

## **SVC COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY: RATES HARMONISATION + ROAD TO SUSTAINABILITY**

### **Purpose of this Community Engagement Strategy:**

This Community Engagement Strategy is intended to:

- identify key message themes for the development of comprehensive communication material to support the engagement activities
- identify the community stakeholders who should be proactively targeted to participate in this engagement activity
- identify the relationship of this engagement activity to previous engagement outcomes
- define the type and number of engagement activities to be undertaken
- provide a timeframe for the engagement activities to be undertaken
- identify the resources required to effectively undertake the engagement
- articulate the expected outputs and outcomes of the engagement
- identify any particular risks or challenges that may arise during the engagement, and pose strategies for addressing these.

### **Purpose of this Community Engagement:**

Snowy Valleys Council has two key projects underway – they are distinct projects but are interrelated, so that it is sensible to consider both projects together. These key projects are:

- Rate harmonisation
- Financial sustainability

In addition, Council will soon be drafting its 2020-21 Operational Plan and its Budget, and information arising from this engagement process will also be used to inform and enhance the Operational Planning process.

Council is undertaking this community engagement to create purposeful opportunities to hear directly from residents and ratepayers across the community about:

1. what is important for the establishment of a rating structure for the future, and
2. what are the priorities for consideration when determining a financially sustainable long-term plan for Council's resources.

### **What are the key messages Council wants to deliver, and the key questions it is seeking answers to from this engagement?**

It is essential that key Council staff and councillors are able to deliver clear, concise and consistent information in relation to these important projects in order to support the wider community's understanding and enhance engagement.

An upfront key message is about the extent of community engagement required to be undertaken within tight timeframes (imposed by external bodies, e.g. IPART and legislation e.g. Local Government Act). It will be important to provide some context about why Council is pursuing community engagement at this time, particularly when many in the community may be more focused on bushfire recovery.

The key messages to be delivered in relation to each element are:

In relation to rate harmonisation proposal:

Approach to developing options:

- The harmonisation is about seeking fairness across the LGA.
- Being fair or equitable is about balancing two key taxation principles: ability to pay and benefits derived.
- Aim to minimise adverse negative impacts where it is not possible to avoid.
- No ratepayer's rates will increase by more than 10% per annum.

External context:

- Council must work within the limited options available for applying and varying rates (minimum rate; base rate; distributing rate burden).
- New land valuations due to be released by the NSW Valuer General on 1 July 2020 will have an impact on the changes made due to harmonisation.
- Timeframes for undertaking the rate harmonisation review is set by NSW Government, and is not impacted or influenced by recent bushfires and boundary review activities.

In relation to financial sustainability proposal:

- The principle of intergenerational equity is an important factor for sustainability
- The elements of sustainability required to be considered include: organisational efficiencies, commercial works, fees and charges, service levels, rating structure and Special Rate Variations, grants.
- A Special Rate Variation requires additional and specific community engagement to be considered by IPART.
- Important groundwork needs to be undertaken now to inform the next cycle of Integrated Planning and Reporting that commences with the new Council, elected in September this year. The new Council can't determine its way forward without clarity about available resources.
- The current Council has a responsibility to adopt a Long-Term Financial Plan that details options for how to deliver a financially sustainable future.

**Who is 'the community' in relation to this engagement?**

Given the focus of the two key projects (rates and financial sustainability), the views of all members of the Snowy Valleys community are relevant. However, there are particular groups in the community who should be proactively targeted to ensure their viewpoints are incorporated in the rates discussion:

- residential ratepayers in the former Tumut Shire
- residential ratepayers in the former Tumbarumba Shire
- rural residential ratepayers in the former Tumut Shire
- rural residential ratepayers in the former Tumbarumba Shire
- business ratepayers in the former Tumut Shire
- business ratepayers in the former Tumbarumba Shire
- farmland ratepayers in the former Tumut Shire
- farmland ratepayers in the former Tumbarumba Shire
- inundated lands ratepayers (Snowy Hydro)
- rural clubs ratepayers (Tumbarumba, Khancoban and Rosewood golf clubs)

- other clubs that could be classified as 'rural clubs' if this sub-category is retained (e.g. Tumut, Talbingo, Batlow and Adelong golf clubs).

It will be important to ensure that every effort is made to achieve demographic and geographic representative participation in the community engagement activities undertaken to support these two projects.

### **How does this engagement relate to previous engagement activities?**

This community engagement process will build upon the intelligence gathered through the Community Survey, Community Sounding Board and Online Budget Allocator Tool activities undertaken to support a Council Service Levels Review in 2018-19.

Those engagement activities drew on diverse views and provided rich information about what the community values in Council's service provision decision-making. This is a key consideration in the financial sustainability discussion.

A key message arising from that engagement was the notion of fairness and equity in both the provision of services, and the burden on residents (and ratepayers) in contributing to Council's revenue (through rates, and fees and charges).

This engagement seeks to examine more closely how to achieve a fair and equitable rating structure across the new local government area, with a view to enabling Council to achieve long-term financial sustainability.

### **What are the proposed engagement activities?**

Robust community engagement seeks to ensure all people who will or may be affected by the subject matter have an opportunity to hear about what is proposed, as well as an opportunity to have their input considered before a final decision is taken.

As identified above, all members of the Snowy Valleys community as well as ratepayers (who may reside elsewhere) should be afforded the opportunity to participate in this discussion. Therefore a variety of engagement mechanisms are proposed:

- Online and hard copy survey
- A suite of communication collateral (including print, digital and video) to enhance community understanding of the projects, their impact and the community's ability to provide feedback and participate in meaningful discussion. Material will be made available on Council's 'Your Voice Snowy Valleys' webpage, in hard copy at key community locations, and promoted through social media, local media and the front page of Council's website.
- An invitation to "have your say" attached to all quarterly rates instalment reminders – with advice about where to find information and provide comment (via 'Your Voice Snowy Valleys', hard copy survey, attendance at public workshops). NB – if rates notices will not be sent during the engagement period, or will reach less than 50% of ratepayers, consider sending a one-off letter to all ratepayers instead.

- A series of public workshops which will include a presentation of the issues and options, followed by a facilitated discussion to elicit community preferences.

#### **When will the engagement be undertaken?**

It is intended that this community engagement activity commences in late February/early March 2020 and concludes by late April. A proposed timetable is:

<b>Item</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Timing</b>
1a	Creation of communication collateral providing background information and outlining the defined options a community response is sought on	By late February
1b	Design survey with multiple choice responses for options under consideration that community members can vote on	By late February/early March
2a	Create a dedicated space on Council's <i>Have Your Say</i> page and upload/distribute communication collateral.	By early March
2b	Upload voting mechanism on <i>Have Your Say</i> page for community members to vote on defined options	By early March
3	Distribute in rates notice a link to Have Your Say page/ hard copy survey encouraging feedback on defined options	By early March
4	Series of facilitated workshops targeting particular stakeholder groups held in a number of locations across the local government area, and including utilisation of communication collateral and survey to give indication of option preferences and demographics of voters.	Mid- March to late April

#### **What resources will be required to support the engagement?**

- Communication collateral – FAQs, background papers, option summaries
- 'Your Say' voting platform to enable capture of 'votes' against defined options (re rates)
- Promotional material to highlight projects, opportunities for engagement – advertisements, social media posts, media releases, posters, newsletter material
- Identification of Long Term Financial Plan scenarios and supporting material to enable informed discussion on options and comments about concerns in relation to the impacts of the options provided.
- Video clip (re rate harmonisation)
- Workshop presentation
- Workshop facilitator and notetaker/s
- Councillors' participation at community workshops

#### **What will be produced for Council's use at the end of this engagement?**

At the conclusion of this community engagement process, it is expected that significant community feedback will be collated in response to the multiple choice

questions provided. It is anticipated that this will give a clear sense of community support for each of the options available within each rating category, as well as a sense of the demographics of those providing the responses.

**How will Council use the information gathered during the engagement process?**

Information gathered during the engagement process will be used by elected Councillors to inform decision making in relation to rate harmonisation and future sustainability actions.

**What are the risks and challenges and how will we manage them?**

The key community engagement risks and challenges are:

- Community members having time and motivation to be engaged in a rates and financial sustainability discussion when their focus may be on recovery from the recent bushfires
- Hearing a representative variety of opinions in a relatively short timeframe
- Managing high emotions during public forums that may derail constructive discussion.

These risks and challenges can best be managed through:

- Acknowledging the context in which the engagement is occurring, and providing interested participants with a variety of mechanisms to engage
- Ensuring that invitations to community forums proactively target particular stakeholder groups, and encourage and enable their attendance through consideration of the timing and location of these activities
- Effective facilitation of community discussions to be mindful of the task, the outputs sought, the time available and the principle of allowing everyone's views to be considered.