
Draft Statement of Commitment

Responsible Officer: Group Manager Planning and Delivery (Andrew Logan)

Recommendation

That Council:

1. Receive and note the intentions of Rous to establish a Statement of Commitment.
2. Endorse the draft Statement of Commitment as presented.

Background

Over the past 18 years, Rous has developed a strong track record of working together in partnership with local First Nations people and Elders. This includes the Water Walks project at Emigrant Creek Dam and Rocky Creek Dam (from 2002 2007), and Reconnecting to Country in the Wilsons River Catchment project (from 2008 2012).

Since 2001, Rous has also co-presented Big Scrub Rainforest Day in partnership with Big Scrub Landcare including involvement from Widjabul/Wia-bal Elders. In 2010 Rous raised the Aboriginal Flag in the Council Chambers and incorporated an Acknowledgement of Country in all Council meetings.

In 2013, Council resolved to develop the Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). RAPs provide a framework for organisations to realise their vision for reconciliation. Rous adopted its first Reconciliation Action Plan - a *Reflect* RAP - in accordance with the Reconciliation Australia framework in 2016, and an *Innovate* RAP in 2021. Key actions endorsed include:

- building and nurturing a working relationship with Traditional Custodians
- preparing and delivering cultural awareness training for all staff
- establishing a RAP Advisory Group
- participating in NAIDOC Week celebrations
- working toward the active employment of First Nations peoples.

The RAP Advisory Group consists of a Rous Councillor, Traditional Custodians, Local Aboriginal Land Council representatives, as well as other relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders. The RAP Advisory Group (RAPAG) provides advice to Council to support the implementation of the RAP.

Why a Statement of Commitment?

Development of the RAP at Rous was initially led by our elected Council as a means to continue to the project-based work that was initiated in the projects described above. While development of the RAP involved the establishment of objectives that led to the development of action plans, unlike other management systems and action planning processes, there was no overarching policy established at that time that outlined why the RAP is important for Rous.

The RAP is important as it says *what* we are going to do to build positive, respectful relationships between First Nations Australians and our broader community. The Statement of Commitment is an important step in stating *why* these relationships are so important for Rous.

Whilst there has been steady progress on RAP actions over an extended period, progression of the Future Water Project (FWP) (and in particular, the Dunoan Dam proposal) by Rous from 2020 onwards has raised significant community concern regarding Aboriginal cultural heritage matters and the need for appropriate consultation and engagement processes.

It is not the role of the RAP Advisory Group to speak on behalf of the Aboriginal community regarding the FWP. To this end, Rous is seeking to establish a consultation process that will take considerable time and effort to ensure that all First Nations community members, organisations and stakeholders are engaged and consulted meaningfully.

Rous is genuine in its intent to complete this critical consultation and engagement and does not wish for these valued relationships it has with local First Nations and community members, as described above, to be eroded by division.

Current situation

To provide assurances to the local Aboriginal people, organisations and stakeholders, as well as the broader community, that these matters will be addressed authentically and respectfully, it is considered appropriate at this time for Rous to endorse a draft Statement of Commitment to the local First Nations community. Adoption of this draft Statement is considered important to enable meaningful consultation regarding the Statement itself, and for the following reasons:

- to provide a clear whole-of-organisation commitment to working together with local First Nations people, organisations and stakeholders on shared objectives
- to demonstrate that this commitment extends beyond the scope of the FWP
- to support the ongoing commitment of the organisation to the RAP and associated actions
- to demonstrate the sincerity of Rous to engage in joint discussions and reassure the whole community that these important issues will be managed with cultural sensitivity and respect, and
- to provide increased opportunities to walk and work together with local First Nations people.

Details are as follows:

1. Draft Statement of Commitment

The draft Statement of Commitment is included as Attachment A.

Finance

There are no financial implications that would directly arise from Council's endorsement of the Statement of Commitment. The RAP has an existing operational budget allocated to support the actions within the RAP and this would be unchanged.

Environment

There are no environmental issues associated with endorsement of the Statement of Commitment. It is anticipated that additional work on country in partnership with First Nations communities would lead to environmental improvements over time.

Legal

Should Rous subsequently adopt the draft Statement of Commitment, Rous would proceed to integrate this commitment into its Integrated Planning and Reporting processes. Forming a key policy document that underpins the policies for the conservation of heritage items in NSW, The Burra Charter is included as a key guiding document for managing Aboriginal cultural heritage.

Consultation

The draft Statement of Commitment was prepared and considered by staff across the organisation including the Leadership Team. In June 2021, the RAPAG reviewed the draft Statement of Commitment. Delays were experienced in bringing the revised document back to the RAPAG – these centred around the change of Councillors for Rous after the December 2021 elections and the flood impacts of 2022. Suggested changes have now been incorporated into the revised draft. This revised version was re-presented to the RAPAG in April 2023 and at a Council workshop in May 2023.

Conclusion

Rous has for many years worked in partnership with local First Nations people, organisations and stakeholders on community educational projects for the protection of water and land, and for reconciliation. These relationships and ongoing partnerships are at risk of being undermined by community concerns regarding the management of Aboriginal cultural heritage matters associated with the FWP. Adoption of the draft Statement of Commitment is required in order to ensure that Rous can:

- i. continue to work in partnership on important social justice components of the RAP; and
- ii. appropriately respond to legislative/regulatory requirements of the FWP.

Attachment

1. Draft Statement of Commitment