

POLICY NAME:	Strathfield Council Communication and Consultation with the Community Policy
PREVIOUS POLICY:	No previous policy
COUNCIL ADOPTION:	2 August 2005
REF:	Minute No. 229/05. File: 755. SMC114163
RELEVANT LEGISLATION:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Local Government Act 1993• Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979
RELATED POLICIES/DOCUMENTS:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strathfield Council Management Plan• Strathfield Council Plans of Management• Strathfield Consolidated Development Control Plans

PURPOSE

The Communication and Consultation with the Community Policy provides an overview of the consultation process and a framework for effective community consultation.

Council sees consultation as a key step towards enhanced decision making. Good consultation promotes a sense of community ownership of a decision as a result of the access of the community to the decision making process.

The accountability of Council for decision making is enhanced, not diminished, by any consultation.

OBJECTIVES

- To promote community involvement and public accountability in Council business.
- To create and foster a consultative culture within the Council organisation.
- To set forth and outline the commitment of Council to effective communication.
- To ensure that Council's planning and decision making processes are inclusive of and responsive to community points of view, in a consistent and comprehensive format.
- To utilise the Communication Strategy and Consultation with the Community Manual that accompany this policy to enable a consistent approach to consultation and ensure that appropriate methods are used

DEFINITION

Consultation is a process of two-way, informed communication between the Council and the community on an issue prior to Council making a decision on that issue.

Council broadly defines the community as those who have an interest in or are affected by the workings of Council and may include:

- Residents and ratepayers
- Business owners and operators
- People who work in the local government area
- Visitors (including tourists and shoppers)
- Government agencies
- Users of Council services
- Local community groups and associations

CORPORATE OBJECTIVES

The Communication and Consultation with the Community Policy is linked to implementing the Council's vision, mission and core values as outlined in the Management Plan. Council's mission places consultation as one of the key features of the relationship between the community and Council and enhances the others.

WHY AND WHEN TO COMMUNICATE AND CONSULT

Council will communicate and consult with the community with the aim to:

- Identify the community's views, needs, ideas and concerns.
- Increase community awareness of Council's services, activities, issues, processes, and decisions which may affect them.
- Improve the community's understanding of the role of Council.
- Encourage new and innovative ideas and solutions.
- Ensure that Council services are provided in a way that is consistent with the community's values and priorities.
- Encourage and foster positive community involvement in issues which affect them and the community in which they live.
- Obtain cooperation in the implementation of decisions.
- Encourage Council to utilise the knowledge of the community in developing programs and services.
- Ensure that programs, policies and services are appropriate to the needs of the local community and are effective in their delivery.
- Generate a greater sense of community.
- Portray a positive image of Council.
- Increase confidence and accountability in Council's decision making.
- Locate resources, in-kind resources, sponsorship and/or partnerships.
- Improve staff morale through better communications leading to better delivery of service both internally and externally.

Council has a statutory obligation to consult with the community. Statutory consultation requirements are contained in the Local Government Act and Environmental Planning and Assessment Act. The Local Government Act, 1993 states in part:

“A Council has the following Charter:

- *To provide directly or on behalf of other levels of Government, after due consultation, adequate, equitable and appropriate services and facilities for the community and to ensure that those services and facilities are managed efficiently and effectively;*
- *To facilitate the involvement of Councillors, members of the public, users of facilities and services and Council staff in the development, improvement and coordination of Local Government.”*

There is also the need for Council to consult with the community beyond legislative requirements. These include:

- In response to community interest
- To help it identify community needs
- When it believes that community input will enhance its decision making

Some of the common Council issues that require consultation are:

- Site specific - matters about a particular site, such as a change in use
- Area improvement – matters that affect people in a neighbourhood, suburb or strip shopping centre (eg rezoning, traffic management)
- Major projects
- Service delivery
- Policies and policy changes
- Strategic plans
- Financial reporting and other reporting regulations

THE PROCESS OF CONSULTATION

The process of consultation involves but should not be limited to:

- Clarifying the purpose
- Identifying who will be involved
- Establishing the timeframe
- Determining the resources required
- Planning the process
- Implementation
- Providing follow up to all parties on decisions or actions
- Evaluating consultation

It is a mistake to assume that any consultation process should lead to a consensus and that it has failed if it does not do so.

Council in considering the view of its citizens, will act upon resident and/or community views where possible, however in the final instance, all members of the community must accept that having considered all possible aspects, that the final decision rests with the Council. The community should be aware that there are a number of factors, which also need to be considered when the

final decision is made. Consultation is an important element, but it is not the only one. Council has limits to its power and has statutory duties that it must fulfil.

COMMITMENT TO COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

Council officers and elected Councillors are committed, in principle and in practice, to public consultation with the Strathfield community on matters affecting the local community.

Council will apply the following to its consultation processes:

- Consultation will have a clear purpose.
- The community will be given the opportunity to participate in the decision making process.
- Council will actively seek out people for consultation.
- Council will tap into the knowledge and expertise existing in the community.
- Council recognises that successful community consultation depends on mutual trust, cooperation and honesty and willingness to respect differing views between the community and Council. This requires a shared understanding of, and a commitment to, the objectives and commitment with respect to any particular consultation program or activity.
- Consultation will be appropriate and timely.
- A clear statement will be made on the role of Council and the role of other participants.
- Adequate resources, skills and time will be committed to ensure that community consultation is conducted effectively and efficiently.
- Information relating to the consultation will be easily accessible by all involved to make informed and timely contributions.
- Information relating to the consultation will be presented in an easily understood format.
- There will be circumstances where commercially sensitive information or information of a personal nature may not be able to be fully disclosed to the public.
- Consultation will allow different ways to respond.
- Consultation will be sensitive to the needs of particular groups to maximise ability to contribute.
- Council will consider and respond to contributions from all participants.
- Consultation will be transparent. All people involved will have a clear understanding about how their feedback and comments are to be used.
- Council on occasions may develop a preliminary preference for a particular position. When this occurs, Council will indicate what that preliminary position is. This will assist the community to understand where the Council stands at the start of the consultation.

- Council will maintain openness and take new ideas on board and alter the course of actions if required.
- Council will respect the diverse range of interests that may be represented during a consultation.
- Reasonable attempts will be made to resolve conflicts, if they arise, and reach a suitable solution.
- The views, concerns and needs of the community will be considered in Council decisions as far as possible.
- Consultation processes will be evaluated after the decision making they contributed to is completed.
- Feedback will be provided to respondents about how the final decision was reached.
- If the progress of an issue that Council is consulting on is delayed or extended due to unforeseen circumstances or if the issue is part of a broader issue that may not be completely resolved for some time, the Council will provide appropriate updates to those who have participated in the consultation process.
- Communicate the policy both internally and externally.

The decision regarding whether community consultation should take place on a matter lies with the Council, the Mayor and/or General Manager, as appropriate in each case.

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

A Communications Strategy has been developed as a guide that outlines the strategies that underpin any form of Council's communication and consultation with the community.

The main aim of the communications strategy is to provide guidelines and instruments to increase the level of public understanding, awareness and participation in local government.

Council's overall objective in its communication strategy is to provide a strategy to improve internal and external communications flowing to, from and within the Council.

Consultation with the community may take many forms. The form chosen will depend on the issue to be considered. Any or all of the communication strategies summarised below can be used as part of the consultation process. It should be noted that while the provision of information does not, on its own constitute consultation, it can be usefully employed as part of the overall process.

- Undertaking a customer satisfaction survey annually to measure overall customer attitudes to learn about what customers think about the areas where Council is performing well and the areas where Council needs improvement.
- Establishing a service charter or guarantee of service.
- Developing protocols for handling customer enquiries and complaints and maintaining opportunities for feedback and continually review and improve systems which will assist the processing and provision of information and service delivery.
- Continuing to provide information on Council's issues, decisions, services and activities through a variety of measures including advertising in local newspaper, publishing a regular

newsletter/newspaper, issuing media releases, placing on public exhibition documents relating to Council activities and establishing Council's publications on its website.

- Continuing to encourage input from the community on Council's issues, decisions, services and activities through a variety of means including promoting Council's complaint handling and feedback systems, encouraging the community to attend and speak at Council and Committee Meetings, encouraging the community to contact or meet Councillors to discuss concerns, encouraging members of taskforces, ad hoc committees, reference groups and interest groups to participate in open forms of consultation where appropriate, letter box dropping/sending letters to the community as a whole or to those households/areas directly affected by any Council proposal inviting comment, conducting a survey, holding public meetings to address specific issues, inviting submissions on plans and other documents relating to Council activities, utilising Council's website for the exchange of views and ideas and using information stalls to get information about issues from people in public areas.
- Maintaining access to information for members of the public (subject to the conditions under the Local Government Act and Freedom of Information Act and subject to Council's duties of confidentiality and privacy).

The strategies to be used depend on:

- Who your stakeholders are
- What the purpose of the consultation is
- The availability of resources
- Your timeframe, and
- The advantages and disadvantages of each method.

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION REGISTER

To have consultation activities registered, monitored and evaluated to ensure consultation practices are improved and developed into best practice, a Community Consultation Register will be kept to record the process and outcomes of all community consultation activities undertaken within Council.

Over time the data in the central register will:

- Allow a comparison and evaluation of Council's community consultation processes, highlight successful projects and the risks or issues identified during a consultation project
- Ensure that current or anticipated consultation projects in the whole of Council are identified and thus avoid duplication enable the shared use of consultation events and avoid overlap or duplication of consultation activities within the community.

The data on the register will be reviewed annually.

SCOPE OF THE POLICY

The Communication and Community Consultation Policy will apply to Council elected members, staff, contractors and consultants of Council.

Council will regularly review the policy to improve understanding of and adherence to the policy and ensure it is in line with best practice.