SUMMARY OF INSIGHTS

Budget Discussion Forums – March 2019

We want to make sure our efforts and funding are being used for maximum community benefit. We know working closely with the community to plan and deliver initiatives helps us to do this.

The annual Council Budget is an important part of the process (along with long-term Community Masterplans and the four-year Council Plan). As part of the conversations for the 2019/20 Council Budget, we conducted an engagement process to gather insights on:

- How familiar our community members are with Council decision making and planning processes (including masterplanning, Council Plan and budget cycles),
- How we can improve the way we consult with our community to make decisions.

The insights below are a summary of discussions with 40 attendees at Forums held across the Shire in March, along with a further 71 responses to an online survey.

What you told us

You are keen to participate in genuine consultation before any decisions are made so that insights offered can be considered and incorporated. Most would like to be more involved in consultation on issues that are important to them, and feel it is important that there is an online opportunity to provide feedback. Many agreed that most areas of Council operations have a need for consultation with the community.

Most people don’t engage with formal reports and documentation (meeting papers, minutes, annual reports, budgets, plans, etc.). Many community members prefer to meet in an informal setting to discuss in person, review plans, and have their issues explored or noted. You want simple, accessible language – particularly where financial information is concerned. For the most part summaries are sufficient, using videos, infographics or visuals. Community members want to feel confident that more detailed information is available if they want to know more.

Local media and social media are important channels for sharing information. An easy to navigate and up to date website is a critical source of truth that many community members use and rely on for information about Council. There are a number of people across the Shire who don’t use digital media to get their information, so places for information to be posted in each town were suggested as a useful alternative to digital channels.

Many community members are unfamiliar with government processes and feel frustrated by bureaucracy. You want to feel confident that any specific requests will be considered or resolved quickly, and to feel you’re getting good value from Council. You want communication to and from Council to be responsive, clear and timely, regardless of whether you get in touch in person or via other channels.

You want to know how to progress important community initiatives and want support navigating formal processes – whether through Council or other levels of government. To do this Council needs to work with you to build a clear understanding of Council planning cycles and how we use ongoing consultation to guide and continually refine priorities, plans and decision making.
What happens next

Council is working on a number of initiatives to improve the way we communicate with you, our community members.

**In the short term**

- **Budget Drop In Sessions**
  We returned to Corryong, Tallangatta, Mitta Mitta and Bellbridge to share these insights and answer any questions as part of this year’s Budget public exhibition process.

- **Improvements to our website**
  We’re working on updating our website to make sure it is easy to use, up to date, and a valuable resource to our community members. The improved website will also support an electronic newsletter. Community members will also be able to opt in or out to receive information on their particular areas of interest.

**In the medium term**

- **Closing the loop**
  We want you to feel confident that we are acting in your best interests. We will re-establish our Customer Service Charter which clarifies our customer service standards. We are also looking at a number of ways to improve communication with Council on everything from individual requests to planning processes so that you are kept in the loop on progress.

  - **Improving transparency**
    Sharing clear, simple information about Council processes helps everyone to get on the same page about what Council does and how the community can play an active role. We will develop a framework to guide how we share information in a way that is transparent and supports us to collaborate effectively.

  - **Community Engagement Policy**
    Insights from these recent Budget Discussion Forum sessions will inform the development of a formal document that guides how we engage with you. This will outline opportunities for consultation, including conversations with Councillors, Advisory Groups and Committees or other kinds of consultation. This Policy will also outline how we incorporate feedback into our decision making and use this feedback for continuous improvement.

**For the longer term**

- **Council Plan 2021 – 2025**
  We’ll consider our current Community Masterplans (Upper Murray 2030, Tallangatta Tomorrow, Our Valleys Our Future, and Our Bellbridge) when setting priorities for our next Council Plan. We will need insights and support from you, our community members, to ensure we’re focusing on what’s most important to you. We’ll be seeking your input in further consultations from September 2020.

  - **Working in partnership**
    We know many of our community members are keen to understand how they can work best with Council. We want to work together to build a network of community champions across Towong Shire so that we can understand and advocate most effectively for the needs of our communities.