community voice

Democratic renewal in the Hepburn Shire

Participatory Democracy
A Living Charter

Community Voice – Democratic Renewal in Hepburn Shire

Introduction

The participation of individuals and communities in public life forms part of the core values of democracy. Accessible pathways for diverse participation is an imperative for a healthy democracy.

As the call for participatory democracy grows louder in Hepburn Shire and around the world, *Community Voice* has begun engaging diverse views across the wards. Work has commenced on a charter that aims to set out core values, principles and processes of participatory democracy. This charter is not a fixed document, rather, it is a living charter, and the people who have so far contributed recognise that a community of diverse voices is always evolving and emerging and that good governance takes time. Contributions and participation is therefore sought to keep growing this process so this living charter meaningfully reflects and builds inclusive and participatory processes of democracy. What follows is the living charter in its current form.

Community Voice believes that:

> Local government is a collaboration between the community and its council to meet present and future needs of local people and environments. Local Government is the most immediate and material level of connection with democratic process and has significant impact on people's day to day lives;

> Responses to complex human, social, and environmental challenges cannot be delivered by elected representatives or council officers alone; responses need to be created by and with those who are affected. Values and processes of participatory democracy are essential elements in responsible governance, including at the election stage. In combination these values and processes promote informed and inclusive decision making;

> Participatory democracy raises awareness of diverse community views, challenges and needs, and ensures broad representation in policy frameworks and decision making;

> Councillors are elected to serve the public, responding to the needs, challenges and aspirations of the community.

Community Voice requires that Candidates nominating for public office are held account to:

> values and processes of participatory democracy that prioritise and ensure community engagement, inclusion, expertise and integration;

> increase the strength, health and resilience of communities within the Hepburn Shire;

> maintain and enhance community assets, including built and natural environments, as well as people and community groups;

> seek and generate consensus as a first principle. This requires being willing to sit with difference and generate policy that is inclusive. Collectively fair and transparent processes, including majority vote, can be called upon when consensus is not able to be reached. A fair and transparent consensus process and debate is essential prior to majority vote.

As an ongoing process, *Community Voice* will monitor and support councillors' commitment to the Charter and establish accountability measures. Models for accountability will be developed in collaboration with diverse community members across the shire.

Values and Principles

Community Voice **believes that** councillors have a responsibility to adhere to the following principles and values:

> **Mutual respect and Care:** engage in respectful and transparent communications; Care for one another, for the community and for the environment; Care, being built on foundations of reciprocity, mutuality and acknowledgement;

> **Inclusion and Equity:** actively seek out and value the views and contributions of everyone in our community; welcome and acknowledge the strength inherent in diverse views and life experiences in our community;

> **Collaboration:** listen to and draw upon the knowledge and experience of diverse community perspectives; Include relevant expertise and opinions to better inform policy making;

> **Localisation:** actively support local cultures, environments and people, and increase agency for self-reliance and community-sufficiency. Maintain a shire-wide focus that responds to diverse needs across wards, town centres and rural areas, and devise appropriate responses to distinctive local circumstances, challenges and needs;

> **Innovation:** exercise creative response thinking, a willingness to take calculated risks, and acknowledge and learn from mistakes within a team framework;

> **Evidence-based problem solving:** be guided by sound evidence-based processes and local knowledge, experience, and diverse perspectives from the community;

> **Resilience:** foster diversity across the community, including broad forms of biodiversity, and build alliances that increase the ability of our community to adapt to rapid changes; balance economic imperatives with social and environmental needs.

Processes

Community Voice believes that Councillors have a responsibility to adhere to the following processes:

> **Community engagement and participation:** draw on the experience and knowledge of the shire's diverse communities, and create transparent, balanced and robust structures that enable everyone to participate; Acknowledge that people's ability to participate depends on personal circumstances, which are often related to race, gender, class and ability. Identify voices that are missing from public engagement; Reach out to marginalised voices and First Peoples, listen and seek to understand and incorporate their views.

> Embrace participatory decision-making processes such as community-selected Peoples' Assemblies, community-run meetings prior to Council meetings, kitchen table conversations and other processes developed by and with the community;

> **Dismantle barriers to participation:** be aware of hierarchies and structures that limit diverse participation and work actively to dismantle those barriers. Support a framework for listening to and representing local people's stories, needs and aspirations;

> Establish community working groups to develop policy;

> Engage with Accountability models and mechanisms as they are established.