



Hepburn Together 2025-2029 Community Panel Outcomes Report

Hepburn Shire Council
April 2025

Prepared by
Conversation Co.

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For Hepburn Shire Council

1. Introduction

From March-April 2025, the Hepburn Shire Council undertook a deliberation process to inform the development of the Community Vision, Council and Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plan 2025-2029, including engagement to inform the Asset Plan, Financial Plan and Revenue and Rating Plan.

This was the second time the Hepburn Shire community has been engaged to support the development of a Council's key strategic documents. Key plans developed and reviewed in the 2021 Hepburn Together consultation included the development of the Community Engagement Policy 2021, Community Vision 2031 and the Council Plan 2021-2025 including the Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plan.

1.1 Project overview

The *Local Government Act 2020* (the Act) requires councils to develop an integrated, long-term and transparent approach to planning organised around a ten-year Community Vision. In addition to the Vision, councils must prepare a:

- Council Plan (four-year outlook).
- Financial Plan (ten-year outlook).
- Asset Plan (ten-year outlook).
- Revenue and Rating Plan (four-year outlook).

In line with the Act, and *Hepburn Shire's Community Engagement Policy 2021* these strategic planning documents must be developed through a process of deliberative engagement.

This report presents the methodology and findings for the Hepburn Together 2025-2029 Community Panel.

1.2 Outcome of this process

The Hepburn Together Community Panel was asked to provide recommendations to Council to assist with the development of a new four-year Council Plan, including the Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plan (2025-29) and support the development of the Asset Plan (2022-32).

Panel members reflected on what was most valuable to the community and what they felt was Council's role for key service areas: Asset Management, Community Wellbeing, Environment, Waste and Sustainability and Economic Development. Panel members were presented with information about discretionary and non-discretionary services provided by Hepburn Shire Council and developed criteria to assist Council as it is reviewing each service. Panel members were also provided with the current Community Vision and invited to discuss its relevance and recommend minor tweaks or changes to the Vision statement to update it.

2. Process of Deliberation

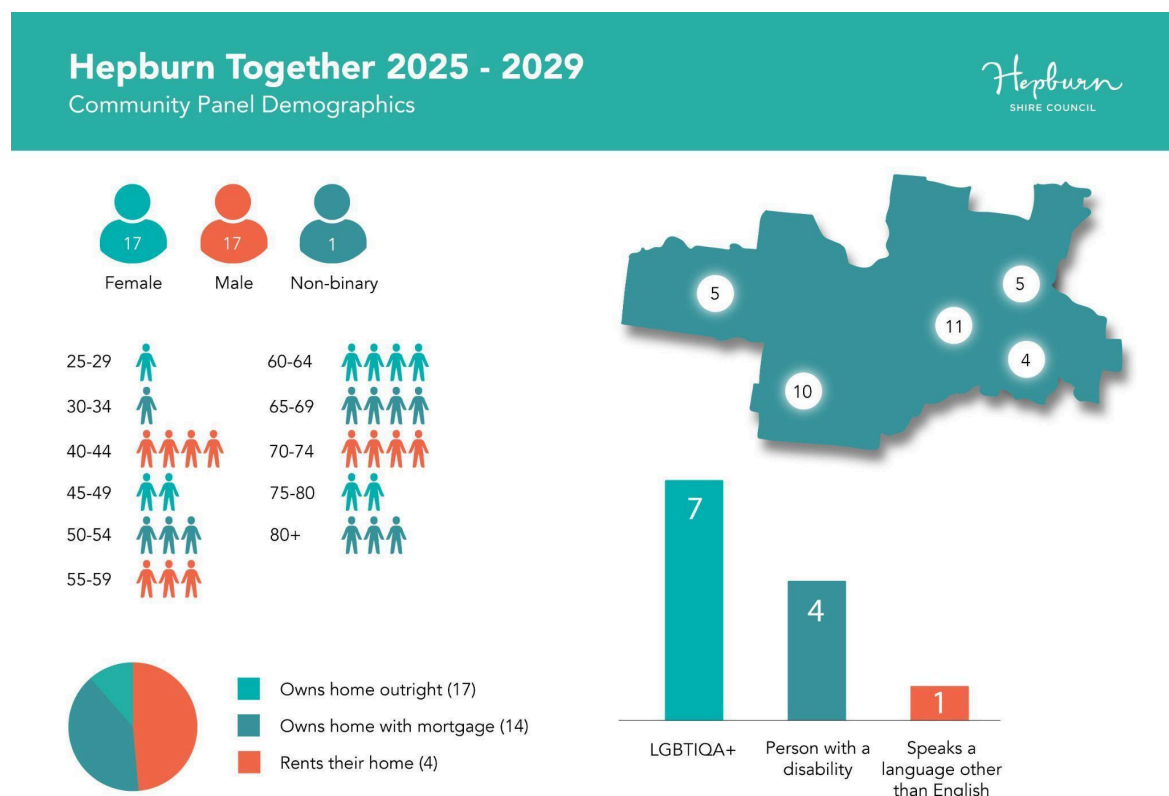
2.1 Recruitment and ongoing participation

Hepburn Shire Council delivered an expression of interest campaign which was extended to all residents within the Shire. This opportunity was hosted via the *Participate Hepburn* community engagement portal and was promoted online via Council's corporate social media channels and via SMS message to Council's database.

Panel members were recruited by Conversation Co to reflect the demographic makeup of the Hepburn Shire community using a stratified sampling approach. A total of 82 nominations were received, with 44 people recruited, however only 35 of those recruited accepted their position on the panel, due to unavailability for the sessions. Further panel members were not recruited as remaining expressions of interest could not produce a stratified sample needed for the demographic representation of the community.

Figure 1 shows the demographic makeup of the panel across age, gender, house tenure, location, and identification with demographic descriptors (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, language spoken, disability and sexuality).

Figure 1. Demographic makeup of panel members



Ongoing participation in the panel process was supported through:

- **Members folder:** Panel members had access to an online folder which contained any background reading, or key information for each session (agendas, presentation) or session outputs (presentations, collated feedback).
- **Training in the use of online tools:** Panel members were provided with the opportunity to undertake Zoom training ahead of the online sessions.
- **Participation reminders:** Reminder SMS messages were sent to panel members from a text service prior to each workshop. Follow-up emails were sent between meetings with any updates or pre reading to be completed.
- **Materials sent out in advance:** Reading materials were provided to panel members in advance of each workshop to allow reading time.
- **Meeting absence grace:** Panel members were able to miss a meeting and remain in the Panel, as these workshops were run with separate content that did not rely on knowledge or participation from previous workshops.
- **Dedicated contact support:** Panel members were able to contact facilitators for support via phone and email. Facilitators also gave follow up phone calls to panel members who missed sessions or required additional support.
- **Flexible modes of feedback:** Panel members who missed a session were able to provide feedback via worksheets provided online, emailed to panel members who were apologies.
- **Creating accessible spaces for panel members:** Facilitators worked with panel members with specific needs to make specific adjustments and create safe, accessible spaces and materials to enable and support participation.

2.2 Attendance

Table 1 outlines the attendance across each of the sessions. As to be expected there were some apologies for non-attendance due to personal circumstances (illness, caring for children, unscheduled work commitments). Contact was made with panel members who missed sessions to follow-up, offer support and encourage them to attend the remaining sessions.

There were also 5 withdrawals due to concerns around privacy, trust in the process and trust in Council as a result of two incidents:

- Removal of a recruited panel member, by Council, before session 1. Council took this action to ensure a safe environment for the panel members during the sessions. Since this created concern for a few panel members, a discussion was undertaken in session one to provide an opportunity for panel members to express their concerns. During this workshop three other panel members chose to withdraw from the process, citing a lack of trust in the process.
- Names of panel members residing in one township were shared by Council before the commencement of session 1. Panel members had concerns about the sharing of their private information. This matter was addressed by Council staff in session 2 and resulted in two withdrawals.

These circumstances impacted the demographic makeup of the panel, however there were still adequate attendees to continue with the process, with attending panel members generously contributing their time towards robust discussions.

Table 1: Number of Hepburn Community Panel Workshops

Date	Attendance
Session 1 : Thursday 20 March 2025	28
Session 2: Sunday 30 March 2025	19
Session 3: Thursday April 10, 2025	22
Session 4: Sunday April 13 2025	22

2.2 Workshop program

Delivery of the Hepburn Together deliberative process took place over four sessions.

Prior to attending these workshops, panel members were provided with detailed information to assist with their deliberations (detail provided in Section 2.3) During the workshops they were then asked to review the information presented by the presenters, ask any questions and discuss their ideas with other panel members. The key remit for this Hepburn Together process was *“Council needs to reduce \$2.6 million from its budget. Looking at discretionary services, we need to consider what is most valued and still needed in our community and what are the criteria under which Council could reduce or exit a service”*.

Workshop 1: Thursday 20 March; 6:00-8:30PM, online via Zoom.

The purpose of session 1 was to introduce participants to each other, the purpose for the deliberative process and give them an understanding of Council in the context of other levels of government. A significant portion of session 1 was spent discussing the removal of a participant who was initially recruited. Facilitators supported discussions between panel members and the CEO Bradley Thomas to answer questions and concerns about this process.

Key items in Workshop 1:

- Mayoral Welcome
- Group introductions and group working styles
- Presentation - Context Overview of tiers of government and Council’s Role
- Presentation - Council’s services and roles within this structure and service map
- Presentation - Management of Council’s finances (Income and expenditure, Local Government financial levers)
- Purpose of deliberation and role of Panel Members
- Tips about how to participate in a deliberative process.

Workshop 2: Sunday 30 March, 10:00AM to 2:00PM, Trentham Mechanics Hall, 66 High St, Trentham

The purpose of session 2 was to consolidate the information presented in session 1 and take a detailed look at Asset Planning to inform the development of the Asset Plan. The session began with a presentation on integrated planning and Q&A session with CEO Bradley Thomas in which participant questions and queries surrounding the remit, Council's role in service delivery and the financial situation for Hepburn Shire.

Facilitators supported a group conversation to rebuild trust with Council and establish a working relationship for the panel going forward. This included discussions about the removal of a participant and subsequent withdrawals of other panel members and the sharing of private information of panel members by Councillors alongside the establishment of group agreements for behaviours and collaboration.

Key items in Workshop 2:

- Your questions answered from Workshop 1
- Working together to rebuild trust
- Presentation - Overview of integrated planning and Council Services
- Presentation - Overview of Asset Planning
- Group Activity: Review different asset management approaches and initiate their preferences for future management
- Group Activity: Level of support for an asset management approach balancing development of new assets vs. renewal and maintenance of existing assets. Participants were invited to discuss their preference and any justifications for their choice
- Group Activity: Criteria for the repurposing, removal or sale of a Council's assets
- Group Activity: Assets for renewal panel members were given a list of Council asset classes and asked to rank them in priority order for renewal

Session 3: Thursday 10 April 2025 6.00pm - 8.30 pm Online

The purpose of session three was to gain final feedback to inform the Asset Plan and create a framework for Council to use when making adjustments to service levels. This framework was developed and tested against a current service.

Key items in Workshop 3:

- Remaining asset management discussions. Final ranking of assets classes for renewal and level of support for management of assets on Mentimeter
- Presentation and activity to develop a service assessment framework for Council to use to assess whether Council might retain the service as is, simplify or reduce the service, do something differently or exit a service.
- Overview of the Communities Portfolio by Ben Grounds, Acting Manager Community and Economy, including question time

- Activity: Council's role in community wellbeing and what is most valuable and important to the community.
- Activity: Test the service assessment framework against Aquatics and discussions of Council's role in aquatics and what is most valuable and important to the community.

Session 4: Sunday 13 April 2025 10am - 2pm Creswick Senior Citizen's Clubrooms

The purpose of session four was to discuss Council's role in the delivery of services under two key portfolios: economic development and waste, environment and sustainability. The final segments of the workshop were spent reviewing the current Community Vision and writing the panel's report.

Key items in Session 4:

- Presentation of collated feedback from session 3
- Activity: prioritising criteria within service assessment framework
- Presentation and discussion Economic Development portfolio, Council's role and community value in local business support and events and tourism.
- Presentation and discussion on Community Vision, legislation and development of current Vision. Level of support for current Vision, additions or suggested changes
- Presentation and discussion on Waste, Environment and Sustainability, ranking of preferred waste management approaches and preferences.
- Activity: Write up the Panel Report and review sections written by other groups.
- Nomination to present Panel Report to Councillors

2.3 Provision of time and information

Panel members were presented with information sources at various intervals throughout the process. Table 2 outlines the information provided to participants and the point in the program at which the information was presented for discussion.

Table 2. Information provided to Community Panel members throughout the project

Information	Media	Point in the process	Detail included within document
Community Panel Member Handbook	PDF	Before meeting 1, at the time of panel selection	• Information about the process • What to expect at meetings • Declaring a conflict of interest • Social media use advice
Service Catalogue	PDF	Before meeting 1	Including a service Map which outlines how services align.
Community Vision 2021-2030 and Council Plan 2021-2025 including Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plan	PDF	Available in the online folder and emailed	The Council Plan sets out the four year vision for the city and the outcomes Council wants to achieve over that period.
Asset Plan	PDF	Available online folder and emailed	The purpose of the Asset Plan is to articulate how Council is going to manage its assets to meet the service delivery needs of the community. Including a ten-year financial forecast for operating and capital expenditures related to assets.

3. Key Findings

Following are the key findings as they relate to each key strategic document:

- Asset Plan
- Financial Plan
- Council and Wellbeing Plan
- Community Vision.

3.1 Asset Plan

Across sessions 1 and 2, panel members were presented with an introduction to Asset Planning including an overview of the Local Government Act requirements for asset planning, a summary of the current Asset Plan objectives and some of the key challenges for the asset management team at Hepburn Shire including: limited budget, ageing infrastructure and growth needs. Panel members were then presented with information on the different asset classes and the current and project state of these assets:

- Roads (including paths and kerb)
- Bridges (including major culverts)
- Recreation and open space
- Water and drainage
- Buildings and structures
- Explanation of asset lifecycles, costs, and renewal needs

There were a total of 23 participants in the group activities undertaken in person and online.

3.1.1 Approaches to Asset Management

In the first activity, participants, in pairs, were asked to consider various asset management approaches placed on slider scales around the room. Each pair was prompted to demonstrate where on the scale, they felt Council should invest for each of the following:

- Spread investment evenly across the Shire vs. Invest where it is needed the most
- Invest the most in assets that are used by many people vs. Invest in assets to support specific activities, even if only used by a few
- Renew and upgrade existing assets vs. Build new assets
- Maintain assets at the current service level vs. Reduce some services in order to improve others
- Maintain existing small, low use or single-purpose facilities vs. Transition to larger, multi-purpose facilities
- Build in line with best practice (environmental, sustainable etc) vs. Build in the most cost-effective way

- Partner with community to help manage facilities vs. Council manage all facilities

Panel members, in their pairs, were asked to come to a consensus on their preferred approaches, using one sticky dot per pair. Participants were encouraged to share their thinking behind their decisions in the form of free text comments.

The results of this exercise showed clear preferences for building in line with best practice, renewing and upgrading assets rather than building new and partnering with communities to manage assets rather than Council managing all facilities. Table 3 shows the breakdown of preferences for all approaches.

Table 3. Preferred approaches to asset management collated findings

Approach 1	v	Approach 2	Verbatim Comments
Build in line with best practice (n=10)	> (n= 2)	Build in the most cost effective way (n=0)	<i>"cost effective might be ok for some small assets - low value assets"</i> <i>"cost effective needs to be environmentally friendly"</i> <i>"reduced running costs doing best practice"</i> <i>"build once and do it properly"</i>
Renew and upgrade existing assets (n=9)	> (n=3)	Build new assets (n=1)	<i>"depends on asset if it can be multipurpose and revenue raising"</i> <i>"case by case basis"</i> <i>"build new = larger short term costs"</i> <i>"balance between both"</i> <i>"given current funding, use a renew what we have till we are in a better financial condition"</i> <i>"definitely no new assets not enough money, use existing assets"</i> <i>"depends on cost of upgrade"</i> <i>"assume its more cost effective to upgrade existing- helps retain character"</i> <i>"Where assets have social, environmental or heritage currency, focus on renewal and upgrading is best to maintain ongoing connection with cultural identity, and to deliver to community expectations and 'council respectability'".</i>

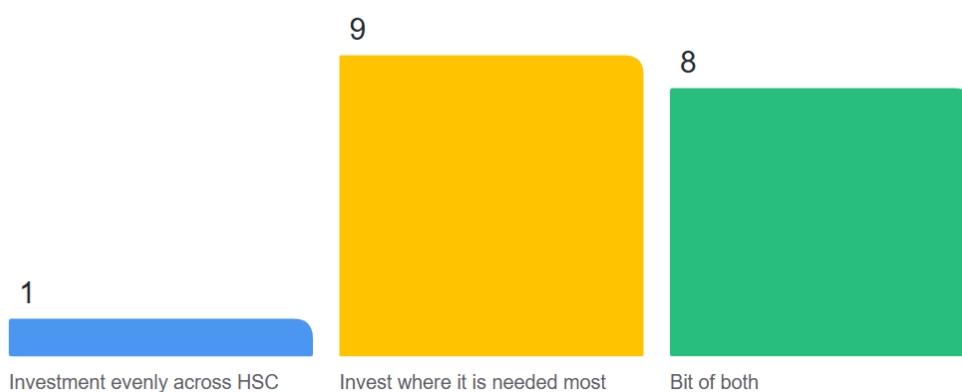
Partner with community to help manage facilities (n=9)	> (n=1)	Council manage all facilities (n=2)	<i>"Community to support facilities that it wants and needs. create ownership and good will"</i> <i>"Let groups to get grants outside of council to improve facilities for greater community use"</i> <i>"Create a sense of shared value and responsibility"</i> <i>"Rates are paid for council to manage facilities so they should manage them. Volunteer management puts onus on community who may lack skills and expertise"</i>
Invest where its needed most (n=8)	> (n=4)	Spread investment evenly across the Shire (n=0)	<i>"Small localities miss out"</i> <i>"Invest to meet agreed service level. i.e \$ to upgrade very poor to fair or higher"</i> <i>"Fairness matters but need is vital. As needed but along a spectrum that evolves over time"</i> <i>"How do we find out where it's needed? community liaison"</i>
Reduce some services in order to improve others (n=7)	> (n=1)	Maintain assets at the current service level (n=3)	<i>"Can some services come with a voluntary charge?"</i> <i>"Issues of isolation in small communities by maintaining their assets you maintain that community. I f we lose assets in small communities we will never get them back"</i> <i>"Better communications between management committees and council staff about what is acceptable level of maintenance"</i> <i>"We need to plan for the future, we are likely to have more extreme weather events and need to proactively protect our assets"</i>
Transition to larger multipurpose facilities (n=5)	= (n=3)	Maintain existing small, low use or single purpose facilities (n=4)	<i>"Small towns still need spaces even if the user level is lower"</i> <i>"Transport/ accessibility is an issue to rationalising. Needs to occur before we can lose small town facilities and transition to hubs"</i>

			<i>"Maintian but do not over maintain, Keep natural characteristic of the shire which are our draw card. there are enough multipurpose already"</i> <i>"Rationalise facilities but still consider needs of minority groups i.e. mobile library"</i>
Invest in assets used by the most people (n=7)	> (n=3)	Invest in assets to support specific activities even if only used by a few (n=2)	<i>"Be careful not to further entrench disadvantage"</i> <i>"For smaller groups looks at other ways to provide access to the assets, i.e transport, share assets, that its safe"</i> <i>"Majority is important but we should look at ways to share with those who use it in smaller numbers to be fair"</i>

Data source: worksheets session 2, online worksheets session 2

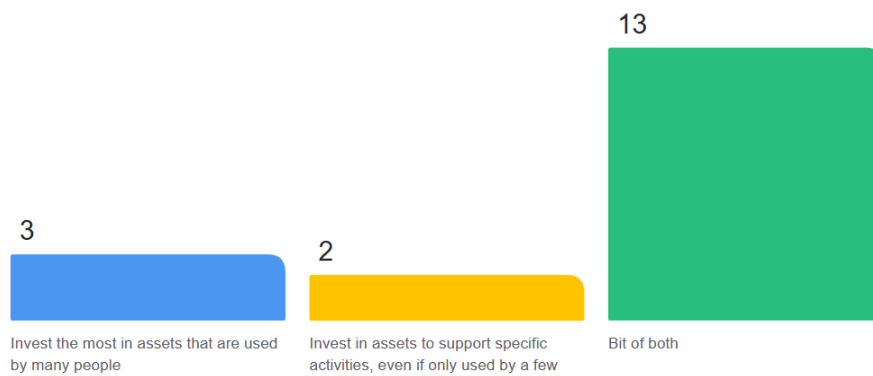
In session 3, panel members were individually asked to choose which was their preferred option for each set of approaches. There was a total of 18 respondents to this set of questions. Figure 2a-2f show the findings of this consolidation.

Figure 2a. Preferred asset investment approach



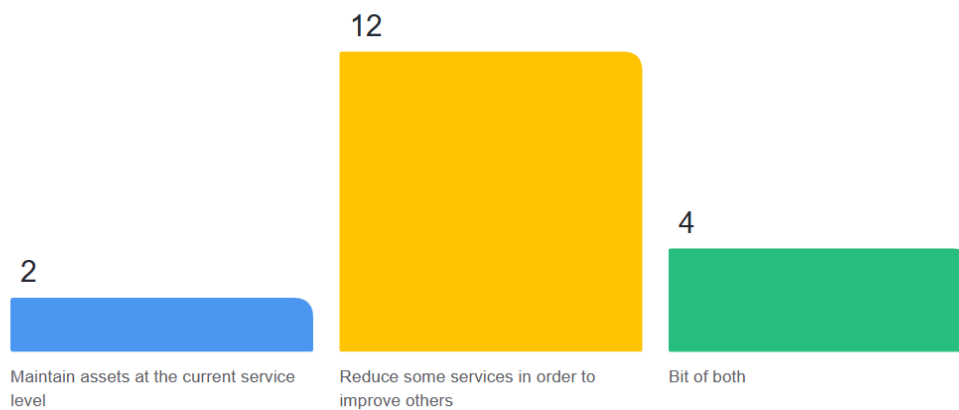
data source: Menti session 3

Figure 2b. Preferred utilisation approach



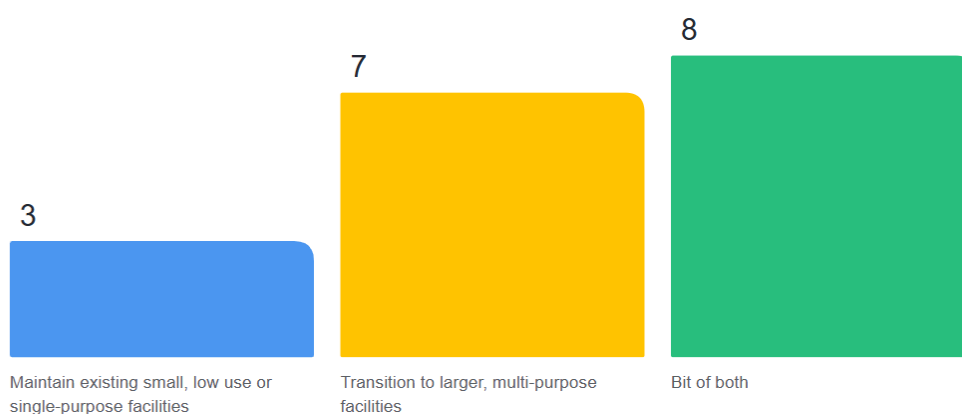
data source: Menti session 3

Figure 2c. Preferred service provision



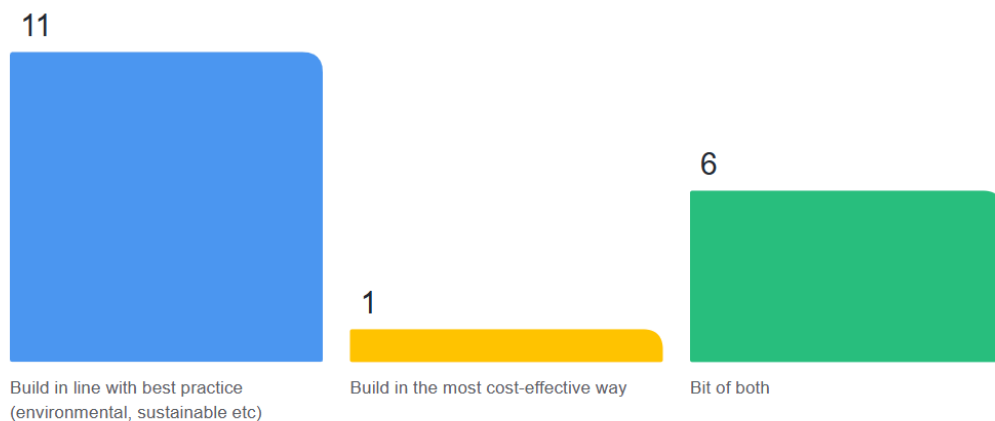
data source: Menti session 3

Figure 2d. Multi use versus single use assets



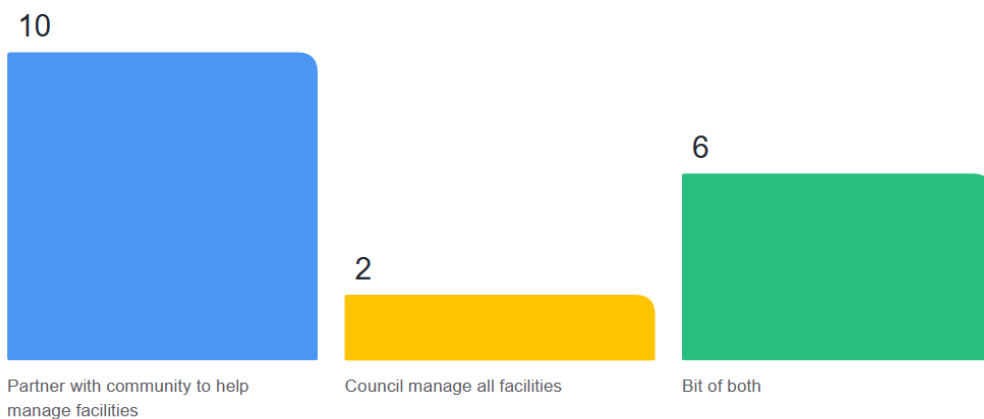
data source: Menti session 3

Figure 2e. Preferred build philosophy



data source: Menti session 3

Figure 2f. Preferred management approach



data source: Menti session 3

Focus on renewal

Participants were asked whether they supported the following statement: “We should only build new assets when one or more of the following applies:

- Significant capital grant funding is available
- Reduces operational costs
- Services or supports the delivery of multiple services
- Fills a needed gap in service or asset need.

There was a total of 23 participants for this exercise, divided across seven groups. All groups supported this statement apart from one group, who stated they support this with considerations, and another group who stated they neither agreed nor disagreed.

The key rationale behind those that supported this statement was:

- Renew existing assets first – focus on use, accessibility, condition and sustainability before considering new builds.

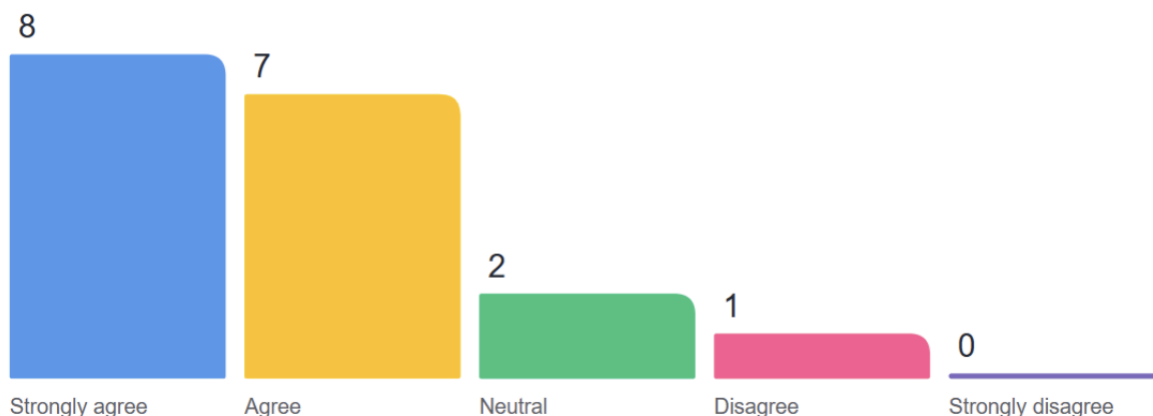
- Only build new if it meets key criteria – fills a real gap, aligns with strategy, is grant-funded, and has a plan for ongoing costs.
- Prioritise multi-use, income-generating facilities – support community needs and long-term financial sustainability.
- Be realistic about costs – grant funding still requires Council investment; avoid projects that create ongoing financial strain.

Participants were asked to present their reasoning for their support for this statement. There was a total of 27 free text comments collected, from which some common themes emerged;

- Good community outcomes (n=6):
 - Focus on renewal and integration can have good outcomes for staff working together
 - Consider the needed gaps in line with strategy for community outcomes i.e. ‘women and girls in sport’
 - Focus on renewal presents good outcomes for protecting heritage value, history
 - Renew until asset no longer serves community health, wellbeing, accessibility
 - Reducing cost could risk good community outcomes
- Funding (n=6)
 - Build new if grants funding can support ongoing costs of maintenance
 - Recognising there are still costs to Council even when supported by grant funding
 - Look at opportunities for sponsor/user pays to cover the ongoing cost and in the long run pay for the asset
- Consider all principles as part of a matrix for decision making (n=5)
 - We should build new only when a number of these principles apply. One is not enough.
- Additional principles suggested (n=6):
 - Environmental benefit
 - Can the asset be a revenue earner?
 - Option to condense/consolidate assets
 - Protect heritage value, aesthetics, street scape
- Focus on renewal until an asset is no longer fit for purpose (n=2)
- This statement can apply easily to some assets but not others (n=2)
 - Difficult to apply to roads, drainage, bridges or any other infrastructure

The statement was then tested again through individual polling in session 3. There was a total of 18 respondents to this question, with majority support. Figure 3 presents the results.

Figure 3. Focus on renewal individual polling



data source: Menti session 3

3.1.2 Principles to rationalise assets

Panel members were asked the question; *'What justification would you need for a structure, facility or land to be removed, sold or repurposed?'* and were presented with some examples of principles including:

- No /low use
- Single service (can be merged with other space/users)
- Not classified as a having heritage values
- Not within Council's direct control (eg. DEECA)

Groups were given time to discuss these principles and asked to provide their own principles for why a structure, facility or land could be removed. Common principles suggested by the group to remove, replace or repurpose an asset:

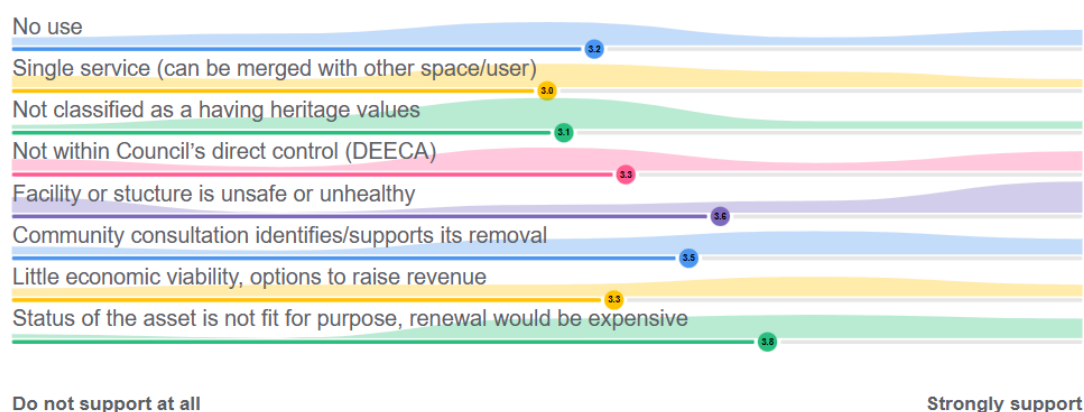
- Status of asset, fit for purpose, pose safety risks or cannot be renewed (n=9)
- Community value and consultation supports it (n=6)
- Economic viability - long term value, revenue raising (n=6)
- The asset does not have aesthetic, historic or heritage value (n=3)
- Clear ownership/responsibility of assets; Council, DEECA (n=2)

Common caveats for these principles were:

- No/ low use should be separated, low use could be a good thing/ service a community need (n=5)
- An asset cannot be removed/changed on the basis of one principle only. Principles should be used as a matrix/scorecard (n=2)
- Always consider repurposing to begin with (n=1)
- Consider partnering with community to take care of assets rather than DEECA for example (n=1)
- Consider substitutes for lost assets (n=1)

The principles, including some new principles suggested by the group were then tested again through individual polling in session 3. There was a total of 17 respondents to this question. Figure 4 presents the results.

Figure 4. Level of support for asset rationalisation principles



data source: Menti session 3

3.1.3 Priority of assets for renewal investment

Panel members were asked to rank in priority order a list of asset classes for renewal. There were a total of five groups who participated in this exercise. The five groups' lists are shown below in Table 4. Not all groups completed the activity due to limited time and discussions around ranking, with individuals having different priorities, highlighting the complexities for Council in prioritising competing asset needs.

Table 4: Priority ranking of assets for renewal

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
Drainage	Footpaths	Passive parks	Unsealed roads	Drainage
Buildings	Drainage	Trees	Tracks/trails	Buildings
Trees	Unsealed roads	Drainage	Buildings	Sporting assets
Unsealed roads	Sealed roads	Footpaths	Drainage	Bridges
Bridges	Bridges	Sealed roads	Passive Parks	Track/trails
Structures	Sporting assets	Unsealed roads	Bridges	Trees
Tracks/trails	Playgrounds	Tacks/trails	Sealed roads	Passive parks
Sealed roads	Passive parks	Sporting assets	Structures	Footpaths

Footpaths	Tracks/trails	Playgrounds	Trees	Unsealed roads
Passive parks		Buildings	Playgrounds	Sealed roads
Playgrounds		Bridges	Sporting assets	Structures
Sporting assets		Structures	Footpaths	Playgrounds

3.2 Financial Plan

In session 3, panel members reviewed and developed criteria to guide Council and Councilors when considering changes to services. Participants were advised that the purpose of developing this framework will help guide Council during the decision-making process when determining whether to retain, simplify, modify, or exit a service.

The six criteria provided for discussion were:

- Level of community demand (is it changing?)
- Availability of other organisations to provide the service
- Costs are too high for Council to afford
- Consequences of not providing the service
- Skill levels of staff to provide the service (are other organisations better equipped?)
- New regulations making the service harder to provide

Panel members were divided into six groups, each assigned one criteria to evaluate. They were tasked with:

- Clarifying any questions or concerns about their assigned criteria
- Identifying the benefits and other considerations for each criteria
- Suggesting any additional criteria that may be important for decision-making

Table 5 shows verbatim feedback received across all six groups for each criterion.

Table 5: Service criteria

Criteria	Questions or concerns	Benefits/Considerations
Level of community demand (is it changing?)	How is the council interpreting the community's priorities in terms of this criteria? Demand may be decreasing but it might have a high value to the community, or vice versa, increasing but not be highly valued.	• Community need to understand the rationale for a change in service
Availability of other organisations to provide the service		• The organisation's experience. • Could they be better than what the council provide. • Need to have continued reviews to ensure that the service is being

		delivered as required/promised.
Costs are too high for Council to afford		• Save council money, extend relationships with other Shires. • Do the social benefits outweigh or make it worth continuing? Can it be provided via outsourcing?
Consequences of not providing the service		• Understanding the Risk matrix - how much impact there will be on the community” • Gets us thinking about: staff, impact on future need, community wellbeing, cohesion.
Skill levels of staff to provide the service (are other organisations better equipped?)	How do we review skill levels of Council staff? How do we identify other groups with these skills?	• Upskilling means social capital is kept in the Shire • Outsourcing, potential loss of social capital, brain drain
New regulations making the service harder to provide		• Trust in council to deliver services. • Can council compete with the private market?” • Does council need to deliver this service if there are others who can? • “How can Council ensure quality service?” • “Capacity for others to deliver services- (volunteerism low)”

Data source: Session 3 online worksheets

Panel members identified the following new criteria that should be used when reviewing service changes:

- Assessment and evaluation- Return on investment
- Future benefit
- Does the program or service align to values (safety, health, community)
- Can we identify a good partner to deliver a service; community group, social enterprise?

During Session 4, panel members participated in an activity where they were asked to allocate a total of 100 points across the existing criteria, as well as any newly suggested criteria from the previous session. This activity was designed to gauge the relative importance placed on each criteria by the group.

In a group discussion, the group noted that consequences of not providing this service was a clear leader, however the following criteria were all very closely scored. Discussions highlighted that the relevance and weight of certain criteria varied depending on the type of service being assessed, with some criteria considered more or less important based on specific service contexts. A total of 22 panel members participated in this activity. Figure 5 presents the results.

Figure 5. Criteria most important to consider for a service change



Data source: Menti session 4

3.2.1 Testing the criteria: pool activity

In session 3, participants were invited to test the framework developed, using Aquatics as an example. Participants were presented with the following information about Hepburn Shires Aquatics programs:

Aquatics manage operations of four pools, splash parks and facilities;

- Daylesford Outdoor Pool,
- Trentham Outdoor Pool,
- Clunes Outdoor Pool,
- Calembeen Park Toddlers Pool
- Creswick Splash Park.

The Sports and Recreation team manage the strategic development, operations, capital works, community education, awareness and promotion for Aquatics. The Aquatics season is open between December to March:

- 25,000 visitors annually
- Access to affordable and inclusive recreation facilities for everyone, including those with disabilities, seniors and children
- Costs \$2.64 out of every \$100 rates collected.
- 2% of recurring costs are recovered through user fees and charges, grants and other income.

Council's role in Aquatics

Participants were asked the question; *'What do you see as Council's role in aquatics?'*. There was a total of 19 responses to this question across the six groups.

The majority of respondents saw the role of Council as the direct provision of aquatics services and maintenance of these community assets (n=11) highlighting the importance of swimming lessons, active recreation and the cultural significance of swimming pools for regional communities.

"Delivering the service of running them".

"For the health and wellbeing of the community they should continue to provide this service".

Other panel members suggested ways to partner with others to deliver this service like: encouraging corporate sponsorship, staggered pricing for entry fees (n=6).

"Council's role should be limited especially when our financial situation is in distress"

"Options for memberships, squad training"

"Sponsorship of facilities - repco fast lane"

Two participants shared general comments about the need for swimming pools.

What is most valuable to the community

Participants were asked the question; *'What is most valuable and important to you and your community?'*. There was a total of 18 responses across the six groups.

Participants most commonly valued having accessible community facilities that provided recreation and leisure opportunities without barriers for all community members (n=8).

"No barriers for children/resident for facilities"

“Access to aquatic facilities for all towns”

Others (n=6) noted the importance of safety, health and wellbeing in having access to aquatic facilities.

“Meeting the future need for aquatic facilities (as global climate changes)”

“A place for school sports - and for kids to learn to swim (big safety issue)”

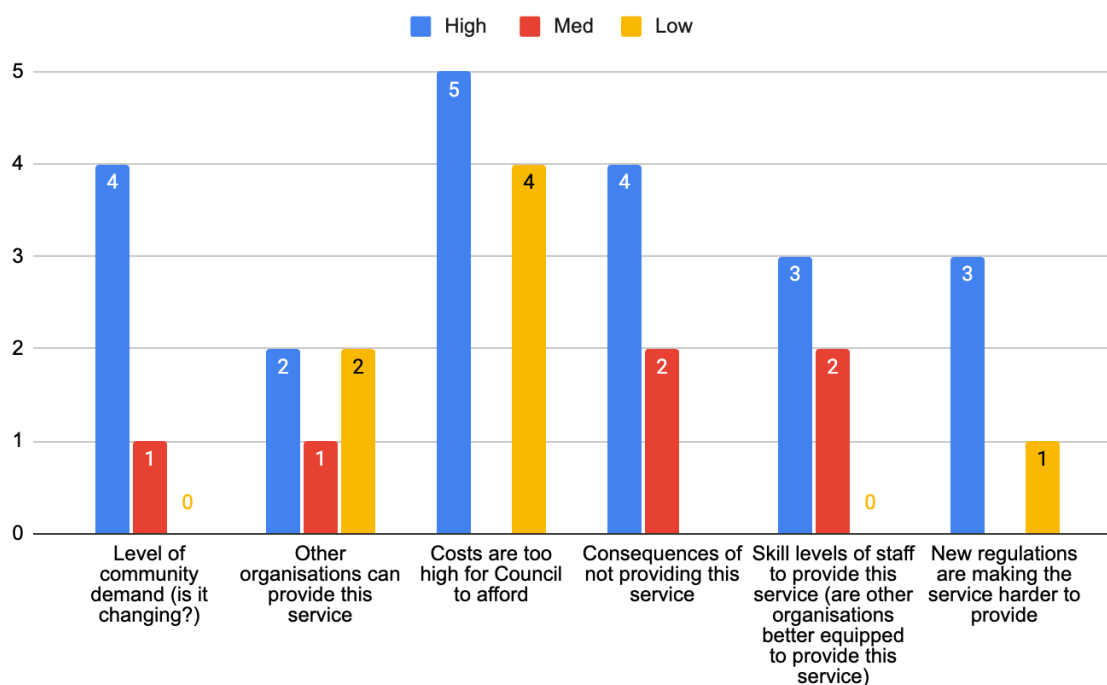
Panel members also valued the cultural aspects of having aquatics facilities in regional towns (n=5).

“Heritage and future legacy of the region”

“Places which we meet such as parks, bbqs, town halls, and gardens, to celebrate our region and culture”

Participants were then presented with the criteria developed in the previous activity, and invited to identify ‘What criteria are the most important for Council to consider when they make service changes to aquatics’. Participants were able to indicate: Low, Medium or High importance for each criteria in the matrix and were able to provide additional comments about the reasons for their assessment. Figure 6 presents the level of importance indicated for each of the criteria across the six groups.

Figure 6. Level of importance for each criteria- Aquatics



‘Consequences of not providing the service’ and ‘Level of community demand’ were understood as the most important criteria for assessing aquatics in which participants highlighted the consequences as “Safety aspects for community” and “Significant to health and wellbeing and safety” alongside suggestions to “consider demand times” and

“even if demand is low, consideration of the per capita usage is needed in small towns”. Panel members were more divided on the level of importance of ‘Cost’ and ‘New regulations making it harder to provide’ with participants suggesting that costs should not outweigh other factors and consider passing some cost onto the consumer.

Generally, participants reflected that having a uniform set of criteria to apply to a variety of different services is challenging and that specific services require unique criteria in order to assess their service levels.

Three groups also suggested additional criteria in order to assess aquatics including:

*“Available outside normal/staffed hours - self responsible for safety. Warm for laps
Where is external funding available for water safety & staying healthy”*

“Climate Change - temperature will get hotter and hotter”

“Operating hours - for different demographic groups”

3.3 Council and Wellbeing Plan

The following sections present the findings from discussions about service portfolios related to community wellbeing, economic development, waste, environment and sustainability undertaken in Session 3 and 4.

3.3.1 Community Wellbeing

Panel members were asked to consider what they see as Council’s role and what is most valuable and important to them and their community when thinking about community wellbeing. Panel members were broken into six small groups to discuss community wellbeing.

Panel members identified a range of priorities that contribute to strong, healthy, and connected communities. They emphasised the importance of affordable and secure housing, inclusive planning processes, access to essential services, and the preservation of green spaces. Community facilities, such as libraries, pools, and neighbourhood houses, play a vital role in social connection and reducing isolation. Key suggestions included:

- Belonging and social connection - building social inclusion, sense of belonging through local festivals, knowing neighbours, welcoming new residents (n=10)
- Community infrastructure - libraries, halls, senior citizens centres, pool, sports grounds (n=8)
- Health and Safety for all - access to healthcare for all, safety in public and residential areas (n=5)
- Housing - affordable and secure housing, balance between permanent vs short stay accommodation (n=4)
- Accessibility - footpaths and maintained roadsides for walkability (n=3)
- Environment - Green and natural spaces (n=2)

- Activities for all - family, youth, older residents (n=2)
- Education - local schools and transport options for children in rural areas (n=1)

Data source: online worksheets

Panel members highlighted that Council's role in community wellbeing must be adaptable and grounded in trust, transparency, and collaboration. Key responsibilities include ensuring fair access to shared spaces, maintaining quality in outsourced services, supporting community led initiatives, and enabling connections between groups and external funding bodies. Protecting local character and empowering communities to express their needs were also seen as important. Key suggestions included:

Advocate (n=3)

- Advocate for housing, schools, and local transport
- Promote diverse health services and alternative therapies
- Push for better use of existing facilities (e.g., Creswick Campus as a school)

Facilitator (n=7)

- Support sports clubs to seek infrastructure funding
- Connect community groups with grant funders (e.g., SRV)
- Host Newcomers sessions, involve groups and community reps
- Encourage participation through local events and outreach (e.g., market stalls)

Partner (n=6)

- Work with YMCA or similar to manage pools sustainably
- Partner with locals to deliver services/community goals (eg. waste)
- Enable collaboration between councils (e.g., shared waste management)
- Empower the community to articulate and act on aspirations

Provider (n=3)

- Continue delivering key community wellbeing services through rates
- Maintain direct control of council assets to ensure access and equity
- Provide accessible spaces (e.g., community halls, sports grounds)

Funder of Major Projects (n=3)

- Fund essential infrastructure (e.g., accessible community buildings)
- Recognise funding should be strategic and not always ongoing – sustainability focus
- Might be impractical and unsustainable as a role for Council

Regulator (n=5)

- Ensure outsourced services are appropriately delivered
- Manage planning, zoning, permits fairly and efficiently
- Uphold equity in access and inclusion through fair regulations

Communicate and engage with community (n=7)

- The relationship of council to community is a fundamental principle and requires trust and working together.
- Making the community understand the limitations provide - managing expectations
- Listen to the community and act - put policies in place to make it happen

Data source: online worksheets

3.3.2 Economic development

Panel members were asked to consider what they see as Council's role and what is most valuable and important to them and their community in two areas of economic development: tourism and events, and local business development. Panel members were advised that economic development projects and tourism projects were not mutually exclusive activities undertaken by Council and that both areas are connected. Six table groups participated, with three groups working on each area.

Local Business Development

Panel members saw Council's role as vital in creating a supportive environment for local business success. They highlighted the importance of Council acting as a facilitator, connector, and advocate, helping to reduce barriers, promote local enterprise, and maintain the character of business precincts. Council was also seen as having a role in supporting sustainable development, improving access to resources, and enabling local employment. Key suggestions included:

Compliance and Regulation

- Streamline requirements to make it easier for businesses to comply with local, state, and federal regulations
- Reduce permit fees, particularly for home-based businesses
- Avoid implementing planning changes that affect businesses without prior consultation

Promotion and Visibility

- Promote local businesses or ensure promotion is supported through relevant channels
- Host forums that support small business, including topics such as health, wellbeing, and resilience
- Invite local business owners as guest speakers to promote their work and share community benefits

Facilitation and Connection

- Support the formation and activity of traders' associations
- Act as a conduit to other government services—such as grants, policy advice, and networking opportunities
- Work closely with businesses to help them meet regulatory requirements

Sustainability and Amenity

- Encourage and support ecologically sustainable business development
- Maintain the ambience and character of business areas, incorporating community ideas

Business Attraction and Employment

- Attract new businesses that offer local job opportunities for both young people and mature workers

This feedback reinforces the view that Council should play an enabling role; supporting, connecting, and advocating for the local business community.

Panel members identified a range of values and priorities that they believe should guide local business development. Their feedback reflected a strong desire to ensure economic growth aligns with community character, environmental principles, and long-term sustainability. Maintaining the balance between the needs of locals and the expectations of visitors was seen as important key themes are listed below.

Community Character and Values

- Economic development should reflect local values, heritage, and community identity.
- Planning and development must prioritise the preservation of local amenity, environment, and heritage.
- There is a need to balance the interests of long-term residents and short-term visitors.

Supportive Planning and Responsiveness

- Timely and prioritised planning responses are essential for local businesses to thrive.
- Business development should be guided by community established values and sustainability principles.

Local Employment and Affordability

- Affordable shopping and services are important to support local residents.
- Economic strategies should aim to attract and retain staff within the Shire, with affordable housing as a key enabler.
- Local employment opportunities that support the local economy and maintain the area's aesthetic and community values are important.

Experience Based and Sustainable Business Models

- Support for businesses that contribute to tourism while reflecting local character and enhancing the visitor experience.
- 'Pick your own' farms were seen as a valuable model that benefits both farmers and locals by reducing costs and offering hands on experiences.

Extended Business Offerings

- Enabling longer trading hours was identified as a way to improve local economic activity and better meet community needs.

Data source: worksheets

Overall, the panel expressed a strong preference for economic development that is rooted in community values, respects the local environment and heritage, and delivers sustainable, locally beneficial outcomes.

Tourism and Events

Panel members emphasised that Council has a key role in supporting tourism and events in a way that strengthens local business while respecting the region's identity, environment, and agricultural base. They highlighted the need for balanced, mindful support that ensures tourism does not overshadow other industries or community values. Key suggestions are listed below.

Practical and Financial Support

- Provide more generous in-kind support for community-run events by reducing fees and charges.
- Offer support through sponsorships, grants, small loans, and access to venues and infrastructure.
- Support not-for-profit events through advocacy, promotion, facilitation, and access to Council resources.

Promotion and Communication

- Promote local events and tourism opportunities outside the Shire to attract visitors.
- Improve advertising and communication around events and activities.
- Provide clear, accessible information and guidance for event organisers.

Balanced and Sustainable Approach

- Act as a promoter of mindful, balanced tourism that enhances local businesses without compromising the natural landscape, waterways, or agricultural community.
- Be cautious of rezoning decisions that may impact agricultural land or shift focus away from primary industries.
- Ensure a balanced approach to supporting both tourism and non-tourism-based businesses.

Health, Safety, and Compliance

- Provide assistance with understanding and meeting health and safety regulations.
- Ensure that venues and event operations meet all necessary standards.

Overall, the panel encouraged Council to be an enabler and advocate for tourism and events that are community led, environmentally sensitive, and inclusive of all business sectors.

Panel members expressed that tourism and events are central to the Shire's identity, economy, and community life. There was strong support for preserving the region's unique cultural offerings and natural environment, while ensuring tourism benefits local businesses and residents alike. A balance between economic development and community led values was seen as essential. Key themes are listed below.

Cultural Identity and Community Connection

- Celebrate and support the uniqueness of local festivals, such as the Swiss Italian Festival.
- Ensure community events are led by the community and reflect local culture and history.
- Provide opportunities for people to gather and share time together through events and spaces.
- Value cultural uniqueness in festivals and events as a key part of the region's character

Support for Local Business and Economic Sustainability

- Keep tourist numbers high, as tourism is the Shire's largest economic driver and job creator.
- Smaller towns rely on additional visitors to support local services, especially mid week.
- Encourage ongoing support for local businesses and community run events.
- Balance support between local business and tourism interests.
- Consider inviting external events and businesses to boost the local economy, when aligned with community values.

Council's Role in Event and Tourism Support

- Ensure Council actively supports and advocates for local festivals and events.
- Be proactive in retaining significant events (e.g. Photo Biennale) and preventing them from relocating elsewhere.
- Identify and involve commercial business communities in discussions and planning.
- Provide more support for events held in smaller communities across the Shire.

Challenges and Opportunities

- Acknowledge that staffing shortages are affecting local businesses, driven in part by housing costs and availability.
- Support the maintenance of facilities, recreational areas, and trails which serve both locals and visitors.
- Preserve the natural and farming landscapes, as well as water and mineral springs, which are part of the region's identity.
- Consider both heritage and future needs when making economic and tourism related decisions.

Data source: worksheets

Overall, panel members called for a thoughtful, inclusive approach to tourism and events, one that enhances economic opportunity while preserving the distinct values and identity of the Hepburn Shire community.

3.3.3 Sustainability, waste and environment

During session four, Council presented to the panel an overview of sustainability, waste and environment, including the Sustainable Hepburn 2022-2026 Strategy and the key objectives. Panel members were asked what their preferred approach to waste services were and were presented with four options to rank in order of preference through Mentimeter. A total of 22 panel members participated in this activity. Figure 7 lists their preferred approaches in weighted priority order.

Figure 7. Preferred approach to waste services



Data source: Menti panel day 4

Panel members were asked to provide a reason for their response. Many expressed that the current waste service system is already too complex and difficult to manage, with particular frustration around overfull red bins and the limited impact of FOGO for those who compost at home. They emphasised that if waste systems are not easy to use, participation rates and correct usage will be impacted.

Protecting the environment, reducing landfill, and achieving long term sustainability were seen as the most important goals. Panel members strongly believe waste services must be cost effective, simple, and focused on a circular economy rather than creating more bins or processes. There was strong concern about the cost and necessity of the new kerbside glass bin, with several suggesting better partnerships with the Container Deposit Scheme (CDS Vic West) to avoid duplication and unnecessary expenses.

Community led efforts to divert waste were highlighted as highly valuable but not adequately recognised or supported. Overall, panel members called for a waste service approach that is environmentally sustainable, easy to use, cost conscious, and better

acknowledges existing community contributions. Key rationale of their preference included:

- System simplicity and ease of use
- Focus on reducing waste and recycling more effectively
- Environmental sustainability and protecting the planet
- Cost effectiveness of waste services
- Support for a circular economy model
- Partnerships with the Container Deposit Scheme (CDS)
- Recognition and support for community led waste efforts
- Equity in access to waste services
- Alternative collection models (e.g., group points)

Data source: Menti Day 4

Panel members were then asked to consider if there are any other approaches Council could consider. Panel members want stronger emphasis on recycling opportunities and better support for managing waste like pest weeds and hard plastics. Many suggested council form partnerships with neighbouring councils and programs like CDS West Vic, to create more regional, cross municipal waste solutions. There is concern about the kerbside glass bin rollout, with calls to advocate for changes now that the Container Deposit Scheme is active. Panel members asked for clearer, more detailed recycling information, and better ways to support recycling items that are harder to process. Key suggestions included:

- Greater recycling opportunities and clearer guidance
- Regional partnerships for waste management
- Partnering with CDS West Vic
- Review and advocate against mandatory kerbside glass bins
- Glass collection still needed for items not eligible for CDS
- Support for recycling hard plastics and offering tip vouchers
- Promote circular economy across municipal boundaries
- Advocacy to expand Container Deposit Scheme to include wine and spirit bottles
- More specific and accessible recycling information (e.g., online database)
- Options for managing pest weeds

Data source: Menti panel day 4

Panel members, in their pairs, were asked to come to a consensus on their preferred approaches, using one sticky dot per pair. Participants were encouraged to share their thinking behind their decisions in the form of free text comments. Table 6 and 7 presents these findings. The two options presented were:

- Council is required to remove glass from mixed recycling by 2027. What would be the best approach for separating glass? Kerbside glass collection vs Drop off/collection points (separate from CDS)
- What should Council's future approach to waste services be? Stick to mandated waste services only vs Actively support Circular Economy programs (partner, funder, coordinator)

Table 6: Feedback on the two approaches presented to separate glass

Approach 1	v	Approach 2
Kerbside glass collection n=3	< n=1	Drop off/collection points (separate from CDS) n=7
Comments		
User friendly • “Kerbside is more user friendly” • “Not everyone can physically go to a drop off point.” Recycling glass considerations • “Recycling needs to be updated process for broken glass (bottles)” • “If it makes better use, more community uptake, more recycling”		Community education and behaviour • “People are lazy at home – needs community education.” • “Take a bag of glass bottles to a collection point when you are going to town anyway.” Partnerships and smarter solutions • “Explore partnerships with CDS West Vic to identify and collect and \$ opportunities.” • Use CDS sites for glass drop-off: “Can we use the sites of CDS to also have a glass drop off?” Cost effectiveness • <i>“The new kerbside glass bin will be a huge unnecessary cost to council when an effective waste management stream exists within CDS.”</i> • <i>“Pilot option with CDS Vic/Bottlecycler etc prior to committing to deploy kerbside glass collection”</i> • “It could take months to fill a bin with glass, then too heavy for some people to manage.” Focus on reducing waste and recycling opportunities • “Reducing waste and recycling is most important.” • “Recycle glass into bitumen inputs.”

		System simplicity and ease of use "If the system is not easy to use, people will not participate properly." "We already find the three bins onerous."
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Data source: worksheets Day 4

Overall, there was much stronger support for drop off/collection points (n=7) compared to kerbside collection (n=3) with one group sitting right in the middle. There is strong support for glass drop off and collection points, particularly by using existing CDS sites and creating additional local options at tips and shopping centres. Many residents prefer drop off over kerbside collection, noting that it could "take months to fill a bin with glass," making bins "too heavy for some people to manage," and that "we don't want more bins" due to cost and practicality concerns. Drop off is seen as more cost effective for council, more flexible for residents who can "take a bag of glass bottles to a collection point when going to town". There is also recognition that any new system must account for "necessitous needs" like disability and ageing, ensuring access and equity in service design.

The second activity presented for the group to discuss was Council's future approach to waste services, with the two options being stick to mandated waste services only vs actively supporting circular economy approaches.

Table 7: What should Council's future approach to waste services be?

Approach 1	v	Approach 2
Stick to mandated waste services only (n= 1)	<	Actively support Circular Economy programs (partner, funder, coordinator) (n=9)
Comments		
Delivering core services well "Got to get waste services delivered right." "Do the minimum well and appropriately." "Need to do more than just the bare minimum." Efficiency and Value in Additional Services		Commitment to circular economy "Actively supporting circular waste is not always achievable, but when possible, it is the best option." "We have surpassed the old ways." "It is the future — moving away from just mandated services."

• "Make sure any additional services work and are efficient." • "Extra circular economy activities should be partnered with Council grouping but not fund the big stuff — low cost/high impact, look at partners."	Empower the community • "Empower community provide cultural and financial incentives"
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Data source: worksheets Day 4

Overall, there was much stronger support for Council to actively support circular economy programs (n=9) rather than stick to mandated waste services only (n=1). Panel members felt Council must focus on delivering core waste services effectively, ensuring that even the basic requirements are met with quality and consistency. At the same time, there is strong support for embracing the circular economy, recognising it as a forward thinking approach that goes beyond traditional waste management.

Any additional circular economy initiatives should prioritise efficiency and value, focusing on low cost, high impact activities and seeking partnerships rather than Council solely funding major projects.

Panel members were asked to consider what Council's role in circular economy might be, rather than fund it panel members thought Council could take the lead on promotion, education, partnerships, facilitation and advocacy. Some examples included:

- Education programs on sustainability and circular economy for all age groups
- Partnerships with road construction groups to reuse materials like glass
- Improved access to compost, tip shops, and upcycling/refit workshops
- Strong promotion of reuse over single use; ban single use coffee cups and problematic packaging
- Partnerships with other Shires and organisations like TOMRA Cleanaway (CDS Vic) and Hepburn Energy
- Repurposing sites to support circular economy initiatives (e.g., repair cafes, upcycling hubs)
- Explore income opportunities through products like biochar
- Provide tip vouchers to community groups that support community to reuse.
- Encourage and support circular economy small business start ups and through leasing sites to circular economy businesses

Data source: Worksheets Day 4

3.4. Community Vision review

As part of the Hepburn Together 2025-2029 Community Panel, panel members were asked to review the existing Community Vision Statement. A Community Vision is the key guiding framework for all of Council's strategies and decision making processes.

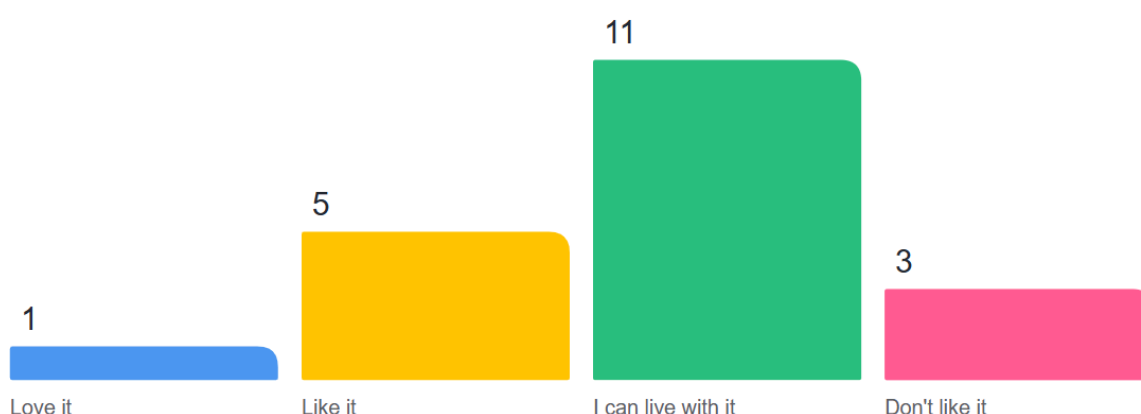
The Hepburn Shire Community Vision 2021-2031 was developed by the Hepburn Shire community in 2021 during a range of community engagement activities involving a broad cross section of the local population.

The current Community Vision is:

Hepburn Shire - an inclusive rural community located in Dja Dja Wurrung country where all people are valued, partnerships are fostered, environment is protected, diversity supported, and innovation embraced.

Panel members were asked to rate their level of support for the current Community Vision. A total of 20 panel members participated in this activity. The majority of panel members who participated voted that they 'can live with it' as shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Level of support for the current Community Vision.



Data source: Menti Day 4

Panel members had small group conversations to discuss if there is anything important missing from this statement and had the opportunity to write their response into Menti as well as on worksheets provided. Table 8 outlines the suggested changes as well as explanations for the suggested changes.

Table 8: Suggested changes to the current Community Vision

Original / Current Text	Suggested Change	Explanation / Reason
People are valued	People's welfare is supported, including the provision of affordable housing	Clarifies the intent and addresses housing needs directly

People are valued	People are valued and supported	Enhances meaning and shows active support
People are valued	People are equally valued	Emphasises fairness and inclusion
Inclusive rural communities	Diverse rural communities	Better reflects differences in people and place
Djaara Country	on not in Djaara Country (encompassing all mobs)	Djarra Country to include all other mobs
country	Country	Capitalised to respect Aboriginal terminology
Environment is protected	Environment and biodiversity are protected	Highlights importance of ecological systems
Environment is protected	Land and waters are protected	Better reflects assets such as Hepburn Springs
Diversity is supported	Diversity is supported and townships are individually supported	Recognises unique needs of different towns
(No mention of history)	Innovation and history are embraced	Acknowledges past and supports progress
(No mention of farming/agriculture)	Farming and agricultural traditions are supported	Needs farming and agriculture reflected
Partnerships are fostered	Relationships are nurtured / Community and Council work together	More human centred and less corporate language
Partnerships are fostered	Fostered with community groups, businesses, and Traditional Owners	Makes intent of “partnerships” clearer
Innovation embraced	Innovation is fostered / nurtured	Softer, more community-driven language
(No specific statement on support)	Council supports community groups and	Recognises Council’s enabling role

	creates opportunities for all	
(No specific statement on equity)	Equity and fairness are upheld	Ensures social justice is embedded in vision
(No mention of working together)	Community and Council are working together	Reinforces collaboration and shared ownership
(No mention of social capital)	Social connection, neighbourliness, and local belonging are valued	Reflects strong community values
(No mention of cultural diversity)	Diverse lifestyles and cultural expressions are embraced	Emphasises inclusive, multicultural identity
	None	'The statement is thorough and absolute & does not need to be changed'

Data source: Menti, worksheets Day 4

4. Evaluation

4.1 Panel Member evaluation

Panel members were asked questions before and after their experience on the panel. Completion of the pre and post panel surveys was optional, with 22 panel members completing the pre survey and 8 completing the post survey. It is important to note that not all panel members completed all questions in the pre and post-survey.

Panel members previous experience

Panel members were asked if they had ever contributed to a Hepburn Shire Council consultation before. A total of 12 people had not participated in previous consultation with several participating in various consultation activities as shown in Table 9.

Table 9: Participation in previous consultations

Consultation activity	Number of people
This is my first consultation experience with Hepburn Shire	12
I have attended a Hepburn Shire Council Meeting (to speak or listen)	10
I have provided feedback on a project (online, email, letter, phone call)	7
I have sent in a submission or signed a petition	11
I have been involved in a planning permit process (applicant or objector)	7
I have been a member of another Council committee or advisory group	4
I have attended a consultation workshop or community meeting	8

Data source: Menti Day 1

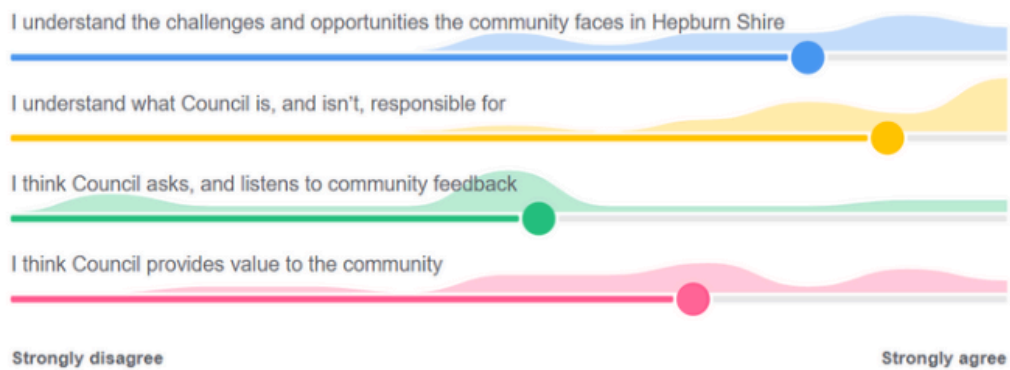
Panel members were asked if they had contributed to a Hepburn Shire Council consultation in any other way, with some responding they had been on the Vision (project) for Glenlyon, through Council meetings, attending listening posts, creating a town survey and speaking with people in the community.

Panel members trust and understanding of Council

Participants were asked to demonstrate their level of agreement with a series of statements relating to their understanding of Council and Council process and their trust in Council. Figure 9 and 10 show the pre participation and post participation responses. A noticeable increase was seen when panel members were asked if they understood the

challenges and opportunities the community faces in Hepburn Shire. This trend carried on through subsequent statements.

Figure 9: Pre-participation responses to statements about Hepburn Shire



Data source Menti Day 1

Figure 10: Post-participation responses to statements about Hepburn Shire

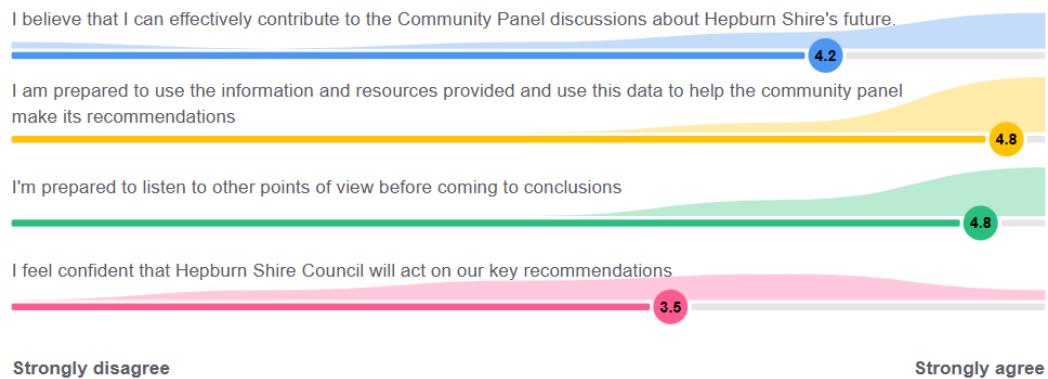


Data source Menti Day 4

Panel members were asked to demonstrate their level of agreement with a series of statements relating to how they feel about their involvement in the Hepburn Together Panel. Figure 11 and 12 show the pre participation and post participation responses.

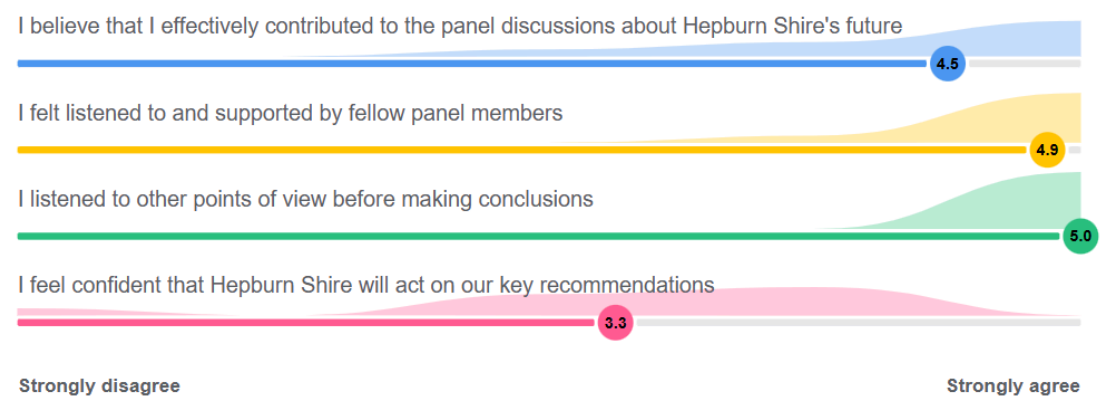
Once again there is an increase in the level of agreement with the statements with an exception to the last statement 'I feel confident that Hepburn Shire Council will act on our key recommendations' which dropped slightly from 3.5 to 3.3.

Figure 11: Pre-participation response to involvement in Hepburn Together Panel



Data source Menti Day 1

Figure 12: Post-participation response to involvement in Hepburn Together Panel



Data source Menti Day 4

After the final session, panel members were asked to select their level of agreement with statements about the facilitation on the panel. Panel members agreed that the facilitators managed the process well, kept people to time and managed the louder voices in the room while supporting the quieter voice in the room. See Figure 13.

Figure 13: Facilitation of Panel



Data source Menti Day 4

Panel members had the opportunity to provide any other feedback on the deliberative panel process. Following are verbatim comments grouped by theme.

Participation and representation

There were concerns raised about the low number of participants and the lack of younger community members.

- "Disappointing that the panel shrank and didn't attract younger community members."
- "Would have been good if there were the proper quantity of community participants present, -25 only. CEO did not resolve the early issue satisfactorily, for some participants who walked out, to return."
- *"I hope that you all do the same process with the youth in the community and try to capture that under 18 voice."*
- *"I think it was well done. I was disappointed that people left early, or stopped attending as it abrogated their responsibilities. But the rest of us tried hard and everyone did a very good job."*

Council and Councillor involvement

Panel members reported they would like greater time with Councillors in the process for the Councillors to hear the discussions.

- *"It was a good attempt but council officers seem defensive when hearing input or answering questions (unless it is in agreement with what council is already doing). (The panel facilitators not though)."*
- *"Better if more time with the councillors. Not just 20 minutes over lunch. Would be good if councillors were more a part of the process at least for one session to hear the community discussions."*

General reflections on the process

Panel members provided overall feedback on the process.

- *"Overall the sessions were conducted with a cooperative spirit and ample opportunity provided for individuals to comment."*
- *"The data given (say, on assets) was very interesting."*
- *"It was good to get the reminders about the next meeting."*
- *"Was super happy with the level of respect in the rooms. Loved differences of opinions & deliberations."*
- *"Great experience."*
- *"Council and facilitators certainly conducted the process graciously, but the funneling of topics and input was so strong."*

Improvements

Panel members made suggestions on improvements to the process.

- *“More time needed at the end of Session 4 to review other group’s input on their written reports.”*
- *“Would be good if more time for actual discussion amongst all panel members when some raised topics were of wide interest or concern. Perhaps 5 other topics overall that panel members could discuss.”*
- *“Could have included a section on ideas to raise money rather than just consider which services might be cut.”*
- *“I think it would help to better explain our role, the expectations of what we are making and an understanding of how it will be used.”*

4.2 Process recommendations by facilitator

Facilitation of a deliberation process differs greatly from a traditional engagement process, as noted within Hepburn Shire Council’s Community Engagement Policy (2021) deliberative engagement is a more in depth engagement that “harnesses the community’s creativity and expertise to unearth community priorities and solutions”. As such, facilitators put forward the following advice aligned to Council’s policy to improve future deliberation processes:

Define the community’s role

- Additional staff and leadership engagement to determine key engagement questions and more importantly how panel feedback would be used to inform development of key strategic documents and their level of influence.

Iterative process

- Seeking broad input from the community to provide participants with insight into community views and priorities to allow panel members to understand wider community sentiment.

Informed

- Provision of data and information to assist panel members to understand the financial position of Council and any key outcomes of each service area.
- Supplementing panel members’ knowledge, through swift follow up of questions about Council’s operations between meetings.
- Preparation of presentations and allowance for internal subject matter experts to attend sessions to speak to larger service groups (community, environment etc). As demonstrated by the Asset Planning team which provided context for panel members to make informed decisions about asset management and future planning.

Recruitment and ongoing panel member membership

- When using an 'opt in' expression of interest process to recruit panel members, ensure there is adequate communication of the opportunity so the recruiter has a diverse demographic group to select from (particularly young people, and people identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander).
- Consider including a question to understand what support participants need to participate for example 'Do you require any assistance or have any specific needs to attend sessions?' As we later uncovered hearing impairments that affected a participant's involvement in session 4.

5. Panel Member Report

During the last panel session, panel members were tasked with writing their own panel report to present the findings of the process to Council and a summary of the groups' recommendations. Panel members were split into seven groups and each group was allocated a different section of the report to write:

- Group 1 - Session 1 - Introduction and key questions
- Group 2 - Session 2 - Assets
- Group 3 - Session 3- Communities
- Group 4 - Session 4 - Economic Development
- Group 5- Session 4 - Environment, Sustainability and Waste
- Group 6- Session 4 - Community Vision Check in
- Group 7- Session 4 - Conclusion and Process improvements

Panel members spent the first half of the session completing their section of the report and then were given time to review other groups' work and other sections of the report. Summary information was provided in each of the sections to report back the findings of the work for those sessions. For sections of the report that were completed in session 4, panel members were provided with the raw data from group activities. The panel member report was circulated to all participants after session 4 via email on April 23 2025 and panel members were provided with the opportunity to provide feedback. See Appendix 1 for the Community Panel members report.

6. Appendices

Appendix 1. Community Panel members report



Hepburn Together Council and Wellbeing Plan 2025-29 Community Panel Report

**Prepared by the Hepburn Shire Community Panel
April, 2025**

Note* All participant verbatim work is indicated in blue, consultant summaries and other information is in black.

Group 1

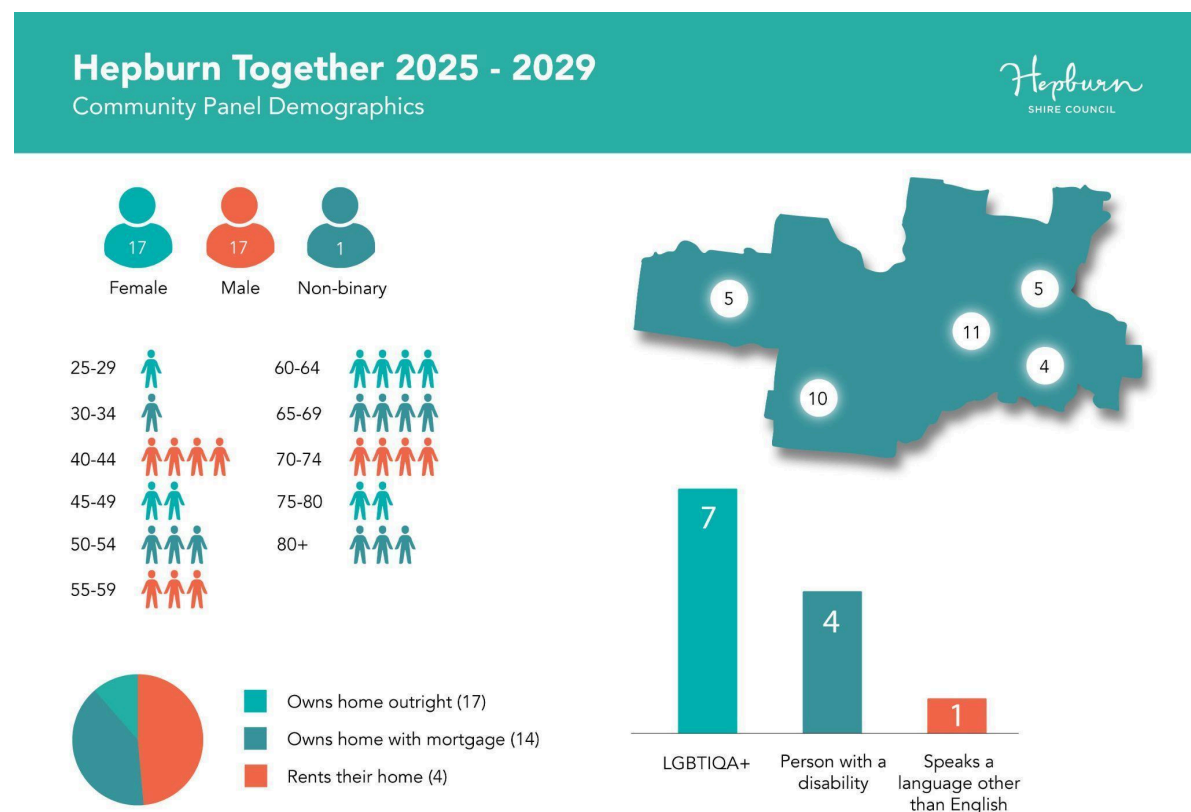
Introduction & Session 1 Key questions

Overall remit for the panel:

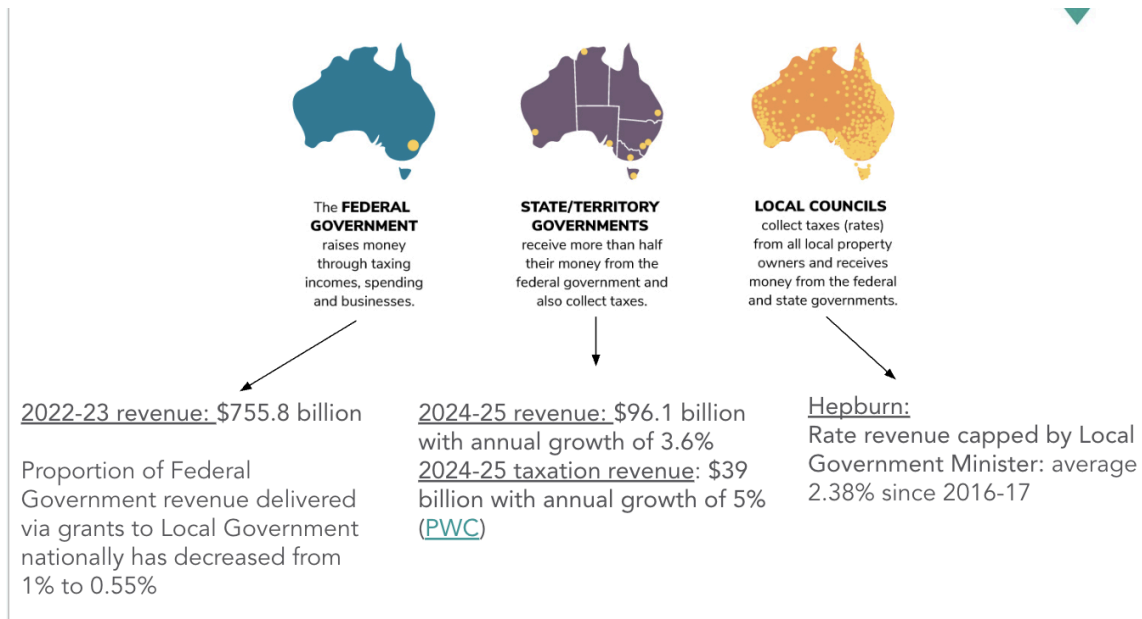
Council needs to reduce \$2.6 million from its budget. Looking at discretionary services, we need to consider what is most valued and still needed in our community and what is the criteria under which Council could reduce or exit a service.

Panel composition

The community panel was made up of 30 members of the Hepburn Shire community



Introduction to Council



On day 1, the panel was presented with financial information, which identified a gap of \$4M annually across 10 years (\$40M) for Hepburn Shire

Levers available to Hepburn Shire:

1. Increase revenue: rates
2. Increase Revenue: other fees, fines and grants
3. Decrease Operational costs: service delivery
4. Decrease Capital works: generational infrastructure
5. Increase borrowing
6. Increase asset sales

GROUP 1 ACTIVITY:

Please write a few sentences about how you felt about being selected to participate on this panel. Some words around why people chose to participate.

What was something new that you learned about Council structure or services?

Please write a sentence or two to summarise the findings or key questions of the panel for this day.

"- Pleased to be selected & given an opportunity to contribute.

-Good to play a part in Councils decision making (X2)

-Wanted to join so I can help with compassionate decision making

- Breaking down the barrier between Council and community

- Wanted my voice to be heard

- Disappointed in the exclusion of some

- Didn't realise that Council managed so many services
- A lot of services provided that are bureaucratic but don't offer anything to the community
- First day was focussed on [the] financial state of Council and its need to reduce costs and spending, but this hasn't really been revisited since.
- Rather than the focus on cost savings, I thought that this process would focus on the enhancement of the community.
- Surprise at the lack of youth voice as part of the panel. Key voices missing in the discussion.
- Thought going through my head as to whether this is just a legislated 'tick the box' exercise. Will any of this be listened to?
- Disappointed about the membership being altered.
- How does Council and community rebuild trust? "

Group 2

Session 2: Asset Management

1. Asset management approaches top preferences:

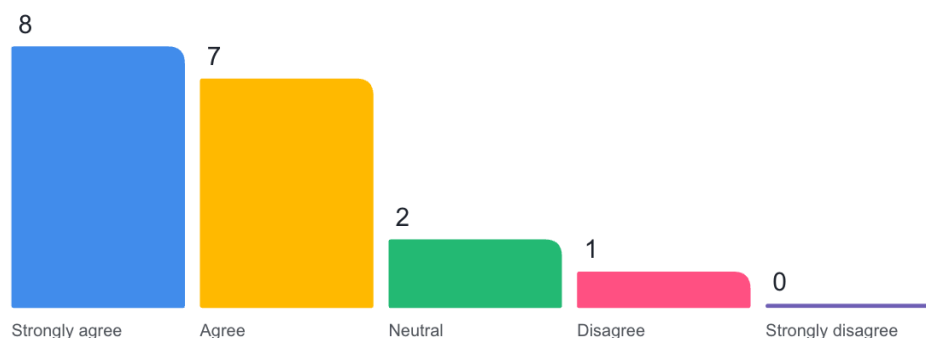
- Invest where it's needed most
- Build in line with best practice (environmental, sustainable)
- Partner with community to help manage facilities
- Renew and upgrade existing assets
- Reduce some services in order to improve others

2. Focus on renewal: The group showed consensus in supporting this statement:

We should only build new assets when one or more of the following applies:

- Significant grant funding,
- Reduces operational costs,
- Services or supports the delivery of multiservices,
- fills a needed gap in service or asset need.

On the condition that we consider a number of criteria/reasons to remove an asset (not just one)

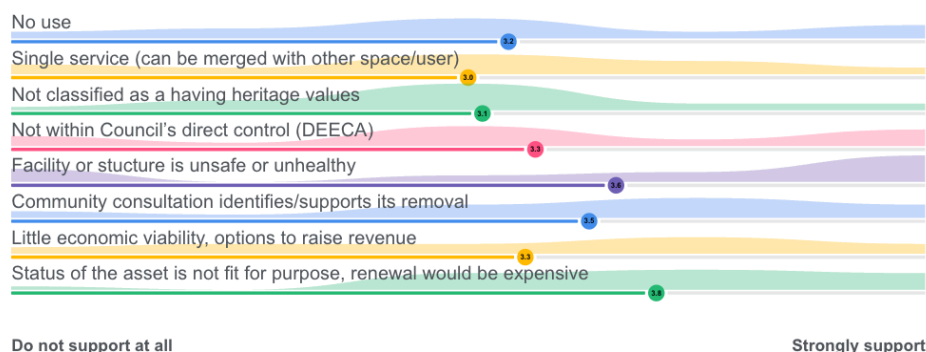


3. Rationalising assets: Some common principles suggested by the group to remove, replace or repurpose an asset were:

- Community value and consultation supports it
- Economic viability - long term value, revenue raising
- Clear ownership/responsibility of assets; Council, DEECA
- Status of asset, fit for purpose, pose safety risks or cannot be renewed.

The main caveats for rationalising assets using principles were:

- An asset cannot be removed/changed on the basis of one principle only. Principles should be used as a matrix/scorecard.
- Always consider repurposing to begin with.
- No/ low use should be separated, low use could be a good thing/ service a community need



The average ranking of asset priorities across the group was:

1. Drainage
2. Trees
3. Buildings
4. Unsealed roads
5. Tracks / trails
6. Bridges
7. Passive parks
8. Sealed roads
9. Footpaths
10. Structures
11. Sporting assets
12. Playgrounds

GROUP 2 ACTIVITY:

Please write a sentence or two to summarise the findings and recommendations of the panel for this day.

- *"Drainage is a large issue for Hepburn Shire, with very destructive floods in November 2010, Jan and Feb 2011 and 2022.*
- *Trees in the creeks and tributaries are an issue with flooding, but the Shire has not replaced any canopy trees to improve diversity of the Shire, and provide shady streets.*
- *Buildings need to be maintained, the cost of replacement is too high in the current financial climate.*
- *Unsealed Roads/Tracks and trails need to be maintained for safety, this includes maintaining road verges for walking, and building new footpaths for better connections around townships.*
- *There is a feeling that the Shire has good and sufficient sporting assets. If any more/upgrades are required, seek funding via state gov grants rather than Council funding.*
- *Buildings: there is a large consensus that facilities may need to be consolidated into multipurpose facilities, where practical, while considering accessibility.*
- *Passive parks: the Shire needs more e.g. Dog parks".*

Group 3

Session 3: Community

Community Wellbeing - What is most valued/important?

- Low cost Housing - affordable and secure housing, balance between permanent vs short stay accommodation
- Accessibility - footpaths and maintained roadsides for walkability
- Belonging and social connection - building social inclusion, sense of belonging through local festivals, knowing neighbours, welcoming new residents
- Health - access to healthcare for all
- Safety - public and residential areas
- Environment - Green and natural spaces
- Community infrastructure - libraries, halls, senior citizens centres, pool, sports grounds
- Education - local schools and transport options for children in rural areas
- Activities for all - family, youth, older residents

Council's role in Community Wellbeing

Council's role should be adaptable based on community need

Advocate

- Advocate for housing, schools, and local transport
- Promote diverse health services and alternative therapies
- Push for better use of existing facilities (e.g., Creswick Campus as a school)
- Facilitator
- Support sports clubs to seek infrastructure funding
- Connect community groups with grant funders (e.g., SRV)
- Host Newcomers sessions, involve groups and community reps
- Encourage participation through local events and outreach (e.g., market stalls)

Partner

- Work with YMCA or similar to manage pools sustainably
- Partner with locals to deliver services/community goals (eg.waste)
- Enable collaboration between councils (e.g., shared waste management)
- Empower the community to articulate and act on aspirations

Provider

- Continue delivering key community wellbeing services through rates
- Maintain direct control of council assets to ensure access and equity
- Provide accessible spaces (e.g., community halls, sports grounds)
-

Funder of Major Projects

- Fund essential infrastructure (e.g., accessible community buildings)
- Recognise funding should be strategic and not always ongoing – sustainability focus
- Might be impractical and unsustainable as a role for Council

Regulator

- Ensure outsourced services are appropriately delivered
- Manage planning, zoning, permits fairly and efficiently
- Uphold equity in access and inclusion through fair regulations

GROUP 3 ACTIVITY: Please write a sentence or two to summarise the findings and recommendations of the panel for this day.

“Accept the 9 introductory points of what the community values.

Empower the community ...

i/ Increased support for community-led organisations

ii/ Support Council leveraging assets and partnerships to provide housing for different people. This

supports businesses and community.

Recommend Council reviews its role in providing services through a balanced lens of cost and impact.

Open to partnering with others to deliver services. Preferencing community org, social ent' over for profit orgs

Prioritise local business where possible in providing Council-related services

*Help communities to identify its plans and aspirations and empower the community to act and run them. Facilitate the community to lead itself.
Support the points under the different roles”.*

Group 4

Session 4: Economic development

Panel members were presented with the raw data and worksheets to collate and refer to from previous activities in session 4.

GROUP ACTIVITY:

Please write a sentence or two to summarise the findings and recommendations of the panel for this day.

“Local business development

Values

We value a balance of economic development and support that takes into consideration the needs of short and long term residents, and small and large business, and respects our heritage, land and waste. Our values include principles of affordability and sustainability and the vision of our town is reflected in our economy.

Council role

Making it easier for a diversity of business, to sustainability grow via promotion and facilitation, in ways that align with our community vision and protect cultural and environmental legacies.

Tourism and Events

Values

We value the unique cultural nature of our small towns, agriculture and natural resources (land, water and ecology). We have a balance tourism, local business and agriculture. We support local events and business but also invite external businesses and events to our towns. There values ensure we time and spaces to gather as a community.

Council Role

To act as a supporter and promoter of a balanced and mindful approach to sustainable tourism that utilises the locally-driven events and businesses while not compromising the natural land, waterways and springs and agriculture”.

Group 5

Session 4: Environment, sustainability and waste

Panel members were presented with the raw data and worksheets to collate and refer to from previous activities in session 4.

GROUP ACTIVITY:

Please write a sentence or two to summarise the findings and recommendations of the panel for this day.

“Overall there is very strong support for Circular Economy Programs.

The preference for continuing with mandated services, would only be on the basis that Circular Waste measures may not be achievable. There was a definite recognition of a move away from mandated services, where the new services are proven to be more efficient and purposeful.

Kerbside glass collection had some support on the following grounds:

Kerbside collection can be more user friendly and provide a service where some people cannot go to a drop off point.

However the consensus is a separate drop off point for glass or drop off points are preferred as it would less costly to Council. and an alternative efficient glass collection system already exists with the CDs that is zero cost to Council”.

Group 6

Session 4: Community Vision

Check in

The panel was asked; are there any minor tweaks you would like to recommend to ensure it is relevant?

Current Community Vision statement

“Hepburn Shire – an inclusive rural community located in Dja Dja Wurrung country where all people are valued, partnerships are fostered, environment is protected, diversity supported, and innovation embraced”.

Panel members were presented with the raw data and worksheets to collate and refer to from previous activities in session 4.

GROUP ACTIVITY:

Please write a sentence or two to summarise the findings and recommendations of the panel for this day.

“The additions suggested by the groups were:

‘Dja Dja Wurrung to Djaara as it incorporates all mobs’

Capitalising Country (to reflect Djaara understanding of Country)

Community and Council are committed to working together

Our part is acknowledged, honoured & valued

The Vision needs to refer to the history of the Shire e.g 'and innovation and local history embraced'

Need something to do with farming/agriculture, not recognised in this statement.

Two groups responded by making larger scale suggestions/or reflective edits to the community vision statement which were not tested across the broader group, and did not receive group consensus:

"Hepburn Shire- a diverse rural community community where all people are valued equally, relationships are nurtured land water and environment is protected, economic diversity supported and innovation fostered"

Provide support to community groups and create opportunities for all.

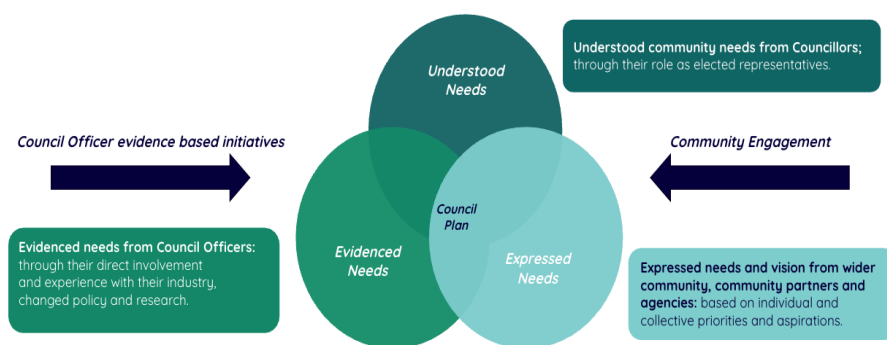
Some participants chose to share more general comments including reflections on where we are in terms of the Community Vision. People shared questions on the clarity of the statement and gave feedback that the Vision was "meaningless jargon".

Group 7

Session 4: Conclusion and process recommendations

In accordance with the Local Government Act 2020, the Hepburn Together community panel participated in a process to give community feedback to inform the direction of Council's strategic documents including the Council Plan (2025-29), Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan (2025-29), Asset Management Plan and the Financial Plan.





Council's promise to the Hepburn Shire community is to 'work with you to articulate, refine and unearth solutions for our local priorities. We will consider advice and recommendations to the maximum extent possible'

The next step for this process are:

- Review feedback from the broad community survey
- Drafting the Council Plan using community, staff and Councillor feedback
- Public Exhibition of the draft document

GROUP ACTIVITY:

What were the group's key recommendations for Council to consider in their development of the Council Plan 2025-29?

How would you like Council to consider your recommendations?

Please state the groups' process recommendations for Council and consultants to consider for future deliberative projects.

Prompts to think about:

- How do you feel about the process you've undertaken?
 - What do you think were the strengths of the deliberative approach?
 - Are there any things you would do differently?
 - Would you recommend participating in processes like this to others?
-
- *"The panel had a missed opportunity due to the panel demographic changing from the beginnings as people chose to withdraw. -First session should have been face to face.*
 - *-Inclusive, conversational sharing of ideas and information, sharing of slides with meaningful data e.g state of asset, projected state.*
 - *[Service] Catalogue was too data intensive, good for some participants.*
 - *Face to face is better*
 - *Broader conversation on asset management*
 - *Didn't directly address that remit of saving 2.6 million*
 - *The voice of youth is missing and Daylesford college, not the source of input (real incentive to participate)*
 - *The use technology and capacity was a barrier- maybe facilitators could be available 5.45 before a start at 6.15*
 - *We would encourage others to participate in something like this.*
 - *We want to see what is included, is adopted and monitored and communicated and transparent and be provided with a timeline. Transparent.*
 - *Ratepayers and panel members don't understand rates capping.*
 - *My hearing difficulties were not taken into account*
 - *Remit should have been about advising council on tools/decision making framework to achieve saving.*
 - *Remit narrow, not addressing trust between council and community to build acceptance of challenges facing the Shire".*