

Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure



Councillor handbook

Office of Local Government

September 2024

olg.nsw.gov.au





Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure acknowledges that it stands on Aboriginal land. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land, and we show our respect for Elders past and present through thoughtful and collaborative approaches to our work, seeking to demonstrate our ongoing commitment to providing places in which Aboriginal people are included socially, culturally and economically.

Published by NSW Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure

olg.nsw.gov.au

Councillor handbook

First published: September 2024

Office of Local Government, Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure

5 O'Keeffe Avenue
Locked Bag 3015
NOWRA NSW 2541
Phone 02 4428 4100
olg@olg.nsw.gov.au

Special arrangements can be made for our publications to be provided in large print or an alternative media format. If you need this service, please contact Client Services on 02 4428 4100.

Copyright and disclaimer

© State of New South Wales through the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure 2024. Information in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of writing, September 2024, and is subject to change. For more information, please visit nsw.gov.au/copyright

Contents

Acknowledgement of Country	2	5	Sound planning and reporting	43	
Minister's foreword	4				
Introduction	5				
5 key things every councillor needs to know	6				
1	An overview of local government in NSW	7			
1.1	Local government	8	5.1	Community strategic planning 44	
1.2	The principles for local government	9	5.2	Land use planning 49	
1.3	A council's structure	10	5.3	Natural Resource Management (NRM) 52	
1.4	Services and functions that councils provide	11			
1.5	How are councils funded?	12	6	Financial management	53
1.6	Legal framework	13	6.1	Principles of sound financial management	54
2	Roles, responsibilities and relationships	14	6.2	Sources of revenue	55
2.1	Roles and responsibilities	15	6.3	Financial planning	57
2.2	Managing internal council relationships	22	6.4	Allocation of revenue	58
2.3	Managing external relationships	25	6.5	Asset management	58
2.4	Effective decision-making	27	6.6	Capital expenditure	60
2.5	Risk and internal audit	28	6.7	Financial reporting	60
3	Code of conduct and acting ethically	30	6.8	Other financial management issues	61
3.1	The Code of Conduct	31	7	Support for councillors	63
3.2	Councillors and public comment	36	7.1	Annual fees paid to councillors	64
3.3	Where to find more information?	36	7.2	Expenses and facilities	64
4	Making the most of meetings	37	7.3	Training and professional development	65
4.1	How councils debate and make decisions	38	7.4	Other information and resources	66
4.2	How often council meetings are held and how they are conducted	38	8	Appendices	67
4.3	Different types of council meetings	41	Appendix 1	Skills and knowledge checklist	68
4.4	Other resources	42	Appendix 2	Key organisations	70
			Appendix 3	Key legislation	74
			Appendix 4	Dealing with the media	80
			Appendix 5	Tips for effective community engagement	82
			Appendix 6	Standards of conduct for councillors	84

Minister's foreword



Congratulations on being elected to serve your community in local government. Representing the hopes, dreams and aspirations of your community by being a councillor is an honour that carries significant responsibility.

Having been a Mayor for over 30 years before entering Parliament, I can assure you the role is challenging but incredibly rewarding.

There are 128 councils in NSW and the work they do goes well beyond roads, rates and rubbish. They bring quality of life, build community ties, celebrate diversity, create economic opportunities and represent community views to other tiers of government. That is why I have always believed local government is the most important tier of government.

Councils are driven by the aspirations of their communities and the decisions made by councillors directly affect people's everyday lives. Residents and ratepayers turn to their councils if they have a problem that needs solving or an idea to improve their community.

Your community have put their faith in you to show leadership and to always act in their best interests. This is an important responsibility that must not be taken lightly.

NSW needs councillors who are hardworking, passionate and community-minded, who will work together to achieve great outcomes for their local areas.

This handbook gives new and returning councillors a comprehensive overview of the role and responsibilities of being an elected representative. It will assist councillors to fulfil their statutory obligations, with information they need to effectively debate matters at council meetings and perform their civic duties while upholding the high standards of conduct expected by the people who elected them.

The handbook will be complemented by 'Hit the Ground Running' webinars to be hosted by the Office of Local Government, and mandatory induction and professional development training provided by your council.

As you look to the four years ahead of you during this term of council, I hope you will not only enjoy being a councillor but will also embrace the opportunity to be a leader and make a difference to your community.

It's a true privilege to represent your community as a councillor and I wish you every success.

The Hon. Ron Hoenig MP
Minister for Local Government



Introduction

Being a councillor is a significant privilege and challenge. New councillors will have a lot to learn as quickly as possible. Returning councillors need to be up to date with changes that impact the sector and to continue to develop their knowledge. This handbook will help new and returning councillors to be effective in the role.

To help you hit the ground running, the following page contains a summary of the five things every councillor needs to know to achieve better outcomes for their community.

Purpose of this handbook and how to use it

While the '5 key things every councillor needs to know' summary is a helpful start, it's important that you have a comprehensive understanding of your role and responsibilities to be an effective councillor.

This handbook is the go-to resource for all councillors during their electoral term and includes links to other useful resources when more information is needed in relation to a particular issue.

It provides more detail on the issues covered in a series of webinars that will be held for new and returning councillors following the local government elections in September 2024.

This handbook is also available on the Office of Local Government's website electronically for ease of access.

If you still have queries after reading this handbook, there are a number of key organisations that may be able to assist.

We have provided a list of these organisations and their contact information in [Appendix 2 - Key organisations](#).

5 key things every councillor needs to know



Leadership

Be an effective leader of your local community by:

- setting the vision and direction for your community without getting involved in the day-to-day operations of your council
- balancing your advocacy role with the need to work as a team with other councillors to make decisions that benefit the whole community
- balancing short and long term community needs and interests
- fostering and maintaining positive internal and external relationships.



Open decision-making

Ensure effective participation in council business by:

- making informed decisions through good preparation and involvement
- following your council's Code of Meeting Practice and legislation on meetings
- drawing on the information and assistance that the general manager can provide to councillors in making their decisions.



Conduct

Conduct yourself in a way that enhances and maintains the credibility of your council and local government as a whole by:

- acting lawfully, honestly, transparently and respectfully in line with your council's code of conduct
- exercising care and diligence in carrying out your functions
- ensuring your relationships with other councillors, the general manager and staff are based on trust and mutual respect, following any clear and agreed protocols.



Accountability

Be accountable for understanding and meeting your community's needs by:

- engaging and consulting with your community
- responsibly managing your council's money and assets to meet current and future needs
- considering the long term consequences of your decisions
- ensuring the requirements of the integrated planning and reporting framework are met.



Learning

Take responsibility for your ongoing learning and professional development by:

- making all reasonable efforts to acquire and maintain the skills necessary to perform your role as a councillor
- developing and participating in an ongoing professional development program in conjunction with your council
- regularly assessing your learning needs
- actively seeking opportunities to acquire further knowledge and skills
- contributing your knowledge and skills to the development of local government as a whole.

1 An overview of local government in NSW



Sydney Town Hall

1.1 Local government

Local government in NSW employs over 55,000 people, spends more than \$15 billion annually delivering local services and manages \$151 billion in infrastructure like pools, libraries and roads. The services it provides range from traditional town planning and waste management to community development, environmental protection, economic development and much more.

Councils can order people to do certain things, such as demolish a building or restrain a dog. They can also issue orders to ensure that public amenity is not compromised; for example, to prevent a noise nuisance, or the operation of an inappropriate business in a residential area.

Increasingly, councils are playing a role in not just delivering services to their community but also shaping the future of the community by working with local people to develop and deliver a vision for each place.

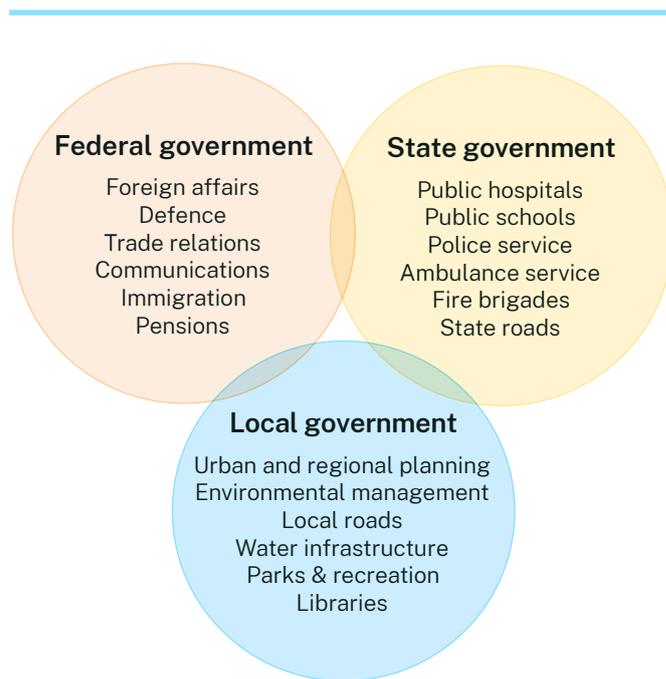
Councillors play a vital role in meeting the needs of local communities. They serve their communities by listening to people in the local area and then representing those views on council. They make decisions that can change local communities and environments.

The communities that councillors represent are made up of a mix of people with different needs and interests from a diverse range of backgrounds. Effective councils are made up of councillors that reflect this mix.

Local government is often called ‘the third sphere’ of government in Australia. It is an elected system of government directly accountable to the local community.

Each council is an independent, statutory body responsible for administering its local government area.

‘The council’ comprises all the elected representatives, or councillors, who work together to govern their local community. The council provides leadership to its local community.



The three spheres of government and examples of their responsibilities

For further information about the specific services provided by councils, see [1.4 Services and functions that councils provide](#).

1.2 The principles for local government

All councillors should read and be familiar with the principles prescribed under the *Local Government Act 1993* to guide the exercise by councils of their functions, decision making, community participation, sound financial management and integrated planning and reporting.

The *Local Government Act 1993* prescribes principles for local government. The object of the principles is to guide councils to carry out their functions in a way that facilitates strong, healthy and prosperous local communities.

Under these principles, in exercising their functions, councils should:

- provide strong and effective representation, leadership, planning and decision-making
- carry out their functions in a way that provides the best possible value for residents and ratepayers
- plan strategically, using the integrated planning and reporting framework, for the provision of effective and efficient services and regulation to meet the diverse needs of the local community
- apply the integrated planning and reporting framework in carrying out their functions so as to achieve desired outcomes and continuous improvements
- work co-operatively with other councils and the State Government to achieve desired outcomes for the local community
- manage lands and other assets so that current and future local community needs can be met in an affordable way

- work with others to secure appropriate services for local community needs
- act fairly, ethically and without bias in the interests of the local community
- be responsible employers and provide a consultative and supportive working environment for staff.

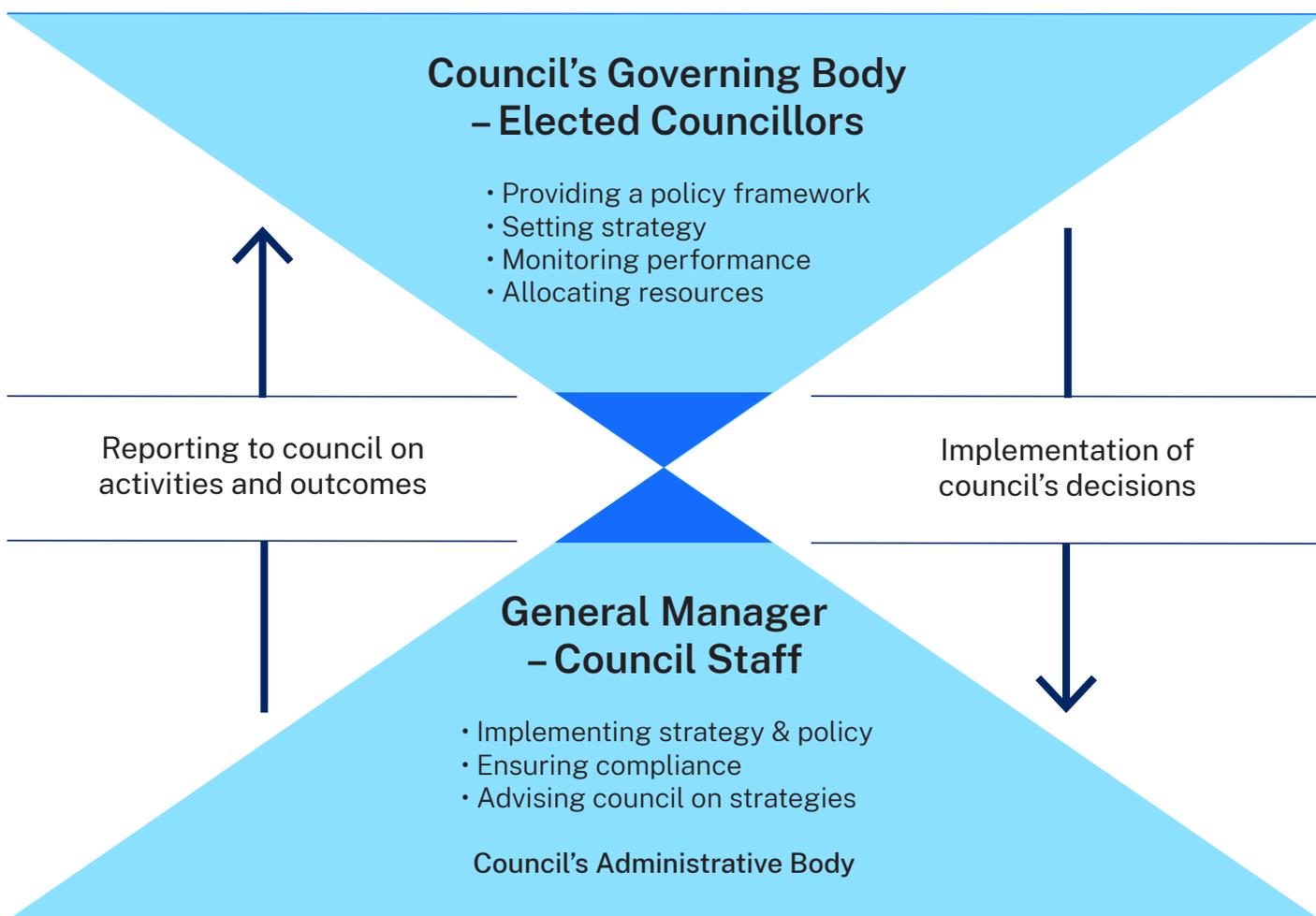
When making decisions, councils should:

- recognise diverse local community needs and interests
- consider social justice principles
- consider the long term and cumulative effects of actions on future generations
- consider the principles of ecologically sustainable development
- ensure their decisions are transparent and that decision-makers are accountable for decisions and omissions.

Councils should also actively engage with their local communities through the use of the integrated planning and reporting framework and other measures.

The Act also prescribes principles of sound financial management and integrated planning and reporting, which are discussed in more detail below.

1.3 A council's structure



Key Relationships

Between 5 and 15 elected councillors hold office as 'the council' for four years.

The elected council oversees the activities of the council but is not involved in the day-to-day running of the council.

It is the role of elected councillors to represent community views when making decisions on services, infrastructure, planning and regulatory matters. It is the job of council staff to advise councillors and implement their resolutions.

Many councils delegate functions to specialist committees that include councillors, council staff and members of the public. These committees provide councillors with the opportunity to participate in council decision-making at a more detailed level.

Councils employ staff to administer the council. The general manager is the most senior member of staff and is responsible to the council for carrying out council decisions and policy and overseeing the day-to-day operation of the council.

The general manager provides the link between the elected council and its employees. While all council staff have a duty to carry out council decisions, they are responsible to the general manager, not the councillors. Individual councillors cannot direct staff in their day-to-day activities. However, this is counterbalanced by the responsibility of general managers to provide information, guidance and support to councillors to make good decisions.

1.4 Services and functions that councils provide

Councils provide a wide range of services and functions. Broadly, these may be grouped into 6 categories, as shown below.



Services and functions that councils provide

Examples of services that fall into each of these categories are given below. These represent a sample only.

Providing and maintaining infrastructure

Providing an appropriate and affordable level of infrastructure is one important contribution a council makes to its community. For example, councils provide and maintain local roads, bridges, public car parks, footpaths, sporting fields, parks and art galleries.

Outside of metropolitan areas, councils are also responsible for the provision of water supply and sewerage services and associated infrastructure. Councils must consult with their local community about providing and maintaining these public assets.

Planning for sustainable development

Councils have a major role in providing long term strategic planning for a local government area as well as town planning, zoning and sub-divisions. They engage communities in key planning decisions that will affect the growth of their communities. They seek to integrate planning for infrastructure with the strategic planning of land use so that infrastructure that supports growth is funded and delivered.

In addition, councils are responsible for processing development applications, for building site and compliance inspections, and for ensuring compliance with building regulations.



Protecting the environment

Councils also have a major role in helping to protect the environment. They have responsibilities under the *Protection of the Environment Operations Act 1997* and can issue various protection of the environment notices including clean up, prevention, compliance cost, provision of records and information and noise control notices.

Councils regularly assess the state of their local environment, provide environmental programs and use their regulatory powers to prevent pollution or restore degraded environments. Councils also have environmental protection responsibilities under other legislation. For example, councils are responsible for noxious weed control under the *Biosecurity Act 2015*.

They also carry out activities to preserve access and amenity to the environment, such as recycling, street cleaning, regulating parking and management of vegetation including bush land reserves.



Supporting the community

Councils regularly consult with and assess the needs of their community with a view to supporting the community and its development. They provide a range of services, including some aimed at groups in the community with special needs.

Community services include libraries, sport and recreation facilities, home care services such as 'meals on wheels', swimming pools, playground facilities and child care centres.



Supporting economic development

Many councils contribute to economic development by working with local businesses, coordinating economic development groups, activities, events and providing tourism services and facilities.



Safeguarding public health

Councils help maintain high standards of public health and reduce the risk of exposure to a wide range of diseases through activities such as water supply and sewerage services, food shop inspections, waste disposal, pest and vermin control and hazardous material containment. They also ensure public safety through controlling dogs and cats (or companion animals).

Why does local service provision vary between councils?

Councils can choose the range and quality of services they provide, based on discussions with their community about their needs and what they want to pay for. This is done through the integrated planning and reporting framework process, which is explained in more detail later.

1.5 How are councils funded?

On average, councils receive 34 per cent of their income from ordinary rates, which is paid by landowners. Councils can also levy annual charges for services such as waste management, and water supply and sewerage (outside metropolitan areas). These charges must be used specifically for the purposes for which they are collected.

Councils can raise additional income from fees for things like parking and the use of publicly owned facilities like swimming pools, halls and other user-pays services. Fees can also be charged for giving information, supplying products or processing applications.

All councils receive a Financial Assistance Grant every year, which is paid by the Australian Government through the State Government.

The amount of the grant varies from council to council. Councils receive grants from other sources from time to time. For example, Transport for NSW may make a grant for work on a particular road.

Councils may borrow funds for any purpose. Councils may also invest funds and receive income from the interest. Ministerial Investment and Borrowing Orders and associated guidelines provide the framework in which councils may invest and borrow.

Council revenue is discussed in further detail in [Section 6 – Financial Management](#).

1.6 Legal framework

Councils work within the laws established by the NSW Parliament. The *Local Government Act 1993* provides a legislative framework reflecting modern community expectations, and gives councils broad powers to plan for and provide local community services and facilities. The Act is administered by the Minister for Local Government through the Office of Local Government.

Councillors have a wide range of legislative responsibilities with which they need to acquaint themselves.

As well as the *Local Government Act 1993*, there are a number of other laws which councils are responsible for implementing.

For example, councils have responsibilities for animal control under both the *Companion Animals Act 1998* and the *Public Spaces (Unattended Property) Act 2021*; for building and development controls under the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*; for environmental protection under the *Protection of the Environment Operations Act 1997*; for the control of noxious weeds under the *Biosecurity Act 2015*, and for the provision, maintenance and management of roads under the *Roads Act 1993*.

The *Local Government Act 1993* provides councils with broad service powers. At the same time, if a council takes action or makes a decision without the necessary legislative authority, it may be held by a court of law to be acting beyond its power. If a council's power is not exercised in the manner prescribed by Parliament, it may be deemed not to have been exercised at all.

Councils must take care to exercise their powers properly. Otherwise their decisions, and any resultant actions, may be declared void by a court, often with consequent financial loss.

When a council has to make a decision involving a value judgement, it must do so with fairness and justice. Natural justice requires that the decision be unbiased and that everyone whose rights and interests are affected is given an opportunity to express their views before the decision is made. Adequate notice of the decision should also be given so that any right to be heard can be exercised.

A council may be liable for actions carried out negligently that result in damage or injury to persons or property. This liability extends to the actions of employees or other people to whom the council's functions have been delegated.

However, councillors and employees will not incur personal liability where the matter complained of was done in 'good faith' for the purpose of executing any Act. 'Good faith' can be broadly defined in this context as something done honestly.

1.6.1 Limited legal protection

The *Local Government Act 1993* provides councillors with a level of protection from civil liability action for undertaking council-related and council-endorsed activities as a councillor.

Protection from civil liability is only provided where a councillor's actions are undertaken in the manner referred to in the relevant sections of the *Local Government Act 1993*, including in good faith and for purposes related to council activities.

Councillors must read and understand sections 731, 732 and 733 of the *Local Government Act 1993*, which provides protection. In the event that a councillor does not understand an issue, it is the obligation of that councillor to seek and be guided by their own legal advice. Councils are required to have an adopted 'Payment of Expenses and Facilities for Mayors and Councillors' policy which may outline the circumstances where the council will reimburse an elected representative's legal expenses.

In relation to defamation action, a council may be sued for defamation, although it cannot itself sue for defamation. Individual councillors and council employees may also be sued for defamation, whether in their private or public capacities.

Generally speaking, councillors at meetings of council (or council committees) are protected from defamation by the defence of 'qualified privilege', but only to enable them to speak freely and publicly in undertaking their duties in council meetings.

Any comment or statement a councillor makes at a council meeting must be relevant to the council business, made in good faith and without malice.

2 Roles, responsibilities and relationships



The importance of trust and mutual respect within the council team and between council and senior management cannot be underestimated.

Councillors can have a major and positive impact on the health and well-being of the whole community.

A good working relationship between councillors, the mayor, the general manager and other council staff is fundamental to an effective council.

Councillors must also have an understanding of how to manage external relationships, with the community, the media and other organisations including State agencies.

The roles of key people in councils, including councillors and the general manager, are defined in the v and are discussed in detail below.

2.1 Roles and responsibilities

2.1.1 Role of a councillor

The role of the governing body of a council

Councillors comprise the governing body of a council. *The Local Government Act 1993* prescribes the collective role of a council's governing body as follows:

- to direct and control the affairs of the council in accordance with the Act
- to provide effective civic leadership to the local community
- to ensure as far as possible the financial sustainability of the council
- to ensure as far as possible that the council acts in accordance with the principles for local government (as described above) and the plans, programs, strategies and policies of the council
- to develop and endorse the community strategic plan, delivery program and other strategic plans, programs, strategies and policies of the council
- to determine and adopt a rating and revenue policy and operational plans that support the optimal allocation of the council's resources to implement the strategic plans (including the community strategic plan) of the council and for the benefit of the local area

- to keep under review the performance of the council, including service delivery
- to make decisions necessary for the proper exercise of the council's regulatory functions
- to determine the process for appointment of the general manager by the council and to monitor the general manager's performance
- to consult regularly with community organisations and other key stakeholders and keep them informed of the council's decisions and activities
- to be responsible for ensuring that the council acts honestly, efficiently and appropriately.

As members of the governing body, and in the interests of ensuring the organisation operates effectively to achieve the best outcomes for the community, councillors should endeavour to work constructively with council staff that are responsible for implementing council decisions.

This need is reflected in the Act which requires the governing bodies of councils to consult with the general manager in directing and controlling the affairs of the council.

The role of individual councillors

The Act prescribes the role of individual councillors as follows:

- to be an active and contributing member of the governing body
- to make considered and well-informed decisions as a member of the governing body
- to participate in the development of the integrated planning and reporting framework
- to represent the collective interests of residents, ratepayers and the local community
- to facilitate communication between the local community and the governing body
- to uphold and represent accurately the policies and decisions of the governing body
- to make all reasonable efforts to acquire and maintain the skills necessary to perform the role of a councillor.

The Act makes it clear that councillors are individually accountable to the local community for the performance of the council.

In the case of councils divided by wards, councillors have an obligation to make decisions that are in the best interests of the community as a whole, not just the ward that elected them.

While councillors are free, subject to their obligations under the council's code of conduct, to advocate a position on matters that are before the council for a decision, once a decision has been made they are required to 'uphold' the policies and decisions of the council.

The requirement to uphold the policies and decisions of the council should be read in the context of the implied freedom of political communication under the Australian Constitution. In practical terms, councillors remain free to speak about the policies and decisions of the council but they must accept and abide by them and must not misrepresent them.

Councillors' oath of office

Under the *Local Government Act 1993*, councillors are obliged to take an oath or affirmation of office at or before the first meeting of the council after they are elected. In doing so, councillors are required to swear or affirm that they will undertake the duties of the office of councillor in the best interests of the local community and the council and that they will faithfully and impartially carry out the functions to the best of their abilities.

The oath or affirmation of office operates as a mechanism for inducting councillors into their role and reinforcing for them the seriousness of the responsibilities and duties that role entails.

A councillor who fails, without a reasonable excuse, to take the oath or affirmation of office, will not be entitled to attend council meetings until they do so and will be taken to be absent without leave.

If a councillor is absent without leave for three consecutive ordinary council meetings their office is automatically declared vacant and depending on the council a by-election must be held or the vacancy will be filled by countback.

What does a councillor do as a 'member of the governing body'?

One of the most important roles of a councillor is to participate in policy decision-making on behalf of the community.

Councillors must work as a team to make decisions and policies within a defined meeting structure that guide the activities of the council. Policies can be defined as the principles and intent behind the programs that a council implements.

This includes setting the broad, strategic direction for the local community. To do this, councillors have to understand their community's characteristics and needs, and the types of services required to meet these needs.

The key responsibilities of the council's governing body in working with and through the general manager are to:

- prepare and adopt the community strategic plan, delivery program and operational plan
- develop the policy framework for their council in relation to the council's regulatory functions
- develop and oversee the delivery of the council's strategic plans that shape the future direction for the local area
- make sure that ratepayers' money is spent in the best interest of the community
- make sure that the council is fulfilling its regulatory functions appropriately by developing policies
- make sure that the general manager, through performance measurement in their employment contract, carries out all of council's policies, plans and strategies appropriately
- provide accountability to the community by reporting on the outcomes of council's activities
- monitor and review the performance of the council.

In doing all of these things councillors must consider the principles for local government as outlined in Section 1 of this publication.

A council will benefit by analysing its activities from time to time, including asking how it is spending its time, where its priorities should be and whether it has the balance of its priorities right.

What does a councillor do as 'an elected representative'?

A councillor's role as an elected representative is to provide an essential link between the community and council.

Councillors are expected to represent the interests of the community, provide leadership, and communicate and promote the interests of the council to other levels of government and relevant bodies.

Councillors have a responsibility to make decisions in the best interest of the whole community when deciding on the provision of services and the allocation of resources.

Councillors also need to provide leadership and guidance to the community. This is especially important when communities face challenges, such as climate change, drought, bushfires or floods, high unemployment or skill shortages.

How do councillors balance their roles?

Councillors must attempt to find a balance between the obligation to represent the interests of individual constituents and the need to make decisions on behalf of the whole community. This dilemma can cause some interesting debates in council.

Councillors need to display leadership and integrity to help ensure that the decisions they make as a member of the governing body are in the best interest of all the community.

Councillors can best help individual members of the community by satisfying themselves that their council's policies are being carried out correctly. If a councillor thinks that a policy needs changing, they need to debate this in a full meeting of council. It is inappropriate for a councillor to attempt to ignore or alter a policy outside the formal meeting structure.

The community expects every councillor to understand and provide representation on all council activities. It is important that councillors quickly become familiar with the whole council area and the important issues affecting their community.

Councillors may find [Appendix 1–Skills and knowledge checklist](#) useful in assisting them to identify the skills and knowledge they need to perform their role effectively.

Determination of the organisation structure

After consulting with the general manager, the *Local Government Act 1993* requires the governing body of council to determine the resources to be allocated towards the employment of staff.

The general manager is responsible for determining positions within the organisation structure of the council but must do so in consultation with the governing body.

The Act requires the positions within the organisation structure of the council to be determined to give effect to the priorities identified in the council's community strategic plan and delivery program.

The general manager is responsible for the appointment of staff in accordance with the organisation structure determined by the council and the general manager and the resources approved by the council. The general manager is also responsible for the management, direction and dismissal of staff.

Appointment and oversight of the general manager

The Act also requires councils' governing bodies to appoint a person to be general manager.

The Office of Local Government has issued Guidelines for the Appointment and Oversight of General Managers with the assistance of Local Government NSW (LGNSW) and Local Government Professionals Australia, NSW.

The Guidelines provide a checklist for councillors to refer to when considering:

- the recruitment and appointment of general managers
- re-appointment of general managers or ending contracts
- conducting performance reviews of general managers
- engaging in the day-to-day oversight of general managers.

The Guidelines aim to promote a consistent approach across NSW councils to the recruitment, appointment and oversight of general managers. They are issued under section 23A of the *Local Government Act 1993*. The Guidelines are available on the Office of Local Government's website at www.olg.nsw.gov.au.

Beyond issuing guidelines, the Office of Local Government has no role in staffing and recruitment matters at councils.

2.1.2 Role of the mayor

The mayor is considered to be the voice of the council and the leader of the community.

Popularly elected mayors hold office for four years. Mayors who are elected by their fellow councillors normally hold office for two years.

The role of the mayor on a council is that of the 'first among equals'. The mayor has the same role and responsibilities as councillors but has additional responsibilities that reflect their leadership role.

Under the *Local Government Act 1993*, the role of the mayor is to:

- be the leader of the council and a leader in the local community
- advance community cohesion and promote civic awareness
- be the principal member and spokesperson of the governing body, including representing the views of the council as to its local priorities
- exercise, in cases of necessity, the policy-making functions of the governing body of the council between meetings of the council
- preside at meetings of the council
- ensure that meetings of the council are conducted efficiently, effectively and in accordance with the code of meeting practice and the Act
- ensure the timely development and adoption of the strategic plans, programs and policies of the council
- promote the effective and consistent implementation of the strategic plans, programs and policies of the council
- promote partnerships between the council and key stakeholders
- advise, consult with and provide strategic direction to the general manager in relation to the implementation of the strategic plans and policies of the council
- in conjunction with the general manager, ensure adequate opportunities and mechanisms for engagement between the council and the local community
- carry out the civic and ceremonial functions of the mayoral office
- represent the council on regional organisations and at inter-governmental forums at regional, State and Commonwealth level
- in consultation with the councillors, to lead performance appraisals of the general manager
- exercise any other functions of the council that the council determines.

2.1.3 Role of the general manager

The general manager's role is to implement council decisions without undue delay and carry out functions imposed by legislation.

A council's governing body monitors the implementation of its decisions via reports by the general manager to council.

The general manager is the most senior employee of a council and is the only member of staff selected and appointed by councillors. The general manager is appointed on a renewable, fixed-term, performance-based contract for a maximum period of five years.

Under the Act the general manager has the following functions:

- to conduct the day-to-day management of the council in accordance with the strategic plans, programs, strategies and policies of the council
- to implement, without undue delay, lawful decisions of the council
- to advise the mayor and the governing body on the development and implementation of the strategic plans, programs, strategies and policies of the council
- to advise the mayor and the governing body on the appropriate form of community consultation on the strategic plans, programs, strategies and policies of the council and other matters related to the council
- to prepare, in consultation with the mayor and the governing body, the council's community strategic plan, community engagement strategy, resourcing strategy, delivery program, operational plan and annual report
- to ensure that the mayor and other councillors are given timely information and advice, and the administrative and professional support necessary to effectively discharge their functions
- to exercise any of the functions of the council that are delegated by the council to the general manager
- to appoint staff in accordance with the organisation structure determined by the council and the general manager and the resources approved by the council
- to direct and dismiss staff

- to implement the council's workforce management strategy
- any other functions that are conferred or imposed on the general manager.

A governing body of council may by a resolution delegate certain functions to the general manager. The general manager may, in turn, delegate functions to other staff with some exceptions. However, the general manager still retains responsibility to ensure that any sub-delegated function is carried out appropriately.

2.1.4 Role of council staff

General managers employ council staff to carry out the day-to-day operations of the council and implement council policies and other decisions, as directed by the general manager.

The general manager is the primary link between the elected body and its employees.

Council staff are responsible to the general manager, who is responsible for the conduct and performance of council staff.

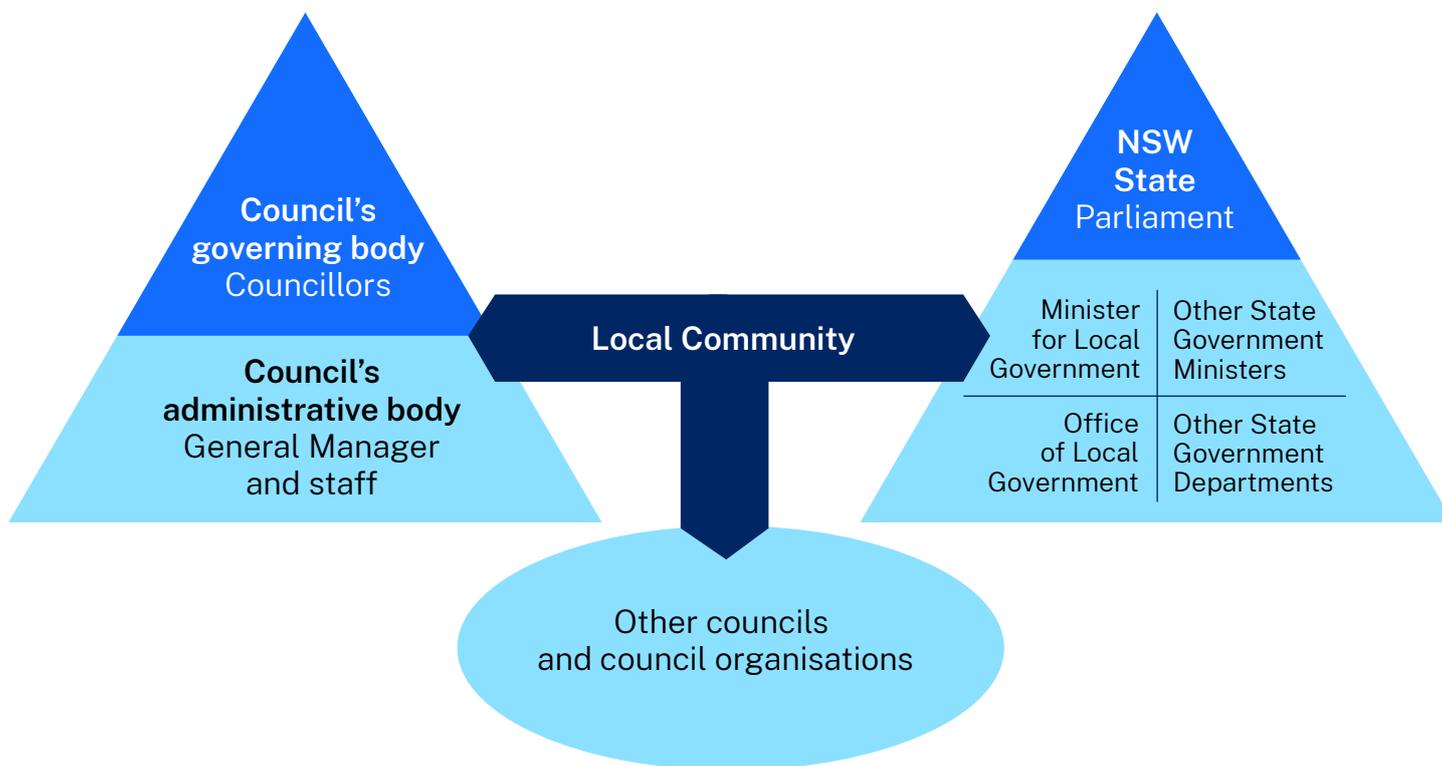
2.1.5 Role of the Minister for Local Government and the Office of Local Government

The Minister for Local Government is responsible for overseeing local government in NSW, including administration of the *Local Government Act 1993* under which local councils and county councils operate.

The Minister ensures councils operate within the law and the NSW Government's policies relating to local government.

The diagram below shows the relationship between NSW state and local governments and the community.

The Office of Local Government is part of the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure. The Office of Local Government is responsible to the Minister for Local Government and is the Minister's key adviser on local government matters. The Office of Local Government is a source of expertise for the NSW Government on local government issues, including finance, infrastructure, governance, performance, collaboration and community engagement.



System of local government in NSW

The Office of Local Government undertakes important regulatory functions, such as conducting investigations, and supports and advises the Minister for Local Government in the exercise of their statutory powers to respond to council-performance issues.

The Office of Local Government also implements the decisions of the Minister and the NSW Government relating to local government, which includes delivering programs across NSW to strengthen councils and to build local government capacity. In carrying out its functions, the Office of Local Government strives to work collaboratively with the NSW local government sector, noting its regulatory responsibilities.

2.1.6 Role of Local Government NSW

Local Government NSW (LGNSW) represents general and special purpose councils.

LGNSW's objective is to strengthen and protect an effective, democratic system of Local Government across NSW by supporting and advocating on behalf of member councils and delivering a range of relevant, quality services.

LGNSW is headed by a President, two Vice Presidents (Metropolitan/Urban and Regional/ Rural), Treasurer and a Board of Directors. All Board members are elected democratically every two years at the LGNSW annual conference.

The LGNSW annual conference is an important opportunity for councillors to be updated about important issues for local government, vote on policy directions and network with other councillors.

LGNSW produces a range of member-focused publications, newsletters and updates, including a weekly e-newsletter which can help you stay up to date on topical issues and events.

2.1.7 Role of Local Government Professionals Australia, NSW

Local Government Professionals Australia, NSW is the leading association representing management staff and other professionals in NSW local government. They are committed to maintaining high professional and ethical standards throughout the sector and ensuring their members are at the forefront of change and innovation.

The association is focused on representing the interests of its members, developing and delivering professional development, providing career pathways, promoting sector wide capacity building and working with partners to create opportunity.

Further information and contact details for these organisations and other key State Government agencies may be found in [Appendix 2 – Key organisations](#).

2.1.8 Local government unions

Council staff are represented by three unions, the United Services Union (USU), the Local Government Engineers' Association (LGEA), and the Development and Environmental Professionals' Association (depa).

The USU is the largest local government union in NSW with over 30,000 members and represents council employees in a range of professions. The LGEA represents local government engineers and technical professionals. Depa represents local government workers in the fields of environmental and public health, building and development control, and planning.

Under the Model Code of Conduct for Local Councils in NSW, councillors are only permitted to engage with the unions on matters of workforce policy. Councillors should not engage with unions on individual or operational staff matters (other than matters relating to broader workforce policy), grievances, workplace investigations and disciplinary matters.

2.1.9 Joint Organisations of Councils and Regional Organisation Councils

NSW boasts a network of joint organisations (JOs) to strengthen collaboration and engagement between State and local governments and improve infrastructure and service delivery to regional communities.

Each JO comprises member councils, State agencies and other key stakeholders as determined by each JO board.

JOs give communities a stronger voice and have transformed the way the NSW Government and local councils collaborate, plan, set priorities and deliver important projects on a regional scale.

The regional bodies are a key mechanism through which the Government delivers funding and programs to regional NSW.

Each JO has developed a statement of strategic regional priorities containing the programs, projects and initiatives it is focusing on delivering by working across traditional council boundaries.

The Office of Local Government works closely with member councils and other key stakeholders to support JOs to deliver for their regional communities.

Councils in the metropolitan area are members of regional organisations of councils (ROCs). ROCs in the metropolitan area include the Northern Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils (NSROC), the Southern Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils (SSROC), Sydney Coastal Councils Group (SCCG) and the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils (WSROC). There are also some ROCs in regional areas.

2.2 Managing internal council relationships

A good working relationship between councillors, the mayor, the general manager and other council staff is fundamental to an effective council.

The following section provides an overview of the various relationships between councillors and other internal council officials and staff.

2.2.1 Relationship between the mayor and the general manager

The relationship between the mayor and the general manager is the most important one in a council and can have a significant impact on the council's performance.

As their relationship is often subject to community and media scrutiny it is important for the mayor and general manager to have a transparent and supportive working relationship. Should conflict or significant differences of opinion arise, both the mayor and the general manager should work to ensure that they are resolved in a timely manner, and not in the public eye.

The mayor and general manager also exercise key leadership roles within the organisation. The mayor also has a key role in the appointment of the general manager and therefore requires a full understanding of the general manager's role and responsibilities.

2.2.2 Relationship between councillors and the general manager

The quality of the relationship between a general manager and councillors is vital to a healthy and effective organisation. Public inquiry outcomes show that where this relationship breaks down, the organisation may become dysfunctional and communities lose confidence in the council.

The general manager is made accountable to their council principally through their contract of employment. The role of the governing body, led by the mayor, is to oversee the general manager's performance in accordance with the Standard Contract.

The relationship between the general manager and the council is managed through the general manager's contract of employment.

The Office of Local Government has standardised the contract of employment for general managers in consultation with the local government sector.

The standard contract provides for the performance of the general manager to be formally reviewed at least annually against the agreed performance criteria for the position. The agreed performance criteria are set out in an agreement that is signed within three months of the commencement of the contract. A council may also undertake interim performance reviews as appropriate.

The general manager must sign a performance agreement with the council. The performance agreement should reflect the activities, performance targets and performance measures as outlined in the council's delivery program.

The Office of Local Government does not have a role in the review of general managers' performance or decisions on their employment.

Indicators of good working relationships between councillors and general managers

- Councillors who publicly express faith in general managers and staff
- General managers who support councillors in their role and who consider ways to improve their levels of support
- Councillors have confidence their resolutions and policy decisions are being effectively implemented
- A clear understanding about how councillors ask questions and receive information from staff, and a formal communication protocol which matches everyday practice
- An environment in which councillors can ask for advice and discuss their position on key decisions
- Opportunities for staff who are experts in their area to put forward their experiences and opinions to councillors to inform key decisions
- Council decisions which are seen as being based on merit rather than ‘the numbers game’
- Relationships which are characterised by respect, good humour and good faith.

Monitoring and reviewing the general manager’s performance

Performance management is an essential part of good management practice. It provides not only a means to monitor the council’s performance but also a means to recognise and reward good performance and to manage under-performance.

The development of a performance agreement and regular review of the general manager’s performance against the criteria set out in the agreement establishes links between the council’s and the general manager’s objectives and priorities and helps improve the council’s performance.

It is recommended that the general manager’s performance be reviewed by a panel of councillors. Where a panel is formed, it is further recommended that the whole process of performance management be delegated to the panel.

It is also recommended that the role of the review panel should include:

- conducting performance reviews
- reporting the findings and recommendations of those reviews to council
- development of the performance agreement.

This process provides a good forum for constructive discussion and feedback.

Councillors selected to take part in the panel should have received training on the performance management of general managers.

Although the composition of the panel is up to the governing body, the usual mix is the mayor, the deputy mayor and one councillor nominated by the governing body. The general manager should also have the option of nominating another councillor to the panel.

All councillors should be notified of relevant dates in the performance review cycle and be kept advised of the panel’s findings and recommendations.

Councillors not on this panel should provide comments and feedback to the mayor in the week prior to each review session. The result should be reported to a closed meeting of council or a committee of council.

While there may be instances where immediate action is necessary, it is generally expected that termination of a contract on the basis of poor performance would be the last resort.

The panel should maintain the confidentiality of the review process, including the paperwork and content of the review. Local Government NSW can provide an independent facilitator to support the review process.

2.2.3 Relationships between councillors and staff

The general manager is the crucial link between councillors and staff.

Generally, requests for assistance or information should go through the general manager, except where they have authorised another council officer to undertake this role.

Similarly, if a staff member needs to talk with a councillor or the mayor, approval should be obtained from the general manager or the appropriate authorised officer. Where authority is given to another council officer, it is the general manager's responsibility to monitor, as far as practicable, that the policy is being observed.

Individual councillors do not have the right to direct council staff in their day-to-day activities.

Councillors can only direct staff through resolutions made at a council or committee meeting.

Councillors must not contact a member of council staff on council-related business unless in accordance with the policy and procedures governing the interaction of councillors and council staff that have been authorised by the council and the general manager.

It is sometimes necessary for councillors and staff to interact and work together so that informed decisions can be made and positive outcomes achieved. Mutual respect, sharing of information and open debate are hallmarks for successful relationships between councillors and staff.

Sharing Information	Demonstrating respect	Ensuring open debate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular meetings between the general manager and councillors Council, committee or specific information sessions for councillors which are well attended Clear protocols about councillor contact with staff which are agreed and implemented, including a systematic approach to responding to councillor requests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Honouring the code of conduct Meeting behaviour which is characterised by respectful language, even in difficult times Staff and councillors referring back to council resolutions in public forums Media statements which focus on issues and refrain from personal criticism Joint participation in community engagement activities Support for professional development for councillors, managers and staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support for professional development for councillors, managers and staff Encouraging staff to provide information and reports to ensure councillors are able to make informed decisions Council records which include staff recommendations, council resolutions and a rationale if the two differ

Personal interaction between councillors and staff

The Office of Local Government's Model Code of Conduct for Local Councils in NSW and each council's adopted protocols or procedures govern the interactions between councillors and staff that relate to council business while they are undertaking their public duties.

The Model Code of Conduct does not prevent councillors and staff communicating. It is a normal part of community life that council staff and councillors would be, from time to time, present at the same social or community events. However, in such situations both parties should ensure that council business is not discussed.

The Model Code of Conduct is discussed in further detail in [Section 3.1](#).

2.3 Managing external relationships

2.3.1 The importance of community engagement

While participatory democracy is an important part of local government decision-making it is essential that councils have a clear, robust and structured community engagement process in place. This helps ensure that the best decisions are made for the whole community, including ‘the silent majority’.

Councillors are the representatives of the community. Therefore, they are accountable to the community. It is important that the community is able to contact and meet with councillors to discuss and contribute their views and ideas. Councillors should therefore spend time undertaking formal and informal community engagement. This helps ensure that a council's policies and programs are acceptable to, and meet the needs of the community.

When a council is developing important policies, strategies and plans, such as a council's community strategic plan, delivery program or operational plan, it is required by law to put the drafts on public exhibition and consider all the comments or submissions received.

The *Local Government Act 1993* also requires councils to adopt a community engagement strategy to guide its engagement with the local community when developing their plans, policies and programs (other than routine administrative matters).

The Act also contains other important mechanisms to enable a council to more formally engage and consult with its community. For example, a council may conduct a poll on an important issue to get an understanding of the community's views on a matter, such as whether to impose an environmental levy.

Councils may also hold constitutional referendums on some matters such as whether to increase or decrease the number of councillors, whether to divide an area into wards or abolish wards, or whether to change the method of election of the mayor.

Effective engagement

The community engagement process needs to be robust, collaborative, inclusive and sustainable.

Community engagement is a mechanism to assist councillors to understand and incorporate the public will and community concerns into decision-making. Community engagement should not be viewed as a ‘box-ticking’ exercise, or something that is only undertaken to pacify the vocal minority.

Good community engagement involves a two-way flow of information. Community engagement can be a very effective way of increasing community understanding of an issue, and a way to increase support for council policies and decisions.

Councils should ensure that the community engagement process is robust, collaborative and inclusive. They can do this by clearly defining the issues in question, identifying all relevant stakeholders and giving them the opportunity to participate, and by allocating sufficient time to the process. Councils should also provide clear feedback to the community on the outcomes of any engagement activities.

This can help councils to ensure the sustainability of community engagement. If community members feel that they have the opportunity to actively participate in engagement activities and that their participation is meaningful, they may be more willing to participate in the process in the future.

More information about effective community engagement is included in [Appendix 5 – Tips for effective community engagement](#).

Methods for engaging with the community

While councillors are generally constrained by the inherent costs associated with undertaking large-scale engagement activities, the following information is provided as a guide to the various methods of smaller scale community engagement available to councillors.

Community engagement will only provide the views of a sample of the community. When planning engagement activities, consideration should be given to what is the most appropriate form of engagement for the audience and the circumstances.

Different methods of community engagement include:

- **Face-to-face** – Public meetings are the most common method of sharing information. They are a useful way to provide members of the community with direct access to the councillors. However, care must be taken to ensure that meetings are held in public venues appropriate to the size and make up of the audience. Meetings should also be well-facilitated and conducted in a structured and orderly fashion. Options include small, targeted meetings; larger, open public meetings; or a series of ongoing meetings.
- **Surveys** – Surveys can be useful for collecting information from a small sample of the community on specific issues. However, the usefulness of surveys can be limited for community members who have literacy or language difficulties.
- **Letter writing** – Letters can take the form of formal mass mail outs to a broad cross-section of the community or smaller scale personal letters to targeted groups and individuals. Letters should be well-researched and appropriate in content and style. Like surveys, the usefulness of letter writing can be limited for community members who have literacy or language difficulties.
- **Telephone** – Telephone can be a useful way of directly contacting individual members of the community. It is particularly useful in the case of targeted community engagement, as the more broad-scale telephoning of individuals can be a time-consuming exercise. Consideration should be given to the timing and appropriateness of phone contact as many people consider this invasive, particularly evening calling. The usefulness of telephone consultation can also be limited for members of the community who experience language and speech difficulties.

- **Social media** – Most councils have Facebook pages which can be updated continually to reach community members in real-time to share information, seek feedback or answer questions. Some councils and councillors contribute to public information sharing about various issues and events through other social media platforms. A number of councils also have YouTube channels and produce clips on various topics including local infrastructure projects. Advances in digital technology have also allowed councils to develop smartphone apps to assist residents and ratepayers interact with them on a range of issues. Links to further information about social media can be found in [Appendix 4 – Dealing with the media](#).

Additional resources on community engagement

The Office of Local Government's integrated planning and reporting webpage contains information and links to additional resources on effective community engagement.

2.3.2 Accountability

Councillors are accountable to the community through community engagement, open and transparent decision-making, as well as regular planning and reporting.

Councillors are accountable to the community every four years when council elections are held. However, council decision-making should be transparent at all times. Fundamentally, community engagement processes are designed to promote a culture of accountability to the local community.

Implicitly, the needs of the community should be reflected in the decisions of council.

Councils must regularly provide information to the public, which demonstrates:

- the council is being administered in accordance with the *Local Government Act 1993*
- the council is allocating resources consistent with its vision and strategic plan as well as the corporate objectives stated in the community strategic plan
- the performance of the council is monitored and reviewed to ensure council objectives are being pursued
- the interests of all the community are served
- each councillor is acting with integrity.

Further information about reporting requirements for councils can be found in [Section 5 – Sound planning and reporting](#).

2.3.3 Other external relationships

Building and maintaining good working relationships with other organisations helps to sustain an effective council. Councils should foster relationships with key organisations including other councils, other state and Australian government agencies, representative and industry bodies, and local industry and local community organisations.

The contact details for a number of key organisations and a brief description of their roles are contained in [Appendix 2 – Key organisations](#).

Strategic collaboration

Strategic collaboration is an umbrella term for how councils work together. Collaboration can take many forms including alliances, partnerships and business clusters.

Its purpose is to reduce duplication of services, provide cost savings, access innovation, enhance skills development and open the way for local communities to share ideas and connect with others. Good collaboration enhances understanding of each other's roles and functions, provides a basis for sharing information and expertise and creates opportunities to work better together. It requires mature relationships based on shared information and a culture of collaboration, negotiation and trust.

Councils often collaborate through regional organisations of councils and Joint Organisations (JOs) which create further opportunities for agreeing shared objectives and collaboration between councils at a regional level.

2.4 Effective decision-making

The majority of a councillor's work involves making important decisions about a council's direction and development. It is critical for all councillors to have the skills and information needed to make well-informed decisions that benefit the council and the whole community.

To make effective and well-informed decisions, councillors must understand how to evaluate the range of plans, proposals, strategies and other matters that will constantly be before council.

All reports before a council should:

- enable councillors to assess the council's ability to achieve its strategic goals as articulated through its integrated planning and reporting framework
- provide information which is linked to the council's approved strategic or project plans (including community strategic plan, delivery program and operational plan), and the budgets that support those plans
- assist councillors in assessing the merits of a proposal, or any other matter before council, and make well-informed decisions.

Prior to making decisions councillors should ask four key questions:

- What impact will the decision have on the community (including residents and ratepayers) and the environment in both the immediate and long term?
- What impact will the decision have on council's finances both in the immediate and long term?
- How does this decision fit in with the long-term direction of the council?
- Are all of the relevant materials and facts available to make an informed decision?

In addition, specifically in relation to project proposals before the council, the first step in the process is to ensure that the proposal makes sense and that each part is logically supported with sound analysis and actions.

Some additional questions to ask include:

- Will the performance measures contained in the proposal enable council to adequately monitor its progress and measure if it is achieving the desired outcome?
- Does the proposal provide value for money?
- Is the cost-benefit acceptable?

Other important issues relating to decision-making are also covered in [Section 5 – Sound planning and reporting](#) and [Section 6 – Financial management](#).

2.4.1 Meeting papers

Council meeting papers are the ‘tools’ used most often by councillors to make decisions. Meeting or business papers should be of sufficient quantity and quality to allow all councillors to do their job properly and effectively.

All the reports councillors receive should contain sufficient information to allow them to be able to assess the council’s performance and make appropriate, well-informed decisions.

Council meeting papers are likely to include:

- reports from the general manager
- reports from senior executive staff in charge of the main functional areas of the council such as environmental services, corporate services, engineering, community services and strategic and commercial services
- reports on special projects or programs, as well as exceptional events or matters which involve council activities or impact on council business.

The papers may also include copies of minutes from council committee meetings.

Further information about good meeting practice can be found in [Section 4 – Making the most of meetings](#).

2.5 Risk and internal audit

Under the *Local Government Act 1993* and Local Government (General) Regulation 2021 (the Regulation), councils are required to have:

- an audit risk and improvement committee (ARIC) that continuously reviews and provides independent advice to the governing body of the council on how the council is functioning and managing risk,
- a robust risk management framework that accurately identifies and mitigates the risks facing the council and its operations, and
- an effective internal audit function that provides independent advice on whether the council is functioning effectively and the council’s internal controls to manage risk are working.

These three governance mechanisms are key to ensuring that councils are operating efficiently and effectively for their communities and are on track to delivering the community’s goals and objectives. They also give councillors better visibility of the performance of their council and emerging financial risks.

Communities are the ultimate beneficiaries of this. If implemented effectively, ARICs, risk management and internal audit assist councils to:

- achieve their strategic objectives in the most efficient, effective, and economical manner
- have better and more efficient levels of service delivery
- have increased accountability and transparency
- achieve better decision-making
- have the confidence to make difficult decisions
- have increased financial stability
- achieve and maintain compliance with statutory requirements, internal policies, and procedures and
- better safeguard their public assets.

More information about how ARICs, risk management and internal audit can be used by councillors to fulfil their civic duties can be found in the Guidelines for Risk Management and Internal Audit for Local Government in NSW which is available on the OLG website at www.olg.nsw.gov.au.

2.5.1 ARICs

At a minimum councils must have or share an ARIC that comprises of one independent chair and at least two independent members who meet the independence and eligibility criteria for ARIC members prescribed in the Regulation.

Councils may appoint staff from other councils as independent members of their ARIC (but not as chair) provided they meet independence and eligibility criteria and do not share the ARIC with the staff member's employer.

Councils also have the option of appointing one non-voting councillor member to their ARIC who meets the eligibility criteria for councillor members.

ARICs are required to review certain aspects of councils' operations and to provide information to the governing body of the council for the purpose of improving the council's performance of its functions. ARICs are required to keep the following under review:

- compliance
- risk management
- fraud control
- financial management
- governance
- implementation of the strategic plan
- delivery program and strategies
- service reviews
- collection of performance measurement data by the council
- internal audit.

The purpose of an ARIC is to provide information and independent advice to the governing body of a council in relation to each of these matters to assist it in exercising effective strategic oversight of the organisation.

The role of an ARIC is also to provide advice to the governing body about the efficacy of the council's controls for managing risk and to identify and inform the governing body of emerging risks to the council's statutory compliance, financial performance, fraud and corruption, and the achievement of its strategic goals.

2.5.2 Risk management

Risk is inevitable in any organisation, including local councils.

Risk management, led by general manager, describes the deliberate and coordinated program of activities a council takes to ensure it knows and manages the risks it faces to achieving its strategic goals and objectives.

Risk management also provides a mechanism to shape council culture – 'the way we do things around here' – and is essential for good governance and decision-making.

While councillors do not have a direct role in, or specific responsibilities for risk management, decisions made by the governing body will need to take into consideration the level of risk a council faces and is willing to tolerate and how risks can be proactively managed. Councillors should seek advice on risk management concerns if they believe a decision creates a financial, legal or governance risk.

ARICs regularly review the effectiveness of the council's risk management framework as well as specific aspects of its legal compliance, business performance, financial management and performance, service delivery, operations, fraud and corruption prevention and provide its findings and recommendations to the governing body.

Councillors should consider the advice and assurance provided by ARICs when making decisions about the strategic direction of the council, as well as individual programs and projects.

2.5.3 Internal audit

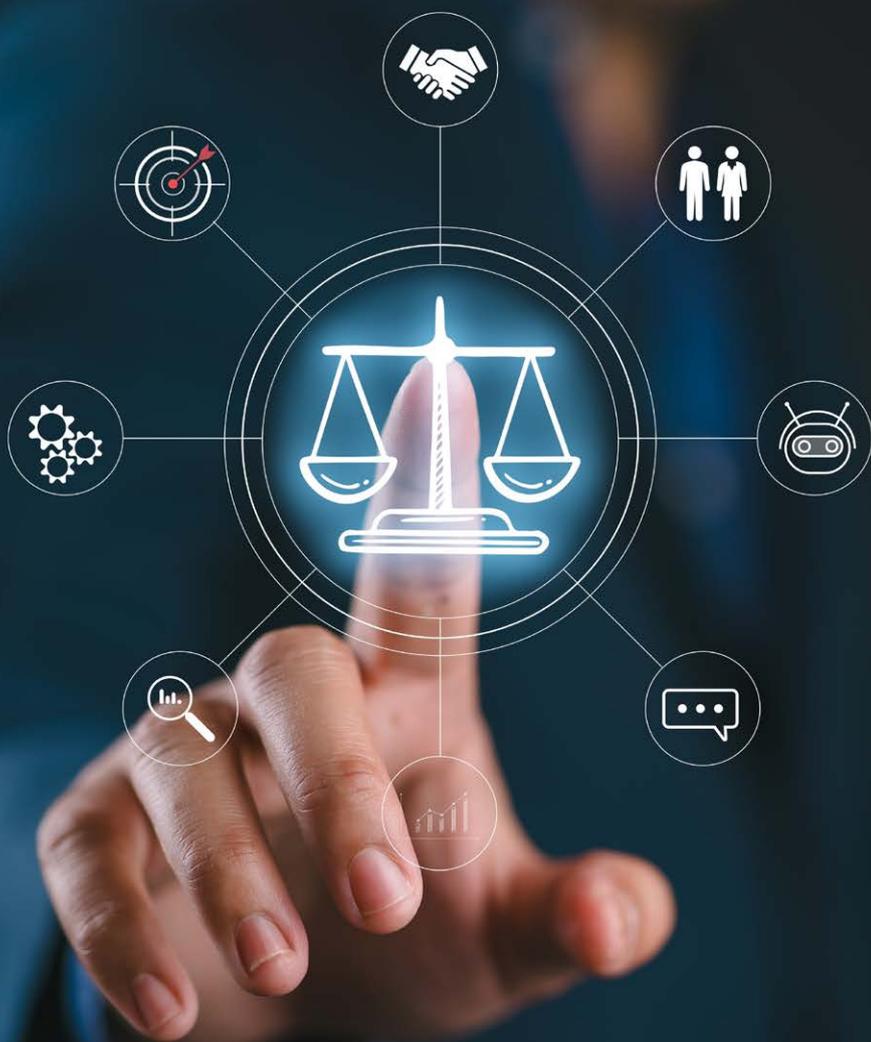
ARICs are supported by councils' internal audit functions.

Internal audit is a globally accepted mechanism that provides councillors and council management with an independent and unbiased assessment of the council's operations.

Internal auditors conduct assessments or 'audits' on specific council policies, activities, decisions, management, operations and performance based on a work plan approved by the ARIC and advise the ARIC on areas of concern and improvement.

Whilst sitting within councils, internal audit functions report directly to ARICs ensuring councillors receive an objective opinion about the way the council is functioning.

3 Code of conduct and acting ethically



The role of a councillor is a public one

Local communities rightly expect the highest standards of conduct of those they elect to hold office in a council. Failure to comply with these standards can undermine community confidence in individual councils and the local government sector as a whole. It also erodes the trust the community confers on their elected representatives.

For this reason, councillors — like other council officials such as staff and delegates of councils — are obliged to comply with ethical and behavioural standards in the performance of their role.

These standards are currently prescribed under the Model Code of Conduct for Local Councils in NSW (Model Code of Conduct). All councils are required to adopt a code of conduct based on the Model Code of Conduct. Breaches of a council's code of conduct are to be dealt with in accordance with the Procedures for the Administration of the Model Code of Conduct for Local Councils in NSW which, like the Model Code of Conduct, is prescribed under the *Local Government (General) Regulation 2021*.

Councillors may face disciplinary action by the Office of Local Government or the NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal for serious or repeated breaches of these standards under the misconduct provisions of the *Local Government Act 1993*.

Penalties include suspension from office for up to six months or disqualification from holding office in any council for up to five years. Councillors who have been suspended on three or more occasions for misconduct are automatically disqualified from holding office in any council for five years.

Acting ethically is not just about avoiding or managing conflicts of interests. It also applies to councillors' interactions with council staff, members of the public, use of resources and any personal benefits councillors might obtain.

Reforming the councillor conduct framework is a priority for the Government. During the next term of council, reforms will be proposed to ensure there are clear expectations on councillors about their conduct as well as proposals to ensure an effective process for genuine complaints and minimisation of the 'weaponisation' of complaints.

3.1 The Code of Conduct

The adoption of a code of conduct is an important means of ensuring councillors are responsible for their own conduct, for making decisions ethically and for being accountable to their communities.

Councillors need to make difficult decisions that do not always have unanimous support in the community. In order to maintain the confidence of the community, councillors must ensure that these decisions are made in an ethical and impartial manner.

The Model Code of Conduct provides the foundation for ethical decision-making in local government. The Model Code of Conduct sets the minimum standards of conduct for council officials in carrying out their functions. All councils must adopt a code of conduct based on this instrument.

The Model Code of Conduct is prescribed by regulation. It is underpinned by procedures for dealing with breaches of the Code and provisions in the Act to impose sanctions.

The Model Code of Conduct and a guide for councillors on their obligations under the Model Code of Conduct is available on the Office of Local Government's website at www.olg.nsw.gov.au.

A brief summary explaining the standards of behaviour expected of councillors and what happens when these are not met is provided in [Appendix 6 – Standards of conduct for council officials](#).

Key principles of ethical and appropriate conduct

The Model Code of Conduct sets the standards of ethical and appropriate conduct for council officials in relation to their general conduct, conflicts of interests and personal benefit, relationships between council officials, access to council resources and information, and maintaining the code's integrity.

The obligations of council officials under the Model Code are informed by eight key principles:

- integrity
- leadership
- selflessness
- impartiality
- accountability
- openness
- honesty
- respect

3.1.1 Ethical decision-making

The importance of following the principles of ethical decision-making cannot be underestimated.

Key questions that councillors should ask themselves to ensure that their decisions are ethical and sound are:

- Is the decision or conduct lawful?
- Is the decision or conduct consistent with council's policy and with council's objectives and the code of conduct?
- What will the outcome be for the councillor, work colleagues, the council, persons with whom they are associated and any other parties?
- Do these outcomes raise a conflict of interest or lead to private gain or loss at public expense?
- Can the decision or conduct be justified in terms of the public interest and would it withstand public scrutiny?

If councillors are uncertain about an action or decision, they should seek advice from the general manager. They may also wish to seek their own independent legal advice.

Councillors should exercise due care in undertaking their functions by acquainting themselves with the requirements of the *Local Government Act 1993*, their council's code of conduct, the details of the matters they are dealing with, and any factors which may affect their involvement in decision-making.

3.1.2 General obligations

Councillors have certain general conduct obligations under the Model Code of Conduct.

Specifically, councillors must:

- act lawfully, honestly and with care and diligence in carrying out their functions
- not conduct themselves in a manner that is likely to bring the council into disrepute
- consider issues consistently, promptly and fairly
- not bully, harass or discriminate against others
- ensure that development decisions are properly made
- not engage in inappropriate or disorderly behaviour at meetings
- not participate in binding caucus votes except in relation to nominations and elections.

In relation to binding caucus votes, councillors are permitted to discuss a matter before a meeting with other councillors and voluntarily agree to a shared position on a matter. However, they must retain their individual discretion and remain free to determine a matter on its merits.

3.1.3 Conflicts of interest

As members of the local community, there is significant potential for councillors to have conflicts of interest in matters they deal with.

It is important that councillors understand the rules governing the disclosure and management of conflicts of interest and comply with them.

The Model Code of Conduct identifies two types of conflict of interest: pecuniary and non-pecuniary conflicts of interest.

Pecuniary conflicts of interest

A councillor will have a pecuniary conflict of interest in a matter where they, their spouse, relatives, or other persons or entities they are associated with, are reasonably likely to gain or lose financially because of a decision the council may make in that matter.

Where a councillor has a pecuniary conflict of interest in a matter before a council or committee meeting, they are required to declare the interest and withdraw from the meeting while the matter is being debated and voted on.

Councillors are also required to lodge with the general manager written returns of their interests containing information on their interests in real property, gifts and contributions to travel, interests and positions in corporations, sources of income, and debts and whether they are a property developer or close associate of one.

This operates as a transparency mechanism to ensure councillors disclose and appropriately manage conflicts of interest that may arise from their interests.

Non-pecuniary conflicts of interest

Non-pecuniary conflicts of interests arise from private or personal interests councillors have that do not amount to a pecuniary interest. Depending on the nature of the affected interest, a non-pecuniary conflict of interest may not necessarily lead to a councillor making a decision to exclude themselves from voting on a matter. However, it is critical all interests are identified and declared.

A non-pecuniary conflict of interest exists where a reasonable and informed person would perceive that a councillor could be influenced by a private interest when carrying out their public duty.

Non-pecuniary conflicts of interest commonly arise out of family or personal relationships, or other responsibilities arising from roles with sporting or social clubs and other community groups or associations.

The political views of a councillor do not constitute a private interest.

In identifying whether they have a non-pecuniary conflict of interest in a matter, councillors must consider how a reasonable person who is informed about the situation would view it.

The Model Code recognises two types of non-pecuniary conflicts of interest: *significant* and *less than significant*.

A councillor will have a significant non-pecuniary conflict of interest in a matter they are dealing with where they have:

- a close relationship (including a business relationship) with a person who will be affected by any decision made in relation to the matter
- a strong affiliation with an organisation that will be affected by any decision made in relation to the matter, or
- a financial interest in the matter that is not a pecuniary interest, or they otherwise stand to gain or lose a personal benefit as a result of a decision made in relation to that matter.

Where a councillor has a significant non-pecuniary conflict of interest in a matter, they must manage it in the same way they would a pecuniary conflict of interest, by disclosing the interest and removing themselves from any discussion and decision making on the matter.

Where a councillor has a non-pecuniary conflict of interests in a matter that arises from a relationship or affiliation that is not particularly close, it will be a less than significant non-pecuniary conflict of interest.

Where a councillor has a less than significant non-pecuniary conflict of interest in a matter, they may participate in discussion and decision making on the matter, but must still disclose their interest and explain why no further action is required to manage the conflict of interest.

Political donations

Matters before councils involving election campaign donors may also give rise to a non-pecuniary conflict of interest.

Where a councillor has received or knowingly benefited from a reportable political donation of \$1,000 or more in the last four years (including multiple donations made by the same donor), and the donor has a matter before the council, the councillor must declare a non-pecuniary conflict of interest, disclose the nature of the interest, and remove themselves from consideration of the matter. This obligation applies to donations received in relation to council, State and Federal election campaigns.

Donations of under \$1,000 may also give rise to non-pecuniary conflicts of interests in certain circumstances (e.g. because of the nature of the relationship between the councillor and the donor) that must be disclosed and managed in accordance with the Model Code of Conduct.

3.1.4 Gifts and benefits

Councillors may find they are offered gifts or benefits such as free tickets to major sporting or other events. These gifts could be offered innocently and in good faith or they could be an attempt to influence. The Model Code of Conduct places an obligation on councillors not to accept gifts or benefits of more than \$100 or multiple gifts or benefits from the same person over a year which have a combined value of more than \$100.

Councillors need to think about how the community might perceive their acceptance of these gifts. Feelings of obligation can arise from accepting a gift. Members of the public might think a councillor's ability to make impartial decisions has been compromised.

In circumstances where a gift or benefit cannot reasonably be refused or returned, councillors are required to surrender it to council and ensure that it is recorded in the council's gifts register.

Councils are required to disclose all gifts they receive with a value of more than \$10 and ensure this is recorded in the council's gifts register.

3.1.5 Access to information and resources

Councillors are entitled to such information necessary for the performance of their functions. However, this is counterbalanced by the obligation to use this information appropriately and to maintain the integrity and security of confidential information.

Councils' codes of conduct also address how a councillor can access information and other council resources such as the expertise of council staff. Access to council staff expertise must happen through the general manager, or in accordance with a system that is put in place to facilitate and coordinate councillor requests for information or action.

3.1.6 Appropriate lobbying

The Model Code of Conduct and the *Local Government Act 1993* recognise that appropriate lobbying of councillors is a normal part of the democratic system and that councillors have a representative role in considering the views of their constituents and communicating with them.

Councillors would be aware that at some time they are likely to be lobbied by a wide range of people including individuals, organisations, companies and developers. It is essential that councillors understand the difference between appropriate and inappropriate lobbying, and do not engage in lobbying that could be considered inappropriate or unlawful and likely to undermine community confidence in a council's decision making.

Inappropriate lobbying usually involves an attempt to obtain preferential consideration or treatment based on factors other than the merits of a matter.

The Office of Local Government will soon be issuing guidelines on lobbying councillors and other council officials and a model policy for councils to adopt based on corruption prevention recommendations made by the Independent Commission Against Corruption.

3.1.7 Reporting breaches

Code of conduct breaches

Any person may make a complaint alleging a breach of the code of conduct.

Suspected breaches of the code of conduct by councillors, members of staff of council (excluding the general manager) or delegates should be reported to the general manager in writing. Allegations that the general manager has breached the code of conduct should be reported to the mayor in writing.

It is important that alleged code of conduct breaches are dealt with appropriately and in accordance with the prescribed procedures for doing so. Councillors must not therefore make allegations of suspected breaches of the code of conduct at council meetings or in other public forums. To do so would constitute a breach of the code of conduct.



Examples of appropriate lobbying behaviours are:

- keeping records of meetings with lobbyists or objectors
- holding meetings in appropriate locations such as council offices
- ensuring other people are present
- making sure that any information obtained when being lobbied is available to council staff and other councillors.



Examples of inappropriate councillor conduct that could occur during lobbying include:

- disclosing confidential information while being lobbied
- accepting a political donation in return for a favourable exercise of discretion
- during decision-making giving undertakings to an interested party prior to consideration of all the information relevant to a decision.

Pecuniary interest breaches

Complaints regarding non-disclosure of a pecuniary interest may be made by anyone to the Office of Local Government. These may be investigated and may result in disciplinary action by the “departmental chief executive” of the Office of Local Government or the NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal (NCAT) under the misconduct provisions of the *Local Government Act 1993*.

Significant penalties may apply to councillors who don't meet their obligations in this area.

Public Interest Disclosures

The *Public Interest Disclosures Act 2022* aims to facilitate the disclosure by public officials of serious wrongdoing in or affecting the public sector, including the local government sector.

It also aims to promote a culture in which public interest disclosures are encouraged, and to protect public officials, witnesses and other persons from detriment or liability that might arise as a result of public interest disclosures.

3.1.8 Maintaining the integrity of the code of conduct

For a council's code of conduct to be effective, people need to have confidence in the integrity of the code of conduct, the processes for dealing with allegations of breaches and the outcomes. Certain types of conduct have the effect of undermining this confidence.

Examples of conduct of this type include:

- publicly making allegations without reporting them so they can be properly and fairly considered in accordance with prescribed code of conduct processes
- making complaints for political or improper purposes
- leaking information about an investigation to embarrass someone or to attack the investigation process
- taking reprisal action against the complainant or a person who has dealt with a complaint.

Where respect and confidence in a council's code of conduct is lost, it becomes difficult for a council to promote and enforce appropriate standards of conduct. This often results in a council becoming unable to govern itself and the loss of community confidence in the council.

For this reason, the Office of Local Government views conduct that undermines confidence in a council's code of conduct seriously. Such conduct would be in breach of the code of conduct. Under the prescribed procedures, councils are obliged to refer such conduct by councillors to the Office of Local Government. Such behaviour constitutes misconduct and may result in suspension for up to six months or disqualification from holding office for up to five years.

3.2 Councillors and public comment

It is common for councillors to be asked by journalists to comment on council policy or decisions.

There are certain protocols that councillors must follow when responding to the media on council policy or decisions.

Many councils have a policy which permits only the mayor, the general manager or the public officer to speak on behalf of the council. In such cases individual councillors remain free to make personal comments to the media but not to speak on council's behalf.

When speaking publicly, councillors should ensure that they clarify whether or not they are acting on behalf of council and/or as an individual councillor.

A level of qualified privilege applies to councillors under the law, which recognises that councillors may need to speak freely and publicly in the discharge of their civic duties.

However, this should be treated with caution.

Qualified privilege covers only statements made at a council or committee meetings in the discharge of a councillor's duties which are pertinent to the business of local government. Such statements also need to be made in good faith and must not be made maliciously.

Councillors are subject to defamation law and it is contrary to law to injure another person's reputation in the eyes of society through the written word, pictorially or in speech.

If a councillor becomes aware of media interest in a particular aspect of council business that could be contentious, they should consider bringing it to the attention of the general manager.

To help create a positive, safe and harmonious organisational culture, councillors should endeavour to work out any issues or differences of opinion privately, not publicly, and especially not through the media.

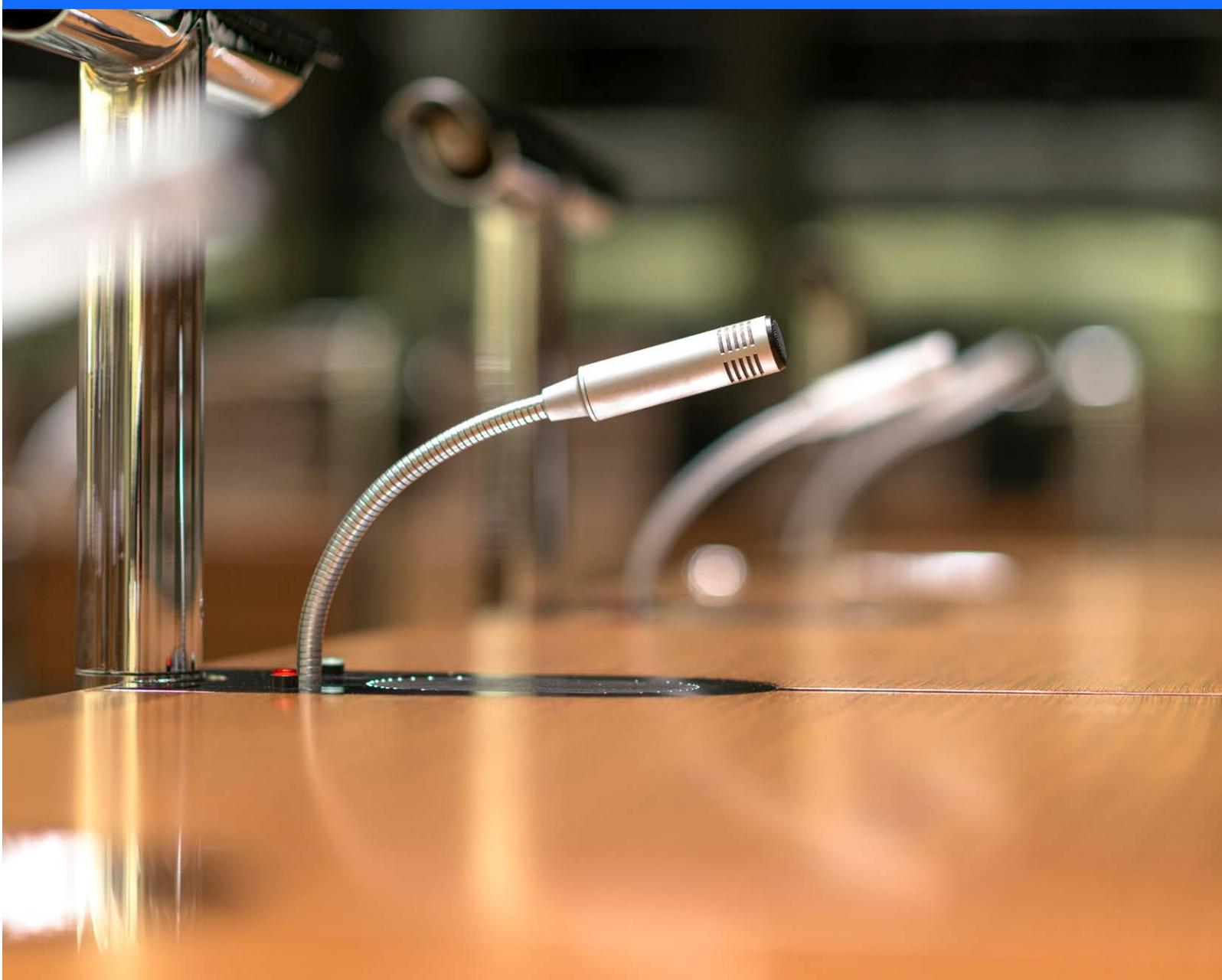
Further information about the relationship between councillors and the media can be found in [Appendix 5 - Dealing with the media](#).

3.3 Where to find more information?

The information in this Handbook is only a snapshot of councillors' obligations under the code of conduct. All councillors have a responsibility to understand their ethical and behavioral obligations under the code of conduct and to comply with them.

The Model Code of Conduct and Procedures are available at the Office of Local Government's website at www.olg.nsw.gov.au together with more detailed guidance for councillors.

4 Making the most of meetings



4.1 How councils debate and make decisions

Council meetings are important because they are the mechanism through which councillors make decisions regarding policies and programs of the council to meet the needs of the community. Decisions of a council can only be made by resolution at a properly convened meeting.

Councillors are expected to attend all council meetings and all meetings of any committee of which they are a member, unless leave is sought and approved. Councillors need to do a good deal of reading in preparation for meetings.

Councillors usually attend meetings in person but may attend meetings by audio visual link with the approval of the council or committee if this is permitted under the council's code of meeting practice.

A decision supported by a majority of the votes at a meeting of the council at which a quorum is present is a decision of the council.

As all council decisions are made on a majority basis, councillors need to understand the meeting process and the need to work as a team to get the best outcome for the community. For this, councillors need good communication skills to state their position as well as a willingness to listen to diverse views and compromise when necessary.

The success of meetings depends on councillors working as a team, respecting diverse opinions and allowing all points of view to be heard. Meeting success also depends on following good meeting practices.

4.2 How often council meetings are held and how they are conducted

Council meetings must be conducted in accordance with the *Local Government Act 1993*, Regulation, and the council's code of meeting practice.

How and when council meetings are held is up to each council to decide, although the *Local Government Act 1993* requires every council to meet at least 10 times a year, each time in a different month.

Some councils meet only once a month. Many larger councils meet more frequently because they have a higher volume of business. Councillors should be given at least three days' notice of meetings, except for extraordinary meetings called in an emergency.

All formal council meetings must be held in accordance with requirements in the *Local Government Act 1993*, the *Local Government (General) Regulation 2021* (Regulation) and the council's code of meeting practice.

This is because meeting procedures contribute to good public decision-making and increase a council's transparency and accountability to its community.

Code of meeting practice

The Act and Regulation prescribe a Model Code of Meeting Practice for Local Councils in NSW (the Model Meeting Code).

The Model Meeting Code provides a uniform set of meeting rules for councils across the State to help ensure more accessible, orderly, effective and efficient meetings.

The Model Meeting Code contains both mandatory and non-mandatory provisions. The non-mandatory provisions cover areas of meeting practice that are common to most councils but where there may be a need for some variation in practice between councils based on local circumstances.

Councils are required to adopt a code of meeting practice that contains the mandatory provisions of the Model Meeting Code. Councils can choose whether to adopt the non-mandatory provisions of the Model Meeting Code or to adopt them in an adapted form. Councils can also include supplementary provisions in their codes of meeting practice.

Councils' codes of meeting practice must be developed in consultation with the community and be made publicly available.

Councils' codes of meeting practice apply to all meetings of councils and committees of councils of which all the members are councillors (committees of council). Council committees whose members include persons other than councillors may adopt their own rules for meetings unless the council determines otherwise.

Public access to meetings

The public has the right to see the agenda and business papers for each meeting, free of charge, and attend all council meetings and council committee meetings except in special circumstances outlined in the Act (see the section below on closing meetings).

To maximise the transparency of council decision making and ensure accountability, councils are also required to webcast their meetings and maintain recordings of meetings on their websites for at least 12 months.

Role of the chairperson at meetings

The mayor is usually the chairperson unless they are absent or wishes otherwise. The chairperson maintains order at the meeting and keeps discussions to the point and to the agenda, amongst other things. This helps ensure meetings are conducted with decorum and decisions are made in an open, transparent way.

While councillors have one vote each, the chairperson has a casting vote if there is a split decision. Therefore, it is particularly important that the chairperson sees that the debate is conducted in a fair and orderly manner, regardless of their own views about the issue under discussion. The chairperson may exercise their second or 'casting' vote as they see fit.

Role of the general manager and staff at meetings

The general manager can attend council meetings but is not permitted to vote. However, the council may exclude the general manager from a meeting if it is dealing with matters relating to the general manager's employment or standard of performance.

Some councils also have other senior executive staff attend meetings for the purpose of answering any technical questions that arise out of the council's business papers. This can be an effective way of ensuring that councillors understand the issues before them.

The presence of council staff at meetings should not be used to raise matters that are not on the meeting agenda or that do not reasonably arise from the business papers. Such conduct does not promote a positive and healthy working relationship between the governing body and the administrative arm of council.

The code of meeting practice allows questions to be put to council staff at meetings through the general manager. However, staff are entitled to reasonable notice of the question and sufficient time to respond. A staff member is entitled to refuse to reply to a question. The chair of the meeting is expected to make sure these questions are put succinctly, directly and without debate.

Quorum

There must be a quorum for a council meeting to take place. A quorum is the majority of councillors who hold office at the time of the meeting and therefore does not include councillors who are suspended from office (section 368 of the Act). For example, if a council has nine councillors then the quorum will be five councillors.

Agendas

It is important that meetings only deal with matters listed on the agenda in the order in which they are listed. This allows councillors and members of the public to follow the items being debated and the decisions being made. If the order of the agenda is to be changed it should be done so by a resolution at the beginning of the meeting.

The code of meeting practice requires that the only business to be transacted at a council meeting is the business that is already before the council, business that relates to a matter already before the council and business of which the required notice has been given.

A matter for which required notice has not been given can only be dealt with if a motion is passed to have the matter dealt with and the chairperson rules it is of great urgency.

Motions

A motion is a proposal to be considered by council at a meeting. It is a request to do something or to express an opinion about something. A motion formally puts the subject of the motion as an item of business for the council.

The number of motions put forward by a councillor cannot be limited. As long as notice and other procedures are followed, a councillor can put forward as many motions as they wish.

When putting forward motions councillors need to balance their civic responsibility for representing the interests of the community with their obligation to use council's resources effectively and efficiently.

Voting

In order to vote at a meeting a councillor must be present, unless the council has given its approval for the councillor to attend the meeting by audio visual means. There is no available mechanism for proxy voting.

If a councillor is present at a meeting during voting they are taken to have voted whether they intended to or not. The code of meeting practice states that a councillor who is present at a meeting but fails to vote is taken to have voted in the negative.

The only way for a councillor to abstain from voting is to leave the meeting.

Closing meetings

All meetings of a council are open to the public unless they have been closed in the limited circumstances set out in Section 10A of the *Local Government Act 1993*. It is important that councillors familiarise themselves with the details of this section of the Act. This states that councils may only close their meetings to the public to consider:

- personnel matters concerning individuals—this does not include matters relating to councillors
- personal hardship of residents or ratepayers
- commercial-in-confidence information
- material which if disclosed would prejudice the maintenance of law
- security matters
- legal advice

- information regarding items of Aboriginal significance
- matters considered under the council's code of conduct.

Section 10B of the *Local Government Act 1993* further limits the powers given to a council by section 10A to close its meetings to the public.

Section 10B provides that a council meeting should only be closed to preserve the relevant confidentiality, privilege or security. In determining whether the discussion of a matter in an open meeting would be contrary to the public interest, embarrassment to the council, councillors or its employees is irrelevant.

Apart from the circumstances prescribed under section 10A in which it is permissible for councils to close their meetings, all other council decisions must be made in an open meeting. This ensures transparency and accountability of council decision making and encourages community participation in the decision-making process.

Resolutions or recommendations made at a closed part of a council meeting must be made public by the chairperson of the meeting as soon as practical after the closed part of the meeting has ended. For example, the chairperson would read out the resolutions passed in the closed part of the meeting when the meeting is re-opened and the minutes of the ordinary meeting will record the words of the resolution passed in the closed part of the meeting.

A resolution or recommendation should be phrased in such a way as to protect any confidential detail. This allows the public to know what the council or committee has decided at the closed part of the meeting without revealing confidential information.

The committee of the whole

When the rules of debate are suspended while a specific matter is debated, this is referred to as a 'committee of the whole'. Councils will form a committee of the whole to overcome the limits on the number and duration of councillor speeches referred to in the code of meeting practice.

For example, the code of meeting practice states that a councillor must not speak on a matter for more than five minutes. If a council resolves to move into a committee of the whole to consider a matter, a councillor can speak for more than five minutes on that matter.

Moving into a committee of the whole does not close the meeting to the public. However, where a council closes part of a meeting under section 10A of the Act, the council may also move into committee of the

whole if it wants to suspend the rules of debate for that part of the meeting.

Recommendations made by a committee of the whole should be put to the council meeting when the rules of debate are resumed and be included in the council's minutes.

In a closed meeting that has resolved into a committee of the whole, the committee's recommendations as well as the resolutions passed in the closed part of the council meeting must form part of the council's minutes of the meeting.

Mayoral minutes

The code of meeting practice states that the mayor may put to a meeting, without notice, any matter which the council is allowed to deal with or which the council officially knows about. This covers any council function under the Act or other legislation, or any matter that has been brought to the council's attention, for example, by letter to the mayor or the general manager.

The mayor may move that a mayoral minute be adopted without the motion being seconded. Mayoral minutes cannot be used to introduce, without notice, non-urgent matters that need research or a lot of consideration by the councillors before coming to a decision. These types of matters must be placed on the agenda, with the usual period of notice being given to councillors.

4.3 Different types of council meetings

There are three main types of formal council meetings which must be conducted in accordance with the *Local Government Act 1993* and the Regulation, and the code of meeting practice.

Ordinary council meetings

These meetings are the forum where the governing body conducts its core business. The general manager is responsible for giving each councillor and the public at least three days' notice of the time and place of each meeting as well as the agenda and business papers for that meeting.

It should be noted that if a councillor is absent from three consecutive ordinary meetings without leave (unless attending the meeting by audio-visual link with the approval of the council), their office automatically becomes vacant.

If a councillor is going to be absent from an ordinary meeting of council, that councillor must apply for a leave of absence. Merely offering or accepting an apology is not enough.

Extraordinary council meetings

Extraordinary meetings may be called on occasions to address business that cannot be postponed. At least three days' notice is required for these meetings unless the meeting is called in an emergency (section 367 of the Act).

Council committee meetings

In addition to council meetings, councils can establish committees to oversee specific functions, projects or programs and report back to the council on those matters. A council committee is one where all the members of the committee are councillors. The committee must be chaired by the mayor or a Chair elected from its membership or by the council. The mayor does not have to be the Chair of the committee.

The meetings of council committees should also be conducted in accordance with the meeting rules prescribed under the Act, the Regulation and council's code of meeting practice.

Each councillor, whether a member of a committee or not, is entitled to attend and speak at a meeting of a council committee.

However, only councillors who are members of the committee are entitled to put business on the committee's agenda, move or second a motion at the committee meeting, or vote at the meeting.

Other meeting types

The following meeting types may involve councillors but do not have to be conducted in accordance with the meeting rules prescribed under the *Local Government Act 1993*, the Regulation and the council's code of meeting practice.

Advisory committees

These differ from council committees and membership can include non-councillors. While the meeting procedures in the Act, the Regulation and the code of meeting practice do not apply, good meeting protocols should be maintained. Councils should, at minimum, ensure that all committees meet basic accounting and governance standards, as appropriate.

Workshops or briefing sessions

Councils may hold workshops for the purpose of conducting in-depth discussions on certain topics. Formal decisions are not made at workshops but these sessions provide the time needed to explore more important or complex issues in detail. A workshop may involve councillors, council staff and invited participants.

Workshops should not be used for detailed or advanced discussions where agreement is reached and/or a de-facto decision is made. Any detailed discussion or exchange of views on an issue, and any policy decision from the options, should be left to the open forum of a formal council or committee meeting.

Workshops or briefing sessions are supported by some to develop councillor knowledge and expertise, and to assist them to discharge their role as public officials. However, where briefing sessions are held in relation to development applications or business enterprises, a council needs to remember its obligations and responsibilities under its code of conduct, and community perceptions in terms of unfair advantage and transparency of process.

The Model Meeting Code contains non-mandatory rules for conducting councillor briefings. This is an area where the Minister for Local Government may propose changes to ensure briefings are held through committees, that information is publicly available, and meetings are recorded.

4.4 Other resources

The Office of Local Government has issued guidelines to assist councils to meet their statutory obligations when closing their meetings to the public.

The Office of Local Government has also issued guidelines on the webcasting of meetings.

These guidelines and the Model Meeting Code are available on the Office of Local Government's website at www.olg.nsw.gov.au.

5 Sound planning and reporting



Planning decisions affect communities, the environment and quality of life and usually have long-lasting consequences.

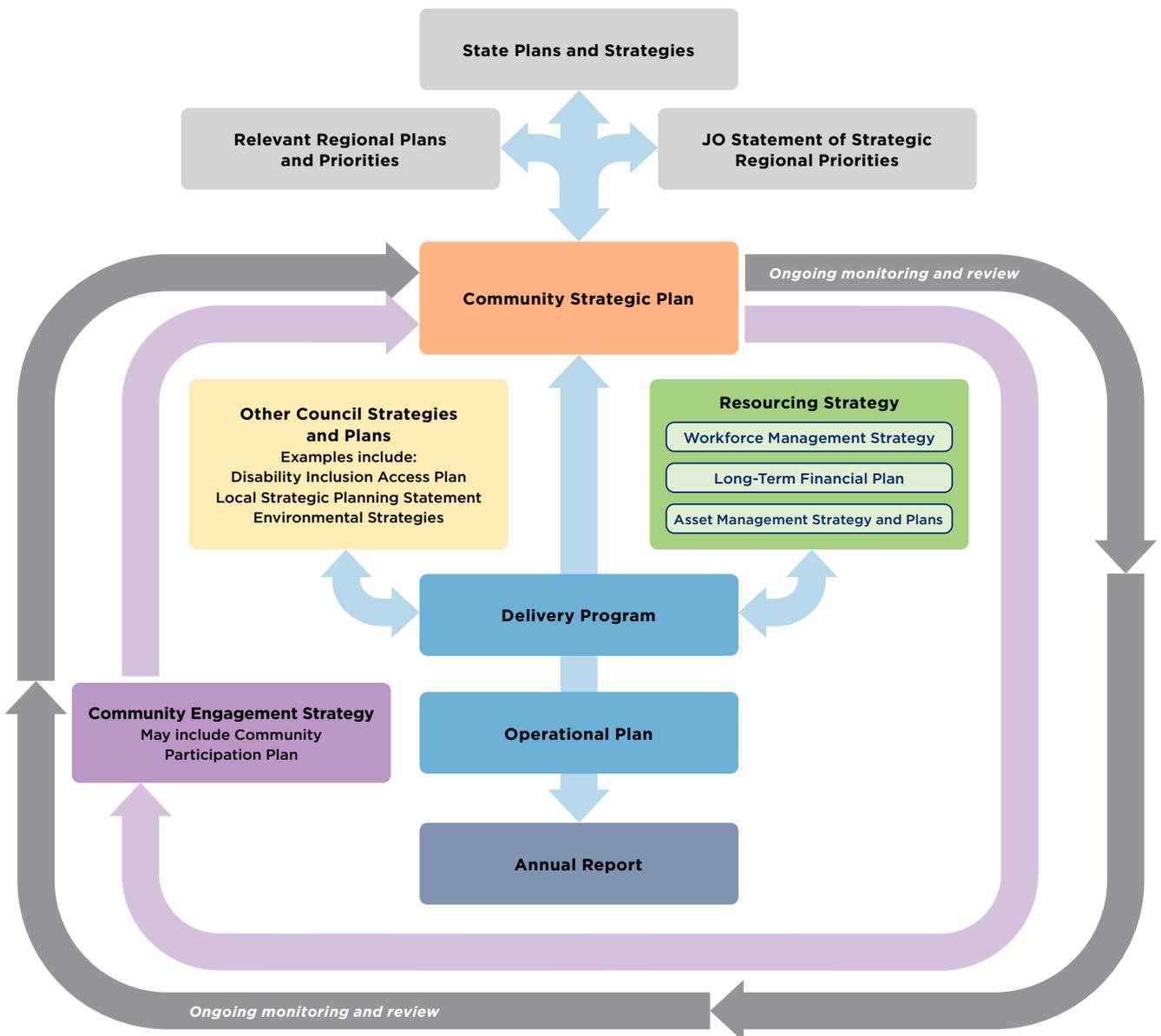
Councillors are involved in overseeing the development and delivery of and reporting on many council plans and activities.

Councils are responsible for different types of planning, including community strategic planning and land use planning. Some council plans and reports have strict legal requirements about what needs to be included in them and how and when a council needs to consult with its community during their development.

5.1 Community strategic planning

Community strategic planning is the process by which a council, with its community, establishes a vision for the future of the local government area, and develops goals, objectives, strategies and actions to achieve that future. To perform their role effectively, councillors need to actively participate in determining the strategic direction for the community and the planning process supporting it.

Councils develop a hierarchy of plans which fall out of the community strategic plan, known as the integrated planning and reporting framework. The diagram below illustrates the framework:



Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework

Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework

The integrated planning and reporting framework enables councils (with their communities) to ask and answer some key questions. The key planning questions include:

- Where are we now?
- Where do we want to be in the future?
- How will we get there?
- When will we know when we've arrived?
The key reporting questions include:
 - How much did we do?
 - How well did we do it?
 - Is anyone better off as a result? If not, why not?

The plans councils prepare under the integrated planning and reporting framework must adequately address the quadruple bottom line:

- social and community considerations
- economic considerations
- environmental considerations
- civic leadership and governance considerations.

The plans must also prepare councils for a sustainable future, one that ensures that future generations aren't left with an unsustainable legacy as a result of irresponsible decisions made now.

The integrated planning and reporting framework recognises that councils don't exist in isolation, but are part of a larger natural, social, economic and political environment that influences and shapes their future direction. Nor do council plans exist in isolation: land use, water supply and sewerage services, and infrastructure planning have social, environmental and economic outcomes, and vice-versa.

The integrated planning and reporting framework opens the way for councils and their communities to have important conversations about funding priorities, service levels, preserving local identity and planning in partnership for a more sustainable future.

5.1.1 An overview of the integrated planning and reporting framework

Integrated planning and reporting principles

The *Local Government Act 1993* sets out operating principles to address the way local government leads, plans for, and makes decisions about service and resources. The integrated planning and reporting framework enables councillors to:

- Work directly with their community to identify long-term priorities for local identity, growth and lifestyle
- Understand the range of services the community wants, the service standards they expect and the infrastructure that will be required to deliver them
- Have meaningful conversations about the cost of meeting community expectations and map out a four – year strategy to deliver key priorities, projects and services
- Set appropriate process and monitor council's progress
- Report back to the community on success in achieving goals
- Be assured that statutory and other planning, consulting and reporting requirements are being met.

Integrated planning and reporting is aligned with the NSW local government election cycle. Each newly elected council considers the information from the previous councils State of Our City Report and engages with the community anew as part of the integrated planning and reporting review process.

Community Strategic Plan

The community strategic plan is the highest-level plan that a council will prepare. All other plans must support the achievement of the community strategic plan's objectives.

The plan articulates the community vision and reflects aspirations of the community over 10 years (as a minimum). The plan must also consider state and regional plans as they apply to council and should identify strategic directions and outcomes and provide a means of measuring progress.

While councils prepare community strategic plans on behalf of their communities, they are not wholly responsible for implementing the plan.

Other partners such as State agencies, community groups and business may also be engaged in delivering the long-term objectives of the plan.

Community Engagement Strategy

Councils must prepare and implement a broadly-based community engagement strategy to support the development of all plans, policies, programs and activities. The community engagement strategy must demonstrate a commitment to genuine and inclusive engagement and be based on the social justice principles of access, equity, participation and rights.

Delivery Program

The delivery program is a statement of commitment to the community from each newly elected council, that translates the community's strategic goals into clear actions. The delivery program describes the council's commitment to deliver against the community strategic plan over the four-year term of the council.

It becomes the single point of reference for all principal activities undertaken by the council. All plans, projects, activities and funding allocations must be directly linked to the four-year delivery program.

Operational Plan

The delivery program is supported by an annual operational plan. This document spells out the details of the delivery program, identifying individual projects and activities that will be undertaken in that year to achieve the commitments of the delivery program.

The operational plan is supported by a detailed budget and a statement of revenue policy, which also sets the fees and charges for that year.

Councillors are strongly encouraged to ensure they receive regular reports on how council spending is tracking against budget. Councillors will also be asked to understand whether council is managing its budget effectively, with regular reports on revenue, grants and expenditure.

Resourcing Strategy

The resourcing strategy should clearly articulate how the council will implement and resource the community's long-term vision. As all the component documents within the integrated planning and reporting framework are linked to one another, activities and actions in the delivery program and operational plan must be reflected in the resourcing strategy and all resourcing implications clearly identified and addressed. The Resourcing Strategy details how council will allocate resources – money, assets, and people - to deliver the aspirations of the community strategic plan.

The resourcing strategy consists of three components:

- long-term financial planning
- workforce management planning
- asset management planning

Long-term Financial Plan

Each council must prepare a long-term financial plan (at least 10 years), which is used to inform decision-making during the development and review of the community strategic plan and the delivery program.

The long-term financial plan is updated annually as part of the development of the operational plan and is reviewed in detail as part of the review of the community strategic plan following each local government election.

Workforce management strategy

Each council must develop a workforce management strategy to address the human resourcing requirements of its delivery program.

The workforce management strategy has a four-year minimum time frame.

Asset management planning

Councils must account for and plan for all the existing assets they own, and plan for any new asset solutions proposed in the community strategic plan or delivery program.

To achieve this, councils must prepare an asset management strategy, incorporating an asset management policy, as well as asset management plans for each class of assets under the council's control. The strategy and plans must have a minimum 10-year time frame.

Asset management plans must identify service standards, and contain long-term projections of asset maintenance, rehabilitation and replacement costs.

Councils must report on the condition of their assets in their annual financial statements, in line with the Local Government Code of Accounting Practice and Financial Reporting.

Annual report

The annual report is one of the key points of accountability between a council and its community.

It is not a report to the Office of Local Government or the NSW Government; it is a report to the community.

The annual report focuses on the council's implementation of the delivery program and operational plan because these are the plans that are wholly the council's responsibility.

The report also includes some information that is prescribed by the *Local Government (General) Regulation 2021*. This information has been included in the Regulation because the NSW Government believes that it is important for community members to know about it to help their understanding of how council has been performing both as a business entity and a community leader.

State of Our City Report

From the term of councils starting in September 2024, a State of Our City Report is required to be presented to the second meeting of the newly elected council for noting. The report covers the four-year term of the previous council and objectively tracks the council's progress against the community strategic plan. The report should provide information that sets the scene for the new council and may include achievements to date and highlight future work to be undertaken. The report should assist the new council to undertake a review of the community strategic plan, which is an essential component of integrated planning and reporting cycle.

Reporting against the quadruple bottom line

The annual and State of Our City reports should each reflect the quadruple bottom line, including reporting on how effective the strategies have been in progressing the social and community, economic, environmental and civic leadership and governance objectives.

5.1.2 Roles and responsibilities of the mayor, councillors and general managers in strategic planning

The success of the planning process relies heavily on the commitment of the mayor and the general manager as well as all councillors. Without strong support and commitment, the council will find it difficult to develop and implement a meaningful suite of plans.

The Act prescribes specific responsibilities for the mayor, the governing bodies of councils, individual councillors and the general manager respectively in the development and implementation of councils' strategic plans and programs.

The mayor, as the leader of the council, is the public face of the planning process. The mayor is responsible for explaining the purpose of the community strategic plan to the community and for encouraging public support for the planning process.

The mayor is responsible for:

- ensuring the timely development and adoption of the strategic plans and programs
- promoting the effective and consistent implementation of the strategic plans and programs
- promoting partnerships between the council and key stakeholders to deliver the council's strategic objectives
- advising, consulting with and providing strategic direction to the general manager in relation to the implementation of the strategic plans.

The governing body is responsible for:

- developing and endorsing the community strategic plan, delivery program and other strategic plans, programs, and strategies of the council
- determining and adopting a rating and revenue policy and operational plans that support the optimal allocation of the council's resources to implement the strategic plans (including the community strategic plan) and for the benefit of the local area, and
- ensuring as far as possible that the council acts in accordance with the plans, programs, and strategies of the council.

The ability of the mayor and councillors to capture a vision for the community's future, and to inspire others to participate in that future, will be fundamental to the success of the process.

It is important that all councillors support and are fully committed to the value of strategic planning. For this reason, each individual councillor has a statutory responsibility to participate in the development of the integrated planning and reporting framework.

Similarly, the general manager has a pivotal role to play in mapping out the council's approach to the planning process and ensuring the community receives the information it needs to participate in a meaningful way.

The general manager will also be responsible for guiding the preparation of the community strategic plan and council's response to it via the delivery program.

They are responsible for implementing the delivery program and will report regularly (at least six-monthly) on progress and ensure that it becomes a living document with regular updates and reviews, as required.

The general manager's clear understanding of the planning process and the way the various components are integrated will be fundamental to its success.

The general manager has an important leadership role to play in ensuring that each member of council's staff understands how their particular work activity contributes to achieving the objectives of the community strategic plan and what is expected of them in delivering its outcomes.

5.1.3 Assessing strategic plans

One of the most important roles of the governing body of a council is to endorse strategic plans on behalf of its community.

As well as the community strategic plan, councils may prepare other strategic plans which are not required by legislation but which may assist in implementing the community strategic plan. These may include cultural plans, public health plans, economic development plans, environmental management plans, emergency and recovery plans and crime prevention plans.

Councillors are also responsible for ensuring that strategic planning expectations for specific functions and activities are met; for example, for water supply and sewerage services, as set out in section 3 of the NSW Government's *Regulatory and Assurance Framework for Local Water Utilities*.

In order to endorse strategic plans, councillors must be able to assess their appropriateness. Councillors should first be satisfied that the plan as a whole makes sense and that each part is logically supported with sound analyses and actions.

For strategic planning for water supply and sewerage services, the NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment, and Water provides a voluntary assurance assessment that tests the effectiveness of strategic planning under section 3 of the NSW Government's *Regulatory and Assurance Framework for Local Water Utilities*.

The questions in [Section 2.4 Effective decision-making](#) and in [Section 6.3.1 Long term financial planning](#) provide a starting point for councillors when assessing strategic plans. However, a framework such as the 'integrity model' may also assist councillors.

The integrity model asks the following questions:

- **Comprehensibility:** Can you understand the plan and explain it to the community?
- **Appropriateness:** Does the plan fit with the council's strategic direction and comply with its legislative and policy framework?
- **Sustainability:** Are the assumptions underlying the plan valid and based on adequate financial, social and environmental analyses?
- **Feasibility:** Is the council able to successfully respond to any challenges contained in the plan? Are council's resources sufficient to support the plan?
- **Accountability:** Does the plan contain adequate performance measures so that management can report on the progress of the plan in a timely manner?

5.2 Land use planning

Land use planning refers to the long-term development or conservation of an area and the establishment of a relationship between local objectives and regional goals.

The *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* (EP&A Act) is administered by the Minister for Planning and Public Spaces, jointly with the Minister for Better Regulation and Fair Trading and the Minister for Building, with support from the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure. This legislation aims to simplify and expedite planning processes while ensuring high-quality decision-making and planning outcomes for the people of NSW.

The aim of this Act is to encourage “the proper management, development and conservation of natural and man-made resources” as well as ecologically sustainable development.

The Act is supported by the Environmental Planning and Assessment Regulation 2000 (P&A Regulation), which sets out procedural matters and how requirements of the Act are carried out.

State Environmental Planning Policies & Local Environmental Plans

The planning framework in NSW is based on Environmental Planning Instruments. These planning instruments include State Environmental Planning Policies (SEPPs) and Local Environmental Plans (LEPs). SEPP and LEP Instruments are statutory plans made in accordance with Part 3 of the EP&A Act.

They exist to guide and control development and land use in NSW. SEPPs typically specify planning regulations for specific areas and certain types of development. Furthermore, SEPPs can identify the development assessment system for certain types of developments and identify the type of environmental assessment required for developments.

The NSW Government introduced a Standard Instrument for LEPs as part of its ongoing reform of the State’s planning system. Councils are able to modify the template to allow for inclusion of detailed local planning rules addressing issues within their local government area. More detailed information about LEPs and the planning system for NSW can be found on the NSW Department of Planning, Housing

and Infrastructure’s website at www.planning.nsw.gov.au.

All local councils in NSW are planning and consent authorities for the purposes of the EP&A Act. In this role they are responsible for the development of a standardised LEP for their local government area and any amendments made to those LEPs.

LEPs may be made for all or part of a local government area and they determine the development status and controls that apply to any site within the area over which the LEPs have effect. They guide and control planning decisions, through the establishment of zoning and relevant development controls.

LEPs provide a framework for the way land can be used in a certain area and are the main planning tool used to shape the future of communities. LEPs also ensure local development is done appropriately. Local councils develop and amend their LEPs in consultation with their local communities and other relevant stakeholders.

LEPs and amendments to LEPs are made by following the planning proposal and Gateway Determination processes set out in the EP&A Act, which is administered by the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure.

Development Control Plans (DCPs)

In addition to SEPPs and LEPs, local councils can adopt and implement development control plans (DCPs) in their local government areas. DCPs provide for more detailed planning and design guidelines and controls, to support the objectives of a council’s LEP.

DCPs typically apply to specific types of development or specific areas of land and provide detailed development guidelines and controls. DCPs outline controls and parameters for development proposals for these specific activities or areas.

DCPs, like LEPs, are prepared by councils in consultation with their local communities. DCPs provide a detailed guideline that illustrates the controls that apply to types of development or certain areas in a council’s local government area. To be valid, DCPs must generally conform to the provisions of the relevant LEP. Similar requirements exist for the public exhibition of DCPs as for LEPs.

Councils may choose to develop DCPs in order to:

- identify development as advertised development allowing for notification of the proposal to adjoining landowners or occupiers and notice being given in the local newspaper. Submissions on the proposal may then be made to the council prior to consideration of consent
- provide additional notification requirements for certain types of developments
- specify additional matters to be considered when making orders.

Environmental Impact Statements (EIS)

A development application for a project, identified as a designated development under the Regulation or a planning instrument, must be accompanied by an environmental impact statement (EIS).

Affected projects usually involve major works such as industrial facilities or extractive industries, among other things. Applications for designated development and any relevant information must be publicly exhibited for a minimum of 30 days.

If approval is granted following the receipt and consideration of public submissions by a council as part of the assessment process, objections to the proposal can be presented to the NSW Land and Environment Court. Conversely, if consent is denied, the applicant has the right to challenge the council's decision.

Conditions of consent

A council may choose to allow a development, subject to certain conditions. These conditions must be imposed for a planning purpose. They should be applied fairly, relate to the development and be reasonable.

Conditions imposed in the consent are open to being tested by appeal to the NSW Land and Environment Court.

Regional strategic planning

NSW Regional Development plans are a suite of strategic land-use plans which provide an overarching framework for local councils in regional areas to apply through their LEPs.

Each regional plan is overseen by a Delivery, Coordination and Monitoring Committee that is comprised of representatives from local councils and various state agencies.

5.2.1 Public land management

Councils have responsibilities under the *Local Government Act 1993* for the management of public land in their areas.

The Act defines public land as “any land (including a public reserve) vested in or under the control of the council”. However, public land does not include a road, Crown land, commons (as defined under the *Commons Management Act 1989*), land subject to the Trustees of *Schools of Arts Enabling Act 1902*, or a regional park under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*.

Public land management is a complex area and council decisions relating to this area can often be the subject of intense public interest and scrutiny. It is therefore important that councillors understand the area.

The Office of Local Government has prepared Practice Note No.1 – Public Land Management to assist councils in their management of public land under the *Local Government Act 1993*. The Practice Note focuses on the requirements of the Act and related issues and covers areas such as the classification and reclassification of public land; plans of management; leasing, licensing and the granting of other estates over community land.

A copy of the Public Land Management Practice Note is available on the Office of Local Government's website: www.olg.nsw.gov.au.

Management of Crown land

NSW Crown land covers 42% of the state and is held and managed by the NSW Government on behalf of the community.

It comprises a diverse array of public land including parks, showgrounds, roads, coastal lands, caravan parks and cemeteries.

The Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure (DPHI) – Crown Lands has primary responsibility for Crown land

through direct management of land, assets and infrastructure, property management services and the oversight of a network of professional and volunteer managers. This includes local councils that manage Crown land within their local government areas.

Councils manage Crown land as either an appointed Council Crown land manager (council managers), a devolved manager or through it being vested in the council (transferred to the council's ownership).

NSW councils manage 6,531 Crown reserves as council managers and over 2,000 reserves as devolved managers.

The *Crown Land Management Act 2016* (CLM Act) guides the management of Crown land. It enables council Crown land managers to manage Crown land as public land under the *Local Government Act 1993* (LG Act). This means both greater autonomy and greater responsibilities for council Crown land managers.

Priorities for the management of Crown land are set out in Crown land 2031 – the State Strategic Plan for Crown land.

The LG Act provides that all public land must be classified as 'community' or 'operational' land. Crown reserves managed by councils will generally be classified as community land.

Councils are required to assign one or more categories of community land referred to in section 36 of the LG Act to all Crown reserves as soon as practicable. Councils can seek to classify Crown land as 'operational' where appropriate with the consent of the Minister administering the CLM Act.

Uses that may fall within operational land may include sewage works, sanitary purposes, quarries and gravel pits as well as water infrastructure.

Councils are required to develop and adopt a plan of management for all Crown reserves on community land. No change in the nature and use of the Crown land can take place without a plan of management in place.

Plans of management are also a critical tool to ensure that any authorisation or restriction on the use of a Crown reserve, including proposed development and tenures, considers Aboriginal rights and interests in Crown land under the *Native Title Act 1993* (NT Act) and the *NSW Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983* (ALR Act).

Under the *Crown Land Management Regulation 2018*, the Minister's consent is required for all plans of management for council managed Crown land prior

to these plans being adopted by council. Councils are encouraged to complete these plans as soon as practicable.

The Crown Reserves Improvement Fund (CRIF) is a funding program managed by DPPI - Crown Lands to support the management and upkeep of Crown reserves across the state. The CRIF supports asset improvements on Crown reserves by providing funding for repairs and maintenance projects, pest and weed control and new recreational infrastructure. Councils are eligible to apply for grants from this fund on an annual basis.

Management of Crown land in line with the *Native Title Act 1993*

Native title describes the rights and interests that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have in land and waters according to their traditional law and customs.

Native title is governed by the *Native Title Act 1993* (NT Act), and any claims made under the NT Act are made to the National Native Title Tribunal (www.nntt.gov.au).

Councils are required to employ or engage a qualified native title manager to provide advice on council activities on Crown land and ensure compliance with the NT Act. This role includes validating acts (such as developments and tenures) on Crown land, in-line with the NT Act.

Unlike granting an Aboriginal Land Claim under the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983* (ALR Act), native title does not transfer the land to the native title claimant, rather it recognises and protects the rights of the native title holder to access land and water to practice those rights.

The Federal Court can determine whether native title exists or has been extinguished and the compensation for any loss, diminution, impairment or other effect of an act on native title rights and interests.

Section 8.13(1) of the CLM Act states that Councils will 'contribute to, or indemnify the State against, any compensation payable by the State for the impact of the conduct on native title rights and interests'.

All Crown land in NSW can be subject to a native title claim under the NT Act, unless those interests and rights have been extinguished or the Crown land is considered to be 'excluded land'.

Nominated council employees must attend training coordinated by NSW Crown Lands in order to become accredited native title managers and practice in this role. Councils are required to provide information to the Minister for Lands and Property about their nominated native title manager each year. DPHI-Crown Lands provides support to native title managers, through delivery of training and supporting materials.

Management of Crown land and Aboriginal land claims

The ALR Act seeks to compensate Aboriginal peoples for past dispossession, dislocation and loss of land in NSW (who may or may not also be native title holders). This Act provides for Aboriginal Land Councils to

make land claims over claimable land as defined in section 36 of the Act, in a way that may include for example vacant Crown land.

Aboriginal land claims over Crown land create an inchoate interest (i.e. it is subject to the grant of the claim) in Crown land for the claimant pending determination of the claim. Councils need to be aware of what claims exist and consider these claims on Crown land when considering dealings or work on Crown land.

It is possible that land claims can be made over Crown lands that are seen as public space or that had previously been leased to councils.

5.3 Natural Resource Management (NRM)

Natural resource management (NRM) is the management of natural assets including vegetation, land, water and soil in a manner consistent with the principles of ecologically sustainable development. Councils make a significant contribution to the management and protection of natural resources in NSW.

Councils have a range of functions, powers and responsibilities that can influence NRM, on both private and public land. These include:

- **strategic and statutory planning:** including settlement or land use strategies, land use zonings and provisions or clauses in LEPs/DCPs
- **plans of management:** including mapping natural assets or hazards
- **development assessment:** including conditions of consent and development contributions
- **incentive programs:** including rate rebates, free tree giveaways and acquisition programs for environmentally significant lands
- **on-ground works:** including site-based rehabilitation projects, tree planting/ revegetation projects/bush regeneration, roadside vegetation management, noxious & environmental weed control, wetland and/ or water body restoration, water quality monitoring and stormwater management and control

- **community engagement:** including information (brochures, website, and factsheets), community feedback, community focus groups, community standing advisory committees, and partnerships with local community groups.

Councils are encouraged to incorporate relevant national, State-wide and catchment priorities and targets into their land use and corporate planning processes in order to deliver an effective and coordinated approach to NRM.

In NSW, NRM is delivered on a regional basis through a variety of stakeholders, including all levels of government, Local Lands Services, Landcare, Bushcare and Coastcare Networks, landholders, and the general community.

Local Lands Services (LLS) work in partnership with local councils to ensure best practice management of natural resources, including weed management and pest control in areas under council jurisdiction.

LLS provide guidelines, training and incentive programs and assist councils with weed and pest management plans.

6 Financial management



Responsibility and accountability for the financial management of a council rests with the governing body.

Councillors are responsible and accountable for the financial management of a council.

Councillors are responsible for making strategic decisions in relation to the financial management of the council that determines or affects the types of services, level of services and the strategic direction of the council.

Councillors need to know:

- How does council get revenue to support its operations?
- Are there restrictions on how this money can be spent?
- What activities does council fund?
- What information is necessary to assess the financial sustainability of council?

6.1 Principles of sound financial management

Governing bodies of councils have the following responsibilities in relation to the financial management of councils:

- to ensure as far as possible the financial sustainability of the council
- to determine and adopt a rating and revenue policy and operational plans that support the optimal allocation of the council's resources to implement the community strategic plan and for the benefit of the local area
- to keep under review the performance of the council, including service delivery.

The *Local Government Act 1993* prescribes principles of sound financial management. These are intended to guide councils in the exercise of these and other functions in a way that facilitates local communities that are strong, healthy and prosperous.

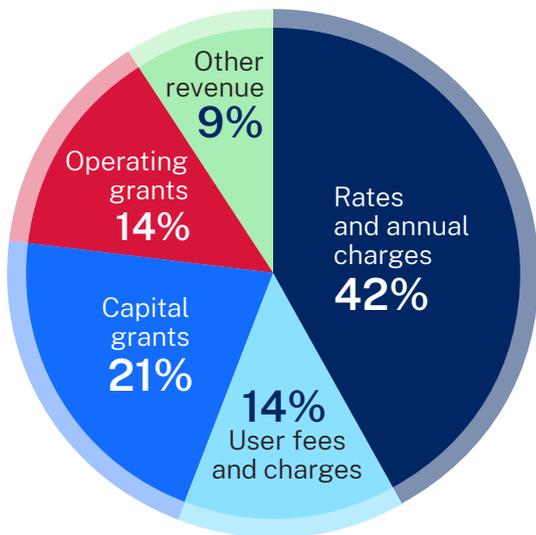
The following principles of sound financial management apply to councils:

- Council spending should be responsible and sustainable, aligning general revenue and expenses.
- Councils should invest in responsible and sustainable infrastructure for the benefit of the local community.

- Councils should have effective financial and asset management, including sound policies and processes for the following:
 - performance management and reporting
 - asset maintenance and enhancement
 - funding decisions
 - risk management practices.
- Councils should have regard to achieving intergenerational equity, including ensuring the following:
 - policy decisions are made after considering their financial effects on future generations
 - the current generation funds the cost of its services.

6.2 Sources of revenue

As discussed briefly in Section 1, councils obtain revenue from five main sources. These are rates and annual charges, user charges and fees, capital and operational grants and other sources.



Sources of revenue for NSW Councils for 2022-23

6.2.1 Rates

Generally, a council's main source of revenue is from rates. Rates are local taxes that are levied on the basis of property values, issued by the Valuer General of NSW, within the local government area.

Growth in each council's total rates income is capped to a percentage each year known as the rate peg, which is announced by the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART).

Council staff will prepare the rates structure on this basis and it will form part of the revenue policy that the governing body will be required to adopt.

IPART has made major changes to the rate peg methodology to apply from the 2024-25 financial year. The new method for setting the rate peg is simpler than the old method and will result in rate pegs that more accurately reflect changes in the costs NSW councils incur in providing their current services. IPART will use forward-looking measures of councils' base costs and the changes will also better capture the diversity of councils across the State.

Special rate variations

The council may seek to increase its rates above the allowed percentage with IPART approval through an application for a special rates variation under section 508(2) and 508A of the *Local Government Act 1993*.

The decision of a council to apply for a special rate variation should be a strategic decision and must be endorsed by the council prior to application.

In considering the decision to apply for a special variation, councillors should consider the purpose of the special rate variation and the impact that the decision will have on the community and council's finances.

Councils should also consider whether the decision fits with the strategic and long term financial plan of the council and whether all the relevant information and facts are available to make an informed decision.

When considering an application for a special variation, IPART takes into account issues such as how the variation will assist the council in meeting its long-term strategic objectives, the community engagement undertaken by council about the proposal and the long term financial position of the council.

6.2.2 Fees and charges

Annual charges

Under section 496 of the *Local Government Act 1993* a council must make and levy an annual charge for the provision of domestic waste management services for every parcel of rateable land for which the service is available.

Under section 496A and 496B of the *Local Government Act 1993* a council may make and levy an annual charge for the stormwater management services and for the provision by the council of coastal protection services.

In addition, under section 501, councils can levy annual charges on each parcel of rateable land, as well as usage based charges, for water supply services, sewerage services, drainage services and waste management services (other than domestic waste). There is also scope to allow annual charges on other services prescribed by the *Local Government (General) Regulation 2021*.

Fees

Councils can raise additional income from fees for the use of publicly owned facilities like swimming pools, halls and other user-pays services. Fees can also be charged for giving information, supplying products or processing applications.

Setting of fees and charges

The amount of fees and charges are set by the council each year through the adoption of the revenue policy, contained in the operational plan.

Fees and charges should be set at a level that reflects the cost to council of providing those services.

A council cannot make and implement a rate or charge until it has given public notice of its draft operational plan, considered any submissions and resolved to adopt the plan.

6.2.3 Grants

Each year all councils receive a Financial Assistance Grant, which is paid by the Australian Government through the State Government's Grants Commission.

For 2023-24 the NSW Grants Commission made recommendations on the distribution of an estimated \$953 million in grant entitlements to councils in NSW. The amount of the grant varies from council to council.

The Financial Assistance Grant is untied, contains a general purpose component that may be used for any council purpose and a component for local roads.

Councils receive grants from other sources from time to time and may apply for specific grants for specific purposes or programs.

These grants are provided through the State and Australian Governments. For example, Transport NSW may make a grant for work on roads.

6.2.4 Other revenue sources

Other sources of income include interest on investments and, developer contributions.

Investments

Section 625 of the *Local Government Act 1993* allows councils to invest money that is not, for the time being, required by the council. Investments must be in line with the current Ministerial Investment Order and any guidelines issued by the Office of Local Government.

Each month an investment report must be presented at a council meeting by the responsible accounting officer (RAO). The RAO must take a 'prudent person approach' to investing council's money.

Given the responsibilities of the governing bodies of councils under the *Local Government Act 1993* in relation to the oversight of the financial management of their councils, councillors should ensure that the council:

- has an appropriate investment policy that guides the investment of ratepayers' funds in accordance with the council's charter
- approves the investment policy by resolution
- ensures that the policy is reviewed each year
- ensures that there is open and transparent reporting of the council investments to council and ratepayers.

Borrowings

Section 621 of the *Local Government Act 1993* allows council to borrow at any time for any purpose allowed. Borrowings can take the form of an overdraft or loan. Councils are required to adhere to the Ministerial Borrowing Order when borrowing. The borrowings are to be identified and adopted in the operational plan and the long-term financial plan.

6.3 Financial planning

A council's operational plan must contain its revenue policy, which sets out how a council plans to pay for its activities. It gives details of council's estimated income and expenditure for the next year; sets out the rates, charges and fees; outlines council's pricing policy; and its proposed borrowings.

It is very important that councillors are aware of what they are approving when they adopt the revenue policy.

Councillors should encourage the general manager to recommend options for cost-effective service delivery and strategies for raising revenue. Similarly, councillors should make suggestions and ask the general manager to report on their viability.

6.3.1 Long term financial planning

A long-term financial plan is an important part of council's strategic planning process. This is where long term community aspirations and goals are tested against financial realities.

The integrated planning and reporting requirements reinforce the importance of the long term financial plan as a key decision-making and problem-solving tool for councillors.

The modelling that occurs as part of the long-term financial plan provides information for councillors to consider financial issues at an earlier stage and to gauge the effect of these issues in the longer term, when making financial decisions for the council.

The following is an overview of the long-term financial planning component of the integrated planning and reporting system:

What are the general requirements for long term financial planning?

- Each council must prepare a long-term financial plan.
- The long-term financial plan must be used to inform decision making during the finalisation of the community strategic plan and the development of the delivery program.

What is the minimum time frame for the long-term financial plan?

- The long-term financial plan must be for a minimum of 10 years.

How often must the long-term financial plan be reviewed?

- The long-term financial plan must be updated at least annually as part of the development of the operational plan. The long-term financial plan must be reviewed in detail as part of the four yearly review of the community strategic plan.

What is the basic structure of the long-term financial plan?

The long-term financial plan must include:

- projected income and expenditure, balance sheet and cash flow statement
- service standards to be provided
- planning assumptions used to develop the plan
- sensitivity analysis—highlights factors/assumptions most likely to affect the plan
- financial modelling for different scenarios
- e.g. planned/optimistic/conservative
- methods of monitoring financial performance.

6.4 Allocation of revenue

While the general manager is accountable to the governing body for the council's financial performance, as members of the council's governing body, councillors are accountable to the residents and ratepayers for the appropriate allocation of council monies.

It is essential that councillors receive adequate financial reports from the general manager so they can assess the financial position of council.

Similarly, in making decisions and assessing the sustainability of the council, it is essential that councillors are provided with relevant and sufficient information to determine if the council can afford to undertake the activity, assess the cost-benefit of any proposed activity or project, and monitor that council activities and projects are being undertaken within budget.

Key questions for councillors when assessing plans and projects

- Is the strategy in the best interests of the community?
- How does it address community wants and needs?
- How does it fit with council's vision and goals?
- What would be the impact of demographic, social or environmental change on the proposal?
- Can council afford the project?
- Will other services be affected by expenditure on the project?
- Does it provide value for money? Is the cost-benefit acceptable?

6.5 Asset management

When making investment decisions about assets, councillors need to consider their full lifecycle cost, not simply the immediate construction/ purchase price.

An asset is defined as “a resource controlled by a council as a result of past events and from which future economic benefits are expected to flow to the council”.

NSW local government is the custodian of approximately \$151 billion of infrastructure assets. These assets include roads, water and sewerage assets, drains, bridges, footpaths, public buildings, recreational facilities and parks and gardens. They enable councils to provide services to the community.

As custodians, councils are responsible for effectively accounting for and managing these assets and having regard to the long term and cumulative effects of their decisions.

The term ‘asset management’ describes the process for ‘whole of life’ asset management from planning, purchase, operation, renewed maintenance to disposal of assets. It also encompasses integration of asset and service outcomes.

6.5.1 Asset management planning

A strong and sustainable council requires robust asset management plans to ensure that its assets are managed in the most appropriate way to deliver the services that the community needs.

To ensure that this is achieved, a council's asset management plans must be integrated with all its strategic plans.

Asset management decisions should be informed by the evaluation of alternative means of service provision, full lifecycle costing, and performance measurement and monitoring.

Informed decision making recognises the long-lived character of infrastructure assets and the need to plan and budget for them on a full lifecycle basis beginning with the identification of a service need and the means to meet that need.

The integrated planning and reporting system reinforces the importance for councillors to consider all aspects of their council's services and programs when undertaking asset management planning. Asset management planning should not be done in isolation.

The following is an overview of the asset management planning component of the integrated planning and reporting system:

What are the general requirements for asset management planning?

- Each council must account for and plan for all of the existing assets under its ownership, and any new asset solutions proposed in its community strategic plan and delivery program.
- Each council must prepare an asset management strategy and asset management plan/s to support the community strategic plan and delivery program.

What is the minimum time frame for the asset management strategy and plan/s?

- The asset management strategy and plan/s must be for a minimum time frame of 10 years.

What is the basic structure of the asset management strategy?

- The asset management strategy must include an overarching council endorsed asset management policy.
- The asset management strategy must identify assets that are critical to the council's operations and outline risk management strategies for these assets.
- The asset management strategy must include specific actions required to improve council's asset management capability and projected resource requirements and timeframes.

What is the basic structure of the asset management plan(s)?

- The asset management plan(s) must encompass all the assets under a council's control.
- The asset management plan(s) must identify asset service standards.
- The asset management plan(s) must contain long term projections of asset maintenance, rehabilitation and replacement costs.

How should councils assess the condition of their assets?

- Councils are encouraged to adopt the following five-category model for assessing the condition of their assets.

Level	Condition	Description
1	Excellent	No work required (normal maintenance)
2	Good	Only minor work required
3	Average	Some work required
4	Poor	Some renovation needed within 1 year
5	Very poor	Urgent renovation/ upgrading required.

Asset management condition assessment model

What asset management reporting must councils do?

- Councils are encouraged to use the five-category assessment model for reporting on the condition of their assets in their annual financial statements in line with the [Local Government Code of Accounting Practice and Financial Reporting](#).

6.6 Capital expenditure

As councils are responsible for the prudent management of community resources, it is important that they undertake a capital expenditure review as part of their normal planning processes before committing to any major capital projects.

The council will need to consider the following before commencing any capital expenditure that is expected to cost in excess of 10 per cent of the council's annual ordinary rate or \$1 million, whichever is the greater (GST exclusive):

- Is the need for the additional facilities identified in the council's community strategic plan and asset management strategy?
- Capacity of council to conduct the project: does the long-term financial plan indicate financial capacity?
- Priority of the project in relation to existing capital commitments and future works: does it achieve an objective of the community strategic plan?
- Alternatives to the proposed works.
- All financial implications of the project.
- What community consultation has been undertaken and is there support for

- the project: does it achieve a desired community outcome?
- Accountability for project through regular reporting to the council.

Councillors are required to vote on capital projects and they should make sure that they are satisfied that the above requirements have been reported adequately to enable them to make an informed decision.

In addition to the minimum requirements for capital expenditure projects, projects forecast to exceed \$10 million council will also be required to complete a:

- business/management project plan
- risk management plan
- probity plan
- tender evaluation.

For more information, councillors can read the [Capital Expenditure Projects Guidelines](#) on the Office of Local Government website: www.olg.nsw.gov.au.

Further information on effective decision making can be found in [Section 2 – Roles, responsibilities and relationships](#).

6.7 Financial reporting

Clause 203(1) of the *Local Government (General) Regulation 2021* requires a council's responsible accounting officer to prepare and submit a quarterly budget review statement to the governing body of council. The quarterly budget review guidelines outline the necessary reporting requirements to be included in this report.

The quarterly budget review statement must show, by reference to the estimated income and expenditure that is set out in the operational plan adopted by council for the relevant year, a revised estimate of income and expenditure for that year.

It also requires the budget review statement to include a report by the responsible accounting officer as to whether or not they consider the statement indicates council to be in a satisfactory financial

position (with regard to its original budget) and if not, to include recommendations for remedial action. Legislative requirements together with the implementation of a formal reporting mechanism will ensure that councils have a robust and transparent budget reporting framework.

Quarterly budget review statements may be accompanied by commentary advising the governing body of any exceptional or unexpected items and explaining any anomalies that might be evident in the statements, as well as ratio analysis of council's performance against established sector performance measures and benchmarks.

It is important that councillors are able to understand the financial reports presented to them in the council meeting papers so that they can monitor council's performance and discharge their responsibilities as members of council's governing body.

It is not sufficient for councillors to solely rely on the assurances of council staff.

While the general manager is accountable to the governing body for the council's financial performance, councillors must feel appropriately informed and comfortable before signing off financial reports or agreeing to financial commitments.

Councillors must make sure that they ask enough questions to enable them to understand the financial situation of council. If the council's governing body feels that it has insufficient information on which to base a decision or monitor or assess a project or proposal it is important that the general manager is asked to provide further information.

Important questions to ask when evaluating financial reports include:

- Are the council's results above or below the benchmarks?
- Is there a variation between the original budget and quarterly results. Are the reasons known for this?
- Are the results improving or declining? If they are declining:
 - What are the reasons for this?
 - What is council doing to improve this in the future?
- What does the long-term financial plan show?
- Are the results comparable to the adopted budget?

The Office of Local Government has a number of benchmarks for various indicators that it uses to assess the financial sustainability of councils.

6.8 Other financial management issues

6.8.1 Goods and Services Tax (GST)

Councils are required to submit a GST compliance certificate to the Office of Local Government every year.

The council is required to sign the GST compliance certificate for the period 1 July to 30 June and forward it to the Office of Local Government by 31 July each year. The statement is to be signed by the general manager and responsible accounting officer.

6.8.2 Formation of companies

Section 358 of the *Local Government Act 1993* allows for the formation of corporations and other entities by councils, but only with the Minister's consent.

An entity for the purposes of section 358 means any partnership, trust, joint venture, syndicate or other body (whether or not incorporated).

It does not include any such entity that is of a class prescribed by the *Local Government (General) Regulation 2021* as not being within this definition. To date, the Regulation has not prescribed any class.

In applying for the Minister's consent under section 358, the council must demonstrate that the formation of, or the acquisition of the controlling interest in, the corporation or entity is in the public interest.

Applications are assessed by the Office of Local Government and referred to the Minister for approval. As part of the Office's assessment of a council's application, regard is given to the following:

- Is the proposal consistent with the functions of the council or an existing service that the council provides? Councillors should ensure that the application is consistent with the functions of the council or an existing service that the council provides.
- Will the proposed entity be legally separated from the council?
- Is the council currently financially viable? Further details on the formation of companies can be found in the Formation of Corporations and Entities (Section 358) Guidelines on the Office of Local Government website: www.olg.nsw.gov.au.

6.8.3 Public Private Partnerships (PPP)

A public-private partnership (PPP) is defined as an arrangement between a council and a private person for the purposes of providing infrastructure or facilities or delivering services in accordance with the arrangement or both. Legislative provisions relating to PPPs are set out in section 400B to 400N of the *Local Government Act 1993*.

A council must not enter into a PPP unless the council has provided the Office of Local Government with an assessment of the project to be carried out.

If the project is a significant project (defined as where the cost is more than \$50 million or council's contribution is more than 25 per cent of the council's annual revenue that is available for such projects) or if the Office of Local Government considers the project to have a high risk, the project will be referred to the Project Review Committee. The Minister may also refer any project to the Project Review Committee.

If their council is considering a PPP, councillors should consult the Office of Local Government's guidelines on the processes that councils are to follow. [The PPP guidelines](#) are available on the Office of Local Government's website: www.olg.nsw.gov.au.

7 Support for councillors



7.1 Annual fees paid to councillors

Being a councillor is an important commitment to the local community but the law does not technically consider it to be employment. As such, councillors are not entitled to wages, workers compensation, sick pay etc.

However, under the *Local Government Act 1993* councillors are entitled to receive an annual fee for carrying out their duties. This is paid in monthly instalments in arrears.

The Local Government Remuneration Tribunal decides each year what councillor fees will be. Councils are not allowed to pay councillors more than the set councillor fee.

Councillors fees are based on the size of the council, the number of people it serves and other criteria. In 2024 the fees range from \$10,220 per year for a small rural council to \$45,070 for councillors in the City of Sydney. The mayor of a council also receives an additional fee.

The fee is subject to tax, so councillors need to consider how it might affect their assessable income for tax purposes.

Councillors can request that they are paid below the fee fixed by the Tribunal if the full fee will adversely affect their entitlement to a pension, benefit or other allowance.

A council may decide to reduce or withhold fees from a councillor if they do not attend meetings and must not pay a fee if the councillor fails to attend meetings for more than three months. Councillors are also not entitled to receive a fee if they are suspended from office.

Councils also have the option to make superannuation contribution payments for councillors based on the superannuation guarantee amount.

Before a councillor can receive a superannuation contribution payment, they must nominate a superannuation account for the payment to be made into.

Further information about fees can be found in the latest determination on fees by the Local Government Remuneration Tribunal. Contact details are contained in [Appendix 2 – Key organisations](#).

Councillors are also encouraged to seek independent financial advice about issues relating to the fees they are paid.

7.2 Expenses and facilities

The *Local Government Act 1993* allows councils to cover some of the expenses that councillors incur in carrying out their duties. This includes training, travel, caring and telephone expenses.

Councils must also provide some facilities to assist councillors to carry out their duties such as access to cars, computers, internet, mobile phones, stationery or administrative assistance.

Councillors may only use the facilities provided to them for performing official duties. For example, a councillor cannot make personal calls from the mobile

phone that the council gives them unless there is a mechanism for declaring and reimbursing private usage.

The range of expenses and facilities provided to councillors varies between councils. However, all councils are required to provide adequate and reasonable support for costs associated with caring responsibilities. The council decides what expenses it will cover and what facilities it will provide as well as limits on these. This must be set out in a councillor expenses and facilities policy that is adopted at an open council meeting.

Council policies on the provision of expenses and facilities to councillors should ensure that councillors are not left out-of-pocket for performing their civic duties.

They should also ensure that expenses and facilities are reasonable, appropriate and provided in a transparent and accountable way.

There are guidelines about what councils can include in their policies. Councillor expenses covered by councils may include:

- training courses
- conferences
- travel to and from meetings, conferences and training
- accommodation, meals and refreshments

- phone calls or internet use associated with councillor duties
- the cost of providing care for children or other dependents while performing council duties
- facilities such as mobile telephones, laptops, stationery etc.

Councils are also encouraged to provide equipment and facilities to assist councillors with disabilities and special needs to access the services and information they need in order to perform their roles.

Further information about this can be found in the Guidelines for the payment of expenses and the provision of facilities for Mayors and Councillors in NSW available on the Office of Local Government's website: www.olg.nsw.gov.au.

Councillors should acquaint themselves with their council's councillor expenses and facilities policy.

7.3 Training and professional development

The roles and responsibilities of councillors are wide and varied, and there is a lot to learn. Councils should identify the training needs of their councillors and ensure that they have access to ongoing training and professional development throughout their term.

Under the Act, councillors have an obligation to make all reasonable efforts to acquire and maintain the skills necessary to perform their role.

In support of this, the *Local Government (General) Regulation 2021* requires councils to provide induction training to newly elected mayors and councillors and refresher training for returning mayors and councillors in the first six months after each ordinary council election and ongoing professional development over the balance of the term.

The Office of Local Government has issued [Councillor Induction and Professional Development Guidelines](#) under section 23A of the *Local Government Act 1993* to assist general managers and council staff to

develop, deliver, evaluate and report on the induction and professional development programs they are required to provide mayors and councillors under the Regulation.

The Office of Local Government and Local Government NSW also provide a wide range of support for councillors, including training and induction programs. More information on this is provided below.

Councillors have a responsibility to participate in the training and professional development opportunities offered to them. Councils are required to report on councillors' participation in induction training and ongoing professional development in their annual reports to ensure councillors are accountable to their electors for their learning.

7.3.1 Council run programs

The general manager is required under the Regulation to ensure the delivery of:

- **an induction program** for newly elected and returning councillors and a specialised supplementary induction program for the mayor within six months of their election, and
- **an ongoing professional development program** for the mayor and each councillor over the term of the council to assist them to acquire and maintain the skills necessary to perform their roles. The content of the ongoing professional development program is to be determined in consultation with the mayor and each councillor. It must be needs-based and reflect the specific skills, knowledge and personal attributes required by the mayor, each individual councillor and the governing body as a whole, to perform their roles effectively.

New councillors are encouraged to tell their council about their personal training needs.

7.3.2 Office of Local Government

Following the 2024 local government elections, the Office of Local Government will be delivering a series of “Hit the Ground Running” webinars. All councillors, including councillors who have served a previous term, are strongly encouraged to participate in the webinars following the elections.

7.3.3 Local Government NSW

As a service to its members, Local Government NSW provides professional development and training specifically catering to the needs of councillors.

Local Government NSW’s Councillor Professional Development Program includes a number of councillor induction programs and essential skills workshops to complete in the election term, these include:

- Councillor Induction
- Mayoral Onboarding
- Code of Conduct for Councillors
- Planning 101 for Councillors
- Understanding Local Government Financials for Councillors
- Integrated Planning & Reporting
- Community & Stakeholder Engagement
- Social Media Policy for Councillors
- Managing Media for Councillors
- Professional Ethics
- Dignity & Respect for Councillors
- Psychological Hazards for Councillors
- Speed Reading for Councillors

Local Government NSW also provides a free mentoring service for mayors and councillors. Mentors provide confidential advice to support councillors in their role as elected representatives.

Information on these programs can be obtained by contacting Local Government NSW via the contact details provided in [Appendix 2](#).

7.4 Other information and resources

New councillors may also benefit from establishing informal support networks and informal mentoring arrangements with more experienced councillors either in their council or in other councils. Many experienced councillors are often happy to mentor new councillors and share their knowledge and experience and provide advice.

8

Appendices



Appendix 1

Skills and knowledge checklist

The most important attribute for you to possess in your role as a councillor is a desire help people and meet the current and future needs of your local community as a whole.

While you do not require any special formal qualifications to be a councillor, having or being able to develop certain skills, knowledge and attributes will help you to be effective in your role.

Councillor Skills

You may wish to use this checklist to identify areas where you require training or assistance. However, it is also important to recognise that many of these skills can be learned and developed over time.

Good communication skills

This includes good listening and interpersonal skills, public speaking skills, the ability to accept alternative points of view as well as the ability to negotiate, mediate and resolve conflict.

Ability to engage with the community

Effective councillors inform residents about important local issues or council policies and seek their views. Councillors should also have an understanding of why this is important and the various ways to consult, such as through meetings, the media, the Internet, public forums, debates and surveys.

It is important for councillors to consult with as wide a cross-section of the community as possible. Developing networks within the local community can provide a sounding board against which the impact of council policies can be assessed.

Problem solving and analytical skills

This includes being able to get to the bottom of an issue and to think of different ways to resolve it, including advantages and disadvantages of each. It is also important for councillors to be able to think strategically and consider the long-term impacts of council policies.

Teamwork skills

This includes being able to work with others in meetings and on committees, and being able to complete any tasks on time that councillors agree to do.

Other councillors can be a valuable resource. Assuming they are not also newly elected, other councillors will already have a good idea of the main issues in the area and should have contact with key groups and individuals. They can show new councillors the ropes and introduce them to useful people.

Organisational skills

This includes being able to plan and manage time, keep appointments and deadlines, make priorities and manage stress. Practical ways to do so include:

- developing a filing system for documents and other information (in electronic or physical form) and emails
- learning to use existing council record keeping systems so as to prevent the duplication of information prioritising what is needed to be read and responded to having an effective diary management system
- having an effective diary management system
- prioritising what is needed to be read and responded to

Leadership qualities

This includes, for example, attributes such as energy and optimism, motivation, resilience, confidence, assertiveness, strategic thinking, advocacy, networking, active listening and negotiating.

Working collaboratively

This includes understanding how to work with colleagues, organisations and the community to solve problems, gather resources and build alliances.

Ethical accountable behaviour

This includes being able to follow a code of conduct that involves, amongst other things, respecting others, acting in the best interests of the community as a whole, transparent decision-making and accountability.

Councillor knowledge

Effective councillors understand the broader local government picture. It is important that councillors understand the structure of their council and its responsibilities to the community. This handbook is a useful reference tool for building that knowledge.

You should also remember that specialist council staff can provide information and advice on a wide variety of issues, but this must happen through the general manager, except where they have authorised another council officer to undertake the role.

Knowledge or understanding of strategic planning and financial reporting processes

This includes an understanding of the importance and role of strategic planning and a comprehensive understanding of budgets, the budgetary process and financial reports.

Knowledge or understanding of social justice principles

This includes having an understanding of why it is important to make sure all people in the community are treated equitably, have the right to be heard and are able to participate in public forums and events if they choose to.

Groups of people whose voices are not always heard include Aboriginal people, people with a disability, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, older people, women and young people.

Knowledge and understanding of local government functions

This includes, for example, land use planning, environmental management and community development and services.

Understanding of relevant State Government legislation

This includes, for example, the *Local Government Act 1993* and the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*. For further relevant legislation see [Appendix 3 - Key legislation](#).

To develop your skills, take the opportunity to attend the various training opportunities offered by your council, the Office of Local Government, Local Government NSW and other bodies.

This further development can be in the form of face-to-face training, conferences and seminars on councillor interest topics, industry webinars, and eLearning modules.

Tips for developing skills and knowledge

(adapted from: Improvement and Development Agency (I&DEA) UK –Councillor Guide 2011-12)

- Talk to the mayor and other councillors.
- Talk to the general manager.
- Take up training courses offered by the council or other training bodies.
- Read the council's strategic and operational plans to gain an overview of the council's agenda and priorities.
- Learn how the council makes decisions and how you can influence these on behalf of the people you represent.
- Take on new responsibilities with care— don't take on too much too soon.
- Learn to manage the paperwork—learn what you need to read and what you don't, and don't hoard outdated or irrelevant material.
- Set up a good filing system.
- Concentrate on matters that interest you and learn them thoroughly.
- Set up a schedule for visiting the key groups in your area over your first year— including faith groups, voluntary groups, major employers, schools, youth centres, tenants' and residents' associations.

Appendix 2

Key organisations

Further information on local government can be obtained from the following organisations or their websites.

Office of Local Government

Street address: (Nowra Office)
Level 1, 5 O'Keeffe Avenue
NOWRA NSW 2541

Postal address: (Nowra Office)
Locked Bag 3015
NOWRA NSW 2541

Phone: (02) 4428 4100
TTY: (02) 4428 4209
Email: olg@olg.nsw.gov.au
Website: www.olg.nsw.gov.au

Local Government NSW

Street address:
Level 8, 28 Margaret Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Postal address:
GPO Box 7003
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Phone: (02) 9242 4000
Fax: (02) 9242 4111
Email: lgnsw@lgnsw.org.au
Website: www.lgnsw.org.au

Councillor professional development program:

Phone: (02) 9242 4181/4081
Fax: (02) 9242 4188
Email: learning@lgnsw.org.au
Website: www.lgnsw.org.au

Local Government Professionals Australia, NSW

Street/postal address:
8/56 Church Avenue MASCOT NSW 2020

Phone: (02) 8297 1200
Email: nsw@lgprofessionals.com.au
Website: www.lgprofessionals.com.au

UTS Centre for Local Government

(Part of UTS: Institute for Public Policy and Governance)

Street address:
Level 21, UTS Tower Building 15 Broadway
Ultimo NSW 2007

Postal address:
PO Box 123
BROADWAY NSW 2007

Phone: (02) 9514 7884
Email: ippg@uts.edu.au
Website: www.clg.uts.edu.au

The University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Centre for Local Government delivers an extensive program of local government research, teaching and specialist consulting services. The Centre is part of the UTS Institute for Public Policy and Governance. It is an independent, cross-faculty centre within UTS and commenced operation in 1991 to support the advancement of Australian local government.

The UTS Centre for Local Government promotes a cooperative approach and maintains close ties with a large number of local government associations, professional institutes and academic bodies in Australia, the Asia-Pacific and globally. The Centre also works closely with local, state and federal government organisations.

Local government unions

The United Services Union (USU)

Street/postal address:

Level 7, 321 Pitt St,
SYDNEY, NSW 2000

Phone: (02) 9265 8211

Email: united@usu.org.au

Website: www.usu.org.au

The USU is the largest local government union in NSW with over 30,000 members and represents council employees in a range of professions.

Local Government Engineers Association (LGEA)

Street/postal address:

Level 1, 491 Kent Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000, Australia

Phone: (02) 9263 6555

Email: LGEA@professionalsaustralia.org.au

Website: www.lgea.org.au

The LGEA represents local government engineers and technical professionals.

The Development and Environmental Professionals' Association (depa)

Street/postal address:

106/118 Great North Road
FIVE DOCK NSW 2046

Phone: (02) 9712 5255

Email: ian@depa.au

Website: www.depa.au

depa represents local government workers in the fields of environmental and public health and building & development control and planning.

Council websites

Council website may be accessed by searching by the council's name or from the Office of Local Government's website ([under 'Local Government Directory'](#)).

Independent Commission Against Corruption

Street address:

Level 7, 255 Elizabeth Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Postal Address:

GPO Box 500
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Phone: (02) 8281 5999

Fax: (02) 9264 5364

TTY: (02) 8281 5773

Toll Free: 1800 463 909

Email: icac@icac.nsw.gov.au

Website: www.icac.nsw.gov.au

The Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) was established by the *Independent Commission Against Corruption Act 1988* to promote the integrity and accountability of public administration in NSW by: investigating, exposing and preventing corruption involving or affecting public authorities or public officials, and educating public authorities, public officials and members of the public about corruption and its detrimental effects on public administration and on the community.

The ICAC is a public authority, but is independent of the government of the day, and accountable to the people of NSW through the NSW Parliament.

NSW Ombudsman

Street/postal address:

Level 24, 580 George Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Phone: (02) 9286 1000

Fax: (02) 9283 2911

TTY: 1300 555 727 then ask for 02 9286 1000

Toll Free: 1800 451 524

Email: nswombo@ombo.nsw.gov.au

Website: www.ombo.nsw.gov.au

The NSW Ombudsman is an independent and impartial watchdog whose job is to make sure that the agencies they watch over fulfil their functions properly and improve their delivery of services to the public. The Ombudsman helps agencies to be aware of their responsibilities to the public, to act reasonably and to comply with the law and best practice in administration.

The Ombudsman is independent of the government of the day and accountable to the public through the NSW Parliament.

NSW Department Of Planning, Housing And Infrastructure

Contact: See website for contact details of relevant division

Website: <https://www.nsw.gov.au/departments-and-agencies/department-of-planning-housing-and-infrastructure>

The Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure comprises of a number of divisions and is responsible for the administration of a range of different legislation relevant to the functions of councils including the *Local Government Act 1993*, the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*, and the *Crown Land Management Act 2016*.

Local Government Grants Commission

Postal address:

Locked Bag 3015
NOWRA NSW 2541

Phone: (02) 4428 4131

Fax: (02) 4428 4199

Email: olg@olg.nsw.gov.au

Website: www.olg.nsw.gov.au

The primary function of the Local Government Grants Commission is to make recommendations to the Minister for Local Government on the allocation to local governing bodies in NSW of general-purpose grants under the provisions of the *Commonwealth Local Government (Financial Assistance) Act 1995*. The Commission may also report on any matter referred to it by the Minister.

Local Government Boundaries Commission

Postal address:

Locked Bag 3015
NOWRA NSW 2541

Phone: (02) 4428 4160

Fax: (02) 4428 4199

Email: EO@lgbc.nsw.gov.au

Website: www.olg.nsw.gov.au

The Local Government Boundaries Commission is a statutory authority constituted under section 263 of the *Local Government Act 1993*. It has the function of examining and reporting on any matter referred to it by the Minister for Local Government regarding the boundaries of local government areas and the areas of operation of county councils. Section 263(3)

specifies factors that the Boundaries Commission must have regard to when considering amalgamation or boundary alteration proposals.

NSW Civil And Administrative Tribunal (NCAT)

Street address:

NCAT Occupational Division Level 10, John Maddison Tower 86-90 Goulburn Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Postal address:

PO Box K1026 HAYMARKET NSW 1240

Phone: 1300 006 228

Website: www.ncat.nsw.gov.au

NCAT is empowered under the *Local Government Act 1993* to consider allegations of councillor misconduct and pecuniary interest breaches referred to it by the Office of Local Government. It is empowered to take disciplinary action against councillors with respect to such breaches including suspension from office and disqualification for up to five years.

Independent Pricing And Regulatory Tribunal (IPART)

Street address:

Level 16, 2-24 Rawson Place
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Postal address:

PO Box K35 Haymarket Post Shop
NSW 1240

Phone: 02 9290 8400

Email: ipart@ipart.nsw.gov.au

Website: www.ipart.nsw.gov.au

IPART annually reviews council rates and charges and sets the maximum increase councils can apply to their general income from these charges – this is called the rate peg. Councils can apply to IPART for special variations to the rate peg.

IPART also decides each year whether or not to set a maximum percentage ('waste peg') by which NSW councils can increase their domestic waste management annual charges.

Local Government Remuneration Tribunal

Postal address:

Public Service Commission GPO Box 3988
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Phone: (02) 9272 6000

Email: remunerationtribunals@psc.nsw.gov.au

Website: www.remtribunals.nsw.gov.au

The Local Government Remuneration Tribunal is constituted under Chapter 9, Division 4 of the *Local Government Act 1993*. The member of the Tribunal is appointed by the Governor for up to three years and is assisted by two Assessors. It is responsible for categorising councils, county councils and mayoral offices to determine the range of annual fees to be paid to mayors, councillors, members of county councils and chairpersons in each category.

The Tribunal is required to make a determination by no later than 1 May each year and make a report to the Minister within 7 days of making that determination. The report is to be published in the Government Gazette and also tabled in each House of Parliament.

Appendix 3

Key legislation

Key Legislation

It is important that councillors have an understanding of the legislation under which councils have responsibilities. The following legislation falls within the portfolio responsibilities of the Minister for Local Government:

Local Government Act 1993

This is the primary piece of legislation governing councils, county councils and joint organisations in NSW. The purpose of the Act is to:

- Provide the legal framework for the system of local government for New South Wales.
- Set out the responsibilities and powers of councils, councillors and other persons and bodies that constitute the system of local government.
- Provide for governing bodies of councils that are democratically elected.
- Facilitate engagement with the local community by councils, councillors and other persons and bodies that constitute the system of local government.
- Provide for a system of local government that is accountable to the community and that is sustainable, flexible and effective.

The Local Government (General) Regulation 2021 supports the powers of councils under the Act.

Section 23A of the Act provides that the “departmental chief executive” of the Office of Local Government may prepare, adopt or vary guidelines relating to the exercise by a council of any of its functions. A council must take any relevant guidelines issued under section 23A into consideration before exercising any of its functions.

Guidelines issued under section 23A are available on the Office of Local Government’s website at www.olg.nsw.gov.au.

Companion Animals Act 1998

The principal object of this Act is to provide councils with powers to ensure the effective and responsible care and management of companion animals (cats and dogs).

The Act also requires councils to promote awareness within its area of the requirements of this Act with respect to the ownership of companion animals, and to take such steps as are appropriate to ensure that it is notified or otherwise made aware of the existence of all dangerous and restricted dogs that are ordinarily kept within its area.

The Companion Animals Regulation 2018 supports the powers of councils under the Act.

Public Spaces (Unattended Property) Act 2021

The Public Spaces (Unattended Property) Act 2021 and accompanying *Public Spaces (Unattended Property) Regulation 2022*, protect valuable public spaces across the State from abandoned and unattended items and animals. The Act provides councils with powers and penalties to rid footpaths, streets, parks, bushland and waterways of abandoned and unattended property. The Act enables councils to store and dispose of unattended or abandoned items and animals taken into possession.

Owners and others responsible for private property left in public, such as shopping trolleys, unregistered and abandoned cars, unattended trailers and stray stock, face regulatory action if they do not remove their property within risk-based timeframes. This includes on-the-spot fines, higher court penalties, rapid seizure action and enforcement orders.

Other key legislation under which councils have responsibilities

Swimming Pools Act 1992

This Act applies to swimming pools (both outdoor and indoor) that are situated, or proposed to be constructed or installed, on premises on which a residential building, a moveable dwelling or tourist and visitor accommodation is located. It does not apply to swimming pools that are situated, or proposed to be constructed or installed, on any premises occupied by the Crown or by a public authority.

The Act also provides the framework for swimming pool inspections, compliance and non-compliance certificates associated with swimming pool barriers.

The Act requires councils to take such steps as are appropriate to ensure that they are notified of the existence of all swimming pools to which the Act applies that are within their area. The Act also requires councils to promote awareness within their area of the requirements of this Act.

The *Swimming Pools Regulation 2018* supports the powers of councils under the Act.

Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979 (EPAA)

Councils have a responsibility under the EPAA to encourage the proper management, development and conservation of natural and artificial resources for the purpose of promoting the social and economic welfare of the community and a better environment.

The Act also requires councils to promote and co-ordinate the orderly and economic use and development of land.

Under the EPAA councils also have responsibility for:

- consulting with relevant bodies in land use plan preparation
- assessing and weighing the interests and demands of different sections of the community with those of the development applicant in the determination of planning policies and development applications
- ensuring that Local Environmental Plans (LEPs) and development control decisions are related to the sound management of the environment and its resources
- identifying local planning needs
- developing policies addressing issues in the LEP

- ensuring that responsibilities for Environmental Impact Assessments are met.

The *Environmental Planning and Assessment Regulation 2000* supports the powers of councils under the Act.

Coastal Management Act 2016

This legislation provides a modern legal framework with the tools needed to plan for and protect the coast, while balancing property owners' rights with free public access to beaches.

A Coastal Management Manual is published by the Department Planning, Industry and Environment to assist coastal councils in managing their coastlines under the Act, including guidance regarding the preparation, adoption, implementation, amendment, review and the contents of a coastal management program (CMP).

Rock Fishing Safety Act 2016

This Act only applies to councils who have opted into this legislation. The legislation gives councils and other enforcement agencies including the NSW Police, DPI Fisheries and National Parks and Wildlife Service, power to enforce the mandatory wearing of approved lifejackets by rock fishers within declared areas. Enforcement options include the issuing of penalty infringement notices (PIN) with PIN's to be paid into the Recreational Fisheries (saltwater) Trust.

Opting in requires councils to undertake consultation with their communities and then to decide to opt into the process. Following the decision of the council to opt in the Minister needs to declare the areas, by Order, published in the Gazette. The Office of Local Government's Council Engagement Team can assist with the onboarding of any council that resolves to join this legislation.

Crown Land Management Act 2016 (CLM Act)

The CLM Act authorises local councils that have been appointed to manage dedicated or reserved Crown land (council managers) to manage that land as if it were public land under the *Local Government Act 1993*.

This means both greater autonomy and greater responsibilities for council managers. Most Crown reserves managed by council managers will be classified as community land under the *Local Government Act 1993* and require a plan of management (section 3.23(6) of the CLM Act).

Council managers can implement plans of management to manage their entire land portfolios

under one streamlined regime, reducing duplication, and removing some administrative complexity.

Council managers must ensure there is an adopted plan of management for all Crown reserves that they manage as community land as soon as practicable, to ensure that Crown land is lawfully used and occupied.

No change in the nature and use of the land can take place without a plan of management in place.

Further information on requirements for the management of Crown land by councils can be found at: reservemanager.crownland.nsw.gov.au

Native Title Act 1993 (NT Act)

Native title describes the rights and interests that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have in land and waters according to their traditional law and customs.

Native title is governed by the NT Act, and any claims made under the NT Act are made to the National Native Title Tribunal (www.nntt.gov.au).

Councils are required to employ or engage a qualified native title manager to provide advice on Council activities on Crown land and ensure compliance with the NT Act.

This role includes validating acts (such as developments and tenures) on Crown land, in-line with the NT Act.

Native title managers are required to provide written advice to the reserve manager who employed or engaged them where the reserve manager intends to perform one of the following functions in relation to the land they manage or own:

- grant leases, licences, permits, forestry rights, easements or rights of way
- mortgage the land or allow it to be mortgaged
- impose, require or agree to (or remove or release, or agree to remove or release)
- covenants, conditions or other restrictions on use in connection with dealings involving the land, or
- approve (or submit for approval) a plan of management for the land that authorises or permits any of the kinds of dealings referred to above.

Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983 (ALR Act)

The ALR Act is important legislation that recognises the rights of Aboriginal people in NSW.

The legislation recognises that land in NSW was traditionally owned and occupied by Aboriginal people, and is of spiritual, social, cultural and economic importance to Aborigines. It acknowledges that land for Aboriginal people in the past was progressively reduced without compensation.

Aboriginal communities in NSW can claim land to compensate them for historic dispossession of land and to support their social and economic development, under the ALR Act. These claims are made by NSW or Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs). The Office of the Registrar for the ALR Act registers these land claims and maintains the register. Successful claims result in the transfer of land in freehold title to the claimant LALC.

The Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure is responsible for assessing Aboriginal land claims against statutory criteria outlined in section 36 of the ALR Act. Generally, Crown land that is not being lawfully used or occupied, is not needed for an essential public purpose and is not impacted by Native Title (registered application or determination) can be granted through this process.

Protection of the Environment Operations Act 1997 (POEO Act)

The POEO Act provides councils with powers to protect, restore and enhance the quality of the environment, while having regard to the need to maintain ecologically sustainable development. The POEO Act also provides increased opportunities for public involvement and participation in environmental protection, and to rationalise, simplify and strengthen the regulatory framework for environmental protection.

The POEO Act also aims to reduce risks to human health and prevent the degradation of the environment by the use of mechanisms that promote pollution prevention and improve the monitoring and reporting of environmental quality on a regular basis.

The *Protection of the Environment Operations (General) Regulation 2009*, *Protection of the Environment Operations (Clean Air) Regulation 2010*, *Protection of the Environment Operations (Noise Control) Regulation 2017* and *Protection of the Environment Operations (Waste) Regulation 2014* support the powers of councils under the POEO Act.

Waste Avoidance and Resource Recovery Act 2001

This Act provides councils with powers to achieve integrated waste and resource management planning, programs and service delivery. The overall aim of the Act is to encourage the most efficient use of resources and to reduce environmental harm in accordance with the principles of ecologically sustainable development. The Act also aims to minimise the consumption of natural resources and the final disposal of waste by encouraging the avoidance of waste and the reuse and recycling of waste.

The *Waste Avoidance and Resource Recovery (Container Deposit Scheme) Regulation 2017* provides for the matters to support the implementation and operation of the NSW container deposit scheme, including refund sharing agreements between councils and waste contractors.

Biosecurity Act 2015

The *Biosecurity Act 2015* provides a framework for the prevention, elimination and minimisation of biosecurity risks posed by biosecurity matter, dealing with biosecurity matter, carriers and potential carriers, and other activities that involve biosecurity matter, carriers or potential carriers.

The *Biosecurity Regulation 2017* supports the powers of councils under the Act.

Road Rules 2014

This is the primary piece of legislation relating to roads and road related areas as well as parking control, including signage and road markings.

Road Transport Act 2013

This Act includes provisions for issue, service and payment of penalty notices; the liability of vehicle owners in relation to offences (including parking) and allows for the making of regulations regarding the parking of vehicles and parked or stopped vehicles on roads and road-related areas, including pay parking and parking offences.

Road Transport (General) Regulation 2021 (RT Regulation)

The RT Regulation provides for the use of pay parking schemes including meters, tickets and coupons, parking permits and mobility parking scheme authorities. It also gives councils the ability to reach agreement with other councils in relation to common pay parking schemes and pass a resolution in relation to fixed fees in accordance with guidelines set by the RMS.

The application of monies raised from parking may be applied by councils at its discretion, but it is also subject to the requirements of the *Local Government Act 1993*. The parking authority must also meet all costs associated with administering and maintaining a pay-parking scheme.

The offences relating to parking are also contained in the RT Regulation. The RT Regulation also defines different classes of persons as authorised persons within the meaning of the *Local Government Act 1993* for the purposes of section 679 of that Act (Penalty notices for certain offences).

Roads Act 1993

Local councils derive their powers as roads authority from the *Roads Act 1993*. In this capacity, they are responsible for the management of all public roads within their area, other than freeways, Crown roads or public roads controlled by another public authority, and private roads.

The *Roads Regulation 2018* supports the powers of councils under the Act.

Transport Administration Act 1988

This Act includes the power to delegate functions of Roads and Maritime Services and powers to regulate traffic management and safety, including traffic control devices and special event parking schemes, as well as the interrelationship with laws relating to local government.

Legislation under which councillors have personal responsibilities

Councillors also have personal responsibilities to comply with the requirements of other Acts and Regulations. The following are only some of the legislation councillors must comply with. Local Government NSW can provide more detailed support to assist councillors meet their compliance obligations. Councillors should also seek advice and be guided by their general manager in compliance matters.

State Records Act 1998

This Act regulates the manner in which councils are required to manage their records. All correspondence received by a council and councillors in their official capacity could be considered records under this legislation.

It is unlikely that correspondence to councillors about a councillor's personal affairs would be included in the definition of a record. However, correspondence to councillors from residents and ratepayers about the personal matters of the residents and ratepayers as they relate to a council's business may be included.

Councils should have policies in place for the good management of council's records to assist councillors comply with this legislation.

Compliance with the *State Records Act 1998* will also assist in complying with related legislation such as the *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009* and the *Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998*.

The *State Records Regulation 2024* prescribes councils as State collecting institutions in relation to private records in a local studies or similar collection.

Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009

The *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009* (the GIPA Act) establishes a proactive, more open approach to gaining access to government information. It:

- authorises and encourages the proactive release of information by NSW public sector agencies including councils
- gives members of the public a legally enforceable right to access government information
- ensures that access to government information is restricted only when there is an overriding public interest against releasing that information.

The guiding principle of the GIPA Act is public interest. It is generally presumed that all government agencies will disclose or release information, unless there is an overriding public interest against doing so. Under the GIPA Act it is compulsory for agencies to provide information about their structure, functions and policies, and agencies are encouraged to proactively and informally release as much other information as possible.

An access application (also known as a formal application) should only need to be lodged as a last resort. Where access applications are needed, the GIPA Act outlines the process that applicants and agencies should follow, as well as the options for reviewing decisions about an access application.

Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998

The *Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998* (PIIP Act) outlines how New South Wales public sector agencies including councils manage personal information.

The PIIP Act prescribes 12 Information Protection Principles. These are legal duties that describe what NSW public sector agencies (including councils) must do when they handle personal information. They detail how personal information must be collected, stored, used and disclosed as well as rights to access personal information.

Work Health and Safety Act 2011

It is important that councillors ensure that they are familiar with the key provisions of the Work Health and Safety Act 2011 (WHS Act). Councillors have the following duties under the WHS Act:

- take reasonable care for their own health and safety
- take reasonable care that their acts or omissions do not adversely affect the health and safety of other persons
- comply, so far as they are reasonably able, with any reasonable instruction that is given to them to ensure compliance with the WHS Act.

It is potentially an offence under the WHS Act to fail to comply with these duties.

Councillors must comply with the local WHS arrangements at council and have an WHS induction. Councils should have local policies dealing with arrangements for accessing workplaces and building sites.

Anti-Discrimination Act 1977

This legislation prohibits discrimination against any person on the basis of their race, gender, disability, religious beliefs, age, marital status, sexuality and carer's responsibilities.

These obligations are also reflected in the Model Code of Conduct for Local Councils in NSW.

Further information about NSW legislation

The Local Government Act 1993 and all other NSW Acts and regulations may be accessed on the website of the Parliamentary Counsel's Office at www.legislation.nsw.gov.au.

Appendix 4

Dealing with the media

The following information has been developed by Local Government NSW. Local Government NSW delivers training to provide councillors with practical techniques to enable them to be more comfortable, confident and effective in dealing with the media.

Media regularly contact councils for comment on local issues, and councils rely on media to promote upcoming events and projects, and to voice their views on certain issues.

The media and councils need each other, but it is a sensitive relationship fraught with risk.

Most councils have media guidelines and the mayor is often the official spokesperson.

There are, however, instances where a councillor is best placed to comment – either because the mayor isn't available, or it is an issue of particular interest/expertise to the councillor.

Below are some tips on getting the most out of the media and avoiding the pitfalls.

General

Be accessible and responsive – journalists are simply doing their job and are the gateway to communicating council views, events and projects.

Follow council policies and guidelines on media contact.

- ✓ Nothing is really 'off the record' so be prepared for everything you say to a journalist to be used.
- ✓ Only say 'no comment' if you have a reasonable excuse (like the issue is in court). It is better to provide a general statement than nothing at all.
- Stick to matters of official council business – avoid personal comments about other issues and individuals.

If you are approached for an interview

- Know your subject and have an understanding of the likely questions and angle of the journalist's story.
- Ask yourself who the audience is and what you want to communicate to them.
- Devise a set of key messages that are short and precise and get your messages across.
- Practice! Even the most seasoned media performers have to prepare to get it right.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, do not make something up or guess. Simply say "I will have to get back to you", "I'll have to confirm" or repeat one of your key messages.
- Don't be afraid to pause while you think of the correct, and best, answer.
- Don't be persuaded to say something that isn't true, isn't your view or isn't appropriate for you to comment on.

For TV

- ✗ Avoid wearing dark or very bold colours – keep your outfit simple.
- ✗ No sunglasses!
- ✗ Don't fidget or shift your eyes.
- ✓ Keep your sentences short and sharp.
- ✓ Don't be afraid to show passion or some emotion, but control it.
- ✓ Repeat your key messages as much as possible.

Press releases

- Keep them to one page.
 - Make the heading catchy and interesting.
 - Make sure the first sentence captures the most newsworthy information.
 - Keep sentences and paragraphs short and to the point.
 - Make sure there are contact numbers for further comment at the bottom of the release.
 - Ensure that spelling and grammar are accurate.
-

Social media

Most councils now use X, Facebook, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Youtube, Instagram and other social media to engage local communities. As an elected member you will need to find out what social media policies and guidelines exist for your council, and apply them accordingly.

Appendix 5

Tips for effective community engagement

The following checklist has been adapted from the NSW Government Regional Communities Consultative Council's 'A summary guide to consulting with rural and regional communities'.

Identify the issue

- What is the nature of the issue?
- What needs to be discussed?
- What are the possible options or contentious issues?

Identify the objective of the engagement activity

- What are you aiming to achieve?
- Why are you talking to the community?
- What information do you need to find out?

Identify who you need to talk to

- Who is affected by the issue?
- Can target groups be identified?
- What are the particular needs of different groups?
- What particular activities should be included to ensure that all relevant stakeholders are able to be included (e.g. Aboriginal community members, young people, families, and people with disabilities)?

What techniques will be needed

- Are the techniques appropriate for the audience?
- What other methods could be utilised to reach the target audience?

Allocate sufficient resources to the process

- Would a neutral facilitator assist?
- Is consensus decision making a goal?
- Has sufficient time been allocated to the engagement activity?

Involve participants in the process

- Has sufficient information been provided to participants to enable informed participation?
- Is written information concise and jargon free?
- Are there appropriate aids to assist communication (e.g. interpreters and hearing loops), are special interests respected, and is the process understood?

Maximise the ability of the community to participate

- What are the most appropriate methods to contact participants?
- Is the activity resourced sufficiently to take into account distance, travel time etc.?
- Is the location appropriate for the participants (not just the council)?
- Is childcare, aged care and disabled access provided?
- Has adequate notice been given?
- Have participants been encouraged to participate through personal contact?
- Have cultural protocols been observed (e.g.: acknowledgment of country)?
- Can the expenses of low income participants be met?
- Is a meeting the best way to achieve the desired outcome?

Realistic timetables

- Is the community engagement activity a one-off or ongoing?
- Is the timetable practical and realistic?
- What are the time barriers and what strategies are in place if they cannot be met to the community's satisfaction?

Resource management

- What resources are needed?
- Is training or are external personnel needed?
- Are existing community resources being used?
- Can this engagement activity or meeting be undertaken within an existing community meeting process?

Outcomes

- Are the desired outcomes clear to everyone?
- Are the outcomes agreed?
- How will the outcomes be documented?
- How will the information be used?
- How will decisions be reached?
- How will the community be informed of the outcomes?

Evaluation

- How will success be defined and measured?
- How can the community participate in the evaluation process?
- How is the evaluation recorded?
- How are the results of the evaluation provided back to the community participants and wider community?

Appendix 6

Standards of conduct for councillors

Councillors play a vital role in serving local communities.

To do this effectively you need to uphold the highest standards of behaviour to ensure the public has trust and confidence in local government.

What are the expected standards of behaviour?

The following standards of behaviour are expected of councillors. You must:

- not conduct yourself in a manner that is likely to bring the council into disrepute
- act lawfully, honestly and exercise a reasonable degree of care and diligence in carrying out your functions
- not bully, harass or discriminate against others, or support others who do so
- consider issues consistently, promptly and fairly
- ensure that development decisions are properly made and that parties involved in the development process are dealt with fairly
- not participate in binding caucus votes
- not behave in a disorderly or disruptive way at meetings
- disclose and appropriately manage any conflicts of interest including those arising from reportable political donations
- not accept money or gifts of value and avoid situations that give rise to the appearance of securing favourable treatment
- not direct council staff or influence staff in the exercise of their role
- use and secure information appropriately and do not disclose confidential information
- use council resources ethically, effectively, efficiently and carefully
- not make complaints improperly, take detrimental action in response to complaints or disclose information about code of conduct matters.

These standards are described in detail in the Model Code of Conduct for Local Councils in NSW. The code is a legal document that all officials are obliged to understand and follow. The Model Code of Conduct forms the basis of each council's code of conduct.

What happens if the standards are not met?

In the very small number of cases where councillors fail to follow the code of conduct, this will be dealt with in accordance with the Procedures for the Administration of the Model Code of Conduct for Local Councils in NSW.

Complaints about a breach of these standards by anyone other than the general manager are to be made at first instance to general manager. Complaints about the general manager are to be made to the mayor. Non-serious complaints will be resolved informally. Where the complaint cannot be resolved informally, a complaint may be formally investigated by an independent conduct reviewer.

Breaches by councillors may result in the following action:

- censure
- referral to the Office of Local Government for disciplinary action including but not limited to suspension for up to three months
- referral by the Office of Local Government to the NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal for suspension of up to six months or disqualification from holding civic office
- automatic disqualification for five years on a third suspension for misconduct.



Griffith City Council building

Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure
Office of Local Government

