8.4.   Introduction of Council App - Response to Notice of Motion

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ATTACHMENTS: Nil

PURPOSE:

This report responds to the Notice of Motion, considered by Council at its meeting of 27 June 2022, that a report be provided on the feasibility of the introduction of a Council App.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The notice of motion proposes that Council investigate the feasibility of creating an app for the purpose of enhancing its community engagement and communication activities when promoting Council projects, infrastructure, initiatives, and services.

To date the Council has invested significantly in developing a new website which will be mobile-friendly and due to be launched before the end of the calendar year. Corporate Services is also prioritising the creation of online forms to complement the Council's digital transformation. If Council is to create an app, it should not replicate the new website as it would serve no new purpose.

Council should consider if it would be more beneficial to further invest in the new website's capabilities, as the soon-to-be revised external communications strategy will explore other channels to meet the Council promotional desired outcomes.

Apps used by other Councils were explored, including Mosman and Randwick Councils.

It is recommended that Council wait until the new website is launched, this will enable, in a limited resource landscape, for staff resources to focus on the new website. Resources will be directed at improvements to the website and online forms and services, and that if gaps continue to surface between what can be delivered by the website and what can be achieved through a mobile app that it be revisited at a later stage.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:
Council did not allocate a budget in the recently adopted Delivery Program. Council did, however, provide budget for the development of a new website and online forms service.

RECOMMENDATION:
1.THAT the report be received.
2.THAT Council support the proposed strategy of completing the implementation of the new Website's functionality before pursuing a new Council app.

LINK TO COMMUNITY STRATEGIC PLAN

The relationship with the Community Strategic Plan is as follows:

3. Our Innovative City
3.2 North Sydney is smart and innovative
5. Our Civic Leadership
5.4 Council services are efficient and easy to access

BACKGROUND:

Council at its meeting of 27 June 2022 considered a Notice of Motion and resolved:

1. THAT a report be prepared investigating the feasibility of introducing a Council app, such report to include details of similar existing local government authority apps, identify a budget and provide options for the features of the app.
2. THAT the ability to seek widespread community feedback on Council projects, infrastructure, initiatives, and services be a prominent feature of the app.

Communications, Information Technology and Customer Service are working to further enhance the overall customer experience. One of its main projects is the development of a new website, which will deliver a highly user-focused web content experience, including providing web content and service access through intelligent forms for today's multitude of devices and platforms.

Layout, placement of navigation elements, image, and text size all dynamically and seamlessly respond to the properties of the user's device, delivering an experience optimised for mobile, smartphone, tablet, laptop, or desktop computer, through to large plasma screens.

Responsive design provides a means to present a consistent user experience across multiple platforms, with a single set of templates and stylesheets delivering content, optimised for each user's selected device. Content is authored, edited, and published once, without the need to maintain separate content for mobile devices. In addition to being mobile responsive the interface is also meeting the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines providing ease of use, not only for those users with accessibility issues, but for all users.

CONSULTATION REQUIREMENTS

Community engagement is not required.

DETAIL

1. **Existing Council External Communications & Engagement Methods**

   1.1. Online Forms

Council undertook a review of how it interacts with external stakeholders in 2017, following which it was determined that use of online forms, which render the view on personal computers (PC), mobile and tablet devices was the preferred priority over a Council app. The project to date has enabled the Council to convert more than one hundred paper-based application forms to online versions, which are user friendly and accessible and complement our digital transformation

   1.2. New Council Website

Council began the process of procuring and developing a new website in 2021 and it will be launched this year. Council has invested significantly in the website project to ensure it has more functionality and mobile accessibility. With this advancement to a modern website, investment is better directed to further enhancing the capability of this single portal for all Council service and information delivery.

Before a decision is made on whether an app is required, it would be advisable to wait for the new website launch so that Councillors can see if the new mobile-friendly version meets all the capabilities of an app. If the website is lacking in a capability, further investigation should be directed at enhancing the new website in the first instance so there is one single Council portal.

Figures 1 and 2 below provide an example of how the new website renders automatically, depending on the device used such as desktop and mobile
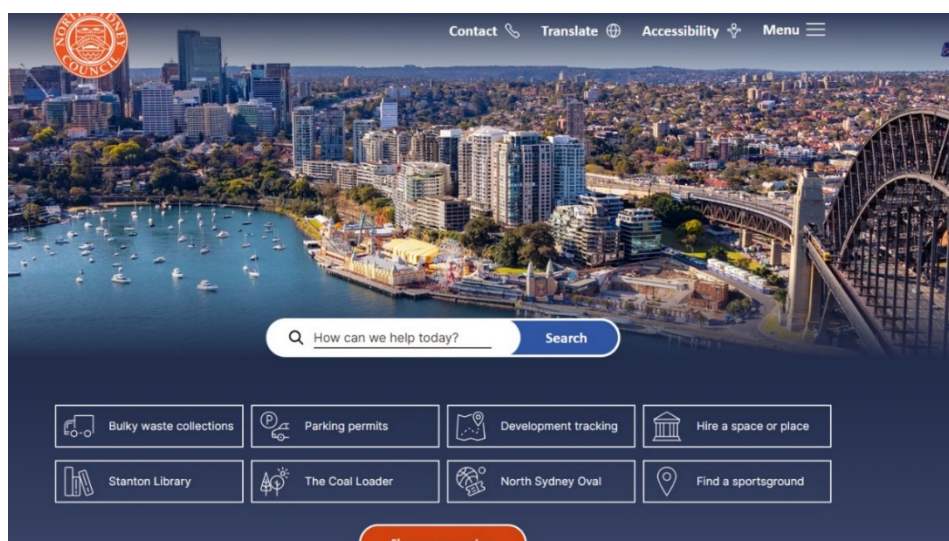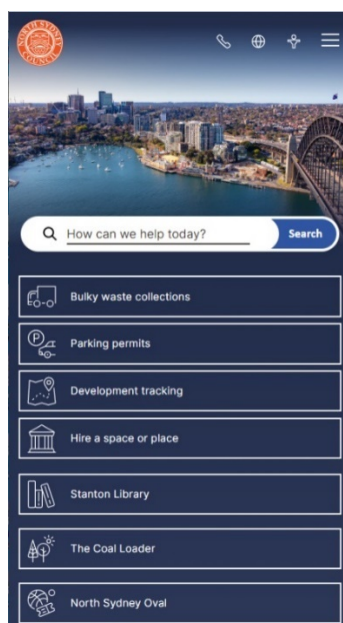
Figure 1 - Laptop/PC view

Figure 2 - Mobile view

1.3. Customer Engagement - Your Say North Sydney site

In addition to the website, our Council, like many others, has a sub-site hosting its current and past engagements. The Your Say North Sydney site, introduced in 2017, provides a portal for gathering community feedback on Council proposed projects (including infrastructure), policies and services.

1.4. External Communications Strategy

The draft External Communication Strategy 2022-2026 will address Council's identified priorities of open governance and consultation. The strategy will highlight how Council will implement communication activities and explore new channels to meet the changing media scope and increase community engagement. An app is not a new communication method as it would replicate the website.

2. APP INITIATIVES BY OTHER COUNCILS

Research has revealed that many Council apps have been discontinued due to stagnation (lack of use/demand) or replaced by enhanced website solutions. Two app examples explored in detail are Mosman Council's MyMosman app and Randwick Council's MyRandwick app.

2.1. Mosman Council

Mosman Council has two apps to assist residents and visitors to the area with a variety of needs, including the MyMosman and Trees Mosman apps. The MyMosman is Mosman Council's 'premier' app which provides access to a wide range of information and services while Trees Mosman provides additional functionality. Their Park Mosman app was

discontinued from 1 January 2022; instead, Mosman motorists can also choose from two other parking apps to view availability and pay for parking in Mosman - the NSW Government's Park'nPay app allows people to view live parking data for popular spots around Mosman and to pay for metered areas, while the CellOPark app allows motorists to pay for parking within Mosman, and for permit holders to access "free" parking sessions.

It is noted that Mosman Council duplicate their mobile app with the same services on their website.

Below is a comparison of the MyMosman's app and North Sydney Council's service delivery:

MyMosman App (as advertised)	North Sydney Council equivalent service
• Current news and events and connect you with Council services on the go with reporting, waste information, recreational activities, community consultations and much more all at your fingertips	• Council website with smarts that connect the citizen to services, either by simple search function, landing page or intelligent algorithm, directing customers to information-based on searches
• Reporting functionality to enable you to notify Council of local issues with the option to include photos and location mapping	• Published on Council website. Access to Online forms which are in the process of being upgraded to be integral to the website offerings. Assessment needed on completion of the website project
• Waste and recycling calendar reminders specific to your residential address that can prompt you the night before your collection date	• All information is published on Council website and in readable form on all devices including mobile phones
• The recreation section has interactive maps and information on popular walks, reserves, beaches and sporting facilities, with access to directions via Google Maps. Extra information is provided for dog owners	• Council has many campaigns and events using Council website, social media, Poster promotion. Council's integrated GIS system provides maps for all facilities (parks, reserves, community centres). Council has a strong promotional activity for dogs and cats
• Improved responsiveness with faster loading and navigation than Council's full or mobile websites	• Council has engaged with new website provider and is confident the speed and navigation to any device delivers a much faster navigation experience than a bespoke mobile app service.

2.2. Randwick Council

Randwick City Council has abandoned their MyRandwick app, which was in use from 2012 to 1 July 2020. A Council representative confirmed that one of the reasons the app was created was because it contained innovative functionality that at the time could not be achieved via their website. Since this time, they have significantly invested in updating and improving their website interface, to the point where it is now easier to use and contains the myRandwick functionality, plus more. In addition, the technology the myRandwick app was originally built upon has changed and this meant that keeping the app running required significant costs and work to upgrade. Given this cost, and the fact that their website functionality has increased,

they decided to decommission the app and focus on providing a single customer digital interface to Council.

Randwick Council still has a Library app in use (called MyLibrary app) and uses the Snap Send Solve app allowing residents to report issues once again from their phone, citing it is a "quick and easy way to notify Council of any issues you see around Randwick City, including damaged footpaths, dumped rubbish, broken playground equipment, potholes, graffiti or abandoned cars." The app, which is free to download on Apple and Android phones, allows users to take a photo of an issue or provide feedback and send it to Council straight away. Your phone's GPS will tag the location of the problem so Council will know where to find it. The app also integrates with our Customer Service software, so it is sent to the relevant team straight away and can be responded to in a timely manner. You'll be provided with a Customer Request Number so you can follow up if you have further enquiries".

2.3. Additional Apps Discussed

There are numerous mobile apps to assist residents and visitors with a variety of needs that can provide access to a wide range of information and services such as reporting incidents or parking apps that give visibility of availability and the ability to pay for parking. A comparison of some of these versus in progress council initiatives is available below.

Additional Mobile Apps Types	North Sydney Council initiative
• Park & Pay	• Council has completed an Expressions of Interest Tender and is preparing a full Tender to refresh the whole of LGA On-Street Parking. The deliverables on this Tender will be the ability to: o Park & Pay. o See availability of parking o Integrate to council website and parking stations to deliver real-time information o Provide a single view for the customer and Council staff
• Snap Send Solve	• Council is integrating the Asset Maintenance Systems into our Customer Relationship System and online forms to enable: o The ability to report incidents on the spot o The ability to capture and send photos of issues that need attention o The ability to provide location data of the incident o The ability to deliver feedback to the customer of incident resolution progress

2.4. Customer Satisfaction of Council Apps

Having researched similar Council mobile apps, not only in NSW but other Australian States and the UK, the single the biggest take away has been the relatively poor ratings and reviews of Council apps, due no doubt to the lack of resourcing in being able to continually maintain and improve the mobile app and being able to maintain and improve other intelligent and adaptive community services.

	Rating out of 5 (Apple Store)
MosmanApp	1.7
Sunshine Coast	3
Bradford City Council	2.4

3. Recommendation

Council has an advanced program for community content management and online service functionality (online-forms) that will meet the needs and challenges of delivering a single touch digital experience for North Sydney Council's local government services. To introduce a duplication feature into the build and design of the website and to introduce the background integration programs required would be a cost and challenge to the already demanding delivery program.

It is recommended that Council wait until the new website is launched, that focus, and resources is directed at improvements to the website and online forms and services, and that if gaps continue to surface between what can be delivered by the website and what can be achieved through a mobile app that it be revisited at a later stage.