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The Acting General Manager,
Craig Swift-McNair
Port Macquarie-Hastings Council

Attention: Christine Bannister

Submission on proposal to update Council's Community Participation Policy.

This appears to be largely an exercise in crafting the existing policy into a new policy format while not changing the substance or intent¹, and where necessary incorporating simplified language and improvements based on previous feedback and experience. And it will be important to provide a succinct Policy Objective. A competent member of staff should be able to readily produce a draft for comment.

But good policy goes only so far. The real impact is in converting this policy into sustained and effective community engagement across the many entities within Council. The existing policy has been in place since 2007 and still BHPA experiences considerable variability in its application across Council staff. Many are excellent but in our view others will probably never 'get it'.

Training is an essential element but unfortunately it is not the be-all. Some staff will need training more than others, and it has to be accepted that some can never achieve a high standard. Managing this spectrum of abilities will be important to effective delivery. On-going monitoring and evaluation of performance will be critical to continuous improvement in the actual delivery across the board.

We give the very simple, but important example of staff answering emails and phone calls in a timely manner. The policy and rules are in place but still we experience large variation among Council staff in their responsiveness. Interestingly this does not appear to be related to level of seniority/responsibility. Poor performers should be identified – but it appears that Council does not have the processes in place to monitor performance and based on this effect remedial action for those who need it most. Role models and mentoring might be considered as part of the solution.

We trust you find this feedback useful.

Yours sincerely

Roger Barlow
President

Cc General Manager

¹ The current policy follows the model of the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum which is accepted as the gold standard in this field.