



Practice Insights #1

Between Promise and Pragmatism: Deliberative Engagement in Victorian Councils

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Practice Insights Series

Practice Insights is a series that bridges research and practice in public participation. Each report synthesises findings from direct observation and practitioner conversations to provide timely, actionable analysis for professionals working to strengthen community engagement and democratic participation.

About the author

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Feedback and enquiries

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For more information about the Big Deliberative Debrief, see Appendix 1.

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Executive Summary

This report synthesises insights from discussion that occurred during the Big Deliberative Debrief (see Appendix 1 for more information) alongside some relevant academic literature to identify what's working, key drivers of the current challenges, and the change required.

Since the introduction of the Local Government Act 2020, Victorian councils have rapidly adopted deliberative engagement practices. While confidence is growing across the sector, analysis reveals significant challenges around organisational buy-in, councillor engagement, process ambition, and demonstrating value.

Key Findings

Councils are without doubt getting better at the mechanics of deliberation but three critical tensions emerged: First, the authorising environment problem – when councillors or executives are misaligned with deliberative outcomes, panel recommendations are diluted or overturned, eroding trust. Second, the scope reduction tendency – participants consistently described narrow remits toward safer, more aspirational topics, limiting deliberation's potential to inform complex decisions. Third, the evaluation gap – while satisfaction surveys are common, few councils systematically measure how deliberation influences policy outcomes or organisational culture.

Building organisational buy-in takes sustained effort. The most successful implementations involved several months to over a year of internal preparation, with executives and councillors brought along through exposure to examples, reassurance about decision-making authority, and clear communication about ownership. Project Control Groups proved essential for aligning internal stakeholders and fostering cross-departmental collaboration. When executives champion the process and councillors have prior experience with deliberation, they become advocates rather than obstacles.

Legislative ambiguity, while offering flexibility, leaves councils uncertain about compliance standards and reliant on informal networks for guidance. Peer-to-peer learning networks have become the primary source of sector capacity building. In the absence of clear, consistent guidance from government bodies, councils rely heavily on communities of practice such as the Engagement Superstars Network and LGPro Special Interest Group to share resources, troubleshoot challenges, and develop collective expertise. This informal infrastructure has filled a critical gap but highlights an opportunity for more systematic sector support.

Without stronger executive support and clearer evaluation frameworks, deliberative processes risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative. To move forward, the sector must address critical challenges around:

- (1) Councillor engagement: strengthening the authorising environment by building councillor buy-in and managing the impacts of electoral turnover.
- (2) Build organisational buy-in: embedding deliberative practice through sustained internal engagement and building staff understanding of its value to their work.
- (3) Remit setting: shifting from safe, aspirational topics to ambitious engagement with genuine trade-offs.
- (4) Return on investment: developing robust evaluation that measures broad outcomes, not just participant perspectives.
- (5) Legislative clarity: securing practical guidance on requirements and standards.
- (6) Community participation: sustaining panel member relationships and broadening engagement with the wider community.

1. Councillor Engagement: The Elephant in the Room

The challenge

Councillor involvement continues to be a challenging aspect of deliberative engagement. How to involve them effectively while maintaining appropriate boundaries remains unclear.

Unlike the previous round of legislated deliberative engagement in 2020/21, when councillors were often kept at arm's length, this round saw greater attention paid to their involvement. However, uncertainty remained about how to appropriately involve councillors while maintaining process integrity. Different councils experimented with various strategies to strike this balance - creating opportunities for councillors to observe and understand the process while preserving the independence of deliberative outcomes.

Some councils established formal observation protocols with separate seating areas, dedicated break spaces, and clear guidelines around interaction with panellists. Others chose alternative approaches, such as inviting panellists to present their findings at council meetings rather than having councillors observe deliberations directly.

Despite these efforts to facilitate councillor engagement, attendance was typically limited. Many councillors who initially expressed interest did not ultimately attend, and those who did sometimes found the observer role - with its necessary constraints on participation - did not meet their expectations. This suggests that councils are still working to find effective models that satisfy both the desire for councillor understanding and the need to maintain the independence of deliberative outcomes.

Timing in relation to elections emerged as a recurring operational challenge. Legislative timeframes for developing council plans mean that deliberative processes typically need to occur shortly after councillors are elected. Council staff noted that deliberative processes conducted immediately after elections faced obstacles, as newly elected councillors were still being inducted into their roles. This timing reduced councillor engagement and created additional demands for briefing and onboarding. To address this, several councils strategically conducted broader engagement before elections, then used deliberation post-election to test, refine and consolidate that input.

Enabling factors

Councillors who have been exposed to deliberative processes in the past frequently become the strongest advocates. This experience demystifies the approach and builds confidence in its legitimacy. These councillors can play a crucial role in supporting future processes and addressing peer scepticism.

Long-term preparation also matters significantly. One council invested six months in building councillor understanding and support through sharing examples of successful deliberation, creating space for concerns and questions, and providing reassurance that decision-making authority would be preserved. This patient groundwork proved essential for creating the authorising environment necessary for deliberation to succeed.

Critical insight

One participant noted that councillors were "shocked" by how closely panel views aligned with council's existing position. While this built confidence, it raises a troubling question: if councillor support depends on alignment with their existing views, are deliberative processes diminishing their own independent contribution?

2. Internal buy-in: The Essential Element for Success

Internal buy-in requires sustained organisational capacity building, and Project Control Groups (PCGs) were consistently identified as the vehicle for achieving this. Councils with strong PCGs reported they "set everyone up for success" by building trust, aligning internal stakeholders, and fostering cross-council collaboration.

Beyond their formal coordinating role, PCGs created opportunities for organisational learning and relationship-building across departments that often work in silos. They provided a structure for "plan owners" (staff responsible for strategic documents) to develop genuine ownership of deliberative outcomes rather than viewing them as external impositions. By bringing together diverse organisational perspectives early in the process, PCGs helped ensure that deliberation was understood not as a community engagement exercise alone, but as a mechanism for better organisational decision-making. In some cases, PCG members wanted to continue meeting even after the formal process ended, reflecting the collaborative culture these groups fostered.

Key success factors

- Early establishment (ideally during 2026 planning for 2028 processes).
- Multidisciplinary composition including governance, communications, and "plan owners".
- Recognition that "internal stakeholders need just as much guidance as community".
- Creating a sense of ownership among participants.

The gap

Internal collaboration wasn't always seamless. Participants described organisational silos where some teams were heavily involved while others felt "tacked on" or only engaged at late stages – this seemed to be particularly the case with asset and corporate planning teams who some described as mostly interested in checking compliance requirements rather than genuinely participating. Building genuine collaboration requires demonstrating to these teams how deliberative outcomes can strengthen their planning work, not simply add to their workload.

3. Remit Setting: Playing it Safe

The pattern

Many councils focused deliberation on high-level 'community vision' statements rather than complex or contentious policy trade-offs which indicates a lack of appetite for more ambitious remits. One council's engagement policy now explicitly limits deliberative engagement to the community vision only, with the rationale that "it's impossible to deliberate on all the plans constructively."

While it seems that executives often steered towards safer remits, the underlying drivers remain unclear. Possible factors include concerns about political risk, uncertainty about how councillors might respond to contentious recommendations, or a desire to maintain control over sensitive policy areas. There may also be genuine concerns about ensuring deliberative processes succeed - avoiding scenarios where panels are asked to grapple with trade-offs the organisation is not yet prepared to action. Additionally, staff running deliberative processes may feel they lack sufficient internal influence to champion more transformative or ambitious remits.

Some participants argued that broad, aspirational remits were appropriate because more specific, contentious issues were too complex for community members to meaningfully engage with, especially given limited time and preparation. However, this justification overlooks a critical problem: when remits are too broad and

aspirational, they fail to generate the kind of considered trade-offs and substantive judgments that make deliberation valuable. The outputs become high-level statements that staff find less usable for actual decision-making, leading to dissatisfaction with the process.

When asked to self-assess their council's risk appetite in an activity, approximately:

- 30% identified as "Fortress Mode" (risk-averse, defensive)
- 40% as "Cautious Explorer" (testing but staying in safe spaces)
- 30% as "Open Collaborator" (edging toward more ambitious practice)

Notably, nobody claimed to be truly confident or willing to take on significant risks.

The risk

As one practitioner reflected: without stronger executive and councillor support, deliberative processes risk being narrowed to symbolic exercises rather than opportunities for genuine collective judgment: "Deliberative processes should not be reduced to simply gathering community sentiment. Instead, they are about generating considered judgment, particularly around issues that are genuinely tricky."

However, council staff appear unconcerned about this limitation. When asked what they would do differently, participants consistently discussed community engagement methods rather than challenging remit scope or pushing for better internal alignment. This suggests that focusing on broad vision statements has become normalised as deliberation's appropriate role, rather than being recognised as a retreat from its transformative potential.

4. Return on Investment: The Critical Evaluation Gap

The tension

Discussion of Return on Investment recurred throughout the Debrief. Some councils expressed doubts about whether large-scale deliberations produced outcomes commensurate with costs. One participant stated bluntly: "It's a lot of money with not a lot of outcomes or return on investment." Others wondered if they could "go smaller and get the same outcome." Interestingly, the same practitioner who said they were "really happy with the project" also questioned whether they needed such a large process next time.

Others defended the value, highlighting intangible benefits like building trust and legitimacy: "Don't underestimate the value of going out to the community, and

another said "realistically the deliberative process was worthwhile" despite significant resourcing.

The gap

Evaluation practices remain underdeveloped. While participant surveys are common, few councils systematically measure the broader outcomes and value that deliberation delivers. Only 3-4 councils (out of 26 represented) had systematic evaluation processes. This evaluation gap undermines the sector's ability to build and sustain strong practice. Understanding what value and outcomes deliberative processes bring is instrumental to building organisational buy-in - executives and staff need evidence that the investment is worthwhile. Without this, councils struggle to justify costs and defend against scepticism. Participant surveys are not enough - they measure experience, not impact. Councils need to think broadly about deliberative outcomes, which can include: better understanding community appetite for certain policy directions, building greater community understanding of complex issues and trade-offs, reaching beyond usual participants to engage new voices, strengthening relationships between council and community, or generating insights that wouldn't emerge through other engagement methods. Without evaluation frameworks that capture this range of outcomes, the value of deliberation remains difficult to demonstrate or sustain over time.

5. Legislative Ambiguity: Communities of Practice Fill the Gap

The dilemma

The Victorian Local Government Act 2020 is viewed as both enabling and ambiguous. Councils reported difficulty accessing clear advice from Local Government Victoria (LGV), with staff often providing inconsistent or vague guidance. You can "get different answers from different people at LGV depending on who you speak to." Some councils openly admitted to "bending the Act," confident there are no real consequences. This suggests legislation functions more as a normative guide than an enforceable standard.

Some participants stated they wanted practical interpretation of the Act, standardised templates for different scales of processes, and clarity on minimum requirements. However, there is an unresolved question regarding which peak body should provide this sector-wide support.

In practice, where there is uncertainty about how to proceed, staff shared that they rely heavily on their own community engagement policies. This highlights the critical role these documents play.

The critical role of communities of practice

In the absence of centralised support, peer-to-peer communities of practice have become vital sources of shared learning and mutual aid. When councils need guidance on interpreting legislative requirements, designing processes, or navigating political challenges, they turn to peers rather than official channels. The Engagement Superstars Network and LGPro Special Interest Group were highlighted as particularly supportive forums. These informal networks fill a critical gap, providing practitioners with spaces to troubleshoot challenges, share resources, and develop collective expertise.

It could be said that this peer-to-peer learning has become the primary mechanism for sector capacity building. However, this approach relies on peer groups having sufficient expertise to guide councils toward good deliberative engagement practice. Without authoritative external support, there's a risk that pragmatic compromises - driven by resource constraints, political pressures, or organisational caution - become normalised as "best practice," potentially limiting deliberation's transformative potential.

6. Community Participation: Panels and Beyond

Despite organisational capacity concerns, when asked what they would do differently, participants consistently defaulted to talking about community engagement methods, rather than internal alignment or remit ambition. This indicates that community-facing engagement remains the dominant frame through which councils evaluate success, sometimes overshadowing systemic considerations.

Councils with standing panels reported strong satisfaction, emphasising their value for quick mobilisation, continuity, and the ability to draw on participants for multiple consultations across different topics without repeating resource-intensive recruitment processes. Despite clear benefits, councils without standing panels - while expressing strong aspirations - shared that they struggled to secure the executive commitment required to establish them.

Beyond formal standing panels, strong interest exists in sustaining ongoing relationships with panel members. Panellists typically remain enthusiastic about continued involvement after formal processes conclude, and anecdotal evidence

suggests many become more actively engaged in council activities - attending meetings, participating in other consultations, or even running for council themselves. However, systematic mechanisms to support this long-term engagement remain underdeveloped. To build on this potential, councils could: establish alumni networks that maintain connection with past panellists, create databases enabling strategic re-engagement of previous participants in relevant future work, commission longitudinal research tracking the civic trajectories and ongoing participation of past panellists, and develop clear pathways for those wanting to stay involved. These mechanisms would strengthen both the return on initial investment and councils' capacity to cultivate an informed, engaged citizenry.

Recommendations for Practice

Start Early

- Begin planning for 2028 processes in 2026 to allow sufficient preparation time and budget commitment
- Establish Project Control Groups early, ensuring multidisciplinary composition including plan owners, governance, communications, and asset teams
- Invest time in building councillor understanding

Be Braver

- Encourage executives to support more ambitious remits that move beyond broad, aspirational statements
- Focus on specific issues involving genuine trade-offs where collective judgment adds real value
- Recognise that communities can handle complexity when given adequate time, information, and support
- Build confidence through smaller, more ambitious projects before scaling up

Build Internal Capacity

- Demonstrate the value of deliberation to staff, helping them see how it supports rather than burdens their roles
- Develop evaluation frameworks that measure a range of diverse outcomes
- Create strong community engagement policies that provide practical guidance and clarify roles
- Draw on resources such as the [Guidebook for Deliberative Engagement](#) and [Deliberative Mini-publics: Core Design Features](#)

Strengthen Councillor Engagement

- Cultivate councillor champions by providing exposure to deliberative processes and sharing examples of successful practice
- Define clear parameters for councillor involvement that balance meaningful engagement with process independence
- Address high councillor turnover through documentation and by building champions who can advocate across electoral cycles

Sustain Community Participation

- Create alumni networks to maintain relationships with past panellists
- Develop pathways for ongoing engagement beyond formal panel processes
- Consider longitudinal research to understand and support the civic trajectories of past participants

Appendix 1: About the Big Deliberative Debrief

The Big Deliberative Debrief was held on Wednesday, 27 August 2025.

It brought together Victorian council staff to reflect on their deliberative engagement experiences since the introduction of the Local Government Act 2020 - examining what worked, what didn't, and how practice could be strengthened moving forward.

The event was designed as a comprehensive sector-wide learning opportunity, incorporating:

- **Pre-event survey** to capture initial reflections and priorities
- **Case study presentations** from Wyndham, Merri-bek, and Wellington councils, sharing data and insights from recent deliberative processes
- **Facilitated reflection sessions** enabling practitioners to connect with peers, identify common challenges, and share lessons learned
- **Practical workshops** to generate concrete ideas and actions for improving deliberative engagement practice
- **Expert panel discussion and Q&A** featuring representatives from the Engagement Institute, MosaicLab, MAVlab, and the Centre for Deliberative Democracy

The Debrief was attended by 49 participants representing 26 councils across Victoria, spanning rural, regional, and metropolitan contexts and ranging from small to large organisations. This diversity ensured insights reflected the breadth of deliberative engagement experiences across the state.

The event was conceptualised and presented by the [Engagement Collective](#)