

# Golden Plains Shire Council Focus Group Report

December 2015

## What we did

### Executive summary

In late November and early December 2015, Golden Plains Shire Council held three focus group sessions with 41 representatives from the community to provide an opportunity to talk to Council about community priorities for the 2016-17 Council budget.

The three key resident priorities to come out of the sessions were: **roads, communications and engagement, and celebrating and supporting our communities.**

One of the objectives for Council was to actively listen to residents. Feedback from Councillors and residents after all three sessions indicated this objective was achieved.

### When did they happen?

The focus groups were held in the north, central and southern areas of the Shire to ensure all areas had a voice: Smythesdale (30 November), Rokewood (2 December) and Lethbridge (9 December).

### Why were they held?

Council wanted to gather information to inform the planning for the 2016-17 budget with input from residents on what residents feel are the most important priorities for the Shire and what they believe Council should focus on when preparing next year's budget.

### Who was invited?

120 representatives from a wide range of community groups across the Shire were invited (by email and post) to ensure a variety of different voices could be heard. Each session was also attended by Councillors, Senior Managers and some members of staff.

### Structure of the focus groups

The sessions involved groups of 3-6 people on a table. Groups included community representatives, a Golden Plains Councillor and a member of Council's senior management to scribe. Groups were asked three questions and provided time to workshop their responses. Each group's responses were presented to the room.

The sessions were led by an independent facilitator, Kevin Larkins, to make sure all residents had an equal opportunity to be heard.

### Questions asked in the focus groups

1. a) What do you value about living in the Shire and what Council does?
1. b) What do you think could be improved?
2. a) On your own, think about how you would rate what's provided by Council on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being the lowest.
2. b) What actions could Council take to increase this score?
3. If we asked you to describe the future, what would you like to see in the Shire?

## What we heard

### Question 1.a) ‘What do you value about living in the Shire and what Council does?’

Across the three focus groups, clear themes came through about what people value:

- **‘We love where we live’** – people discussed their passion for their peaceful, beautiful environment, close enough to big towns but participants particularly enjoyed the rural/semi-rural feeling of living in the Shire.
- **A strong sense of community** – people love the active community involvement, events, groups and interacting with the history of their particular area. Participants also highlighted an appreciation of Council’s support, involvement, assistance and facilitation of community groups such as community planning.
- **Community services provided by Council** – each group mentioned specific services provided by the Council they appreciate – the mobile library, Bannockburn Library, Maternal and Child Health services, Aged and Disability services and community planning and grants.

#### Additional themes per region:

North	Central	South
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Great Council services, including waste management</li> <li>• Peaceful separation – clear sense of community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Love the history of the region</li> <li>• Accessibility to Councillors and Council officers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bannockburn library</li> <li>• Community grants</li> <li>• Individual personalities of the communities</li> </ul>

### Question 1. b) ‘What do you think could be improved?’

Again, common themes were clear, with one notable addition from both the north and central focus groups about services and facilities being concentrated in the southern region of the Shire.

- **A better partnership (improved communication and engagement with the community)**  
Groups at all three focus groups felt that communication between the Council and residents and ratepayers could improve, with ideas like clarity about what Council does do for residents and which Councillor or staff member to contact, providing more communication to the community and opportunities to be involved in Council’s decision-making processes.
- **More equitable distribution of funds and attention throughout the Shire** – the north and central focus groups both strongly indicated Council could do a better job of showing how time, money and effort are spread across the Shire, as it seems more focussed in the southern region.
- **Council needs to demonstrate that they follow through** – participants at all three focus groups made points about Council seeing projects and activities through to the very end; and if they have, making sure the community knows about it. An example mentioned was following up from the focus groups by sharing results and next steps.
- **Road maintenance** – participants in all three groups thought road maintenance was a key area where Council could improve; particularly the maintenance of the shoulders and roadsides.

**Additional themes per region:**

North	Central	South
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secondary school in the north</li> <li>• Walking trails</li> <li>• More community events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintenance of halls – Councillors should visit halls more often</li> <li>• Telecommunications</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could do more forward planning</li> <li>• Access to Councillors</li> </ul>

**Question 2. a) ‘On your own, think about how you would rate what’s provided by Council on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being the lowest.’**

**The overall average rating (from the 41 attendees of the three groups) was 6.2 out of 10.**

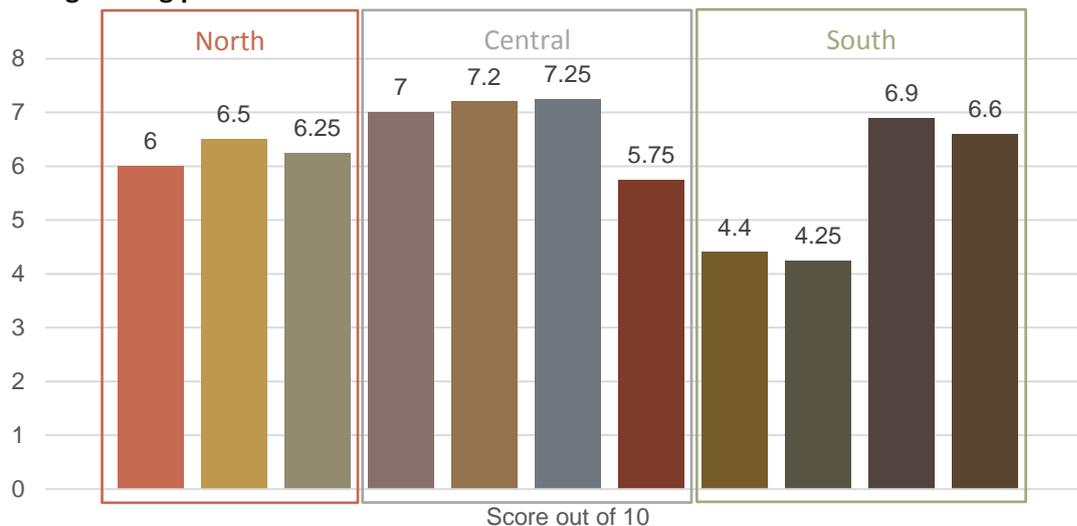
This question allowed Council to see how people feel overall about the services and facilities provided by Council and how much room residents feel there is for improvement. This overall rating will provide a context for constructive conversations at Council.

**Average rating per region:**

North	Central	South
6.25	6.8	5.5

When considering the region average rating, it is apparent that those in the southern region of the Shire feel that what Golden Plains Shire Council provides is not adequate when compared to their expectations. North and Central’s average rate was higher at 6.25 and 6.8; the highest rating from a table was 7.25 and the lowest was 4.25.

**Average rating per table:**



## Question 2. b) ‘What actions could Council take to increase this score?’

Participants came up with some constructive actions Council could take to positively increase the rating they provided. Many of these recommendations correlated directly with what they felt could be improved which is outlined in question 1.b in this report (improved communication and engagement with the community, Council needs to follow through, road maintenance), and as such, we have included only new or supplementary information below.

- **Partnership - improved communication and community engagement** was again a consistent area for improvement from the three focus groups. Participants said they want better information about Council services, particularly education about waste and recycling and for new residents. One group specifically suggested Council “Improve the culture of communication between volunteers, community and staff”. People said they want more opportunities to communicate directly with Councillors.
- **Follow through on projects** – residents reiterated how important it is to them for Council to make sure each project is completed; examples given were hall upgrades, and partially-funded projects. One group said they’d like to see more of a “can do” Council.
- **More support for community groups and volunteers** – participants from all three groups wanted to see more funding and resources for community groups, who they feel undertake a lot of important work for their communities.

### Additional themes per region:

North	Central	South
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funds and support for major facilities in the North</li> <li>• Community understanding of how maintenance funds are split between towns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weekly garbage service</li> <li>• Work with local schools to support local community by providing services – e.g. adult education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Council representatives at community meetings and follow up issues</li> <li>• Better balance between farming and the environment</li> </ul>

## Question 3. ‘If we asked you to describe the future, what would you like to see in the Shire?’

In this question, participants provided us with their vision for the future. When all groups had presented their thoughts, each person was given five stickers to use to express their priorities, to be ‘spent’ however they chose. These have been grouped into broad themes in order to get an overall picture of topics participants were talking about, as well as top priorities for the future in the three regions.

### The top five ‘future’ themes overall (from the 41 attendees of the focus groups) were:

Theme	Votes
Services and facilities	50
Celebrating communities	31
Economic development	18
Transport	14
Better roads	13

This exercise demonstrated the broad areas most important to residents, and will inform budget planning for 2016-17.

**The top five priorities per region were:**

	Theme	Specific priority (as stated by group)	Votes
<b>North</b>	Roads	Good quality roads	5
	Economic development	Tourism focus, environmental, historical, Promote rail trail and Rainbow Bird Trail	5
	Services and facilities	University / industrial /employment for youth	4
	Services and facilities	Ross Creek needs an attractive public park for families, community groups to gather for barbeques, picnics, etc.	4
	Celebrating communities	Same look and feel throughout the Shire e.g. entrance signs, notice boards	4
<b>Central</b>	Better roads	Better roads – improved safety on well used local roads, long term strategy, with a view to quality construction	9
	Community engagement	Genuine active engagement with local people in decision making. More time involvement in projects	5
	Economic development	Employment growth (alternate farming etc.)	5
	Services and facilities	A fully self-sufficient Shire i.e. no need to leave the Shire for “any” services/goods/facilities	5
	Telecommunications	No black spots, full strength service telecommunications	5
<b>South</b>	Services and facilities	2 acres of public land - Batesford	7
	Governance	A subdivided Council i.e. back to Wards, - Return local Government to locals	6
	Governance	Sustainable Council with happy rate payers	6
	Transport	Bike trails, linking towns	5
	Celebrating communities	Township boundaries fixed for 100 years	5



## What we'll do

### The next steps

The focus group input will be considered in planning for the 2016-17 Budget and Strategic Resource Plan (SRP). This forms part of the Council Plan and provides an overview of Council's proposed key actions over the next four years).

There will be more opportunities for the broader public to provide feedback on the Budget.

January/February 2016	<b>Council to develop draft Strategic Resource Plan.</b>
February/early March 2016	<b>Draft Strategic Resource Plan to be released for public comment:</b> Opportunities for community feedback will include an online consultation. Further details will be released in the February edition of the Gazette and on our website.  Council will advise how community feedback has been considered and influenced the SRP.
March/April 2016	<b>Council to take community feedback into consideration</b> and further develop the Strategic Resource Plan and budget. A summary of findings and Council's actions to be provided on Council's website
May 2016	<b>Golden Plains Shire Council 2016-17 Budget to be published for public comment</b> under the submission process prescribed by legislation (section 223 of the Local Government Act 1989). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>A Public Notice</b> of the proposal be given in newspapers (the Geelong Advertiser and Ballarat Courier) and be posted on Council's website.</li> <li>• <b>Written submissions</b> can be lodged on the proposal within 28 days of the advertisement appearing.</li> </ul>
Early June 2016	<b>Council will hold a special meeting to hear community submissions.</b>
Late June 2016	<b>Council will table its final 2016-17 Budget for adoption.</b>

### Developing the Community Engagement strategy

Golden Plains Shire Council is serious about community engagement; long term planning has commenced in the form of a Community Engagement Strategy for 2016-2020. This Strategy will guide Council on its delivery of community engagement activities and highlight opportunities for engagement with the community over the next four years.

### Please take our Community Engagement survey

Council would like to hear how you think it should be engaging with you and your community and involving you in its decision making processes. Council would like to encourage all residents to fill out the Community Engagement survey today – it can be found here:

[www.goldenplainsdigital.com.au/consultations/134](http://www.goldenplainsdigital.com.au/consultations/134)

## Thank you

Golden Plains Shire Council would like to thank everyone that took time out of their busy lives to come along to the focus groups – your input was invaluable, and demonstrated the passion and energy our residents bring to their communities.