



Community Focus Groups Assessment of Assets

May 2014



Background

Focus group sessions were conducted in order to provide a greater understanding of the community's understanding of key asset classes, as well as Council's perceived role in funding these assets and engaging with the community about the potential funding gap.

A Moderators Guide was developed in conjunction with Council's Project Team

Three face-to-face focus group sessions were conducted on May 14 and 15, 2014. The participants for these 3 focus groups were recruited from those who participated in the community telephone survey conducted in August-September 2013.

There was a high level of interest in participation, with a total of 25 residents attending. Focus group attendees included a mix of age and gender categories, reflective of the local population.

Attendees were also provided with a \$50 payment for their assistance.



Findings in Detail:

1. General Issues/Themes

Attraction of the Hawkesbury



Consistent with previous qualitative and quantitative research, resident participants overwhelmingly spoke warmly about the Hawkesbury as a place to live – and in particular, its ‘rural lifestyle’ and all that that entails, including space and peacefulness (whilst this was a very strong theme that emerged in all groups, it has been explored fully in other research reports so won’t be explored fully here):

“I value the open air, open space. I appreciate the weekends, like being on holidays.”

“I prefer the quieter life out here.”

Other core attributes mentioned included:

- **Community spirit, friendliness:** *“The people are fantastic ... the people have been so supportive”, “Community spirit in MacDonald Valley”.*
- **Remote location, but still close to the city:** *“Feels like the country but you’re only one hour from the city”, “Not in the city but you’re close enough”.*
- **Safe area to bring the children up in:** *“Keeping children away from things closer to the city”, “Great place to bring your kids up”.*

Most participants had lived in the LGA for many, many years – and several were involved in community associations.

Given residents’ long term engagement with the region, Council should consider them active partners in planning for the future

Challenges within the Hawkesbury - Transport



The main areas of concern mentioned without any specific prompting all revolved around transport:

- **Lack of transport options:** *“Dearth of public transport and the commute is the only issue”, “We could do with better transport”, “I’ve struggled with transport out here, I work in Sydney”.*
- **Road congestion:** *“You get bottlenecks crossing the bridges”, “Traffic congestion, that’s the biggest [issue] ... Since the time we’ve been here, that side of the river, Richmond, you can spend an hour coming home from work”.*
- **Poor condition of roads:** *“The edge of my road is dead-set dangerous. I’ve done two tyres because in the rain you can’t see the edge, there could be a six inch drop”, “The roads are just so neglected, like Grose Vale Road has been the same – apart from some potholes – in the 38 years I’ve been here”, “Last summer the heat melted the road surface – they did nothing so it will happen again”.*
- **Untidy verges, in terms of rubbish dumping and overgrown plants:** *“In my area, each successive summer, under power lines you’ve got all this shrub growth and they’re not clearing it”, “Rubbish on the side of the road, mattresses, fridges”, “The tip’s so expensive, it’s ridiculous, that’s why people dump all over our properties”.*

The remoteness residents crave, combined with the lack of public transport, means roads are the lifeblood of the Hawkesbury – and they are readily and regularly appraised by residents.

Other areas of concern mentioned without any specific prompting were less tangible – but still seemingly important to some residents:

- **Infrastructure (roads, schools, public transport) is not keeping up with increasing sub-division developments:** *“Schools are full now, roads are choked. I don’t mind bringing the people in but do the infrastructure first”, “The amount of people coming in and the infrastructure – the Council is not doing anything about infrastructure first”.*
- **Getting the development (sub-divisions, tourism) balance right will be a challenge for Council – residents aren’t necessarily opposed, but they don’t want development to spoil the amenity of the area:** *“There’s room for growth if we go about it the right way...”, “The rural amenity of the Hawkesbury is what we came here for so if we divide it up we lose that – the aesthetic”.*
- **The sheer size of the LGA means an ‘us and them’ mentality was occasionally evident in the groups – with the Hawkesbury River being the psychological barrier:** *“We have a 80km round trip to Richmond, so we are part of the forgotten people”, “Since we moved to Hawkesbury Council [from Colo Council], we’ve become more ‘city’ ”, “Take some of the focus away from urban”, “90% of the Councillors live on this side of the river so it doesn’t impact them”.*

Council needs to be seen to be listening and responding to residents throughout the LGA, to minimize an urban/rural divide.

Appreciating Population Density



Participants were generally aware of the geographic size of the LGA – and combined with a relatively low population density, meant they appreciated the financial challenges faced by Council. In some cases, we didn't have to raise this as an issue in the groups – participants did so unprompted:

“We live in a really big area, population density is low, that's the problem”

“I know the Hawkesbury is a huge LGA ... so Council is also limited with funding in terms of maintenance, the less rates they have the less money they have – it's a bit of a catch 22 and I think many of us are aware of the problem”

Scepticism about this notion was seemingly limited, with only one respondent openly questioning it:

“In other areas, like Cessnock, they have bigger properties and fewer people but they manage”.

Explaining the population density issue to residents as context to funding gap discussions should be considered by Council.

Experiences with Council



Several participants in the first group were vocal about poor service they had received from Council in the past:

“Have you ever tried to get through the rigmarole of getting onto Council?”

“We contacted Council about rubbish by email and we’re still waiting for a response. The communication has been pretty poor”

“I sent an email about rate changes. Couldn’t find GM’s name on the website. I’m still waiting for a response”

However, overall, there was more positive sentiment across the groups about experiences with Council, particularly in terms of issues being addressed:

“Last storm I lost half my driveway but Council was there the next day”

“I’ve rung customer service about hanging trees and someone has been out in half an hour. Ring the Customer Service Centre – they would know where to direct you”

“Kurrajong Forum and the community have been consulting with Council for over a year to have an upgrade of Memorial Park Kurrajong and heritage signage and Council is doing it – so that’s a positive thing”

Customer service experiences with Council were more positive than negative

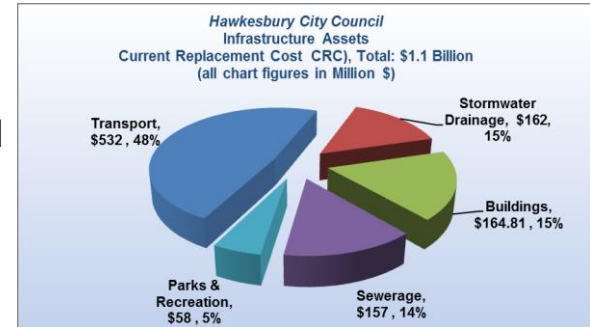


Findings in Detail:

2. Introduction to Asset Classes

Participants were shown a pie chart summarising the value of all assets held by Council. A brief discussion then followed, with a view to understanding how meaningful residents would find such information.

Overwhelmingly, participants indicated they would prefer to see maintenance expenditure rather than asset value:



“This only shows me what the assets are, not the cost to maintain”

“What I want to know is how much it will cost to maintain – maintenance is most important to us”

“Expenditure would give more information than just assets – what they are spending things on, not the value of things as they are, because they’re not going to sell them anyway”

That said, some participants did find meaning in the asset values. Some were surprised at the large size of the transport component. Another participant felt that knowing the overall asset value helped to justify the expenditure on maintenance etc:

“The fact that Council has \$200 Million in [building] assets is interesting – they have to be upkeep”

Whilst asset values are useful communication items, maintenance revenues appear to be more meaningful to residents.



Findings in Detail:

3. Focus on Roads

Discussion then turned specifically to roads, and participants were shown stimulus materials such as pictures of sealed roads in varying conditions to stimulate discussion. Not surprisingly, key issues discussed covered some of the areas mentioned in the initial unprompted discussion, namely:

- **Congestion – given that the stimulus materials were of roads in various states of repair rather than of congestion, this is clearly an important factor for residents:** *“After 3.00pm we wouldn’t come near Richmond because of congestion”, “I think more people would complain about delays than some poor roads”, “There is a congestion problem, it backs up from Sydney”, “Traffic is really going to increase”*
- **Maintenance, potholes, broken up edges:** *“We could improve the roads for the benefit of everybody – a much better ride”, “I was told to keep my tyres at a higher PSI because of the Hawkesbury roads”*
- **Road infrastructure lagging behind residential and tourism developments:** *“Council is promoting tourism at St Albans but they’re not keeping the roads in good condition”, “\$20mill has been set aside for that road structure but they have to sell 450 plots before that happens – so it’s back to front”*

Traffic congestion and road maintenance are key top-of-mind issues for residents that won’t be ignored

However, the focused discussion also raised several other road-related issues:

- **In some areas, the lack of footpaths is a hazard for drivers and pedestrians:** *“In some areas it’s a nightmare walking alongside the road because there’s no path”*
- **Roads in new sub-divisions are too narrow for cars to pass:** *“They’ve put these narrow roads in new sub-divisions, two cars can’t pass, and you’re not allowed to park on the footpath”*
- **Unsealed roads shouldn’t be ignored.**
- **Following on from the above, there was a sense that urban roads were likely to be better than rural roads – which could potentially lead to an ‘us and them’ divide as noted earlier:**

“These here [better condition photos] look like a sub-division where the developers have been. This one [poor condition photo] is more of an artery, more ratty”

“On our side of the river, [improving roads is] definitely a critical issue”. “But if you have to rob Peter to pay Paul, who suffers?”

“The streets in Hobartville are excellent” “That’s right, they’ve not done anything to them, but they don’t need the priority”.

Participants had no trouble discussing the shortcomings of local roads

The focus on roads also allowed us to explore potential solutions to road issues, particularly in terms of maintenance. A key solution centred on understanding who was responsible for particular roads, Council or the state government – and as the language below suggests, some participants were almost frustrated by this:

“We don't actually know what we're talking about in terms of roads – who is responsible for them?”

“Yes, but which road is which and who do we contact – we don't know where to go”

“Is there a process of identification of roads? Is it just a matter of ringing Council about a pothole?”

Participants felt the solution was more clarity from Council on who is responsible for which roads:

“Tell us the rules and regulations of who to contact”

“Council should let us know which roads they are responsible for and which ones the RTA is responsible for”

An online solution where residents type in a street name and know who to contact for maintenance could be useful.

Other road-related solutions mentioned included:

- **Residents want to see thorough repairs, not band-aid solutions:** *“Proper maintenance – not just fill up a hole with a bit of tar and then when it rains next week it falls out again”, “*
- **Maintain the roads, don’t simply reduce speed limits to compensate for deteriorating roads:** *“We’ve had reduction, reduction, reduction, even in Council roads, in speed limits ... because of the state of them, they are just terrible”*
- **Specific areas requiring attention that were mentioned included:**
 - A second Richmond Bridge
 - More overtaking lanes
 - Maintenance on the Bells Line of Road; Grose Vale Road; Tennyson Road.

Maintenance of roads is very visible – residents want to see quality repairs and upgrades

In terms of possible communication strategies to help engage residents, the following emerged:

- **Language is important.** For instance, the word ‘Transport’ was used on the asset chart discussed earlier, and participants were unsure what this included. So clearly mentioning roads, footpaths, etc is important.
- **Let residents know the relative costs of fixing roads**, so they are more likely to help Council identify problems early: *“How much does it cost to fix a pothole? That’s meaningful to people...”*,
- **And those living in remote areas with unsealed roads want to understand the cost of regularly maintaining an unsealed road** versus the longer term solution of sealing it: *“How much does it cost to keep a 10km section of unsealed road maintained for 10 years?”, “What saving is there in having an unsealed road versus a sealed road?”*
- **Make it easier for residents to log problems/issues with their local roads** – and to keep them informed of progress: *“If you have a website we can complain to, say I want Tennyson Road fixed up, and then they actually reply ... with information about what’s going to happen to that road, that would be awesome. But I feel like I would be talking to myself so I don’t bother”, “Why not have a particular email point?”, “It’s important to keep it personal”*.

Develop a ‘stitch in time’ push-pull strategy – inform residents about the costs of road repairs so they want to report issues quickly – then give them an interactive online mechanism to do so.



Findings in Detail:

4. Focus on Buildings

Buildings – Overall Impressions



Participants were then shown building-related stimulus materials such as internal and external pictures of Council buildings in varying conditions to stimulate discussion about the state of Council buildings in general.

When asked which Council buildings they tended to use most, participants mentioned Library, Museum, Community Centres and Community Halls. Public toilets were also mentioned, but more-so as a place to avoid.

Overall impressions were multi-layered (but not necessarily polarised). At one level, there was a sense that Council had invested in their buildings recently and they were in good condition – and that they are less of a priority than are roads:

“I think the area is pretty well catered for. The Council office is fairly impressive for an area of this size”

“Over the last decade I think our Council has maintained and built lots of new buildings, including the museum. In my area, Kurrajong, we’ve had a new community building ... and this building here [Deerubbin Centre]”

“A road is going to impact our life everyday. [Building assets] don’t impact us to the same extent.” “This is not a high priority area at the moment for me”

Residents are generally happy with the number and current state of Council buildings

Buildings – Overall Impressions



However, participants generally agreed that maintenance should be continued given their overall asset worth – a stitch in time approach:

“I don’t think anyone would argue against maintenance being kept up”

“As long as they’re maintained, they’re brick so they’ll last forever – paint them, repair rust”

“If maintenance isn’t continued, the buildings will deteriorate like most things and cost more in the long run to fix up or replace”

“The fact that the Council has \$200mill in assets is interesting – they have to be upkeep”

In terms of the degree of maintenance, some participants felt ‘function’ was more important than ‘form’:

“I’m not keen to see a lot of money spent on visuals, aesthetics” “Yep, function ahead of form”

But for others, aesthetic appeal is also important:

“If you want people to use community halls, you have to look after them”

“They’re the main feature of your village, town, whatever. If the Council chambers aren’t adequate and maintained, it’s only going to encourage riff raff”

Maintaining the quality of Council buildings is expected. However, there is some polarization in terms of focusing maintenance on function and/or form

In one of the three groups, participants raised the notion of rationalising the building asset pool to help with the possible funding gap:

“The amount spent on buildings is a hell of a lot – maybe we should just demolish some”

“Do you cut back the buildings? ... We all want this place to flourish. With our rates, you pay your fair share. If the buildings are a major cost that can go elsewhere, I’m not saying you get rid of them all, but there are certain ones you could”

“There used to be an amenities block on Putty Road just north of Wilberforce, but six or seven years ago Council got rid of it because it was being used for improper purposes. I think this might apply to quite a few of these places too”

When communicating with residents about building assets, the following points should be noted:

- **Use images of both urban and rural buildings.** As one participant wryly noted: *“One [of the photos] is in Richmond and the other is in Windsor – I think that says a lot”*
- **The need for Council to adhere to compliance rules in terms of maintaining buildings was readily understood and accepted by participants:** *“It’s taken on a big area, health and safety, in life now”, “It’s an added expense”, “You can’t do anything else but do that”*

In the face of a potential funding gap, some residents may question the extent to which Council should be involved in real estate



Findings in Detail:

5. Focus on Recreation

Parks & Recreation – Overall Impressions



Responses to the availability and state of recreation areas in the Hawkesbury tended to be mostly positive. Specific positive feedback focussed on the number and condition of the recreation areas – and interestingly, there appeared to be consensus on both sides of the river:

“One contractor you have in St Alban’s parks, he deserves to be paid double” “I agree, facilities pretty good”

“The way you’re putting in your playground equipment is great”

“I’ve generally found the sports fields to be well maintained – but that’s in the more residential areas”

“I was quite amazed at the number there is. And I notice they’re repairing the one in Richmond – I can’t wait for that to be done” “I find that too. Over the last decade Council has really had a focus on our parks and maintenance and upgrades of many of them”

“There’s a pretty good mix of small, very local parks for just quiet leisure and small children activities, and larger ones a little further out”

“And sporting grounds as well. Like the Richmond Park now is brilliant – and in the townships the parks are more than adequate” “And on the other side of the river I think all the parks are excellent”

Residents are generally happy with the number and current state of recreation areas.

Parks & Recreation – Overall Impressions



Negative comments were less frequent, and were more likely to focus on the maintenance of the parks rather than their availability:

“Financial waste on parks. Spend dollars on certain things like all new fences, toilets, BBQs, but now the park is overgrown with weeds, and snakes”

“We have a cemetery with First Fleeters, and Council encourages people to come and see. But the fence has fallen down, no one has come and fixed it. You build it up and don't maintain it.”

“We had some visitors come through, the lawn hadn't been mowed and it didn't look good”

Other concerns were more fragmented:

- **Used syringes were found at Windsor Park.** But as the participant noted: *“Now everything is OK, so [Council] was proactive”*
- **Playground equipment is only for small children:** *“The parks are great, but all of the equipment is aimed at small children”*
- **Lack of toilet facilities at Wheeny Creek:** *“My kids were going to do an excursion down to Wheeny Creek and there are no toilets there, the rubbish has never been cleaned up, it's a tip”*

Concerns about recreation areas were generally fragmented. However, they should not be ignored as the parks and sporting fields potentially contribute to the rural ambiance of the Hawkesbury



Findings in Detail:

6. Addressing the Funding Gap

Expectations of Council



Participants were asked for ideas on how to address the potential funding gap. Several themes emerged in terms of what residents expect of Council.

Not surprisingly, at a macro level residents are looking for management and leadership from Council:

“We expect good management from Council to minimise the gap”

“I don't want to hear they have a funding shortfall – I want to hear what they're doing with what they've got”

More specifically, they want to see that Council has a vision and a plan for the Hawkesbury to guide future funding decisions:

“They need a plan”

“If we know they have a plan to deal with it, so be it”

“I think if you have a vision for what the Hawkesbury should be, it will be easier to communicate and keep the vision alive. It's the rural living that we embrace”

“They should have an agenda”

Taking a vision/plan to the community that is underpinned by the rural aesthetic but provides one or more options for closing the funding gap is expected.

And a strong theme that came through from participants was that they wanted the vision/plan to be based on community consultation:

“There is a difference between a plan that they bestow on people and a plan that they ask the community about. At least if you consult you quell the disquiet in the community”

“I think they make it difficult for themselves because they don’t involve themselves in the community” “The Hawkesbury belongs to everyone, not a group of politicians”

“The only way it’s going to change is through engagement”

Complementing the plan, participants indicated they needed to know more about the Councillors in order to trust they are representing all of the LGA:

“I’d like to know a little more about the Councillors I’m voting for. I couldn’t name a Councillor other than the Mayor – I don’t know them and I don’t know what they stand for”

“Put out a circular so we can see where the Aldermen live, where the money goes. It’s too closed up, too locked in”

“On ‘that side’ of the river the Council hasn’t looked to see who exists”

Several asset-specific solutions to the possible funding gap have already been discussed in the earlier Roads and Buildings sections. However, several more generic strategies were mentioned towards the end of each group.

One solution was based on the potential cost savings by having residents help to identify areas requiring attention and communicating them to Council (this was also discussed earlier as an approach in relation to roads maintenance):

“The more Council can rely on community input the better so you get targeted spending”

“Targeted responses would be fantastic”

Another funding gap solution mentioned in two of the three groups was to increase revenue from non-residents by better promotion of the Hawkesbury as a tourist destination:

“Can Council have other revenue streams? I see people using the boat ramp and I don’t think they’re locals ... Windsor is an historic centre, they could do things in terms of revenue streams”

“How do you get people outside the area to come in for community events and to spend?”

“I think tourism could be increased here, there’s not enough going on here to encourage people to come and stay here, for a couple of nights even. Everyone comes through, maybe stops for a coffee, then continues to the Blue Mountains”

Council should explore community engagement/targeted maintenance, and alternate revenue streams such as tourism (as Penrith Council has done)

Participants were cognisant of the challenges associated with a ramp up in tourism, including lack of infrastructure and accommodation, and living in the shadow of the Blue Mountains:

“Accommodation in the Hawkesbury, there’s not that much” “It’s crap” “It’s nice for B&B’s” “In the late 1800’s /early 1900’s, the Hawkesbury was well known for its guest houses all through the hills”

“It’s difficult to compare the Hawkesbury with the Blue Mountains – it’s an iconic, global destination isn’t it – tourists from Japan wouldn’t have heard of the Hawkesbury but they’ve heard of the Blue Mountains”

Another solution mentioned just the once was to increase the number of ratepayers in the Council area – although this suggestion didn’t garner great support:

“You want more ratepayers!” “Yes, more sub-divisions”

And participants avoided the possibility of paying more rates – only one participant directly addressed this:

“The issue of raising revenue [from tourism] is an interesting one” “Well, you don’t want to use the rate payers do you!”

Participants didn’t offer to pay more rates to help close the funding gap!

Communication from Council was mentioned at various times throughout the sessions:

“If they communicate. A lot of this goes back to a lack of communication”

However, even participants who were keen to be engaged with Council realised communications failures are not only the Council's fault:

“That information may already be in the website but we don't have the time...”

“The onus is on the person, if they want to know...”

Online is an obvious choice of communication channel because it allows for a dialogue rather than a monologue – so residents can report issues back to Council:

“Why not have a particular email point?”

“A website, wouldn't it be a good idea?” “I think it would be in this day and age, yes, instead of ringing up”

Community newspapers were also mentioned: *“The Gazette or the Courier. At the end of the day if you want to know you can't say you weren't informed”*

Communication is critical. Where possible it needs to be a dialogue rather than a monologue. Online is the obvious solution – although local papers were also mentioned

Other communication channels mentioned included:

- Live streaming of Council meetings
- Community forums along the lines of the ABC's Q&A program: *"You could have a special day where you meet at Council and people who want to ask questions can ask questions, and everyone's invited"*
- Residents can participate in political parties or community organisations and will be exposed to Council's plans: *"We've got Rotary, the ladies have got Inner Wheel, there's View Club for the ladies as well ... Those clubs invite people to come to talk ... we have had people from Council come along"*

Stated at times but implied more frequently was the notion that participants wanted specific communication that was relevant to their local community, not LGA-wide communications (this is potentially a symptom of the alienation some remote residents feel):

"Once a year an overview of what will be spent on each zone"

"People want to know what's going to happen in their own particular area, so if you could name the areas it would be better I'd say"



Summary

- Residents generally appear to appreciate the unique financial challenges facing the LGA based on its size and low population density.
- Residents want to be engaged in future planning and addressing potential funding gaps
- ⇒ ***Council should provide residents with a vision of the future, and options for addressing potential funding gaps within the context of that vision.***
- Council needs to build trust amongst residents – part of this is addressing a perceived ‘us and them’ divide between urban and rural.
- ⇒ ***Council interactions with the community should, where possible, be a dialogue rather than a monologue, and provide multiple access points i.e. online, phone, email etc.***
- ⇒ ***Focus on providing access and saliency for the Council’s narrative – measure the success of various methods so Council can develop an informed communication strategy***
- For residents, closing potential funding gaps is not just the domain of service cut-backs or rate increases. Alternate revenue options should also be explored – in particular, leveraging the Hawkesbury’s tourism appeal.
- Communications should use clear, concise language – don’t over-complicate and avoid Council terminology.

Council could consider conducting a communication audit in order to inform the development of a communication dissemination strategy

micromex research

The logo for micromex research features the word "micromex" in a bold, black, lowercase sans-serif font. A stylized compass rose is superimposed over the letter "o". The compass rose has a white center with black lines extending outwards. The top point of the compass is a red triangle pointing upwards. Below "micromex", the word "research" is written in a smaller, grey, lowercase sans-serif font.

Telephone: (02) 4352 2388 Fax: (02) 4352 2117
Web: www.micromex.com.au Email: stu@micromex.com.au