

Involving Locals in Local Plan Making

December 2014

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1. Councils involved in the research

Executive Summary

Councils have been developing more proactive, professional engagement strategies that are involving communities on strategic plan making matters much earlier in the plan making process than in past years.

Involving locals in local plan making is a key planning issue for all councils. How councils inform, consult, involve and collaborate with communities is improving and is likely to continue to do so, in the future. Aligning this practice with the plan making process is the key to success. Taking a long term approach is critical so that the consultation process can target the planning issues that matter, enabling communities to be well informed on the strategic framework, as the relevant point in the plan making process so that feedback can be more meaningful and productive.

This research by Local Government NSW (LGNSW) has involved 20 councils, covering metropolitan, regional and rural areas. It demonstrates that councils have experienced a cultural shift in this area of work. Councils are confidently developing better practice, and experimenting with new ideas. There has been a 'gear shift'; as this work expands, going both deeper and wider in approach.

This change in practice is based on a number of trends that include:

- a growing professional commitment to engagement practice by councils;
- pressure from communities to be more involved in planning decisions;
- an increasing range of communication tools to connect more effectively with communities; and
- the influence of the Integrated Planning and Reporting (IPR), (spelt out in Local Government Act 1993 Chapter 13 Part 2 Strategic Planning), that has inspired better practice and encouraged more alignment on engagement strategies internally within councils.

It is also observed that the more beneficial outcomes are achieved where Councillors and staff work as a team, applying an agreed approach to managing the contentious issues, which inevitably arise with this type of work.

All participating councils agreed that consultation at the Draft Local Environmental Plan, referred to as Stage 3 of the plan making process, is generally too late in enabling communities to be involved in strategic planning issues. Hence, best practice engagement for strategic planning matters has moved to the formative stage of plan making, referred to as Stage 1, and the planning study phase, referred to as Stage 2, in this research.

The research has found that the more effective engagement strategies are around Land Use Studies, such as Housing Strategies and Rural Land Studies, and Local Precinct Based Planning Studies, such as CBD Centre Studies, Main Street Studies in rural towns, Beach Front Redevelopments and specific Precinct Redevelopment Masterplans. These studies usually involve a series of consultation processes that seek preliminary feedback on the more formative ideas, which is followed up with more consultation as the plans take shape.

Engagement with communities on the more conceptual aspects of strategic planning, at Stage 1 of the plan making process, continues to remain challenging. However, councils are adopting techniques used under the IPR process, with the use of reference groups and forums, as a method of obtaining earlier feedback on more complex and esoteric issues.

Nevertheless, all councils wrestle with the vexed issue of ‘when to engage’ and the level of information communities need to be able to participate in a meaningful way. If councils consult too early, when issues are ill defined, the response level is usually low. When the plans are more concrete the response levels are usually higher. At what point and with what level of information, do councils apply best practice engagement methods?

In practise, councils experiment with this vexed issue by adopting a variety of methods to test ideas, and delivering enough direction and information to facilitate an informed conversation.

All councils are developing better ways of presenting information, both in exhibition formats and online. Most metropolitan councils heavily rely on online feedback, however rural and regional councils more heavily rely on printed material to inform and receive feedback. Yet, all participating councils recognise the importance of providing professional advice and face-to-face conversations to explain and facilitate feedback.

Overall the work is improving quickly, however all councils, to various degrees, have to manage limited budgets and resources to implement sometimes ambitious engagement projects. In addition, time limitations are placed on councils to complete DLEPs, which will further limit the scale and depth of many engagement projects. These issues will continue to be a problem in plan making, especially where councils are under pressure by the State Government and industry to update planning instruments quickly.

LGNSW has undertaken this research to document current community engagement practice used by councils in plan making processes. The focus is on ‘up front’ engagement as this is considered to be the gap in research and the area of most interest. Councils endorse more ‘up front’ engagement as the more effective means of involving locals in strategic planning issues, before the strategic planning decisions have been settled.

This research supports ‘up front’ engagement and provides guidance to councils who are endeavouring to develop better practice in this area.

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the Report

The purpose of the paper is to document current community engagement practices used by councils in plan making processes. The focus is on 'up front' engagement as this is considered to be the gap in research and the area of most interest. The proposed new planning system had endorsed more 'up front' engagement as a legitimate and appropriate means of including locals in local plan making decisions. While the key legislative elements of the new planning system have stalled, other elements involving community engagement, e-planning and cultural change are progressing. The objective of 'up front' engagement is to involve the community in the strategic planning decisions that inform the development of the local plans.

The research indicates that what constitutes 'up front' community engagement has shifted to the more preliminary stages of plan making, with the development of the formative planning documents and studies that form the strategic framework for the preparation of the Draft Local Environment Plan (DLEP).

To assist clarity this research divides plan making into three stages that are considered to be as follows:

- Stage 1: The formative and visionary stage of plan making that sets the objectives and identifies the planning issues. Often councils prepare Discussion Papers on Land Use issues with reference to the may rely outcomes of the Community Strategic Plan under the Integrated Planning and Reporting process.
- Stage 2: Planning Study stage- This involves a series of land use studies in topics and or are based on a Locality or Precinct model; and
- Stage 3: Planning controls – This constitutes the preparation and delivery of the Draft Local Environment Plan (DLEP).

'Up front' community engagement is considered to be the practice that relates to Stage 1 and 2 of the plan making process.

Given that the proposed new planning system advocates for 'more up-front engagement', this report focuses on what this means for councils.

The research is based on extensive interviews with a representative sample of councils across NSW about current community engagement practices in local plan making processes. The research project was designed to document and explore current and emerging issues for councils.

The project has four components:

- Documenting current practice undertaken by NSW councils;
- Identifying the issues arising from current practice;
- Making general and specific observations arising from the research; and
- Developing conclusions about how practice can be further developed.

This report is structured in four sections. Section 1 describes the purpose and approach to the research; Sections 2 and 3 contain general and specific observations and the Section 4 presents the conclusions.

1.2 Research Methodology

The following research methodology was adopted:

Steps to the Research Methodology		
Scoping the Issues	A literature review of current practice	October/ November 2013
Fact finding	Preparing a list of questions to ask council staff on community engagement on planning matters- trialling the questions; Developing a list of representative councils to interview and set up interviews; Undertaking in-depth interviews with council staff; Documenting information and checking accuracy.	December- March 2014
Collating feedback	Preparing draft report and circulating it to participating councils for comment.	April 2014
Verify findings and conclusions	Holding a forum of participants; and Finalising report with input from forum.	May 2014
Final Report	Endorsement of the report by the LGNSW Board.	2014

The research approach chosen was to undertake in-depth interviews with key staff of a representative selection of councils across NSW. It was considered that intensive interviews would be a more beneficial means of obtaining information that would be preferable to a more restricted survey approach. This approach enabled an in-depth discussion on the issues more relevant to each council.

Twenty councils were involved in the research work, which comprised a cross section of metropolitan, regional and rural councils. Refer to Appendix 1 for the list of participating councils.

The interviews with Sydney councils were usually held at the council offices with a duration of one hour or longer. This enabled meaningful discussion around issues on and associated with current practice, as well as allowing a number of staff from different divisions of council to be involved in the discussion. A list of questions was used to guide the conversations and provide comparative information on key issues.

Most interviews of staff from regional and rural councils were held over the phone, but not all. Some face to face interviews were held in Sydney, where staff were available to travel to Sydney. Notes on interviews were returned to staff to be checked for accuracy.

The research project was positively received by councils with many staff wanting to be involved and expressing an interest in other councils experience and the overall findings of the project. Appendix A provides a list of councils involved in the research.

1.3 Limitations of the research

The research focused on engagement practices used by councils in plan making matters and not on engagement practices in relation to assessment of Development Applications (DAs).

This is because it is acknowledged that this type of engagement is more challenging and less documented, than consultation on individual development proposals.

LGNSW acknowledges the importance of councils engaging with communities on DAs. This report must not be read as minimising the importance of engagement on DAs, but rather a recognition that there is a gap in the research on what is happening, in relation to up front engagement strategies around strategic planning issues.

2. Key Observations

2.1 Councils support 'up front' community engagement

This report reveals that 'up front' engagement is essential in delivering an effective engagement strategy, and that every council interviewed is implementing engagement strategies that 'go beyond' the legal requirements for preparing a DLEP. All participating councils to varying degree are applying engagement strategies at Stage 1 and 2 of the plan making process, as well as exceeding the regulatory requirements surrounding the exhibition of the DLEP.

All councils interviewed strongly agreed that councils have shifted their focus to varying degrees, from end stage engagement strategies, required by legislation, to earlier methods of engagement on more conceptual and formative plans (Stage 1) and preliminary Planning Studies (Stage 2) that lay the foundations of the emerging planning instrument. Everyone interviewed agreed that this is not only developing practice, but is considered to be best practice.

Nevertheless, it should not be interpreted that councils do not support the current procedural practices that are required to exhibit the DLEP (Stage 3). These procedures are considered essential in providing a transparent and fair process that protects public and private rights. It provides an essential means for communities to 'check' the proposed plan. However, the councils interviewed, generally viewed this as being generally 'too late' in the process. It is considered to be a less productive way of having an informed discussion on the strategic planning issues, often triggering negative reactive responses from communities.

The research reveals that councils interviewed support the general tenor of the *A New Planning System for NSW: White Paper* that promotes 'up front' community engagement and that early 'up front' engagement is a more means of involving communities in local plan making issues.

The key observation is that 'up front' engagement is increasingly becoming the norm, but that this trend is limited by lack of funding and time frames to deliver the resulting planning instrument.

The research has also revealed consistent themes across councils that are listed below and will be discussed in order:

- Councils are becoming increasingly proactive in seeking feedback on plan making matters and practice is expanding quickly;
- How councils engage with communities is becoming increasingly professional;
- Long term, more integrated community engagement practices are being implemented;
- Council support face-to-face conversations; and
- 'Up front' engagement requires commitment from Councillors and planning staff.

2.2 Councils are being increasingly proactive

Every council interviewed indicated that their engagement strategies in all areas of plan making have been purposely expanding over the last five or ten years.

The way councils undertake engagement practices is undergoing a 'gear shift'. There is a noticeable change in practice where councils are now driving a more expansive, proactive and

more thorough engagement practice across the sector that is influencing the preparation and delivery of local plans. This is being driven by a range of issues that are covered below.

Councils strongly indicated that the level of community engagement on plan making matters is likely to further expand in future years. This is because councils are adapting to 'what works', and learning from each other, to achieve better outcomes within their capacity and resources. Councils are all endeavouring to develop more effective outcomes, within their constrained budgets.

Notwithstanding, this noticeable and significant change in practice, there is a degree of variation across the sector that reflects the level and constraints imposed by limited funding and time constraints to deliver outcomes.

2.3 The quality of engagement is improving

Councils are applying engagement strategies that are seeking to obtain more meaningful feedback from communities in the preliminary plan making stages, so that the feedback can be incorporated within the planning process, rather than relying on feedback towards the final stages of the plan making process. This has required councils to improve their processes of informing, consulting and involving communities in every aspect of plan making.

All councils interviewed are applying engagement strategies on plan making matters that are based on formally adopted engagement protocols and policies, some of which have been in operation for many years and most being updated with the introduction of the Integrated Planning and Reporting (IPR) process. These engagement protocols or policies are generally based on the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) principles of engagement that enable the council to apply appropriate engagement strategies to the scale and risk of the proposed plan. Increasingly, councils are seeking to not only better 'inform' the community on plan making matters, but to 'consult' and 'involve' communities more and more in plan making matters. Some councils are also implementing strategies that aim to collaborate with communities.

Table 1 portrays the Spectrum of Public Participation developed by IAP2. This figure reveals the range of goals that may apply to an engagement strategy on local plan making matters and the requirements on councils to meet those goals, together with common techniques used by councils to deliver these goals.

Figure 1: International Association for Public Participation Spectrum of Public Participation

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Public participation goal	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.
Promise to the public	We will keep you informed	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will adopt what you advise.
Example techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public Exhibition • Information sessions • Council website • Print material • CDs, film • Advertising 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open meetings • Forums • Reference groups • Surveys • Social media/ twitter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face-to-face forums/ workshops • Reference groups-online and face to-face 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing face-to-face forums/ workshops • Consensus-building forums e.g. Charettes • Local Participatory decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizen jury

There are two other factors that are influencing practices in addition to councils adopting a more professional approach to engagement. These are as follows:

- **The expansion of communication strategies and tools**
The methods to engage and the range of communication tools used by councils are quickly expanding to inform and facilitate feedback from communities, with the development of information technology and social media. Councils now have a greater range of tools to update relevant information on plan making matters and the ability to receive on-going feedback across differing formats.

- **The rise in community expectations about engagement**

The councils reported that community expectations are rising markedly on how councils deliver information and enable communities to provide feedback. For example, it is not acceptable for councils to rely on residents to ‘turn up’ to events that are advertised in the local papers. Increasingly, communities expect to be able to access information out of office hours and provide feedback in formats other than written letters.

Figure 2 below illustrates how the desire to improve professional engagement practice, the increasing opportunity to utilise better communication tools and the rise in community expectations of being involved in plan making, creating a cyclic effect that results in delivering better community engagement practices on plan making matters across the sector.



Figure 2: Rise in Professional Practice: The inter-relationship of the desire to improve professional practice, increasing opportunities to expand communication tools and the rise in community expectations is improving professional engagement practice across Local Government.

2.4 Councils are constrained by limited resources

Most councils indicated that they anticipated that practice was likely to continue to improve with the expansion of communication tools, and increasing pressure from communities to be more involved in plan making issues. However, there was range of views on whether council would have increased resources to administer and fund the expected changes.

The research revealed that there were notable examples of professional commitment by planners to implement extensive programs on limited budgets. A significant proportion of councils indicated that their engagement strategies relied on planning staff attending workshops and staffing information booths out of business hours. There is a considerable cultural shift occurring in this field that is being driven by growing professionalism in the planning industry and the increasing expectations of communities and Councillors. This needs to be matched with resources.

Some councils indicated that budgets needed to be more realistic to reflect the work involved and that staff needed more training to implement best practice.

The councils varied in what they indicated they needed to improve practice. Most councils supported further education, but there was a difference of opinion on what would be considered helpful. They agreed that education needed to be tailored to the needs and context of the council to be valuable. Some councils considered that a mentoring program would be suitable, especially for councils that were more isolated.

The research was less clear as to whether guidelines would be helpful as most of the surveyed councils expressed a level of caution about how guidelines would be applied. Councils agreed that there could be danger in revamping guidelines that could inadvertently introduce 'red tape' around a practice that needed to be specifically tailored to the local context of the plan making process.

Nevertheless, there was agreement that sharing of information, experience and resources between councils would be helpful.

It was also noted that there was general agreement that there were few opportunities for Council staff to be up-skilled, on applying engagement practices to plan making matters. Clearly, some councils were developing better alliances within council, with the corporate planning team, to up-skill staff.

However, for most councils already experimenting with new ideas, there was considered to be few places of education that could offer the level of combined theory and practice needed for councils to develop further practice. On the whole, most councils indicated that they would be supportive of educational opportunities where they could learn more from each other, and from consultants with expertise in the field. However, this learning had to be practical rather than theoretical in approach.

2.5 'Up front' engagement requires commitment from Councillors and planning staff

Despite the shift in practice, the councils said that 'up front' engagement is 'hard work' and may directly or indirectly deal with controversial issues. The view from those interviewed was that it requires team work from councils to be effective. Professional commitment by council planning staff and supportive direction from Councillors is needed to develop the most effective strategies.

Some councils indicated that they have developed innovative approaches to engagement to manage controversial and divisive planning issues that are under review.

The research found that the strategies that have been more effective are those where the Councillors not only 'sign off' on the strategy, but have confidence and an appropriate level of involvement in the process that demonstrates to the community that the process is important and will be taken seriously.

Councils have found that engagement strategies are more effective where the engagement strategy is delivered within the term of the council, to avoid unimportant matters becoming unnecessarily politicised.

In addition, practice is considered to be most effective where the Councillors are not only seen to be publicly endorsing the process, but also adopting a listening role in the process. Where issues do become controversial, councils found that it was important for Councillors not to feel side-lined in the process, but be appropriately informed and involved, so that the council could come to an agreed position on the findings of the engagement process.

In rural and regional areas, Councillors tend to be more involved in attending workshops and forums run for the community, and are more often used to 'open' an event of this nature.

Due to the political sensitivities around some planning issues in Sydney, Councillors are more wary of attending community workshops as it can be more challenging to be impartial to the issues.

Nevertheless, all councils interviewed indicated that Councillors' support of the engagement strategy was essential to its success. Councillors can have an important role in educating communities on planning issues and encouraging them to participate in the planning process in a constructive and timely manner. The Councillors' attendance of events could be seen by the community as a means of endorsing the process, yet both Councillors and staff are aware that the role of the Councillors can politicize some issues and that developing an agreed approach was essential, as to whether the emerging plan would be supported by the full council at the end of the process.

The examples below illustrate these points.

Cowra	<p>Cowra Shire Council developed a new Local Environmental Plan over a number of years, which was successful in building consensus with a community that was deeply divided on its rural planning policy.</p> <p>The engagement strategies used throughout the preparation of the plan encouraged a significant cultural shift from noisy public meetings to calmer information workshops. This approach was developed by team work of senior staff and Councillors.</p>
Tamworth	<p>Tamworth Council suggests that Councillor's role in the engagement strategy is to verbalise the vision, open the conversation and allow the staff to continue the debate. Hence, Councillors are able to 'set the scene' and then 'bow out' of the process that enables the staff to follow through with the exercise.</p>

3. Developing better practice

This section outlines how practice has evolved and is evolving around ‘up front’ community engagement and is discussed under the stages of plan making. As indicated earlier this report refers to ‘up front’ engagement, as the engagement practice around the formative higher level plan making (Stage 1) and more expansive plan making processes associated with Planning Studies (Stage 2).

The findings of the research are discussed under the following headings:

- Developing a long term approach;
- Engagement strategies for formative plan making- Stage 1 plan making;
- Engagement strategies for Planning Studies- Stage 2 plan making;
- Engagement strategies for locality/precinct based planning- Stage 2 plan making; and
- Engagement strategies around the LEP process- Stage 3 plan making.

3.1 Developing a long term approach

Councils interviewed indicated that they have adopted, or are developing, engagement strategies for plan making that are long term, sequential and better integrated into the on-going plan making process. This approach to engagement allows councils to design the engagement strategy to focus on what is important and enable communities to be informed in a sensible and progressive way. This delivers a more coherent process and is more able to attract meaningful feedback and better outcomes.

Importantly, the councils agreed that a staged approach to engagement enables communities to better understand the strategic context that can be followed with the detail.

See examples in the table below.

<p>Randwick City Council</p>	<p>Randwick undertook a series of engagement practices that followed a number of key land use themes. A Discussion Paper was developed on 6 key themes that presented the issues and suggested options to address the issues identified. The themes covered Residential, Business Centre, Industrial, Special Uses, Open Space and Environment and Randwick Education and Health Specialised Centre.</p> <p>The approach was educative, sustained and interactive enabling residents to follow the strategy and engage in an informed manner. This council was nominated for a PIA NSW Award in 2012 for this approach.</p>
<p>Forbes Shire Council</p>	<p>Forbes prepared two preliminary planning documents to inform the LEP/DCP, the Issues Paper 2005 and the Forbes Growth Management Strategy 2007. As the Issues Paper attracted limited feedback, council adopted a more proactive consultation process that included a series of small forums, to obtain feedback on the Draft Strategy 2007. This proved to be a more meaningful exercise than the former ‘scatter-gun’ approach to consultation.</p>

<p>North Sydney Council</p>	<p>In early 2012 council resolved to undertake a planning study to provide an integrated planning approach to the emerging educational precinct adjoining the North Sydney CBD. In particular it sought to develop new strategies and initiatives to provide defined public benefits in conjunction with any new development, improve urban design and street level amenity, improve connectivity between the CBD and the various educational campuses, improve traffic planning; and protect residential amenity.</p> <p>To do this, Council undertook a two-step approach which involved the preparation of a draft Planning Study followed by a Masterplan. The draft Planning Study was publicly exhibited and feedback was actively sought from stakeholders through direct letters, presentations and meetings and written submissions. The draft Planning Study received widespread support for identifying issues and proposed strategies to enhance the area's identity, character and function as an education precinct. The Masterplan informed by a workshop with key stakeholders and the draft will be placed on public exhibition seeking wider community feedback from mid 2014. A similar approach to ensuring stakeholder comments on the draft Planning Study will be employed.</p>
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Sequencing the engagement program enables communities to concentrate on a simpler set of issues, in an orderly manner, enabling council to consider and incorporate relevant feedback in the appropriate stage of the plan making process.

3.2 Engagement practices for formative plan making – Stage 1 plan making

Councils generally prepare an Issues Paper or Discussion Paper that is a high level document that identifies the planning issues and sets the policy objectives for a review of the current planning controls.

How councils undertake community consultation at this stage varies considerably across the sector. It is based on the time frame available for developing a new strategic plan, the pressure for development and the funding arrangements available to council to update their strategic plan and the resulting planning instruments.

In some cases the Department of Planning and Environment may impose certain limitations (e.g. time or financial) on the engagement strategy that councils may be consider to undermine the effectiveness of that process.

Examples of variations in Stage 1 plan making are set out below.

<p>Mid-Western Regional Council</p>	<p>Council reported that their engagement strategies for the formative stages of plan making were tied to the funding provided by the then Department of Planning and Infrastructure. The funding arrangements required council to implement a repetitive and inflexible engagement strategy that was ineffective in informing or involving communities in the strategic planning issues.</p>
<p>Dubbo City Council</p>	<p>Council has undertaken a comprehensive engagement strategy to review its Urban and Rural Strategies that inform the Draft LEP. This 'up front' engagement practice comprised three steps. Firstly, the local communities were contacted to provide their thoughts on the relevant planning issues on the rural or urban front. The second step, sought feedback on the Draft Issues Paper and the third step allowed communities to comment on the Draft Strategies that would form the basis of the development of the Draft LEP. Each step required information to be</p>

	distributed to local communities, forums set up and feedback collected.
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3.3 Engagement practices for Planning Studies – Stage 2 plan making

Most councils develop a general discussion paper on land use issues, that is followed by a series of more detailed Planning Studies based on what needs to be updated.

The interviews revealed that the more effective engagement strategies are where the council prioritises the land use issues that are likely to be important to communities and develops a suitable approach depending on the sensitivities around the land use issue. For example, Housing Studies can be controversial in metropolitan areas and in such cases councils are required to carefully consider appropriate engagement strategies that acknowledge and manage the variety of perspectives. Both Hornsby and Warringah councils implemented very ambitious engagement strategies to develop their Housing Strategies - see below.

In contrast, councils also indicated that where council was not able to deliver an appropriate engagement strategy due to time or budget restrictions, the sensitive issues were most likely to remain unresolved under the DLEP. In some cases, where the 'up front' engagement' had been 'rushed' or was poorly implemented around housing issues, the community become reactive, resulting in the policy changes not been accepted by the community at the DLEP stage.

Two councils indicated that land was excised from the DLEP, immediately prior to council approval of the DLEP, over debates on housing density – one in Sydney and one in rural NSW. Both indicated that this may have been avoided if the engagement strategy on the housing issues had been more informative, and consultative. In particular, the reaction to the changes to the rural zonings was not understood and enabled more development options. In the metropolitan case, the issues were around the expected scale of future development rather the density per se, as the community supported the up-zoning in general.

Clearly the level of information provided to communities on land use studies can be problematic. Nevertheless, implementing a comprehensive engagement strategy, as revealed in Warringah's case, with the *Talk of the Town Project*, does not ensure its adoption by council. However, the research reveals that it is more likely that policy changes, that have been subject to a more comprehensive engagement process are more likely to 'flow through' to the DLEP stage and be incorporated, possibly with amendments, at the end stage.

It is difficult to measure, but one council also indicated that the engagement strategy on its Housing Strategy has resulted in less conflict on DAs arising from these changes. Further research is needed to ascertain whether this generally applies.

In rural areas, changes to rural land policy can also attract strong reactions that require the careful implementation of a suitable engagement strategy. Cowra has adopted a sequential engagement strategy to better educate the community about the implications of the various planning options for subdivisions on rural land with a view to seeking a level of community consensus on the issue. See section 2.5.

Examples of Stage 2 Plan making are set out below.

<p>Hornsby Shire Council</p>	<p>Hornsby council's engagement strategy has focused on the key component of the emerging DLEP plan - the Housing Strategy, which was considered to be the more controversial study, warranting the time to seek feedback form the community.</p> <p>Residents were invited to comment on the range of options for growth, based on the State Government's housing targets. The feedback refined the proposed plan that resulted in a similar, but different plan to that what was originally proposed. Overall the community was educated by a comprehensive information kit (that included a CD), and supporting material provided on the website. Council held information sessions and forums which enabled an informed discussion of the issues and time to adjust the emerging plans. Council has found that there are less objections to the DAs for the resulting flats and considers that this is due to the extensive engagement process that was implemented under the Housing Study.</p>
<p>Warringah Councils</p>	<p>Warringah Council has a strong commitment to 'up front' community engagement that was delivered by its engagement strategy that was called Talk of the Town. This project relied on intensive consultation that included an education process, as well as a pro- active methodology that sought a range of views to represent the overall community. This approach required a high level of funding and commitment to the value of engagement from council staff, to deliver the project.</p> <p>The Talk of the Town project was an ambitious project, as it required taking a group of 500 people through an intensive period of engagement, who were given comprehensive information on the emerging housing policy for the area. This process inputted into the development of the Draft Housing Strategy (DHS).</p> <p>Nevertheless, despite the extensive process of consultation, some aspects of the DHS are controversial and hence the council has not been able to adopt the DHS as an official policy of council. This reveals that the issues, under discussion during the engagement process, such as increasing the density of certain suburban areas, can be controversial and that an engagement process is not a panacea to the resolution of these issues.</p>
<p>Parramatta City Council</p>	<p>Council has adopted an engagement strategy for their Masterplan work for employment land to promote ownership of the Masterplan by the owners and users of the employment area. This is to encourage the implementation of the agreed plan.</p>

3.4 Engagement practices for Locality or Precinct Based Planning – Stage 2 plan making

The locality based approach to community engagement is the other method used by councils at Stage 2 of the plan making process.

This approach is commonly relied on in rural and regional areas with dispersed communities Likewise, metropolitan councils adopt this approach when reviewing Centre Based Plans for CBDs, town centres or neighbourhood centres as well as for specific localities, such as beach precincts.

Examples below.

<p>Mid-Western Regional Council's Lue Conversation, 2013</p>	<p>Lue Conversation was an engagement strategy for a small rural town, called Lue that was experiencing growth due to a nearby Silver Mine at Bowden Kingsgate. This council developed an engagement strategy that included preparing brochures and running a well-attended public meeting (with 60 of the 100 residents attending the meeting) in the local hall of Lue. Council staff from all departments of council facilitated small group discussions to consider the views of the community and develop options to address the problems. The community indicated that they appreciated being able to share their concerns directly with council staff in an informal and constructive way.</p>
<p>Randwick City Council's Maroubra Beach Town Study 2011/12</p>	<p>An extensive collaborative approach was developed to underpin the development of the Maroubra Beach Town (MBT) Study, using consultant firms to capture the views of the residents around the future uses of the MBT Centre. This provided input into the emerging Masterplan, DLEP and DCP.</p>
<p>Coffs Harbour City Council's CBD Masterplan and Jetty4Shores Masterplan 2013</p>	<p>Council has recently undertaken two Masterplans that were based on feedback from communities- the CBD and Jetty4Shores Masterplans. Staff set up a presence in both locations, seeking feedback from the community on emerging issues as well as a reference group. In both cases the consultation process involved a number of steps, seeking early contact on preliminary ideas that were followed with more formal feedback on the emerging plans.</p> <p>The response to the Jetty4Shores Masterplan was considerable, with around 1,500 people viewing the preliminary draft plans, over 300 pre-submissions were received at a market day exhibition; that was followed by a total of over 1300 written submissions being received in relation to the official Draft Plan. The dedicated Jetty4Shores page was visited by 2,676 people, with over 3,900 total views.</p> <p>The CBD Masterplan won the IAP2 Australasia Core Values Award (the NSW State Award for Project of the Year) in 2013 for the City Centre Masterplan in partnership with Straight Talk. (http://www.iap2.org.au/documents/item/219)</p>
<p>Tenterfield Shire Council Forums and Tenterfield Main Street Masterplan</p>	<p>Tenterfield Council has set up a series of forums over a number of years that are held in 8 locations, representing distinct communities of interest. These forums are informal meetings held in villages that have been used to provide feedback from communities under the new IPR Process and has also enabled communities to discuss proposed changes to the Draft LEP.</p> <p>In addition, council has more recently made use of a vacant shop in the main street to raise the profile of the Main Street Masterplan, and enable the community to be informed and able to contribute to suggesting ways that the Tenterfield Township can be 'open for business'.</p>
<p>Waverley Council</p>	<p>The recent West Oxford Street Project has adopted an innovative, artistic engagement strategy that has made use of three teams of professionals to establish a creative designed –based approach to engagement, which involves communities at the earliest stages of plan making. The community is invited to a series of information session, held at the local park, library or local Leagues Club, which records the views of the participants, by survey and using visual indicators on maps , to record attitudes to existing and potential development of the precinct.</p>

North Sydney Council	Although project specific engagement strategies are prepared for all local plan making projects, council always consults on such matters via the North Sydney Community Precinct System. The LGA is divided into 25 geographical areas (or precincts). Since the late 1970s Council has addressed Precinct meetings in the locality affected by each proposal to obtain feedback.
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4. Common obstacles

Councils have been progressively improving the effectiveness of their engagement strategies by responding to the obstacles to implementation of an effective engagement strategy.

There were a number of common obstacles regularly mentioned by councils as being challenging to manage or avoid. Councils agreed that avoiding these problems can substantially improve outcomes.

The common obstacles identified by those interviewed were as follows:

4.1 The repetitious process of plan making can produce engagement fatigue

Most councils have been developing planning documents, strategies and studies that form the basis of their DLEPs, that have been required to be brought into conformity with the Standard Instrument Local Environmental Plan (SI LEP) Program. Many of these plans have been under preparation for almost a decade.

In a number of cases, similar plans have been revised repeatedly, and placed on public exhibition repeatedly, where plans are consolidated under the SI LEP Program or minor technical changes are required to be made to the legal instrument. Some councils indicated that they have had to re-advertise DLEPs on technical matters, or where plans had been consolidated. This can be expensive and not very useful as the re-exhibition process is unlikely to attract further responses than the original round of consultation, and in fact, can raise confusion with communities rather than add to the process.

Mid-Western Regional Council	Mid-Western has undertaken 2 major reviews of their Planning Instruments over a period of 8 years, resulting in a 'rolling process' of engagement that was exacerbated by the introduction of the Standard Instrument LEP Program during that period of time. This required the same information to be re-exhibited which has been confusing for communities and counter-productive in attracting more interest from communities on formal public exhibitions.
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4.2 Poor response levels to public exhibitions

Overall, many councils indicated that the public's formal response levels to the DLEP exhibition can be low, for a number of reasons. The councils interviewed said that they did not rely on formal responses as a means of gauging feedback on proposed plans, as attendances and/or responses to exhibitions –on site and on line –can vary considerably and not provide an accurate gauge of the community's views.

In addition, it was found that community feedback on Planning Documents of a more strategic nature, can be ignored by the community and it is hard to ascertain whether this is apathy or because these documents are considered to be too general or esoteric to warrant comment. Many councils indicated that communities often ask how the policy affects their land and if this cannot be answered, that do not appear to be interested.

On the other hand, a few councils indicated that on occasions they can receive a high level of responses, in opposition to a single issue. Again, this can be useful in identifying an issue that

is considered to be important to group of residents but may not reflect the views of the wider community.

Hence, the lack of reliability of the formal feedback method has driven councils to engage their communities earlier and more proactively, as these methods are considered to be more reliable to ascertain the broad view of communities on relevant issues.

Examples are set out below.

Forbes Shire Council	Forbes prepared two preliminary planning documents to inform the LEP/DCP; Issues Paper 2005 and the Forbes Growth Management Strategy 2007. As the Issues Paper attracted limited feedback, council adopted a more proactive consultation process that included a series of small forums, to obtain feedback on the The Draft Strategy 2007. This proved to be a more meaningful exercise than the former 'scatter-gun' approach to consultation.
Mosman Municipal Council	Despite Mosman Council's professional commitment to engagement, the staff have raised concerns that the Mosman community may well be overly consulted by council and that this can undermine the quality and amount of the feedback received. This is because Mosman Council is continually requesting information from residents on a wide range of issues in addition to planning matters. Engagement needs to be staged across all areas of council's responsibilities to avoid engagement fatigue.

4.3 The level of information provided on exhibition can be overwhelming

The councils indicated that they struggle with the level of information that needs to be presented at a public exhibition. The scale and number of plans that have to be exhibited in rural areas makes it very challenging to provide meaningful information.

The councils interviewed indicated they are simplifying the information on display and providing further information on computers on site and professional staff to advice at all public exhibitions.

An example is provided below.

Dubbo City Council	Dubbo City Council found that the level of information and the number of maps required to be displayed at a public exhibition on the DLEP was problematic. Hence they developed an on-line format that enabled properties to be searched. This addressed the problem of having to show the level of information required by the Planning. Regulations but not overwhelming the viewer with detail.
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4.4 Large public meetings are often considered to be counter-productive in providing meaningful feedback

A number of councils indicated that they made less use of large public meetings as a method of collecting feedback from communities, as they can sometimes be used to air extreme views, rather than debate issues constructively, or are not well attended. Increasingly, councils are managing public meetings as either information sessions only and/or modifying their format to a workshop style of venue, allowing small group sessions to facilitate discussion.

It appears that many councils currently prefer to establish small focus groups and forums, in smaller meeting spaces, that encourage dialogue on planning issues. More often councils are using community spaces to hold these events, rather than council offices so that communities consider the discussion to be on neutral ground.

An example is provided below.

<p>Leeton Shire Council</p>	<p>Council ran a series of information sessions on the DLEP that were advertised by letter, radio announcements and word of mouth, yet the turn out at the council chambers was very low. However, the meetings held at the villages were better attended. Staff also found that attending local events and presenting the relevant information to say the local Rotary Club was a more effective method of communicating the proposed plans than holding large special purpose public meetings.</p>
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4.5 Presenting strategic planning concepts

While councils are generally supportive of community engagement in the formative stages of the plan making, the results are often disappointing.

Communities often find the issues too general or hard to understand to warrant comment. Many councils reported that residents involved in the high level policy development often ask how the policy will affect the land in question.

Further research is needed to assist councils in developing more effective ways of presenting the high level strategic plans in a more accessible format. The use of structure plans that visually presented strategic information in a diagrammatic format and 3 D imagining may have their place. But it is too simplistic to say that using better visual tools resolves these issues.

On the whole many people are uninformed about local plan making processes and Local Government decision making processes in particular. For engagement practice to be developed the level of education across communities needs to be improved so that the level of conversation can be more constructive.

4.6 Community engagement is not a panacea for the resolution of planning issues

To conclude this section, the councils interviewed indicated that community engagement does not necessarily resolve conflict on planning issues or provide input to the process that is helpful. There is an appreciation among practitioners that good consultation practice can 'stir up' objections that may result in delaying the development or adoption of the plan. These objections may or may not be well based.

All councils interviewed recognise the challenge councils face in developing better engagement strategies that enable more informed discussion around issues that most people do not understand.

There is a general recognition that there needs to be more education around general planning issues and Local Government plan making processes to assist communities in being able to better engage in the process.

An example is provided below.

<p>Forbes Shire Council</p>	<p>The Draft LEP was advertised and exhibited for 2 months in 2012, mostly attracting questions from residents on matters pertaining to their own property. Despite the work undertaken to consult with the community a sector strongly opposed the rezoning of rural land from 40 ha to 2 ha following the adoption of the strategy but before gazettal. This resulted in an area of the Shire being removed from the DLEP so that plan could be completed.</p> <p>Council will now be required to 'go back' to the 50 or so residents who are affected by the proposed changes to develop appropriate zoning controls. It is a surprising result given that most rural people would support subdivision to smaller lifestyle properties and it questions whether the residents really understood the changes.</p>
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5. More ideas

5.1 Councils support face-to-face conversations

Engagement practice is evolving quickly. However, even though councils are introducing and experimenting with new methods of engaging with communities, all councils interviewed indicated that ‘face to face’ conversations were still a very important part of effective engagement practice.

Councils are seeking to foster ‘conversations’ with communities, on plan making matters, to understand the issues, educate where necessary, and listen to range of perspectives that are held by stakeholders and communities. Engagement strategies are changing from receiving ‘objections’ at the end of the process, to ‘going out’ and seeking views at the start of the process with an increasing desire to encourage ‘face-to-face’ conversations.

Some councils however, are also using technology to encourage online conversations, such as e-reference groups that enable on-line forums and chat rooms.

In addition, the research revealed a growing trend to provide professional support to communities at planning exhibitions, information sessions, specific forums and workshops, to enable participants to ask questions and discuss issues. There was a level of agreement by councils that the most meaningful feedback often arises from more in-depth conversations held over a period of time, rather than listening to statements made by community members at large scale public meetings held by council. Therefore, councils are actively setting up events more often in the locality, using venues, such as ‘pop up’ shops in main streets, market stalls and touring exhibitions to promote interest and develop dialogues with community members. Most meetings with communities are being managed to enable conversations to be held around small tables, or the like, and there is less endorsement of the large public meetings as an appropriate means of obtaining meaningful feedback from communities.

Councils are developing a range of tools to encourage ‘face-to-face’ dialogue that will be discussed further in this paper (see section 3.3).

Examples are set out below.

<p>Tweed Shire Council</p>	<p>Tweed council has developed thorough and proactive approach to engagement that relies on ‘face to face’ meetings with community representatives at a local level to assist with the development of local plans. This council has developed a series of Locality and Masterplans, using a community reference panel that is progressively consulted with, on the emerging plan. This allows the community to be informed and involved in the local plan making process in an inter-active environment.</p> <p>Tweed council has found that this engagement strategy has provided meaningful feedback in an area where planning issues attract considerable interest. The Tweed Council DLEP received over 1500 submissions, as Tweed is a high growth area and planning issues attract a high level of interest.</p>
<p>Waverley Council</p>	<p>Waverley Council supports emerging practice that concentrates on developing ways of engaging with communities on strategic planning issues, in preference to the current requirements placed on council to focus on obtaining feedback at the end stage of the development of the DLEP or the final stages of the development assessment process. This council recognises the challenges in obtaining representational feedback on the ‘big</p>

	<p>picture' issues and is actively developing practice to focus more on 'up front' engagement practice. The recent West Oxford Street Project, the RSL Club redevelopment plan and the Bondi Beach Management Plan set up processes that enable communities to discuss the local planning issues that are relevant to these plans.</p>
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5.2 Improving how to 'inform' communities

Councils are developing better methods to inform communities on planning issues. There was general agreement that the level of understanding of planning issues is low across the community, and it is challenging to educate communities on the process and the relevant issues at the same time.

Hence councils are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their method of presenting information so that it is engaging, legible and able to be easily interpreted. The research showed that planning staff are increasingly collaborating with council's communication teams to deliver well-branded and graphic-based communication strategies that cover all aspects of the communication plan.

The current tools used by councils to improve the delivery of information cover a wide range of the traditional and more innovative methods of communication.

5.3 Seeking representative feedback

Councils interviewed indicated that they are aware that feedback from communities may not be representative of the diversity of people who live in the locality or the LGA or may be the new users of the emerging plan.

It was generally considered that the more formal forms of engagement attract responses from the more well-educated people, who have some experience with Local Government or planning matters. Current regularity practice was more suitable for those members of the community who were able to communicate in writing.

The councils indicated they are very aware of this issue and have been purposely applying methods to obtain a more representative view on planning matters.

Common techniques used by councils to attract a wider range of views from the public are listed below:

- Reference groups;
- Citizen juries;
- Planning forums;
- Charrettes; and
- Other formats.

5.4 The IPR process has influenced engagement practice in plan making

Most councils interviewed considered that the introduction of the IPR process in 2009 has improved the overall standard of community engagement undertaken by councils, and in particular, improved how engagement strategies are being undertaken by planners. However, the degree of influence varied considerably.

For most councils interviewed, the development of their Community Strategic Plan under the IPR process, has been running concurrently with the preparation of the DLEP. Hence, those councils that have recently finalised their DLEP are more likely to adopt some practices that have been emerging under the IPR process.

Nevertheless, the introduction of the IPR process has given councils more confidence in being more proactive and thorough in implementing appropriate engagement strategies on plan making matters.

The common set of tools used by the IPR process in garnering community feedback have included forums, reference group and to a lesser extent the citizen jury. Forums and reference groups are more commonly being used by planning staff to obtain feedback on plan making matters. Citizen juries have not been used by the councils interviewed in the plan making processes. However, as discussed earlier in this report, councils are becoming more sophisticated in how they communicate planning matters, and this change can be directly attributed to the IPR process. Council planners are increasingly adopting communication strategies to raise the profile of planning projects, adopting comprehensive branding strategies across the project.

Most councils indicated that the plan making and IPR processes were becoming increasingly aligned. The majority of councils said that they had already undertaken considerable work on developing better practice across all divisions of council, while others indicated that they were in the process of developing a more co-ordinated approach to engagement across Council.

As councils review their current practice and consider further ways of improving practice, it was considered likely that there will be further alignment between the IPR process and the plan making process.

Gosford City Council	Gosford Council has developed a range of innovative methods of attracting residents to public events, such as using high profile speakers to open meetings that are required under the IPR process. Their innovative ways of raising the profile of issues has influenced how they undertake engagement on plan making matters. Planning projects are well branded and staff take the exhibitions to shopping centres, actively courting responses from a wide selection of local community.
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5.5 Monitoring and evaluation

Councils interviewed agreed that most communities are generally indifferent to plan making matters unless the issues are controversial or appear to more directly impact on their property or lifestyle. The research indicated that council staff are commonly asked by residents, whether the 'plan' affects their property. There is noticeably less interest in strategic issues underlying the plans.

The focus on the controversial is borne out in high growth areas, where councils have been required to develop more rigorous engagement practices as the community is likely to be more critical and outspoken on the planning issues. Yet this is not necessarily an indicator of the effectiveness of the strategy but rather an indicator of the level of controversy that may surround the plan.

For these and other reasons, councils said that they are keenly 'in touch' with the impact and effectiveness of their engagement strategies as they directly experience the consequences. In

many instances for example, the local press and the community themselves provide direct feedback to staff and Councillors on many aspects of the engagement strategy - both on the issues and the process.

Most councils indicated that they 'get to know' what works in their area and develop better practice based on direct feedback or lack of feedback on the process.

Councils revealed that they regularly hold staff and councillor internal de-briefing sessions after events, to explore better ways to run sessions. Councillors also provide feedback to staff on whether they believe the process is constructive, given that communities are likely to complain directly to them.

Some councils also obtain feedback through the IPR process and direct surveys that may identify what approaches are being used by councils that elicit a response.

In addition, staff are required to regularly report to council the findings of the engagement strategy and validate the budget allocated for the work.

It was agreed by councils that it is challenging to monitor the effectiveness of an engagement strategy, as it is hard to evaluate whether the level of response is due to the issues themselves or the process of engagement. In practice it is impossible to untie these elements. It was also agreed that it is challenging for planners to be able to retain a neutral position on aspects of these plans and hence some councils indicated that planning and communication consultants may be better able to evaluate some processes where issues can become controversial.

6. Conclusions

Councils have undertaken a significant cultural shift in engagement strategies around plan making matters. Previously, it was considered appropriate that locals would be involved in strategic planning matters by attending public exhibitions and making formal responses to the proposed planning instruments (known as the DLEP). Now this is considered to be out of date and less effective in enabling communities to be informed, consulted or involved in strategic plan making matters. In particular, it is considered to be 'too late' in the process for the strategic issues to be revisited as these matters are more appropriately settled at the earlier plan making stages.

Councils agree that engaging communities in strategic planning matters must come earlier in the process and likewise, there was general agreement that this was emerging, as better practice across the sector.

Yet, it was also recognised that this is challenging as communities tend to be less interested in the broader strategic issues at Stage 1 in the plan making process unless they are more directly affected by the proposals under discussion.

The dilemma, well understood by councils, has driven councils to change their focus and their practice. This has been to consider how to engage with communities earlier, and on issues of substance, in a more meaningful way.

At the same time, the research has revealed that practise has already changed and is likely to continue to improve. Councils have found themselves on many occasions on the 'cutting edge' of implementing new practice in community engagement practices for plan making matters. They are experimenting with new ideas and implementing new approaches of engagement, despite the limitations of their budgets and time frames to deliver new plans.

This has resulted in a significant change in practice over the last five years to ten years for most councils.

At the same time, the introduction of the IPR process has influenced engagement practices around plan making, stimulating councils to be more innovative. It was found that there is general agreement that the engagement around the IPR process and plan making, have become increasingly more aligned, and that this alignment, is likely to be further improved in the future.

More specifically this research has revealed:

- Councils are becoming increasingly proactive in seeking feedback earlier in the plan making process and practice is expanding quickly;
- How councils engage with communities is becoming increasingly professional;
- Long term, more integrated community engagement practices are being implemented;
- Councils support face-to-face conversations; and
- 'Up front' engagement requires commitment from Councillors and planning staff.

The integration of the community engagement strategies with the long term plan making processes is a key factor in developing an effective engagement strategy. This is because it allows communities and stakeholders to be educated, informed and progressively consulted in

a sensible manner over a period of years. It also, enables communities to be involved in the emerging ideas in a progressive way.

Councils have indicated that they are likely to continue to apply better practice, around plan making matters. This is because professionalism is likely to be sustained, new techniques in social and IT communication expanded, and community expectations are also likely to increase.

Councils also reported that although modern forms of communication are important in delivery information and enabling fast feedback, there remained a strong preference for face to face meetings. It was surprising, that almost all councils indicated that 'face-to-face' contact with communities was essential in providing depth to the process. Hence, there was strong support for planning forums, reference groups and charrettes, as a means of improving the level of understanding of planning issues, to enable more meaningful conversations.

There was also a strong recognition that engagement tools are needed to elicit feedback from communities that constitute a representative view of the community.

There was a strong resolve from councils to sustain the level of change that has already been delivered. Yet there is a recognition that further development of engagement practices, will require more resources - increased budgets and increased staff expertise to deliver more sophisticated programs. There was also recognition that professional staff have a high level of commitment to this work and an acknowledgement that this commitment is driving change.

All those interviewed agreed that communities do not readily understand the planning process and in particular they have observed that communities regard the strategic issues as not important, unless the proposed change is considered to be controversial.

The role of Councillors and staff is recognised as very important in delivering better practice and good outcomes. Councils indicated that team work was needed to manage controversial issues. Although it is well understood that many issues of importance to communities can be controversial, it was found that the engagement process was more effective where the Councillors 'set the scene' and then 'bowed out' of the process, enabling the staff to 'follow through' with the process. To achieve this, both Councillors and staff need to be confident and assured that the engagement strategy is well based on current best practice. This is the purpose of this research - to document and thereby enable councils to understand and better implement effective engagement practices on plan making matters at a local level.

Appendix 1: Councils involved in the research

<p>Councils involved in the research</p>	<p>Coffs Harbour City Council Cowra Shire Council Dubbo City Council Fairfield City Council Forbes Shire Council Gosford City Council Hornsby Shire Council Leeton Shire Council Lismore City Council Mid-Western Regional Council Mosman Municipal Council North Sydney Council Parramatta City Council Penrith City Council Randwick City Council Tamworth Regional Council Tenterfield Shire Council Tweed Shire Council Warringah Council Waverley Council</p>
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