COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY
COUNCIL POLICY

Adopted July 2023

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Wollongong City Council would like to show their respect and acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Dharawal Country, Elders past and present, and extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We want to share information, hear your views and involve you to help make decisions that affect our community. This process is called community engagement.

What is community engagement?

Community engagement is how we reach out and encourage you, the community, to talk with us about the plans, projects and policies we develop on your behalf. It is about seeking and listening to your feedback to help us make decisions. Through engagement, Council and the community benefit from sharing ideas, skills, knowledge, expertise and experiences.

Community engagement is based on social justice principles of equity, access, participation and rights. When done well, it offers opportunities to:

• Involve the community in decision making;

• Build relationships and trust;

• Strengthen community;

• Build a sense of belonging; and

• Keep the community informed.

There are risks if genuine opportunities for community engagement are not provided, such as a loss of trust from community, unrealistic expectations and misinformation.

Our commitment to community engagement

We are committed to the following principles of community engagement:

1. We aim to be flexible

We will use a range of methods to give you opportunities to join the conversation and share feedback. We encourage feedback from you and all community members who may be affected by, or are interested in, a decision we make on the community's behalf.

2. We will be inclusive

We live in a diverse community and know it's important everyone's voices are heard. We also recognise the unique and significant contribution made by Aboriginal people to the local community. We will tailor our engagement methods and activities to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, children and young people, people with disability, and community members who need support, have appropriate access and opportunities to share their feedback and join the conversation. We also have an Aboriginal Engagement Framework to support and deliver on this principle.

3. We believe community engagement is important for good governance

We are committed to engaging with you, the community, as a core component of effective decision making. We value your ideas, views and local knowledge. Your feedback will be used to continuously improve the service we provide.

4. We aim to effectively plan each engagement

Through effective planning and engagement techniques we will avoid repeatedly asking the community to provide feedback about the same topic. You will be provided reasonable timeframes to join the conversation and share your feedback. We will continue to learn, improve and build our capability to engage effectively.

5. We will keep you updated

We are committed to letting you know your views, concerns and feedback have been heard and outlining why decisions were made. We will keep you informed about decisions made and provide updates on projects and plans.

Our process of community engagement

Each engagement will be tailored to the needs of the affected community and the project. We will undertake six key steps. The order these steps are taken can vary and may move back and forth, especially for complex projects.

Plan

Deciding to engage

Community engagement is considered when a change of service, activities or infrastructure is planned, or when an issue is raised and requires a decision. For a long-term project there is likely to be multiple stages of engagement. Community engagement isn't possible or necessary for all the work Council does, for example, emergency work or low-impact maintenance.

When planning an engagement we consider who to engage, how to engage and where to engage.

Who we engage

We define community as all people and groups who are interested in the future of Wollongong. This includes government and non-government agencies, community groups, businesses, residents and visitors. We will target engagements to those who might be interested in, impacted or benefited by a decision.

How we engage

How we engage depends on the level of interest and impact a plan or project will have on people and stakeholder groups in the community. To support community participation, accessibility and inclusion, we will use a range of ways for people to be involved, including face to face and online. Based on our stakeholder analysis, we will use culturally appropriate methods, share information in other languages and work with community groups to involve our harder to reach community members.

Where we engage

We engage in many different settings. This can be in the community, at workshops or events, meetings of committees and groups, and using different online options like our Council websites, online meetings and social media.

Engage

This is when we talk with you, the community, about a project. We call this the engagement or exhibition period. For each engagement process we will explain:

• What the engagement is about;

• Where to find out more information about the topic;

• How you can share your feedback and join the conversation;

• The timeframe to provide your comments;

• What happens to your feedback.

We accept community feedback in a variety of formats such as letters, emails, surveys, online tools, petitions, feedback forms, face to face meetings and workshops. We are also open to alternative methods of communication so everyone can join the conversation and share their feedback. Submissions can be made available for people to read. You can request we remove your personal information from your submission.

Analyse

We read, review and analyse all feedback. All feedback is collated in its original format, analysed, assessed and a report is written summarising what was said and presenting key themes. Petitions and form letters will be handled in line with our **Petition Guidelines**. The report is provided to decision makers and is one way community feedback informs the decision making process.

Decision making

Your views, ideas and local knowledge are an important part of the decision making process.

Other things we need to consider include:

- Budget or financial impact (so we can spend your money wisely);
- Legislation (State and Federal);
- Council policies and resolutions (endorsed by your elected representatives);
- Evidence provided by technical and professional assessment and industry best practice;
- Economic, environmental, social and governance impacts.

The diagram (right) shows how feedback is one of a number of considerations when a decision is made.

Factors in decision making

DECISION

YOUR FEEDBACK — COST $ — LEGISLATION — COUNCIL POLICIES — EXPERT OR TECHNICAL ADVICE — ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT — SOCIAL FACTORS — ECONOMIC IMPACT — GOVERNANCE

Provide updates

We will let you know what the outcome of the engagement was, including how feedback was used and what decisions were made. We will provide updates on projects as they progress.

Evaluate

We will evaluate the effectiveness of our engagement activities and processes so we can continue to learn and improve the ways we engage. Our evaluation criteria aligns with our principles of community engagement.

Evaluation Criteria

Engagement Principle	Measure
We aim to be flexible	• A stakeholder analysis is done and used to plan the engagement • A range of communications and engagement methods are used to share information and gather feedback • We adjusted our engagement approach based on identified needs or when requested
We will be inclusive	• The engagement is publicised and people viewed the material • Feedback is received from a range of people/stakeholders • Accessible, inclusive and culturally appropriate communications and engagement methods are used
We believe community engagement is important for good governance	• Community feedback is analysed and reported to decision makers • People tell us they've had a positive experience through the engagement process • Community feedback informs the decision making process
We aim to effectively plan each engagement	• An engagement plan is developed identifying the project background, level of engagement, stakeholders, methods, messages and timeline • The right people received the right information at the right time • We identify areas for improvement for our people and practice and act on them
We will keep you updated	• Submissions are acknowledged • Engagement outcomes and decisions are shared with respondents • Project updates are provided

Our Stakeholders

Our community is diverse, with people from a range of backgrounds and with a range of interests living, working and visiting this place. When planning community engagement, we analyse the stakeholders and target those who might be interested in, impacted by or benefit from a decision.

- Residents and ratepayers
- Traditional Custodians
- Aboriginal communities
- CALD communities
- Young people
- Children
- People with disability
- Commuters
- Homeless people
- Creatives
- Staff
- Volunteers
- Media
- Business
- Visitors + tourists
- Council reference groups
- Interest groups
- Engagement HQ users
- Neighbourhood Forums
- Non-government agencies
- State and federal MPs

Levels of engagement

The guide below shows the four levels of engagement Council has adapted from the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum. A range of factors are considered to determine the level of engagement for each project including the engagement purpose, level of impact, degree of complexity, timeframes and legislation.

Community engagement is a dynamic process which means there is likely to be movement back and forth through the different levels of an engagement process. Whichever process is used, Council is responsible for making the final decision.

LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT				
	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE
GOALS	To let the community know what we're doing.	To seek community feedback on what we're planning. To use community feedback to inform decision making.	To work with the community to understand their priorities and involve them in designing potential solutions.	To work with the community to understand their priorities and work together to decide on preferred solutions.
COMMITMENT	We will use a variety of methods to share information. We aim to make sure that information we share is accessible. We will share project updates.	We will provide opportunities for the community to share feedback that will be considered in decision making. We will provide clear information and give reasonable timeframes for the community to share feedback.	We will provide opportunities for the community to work with us to identify priorities. We will incorporate feedback into our plans as often as possible. We will provide updates on how community input influenced decisions.	We will work alongside the community to develop solutions together.
METHODS	Council's websites and online media channels 'Our Wollongong' - Council's Engagement website Council's newsletters Letters and emails Fact sheets Customer Service Community forums Information stand and information sessions	'Our Wollongong' - Council's Engagement website Public Access Forum Community forums Information stand Surveys and submissions Online engagement Independent Hearing and Assessment Panel	'Our Wollongong' - Council's Engagement website Community forums Reference and Advisory Groups Focus groups Workshops Online engagement Working groups	'Our Wollongong' - Council's Engagement website Focus groups Workshops Community forums Reference and Advisory Groups Online engagement Working groups

* adopted from IAP2

Application of this policy

This Policy applies to Council's:

• Councillors

• Staff

• Volunteers

• Contractors

• Consultants

Role of the Lord Mayor and Councillors

The Lord Mayor acts as the spokesperson for Council to promote engagement on key strategic plans and projects. Together with the General Manager, the Lord Mayor ensures adequate opportunities for engagement between Council and the community, and promotes collaboration with key stakeholders.

Councillors are your elected representatives and have a role in community engagement. They meet with the community in a range of ways to hear your views, concerns and aspirations. They sit on reference groups and committees, attend Council meetings, events and engagement activities.

Councillors may attend opportunities set up by staff to talk with the community. At these community engagements, the Councillors' role is to listen, discuss and record community feedback so it can be considered in decision making. Councillors may also engage with the community without Council staff involvement.

Councillors do not make decisions about Development Applications (DAs) and they are not allowed to attempt to direct, influence or pressure staff in an assessment or determination of a DA. As a community member you're able to contact your Councillors directly. Their contact details are listed on Council's website.

Role of the General Manager

The General Manager oversees preparation and implementation of this policy and legislative documents for endorsement by the elected Council. The General Manager ensures community members are given enough information to participate meaningfully in engagement processes.

Role of Council staff

Council staff are responsible for providing clear, professional and objective information to help the community understand a project. Council staff will engage in a respectful and genuine way to provide information on the ways the community can share feedback, how feedback will be reported and to share updates on projects.

The requirements to engage with you on matters that affect you are set out in the Local Government Act 1993.

Related documents

This Policy should be read in conjunction with the following documents:

• **Works notification policies** – describes standard internal process for maintenance, tree management, chemical use, civil works and construction notifications.

• **Customer Service Policy**

• **Council Committees and Reference Groups**

• **Neighbourhood Forum Charter**

• **Code of Meeting Practice Policy**

• **Aboriginal Engagement Framework**

• **Petition Guidelines**

• **Privacy Management Plan Policy**

• **Public Access to Documents and Information held by Council Policy**

There are statutory/legislative requirements for planning matters that guide engagement needs.

• **Wollongong Local Planning Panel Submissions Policy**

• **Community Participation Plan**

• **NSW Office of Local Government Policy and Legislation**

OUR WOLLONGONG JOIN THE CONVERSATION

We are a connected and engaged community

- Residents have easy and equitable access to information and play an active role in the decisions that affect our city.

- Our residents have an increased sense of community.

- Our Council is accountable, financially sustainable and has the trust of the community.

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