

**Moreland Council Consultation Framework**

**May 2000**

## **Consultation and Democratic Governance**

### **Introduction**

Consultation has been a critical part of democratic governance in Moreland. This local government has a proud tradition of consultation on every key issue and has developed innovative solutions to consultations across a broad range of issues. This paper attempts to provide an overview of the consultation process and a framework for future consultations to take place.

Council sees consultation as a key step towards enhanced decision-making. Consultation may result in slower development of difficult or complex decisions, but in the long run leads to quicker implementation. This is because good consultation leads to community ownership of a decision as a result of the access of the community to the decision making process.

Consultation is fundamental to democratic governance, with its emphasis on community development and political leadership based on an informed and involved community. It needs to be clearly stated that consultation does not imply government by referendum. The accountability of government for political leadership and decision-making is enhanced, not diminished, by consultation.

Moreover, it is important that consultation is done with imagination and an understanding for the needs of the community. This strategy deliberately avoids any set process for consultation while highlighting the key issues that should be considered whenever consultation plans are being developed.

This strategy aims to give the community a clear view of the importance of consultation in democratic governance. It also aims to be a practical document that will assist Council to undertake effective consultation in Moreland.

From its inception, Moreland believed that good local government was achieved through open leadership and sensitivity to community needs, interests and aspirations.

‘Ultimately, Councillors have to take the decisions. After all, this is why they are elected. What they have to balance, therefore, is the same need to consult properly with their community while at the same time recognising that their responsibilities as decision makers may mean taking decisions which do not reflect other people’s views.’

Cr Mike Hill, first Moreland Mayor, 1996

Every Council report has a section on internal and external consultation to ensure that proper attention has been given to this area of making decisions. This paper is to ensure that consultation genuinely reaches people affected by a decision and they have every opportunity to impact on Council decision-making and to foster a consultative culture.

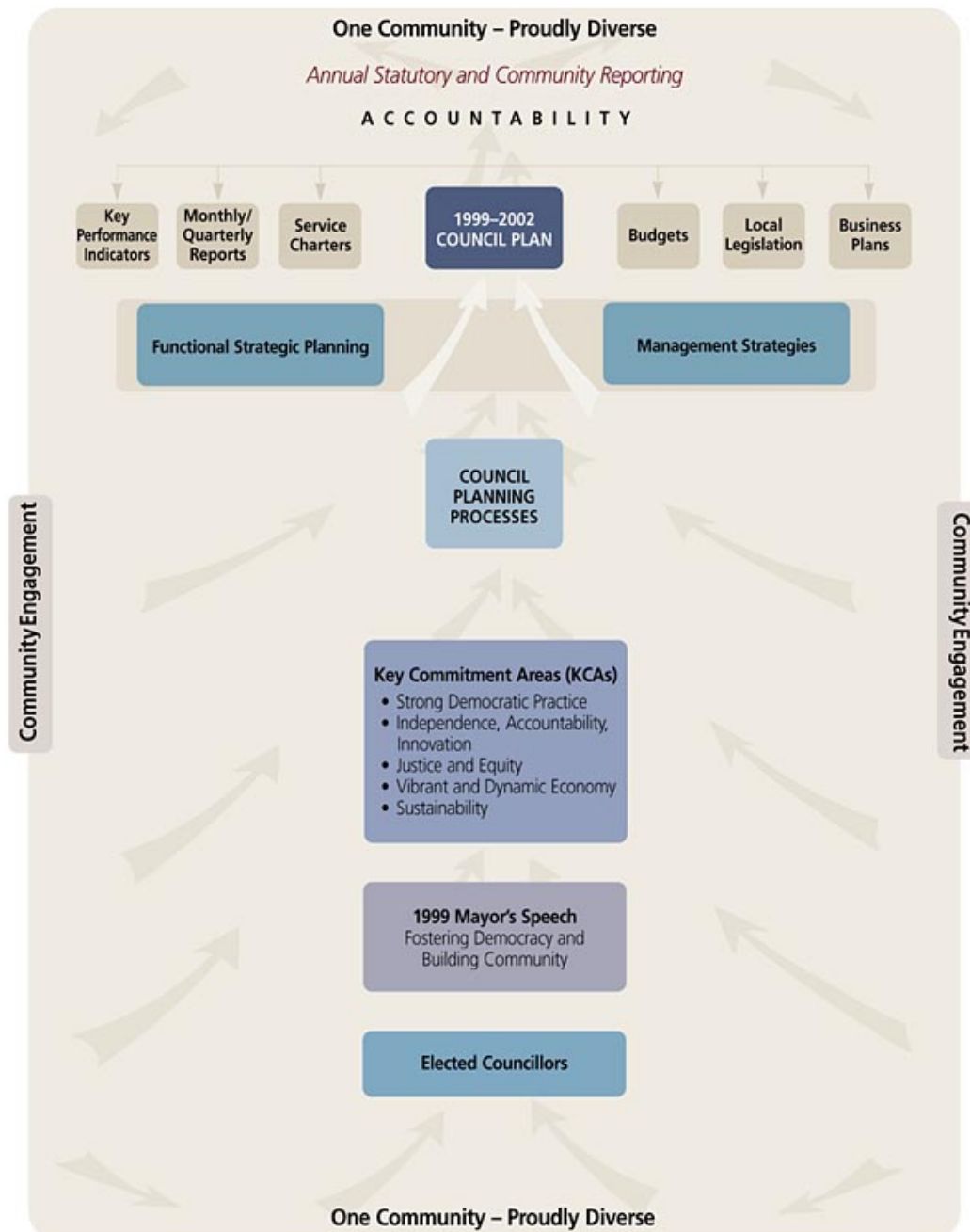
The Moreland Council Communication Strategy has already presented a vehicle for providing information to the community. The strategy outlined the use of the Internet, community radio, Moreland City News, Council advertising and releasing information to the media, in providing information to the community. Accessible information provides an underpinning for any consultation strategy.

The Moreland Community Information Strategy also develops a means for the community to be informed about issues. The development of an effective database will improve mailouts and help target information. The development of the internet will also assist in this process.

## Moreland Council Planning Framework and Consultation

The Moreland Council planning framework places consultation as one of the key features of the relationship between the community and Council. Council's key commitments to the Moreland community remain the foundation for the entire planning process, in undertaking the key roles of leadership, consultation, advocacy and service. Consultation is one of the key relationships between Council and the community and enhances the others.

Strategies are developed and decisions are made based on the continued efforts of Council and staff in consultation with the Moreland community.



Based on Moreland Council Plan 1999 - 2002,  
*Fostering Democracy and Building Community*

The Communication Task Group has been given the responsibility to establish a wider framework for Council's consultation processes.

To start this process, a paper was commissioned by Council to deliver a working party report on the Consultation Strategy in 1996. This paper was the first step towards a more comprehensive strategy.

It identified four main reasons to consult with the community.

- To extend boundaries of knowledge
- It is ethical
- It is democratic
- It is efficient

The paper said that effective consultation included some important prerequisites. Council has to:

- Be clear and open about its intentions and actions
- Be prepared to listen to people
- Establish proper processes for wider information gathering and public exchange
- Recognise the legitimacy of diverse groups to enter debates
- Accept criticism
- Support the structures and processes for community participation and consultation.

Consultation should not be confused with providing information or seeking feedback. The paper is the foundation for the full consultation strategy.

### **Definition of Consultation**

Consultation for this paper is defined as a process of two-way, informed communication between the Council and the community on an issue prior to Council making a decision on that issue.

Democratic governance involves community participation and input into governance and decision making. Consultation is a vehicle for obtaining this input and it enhances the decision making process. It fulfils a need to ensure that views can be identified and communicated. Consultation does not impact on the Council's role to make decisions and its accountability for its decision making. It does not imply government by referendum.

## Aims

The aim of the consultation strategy is to create and foster a consultative culture within Moreland City Council.

The Key Commitment Areas are the building blocks for Council's vision and a consultative culture will impact on KCAs developed in the Council Plan.

<b>Strong Democratic Practice</b>	Strengthen and improve Council decision-making by obtaining input from the people who are likely to be affected by – or are interested – in particular decisions.
	Enable Council to represent the community and provide leadership in decision making.
	Strengthen the advocacy role of Council.
<b>Independence, Accountability and Innovation</b>	Provide a framework within which Council will work to consult with the community, so that Council staff carrying out consultation are able to approach each consultation from a similar basis.
	Build processes that uphold a commitment to consult and communicate with the people who are affected by particular decisions.
<b>Justice and Equity</b>	Strengthen and build the community.
	Offer participation for the community.
<b>Sustainability</b>	Enhanced decision-making has meant that the decisions on sustainability have widespread public support.
<b>A vibrant and dynamic economy</b>	Improve economic development of the Moreland community through enhanced and responsive decision making that takes into account and balances the interests and needs of both business and the wider community.

## Foundation Principles

The following foundation principles will be applied to all Moreland consultation processes:

### 1. **Inclusiveness**

- Consultation will encourage the participation of people affected by or interested in a decision.
- Everyone will be given equal opportunity to participate in consultation.
- Everyone can select their own representative to work with Council.
- Consultation will be sensitive to the needs of particular groups to maximise ability to contribute.
- Council will actively seek out people for consultation.

### 2. **Focus**

- Consultation must have a clear purpose.
- Chosen consultation methods will be appropriate for the task.
- A clear statement on what the consultation is to achieve will be provided.
- A clear statement on the role of Council and the role of other participants will be made.
- Internal coordination will ensure Council ownership of consultation outcomes.

### **3. Responsiveness**

- Council will consider and respond to contributions from all participants.
- Consultation will be transparent. All people involved will have a clear understanding about how their feedback and comments are to be used.
- Maintain openness. Take new ideas on board and alter the course of actions if required.
- Ensure respect for the diverse range of interests that may be represented during a consultation.
- Make reasonable attempts to resolve conflicts, if they arise, and reach a suitable solution.

### **4. Providing Information**

- Information relating to the consultation will be readily available to allow participants to make informed and timely contributions.
- Information relating to the consultation can be easily accessed by all involved before key decisions are made.
- Relevant information will be presented in an easily understood format.
- There will be circumstances where commercially sensitive information or information of a personal nature may not be able to be fully disclosed to the public.

### **5. Implementation and Evaluation**

- All consultation processes will be evaluated after the decision-making they contributed to is completed.
- Participants will receive feedback about ideas received and how the final decision was reached.
- If a difference occurs between the ideas and the final decision the reasons will be documented.
- As a part of its commitment to the effectiveness of a consultation, Council's associated decision making processes will be evaluated after a final decision has been made.

## **Issues for Consultation**

The principles require that Council consult on issues of community concern. Consultation methods will vary according to the issue. Site specific issues will require a lower level of consultation to obtaining community views on statewide or national issues that might require a Council position. Six issue types exist that will require different methods of consultation:

### **Site Specific**

Matters about a particular site, such as a change in use.

### **Area Improvement**

Matters that affect people in a neighbourhood, suburb or strip shopping centre. (eg: traffic management).

### **Service Planning**

To develop or improve a service. The service could have an impact on the whole municipality.

## ***Policy Development***

To develop or improve policies for Council's position on particular matters. Policies may affect the whole municipality.

## ***Major Projects/ Strategic Issues***

Projects of such size they impact on the finances or future of the whole municipality. (eg: CityLink and Pentridge).

## ***Strategic Plans***

Establishing the decision-making framework of Council. This includes the Council Plan and the new Planning Scheme.

## ***Methods of Consultation***

The various methods of consultation are illustrated here. The basic thrust of all these communication is to provide accurate information to both the community and council to ensure that decision making is informed.

### ***Write a Letter***

This is a personally addressed letter to all the affected households. It outlines the issue and invites comment. It always indicates where the comment should be directed within Council.

### ***Survey***

This is a statistically correct survey of particular attitudes, beliefs or information. It is almost always conducted by independent survey specialists and may be done by phone, written survey or doorknock of individual households.

### ***Letterbox Drop***

This is a non-addressed leaflet or flyer that summarises the issues and invites feedback to Council. The flyer indicates how that feedback can be given.

### ***Council Newsletter***

This is the regular publication of Council. It can carry articles about a policy or issue. If it is used for consultation, then the article must inform and encourage feedback. The newsletter is an important vehicle to report on the results of other consultations.

### ***Special Publications***

These can range from a special newsheet to a brochure or a draft printed policy. They are designed to inform the consultation process.

### ***Ads in the Local Newspapers***

Ads in the news section of the local papers (except for statutory requirements) are an important means of advising the community about the matter under consultation and how they might have their say.

### ***Media***

This involves issuing media releases and conducting interviews with local journalists. If it is part of the consultative process, the Council spokesperson should always indicate to the media representative that feedback from the community is valued.

### ***Community Leaders***

Community groups have their own systems of communication. In any consultation, the leaders of those community groups play an important part in circulating information and receiving feedback.

### ***Personal Briefing/s***

These are held at the request of a member or members of the local community to discuss a particular issue with a responsible officer. They may include a councillor.

### ***Focus Groups***

These are discussion groups of around 5-20 people, usually led by a trained person (facilitator). The participants are invited because they are residents or because they have a particular interest, involvement or stake in the subject being discussed. The purpose is to find out the range of opinions that exist on a particular topic. Focus groups cannot measure how widely those various opinions are held in the community.

### ***A Meeting Called by the Community***

With some issues the community may determine to call its own meeting as part of the consultation process.

### ***Public Meeting***

This may be held at a community venue, at the site of the matter under consultation, or at the Council offices. Invitations will be sent by one or more of the following methods:

- ad in the local papers
- letterbox drop
- media release or telephone contact with community (including ethnic) leaders.

## Consultation Matrix – which method is used when

Moreland City Council will use a range of consultation methods to suit the needs of the issue. The table below illustrates the most common methods and their frequency of use. Methods rated as number 1 will be used every time, while those with the number 5 will rarely be used.

	Site Specific	Area Improvement	Service Planning	Policy Development	Major Projects	Strategic Plans
Write a Letter	1	1	2	2	4	4
Survey	4	2	2	2	2	3
Letter Drop	3	2	4	2	2	2
Council Newsletter	5	3	1	1	1	1
Special Newspaper	5	3	3	2	3	1
Ads in Newspapers	2	2	1	1	1	1
Media	4	1	1	1	1	1
Community Leaders	3	2	1	1	1	1
Personal Briefing(s)	2	1	2	3	3	4
Focus Groups	5	4	1	2	1	3
Community Called Meeting	1	1	1	1	1	1
Public Meeting	2	2	2	1	1	1

### Consultation key

#### When

Every time	1
In most circumstances	2
Depending on the program	3
On the odd occasion	4
Rarest of circumstances	5

### *Using the matrix*

The matrix should be used as a guide. It is not possible or desirable to write a personal letter for every event, although the community has clearly called for personal communication on issues close to home. The matrix must not be used prescriptively. It is not necessary to both advertise and produce a special publication. Equally, a small meeting may negate the need for focus groups. All consultations require that officers look at the matrix to determine what the community expects and then meet those minimum standards. The matrix has to be used with the checklist to ensure that a solid and consistent approach is adopted to consultation across Council.

## **Other communication tools**

This strategy has avoided a prescriptive approach to consultation. The consultation matrix is to assist officers to determine proper level of consultation. Listed below are some other ideas for the consultation process that can be used with the matrix.

### ***Ward meetings***

The community, in different ways, raised the possibility of ward meetings on issues. This possibly reflects a desire to meet and talk to the ward councillor on some form of equal footing. Ward meetings should be considered as an option after discussion with the relevant ward, project or portfolio councillor.

### ***Self Directed Focus groups***

Focus groups can be either directed or self directed. Directed focus groups have a facilitator who directs and reports back on the issues. Self directed focus groups do not have a facilitator and involve a discussion with a selected target group. The purpose of the target groups is to bring out issues through discussion. It is an excellent tool for highlighting issues that can be further explored through the quantitative research. Self directed focus groups can also be dominated by a single person and should be used carefully.

### ***The internet***

The internet needs to be explored as an adjunct to any consultation process. Major documents can be placed on the web page for downloading by interested groups and people.

The broader issue of using the Internet will need to be addressed by Moreland Council in the coming years. The potential for the internet is enormous in the quick uptake and exchange of views and ideas.

### ***Street stalls***

Street stalls are a useful tool in getting information about issues from people in the street. They also offer a chance to discuss a wide range of issues. Street stalls were used in the local laws consultation. It is important that officers are prepared to handle a wide range of issues and not just the issue that is being consulted upon. A good way to canvas the mood of the community. Done with a short survey, it can be very useful.

### ***Reference groups***

There is a range of reference or interest groups for many groups and specific groups can be encouraged to participate. The community information strategy is being developed to strengthen the role of these groups.

### ***Language Link, interpreters and translations***

In some form, Language Link should be used in conjunction with all consultations and communications. Translations should be used when needed. Interpreters are available on requests for meetings. A Language Link booklet is being developed to assist staff and the community to effectively use this valuable tool.

## **Issues raised during the consultation process**

A number of issues were raised during the consultation process by staff and the community to enhance consultation.

### ***Internal communication***

Good consultation needs sound internal communication processes. Moreland staff have identified this area as one that needs continued work. More work needs to be done on developing both formal and informal processes.

### ***Resourcing***

- All significant consultation exercises are carefully costed.
- In the interests of equity, Council will consider assisting groups who would otherwise be unable to contribute. The manner of this assistance will differ depending on the consultation and the resources available.

### ***Training***

- Staff must be trained in appropriate consultation techniques.
- Training must be focused to acquaint staff with the principles of good consultation, implementation of sound consultation and evaluation of the consultation.

### ***Timing***

- Adequate time must be allowed for participants to contribute and unexpected issues to be raised. Consultation will be started as early as possible to allow time for community involvement and comment.
- Reasonable deadlines will be set for participants to respond and for the completion of tasks.
- Sufficient time is allowed so that there is flexibility to debate and investigate any unexpected and important issues that arise.

### ***Consultation with Wurundjeri People***

- The unique perspectives of the Wurundjeri people are acknowledged in Council consultation.
- Council is committed to involving indigenous people in its decision-making processes.
- The most appropriate way to involve indigenous people in the consultation will be discussed in conjunction with Wurundjeri representatives as part of the reconciliation policy.

## Conclusion

Enhanced decision-making is one of the primary reasons why Council consults. This is based on the recognition that if you communicate properly with people affected by a decision, they are likely to provide you with a wealth of information and insight about a proposal.

Feedback from those consulted is analysed with the expectation that new ideas and new perspectives will be thrown up for further investigation or ideas that had originally been suspected will be confirmed. The outcomes of this analysis can then be incorporated directly into the decision-making process. In the end, Council is accountable for the decisions it takes.

The submissions commented mostly unfavourably on aspects of individual consultations. Many stated that the principles underlying community consultation were fine but there was a great deal that could be done about implementation. Some accused the Council of empty rhetoric and not being serious about consultation.

It is clear that consultation is a contentious issue within the Moreland community. The most recent community perceptions survey places community satisfaction at 62 per cent. Given the emphasis placed on consultation, there is still room for improvement and the anecdotal evidence suggests that many sections of the population are dissatisfied with the way consultation is undertaken. Many residents have said that it is seen intimidating to enter into vigorous public debates. The challenge is to make participating in consultation to be pleasant and having all people treated with respect and dignity. This is difficult when contentious issues arise.

On the other hand, some businesses feel that there is too much emphasis on consultation and not enough on implementation. There needs to be a strong commitment to get the job done.

In more general terms, people are not interested in being consulted about broad-brush strategies. They are interested in the implementation of such strategies. Hence, it is unlikely that the community wants to be involved in high level budgetary discussions, but it is interested in how the playgrounds will be built, or child care centres are located or traffic management measures are introduced. While most people – 90 per cent – endorsed the matrix, the main area for divergence was the importance placed on site issues. People want more attention paid to the site issues and where things are being done. In general terms, people downplayed their role in major strategies, but wanted to be informed and asked about site issues. Further people wanted clear and precise information before the consultation process begins.

This Consultation Strategy has provided citizens, staff and Councillors with a framework within which they can plan, carry out and implement consultation activity. The matrix and checklist have been developed and refined through this consultation process. It is hoped they provide a framework that is both flexible and open. Framework 2000 is the first step in the process. It needs to be constantly reviewed and reworked. Consultation can never be a rigid process, it will always require imagination and creativity to work effectively.

## **Appendix one**

### ***Evaluating the Strategy – the Consultation Checklist***

The consultation checklist puts the aims and principles of the strategy into concrete form. It provides a framework for Council officers and a reminder of key points of the consultation process. Moreover, it provides a means of ensuring that consultations can be properly evaluated. Listed below are the boxes on the checklist and the principles behind their inclusion.

#### ***What is the aim of the consultation?***

The first question is in many ways the most important. It addresses the principle of **focus** to ensure that consultation is purpose-driven and the type of consultation is appropriate to the task. The essential first step is to ensure that the consultation is targeted and appropriate. There must be a clear statement about what the consultation is to achieve. The checklist will remind officers about the importance of developing SMART – sensible, measurable, achievable, realistic and timed – objectives to ensure that the consultation can be properly evaluated at the conclusion of the process.

#### ***Have the main groups been identified?***

#### ***Have the secondary groups affected been identified?***

#### ***Do the groups identified adequately reflect the range of views?***

These questions meet the principle of **inclusiveness**. The way the consultation is set-up and administered encourages the participation of the appropriate groups who are to be affected by a decision. A consultation maybe about a sports centre and the main groups affected by the centre will be the sports groups using the centre. The secondary groups may be nearby residents or businesses affected by the development. A funding decision for one centre may affect funding at another centre. While it is not possible to predict the impact of a decision on every group, it is critical that a conscious process is developed to identify groups affected.

#### ***How will you ensure that those to be consulted have clear and precise information to make informed comments?***

This question meets the principle of **providing information**. People who are to be consulted must be given sufficient information to assist them to provide informed ideas. This could take the form of maps, diagrams, briefing papers etc.

#### ***Will the consultation be advertised widely?***

#### ***Will the main target group be reached by the advertising?***

#### ***Will the secondary target group be reached by advertising?***

#### ***Will your plan reach the main target group directly?***

#### ***Will your plan reach the secondary target group directly?***

#### ***Are you going to meet your target groups?***

These questions meet the principles of **inclusiveness**. Affected groups will be actively encouraged to participate and have equal opportunity to do so. Advertising is one such means to ensure the participation of those affected by the decision are aware of the consultation and the way to participate in that consultation.

To make sure there is a real commitment to consider and respond to the community, an active campaign of going out to the community may be part of the strategy. Examples could include a stall at a shopping centre actively canvassing views on issues, distributing surveys in affected areas. Advertising is essentially a passive way to encourage participation. These questions ask the officer to think about active ways to gain opinions.

***Will you inform people as to how the information which they provide is to be used?***

This question meets the principle of **responsiveness**. It also relates to **focus**. Council must ensure that its decision-making processes are such that they genuinely incorporate consideration of the information gained from consultation, ie the decision has not been already made. This in turn must be communicated to the participants in the consultation process. People are entitled to know to what use Council will put the information which they provide.

***Will you reach people from non-English speaking backgrounds?***

This question also goes to the principle of **inclusiveness**. This question is a reminder to officers of the importance of considering people from non-English speaking backgrounds. Every consultation must contain a process for consultation in the non-English speaking community. The use of Language Link and translations is encouraged in this process.

***Will you use the appropriate communication tools to reach your target audience?***

This question addresses the principles of **providing information**. It is imperative that information is provided in a variety of ways. The internet, the Moreland City News, the Community News page, Radio Moreland, the Leader advertising page, brochures, posters and surveys all provide information. Officers should consider a range of publications and never rely on one means for consultation. In any advertising, issues of timing are important to allow people time to respond on their own terms.

***Are there feedback forms to fill in?***

***Have you prepared mailing lists from this consultation for further research if needed?***

***Have you developed an evaluation process?***

These questions introduce the importance of **evaluation and implementation**. Proper evaluation is the key to sound consultation. It is based on the setting of SMART – sensible, measurable, achievable, realistic and timed – objectives at the beginning of the process. By setting SMART objectives, the process of evaluation is straightforward and lays the basis for future consultation. Indeed it is a cyclical process where consultation leads to evaluation which is the basis for future consultation. Consultation becomes an integral part of the decision making process.

***Approval of the checklist***

The checklist is given to the relevant Director who may approve the consultation process outlined in the checklist. Major consultations, or those focussed on contentious issues, will need the approval of the Communications Task Group.

***A final step***

A final step is to close the process by sending a thank you letter to people involved in the process advising them of the decision or any continuing process.