

10.19.Pro-Active Community Education Quarterly Report

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ATTACHMENTS: Nil

PURPOSE:

Council, at its meeting of 23 May 2022, called for a report outlining how Council could better support community understanding of the planning process.

At the Council Meeting of 8 August 2022 a report was provided by the Manager of Development Services that highlighted the work undertaken by officers within CIS in community engagement with the planning process. This report gives an overview of the return to pre-COVID service levels with regards to community engagement and expanding on engagement through Council's existing Planning Advisor role.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Council at its meeting of 23 May 2022 recognised the significant and growing community concern about the sentiment of overdevelopment in the North Sydney Council local government area. Council further recognised that community members find it difficult to understand the New South Wales (NSW) planning system and their rights against often well-resourced property developers.

On 8 August 2022 the Manager of Development Services reported to Council in regard to the complexity of the planning process in NSW and how Council would address community engagement through the existing resource of the planning advisory service.

This report sets out existing community engagement processes undertaken by Council in planning, and the return of Council's Planning Advisory service to a pre-Covid service level, with a focus on community engagement.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

No additional financial implications are envisaged.

RECOMMENDATION:

1. THAT the report be received.

LINK TO COMMUNITY STRATEGIC PLAN

The relationship with the Community Strategic Plan is as follows:

5. Our Civic Leadership

5.1 Council leads the strategic direction of North Sydney

5.2 Council is well governed, and customer focused

5.3 Community is informed and Consulted

BACKGROUND

Council at its meeting of 23 May 2022 called for a report outlining how Council could better support community understanding of the planning process.

At Council's meeting on 8 August 2022 the Manager of Development Services reported on the current community engagement undertaken by CIS staff and set out some of the challenges presented by the NSW planning system and a return to a more proactive community engagement post COVID pandemic. Council resolved:

THAT there be a quarterly report to update Council on the progress of the return to proactive education of the community by current staff including specific tasks undertaken, with the first report presented to Council before the end of the current calendar year.

CONSULTATION REQUIREMENTS

Community engagement is not required

DETAIL

Changes in the Planning System and Council Processes

Over the past two years during the COVID pandemic there has been a reduction in the proactive engagement of the community by Council's Planning Advisory team. For example, the inability to hold face-to-face meetings, especially in larger forums, due to evolving lockdowns and social distancing requirements.

During this period there have also been significant changes in the NSW planning system, including short term changes to assist in management of development-related activity during COVID lockdown periods, the ongoing expansion of the exempt and complying development codes, and the introduction and mandated use of the NSW Planning Portal in late 2020.

These changes have required reallocation of planning and development advisor resources towards managing changing systems and assisting in the smooth transition to digital

planning. This has resulted in limited opportunity to engage in pro-active community education programs, and has required focus on responses to planning enquiries and Council's long established pre-lodgement planning advice programs.

Staffing changes – Public Projects and Infrastructure (Sydney Metro & Western Harbour Tunnel)

In response to major projects, Council's Executive Planning Advisor has taken on a secondment role within Transport for NSW as Public Projects and Infrastructure Manager. This role has historically been focused on engagement with North Sydney Precinct committees and management of Major Project lodgements.

The impact of this on the Planning Advisory team has led to a significant reduction in capacity to respond to planning education functions. This role was not able to be back-filled until March 2022. Whilst the new staff member has proven to be a valuable asset, there has been a training period which has impacted on the delivery of some planning advisory services.

Community Engagement and Education

Planning Advice Meetings recommencing

Pre-COVID, Council's Planning Advisory Service provided eight (8) half hour meetings per week, in person, for members of the public to discuss a wide range of planning-related matters, from how to lodge a development application, to discussion of development potential of their property, to what can be included in a submission on a DA (Development Application) that has been lodged to Council.

These meetings also included initial discussions with developers, and in these instances would feed into formal Pre-DA meetings. The informal meetings were free of charge and minutes were not provided, with the aim being to inform the public on how to engage with the planning system, as well as providing high level feedback on proposed developments. These meetings were suspended in April 2020 and are set to resume in November 2022, online and in-person.

Planning Enquiries (Written and Telephone)

The Planning Advisory team provides responses to approximately 2,100 planning enquiries per year, ranging in complexity from straightforward questions around planning controls to complicated matters such as the development of a site and technical questions which require interdepartmental correspondence.

Currently the Planning Advisory team may be contacted during business hours by telephone or through Council's online enquiry form. This enquiry form in its current state requires review for integration with Council's EDMS (ECM) to ensure ease of submission and so clarity of incoming queries can be improved. Council's planning advisory team are working with IT and DMS to improve this system and the roll-out of Council's new website. The total number of queries has increased significantly with the pausing of the in-person informal meetings.

Engagement with Community Groups

Precinct Committees and Public Forums

Pre Covid, Council's Planning staff have provided panel members and speakers to communicate planning process in NSW and in North Sydney in general terms and to discuss specific issues and applications, it is envisaged that this will recommence in 2023/24.

Council's Precinct Committees remain an effective means of communicating changes to interested residents and provides valuable insight and feedback to Council's planning programs. This system is used effectively by many Council Divisions to communicate not just development activity, but also strategic planning projects.

School groups

Council's Planning Advisory team has provided talks to local high school students to discuss planning in high school geography classes relating to the built environment and liveability, the role of planning, and the role that Council plays in this area. These talks have recommenced this year and will continue.

University and TAFE Groups

Pre Covid, Council's Planning Advisory team provided talks to university groups (UTS), providing a case study relating to the amount of development in North Sydney CBD and the tensions between the Sydney Metro, corporate and residential property owners from the perspective of local government. Similar talks have been given to the planning module of the NSW TAFE property valuation course. These opportunities are limited by the tertiary institutions' demand for engagement.

Liaising with other Divisions within Council

Council's Planning Advisory team provides planning advice to all teams within Council that may require the lodgement of development applications, the preparation of planning documents for review, or assisting in determining whether works may be exempt from requiring consent. The following teams and divisions are frequently assisted by the Planning Advisory team:

- Building & Compliance
- Open Space and Environmental Services Division
- Community Development
- Property Services

Beyond the remit of the Planning Advisory Service, the following departments of Council provide invaluable assistance and education to the community regarding matters directly:

North Sydney Council Heritage Centre

The North Sydney Heritage Centre provides a high level of education and resources to the public in the heritage of North Sydney, in both social/cultural heritage and the built environment.

Strategic Planning

Council's Strategic Planning team address community forums, groups and videos relating to policy development, exhibition, and planning proposals. The Strategic Planning team also provides advice on developer contribution fees.

Corporate Planning and Engagement

The Corporate Planning and Engagement team engages with Council's precinct committees, where planning and development are principal matters raised. Often Council's Planning Advisory team assists with clarification and explanations around planning matters.

Customer Service

Council's Customer Service team provides an initial point of contact in person and on the telephone to field enquiries, and often provides initial advice prior to an inquiry being forwarded to Council's Planning Advisory team.

Liaising with other Councils

The Planning Advisory team has also contacted Waverley Council to open a dialogue regarding the recently advertised Community Planning Advocate role. An understanding of the services provided by the officer at Waverley Council will assist our Development Advisors in best-practice engagement of the North Sydney community. This dialogue may also identify opportunities to improve the service level provided by the Development Advisory team. The Advisors are eagerly waiting a response.

Conclusion

In the latter part of the 2022 calendar year, Council's Planning Advisory team will continue to improve levels of community engagement, by returning to planning advice meetings and re-engaging with community groups to assist with their understanding of the planning process in NSW and in the North Sydney Local Government Area.