

Our Ref: 14076-LET-002-Connecting with Country_RevB

Date: 22 September 2025

Port Stephens Council
116 Adelaide St
Raymond Terrace, NSW 2324

ATTENTION: To Whom it May Concern

RE: Request for Information - 16-2024-542-1: Connecting with Country Statement

Dear Sir/Madam,

We write in response to Council's RFI regarding the proposed development at Fleet Street, Salamander Bay, and specifically the RFI's request for a Connecting with Country Statement regarding the proposed development.

We understand the valuable objective of the NSW Government's Connecting with Country framework is to promote built environment projects moving from a human-centred approach to a Country-centred approach. The outcomes of this desired shift in process include steps towards reconciliation with first nations people, and increasing environmental resilience within the built environment based on the Aboriginal philosophy "*that if we care for Country, Country will care for us*".

Regarding the subject site, the first people to inhabit the area of today's Port Stephens region were the Worimi (or *Warrimay*) Aboriginal people. The history of the Worimi people begins with the dreaming story "Baiaame's Ngunnhu" describing the creation of their landscape by the great sky spirit Baiaame. The Worimi lands are generally considered to have been bounded in the north by the Manning River, in the south by the Hunter River and in the west the Allyn and Paterson Rivers. The Worimi Nation was home to 18 clan groups 'Ngurras', all of which spoke the common Gathang Language. It is understood that the *Maiangal* clan are the traditional inhabitants of the area of Port-Stephens encompassing the site.

While it is firmly acknowledged that all Country holds significance to its traditional owners, we note that a contemporary AHIMS search defines that there are no listed places or items of Aboriginal Cultural significance within the vicinity of the subject site in Salamander Bay. It can be easily imagined however that the site would have been traversed, utilised and cared for by the Worimi people before Colonisation. Sitting on a slight rise and overlooking the harbour, with views towards heads of *Yacaaba* (Big "Brother") and *Dhurrumiri* (today's *Tomaree*, meaning "Rainbow") the site would have supported the Worimi people with the resources necessary for their presence in the area over thousands of years of inhabitation.

To provide some context for the timeline of our current proposal, we note that the project's Development Application was first submitted in 2022, before the establishment of the Connection with Country Framework in 2023. The site was not a green-field development at the commencement of our design process, having a pre-established network of roads and holiday accommodation buildings situated on it since around the 1980's. As described in the submitted landscape documentation, this circumstance provides opportunity for the design to "reawaken the memory of place and Connect with Country through the proposed design approach", but we note again that the Connecting with Country guidelines were not formalised during the developmental design process of the project. The design process is of course also influenced by a large variety of other criteria, including economic viability, and planning controls, and as such the proposed works generally include in-fill works within the constraints of the pre-existing built environment on

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the site, aligning strongly with the Port Stephens Local Housing Strategy that *"...focuses on three main areas - housing diversity, housing affordability and housing supply;"* and *"...emphasises a mix of housing types and increased density near our town centres."*

The project was first considered by the Port Stephens Urban Design Panel 13 June 2024. The summary minutes of this meeting recommended consideration of the principles of 'designing with country' in the proposal's landscape plan, and that contextually, the process should be 'informed by Designing with Country Principles'.

While we agree on the objective of this direction by Council, we would respectfully submit that its strict interpretation for assessment of a project that was designed and submitted before the formal establishment of the Connecting with Country framework may not be reasonable. For example, while early engagement with first nation's community is a recommended pathway for Connection to Country in the document, it would not be a meaningful or appropriate undertaking to apply retrospectively many years after the design has been established.

Having said this, we believe that all good design should inherently and subconsciously apply certain principles of Connecting with Country, whether or not they are known by that name. We submit that the following design features assist with the project's Connection to Country:

Topography – The project explores the natural rise of the site's hillside, with topography dictating the pattern of the development and streetscape (within the constraints of existing buildings). Cut and fill is minimised where possible. The outcome of utilising the topography to separate adjacent rows of buildings vertically allows increased access to light, views and cross ventilation to the collective buildings.

Sightlines & Views – The position of the existing site, sheltered within a surrounding expanse of bushland and with access to views outward across the bay allow connection for residents to the broader natural cultural landscape of the region.

Ecology & Biodiversity – Local Housing Strategy seeks density; however ecology also needs to be protected. The project seeks to infill an existing cleared and pre-developed site instead of impacting a landscape with natural ecological features. The proposal's landscape plan seeks to re-establish endemic species and provide habitat for pollinators & other local flora and fauna through green corridors across the site.

Water – The site enjoys proximity to Salamander Bay and Cromartys bay. Where midden deposits of shell fish in Port Stephens indicate Aboriginal people's use of the waterways for food collection over thousands of years, Oysters are still farmed in close to the site today. Allowing people to live in proximity to the waterways of Port Stephens increases the opportunity for human connection to the greater systems of Country's biosphere.

Circular Economy – The proposal seeks to re-use and "up-cycle" an existing built environment that would otherwise be demolished at the end of its life as tourist accommodation. Retention of this embodied carbon on the site is a strong environmental outcome, caring for Country in a direct practical sense.

We trust this satisfies Council's enquiry in this matter, if you need any further information, please do not hesitate to contact the undersigned.

Yours faithfully,

EJE



Barney Collins
Director

Registered Architect 4438 (NSW ARB)