Figure 2H
Lessons learnt: Maroondah 2040 Community Vision

- Allocating more time or funding to the research phase would have enabled a deeper exploration of themes and topics. Some of the desired information could not be obtained due to pressures of either time or resources.
- Delivery of the community engagement survey during the middle of winter resulted in a lower number of completed surveys than expected. Face-to-face data collection was well received by the community, but the inclement weather reduced the engagement team's ability to reach a large number of people.
- Many comments were received from community members who were impressed with the council 'hitting the streets' to engage.
- Certain engagement techniques are better for different circumstances.
- More focus is needed on engaging hard-to-reach groups in the community.
- Council employees could benefit from additional guidance on planning and implementing community engagement, perhaps in the form of a guide or handbook.

Source: VAGO.

Public participation in council activities

2.6 Other council activities

Councils provided evidence of public participation in a wide range of community projects and activities. The case studies that follow illustrate public participation mainly at the Involve and Collaborate levels of public participation—levels three and four of the IAP2 spectrum.

Public participation at these levels is characterised by the two-way flow of information and includes sharing information within and between stakeholder communities during the decision-making process. When undertaking engagement activities, decision-makers commit to using stakeholder feedback to inform the decision and shape the outcome.

The final case study, Figure 2N, illustrates the Empower level of the spectrum, which involves creating governance structures to delegate decision-making or work directly with the community.

Maribyrnong provided an example of public participation that involved a hard-to-reach group—children and young people—outlined in Figure 2I. The purpose was to design a new playground.

Figure 2I
Case study: Skinner Reserve, Maribyrnong City Council

During 2016, Maribyrnong City Council identified and involved a broad range of stakeholders in the development of a new $750 000 playground. The project included engagement with the public on each aspect of the decision, including the development of alternatives and a preferred solution. The community influenced the draft concept plan and the final design, through an online survey, submissions, barbecue and listening sessions, and activities with children and young people.

The council's online consultation platform 'Your city, your voice' was one of several tools used in the community consultation. The council encouraged people to visit the online consultation platform through social media, including Twitter, Facebook and a newsletter. Overall, the site received 299 site visits and 64 survey responses. The council distributed a project flyer to 1 500 households, and more than 100 pre-school and school-aged children provided visual responses.

Source: VAGO.

Murrindindi also successfully engaged a hard-to-reach group—non-resident property holders—in a public participation activity to establish a new waste management system, outlined in Figure 2J.

Figure 2J
Case study: Taylor Bay waste management, Murrindindi Shire Council

In 2015, Murrindindi Shire Council undertook consultation on the Taylor Bay waste management system. The objective of the public participation was to develop an adequate waste collection service, to stop illegal dumping of hard rubbish and to introduce a recycling service for Taylor Bay. The council established a community reference group, including non-resident property holders, to make recommendations for a new facility. The council accepted the recommendations.

Source: VAGO.

Cardinia adopted multiple methods as part of its feasibility study for new arts and culture facilities, detailed in Figure 2K.

Figure 2K
Case study: Arts and culture facilities feasibility study,
Cardinia Shire Council

The 2013–14 Cardinia Shire Council budget included funding to determine the vision and needs of the shire's arts and cultural community, the feasibility of providing arts and cultural facilities, and recommendations on future facilities.

Consultants gathered information via research, benchmarking and extensive community consultation. This included two community engagement forums attended by more than 65 people, a survey that received 247 responses, discussions with the council's arts and cultural reference group and councillors, and interviews with community members and internal staff. Based on the research, recommendations were made to the council on current and future needs for arts and cultural facilities in Cardinia. The council endorsed the final report, including recommendations to be implemented over the following five years.

Source: VAGO.

Consultation on Mitchell's Seymour Structure Plan, outlined in Figure 2L, occurred over a month and included various forms of promotion including newspaper advertisements, website updates, posters, Facebook content, radio segments, floor stickers and postcards, and events such as drop-in sessions at various locations.

Figure 2L
Case study: Seymour Structure Plan, Mitchell Shire Council

During 2015–2016, Mitchell Shire Council consulted the community on the Seymour Structure Plan. The plan was intended to guide development over the next 20 to 30 years and provide an opportunity for community members to help shape the medium- to long-term future of Seymour and surrounding areas. Community input to this project occurred at four key stages.

The council established a community liaison group, a project website and an online forum. It also sought submissions, produced postcards, visited schools, ran community workshops, events and stakeholder meetings, and conducted face-to-face surveys. Community input from the first stage of the project informed stage two of the project.

Source: VAGO.

The development of Maroondah's housing strategy involved two rounds of community and stakeholder consultation, described in Figure 2M.

Figure 2M
Case Study: Maroondah housing strategy, Maroondah City Council

Development of the updated Maroondah City Council housing strategy involved direct engagement with a wide range of community members and key stakeholders in 2015−2016. Public participation activities included an online survey, face-to-face engagement activities at public events and three stakeholder focus groups. Following the development of the draft strategy, the council undertook further community engagement activities including face-to-face engagement, a workshop with key stakeholders, an online survey and a dedicated website. Using the resulting feedback, the council refined the vision for housing and chose five focus areas and 10 key directions.

Source: VAGO.

Public participation in council activities

Ballarat's Engaging Communities Program, outlined in Figure 2N, gave the community an opportunity to consult on and decide how a funding allocation would be spent. It is an example of a council empowering the community to make funding decisions.

Figure 2N
Engaging Communities Program, Ballarat City Council

Ballarat City Council's Engaging Communities Program is an example of a council empowering the community to implement a local initiative. The program has been working with local communities in Buninyong, Miners Rest and Learmonth to improve local spaces and build a sense of local identity.

As part of the program, the council allocated $100 000 in 2014 and another $100 000 in 2015 to each of three project teams so they could develop and enhance their chosen project. The council established the following objectives for the program:

- increase community engagement and opportunities to empower the community
- implement new communication channels to increase community involvement
- improve coordination of project delivery and integration within council
- improve community confidence in and satisfaction with the council across the three local areas
- maximise the impact and benefits for the local community.

A key aspect of the program has been building community engagement through strong community relations and partnerships over a longer period of time than any one-off project engagement initiative.

As well as the $600 000 investment, other council departments, state government and not-for-profit organisations have contributed more than $1.7 million.

This successful program shows how practical opportunities for the community to work together on shared local projects can have wide-ranging benefits. The program received a high commendation in the 2015 Victorian Local Governance Association Governance Awards for displaying a strong commitment to good governance and community engagement.

Source: VAGO.

2.7   Implementation framework

It is important that councils clearly document public participation activities as they would for all other project activities, in a plan that provides an end-to-end roadmap for successful implementation. The length and detail of the documentation will depend on the scale and complexity of the activity. The underlying aims remain the same—to clearly and comprehensively document a plan for councils to follow and use to assess whether they are achieving the objectives of their public participation activities.

We tested whether councils had a framework for effective public participation for one of their recent investment decisions. The criteria included:

- having a fully informed description of the planned objectives and scope of public participation
- identifying those likely to be affected and how they should be approached
- identifying the resources, skills and time frame required to undertake the activity
- having a plan that is appropriately customised to the activity
- having evidence that public participation has been implemented as described in the plan
- evaluating the public participation activity.