



Wingecarribee Shire Council **Communications Strategy**

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This Communications Strategy has been written in conjunction with the Wingecarribee Shire Council Community Engagement Strategy 2014.

Both of these documents can be accessed on the Wingecarribee Shire Council website: www.wsc.nsw.gov.au

Requests for information or feedback can be provided to the Media and Communications team by emailing wscmail@wsc.nsw.gov.au or by writing to: Civic Centre, Elizabeth Street, Moss Vale NSW 2527.

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01/ INTRODUCTION

Like other local government authorities around Australia, Wingecarribee Shire Council faces the challenges of meeting the increasing expectations of its various audiences within a finite budget and amid a political environment where major local government reform is on the horizon.

At the same time, rapidly evolving technology has transformed the way councils communicate and engage with their communities. These changes bring both opportunities and risks as new and cost-effective tools allow instant and interactive communication involving levels deep within Council's structure.

Wingecarribee Shire is also firmly straddling the "digital divide", with a groundswell of the community embracing technology and more recently emerged forms of communication, and a large proportion of its audience wedded to traditional communication techniques.

This Communication Strategy, and the Community Engagement Strategy which is strongly aligned to it, shows how Council's many forms of communication link together to achieve specific objectives. It identifies actions to improve consistency and ensure Council is communicating and engaging on the issues of highest priority to the community, while catering for the Shire's diverse audience groups.

02/ STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

The overall aim of this Strategy is to manage the Wingecarribee Shire Council brand and ensure Council messages are communicated effectively, proactively and consistently. Consultation undertaken to develop this Strategy identified four communications objectives that will support our efforts towards achieving this aim.

These objectives are:

01. Ensure Council has proactive, deliberate and sustained communication with its audiences across diverse communication channels.
02. Clearly communicate what Council delivers, through consistent messages and an engaging visual presence.
03. Ensure Council staff have the tools they need to be reputation ambassadors.
04. Strengthen Council's partnership with the community through effective engagement.





03/ BACKGROUND

While Council is highly active in terms of communication and engagement, the most recent community survey identified that Council's reputation could be improved with an even stronger focus in this area.

The report on Council's 2012 survey, conducted by Micromex, noted that while 42% of residents rated Council's image within the community as 'good' to 'excellent', 28% gave it a rating of 'poor' or 'very poor'.

Council's overall community satisfaction rating was lower than the Micromex LGA Benchmark (3.2 v 3.6) (Community survey 2012). "The best rated NSW councils have the capacity to engage and respond to their communities in a competent fashion. To improve community satisfaction, Wingecarribee Shire Council needs to demonstrate that it can engage and respond to the community," the report said.

Communication and engagement are a significant focus and key plank of the Community Strategic Plan, Wingecarribee 2031+. The community has clear expectations that Council will act "in an inclusive manner with open information, communication, views

and participation" (Goal 1.4) and fosters "respect through continuing engagement and communication activities using a variety of modes and mediums" (1.1.2) including investing "in communication technology for direct interaction with the community" (1.4.2). Developing Communication and Engagement strategies are identified in the Plan as key measures in the area of Leadership.

Many councils focus much of their communication and engagement energies reacting to negative issues rather than instigating deliberate, strategic and sustained communication across diverse channels. They also tend to grapple with the balance between new and traditional media, and have considerable work to do when it comes to consistency of presentation.

In comparison, Wingecarribee Shire Council is already actively exploring new technology while maintaining its presence across traditional channels and has an extremely proactive approach to communication and engagement. It is in a position of strength when it comes to communication, however its challenges lie in harnessing its many activities into one consistent approach that reflects the priorities of the community.

3.1 WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION?

Effective communication and engagement requires buy-in from all stakeholders. All Council staff, Councillors, divisions and work teams are responsible for the organisation's reputation. Everything we do, say and deliver, and the way we look, impacts the public's perception of Council.

Council has a very active Communications team (although while they are co-located, they are not a "team" under the organisational structure), with a strong connection to the Customer Service area. This is critical in ensuring that what Council says about itself is consistent with the customer experience of Council.

While we are all responsible for communication, the Communications team will lead the implementation of the Communication Strategy. The team supports the rest of the organisation to increase awareness, confidence and satisfaction in services provided by Wingecarribee Shire Council.

3.2 OUR COMMUNITY

Wingecarribee Shire has a population approaching 45,000, with nearly one third aged 55 years and older. Fifteen per cent were born overseas (compared to 27% of the Australian population).

The LGA covers 2700 square kilometres and is known to visitors as the Southern Highlands.

Much of Wingecarribee Shire is located at or above 640 metres above sea level. The main towns are Bowral, Moss Vale and Mittagong. As well, there are smaller villages including Bundanoon, Hill Top, Yerrinbool, Colo Vale, Robertson, Berrima, New Berrima, Exeter, Burrawang, Penrose, Willow Vale, Alpine, Balaclava, Renwick, Wingello, Sutton Forest, Avoca, Fitzroy Falls and Balmoral Village.

3.3 OUR COUNCIL

Wingecarribee Shire Council consists of nine Councillors who are elected by the residents of the Shire every four years. Each September, Councillors elect a Mayor and Deputy Mayor for the ensuing 12 months.



04/ ORGANISATIONAL LINKS

The Communication Strategy closely aligns with Wingecarribee Shire Council's vision, values, principles and the Community Strategic Plan, Wingecarribee 2031+. It also has close links with a range of other organisational plans and strategies.

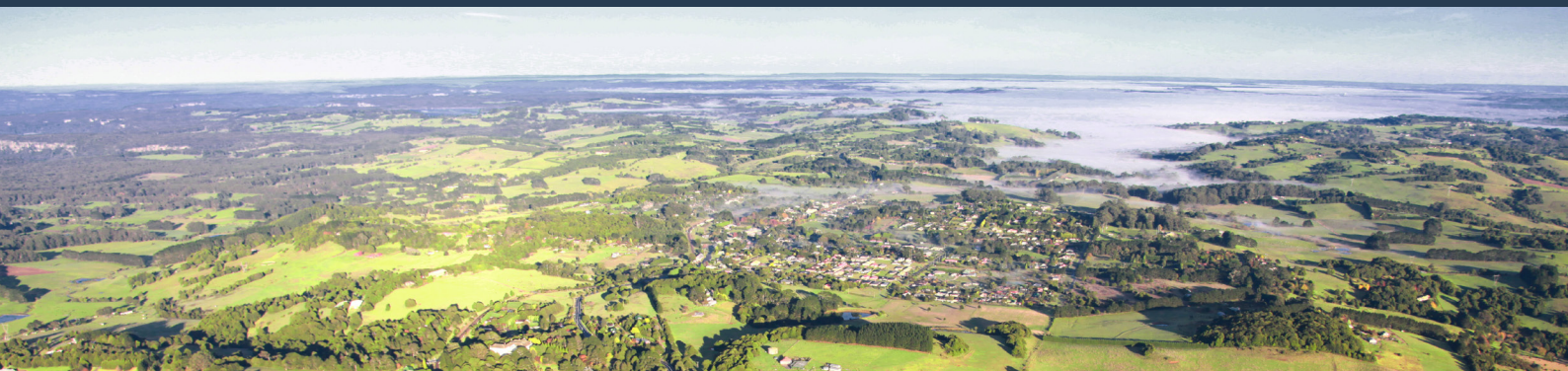
Council's Community Engagement Strategy is also strongly aligned with the Communication Strategy. Action plans for communication and community engagement set out more specific activities for achieving the Strategies' objectives.

4.1 OUR VISION

In conjunction with the community, Wingecarribee Shire Council has developed a vision for 2031 to be "A healthy and productive community, learning and living in harmony, proud of our heritage and nurturing our environment." The Communication Strategy has been developed with this vision at the forefront and seeks to reinforce it.



“Our Future, Our Choice”
- W2031+



05/ TARGET AUDIENCES

While “the community” is Council’s key audience group, it has many different dimensions and these must be taken into account when planning communication and engagement. There is no “one size fits all” approach.

The Shire’s growing popularity as a “tree change” location has created a mix of new residents, established residents, and those whose families have been in the Southern Highlands for generations. This in turn creates diversity in the community’s expectations of Council; long-established residents may feel strongly about retaining the character of the LGA in which they were raised, while relative newcomers may expect metropolitan-style services and facilities, while also wanting to preserve the lifestyle that attracted them to the Shire in the first place.

The rural character of the LGA, with agricultural lands separating its towns and villages, also creates distinct expectations based on locality. Through this strategy, Council must ensure that all geographical areas of the Shire are included in communications and engagement.

Wingecarribee Shire’s relatively high percentage of residents aged 55 and over also has implications for the channels Council uses for communication and engagement. While it should not be assumed that age is the determining factor in residents’ access and usage of online communication platforms, research shows that “people over the age of 65 years are much less likely to use the internet than younger people”. (Chesters, Ryan and Sinning, *Older Australians and the take-up of new technologies*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2013).

Other factors that segment the broader community into more defined audiences include general interests, socio-economic groups, cultural heritage, education, migrants or residents who don’t speak English as a first language, and many others.

Council also communicates and engages with many other key audiences, including:

- Non-residential ratepayers – may have an interest in decisions affecting the value of their property;

- Businesses – likely to be keenly interested in economic development, business growth opportunities;
- Visitors – strongly attracted to the many attributes of the Shire and iconic events such as Tulip Time;
- Staff – many of whom also live in the LGA;
- Future staff – opportunities to promote Council as an employer of choice, and the lifestyle attributes of the Shire;
- Government agencies/MPs – important stakeholders in Council decision-making and service provision;
- Suppliers – interested in any information that might impact their business with Council or offer new opportunities.

Council’s Community Strategic Planning process and its community surveys provide valuable insights into the issues and projects of most concern to the community.

Those of highest importance are:

- Creating “a healthy and productive community, living and learning in harmony, proud of our heritage and nurturing our environment” (W2031+ Vision)
- Addressing the five key themes of Leadership, People, Places, Environment and Economy
- Roads – maintaining the road network
- Development – controlling over-development
- Community services – providing facilities, value for money
- Availability of car parking in town and village centres
- Waste reduction
- Youth services
- Economic development
- Provision of information to residents
- Drainage

Council’s communication and engagement activities will be most effective if prioritised and targeted to reflect the community’s identified priorities. Even if some issues on the list above are not strictly Council’s responsibility (for example roads managed by the Roads and Maritime Services), Council still has an important role in keeping the community informed about high-priority issues, and engaging people in debate and decision-making.

06/ KEY MESSAGES

Because Council operates across such diverse service areas and communicates in so many different ways, it's vital that consistent messages are used regardless of the channel or the subject matter. Just as Council has developed a Style Guide for the way it is represented visually, its key messages provide a framework for the language used when conveying any Council information.

It's important to stress that not every message will be used in every form of communication, and messages won't necessarily be used verbatim. They will provide a guide for anyone communicating about Wingecarribee Shire Council or engaging with an audience. Whatever the channel – written, verbal, virtual – and audience, the communicator will be able to check their content against this list, and ensure that what they are seeking to convey aligns with the essence of one, some or all of these messages.

Another important point is that these are not intended as meaningless “motherhood” statements that do not reflect the reality of a given situation. Messages must always be authentic, appropriate

and relevant. In some cases, they might be used because Council is explaining why something hasn't happened, or why a particularly challenging decision has been made.

Working with you

The tagline “working with you” appears on all key corporate documents. This is Council's central key message and there are many opportunities to reinforce the sentiment behind it even when the written tagline does not appear. For example:

- Concluding a speech or presentation with words like, “and these are just some examples of the many ways that Wingecarribee Shire Council is working in partnership with our community...”
- Building it into a social media post, for example, “We're working with you to find the best name for our new community centre. Tell us your views!”
- Writing a paragraph in a letter to a community group with words like, “We'd like to work with you to develop the best possible result for this project.”



Key language from Wingecarribee2031+

The Community Strategic Plan also contains key messages that reflect the priorities of the community, and in adopting the Plan, Council has committed to working with the community to deliver its Vision.

All Council communications should reflect the language used in the Plan across its five key themes. While the list below is not exhaustive (refer to Page 9 of W2031+ for the full themes) it provides a reference point for the main messages that can be built into communications, depending on the subject and audience.

Leadership – trust, respect, responsibility, integrity, ethical governance, mutual benefit, visionary, creative, practical, participative, empowerment, inclusive, flexible, responsive.

For example: a quote in a media release that says, “this decision demonstrates that Council is responsive to feedback and will work with residents to come up with practical solutions...”



People – opportunities, lifestyle, inclusion, meeting needs, diversity, community spirit.

For example: promotion for an event, which includes a reference to Council promoting the community spirit of Wingecarribee Shire.



Places – advocating for transport services, unique character of Shire, diverse housing, significant heritage.

For example: a sentence in a report to a government agency that says, “Wingecarribee Shire Council is proud of its Shire’s history while embracing the opportunities and challenges of the future.”



Environment – protect and enhance, education, waste reduction, carbon neutral economy.

For example: a story on Council's website or in the newsletter focusing on waste reduction.



Economy – tourism, learning centre, agribusiness, green jobs, diverse opportunities, industry clusters.

For example: reinforcing in a media interview that Council is committed to the creation of green jobs in Wingecarribee Shire.





07/ OBJECTIVES

While Council clearly has a strong program of communication and engagement activities, there are opportunities to build on relationships with key audiences and improve the consistency of communication across the organisation. To do this, it is proposed that Council pursues four objectives and associated actions over the life of this strategy. Each action will require more specific tasks and a timeframe for achievement.

01. Ensure Council has proactive, deliberate and sustained communication with its audiences across diverse communication channels

- Implement a proactive and prioritised media strategy – focused on the areas of importance identified in the community survey and W2031+
- Ensure information on all key decisions, projects, events and issues is communicated through a mixture of online and traditional tools
- Continue to identify and explore emerging communications methods and channels in-line with changing technology and community needs.
- Establish a process for submitting information to the Communications team for dissemination through various channels
- Resource the Communications team to ensure the actions in this strategy can be delivered
- Provide assistance for elected members in managing their own communication and engagement activities

02. Clearly communicate what Council delivers, through consistent messages and an engaging visual presence

- Enforce the principles of the Style Guide and use of key messages in all communication
- Implement plain language communication across the organisation
- Ensure risk/crisis communication plans are in place to respond appropriately to a range of scenarios

03. Ensure Council staff have the tools they need for effective communication

- Maintain a proactive program of internal communication
- Strengthen internal communications process, with an emphasis on improving links between Customer Services, Communications and Community Engagement staff
- Develop and implement policies for media, social media and community engagement
- Ensure key staff are trained in delivering effective media interviews
- Review the structure of the Communications team to ensure it is best placed to deliver the Communication Strategy and meet organisational needs
- Create awareness of what the Communications team does and the many channels available to staff
- Ensure key elements of communication and engagement, including the Style Guide and this strategy, form part of new staff inductions
- Include communication competency as a key performance indicator for all key staff

04. Strengthen Council's partnership with the community through effective engagement

- Develop and deliver a Community Engagement Strategy
- Ensure key staff are trained in community engagement
- Implement processes for engagement to be built into all key projects
- Celebrate community engagement successes

08/ EVALUATION

It is proposed that this Strategy is reviewed annually and formally assessed three years after its adoption.

It is also recommended that outcomes linked to the Strategy are built into the performance reviews of the Communications team and other staff as appropriate, as well as future iterations of the Delivery Plan.

09/ REFERENCES

- Community Strategic Plan, Wingecarribee 2031+
- Wingecarribee Shire Council Style Guide
- 2012 Community Survey





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