

Accredited Community Forums (ACF) – Policy & Operating Model

1. Purpose

Provide a safe, consistent, and transparent framework for Council recognised community groups that support place-based engagement between Council and local communities.

2. Objectives

- Ensure community input is representative and constructive.
- Enable accreditation and withdrawal process for community groups and Council.
- Provide consistent controls, reporting, and independent complaints handling.
- Provides a safe working environment for elected officials and staff of Council who attend ACF meetings.
- Provides absolute clarity for the legal standing and obligation of ACFs under the NSW Association Incorporation Act.

3. ACF Role & Operating Principles

- **Advisory only:** ACFs provide non-binding advice and local insights to Councillors and staff. ACFs must not represent themselves as decision-making bodies, official Council committees, or authorised spokespeople for Council. All advice is informal, nonbinding, and carries no expectation of adoption or response beyond standard acknowledgement processes.
- **Political neutrality:** ACFs must maintain party political neutrality, and as an organisation, must not participate in party-political campaigning, endorsement, fundraising, or association with political parties or candidates in any aspect of their operations. Members of ACFs are not precluded from party political activities as private citizens and must not portray themselves as representatives of the ACF while undertaking those activities.
- **Standards based recognition:** Council recognition is conditional on continuous compliance with the Accreditation Checklist (Section 13).

- **Safety and respect:** ACFs must uphold a zero tolerance for harassment, discrimination, or unsafe conduct.
- **Incorporated structure:** ACFs must be incorporated entities, ensuring legal accountability, clear governance arrangements, and consistent management of responsibilities, finances, and risk.

4. Governance

Incorporated associations in NSW are governed primarily by the Associations Incorporation Act 2009 (NSW) and the Associations Incorporation Regulation 2022, administered by NSW Fair Trading.

Incorporated bodies must have:

- a constitution and clear purpose
- an elected committee with legally enforceable governance duties
- a public officer responsible for compliance
- transparent financial and operational reporting
- proper meeting processes
- lawful membership and dispute resolution processes
- compliance with NSW Fair Trading.

5. Mandatory Standards

ACFs act as a conduit between Council and communities on matters of local concern. ACFs are solely responsible for demonstrating compliance with mandatory standards.

To fulfill this requirement, they need to:

- actively share Council information with residents and ratepayers of the geographical area they represent
- accurately represent feedback provided to them to Council
- encourage social, cultural and economic diversity in their membership
- provide a safe, welcoming, and psychologically safe environment for meetings
- invite Councillors to all meetings and provide them time to address the meeting if they wish
- meet at least 4 times a year
- share local insights with Council as they arise.

Accredited Community Forums must not:

- engage in conduct or communications that are derogatory, defamatory, discriminatory, harassing, threatening or otherwise harmful toward Council elected officials or Council employees
- make or publish false, misleading, or unsubstantiated statements that may damage the reputation of Council elected officials or Council employees.

6. Geographical Representation

Council can accredit one ACF per geographic area, specifically meaning one per town, village or locality.

7. Accreditation Process

The CEO is responsible for the assessment, suspension or withdrawal process of ACFs, in conjunction with the Governance team.

- **Application:** Community groups seeking recognition as an Accredited Community Forum (ACF) must apply each year to Council and demonstrate that they meet the accreditation standards outlined in this framework.
- **Assessment:** Via an online checklist. Staff will then review and approve or may request corrections.
- **Accreditation:** The incorporated community group would then be accredited for 12 months and listed on Council's website.
- **Declined:** Reason/s for refusal will be provided and option to reapply would be offered where possible once any concerns or issues are addressed.

Accreditation does not imply endorsement of views, positions, or conduct of an ACF and may be withdrawn without Council assuming any responsibility for forum operations.

7.1 Annual Re-accreditation

Applications will open 1 May each year for accreditation by 30 June.

Submission window: minimum 30 days before expiry.

Required evidence:

- Meeting schedule for the preceding and upcoming year.
- Incorporated status.
- Completed Accreditation checklist.

7.2 Mid-term Changes

Material changes (scope, leadership, meeting frequency) must be notified within 10 business days for Council information.

8. Council's Role

Council is responsible for enabling effective and timely two-way communication between ACFs and Council, ensuring communities are informed and that place-based feedback is appropriately received and considered.

Council's role is limited to information provision and accreditation administration. Council does not supervise, direct, or manage ACF operations, governance, or internal processes.

Council may provide ACFs with relevant, non-confidential information such as:

- media releases and public statements
- project updates and fact sheets
- links to Council plans, strategies, and decisions to support accurate and consistent communication with communities.

Council will:

- notify ACFs of relevant community engagement activities, consultations, exhibitions, surveys, and workshops so forums can promote participation within their local areas
- provide guidance on how information may be shared by ACFs, including the use of disclaimers to clearly distinguish between Council information and forum generated advice
- maintain a list of ACFs and their contact details on Council's website.

9.1 Feedback and response

Where ACFs provide formal advice or feedback, Council will ensure it is acknowledged, referred to relevant staff, and responded to in accordance with Council's Customer Service Charter.

10. Financial Support for ACFs

Council will provide limited financial support to Accredited Community Forums to help meet essential operational requirements and reduce barriers to participation.

Financial assistance is intended to ensure ACFs can operate safely, independently, and in compliance with the conditions of accreditation.

10.1 Administration Support & Insurance Grant (Up to \$1,000 per year)

Council will offer an annual grant of up to \$1,000 to support core administration activities and insurance costs.

Administration expenses can include:

- venue hires beyond Council provided facilities
- printing, stationery, and meeting materials
- digital tools such as online meeting platforms, domain names, or basic website costs
- bookkeeping or recordkeeping assistance
- administrative support to meet transparency obligations (e.g., publishing minutes, agendas, registers).

ACFs are required to maintain insurance coverage as incorporated associations, and this funding can contribute to:

- public liability insurance
- volunteer insurance
- other essential coverage required under incorporation governance obligations.

This support helps ACFs meet statutory and governance obligations associated with incorporated status, including managing risk and maintain legal compliance as required under NSW incorporation laws.

10.2 Access to Council Halls and Facilities

Accredited Community Forums may have access to Council owned halls, meeting rooms, or community facilities at no cost, subject to:

- venue availability
- compliance with booking procedures
- safety requirements
- appropriate use of facilities consistent with ACF standards and apolitical status.

This access supports ACFs to hold safe, accessible, place-based meetings.

11. Reviews and Investigations

Council will not investigate complaints made by members of the public or any other community organisation against an ACF. ACFs must address complaints directly, as per Complaints Management (Section 13).

The CEO will review complaints made by an elected official or staff member of Council relating to their own experience.

11.1 Process for Council Review

Where an elected official or Council staff member is subject to conduct assessed as causing psychological harm, the CEO will issue an improvement notice to the ACF. Upon receipt of a second substantiated complaint, the CEO will issue a suspension notice for the remainder of the financial year. Accreditation may be withdrawn permanently following a third substantiated complaint by CEO and Council's Governance team.

12. Suspension and Removal of Accreditation

Accreditation may be suspended or withdrawn where a forum:

- engages in conduct that causes psychological harm to Council elected officials or staff
- becomes noncompliant with incorporation requirements and is found by Fair Trading to be non-compliant with terms of Associations Incorporations Act 2009
- engages in political activity or breaches party-political neutrality.

Council is not required to demonstrate fault or intent prior to suspension or withdrawal of accreditation of an ACF.

Any group that has been suspended is ineligible to apply for accreditation in the subsequent application period but may reapply the year after.

13. Complaints Management

13.1 Scope

Complaints from community about forum behaviour, safety, governance, transparency, or alleged breaches of standards are to be managed and resolved by the ACF.

Complaints from Council elected officials and staff will be managed by the CEO.

13.2 Clear and Accessible Lodgement

The ACF must provide an accessible way for community members or participants to lodge complaints (e.g., email address, online form, or written submission).

Complaints must relate to ACF operations, member conduct, safety, or governance.

13.3 Council's Role in Complaints Management

Council does not form part of any community complaints process of an Accredited Community Forum (ACF). Responsibility for managing complaints rests with the ACF and is expected to be addressed at the local level, in accordance with the forum's approved complaints handling procedures.

Council will manage complaints received directly from Council elected officials and staff about any instance where they personally experience psychological harm caused by unsafe behaviour at an ACF meeting.

14. Annual Compliance Checklist

- Must be incorporated or auspiced by an incorporated body.
- Has a Code of Conduct in place.
- Invites all Councillors to attend and speak at meetings.
- Conducts a minimum of 4 public meetings per year.
- Must not have three complaints against the ACF by Council elected officials and/or staff within a 12-month period.
- Maintains party-political neutrality.

15. Date for Review

This ACF Operating and Policy model must be reviewed by 30 May 2028 in consultation with ACFs.