Hawkesbury City Council

2021-2025

COMMUNICATION
AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

hawkesbury.nsw.gov.au

Hawkesbury City Council acknowledges the Darug and Darkinjung people as the Traditional custodians of the Hawkesbury. We pay respect to all Elders, past, present and emerging, and acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first people of this Country.

INTRODUCTION

This is Hawkesbury City Council's first overarching Communication and Engagement Strategy, setting out the strategic direction for the organisation's communication effort over the next four years. It seeks to build on the work we have done to communicate and engage with our community in a complex and crowded environment, setting out the opportunities and challenges and how we aim to maintain and improve our performance.

Our aim is to deliver effective and efficient communication services that are highly valued and respected by our community.

We put the community at the centre of everything we do.

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS
RAISING OUR VOICE

Hawkesbury City Council plays a crucial role in shaping the future of our region. We provide over 50 services and facilities to more than 67,000 residents living in urban and rural communities spread across an area of 2,800 square kilometres, roughly the same size as the Sydney metropolitan area.

This large area, with its many towns and villages, makes communicating with our Hawkesbury community challenging.

When we are communicating with our community we are not dealing with one group of people, but rather a complex and diverse range of audiences who are often passionate about the place they have chosen to live in.

The community is at the heart of everything we do. Good communication and engagement will help us improve the delivery of our service, and inform, empower and connect our community. We know that communicating with our community needs to be at the core of what we do, and we want to do it better.

Recently we have had to deal with the challenges of the bushfires touching many in our community, followed closely by floods which impacted many of those same residents. COVID-19 restrictions have influenced the way we communicate and engage with not only these communities, but also the wider Hawkesbury.

Council is generally a trusted source of information. We are the level of government that is closest to our community and the information that we provide is usually detailed and relevant. There are opportunities for us to recognise and use this trust by working to build relationships with key community groups, community leaders, elders and businesses.

Our communication comes to our community in a complex, dynamic and crowded environment. Our challenge is to cut through that in a clear and simple way.

To do this we directly communicate with our community, we work with the media to help us deliver our messages.

We communicate with our community not just to inform them, but to engage and collaborate to build community capacity by increasing the community's knowledge on themes and issues affecting them each day.

We also want our community to know we take their feedback seriously. We are here to support them as we make decisions and put in place plans that impact on their future.

Open and effective communication with our community will deliver a range of benefits, including strong positive relationships, generating support and participation and raising awareness of our programs, activities and services. Good communication is the key to improving customer service and meeting the expectations of the community.

We are part of the community. Of our 300 employees, many live locally and are part of the Hawkesbury so we have a vested interest in the success and future of our region.

We also recognise that the way we engage with our community has changed over time and it will continue to evolve.

This Strategy identifies initiatives to support our commitment to communicating and engaging in a way that encourages open relationships and builds trust with our community.

This Strategy is supported by a clear action plan that sets out how we will implement the principles and opportunities outlined in this document.

BUILD
community trust

RECOGNISE
growing community
expectations

TRANSFORM
ourselves

A SUMMARY OF OUR
KEY INITIATIVES

As part of this Strategy, there are three key initiatives that we will focus on over the next four years.

1. Using communication to build trust and increase Council's standing in the community

1.1 Build our brand
1.2 Share our story, be our own newsroom
1.3 Engage our community

2. Connecting people with the information they need by building the capacity of our staff and Councillors to communicate, engage and champion Council business

2.1 Social media
2.2 Digital communication
2.3 Corporate communications
2.4 Emergency and crisis communication
2.5 Creating an army of ambassadors
2.6 Councillors

3. Celebrating and connecting local communities

3.1 Our towns and villages
3.2 Our visitors and new residents

DELIVERING ON OUR **VISION** , OUR **MISSION** AND OUR **VALUES**

The way local government does business is changing.

There are changes in the way we are funded, there is a shift in the relationship we have with the State Government and we are implementing new approaches to our service delivery – through forging new partnerships, community facilitation and enabling self service. Communication will have a significant role to play.

If we communicate our mission effectively we can build trust, change the way people think about the organisation, influence behaviours and bring about positive change.

This positive change will support our community's vision for the Hawkesbury, set out in the Hawkesbury Community Strategic Plan The Hawkesbury 2036...It's Our Future

> *We see the Hawkesbury as a vibrant and collaborative community living in harmony with our history and environment, whist valuing our diversity, striving for innovation, a strong economy and retaining our lifestyle and identity.*

To support our community in achieving this vision, we need to deliver on our mission to lead and work with our community to create a healthy and resilient future.

The communication activities of Council are also aligned with the values in the Hawkesbury Community Strategic Plan.

> *profesional-ethical-engaging-collaborative*

UNDERSTAND OUR
GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Council will set the agenda for Council our news by being the first to communicate the messages.

The Council will lead, not follow, in the delivery of our message.

Council also has a key role in sharing the messages of other organisations, particularly during times of crisis. Many lessons have been learnt from recent bushfires, floods and COVID-19 communication.

The principles we have developed to guide our communication in the future have resulted from lessons learned.

Our communication will be:

Accessible delivered in different ways to meet the needs of our community

Timely planned, proactive, responsive yet appropriately paced

Two way with opportunity for feedback and input

Proactive provided so the community doesn't need to seek it out

Integrated same message available across multiple channels so all community can access

Supportive of other organisations, particularly during crisis situations

Transparent open and honest decision making

Purposeful relevant to what our community members' need, topical and of interest

Diverse reflects the different wants and needs of our community

Local information tailored to people's local circumstances and needs

Clear concise and easy to understand

Whilst this Strategy is linked to our Hawkesbury Community Strategic Plan, it is also closely aligned with our Customer Service Charter, our Community Engagement Framework, our Events Strategy, our Crisis Communication Plan, our Media Policy, our Disability Inclusion Action Plan and meets the Web Content Accessibility (WCAG) 2.0 to make the content accessible to a wider range of people with disabilities. These documents set out our commitment, organisational standards and how we conduct business in these areas.

HOW DO WE
COMMUNICATE?

There are many ways to communicate with people and for them to communicate with Council each day, through a variety of channels. The most effective communication is timely and targeted, using the networks and outlets most relied upon in a community, rather than a general broadcast of information. All audiences have high expectations for rapid response and time critical information.

When we consider our communication and engagement, much of what we do is about:

- Communicating information to people
- Seeking information from people
- Involving people

The communication channels we rely on are varied:

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

- Build our brand
- Share our story, be our own newsroom
- Engage our community

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

- Intranet, emails, newsletters

TRADITIONAL MEDIA

- Publications, corporate communication
- Press releases, press interviews, radio
- Advertising

EVENTS

- Community, civic
- Sponsored
- Business

HOW WE
COMMUNICATE?

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Surveys, Your Hawkesbury Your Say engagement portal, workshops, town meetings, drop in sessions, information booths, interactive maps

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Council offices, libraries, the Visitor Information Centre, museum, gallery, face to face, meetings, telephone, on-hold messages

DIGITAL

Social media, website, SMS, digital advertising, video, email, rates notices, newsletters or newspapers

WHO ARE WE
COMMUNICATING WITH?

Our community is located over 2500 square kilometers and we are the largest council in the Sydney Metropolitan Area. We have people living in 65 towns and villages across the Hawkesbury. When we are communicating, we are mindful that is it not with one group of people, but a complex and diverse range of audiences.

Often, we share a common message amongst our community about the delivery of our Council services. At other times we are not trying to communicate with everyone. Specific Council issues, initiatives or programs often relate to only one segment of our community, so we need to be constantly thinking about who we need to reach with our activities.

As we plan our communication activities, we consider our audiences not in terms of our organisational boundaries, but in terms of the community they identify with and their area of interest. This helps us fine tune our activities and determines which tactics will work best in any given situation. In broad terms, our audiences fall into several categories.

OUR COMMUNITY

• **Residents**

Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander people, CALD communities who are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, older people, people who live in areas without access to communication technologies, homeless or in temporary accommodation, farmers, bushfire and flood affected communities, people with a learning difficulty, people who are hearing impaired or deaf, people who are visually impaired or blind.

• **Rate payers**
• **Businesses and business organisations**
• **Emergency services**
• **Visitors**
• **New residents**
• **Community, sporting and social groups**
• **Environmental groups**
• **Key service users**

COUNCIL

• **Councillors**
• **Committees**
• **Volunteers**
• **Employees**

OTHER KEY STAKEHOLDERS

• **Local members of parliament**
• **Government**
• **Agencies**
• **Media**
• **Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils**
• **City Deal Councils**

WHY COMMUNICATE WITH OUR COMMUNITY?

Effective communication helps build relationships with our community and informs them about the projects, activities and services relevant to their interests.

Communication can help promote understanding of what we do, why we do it and how we support the community we all live and work in. This will support the development of an understanding of our role in the community.

Good communication also increases engagement with the decision making process. The community can be involved and their feedback included in the planning and delivery.

Communicating openly and honestly helps to build trust in our community. For our community to trust we are a well-run and managed Council, it is imperative they understand how we make decisions, how we plan for the future and how we provide services to the community.

Communication can encourage pride in the community, help to recruit and maintain good staff and improve Council's reputation. Staff ambassadors and elected members can bring about positive change that will assist in delivering our organisational mission.

> **We want the community to understand we are so much more than 'roads, rates and rubbish'.**
> **We need to focus on:**
> **What is local government and what does it do for local people?**
> **Why does it matter to me and my family?**
> **How can it help me and my family?**

As communication develops and changes rapidly, Council needs to adapt to the different ways people consume information. That doesn't mean we have to abandon some of the things we already do, but it means we need to think about communication differently. Our communication needs to be confident, proactive and constantly reinforced. We need to engage in difficult communications when it is necessary and shout about our success whenever we can.

WHAT DO WE COMMUNICATE?

As we communicate about so many different things in so many ways, it's important for us to have consistent messages. That's why we've developed a strategic approach to sharing our messages.

Our corporate narrative or key messages support the Council's ambitions and objectives as set out in the Hawkesbury Community Strategic Plan. This is an audience-led approach to our communication, which aligns with the corporate themes that the community told us were important to them when we prepared the corporate plan. This ensures that we are:

- Building campaigns around audiences and what they told us they are interested in so that the information they receive is relevant
- Delivering communication activities with a common theme or objective, designed to influence the community's perceptions or effect behaviour change

As well as the objectives of the corporate plan, it is useful to have a simpler, overarching set of key messages. This helps tell a clearer story and form a narrative about Council's priorities.

The key messages are supported by statements which guide where Council focuses our messaging:

COUNCIL

- We provide consistent, transparent and inclusive leadership
- We are building financial sustainability for current and future generations

OUR HAWKESBURY

- The Hawkesbury is a vibrant and collaborate community
- We recognise our region is unique and precious
- We want to retain our lifestyle and our identity
- We are creating a connected and cohesive community
- We are creating social cohesion across community's and businesses

OUR ENVIRONMENT–SUSTAINABLE HAWKESBURY

- We are committed to recognising and improving our natural environment
- We are committed to living sustainably and reducing our ecological footprint
- We are committed to reducing waste and encouraging recycling

WHAT DO WE COMMUNICATE?

OUR INFRASTRUCTURE – BUILDING HAWKESBURY'S FUTURE

- We deliver infrastructure
- We provide and maintain open spaces and playgrounds

LIVEABLE PLACES AND SPACES – TOWN CENTRES, PARKS, PLAYGROUNDS, THE RIVER

- We provide the right places and spaces for our community, particularly in our town centres, parks and by the river

OUR HERITAGE – ABORIGINAL AND NON ABORIGINAL

- We want to preserve our history and celebrate our heritage
- We value and protect our Aboriginal people, their history and culture

OUR BUSINESS

- We strive to be innovative and support local industries and businesses
- We want a strong economy

HAWKESBURY EVENTS

- We deliver events for our community in our town centres and riverside locations
- We celebrate our rivers and town centres
- We support local events through our Events Sponsorship Program
- We encourage and support community involvement and participation

HAVE YOUR SAY

- We value feedback from our community and use this as a basis for all the decisions we make.

DISCOVER THE HAWKESBURY

- We want to grow visitors to the region
- What's On in the Hawkesbury?

Engaging with our community helps create a sense of ownership and belonging on major issues, activities and plans affecting the future of our community. Listening to diverse perspectives and potential solutions helps Council to make more informed decisions.
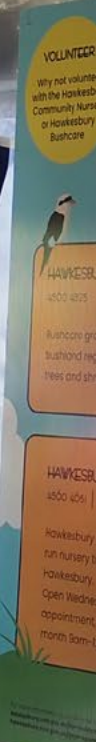
When engaging with the community, we are committed to:

- Providing accurate, accessible and timely information
- Sharing information that is relevant and easy to understand so the community can contribute in a meaningful way
- Encouraging participation from those who might be affected by or interested in the decision
- Considering the needs of people involved in the decision making process and ensuring the engagement methods are inclusive and accessible
- Using a range of mechanisms to consult broadly
- Evaluating the engagement process and outcomes
- Explaining decisions to the community and how their input was considered
- Linking engagement with existing events, groups and activities

The level of community involvement is underpinned by the best practice principles developed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2).

Many of the actions in this Strategy will assist Council in adhere to the IAP2 public participation spectrum.

Increasing level of community engagement

LEVELS OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION	EXAMPLES
INFORM To provide the community with the information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives and/or solutions; to keep the community informed of the issue and decision.	• Fact sheets • Newsletters • Website • Open houses
CONSULT To obtain input on issues, draft documents and/or decisions; to acknowledge and consider public concerns.	• Public comment • Focus group • Survey • Comment form
INVOLVE To work directly with the community to determine public concerns and opinions and ensure that these are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and the decisions made.	• Workshops • World cafe • Deliberate polling
COLLABORATE To work in partnership with the community on each aspect of the decision making process, including understanding of the issue, developing alternatives and identifying the solution.	• Community advisory group • Participatory decision making
EMPOWER To fuller delegate control of the decision making process to the community; Council participates in this process as one of the stakeholders and works with the community to implement the decision.	• Citizen juries • Ballots • Town representative groups • Residents panel • Deliberate democracy

OUR
KEY INITIATIVES

Our three Key Initiatives are underpinned by a series of commitments.

KEY INITIATIVE 1

1. Using communication to build trust and increase Council's standing in the community

1.1 Build our brand
1.2 Share our story, be our own newsroom
1.3 Engage our community

1.1 BUILD OUR BRAND

It is important that all publicity material adheres to the Style Guidelines. The Guide for printed and digital materials includes information on Council logos, fonts, colours, size, and explains why Council always needs to use consistent styles.

The branding applies to all digital and printed materials including advertising, emails, letters, websites, flyers, posters, certificates and videos.

Although Council is a diverse organisation delivering a huge range of services, its branding has created an identity that is consistent and professional. It allows Council's customers, residents, partner organisations and other stakeholders to know instantly that the information they are receiving has been produced by Hawkesbury City Council and that it is authentic and can be trusted.

Adopting the high standards set out in the branding guidelines will ensure that all printed and digital communications are produced to a consistent and professional standard.

1.2 SHARE OUR STORY, BE OUR OWN NEWSROOM

The media is one of Council's most important external stakeholder groups, however it is changing and evolving rapidly. The traditional model of the local newspaper is in a state of flux and is being overtaken by new media. People are now likely to get their news from social media, not from the local media.

Council is adapting to the realities of these changes and is working to tailor its media messages and the way it disseminates information. In order to keep pace, we are switching to a 'digital newsroom' approach. Instead of issuing a one-size fits all media release, the emphasis is on developing a more tailored content for a specific channel and audience, which is then distributed on Council's channels, for journalists, community groups and residents to pick up. There are now many more ways to communicate and places to share the message.

Council will, at all times, aim to set the agenda for news about the Hawkesbury. Council will shape the debate and influence where we can so that people know and understand our side of the story.

1.3 ENGAGE OUR COMMUNITY

Strengthen our partnerships and community involvement through a whole of Council approach to engagement.

Good communication is the key to improving our customer service and meeting the expectations of the community.

Keeping our residents informed about how to access services and encouraging their involvement will increase community ownership of our projects, policies and strategy decisions. This will result in, better outcomes and it will allow residents a voice about the issues that are important to their community.

While we have obligations to publish information, provide submission opportunities and place information on our website, we genuinely desire to engage with the community and we are exploring ways that we can do this more effectively.

KEY INITIATIVE 2

2. Connecting people with the information they need by building the capacity of our staff and Councillors to communicate, engage and champion Council business

2.1 Social media
2.2 Digital communication
2.3 Corporate communications
2.4 Emergency and crisis communication
2.5 Creating an army of ambassadors
2.6 Councillors

2.1 SOCIAL MEDIA – GROWING OUR AUDIENCE

The change in the way we consume information has been largely driven by the arrival of social media channels, which in turn have changed the way people interact with organisations like ours.

As a source of news and information, social media has now outgrown traditional forms of media like newspapers. It represents an unparalleled opportunity to disseminate Council's messages without interpretation or mediation.

Social media is now seen as creating an opportunity to connect directly with large numbers of people in a way that is convenient for them. People can question organisations like ours instantly. They can demand information at any time and there is now an expectation that there will be someone on the other side of the conversation to answer them.

Social media is a very cost-effective communication channel and it allows us to make immediate connections with people without reliance on third party interpretation of messages.

We can use it to be responsive so that it has immediate impact, to distribute messages and information and help steer people's views and answer questions.

Through social media, Council can influence behaviours – get people involved – get people to do or think differently and we can alter people's perceptions by demonstrating where and how we are making a difference and what the reality of a situation is, rather than what people imagine it to be.

Social media can reach large numbers of people. In 2021, Council has almost 11,000 followers and our messages can reach many thousands more.

Typically, through its social media accounts Council reaches about 50, 000 people each month.

This demonstrates the significant value of social media now and also the value of investing in developing and growing our audience. We do recognise that communication via social media is not the only way to communicate. While it is an important and versatile tool, many people do not access social media and it is not always the right option. It can be used on its own or to accompany work that uses other channels.

Social media can be used more effectively if it used strategically. We can encourage people to ask questions, make enquiries and contact the organisation, in the first instance through social media. Social media can be used to increase engagement and reach, deal with customer service inquiries or promote or services or all of above.

2.2 DIGITAL COMMUNICATION – NEW BETTER WAYS TO INTERACT WITH COUNCIL

More and more people are communicating digitally through websites and social media. Council's website is one of the main ways that people get in touch with us. As this form of communication is growing it is important that the site allows people to do what they want to do.

The website has recently been upgraded. It is an accessible site that is customer focused and will help to reduce more costly forms of contact (face to face, telephone). Continuing to develop new and easier ways for people to interact on line will drive savings and behaviour change towards customer self serving.

2.3 CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

Corporate communications involves a range of communications for the organisation whether it be marketing, branding, content and knowledge management, engagement, or customer service. We are all responsible for communication and it requires buy in from everyone to manage our reputation. Everything we do, say and deliver and the way we look impacts on the public perception of Council.

2.4 EMERGENCY AND CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

The Hawkesbury is a region which is impacted by bushfires, floods and extreme weather. Recently we have had to deal with the challenges of the bushfires touching many in our community, followed closely by floods which impacted many of those same residents. COVID-19 restrictions have impacted the way we communicate and engage with, not only these community's, but the wider Hawkesbury. Our emergency communications are focused on keeping our community safe during any crisis. In crisis situations, we act as a bridge between the emergency services and the public.

The responding emergency service is always the lead authority to ensure that the appropriate message is used to direct the community to use the right channel of the service to avoid conflicting and confusing messages.

We could also have to deal with a crisis situation which could be a threat to Council's business. This could be something that would be a threat to the health of our business.

A Business Continuity Plan has been developed to address these situations. A Communication Plan is an addendum to this Business Continuity Plan.

2.5 CREATING AN ARMY OF AMBASSADORS

Effective communication and engagement requires buy-in from all across the organisation, including all staff and Councillors.

Increasing staff and Councillor knowledge and understanding of our services, activities, projects, decision making and planning process will assist them to be advocates in the community, both in their professional and personal interactions. By building an army of ambassadors, we will build the capacity of staff and Councillors to communicate, engage and champion the business.

While overall responsibility for successful implementation must rest with every member of staff as they are all ambassadors, it must be recognised that some of our Council officers have public facing roles where they interact with the community – library, gallery and museum officers, customer service staff, visitor information centre staff, parking officers, compliance staff and planners.

Empowering these and all council staff with the right information about the organisation is key to enhancing its reputation and brand and reinforcing organisational development. Well-informed workforces are more likely to be positive about the organisations they represent.

If Council staff do not understand the organisation's values, no one else will. To be well informed corporate citizens, Council staff need timely and accurate information. This is crucial because the staff represent the organisation. They are out in the community meeting and talking to residents. When they are not at work, many of the staff are members of the local community, are speaking with friends and seeing information on social media.

Good communication is created by the leadership of an organisation being united in its belief and purpose – and being able to articulate its mission. Council will seek to strengthen the links between its staff and leadership, thereby creating a unified sense of purpose and direction.

We will develop new ways of embedding our values into internal messages.

Professional – Ethical – Engaging - Collaborative

2.6 COUNCILLORS

Councillors are the public face of Council and it is important that they are given the right communication advice and support to allow them to communicate effectively with residents, community and business groups and other stakeholders. They are considered a trusted source of information relevant to their region, and often they are advocates for getting things done and fast responses.
They are often on the front line and operate in a challenging environment where demand for Council services is increasing. It is important that they are given the right communication support and help to engage in the right conversations.

KEY INITIATIVE 3

3. Celebrating and connecting local communities

3.1 Our towns and villages
3.2 Our visitors and new residents

3.1 OUR TOWNS AND VILLAGES

Colo - St Albans - Upper Macdonald Valley – Bilpin – Glossodia - Pitt Town – Kurrajong - Wilberforce – Ebenezer – Colo Heights – Kurmond

One of the Hawkesbury's strengths is its sense of community identity across its towns and villages, particularly those outside the main centres. The distinct characteristics of each of the townships should be promoted and celebrated. Council wants to understand what makes these communities special, but we also need to work with them to understand their concerns.

Community leaders and local organisations from our towns and villages and organisations within these communities are often the most trusted source of information. Many are local store holders or business leaders or presidents of local organisations. These community champions are integral to getting the message to the communities.

3.2 OUR VISITORS AND NEW RESIDENTS

Across our communities we know what the Hawkesbury has to offer. We want to celebrate this not only with locals, but with new residents and visitors.

We have been working hard to improve the way we promote the Hawkesbury to visitors who come out to see and explore a destination that is only an hour from Sydney.

We know that our visitors are jumping online to do the research but then coming into the Visitor Information Centre for that great personal experience, to validate the online research, for local tips and up to date advice.

MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION PROCESS

A measurement and evaluation process will be established to deliver consistent measurement of communication activities and reporting on communications outputs and impacts. Regular analysis will be used to improve practices and constantly refine our approach, a dashboard of metrics will be established and targets set for regular reporting of communication activities.