

Sutherland Shire Council

A proactive approach: Engaging an entire workforce in improving safety culture



Major Fleet: 356

Waste Services: 920,000km travelled annually

Case Study:

Consultation, improved business performance keys to creating proactive safety culture

Organisation: Sutherland Shire Council

No. of Fleet: 356 (133 Light, 177 Heavy, 46 Waste)

Bin Collections: 6.75m annually



Key outcomes

- A proactive safety culture can change an organisation's focus from 'reacting' to safety incidents to preventing them
- It is possible to change from a reactive to a proactive safety culture, but it takes time, patience and persistence
- There is a strong link between stronger business performance and improved safety, recognising and leveraging that connection can be a powerful tool in making safety an organisational priority
- Consultation on decisions that impact their everyday working life is key to engaging workers with, and increasing their acceptance of, safety measures
- Getting the buy-in of management is critical in improving safety culture and performance; showing the 'costs' of inaction or the return on investment of a more effective approach attracts attention
- Technology can help prevent incidents and showing how it can help workers and make them safer in their everyday operations can overcome resistance
- Not all issues need to be addressed or safety measures introduced at the same time – safety is a journey and continually addressing 'gaps' results in strong overall road and workplace safety systems.

Synopsis

Moving from a reactive to a proactive road and workplace safety culture can reduce risks and prevent incidents, improving safety and business performance. It requires time and persistence, consultation with workers and executive support, but improvements in safety performance flow into an organisation's bottom line and its internal and external reputation.

Introduction

Councils are highly visible organisations in the community. They provide a range of services, from rubbish collection to construction and maintenance of community assets and services, that create interaction with residents, vehicles and vulnerable road users (VRUs). And, the vehicles, plant and equipment that makes up their fleet are usually emblazoned with the Council logo.

In short, when it comes to road and workplace safety, there is nowhere to hide.

This case study examines the sustained and deliberate steps Sutherland Shire Council has taken over the past decade to improve its road and workplace safety performance, how it has engaged workers and management with safety issues, and the link between improved business and safety performance and the results that can be achieved, including improving the quality and safety of its fleet while reducing maintenance and incident costs.

Led by its Manager of Fleet and Logistics, the Council has changed its safety culture from reactive to a proactive management state, consulting and encouraging buy-in from its entire workforce at every step of the way, and using incidents and data gathered as opportunities for improvement rather than punishment.

"...it has engaged workers and management with safety issues, and the link between improved business and safety performance..."



About Sutherland Shire

Located 25km south of the Sydney CBD, Sutherland Shire Council is the southern-most coastal Local Government Area (LGA) in the Sydney region.

Covering 370sqkm and with an estimated residential population of more than 230,000 people, it has the second largest population of any LGA in New South Wales.

The Council operates more than 350 major fleet assets engaged across a diverse range of service activities and environments, including:

- Light Vehicles: 133
- Heavy Vehicles: 177
- Waste Fleet: 46

Half of its fleet is categorised as high to extreme in operating risk.

Combined with the scale of its Waste Services Fleet operations and number of daily movements and interaction with VRUs, including pedestrians and cyclists, this significantly increases the risk of safety related incidents.

A key component of its safety focus in recent years has been the vehicles that pose the main risk to Council as an organisation. These are the Heavy Vehicles that provide a waste collection service to the community.

The Council collects 6.75 million bins and the waste fleet travels 920,000 kilometres annually. In 2019-20, it collected more than 100,000 tonnes of waste, recycling, green organics and clean up as well as introducing improvements to the waste service provided to residents.

“...a proactive road and workplace safety culture can reduce risks and prevent incidents, improving safety and business performance”

A proactive safety culture

Sutherland Shire Council's (SSC) approach to road and workplace safety culture demonstrates that improving safety performance is an ongoing journey. It also reflects the connection between efficient business practices and strong safety performance.

Led by its Manager of Fleet and Logistics, the business has focused on improving various aspects of its performance in recent years, including ensuring each item of plant and equipment in the fleet is fit-for-purpose and improving the efficiency and performance of its maintenance program.

In the second half of 2021, an internal project to standardise training for each item of plant and equipment, to ensure all operators are appropriately skilled, is expected to be completed.

SSC has a genuine concern and interest in minimising potential fleet safety impacts on its community and VRUs, and wanted to achieve that in a more proactive way.

That has reflected a change from a reactive culture where, for example, Council recorded a reasonable number of breaches, community complaints or enforcement, and analysis of specific incidents often leading to disciplinary matters.

A more proactive culture includes regular ongoing review of speed and mass breach trends, which are viewed as an opportunity for education and raising awareness with drivers in a way that supports positive reinforcement for behaviour change.

Reporting of serious incidents, minor collisions and near misses involving VRUs, combined with changes in legislation that shift accountability to the employer, have also spurred the change to minimise risk and prevent incidents rather than 'react' to them.



On the ground measures

Fit for purpose

While SSC had 'reasonable' fleet systems in place, there were gaps in ensuring its plant and equipment were of consistently good quality, fit for purpose across the board, and able to maintain quality and reliability for their entire life cycle.

This made strategic asset management the first focus of the incoming Manager of Fleet and Logistics.

The other key focus in improving fleet asset performance was ensuring each item of equipment had the required design features and functionality so work activities could be carried out safely, such as secure fittings, proper towing devices, and correctly rated load restraints. Over time, as fleet assets were renewed, that approach led to the fleet as a whole meeting high quality standards.

Consultation with drivers and other plant and equipment operators was a key part of that process (see 'Implementation' below), with all workers who used or were exposed to equipment involved in setting the requirements and, by association, in setting accepted standards.

Addressing maintenance costs

Another significant area of focus has been making SSC's maintenance operations more proactive, increasing efficiencies and supporting the goal of keeping quality assets performing efficiently.

The Council was completing all its fleet maintenance internally as well as repairs, which were common with equipment that has many moving parts, including where breakdowns should have been claimed via warranty. Elsewhere, some plant was not being serviced at all due to a lack of resources, relying on reactive breakdown responses only.

Gaps in the maintenance program led to assets degrading, contributing to higher and more frequent repair or replacement costs. Compliance with manufacturer guidelines and inspection testing requirements were not being met to an acceptable standard, so compliance issues became safety risks.

The Fleet Manager revised SSC's maintenance practices, identifying 'what we were and weren't good at' and implementing a proactive maintenance plan focussed on keeping vehicles and other equipment in good working order throughout the entire assets lifecycle.

Resources across sections, such as minor plant and light and heavy vehicle, which had been segregated were pooled and the Council invested in updating its workshop and tooling to make the operation more efficient.

SSC built on internal improvement by engaging suppliers to cover off on compliance issues, and aligning its capabilities with industry standards. For example, it's now a longstanding member of RMS Clean Fleet, which focuses on maintenance processes and practices, and has achieved the National Heavy Vehicle Regulator's Scheme for maintenance management.

For critical high maintenance assets, an extra layer of control has been added with 6 and 12 monthly manufacturer's quality inspections.

In addition to improving the work environment, SSC upskilled its mechanics with training in the Regulator's maintenance manuals for identifying defects and safety critical tolerances. They also receive dedicated induction training on new equipment.

Two-thirds of maintenance is now planned instead of reactive and improved maintenance has all but eliminated defects identified in annual RMS fleet safety inspections (see 'Results' below).

"...implementing a proactive maintenance plan focussed on keeping vehicles and other equipment in good working order throughout the entire assets lifecycle"



Technology as enabler

SSC has utilised technology solutions to increase its performance monitoring capability in fleet assets that are considered a high to extreme safety risk.

Warning, monitoring or compliance systems installed in vehicles include a GPS system, telematics speed monitoring, handbrake door alarms, on-board weight scales, reverse sensors, a collision avoidance system and a mobile digital video recorder.

As well as helping to prevent incidents, the systems have provided data or footage to highlight trends that need addressing or to provide education to workers in specific areas.

Fleet Safe to stay safe

A commitment to preventing serious and avoidable accidents has been the catalyst for SSC to tackle the 'operator side of safety' through its Fleet Safe project. This commitment has been driven by a renewed focus on the skills and competence level of SSC's drivers, operators and supervisors.

Primarily focussed on verifying current competencies (VOC), Fleet Safe aims to develop the skills and competency of workers to 'drive safe', developing a formal structure for fleet operator and driver training and confirmation of skills.

As well as providing clarity about minimum skill and competency levels for supervisors, drivers and operators, the project will review and implement improved processes and practices to control risks relating to high risk activities and contribute to a safe environment where fleet incidents are actively reported.

In addition to helping SSC comply with changes in legislation for managing plant related risks, it is a proactive initiative to ensure plant is operated safely and prevent incidents from occurring.

For new workers, the VOC process will be completed before high-to-extreme risk plant is operated.

For existing workers, a VOC assessment will be completed every three years or six months after gaining a new qualification, or in the event of a near miss or an incident that causes damage or injury.

Clarity and competency

As part of the Fleet Safe project, the Fleet team has partnered with SSC's Risk and Learning Development teams to map the competency and training requirements required for workers to operate high-to-extreme risk plant on a worksite, rather than leaving it up to individual operational areas to make reactive decisions.

For example, minimum induction, licensing and load shifting requirements have been determined for backhoe operators, with that training formalised through a Registered Training Organisation. A backhoe operator also needs to be properly trained in overhead power line and underground awareness and loading and unloading from trailers.

That provides confidence across the organisation that any worker driving a truck or operating a piece of equipment has met at least the minimum safety standard requirements for skill and competency training.

It also means evidence is collected to show that workers are suitably skilled, trained and competent to safely operate equipment in their workplace.

A VoC pilot has already highlighted risk gaps in load shifting equipment, with several operators provided further training to 'bring them up to speed', and in induction training for rubbish truck drivers, where they were only provided informal practical training.

The final components of the Fleet Safe project will examine SSC's worksite risk assessment processes and simplifying the Council's safety documentation so it can be easily and quickly understood.



Implementation and driving buy-in

Consultation is king

The Council's approach to Fleet Safe and verifying competencies is a typical example of its commitment to consultation in developing safety measures, a critical factor in ensuring buy-in from the workforce.

The project has been structured with a steering group, which includes all key senior operational managers as well as Council's Safety and Risk Manager and is coordinated by the Fleet and Logistics Manager.

A working group includes key representatives from each operational area 'who are at the coalface' allowing them to have input from the start of the project (see 'Examples' breakout box). The reasons for the measure and the anticipated benefits were outlined, and a deliberate approach used pilots to test the process with operators and drivers to identify any unintended impacts on their operations.

"Improvements in near miss reporting and reduction in incidents demonstrates that the move to a proactive proactive culture has gained traction"

Near miss reporting

The process SSC follows in the case of a 'near miss' or incident is similarly collaborative, bringing together all parties impacted when a situation is logged in its IQ corporate safety system. That will usually include the business unit manager, health and safety representatives, and workers with technical knowledge of the issue.

Council's ICAM incident investigation system has proven valuable in SSC devising and implementing legitimate and appropriate corrective actions and controls.

It has also contributed to making the Council's safety culture more proactive, showing that incidents once considered 'business as usual' or 'just what happens' can be prevented. Rubbish trucks hitting Telstra or other utility's overhead lines, for example, or increasing incidence of truck fires caused by inappropriate disposal of lithium ion batteries or propane cylinders.

Council is attempting to be even more proactive in this area and prevent fires, by providing community education on safe ways to dispose of those dangerous items. Previously, bolt-on fire extinguisher systems would have simply been added to the trucks, creating extra cost, without any focus on finding a solution to the problem.

Consultation example 1 — 'It's about your approach'

"I had one of our guys who's been operating an excavator for 40 years say to me: 'what's this about? I've been an operator for 40 years, you're not going to teach me anything new,'" SSC Fleet Manager Mark Mills said. "I explained: 'It is just a pilot to assess the benefits of this type of process, which is a compliance and regulatory thing Council needs to ensure we do to develop safe operators."

"We're aware you've been operating for 40 years and we probably can't teach you anything, but we have younger and inexperienced people. Your knowledge in that training environment can benefit them. So if you're not going to go along for yourself, please go along to help and assist them."

"Anyway he went through it and he came back to me and said 'you know what I actually learnt something'"

Consultation example 2 — Procurement by consensus

Another example where workers operating the equipment are consulted on business decisions is in truck purchasing. Rather than previous practice where the Fleet Manager decided brands and models of trucks, now a selection team is established.

That selection team includes the fleet coordinator, who as a trained mechanic brings mechanical knowledge 'from the floor' as well as representatives from the vehicle drivers or equipment operators.

If the item is assessed as high risk or is something Council has not purchased previously, the Fleet Manager and coordinator of that business unit will likely be involved along with a representative from the Safety Team. If it's a major order, for example \$4 million worth of rubbish trucks, the manager of that area is also included.

The selection team will assess several factors, such as loading type, the work environment and fire risk, and then sign off on a specification that goes to market. After quotes are received and a shortlist compiled, the selection team puts forward a preferred recommendation.

According to the SSC Fleet and Logistics Manager, the implications of a particular choice on, for example, maintenance, may need to be further explained, but "I don't think we've ever had a disagreement that we couldn't reach a consensus on."

Results

Changing culture

Improvements in near miss reporting and reduction in incidents demonstrates that the move to a proactive culture has gained traction, shifting a 'we can't really do anything about that' mentality.

An extension of that approach is SSC 'starting to get a seat at the table with industry'. Whether it's through recognition with the heavy vehicle regulator, the National Road Safety Partnership Program or the IPWEA Fleet National Council, SSC is increasingly being seen as a leader in road and workplace safety.

Annual inspections

A key indicator of the health and safety of SSC's fleet is its annual safety inspection regime, performed each September.

Over time, the defects and remedial works that have been identified have steadily diminished to be almost non-existent (see table). That reduction has been driven by improvements in maintenance operations as well purchasing better quality products and a stronger focus on Council's renewal program.

"For me, those remedial works after that program of inspections is a tangible thing," the SSC Fleet and Logistics Manager said. "The past few years it's been tapering down to next to nothing."

Secrets of implementation success

Consultation, education and explanation

Consultation has proven to be a key strength of SSC's approach to safety, helping to overcome resistance and drive acceptance of safety measures. Explaining the reason behind measures and how they will impact daily operations has also been important. When the in-cabin GPS was introduced, for example, explaining how the system would be used to identify areas where drivers could be supported to improve, rather than 'having to sit in front of a screen all day watching the GPS', drove acceptance.

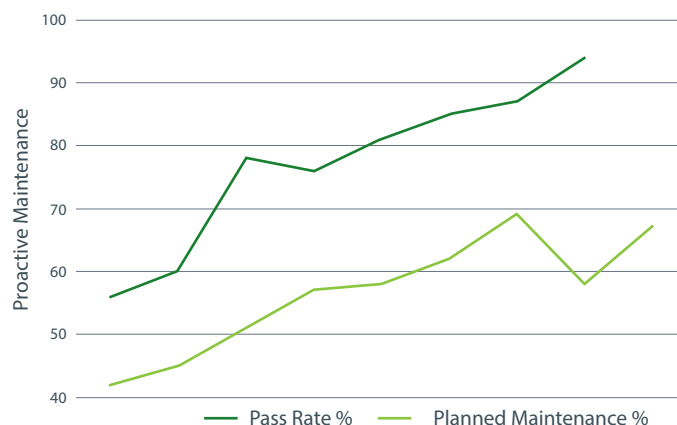
GPS data is reviewed to identify trends. In a situation where a driver is, for example, observed exceeding speed limits even as little as 5-10km/h over, they are shown the data and the action is highlighted for the driver to change their behaviour before there is a serious incident. The data is reviewed again a few weeks later. Rather than being viewed in a negative way, the GPS data highlights areas where further education may be needed to prevent breaches and avoid the need for disciplinary action.

Executive engagement

Strong support from organisation management for safety is a major factor in success, particularly where the goal is improving a safety culture. The Fleet and Logistics Manager secured the attention of the Executive by firstly interrogating Council systems to highlight where its business processes could be improved and demonstrating how those gaps were costing SSC money or compromising safety performance, such as reviewing its asset management plan and fleet policy.

Annual inspection and planned maintenance trends

Year	Safety Inspections	Vehicles Failed	Failure Rate %
2020	167	10	6%
2019	145	19	13%
2018	153	23	15%
2017	145	28	19%
2016	140	34	24%
2015	138	30	22%
2014	139	55	40%
2013	144	63	44%



Solutions were then identified and put forward to improve operations and safety at the same time, while saving the Council money or using its resources more efficiently. Along with an ability to demonstrate sound practices, this was critical in the context of tight budgets and a financial environment where additional funding was unlikely.

Patience and perseverance

Safety is a journey that requires perseverance to achieve goals. Not every safety measure has to be implemented at the same time, with a patient approach that progressively addresses safety – and business – issues one at a time ultimately culminating in improved safety performance and a strong safety culture.

A passion for safety is also helpful along with a commitment to stand up for safety in an organisation, which can be difficult if suggestions from managers or colleagues will not resolve issues.

Reporting culture

Building a culture where it's 'safe' to report is also important. This leads to common minor incidents not being accepted as unavoidable or 'everyday' incidents, and vehicles with defects or equipment not working being grounded until they are fixed. This attitude, in turn, prevents neglected incidents from becoming major issues and minimises the safety risk caused by fleet vehicles.