

A Proposal from the Combined Shoalhaven Community Consultative Bodies

Strengthening Community Consultation in the Shoalhaven

Executive Summary

Shoalhaven City Council resolved on 16 December 2025 to transition away from the current Community Consultative Body (CCB) model in its present form from 1 July 2026, and to undertake consultation from February/March 2026 to determine an alternative approach.

In response, the Combined Shoalhaven Community Consultative Bodies convened a workshop on 12 January 2026, attended by representatives from 20 CCBs across the Shoalhaven. That meeting unanimously resolved to establish a Working Group to prepare a proposal for Council outlining a constructive way forward for future community consultation.

This paper is the outcome of that process. It is presented to Council as a practical proposal that responds to Council's stated concerns while recognising the value of structured, local community engagement across a large and diverse local government area. Unanimously, the CCBs wish to preserve this.

The Combined CCBs:

- acknowledge Council's concerns about workplace health and safety, behaviour, governance, consistency, public liability and role clarity.
- accept that reform is required, including stronger and enforceable standards.
- recognise that incorporation helps manage risk and protect volunteers but does not on its own resolve consultative governance issues.
- do not support discontinuing place-based community forums without an agreed replacement.
- seek a constructive and collaborative way forward.

A practical way forward

Workshop discussions canvassed a range of ideas for future engagement. While not all were developed, the concept of Accredited Community Forums (ACFs) emerged as a potential way forward that responds directly to Council's concerns while retaining local representation.

Under an ACF approach, community forums would operate in an advisory capacity only. Council recognition would be conditional on meeting clear and mandatory standards covering conduct, safety, governance and transparency. Incorporation would be encouraged where groups undertake operational or on-the-ground activities but would not be required for consultative recognition. Council would retain clear authority over accreditation, compliance and, where necessary, withdrawal of recognition.

The ACF concept is not presented as a predetermined outcome, but as a framework to support Council's consultation process and provide a clear basis for discussion and refinement.

1. Purpose of this Paper

This paper is presented to Shoalhaven City Council as a proposal from the Combined Shoalhaven Community Consultative Bodies (CCBs) to assist Council in considering future arrangements for community consultation following the Council resolution of 16 December 2025.

The purpose of the paper is to:

- respond constructively to Council's stated concerns regarding the current CCB model;
- articulate the value of structured, place-based community consultation across the Shoalhaven;
- outline a practical way forward that strengthens governance, safety and accountability; and
- support Council's forthcoming consultation process by providing a clear, workable framework for discussion and refinement.

This paper is not intended to defend the status quo. It recognises that reform is necessary and seeks to contribute positively to the development of a stronger, safer and more effective community engagement model.

2. Background and Mandate

Shoalhaven City Council resolved on 16 December 2025 to transition away from the current Community Consultative Body model in its present form from 1 July 2026 and undertake community consultation from February/March 2026 to determine an alternative long-term engagement model.

In response to that resolution, a Combined CCB Workshop was convened on 12 January 2026. The workshop was attended by representatives from 20 Community Consultative Bodies across the Shoalhaven, reflecting a broad cross-section of geographic areas, incorporated and unincorporated groups, and community interests.

At that meeting, the Combined CCBs unanimously resolved to establish a small Working Group to draft a proposal for presentation to Shoalhaven City Council. The Working Group was tasked with incorporating the views expressed at the workshop and providing a constructive way forward for future community consultation.

This document is the outcome of that process and is submitted to Council in accordance with that mandate.

3. The Role and Value of Community Consultative Bodies

Community Consultative Bodies have operated in the Shoalhaven for many years as place-based forums representing local communities, residents and ratepayers.

Community Consultative Bodies :

- provide local knowledge and insight that is not easily captured through centralised or issue-specific consultation;
- act as a conduit between Council and communities on matters of local concern;
- support early identification of issues and opportunities at a local level; and contribute to more informed, transparent and trusted decision-making.

The Shoalhaven Local Government Area is geographically large and diverse, comprising numerous towns, villages and distinct communities. The Combined CCBs consider that this diversity requires engagement mechanisms that are capable of operating at a local, place-based level, particularly where issues have significant community impact.

CCBs are consultative bodies. They do not make decisions on behalf of Council, nor do they exercise delegated authority. Council decision-making is informed by a wide range of inputs, of which community consultation is one important component.

4. Independence and Relationship with Council

Community Consultative Bodies are independent community organisations. They are not committees or sub-committees of Council.

At the same time, there is strong mutual benefit in a constructive and respectful relationship between Council and place-based community forums. Councillor and staff attendance at CCB meetings, when invited, is valued by communities and supports information sharing, mutual understanding and trust.

The Combined CCBs recognise that:

- Council must manage risk, safety and governance in its interactions with community forums; and
- clear expectations, standards and boundaries are essential to maintaining effective and respectful engagement.

Any future model of community consultation should therefore preserve the independence of community bodies, clearly define roles, responsibilities and boundaries and provide Council with appropriate mechanisms to set conditions for formal recognition and engagement.

5. Council's Stated Concerns and Shared Issues to Address

Shoalhaven City Council has identified a number of concerns in relation to the current operation of Community Consultative Bodies, including:

- workplace health and safety at meetings;
- behaviour and meeting conduct;
- public liability and insurance;

- governance and consistency; and
- role clarity and expectations.

The Combined CCBs acknowledge that these concerns are legitimate and require clear and effective responses. They also recognise that inconsistent application of guidelines and a lack of enforceable standards have contributed to uncertainty for both Council and community participants.

At the Combined CCB Workshop held on 12 January 2026, these matters were discussed extensively. There was broad agreement that the key weaknesses in the current model lie not in the existence of place-based community forums, but in the absence of clear, mandatory and consistently applied standards governing their recognised consultative role.

This proposal proceeds on the basis that any future engagement framework must directly address these shared issues in a way that improves safety and conduct, provides clarity and certainty for all parties, and enables Council to manage risk appropriately while maintaining meaningful community engagement.

6. Role Clarity and Risk Boundaries

A recurring theme in discussions between Council and CCBs has been the need for clearer separation between consultative functions and operational or on-the-ground activities.

The Combined CCBs recognise that: Community Consultative Bodies exist to provide advice, local knowledge and community perspectives to Council; and they do not act on behalf of Council, nor do they undertake delegated functions.

Where community groups undertake operational activities — such as events, works or service delivery — these activities are best undertaken through incorporated entities, appropriate insurance arrangements and governance structures that are separate from the consultative role.

Clear role separation benefits both Council and communities by reducing uncertainty around liability and responsibility, protecting volunteers and participants, and preserving the integrity of community consultation processes.

A strengthened consultation model should therefore clearly define what activities fall within the recognised consultative role and what activities sit outside that role and require separate governance and risk management arrangements.

7. Community Consultative Body Guidelines and the Case for Stronger Standards

Council's existing Community Consultative Body Guidelines provide a useful foundation for engagement between Council and community forums. However, experience has shown that advisory guidelines alone are insufficient to address issues of conduct, safety, consistency and accountability.

Issues identified by CCBs include:

- lack of clarity around roles, responsibilities and boundaries;
- inconsistent interpretation and application across different CCBs;
- uncertainty regarding liabilities and consequences of non-compliance; and
- limited practical guidance on managing behaviour and meeting conduct.

There is a shared interest between Council and the Combined CCBs in strengthening this framework.

Any future model should include:

- clearly articulated mandatory standards for recognised consultative bodies;
- a code of conduct covering behaviour, meeting practice and political neutrality;
- transparent expectations regarding governance, openness and representativeness; and
- clear, fair and proportionate processes for addressing non-compliance.

Such standards should be developed through consultation, clearly communicated, and supported by Council through guidance and education, as well as consistent enforcement where required.

8. A Practical Way Forward: Accredited Community Forums

In considering future arrangements for community consultation, the Combined CCBs recognise the need for a model that both addresses Council's stated concerns and retains the benefits of structured, place-based engagement.

During the Combined CCB Workshop and subsequent Working Group discussions, a number of ideas were raised. While not all were developed into detailed models, the concept of Accredited Community Forums (ACFs) emerged as one practical way forward that could meet Council's requirements while preserving local community voice.

Under an ACF approach:

- community forums would operate in an advisory capacity only;
- Council recognition would be conditional on compliance with clearly defined and mandatory standards;
- expectations regarding behaviour, safety, governance and transparency would be explicit and enforceable; and
- Council would retain clear authority to accredit, monitor and, where necessary, suspend or withdraw recognition.

The ACF concept supports a clearer distinction between recognised consultative functions undertaken within an agreed framework and operational or community activities which may continue independently under appropriate governance and insurance arrangements.

Incorporation would be encouraged but not mandated. Incorporated bodies can, if they wish, retain full independence in their internal governance, while Council recognition would apply only to the consultative role and associated standards.

The Combined CCBs emphasise that the ACF concept is not presented as a predetermined outcome. Rather, it is offered as a workable framework to support Council's forthcoming consultation process and to provide a tangible basis for discussion, testing and refinement.

9. Next Steps and What Is Sought from Council

The Combined CCBs are keen to work constructively with Council to develop a strengthened and sustainable community consultation model.

In that context, this proposal seeks Council's consideration of the following next steps:

1. recognition of place-based engagement;
2. consideration of the ACF framework as a practical basis for further consultation and development;
3. collaborative development during early 2026 of accreditation criteria and standards, a code of conduct and meeting practice requirements, and a clear governance, compliance and review framework; and
4. alignment with Council policy, including the Community Engagement Strategy and Framework.

The Combined CCBs see this as an opportunity to strengthen community consultation outcomes for both Council and communities, and to rebuild confidence and trust in engagement processes.

10. Endorsement and Signatories

This proposal is submitted on behalf of the Combined Shoalhaven Community Consultative Bodies.

Working Group (appointed by the Combined Shoalhaven Community Consultative Bodies):

John Wells — Cambewarra Residents & Ratepayers Association

Gary Bickford — Tomerong Community Forum

Chris Grounds — Basin Villages Forum

Fiona Ellis — Callala Bay Community Association Inc.

David Swarts — Tabourie Lake Ratepayers and Residents Association Inc.

A full list of endorsing Community Consultative Bodies is provided in Appendix A.

Appendix A – Endorsing Community Consultative Bodies

- Basin Villages Forum
- Bawley Point, Kioloa and Termeil Community Association
- Berry Forum
- Budgong Community Group Inc.
- Burrill Lake Community Association **Inc.**
- Callala Bay Community Association Inc.
- Callala Beach Progress Association
- Cambewarra Residents & Ratepayers Association
- Conjola Community Association
- Culburra Beach & Orient Point Community Forum
- Currarong Community Association Inc.
- Huskisson Woollamia Community Voice
- Hyams Beach Villages Association **Inc.**
- Kangaroo Valley Community Consultative Body Inc.
- Milton District Community Forum
- Red Head Villages Association Inc.
- Shoalhaven Heads Community Forum
- Sussex Inlet & Districts Community Forum
- Tabourie Lake Ratepayers and Residents Association Inc.
- Tomerong Community Forum
- Ulladulla & Districts Community Forum Inc.
- Vincentia Ratepayers and Residents Association Inc.
- Wandandian Progress Association **Inc.**