



PRESERVING OUR HERITAGE

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Feedback to the Draft Community Engagement Strategy & Community Participation Plan

The Hunters Hill Trust is writing in response to Council's request for feedback on the above with comments as follows:

Overall Feedback

The wording of the Draft Community Engagement Strategy & Community Participation Plan is very detailed in documenting the processes, legislative framework, optimal outcomes and ways in which the community can have input. However, we note that many statements throughout the document do not reflect the reality of Council's past or current performance and engagement with residents.

The stated purpose of the Plan is to 'enhance the decision making powers of Council' but the community needs assurance that residents' views and strength of feeling will also be taken into account when final decisions are made.

If, as stated under 1.2 'Principles', Council follows the core values of the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), then point 02: '*Enable our community to influence decisions*' is very relevant.

This point is further enforced by the statement: '*Without following the IAP2 framework Council will not be in a position to support the community's sense of shared ownership and purpose.*'

Therefore the Trust would urge Council to include wording in the Draft Document that properly reflects these stated aims.

1. Introduction

"The Strategy does not replace the decision-making powers of elected Councillors or the General Manager, it does enhance the capacity of Council to make well-informed decisions that clearly demonstrate community buy-in and support"

The community has yet to see applied evidence of such intention reflected in Council's decision-making and outcomes. In fact the recent decision on the reclassification of C.A. Fairland Hall clearly demonstrates the complete opposite:

- The many submissions against the proposal were given cursory identical responses in spite of the Legislative Framework that: *“The EP&A Act also requires Council to publicise the reasons for decisions on key matters and show how they considered community views”*
- An independent Public Hearing and Report, provided no doubt at considerable cost to the ratepayers, gave options for the reclassification of the site which would satisfy all the objectives of Council and the community but these findings and solutions were completely disregarded.

1.1 Legislative Framework

“Community members are entitled to speak at Council Meetings to ensure their voices are heard”. After some instances of antagonism towards community members at Council meetings, the Trust considers that this statement needs the words added at the end of the sentence *“and respectfully listened to”*.

As an example of the lack of concern for the community, the Trust has over the last few years, requested that the audio volume of the microphones in the Chamber be increased, to allow people seated in the public gallery who have made the effort to attend meetings, the courtesy of clearly hearing what is being said by Councillors and Council staff. We are still waiting for this to happen.

1.2 Principles

- 0.1 *Enable our community to be involved in decision making*
- 0.2 *Enable our community to influence decisions*

These Principles must be implemented in practice. As an example, the recent approach to selling Lane Cove River foreshore at 16C Vernon Street serves to highlight a total disregard for community input. Errors in the report assessment regarding lack of access to this site, challenged by the local community, were not acknowledged. In addition costings for maintaining the site, if retained, were not made available to the public and no adequate explanation was given as to why a current survey of the land could not be provided.

2.1 Identification & Analysis

The use of any data must be fully referenced to be meaningful but there is no source reference for the demographic data as published and the category headings do not allow for comparison with census data which has different datasets. An example of the importance of this was the Montefiore Planning Proposal where outdated Census data from 2016 (even though Census 2021 was available) was used to make the argument for Planning Approval.

3.6 IAP2 International Association of Public Participation

The levels of participation under the above heading include the following:

- 03 *The community's concerns and feedback are reflected in decision-making*
- 05 *The community and stakeholders have final decision-making power*

As stated in the examples above, if these participation goals are to be achieved, a much higher level of willingness to listen to the community and transparency regarding the decisions made needs to be demonstrated by Council. Whilst this is a policy document and not meant to be specific to any single issue, it would help the community to understand if examples were given of the types of decisions that fit within each level of participation.

Draft Amendments to the Model Meeting Code

We would draw Council's attention to the Draft Amendments to the Model Meeting Code released by the Office of Local Government in an effort to restore public trust in local government.

We would suggest that wording to reflect the following key changes be incorporated into the Draft Community Engagement Strategy & Community Participation Plan to allow for more transparency:

- Prevent councils from holding private councillor briefing sessions
- Require information considered at closed meetings be made public as soon as it ceases to be confidential
- Give reasons when making planning decisions that depart from staff recommendations
- De-politicise the role of GM/CEO by removing requirement for them to prepare reports on councillors' notices of motion.

Conclusion:

While a level of engagement to meet minimum legislative requirements is mandated, the Trust would urge Council to do more than simple compliance. We would hope to see the comments above incorporated into this policy document and a future practice of engagement and response that goes beyond the legal minimum.

Our local community is entitled to greater transparency with regard to information, actions and projects being put forward by Council, and a clear rationale presented to them, as well as full exposure on why decisions are taken and the process applied by Council in reaching their conclusions.

We hope to see evidence of Council's intention that this document will become a meaningful policy statement actively implemented for the benefit of the residents. Only in this way can the community have confidence that this will not just be another policy document sitting on a shelf but will in fact signify a more harmonious and productive way forward.

Hunters Hill Trust
24 January 2025