

Handling Contested Debates

An officer guide for anti-racism strategies

Model Anti-Racism Strategy for Local Government

1. About this guide

Anti-racism strategies can prompt strong views. This guide helps council officers prepare for debate in the council chamber, at public meetings and online, so that the strategy is considered on its merits and staff are supported. It complements the Model Anti-Racism Strategy and its Guideline.

Key messages to keep returning to:

- The strategy is about how people in our community are treated, whatever their background or faith.
- It treats every community the same way and does not rank them.
- It is practical, mostly delivered within existing resources, and measured.
- It does not take positions on overseas conflicts.
- It does not override positions Council has already adopted.

2. Why debates happen

Source of debate	What it can look like
Definitions	Calls to add, remove or replace a definition of a particular form of racism
Overseas conflicts	Attempts to bring debate about events overseas into the strategy
Symbolic items	Disagreement over signage, statements or flags
"Is there a problem here?"	Claims that racism is not a local issue
Perceived favouritism	Concern that some communities receive more attention than others
Cost and role	Concern that anti-racism is not council business or will cost too much

3. Before the meeting

- **Brief councillors early and individually.** Use the Councillor Briefing. Ask about concerns before the meeting rather than meeting them for the first time in the chamber.
- **Consult advisory committees early.** Their support, or their concerns, are best known before the report is written.
- **Anticipate amendments.** Use the table in Section 4 to prepare short, factual responses.
- **Check meeting procedures.** Confirm how amendments, foreshadowed motions and rescission motions work under council's code of meeting practice.
- **Prepare the facts.** Have the national figures, cost summary and list of chosen actions to hand.
- **Plan communications.** Agree who will speak to media and prepare a holding statement (Section 7).
- **Consider staff wellbeing.** Check in with staff who may be personally affected by the debate (Section 8).

4. Common amendments and suggested responses

Officers provide advice; Council decides. These responses are factual points officers can draw on.

Proposed change	Points for officer advice
Add a specific definition of one form of racism	The strategy uses one common definition that applies equally to every community. Section 3.3 lets Council list policies, statements or positions it has adopted, which continue to apply. Adding a definition for one community only may prompt requests for others and lengthen debate. Council can consider a definition by separate resolution and list it in Section 3.3.
Remove a community from the list	The list is illustrative. The strategy covers racism against people of any background whether or not a community is named.
Add a community to the list	Straightforward: the list can be extended without other changes.
Remove the sentence on criticism of governments	Removing it does not change the common definition, which applies to every community either way.
Add a statement about an overseas conflict	Outside the scope of the strategy, which focuses on how people in our community are treated. Council can consider such matters separately.
"There is no racism problem here"	National evidence shows racism is widespread and mostly unreported. The strategy builds local evidence at little cost (Action 5.9).
Remove or add signage (Action 4.11)	Signage is optional. The strategy's practical actions do not depend on it.
Reduce cost	Identify which actions use existing resources. Actions can be moved to later years or removed without affecting the rest of the strategy.
Defer adoption until national or state developments	Section 12 allows early review if frameworks change. Deferral delays practical actions that do not depend on those developments.
Replace with a social cohesion strategy	The strategy treats social cohesion as the outcome of anti-racism work. Removing the anti-racism focus may leave people who experience racism without a clear response.

5. Keeping the strategy in place

Commitments made by one council can be reversed by the next. Councils have removed anti-racism signage after changes in council views. To support durability:

- include actions in council's delivery, operational or annual plan, not only in the strategy
- report progress to Council every year, so the strategy stays visible
- favour practical actions with measures over symbolic actions alone
- keep advisory committees and community organisations informed, so they can speak to the strategy's value
- brief new councillors on the strategy at induction (Action 2.1).

If a rescission or amendment motion is foreshadowed, provide Council with a clear account of what the change would mean for actions already under way, their cost and the community partners involved.

6. Public meetings, submissions and online comment

- **Set expectations.** Remind participants of council's code of conduct or community engagement standards at the start of meetings.
- **Keep to council's role.** Redirect discussion of overseas events to how people in our community are treated.
- **Moderate online comment.** Apply council's social media moderation policy consistently. Remove abusive or vilifying content and keep a record.
- **Summarise submissions fairly.** Report the range of views, including those opposed, without identifying individuals.
- **Protect participants.** Offer ways to make submissions privately, and make sure people who share experiences of racism are not exposed to abuse.
- **Respond to incidents.** If racist conduct occurs at a council meeting or event, follow council's procedures and consider the targeted response process (Strategy Section 3.4).

7. Media and social media

- **Spokesperson:** [Mayor / CEO] speaks for council. Officers refer media enquiries to [communications team].
- **Stay neutral and factual.** Describe what the strategy does. Avoid commenting on individual councillors' views.

Holding statement (adapt as needed):

[Council name] is [preparing / consulting on / considering] an anti-racism strategy that sets out how council will prevent and respond to racism against people of all backgrounds. The strategy focuses on practical actions within council's role, most using existing resources. [Details of consultation or meeting date].

8. Supporting staff

Debates about racism can be distressing, particularly for staff from affected communities.

- Check in with staff who are presenting the report or managing engagement.
- Don't expect staff to represent their community's views because of their background (this is sometimes called "cultural load").
- Make sure staff know how to access the employee assistance program.
- Apply council's procedures if staff experience abuse from members of the public (Action 2.3).
- Debrief with the team after significant meetings.

9. Checklist

Before the meeting	Done
Councillors briefed individually	☐
Advisory committees consulted	☐
Likely amendments and responses prepared	☐
Meeting procedures checked	☐
Facts, figures and cost summary ready	☐
Holding statement and spokesperson agreed	☐
Social media moderation arrangements confirmed	☐
Staff wellbeing check-ins arranged	☐