



# Essential Services Commission - Advice from Independent Engagement Expert

Hindmarsh Council

14 June 2017

***Thank you for the opportunity to review the submission from Hindmarsh Council on their approach to engagement with the community around their application for a higher cap under the Fair Go Rates System.***

***Outlined below is my response to their original application.***

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kathy Jones', is centered on a light gray grid background.

Kathy Jones  
Executive Chair  
KJA





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**Summary of contents provided and completeness. Clarity of reasons for methodology. Integrity of delivery.**

The council has an engagement strategy that has been established alongside the development and implementation of its long term financial strategy from 2013/2014. This approach has continued into the development of the 2017/2021 long term council plan.

Council has a well-established and extensive Community Engagement Framework which has been presented as documentary evidence of the principles behind council's ongoing engagement programs.

The conversations with the community are around the issue of sustainability and how this can be achieved in a holistic sense rather than just focusing on specific and immediate issues such as individual services or infrastructure. This is to be commended as it leads to more mature conversations about trade-offs.

**Does the engagement program contain clear accessible and comprehensive information and follow a timely process to engender feedback from the community? Does it satisfactorily detail the following? What council did to engage with their ratepayers and communities, what information was provided during the engagement process, how this information was presented and how feedback was gathered and what this feedback was.**

No plan for this specific engagement program has been submitted, therefore a judgement of how it is faced against council's policy cannot be made. That being said, the narrative in the application about how the

Community Conversation program was undertaken does fit in with the principles outlined in the policy.

**Is engagement on going and tailored to community needs? Does the program fit in with Councils ongoing SRP engagement?**

Council has shown evidence of extensive engagement since the creation of its 2013/2017 long term plan. They have discussed both services and infrastructure provision in the context of the sustainability of the council and have sought community views on how these issues might be balanced.

Council has acknowledged, with its community members, their limited capacity to pay for services but also for additional rates. They seem to have created an effective mix of channels to engaging the community although with most small rural councils, face to face meetings seem to be the most effective tool. There is also good evidence that different demographic groups have been specifically targeted to get a better understanding of how best to deal with their issues.

**Does the engagement program prioritise matters of significance and impact? Does it satisfactorily detail the following? How Council considered the scale of the higher rate cap, whether the higher rate cap is addressing short term or long term financial needs, how engagement was conducted in the context of the issues above, how the options or trade-offs were presented, what Council learnt about the community's priorities through the engagement process, how Council assessed differing community views.**

The agenda for the "Community Conversations" around the 2017/2018 budget is thorough and very much focused on the past and future budget management of the council.



However conclusions about the support or otherwise, for rate capping specifically, needs to be moderated by the fact that the numbers are small and ratepayers probably did not consider that they were 'voting' when they filled in the survey.

The important thing is that the community were given thorough information and that their understanding of council's budget constraints is increasing which appears to be the case given the length of the engagement process around budgeting (since 2013).

The application talks specifically about the work done with farmers in helping them to understand the implications of the budget and seeking their advice on what trade-offs would be required. This is commendable engagement work. It would be further lauded if there was some supporting evidence of the outcomes of these discussions provided, for example; a community feedback report distributed further than what is reported to council.

**Has the engagement program led to communities becoming more informed about council decision making? Does it satisfactorily detail the following? How the engagement program was evaluated, how feedback was gathered and what this feedback was, how the outcomes of the engagement process were communicated with the community, how the engagement undertaken influenced Council's decision to apply for a higher rate cap, how Council is responding to issues raised during the engagement and why, how Council dealt with or is dealing with unmet community expectations in relation to rate increases and/or service provision and how Council maintains ongoing communication with its community.**

The evaluation is anecdotal which is understandable given the size of the council.

That being said, council has reported on the diversity of groups being engaged over a range of programs and the numbers of individuals actively involved. Council has also reported on its community satisfaction with engagement (59%) in the community satisfaction surveys and in comparison with other similar councils.

There is no comment which explains how those not in favour of a rate rise as part of the package of sustainability tools, will have their unmet expectations dealt with.

### **What were views of ratepayers and the community about the rate increase?**

Anecdotal evidence only has been provided – a selection of quotes and the raw data in response to the survey/feedback at the community conversation sessions.

### **How were these views taken into account by Council in making their decision?**

Council notes in the report that they have undertaken extensive consultation around budget planning as well as future planning for its different villages and precincts. Its focus on explaining the requirements of sustainability and the options available to achieving this are important.

Examples of the outcomes of a range of engagement processes (e.g. with the farmers and young people) have been included in the application and are certainly present in The Council Plan which has been submitted.



The Report to council on the engagement specifically for this application has not been included so there is no evidence to show how the councillors considered the stakeholder feedback on this issue.

**Comments about gaps in contents.**

Would be useful for council to submit the material that was used in the community conversations and the actual plan for these conversations. Similarly, any feedback Report that was provided to the community.

**Comments about the impact of these gaps.**

To give a greater evidence base for the findings reflected in the application.



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