

POL	COMMUNICATION & INFORMATION DISSEMINATION	SC6
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BACKGROUND:

An important aspect of managing a rapidly developing authority such as Cockburn is establishing and maintaining an identifiable nexus between the Decision Making (Elected Member) and the Administrative (Executive) areas of Council. This communication link needs to be clearly understood and highlighted as a vital organisational mechanism upon which a consistent and efficient system of information dissemination and decision making can be based.

PURPOSE:

To establish a procedure which provides for an interface between Elected Members and Council Staff involving the following Council related matters:

- Discussions
- Briefings
- Understanding of Issues
- Action Planning
- Allocation of Responsibility
- Feedback

POLICY:

- (1) The City of Cockburn is committed to a corporate management system, which involves the provision of full and clear information, presented in a professional

POL	COMMUNICATION & INFORMATION DISSEMINATION	SC6
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and high quality manner in order to facilitate an efficient, transparent and participative process of decision making.

- (2) In addition, the City is committed to a process of communication which allows the information to be freely, fully and openly discussed in a co-operative and conciliatory manner with a view to seeking the correct outcome, based on information and advice presented, for the wider community.
- (3) This commitment to open dialogue and information provision will be facilitated by the conducting of regular forums and information_sessions to be attended by Elected Members and appropriate Council Officers.
- (4) The procedures for the conduct of these sessions are contained in the attached document entitled "Agenda Forums and Other Information Sessions" which ensures that the focus of the sessions will be to assess matters which are to be considered by, or be of interest to, the Council.
- (5) A Notice Paper, detailing all aspects of each forum or session, will be prepared and distributed to all Elected Members and appropriate staff in advance.
- (6) Any available additional information which will enhance Elected Members' understanding of an issue, will also be distributed with the Notice Paper, if considered appropriate to do so by the Chief Executive Officer. If such information is too voluminous to distribute, Elected Members will be advised of its whereabouts to enable them to peruse the information if they wish.



Agenda Forums and Other Information Sessions

*Comprehensive explanation of procedures
followed for conducting Agenda Summary
Forums and other information sessions*

INDEX

Page

AGENDA SUMMARY FORUM/GENERAL ISSUES	2
Agenda Summary Forum	2
General Issues:	3
ALTERNATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS PROCEDURE	4
COUNCIL MEETING DEBATE ETC	6
Agenda Summary Forum.....	6
Alternative Recommendations	6
Standing Orders – Debating Procedure	7
CONCEPT FORUMS.....	7
OTHER PRESENTATION FORUMS	8
CONCLUSION	9

ATTACHMENTS

This document has been produced as a concise record of the procedures followed when facilitating any type of information session, presentation, briefing, concept forum etc on a particular issue(s).

These sessions are organised and run by the Administration; whether it was at the request of an Elected Member, from a developer, a community group or directly by staff. It may simply be a forum for staff to explain a complex issue, showing detailed maps etc.

At no time during these sessions, are decisions made or discussions held on the outcome to be achieved at the Council Meeting where this issue will be presented. It is usually an opportunity for officers to seek guidance on the additional information that Elected Members may need to assist them make an informed decision at the appropriate time.

The following is a detailed explanation of the format that each type of information session.

AGENDA SUMMARY FORUM/GENERAL ISSUES

Agenda Summary Forum

These information sharing sessions were instigated during the Commissioners Regime (April 1999 – December 2000) when they requested that Officers provide general information to them at a briefing type session, on each of the issues to be listed on the forthcoming Council Agenda, to help them understand the finer points of the item, rather than asking simple questions in the Council Chamber, thus bogging down the Council Meeting with minor details.

It proved to be a very successful way of familiarising the Commissioners and in response, the Commissioners were able to ask for further information that was to be presented to them at the Council Meeting. An example of additional information included:

- ◆ More detailed map of location, building plan etc;
- ◆ Comments/feedback from neighbours;
- ◆ Clarification from State Government Departments on particular points;
- ◆ Grounds for Appeal should applicant not be satisfied with Council's decision.

This assisted Officers in understanding that more detail was required, at times, to be provided in Agenda Reports/Attachments and hence, Cockburn's Agenda document content quality improved and are rated 'Very High' with the Department of Local Government at the last review.

After the elections of December 2000, the CEO recommended that the practice continue as it was considered beneficial by both Directors and Commissioners. This was very evident in the dramatic change to the length of Council Meetings (prior to Commissioners – 5hrs approx.; after Commissioners – 1.5hrs approx.). The new Council chose to continue the practice on a trial basis and have continued ever since.

The Agenda Summary Forum/General Issues Sessions are held on the 1st Thursday of every month commencing at approximately 6:30pm. This time varies depending on whether there is a guest speaker or a presentation on a separate issue prior to the Agenda Summary commencing. By holding this session on the 1st Thursday of the month, it then gives Elected Members a full week to read the Agenda and ask questions if necessary.

General Issues:

The important points to be noted about these sessions are :-

1. All Elected Members and Directors are invited to attend.
2. It is an **informal session** instigated by the Administration as a general information sharing exercise; therefore there is no formal meeting procedure.
3. The **index only** of the Council Agenda is provided to each person.
4. The CEO runs the session.
5. At the beginning of every session, the CEO makes a statement to the effect of reminding Elected Members that it is an informal session and that **no debate or decisions are to take place**. Only questions may be put and answered.
6. Each Director, in turn, generally explains items on the agenda relevant to their division. Maps, overheads etc may be shown to better define the location of the issue. These are normally enlargements of maps included in the Agenda Attachments booklet. Elected Members are able to ask general questions (ie: how many submissions received, when will the road be constructed etc) or if further information is required, the officer can provide it prior to the Council Meeting.
7. The CEO does not allow discussion by Elected Members, only questions are allowed.
8. No notes are taken relating to the Agenda as there are no outcomes. The Agenda Summary Forum is now being taped to verify this point.
9. No decisions are made at this Forum.
10. In addition, the Directors may use the Forum to advise the Elected Members of the status of any issues relevant to the City.

At the conclusion of the evening, the Elected Members are given their Agendas to take home. The Agenda Booklet has already been finalized and copied prior to this session commencing, ensuring that no opinions and comments given at the session, will have any bearing on an officer's recommendation or report content.

As per the Local Government Act, Agendas are required to be made available for viewing by the public soon after they are available to Elected Members.

Therefore the public copies are distributed and placed on Council's Website the following morning.

ALTERNATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS PROCEDURE

In earlier years, during a Council Meeting, confusion was experienced when a Councillor moved a motion different to that recommended in the Agenda. If the Councillor had not prepared their motion beforehand or if it was lengthy, confusion was sometimes experienced in the Chamber either by other Councillors who did not understand fully the implications of the alternative, or the motion did not give a clear instruction to officers to act after the Council Meeting, or even confusion by Councillors after the meeting as to exactly what they voted on.

To alleviate these problems, a system was implemented whereby any alternative motions to be put to Council, whether by Elected Members or an amendment by Staff, was provided to the Chief Executive Officer before the meeting. If the CEO considered the alternative did not give a clear instruction or simply needed "touching up" to make it clear, the relevant Director would assist in rewording the prospective motion so it was clear for all. All alternative motions are then combined into one document and placed around the Council table so Councillors and Staff can easily follow the alternative motion.

This procedure has proved very successful and has been accepted as a standard practice by the current Council.

This is an Administrative procedure aimed at keeping the meeting efficient and not part of the formal Council process.

Concerns were raised by members of the public that Elected Members had information (referring to the Alternative Recommendation Document) that should be available to the public. As it was purely an Administrative document to help with the fluent running of the Council Meeting, and that the alternative motions contained in that document may or may not actually be moved at the meeting, it was not considered a document for public scrutiny.

However, to alleviate any concerns of 'secretiveness', Policy SC28 was created so that it was public knowledge such a procedure is carried out and how.

The procedure for submitting alternative recommendations is as follows:

1. Any proposed amendments are to be forwarded by an Elected Member to the Executive Support Department, following the distribution of the Agenda Paper and by 10.00am on the day of the Council Meeting.

2. The date/time of receipt of the amendment is noted. Should further amendments be received for the same item, they will be collated in the same order as received.
3. A reason for decision for the proposed amendment must also be provided.
4. A copy of the amendment is given to the relevant Director for perusal. Should the Director consider that the amendment needs rewording to clarify its intent, the Director will make suggested corrections. The reworded item is then forwarded to the Elected Member for their approval or if not satisfactory, the Elected Member and Director will liaise directly.
5. Once approval is received from the Elected Member, the Executive Department will distribute the final amendment to all other Elected Members for their information, if not already circulated by the Elected Member.
6. Having received all proposed amendments in accordance with the Policy and by the allotted time, the Chief Executive Officer will compile a listing of all proposed amendments received (with explanations), for provision to Elected Members by 5.30pm on the day of the Council Meeting. The listing will comprise of items in numerical order as they appear on the Agenda Paper. Where multiple amendments are proposed for the same item, they are listed in the order received (as per 2. above).
7. Elected Members then have an opportunity to peruse the alternatives and ask any questions **of a general nature** to Directors. *Explained in more detail later.*
8. When called upon to do so at the relevant time during the Council Meeting by the Presiding Member, the CEO will inform the Meeting of the Agenda items that he has received notice of a proposed amendment(s) and from which Elected Member(s) the notification(s) has/have been received.
9. At the relevant point of the Council Meeting, the Presiding Member invites the Elected Member proposing the amendment(s) to move their motion. In the case where more than one proposal has been received, the Presiding Member shall call for the amendment(s) to be put in order of their receipt (i.e. as per list compiled by the CEO) and dealt with in accordance with Council's Standing Orders, where applicable.
10. While every encouragement is made for Elected Members to conform with this Policy, it is acknowledged that it is the right of any Elected Member to refrain from adhering to this procedure, owing to

its sub-ordinance to the process stipulated in Council's Standing Orders, in relation to dealing with and debating motions.

This document is also used to assist the Minute Clerk in the production of the Council Minutes.

At times, those directly affected by the Council decision or Members of the Press may phone to query the decision on a particular item. On these occasions it is made clear that the Council decision basically was to but that is not definite until the minutes are produced.

COUNCIL MEETING DEBATE ETC

The procedure for Council Meetings is in accordance with Council's Standing Orders which details how Meetings are conducted.

Prior to April 1999 (Commissioners Appointed), Ordinary Council Meetings were lasting between 4 and 6 hours, often finishing after midnight.

As a result of initiatives such as the "Agenda Summary Forum" and "Alternative Recommendations List", Council Meetings now flow smoothly and are very concise, rarely being bogged down on one particular issue by minor details. Council Meetings now conclude in 1 or 1.5 hours.

However, from the public's perspective, it has been reported that it looks like decisions must be being made before hand at "secret meetings" because there is very little debate in Chambers. This is definitely **not** the case and Elected Members are free to debate issues they see fit. In practise, however, it is probable that members are satisfied that, through the processes now available to them, they are adequately enough informed for them to understand what is being proposed, without the need for superfluous debate.

Agenda Summary Forum

Because questions of minor details are asked at Agenda Summary Forums, there is no need to ask them again in Chambers, therefore the public do not see many questions being asked, just the voting process.

Alternative Recommendations

As 'alternatives' are provided by 10.00am, on the day of the Council Meeting, a list is compiled of the alternatives and circulated around the Chamber table, time permitting, and made available should Elected Members wish to read them prior to the meeting. At 5.30pm on the day of the Council Meeting, Directors make themselves available should any Elected Member wish to ask a question of clarification. This is sometimes the case when an Elected Member may be considering putting an alternative themselves and may wish to discuss their suggestion with the

Director or Elected Member submitting the original alternative to perhaps consolidate their ideas.

Again it is reiterated that this is NOT an opportunity to discuss voting strategy.

Contrary to media reports, it is also reiterated that this opportunity at 5.30 IS NOT a secret meeting but simply, information sharing to ensure that the Council Meeting runs smoothly and all concerned are clear on the intentions of the alternatives to be moved. If there is a query, an alternative may be amended during the meeting.

Standing Orders – Debating Procedure

Standing Orders – Parts 9 & 10 define the Conduct of Members and Procedures for Debate and are strictly adhered to.

Basically it states that when a motion is put, whether it be as per the Officer's Recommendation or an Alternative, a seconder is called for (if there is no 'seconder' the item does not continue and another motion is tabled). Once seconded, the mover has the opportunity to explain the reason for the motion. The Presiding Member then asks for a speaker against the motion, then a speaker for the motion, then against and so on until there is no speaker for/against. The original mover then closes the matter before voting. Should there not be a speaker against the motion in the first instance, no more debate is held on that item.

As Elected Members normally clearly understand the intent of the motion because of the Alternative Recommendation List, there is generally no cause for any debate. This again may be construed by the public as Council not deliberating important issues. The Administration considers this to be the complete opposite as Elected Members have had a full week to read the agenda, ask questions of Staff, seek input from the community etc and if necessary, submit an alternative recommendation that is well considered.

These processes assist in conducting an efficient and structured Council Meeting and, after close scrutiny by the Department of Local Government, has been considered 'best practice'.

CONCEPT FORUMS

Council holds "Concept Forums" to develop positions which are considered to be of an internal nature, being matters such as development of the Principal Activities Plan, Budget or Corporate Activities Plan. At these sessions, a general consensus of Elected Members views are taken which may reflect in a recommendation being made by staff to a future Council Meeting.

The outcomes of these discussions are recorded and distributed to Elected Members.

There are no binding decisions made and Elected Members are in no way bound by the outcome of the consensus when voting on the matter at a Council Meeting. Staff are also not bound to present a recommendation based on the consensus expressed at Concept Forums.

OTHER PRESENTATION FORUMS

There are many occasions when it is necessary to conduct presentations or other information sessions such as:

- ◆ Update from Consultant on an issue
- ◆ Guest Speakers
- ◆ Delegation from Community Group relating to their particular issue

When it is necessary to organise such a session, the Mayor is informed and a date/time is set. Elected Members and relevant Officers are advised in writing and if necessary, documentation is provided beforehand of the issue.

No decisions are made at these Forums, they are simply information sessions.

CONCLUSION

The above practices, put in place in an attempt to streamline certain processes, have proved very successful but are under constant review in order to improve practices wherever possible.

It should be noted that the Department of Local Government and Regional Development considered that the process could be considered as 'best practice' and would be proposing it as a model for other local governments to consider.

Stephen Cain
Chief Executive Officer

12 April 2012