



**DRAFT
COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT
STRATEGY**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Cessnock City Council acknowledges that within its local government area boundaries are the Traditional Lands of the Wonnarua people, the Awabakal people and the Darkinjung people. We acknowledge these Aboriginal peoples as the traditional custodians of the land on which our offices and operations are located, and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We also acknowledge all other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who now live within the Cessnock Local Government Area.

About this Strategy

Community engagement and participation in decision making forms an important part of our local democracy. Our community has the right and responsibility to access information, be consulted and actively participate in Council's planning and decision making processes.

The Community Engagement Strategy (the Strategy) will help you understand when and how you can influence Cessnock City Council's decision making. We acknowledge conversations are not always led by Council and can be initiated by the community.

The Strategy outlines Council's commitment to community engagement and sets a strategic direction that aims to increase opportunities for genuine participation.

Council is responsible for decisions that have both intended and sometimes unforeseen impacts on our community. The Strategy will support us in undertaking effective community engagement and being more responsive to our community, so we can deliver strategies, services, projects and programs that help achieve our community's aspirations for the Cessnock Local Government Area.

This Strategy is divided into two parts:

Section 1: Our community engagement approach including our principles.

Section 2: An action plan in order to meet the objectives of the Strategy.

The Strategy is supported by:

- [Community Strategic Plan](#) that sets out the community's vision for Cessnock.
- [Customer Service Strategy](#) that provides a roadmap for continuous improvement to achieve excellent customer service.
- [Community Participation Plan](#) that sets out

how and when we will engage the community across our planning functions under the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*, including all mandatory requirements.

- Internal toolkit to provide Council staff guidance and direction in the planning of engagement activities



Section 1 - Our Community Engagement Approach

1.1 What is community engagement?

Community engagement is a process of involving people that are affected by or interested in a decision. It enables good governance, problem solving and decisions that are balanced and informed, resulting in better outcomes. It supports transparency, builds trust in the decision making process and an understanding of decisions.

1.2 What do we mean by community?

Our community is the many different individuals, groups and organisations that have a vested interest in our people and the Cessnock Local Government Area, including:

- people that live or own a property here
- people who work or study here
- people that visit the local area
- business owners and operators
- resident and ratepayer associations
- local Aboriginal communities and agencies
- community, sporting and environmental groups

- community agencies that provide services to and/or advocate for people in the local area
- business and industry associations
- developers and investors
- neighbouring councils and regional bodies
- government agencies
- local members (state and federal).

1.3 Our engagement objectives

1. We are responsive to our community.
2. Our staff have the skills, tools, capacity and confidence to engage effectively.
3. Our community has opportunities to contribute to Council's decision making process.
4. Our community has the necessary information to make an informed contribution.

1.4 Our values

Our core values shape our corporate culture and guide us on how we interact with each other and provide the best outcomes for our community.



Integrity

We are open, honest and transparent. We build trust.



Respect

We treat people fairly and consistently. We respect others' views, ideas and opinions.



Teamwork

We work as one to get the job done. We work together with our community.



Accountability

We are committed to safety in all we do. We take ownership of our decisions and actions. We are accountable to our community.



Excellence

We strive to do it once and do it right. We take pride in our work and strive for efficiency and innovation.

Our Community Engagement Approach

1.5 Our community engagement principles

Council commits to the following principles that underpin all of our community engagement. They build upon Council's values of integrity, respect, teamwork, accountability and excellence.

In summary, our community engagement will:

- Be facilitated with **integrity**, ensuring the process is transparent and clear in scope and purpose.
- Be designed to be **inclusive** ensuring a range of values and perspectives are captured through use of participation practices that are accessible.
- Promote **dialogue** and encourage open and genuine discussion in an environment where participants feel heard.
- Ensure the community's **influence** is reflected in the outcomes.

Integrity

- We will maximise engagement opportunities when there is capacity for our community to influence a decision.
- We will explain which decisions can and those that cannot be influenced by the community.
- We will be clear about the engagement process.
- We will be clear about the decision making process.
- We will actively share information to enable informed participation.
- We will communicate the information in a way that is accessible, easy to understand and uses plain language.

Measure: our community has confidence in the engagement process.

Inclusive

- We will seek diversity of views.
- We will identify and remove barriers to participation.
- We will treat all views, ideas and opinions with respect.

Measure: levels of participation from different sectors of the community.

Dialogue

- We will seek out and encourage participation from people who may be affected by or interested in a decision.
- We will engage in a way that is appropriate to the level of influence on the decision using methods that best suit our community.
- We will consider the differing views of our community in our decision making.
- We will use the information collected during the engagement process in a meaningful way.

Measure: affected and interested people have the opportunity to participate in a meaningful way.

Influence

- We will be responsive to community.
- We will communicate to participants how their input was used to influence the outcomes.
- We will evaluate the effectiveness of the engagement with a view of continuous learning and improvement.

Measure: we report back to participants on how community input was used and the final outcome.

Our Community Engagement Approach

1.6 Community engagement in the decision making process

We are responsible for making informed and balanced decisions about services for our community. Our decision making may be influenced by, but not limited to:

- legislation
- council policies and resolutions
- technical and professional advice
- community views
- budget and resourcing impacts
- social impacts
- environmental impacts
- economic impacts
- population data.

1.7 Community engagement process

The types of engagement we will undertake can be broadly identified as:

Inform

We communicate information to those affected by or interested in a decision. This takes place when

a decision has already been made or there is no capacity to influence the decision.

Consult

We seek some input or feedback on a project or decision before it progresses.

Active participation

We collaborate with the community and/or specific stakeholder groups to problem solve and develop solutions that are included in decision making. It enables individuals and communities to raise their own issues and for participants to take responsibility for their contribution to solutions.

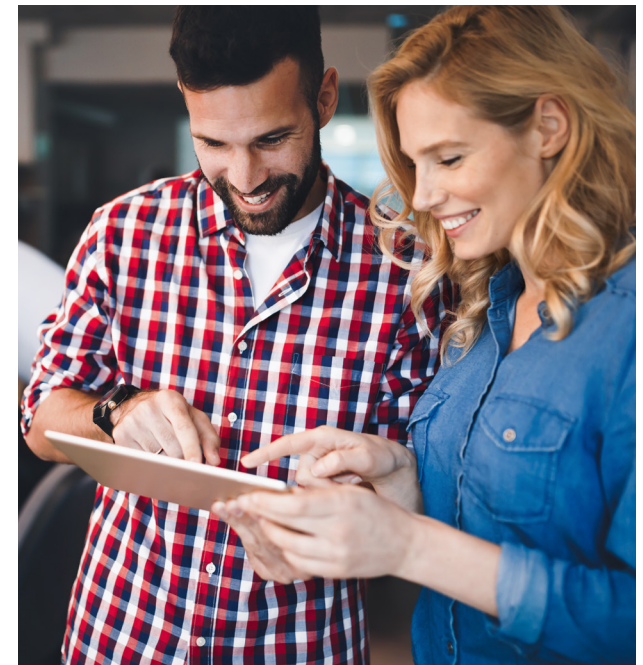
We will design the engagement process including methods and activities according to the:

- objectives of the project
- level and scope of influence on decision(s) to be made
- level of impact and interest the decision(s) may have
- most effective ways to reach affected and/or interested communities and stakeholders
- time, budget and level of resources available.

Some of the reasons for engaging with our community can include:

- making decisions that impact our community

- major infrastructure projects
- developing or reviewing of a significant policy, strategy or plan
- developing a new project or initiative
- changing a strategic direction or service.



Our Community Engagement Approach

1.8 Barriers to engagement

There are many factors that could make it difficult for people to participate in engagement processes including, but not limited to physical health, language, social isolation, digital access and knowledge, distrust, lack of time and lack of awareness. Council acknowledges these barriers and is committed to making engagement opportunities inclusive and accessible by adapting our methods.

1.9 Statutory engagement

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 participation, 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 co-ordination of Local Government.

It prescribes statutory engagement requirements for specific Council activities including the Community Strategic Plan.

We are also required to engage the community on our planning functions under the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*. This includes strategic plans and Council's role in assessing and determining development applications. Please refer to our Community Participation Plan for further information, including notification and exhibition requirements, timeframes and methods.

The Strategy does not replace these existing statutory requirements, but may be used to enhance the minimum requirements specified.

1.10 When we won't engage

Council makes operational decisions that are guided by our adopted plans and the Integrated Planning and Reporting framework. There are times when the community cannot influence decisions of Council, including:

- developing or reviewing internal procedures and protocols
- the decision involves confidential or commercial information
- there is risk to public health and safety
- there are legal constraints
- an immediate resolution is required
- there is no scope for community input.

1.11 Reporting on engagement

The information we collect through community engagement activities helps us to make decisions. This information and the outcomes of engagement are reported and made publicly available.



Our Community Engagement Approach

1.12 Privacy in engagement

Participants' personal information will be managed in accordance with the [Government Information \(Public Access\) Act 2009](#) (GIPA Act), the [Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998](#) (PPIP Act) and the [Health Records and Information Privacy Act 2002](#) (HRIP Act). [Our Privacy Management Plan](#) details how personal information will be used, stored and accessed after it is collected by, or given to us.

Please note submissions and petitions are subject to the provisions of the [Government Information \(Public Access\) Act 2009](#) and may be made public. When a submission is released by law, we routinely withhold contact numbers, email addresses and signatures. Should an individual wish for all personal details or any information that may identify the individual to be withheld from the public, this must be advised in the submission.

Individuals must also advise the reasons behind their request to enable Council staff to process it, as the GIPA Act requires submissions to be publicly published unless there is a concern for one's welfare or safety. Petitions on the other hand are retained in Council's records management system and are tabled at a Council meeting where they can be inspected by anyone present at the meeting. Individuals not wanting to have their personal information shared should not sign any petitions.

1.13 Evaluating our engagement

We evaluate our engagement across the following areas so that we can adjust our engagement approach if required and improve future engagement.

Process

How well was the engagement designed and implemented?

Relevance

Was the engagement appropriate and did the community accept the engagement process?

Reach

Did we reach those affected and/or interested in the decision?

Outcomes

Did we achieve the objectives of the engagement process?



Our Community Engagement Approach

1.14 Roles and responsibilities

Council staff

All Council staff are responsible for identifying opportunities for community engagement in their area of work. It is their role to seek out the views of those stakeholders affected by or interested projects, and consider the information without bias as part of their decision making process. It is the role of the Council Officer to report back to participants how the information collected was used and the final outcome of the process. A toolkit is available to assist staff in designing an engagement process.

Contractors

To ensure a consistent approach consultants contracted to undertake an engagement process are required to do so in accordance with Council's Community Engagement Strategy. Contractor guidelines are available in Council's internal engagement toolkit.

Councillors

The role of each Councillor in implementing the Strategy is to represent the interests of ratepayers and residents, facilitate two-way communication between the community and Council and consider the results of community engagement processes in their decision making at Council meetings.

Community

The community is responsible for making themselves aware of community engagement opportunities, ensuring they consider the information provided, participate in activities, provide personal views, be respectful of other views and provide feedback to Council on the process.



Section 2: Action Plan

The Community Engagement Strategy is supported by actions that will be delivered over a four year period.

2.1 Objective 1: We are responsive to our community

What's important to community?

Council's response to community needs.

We will:

- Be clear about the engagement process.
- Be clear about the decision making process.
- Consider the differing views of our community in our decision making.
- Use the information collected during the engagement process in a meaningful way.
- Communicate to participants how their input was used to influence the outcomes.

Actions

- ✓ Make an engagement summary available for public engagement processes.
- ✓ Publicly report how community engagement has influenced decision making.
- ✓ Communicate the link between Council operations and the Community Strategic Plan.
- ✓ Evaluate community engagement activities and processes.

- ✓ Continue to undertake the customer satisfaction survey biennially.
- ✓ Review the implementation of the Action Plan items on an annual basis and report to ELT, Councillors and community.
- ✓ Report on the performance of community engagement activities in Council's Annual Report.



Action Plan

2.2 Objective 2: Our staff have the skills, capacity and confidence to engage effectively

What's important to community?

A more proactive approach to engagement.

We will:

- Engage in a way that is appropriate to the level of influence on the decision using methods that best suit our community.
- Treat all views, ideas and opinions with respect.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the engagement with a view of continuous learning and improvement.

Actions

- ✓ Provide information on our strategic objective to increase community engagement.
- ✓ Develop an engagement toolkit including guidelines, templates and checklists.
- ✓ Develop a dedicated section on the intranet with access to relevant information and tools/templates that guide community engagement practice.
- ✓ Include engagement in the corporate induction program.

- ✓ Implement a staff education program and targeted training.
- ✓ Identify and implement specialised skills development.
- ✓ Support and expand on the implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness training program* for staff that includes local culture, history and achievements, legislation and management.
- ✓ Actively participate in the Local Government Engagement Practitioners Network.
- ✓ Develop and implement a forum that enables

** Identified in Council's Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP)*

staff to collaborate and share learnings regarding engagement.

- ✓ Develop case studies of engagement processes.
- ✓ Nominate staff that have undertaken best practice community engagement for staff awards.
- ✓ Nominate best practice community engagement for industry awards, where appropriate.
- ✓ Review the Community Engagement Officer role within the organisation.



Action Plan

2.3 Objective 3: Our community has opportunities to contribute to Council's decision making process

What's important to community?

Community involvement in Council decision making.

We will:

- Maximise engagement opportunities when there is capacity for our community to influence a decision.
- Explain which decisions can and cannot be influenced by the community.
- Seek out and encourage participation from people who may be affected by or interested in a decision.
- Seek diversity of views.
- Identify and remove barriers to participation.

Actions

- ✓ Develop and implement a proactive engagement program that includes face to face options.
- ✓ Identify projects requiring engagement in the Operational Plan.

- ✓ Include community engagement in project design plans.
- ✓ Clearly state the engagement process, including timeframes.
- ✓ Implement an online engagement hub where all public engagement activities can be viewed.
- ✓ Investigate and expand digital engagement options, including an interactive map, to increase participation.
- ✓ Work with hard to reach communities to ensure engagement methods and practices support participation.
- ✓ Identify and address access barriers for people with disability when planning engagement.
- ✓ Develop a database of individuals and organisations that are interested in Council's engagement opportunities.
- ✓ Develop a Terms of Reference and Nomination Form template for project-based community working groups.
- ✓ Review Council's Community Participation Plan.



Action Plan

2.4 Objective 4: Our community has the necessary information to make an informed contribution

What's important to community?

A single point of access to engagement processes and information that enables understanding of the issues.

We will:

- Actively share information to enable informed participation.
- Communicate the information in a way that is accessible, easy to understand and uses plain language.

Actions

- ✓ Share information that is necessary to the decision making process.
- ✓ Provide information in a way that is easy to understand and uses plain language.
- ✓ Provide information visually, where appropriate.
- ✓ Consider accessibility when planning written communication and make it available in alternative formats when requested.
- ✓ Provide answers, where possible, to common questions relating to the topic.





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