Hunter's Hill Council
Special Variation
Communication & Engagement Strategy

BACKGROUND/INTRODUCTION

The Special Rate (SR) Communication and Engagement Strategy gives both Council and the community a vision for the main priorities and aspirations for the future of the Hunters Hill local government area. Any Council project should identify the community's main priorities and aspirations, and plan broad strategies for achieving these goals.

To achieve the objectives of continuous financial improvement to meet the needs of the local community Council has developed this robust strategy to ensure:

- The needs and priorities of the community are driving programs and services.
- The community is empowered through community engagement.
- Councillors, individuals and community groups are encouraged to become actively involved in the planning process.
- Feedback is given to residents about the outcomes of community engagement.
- Groups/individuals who are not usually represented are targeted to ensure a holistic outcome.

A strategic platform for stakeholder mapping and clear consultative approaches will ensure Council facilitates a clear set of outcomes. Council will be better placed to understand the needs and wants of its community and prioritise these to ensure greater resident confidence in its services. Council will also be able to determine its financial forecast with confidence.

Other subsidiary purposes to this strategy include:

- Improvement of Council's communication flow with the community.
- Transparency of information regarding Council's financial sustainability.
- Compliance with legislative framework and timelines including IPART's procedures and regulations surrounding Special Variation (SV) applications.

- Inclusion of social justice principles; rights, equity, access and participation meaning that all members of the Hunters Hill community have the opportunity to actively participate.

STATE GOVERNMENT FRAMEWORK

At the basis of all communication and engagement activities is the IP&R framework introduced by the State Government that recognises that communities do not exist in isolation – they are part of a larger natural, social, economic and political environment that influences and, to a large extent, shapes their future direction. Linked to IP&R is Council's Resourcing Strategy that incorporates the Long Term Financial Plan, Workforce Plan and Asset Management Plans. All of these plans include important information about service levels and funding priorities to plan in partnership for a sustainable future. IP&R therefore underpins decisions on the revenue required by Council to meet community needs and demands and whether Council requires a SV to meet those needs.

The Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) will assess and determine special variation applications by councils under powers delegated by the Minister for Local Government. When IPART is reviewing SV applications they will determine whether Council has identified SR options in its IP&R process. They will also determine whether Council has clearly explained two important scenarios; outlining the baseline scenario (which reflect the business are usual model) and the SV scenario (which reflects the result of implementing the SV).

Special Variations may fund:

- Improvements in Council's financial sustainability.
- Asset maintenance and renewal.
- New or enhanced services to meet the needs of the local community.
- Projects of regional significance.
- Special cost pressures being faced by Council.

The framework recognises that most communities share similar aspirations; a safe, healthy and pleasant place to live, a sustainable environment, opportunities for social interaction, opportunities for employment, reliable infrastructure. The difference lies in how each community responds to these needs. This is what shapes the character of individual towns and cities.

The framework opens the way for councils and their communities to have important discussions about funding priorities, service levels, preserving local identity and to plan in partnership for a more sustainable future. This framework allows NSW councils to draw their various plans together, understand how they interact and get the maximum leverage from their efforts by planning holistically and sustainably for the future:
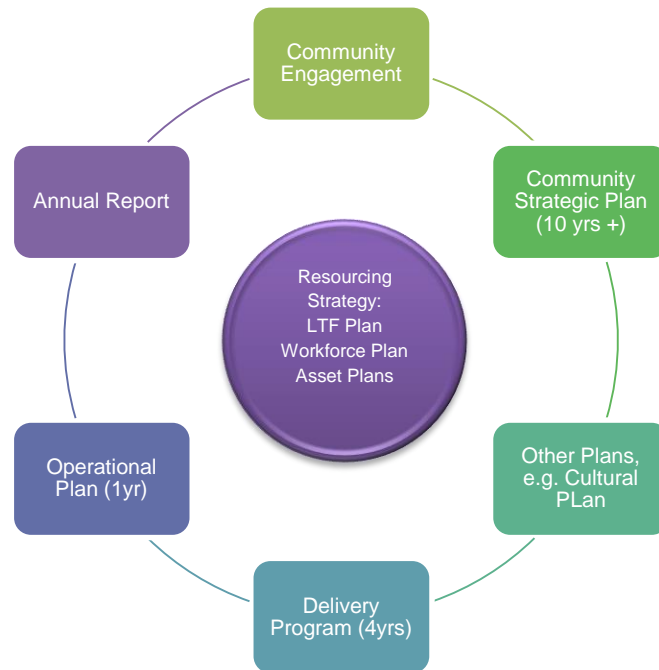
PURPOSE

The purpose of this Strategy is to:

1. Meet the new Integrated Planning Guidelines as set out by The Department for Local Government, which are to include special rate scenarios in IP&R documentation.

2. Establish a standard process for community engagement, and in particular the SR process.

3. Review already obtained and relevant financial and engagement information.

4. Allocate timelines to ensure transparency and clarity of key milestones.

5. Make better use of technology such as social media and Council's website to inform residents about the opportunities to participate in SR engagement processes.

6. Ensure that Council consistently listens to the views of residents and service users and that they are central to the decisions that Council makes.

By meeting this criteria Council will ensure that the community are given an appropriate opportunity to be involved and are acknowledged for their contribution in shaping the future of the Hunters Hill local government area and its financial sustainability.

GOALS

The five (5) main goals of the SR Strategy are to ensure that:

Goal 1	Council will demonstrate the need for and the purpose of a different revenue path and clearly identify this in the IP&R documents and any rating information forwarded to residents.
Goal 2	Council will provide evidence that the community is aware of the need for and extent of a rate increase.
Goal 3	Council will demonstrate that the impact on affected ratepayers must be reasonable.
Goal 4	Council will ensure that the relevant IP&R documents are exhibited, approved and adopted by Council before Council applies to IPART for a SV.
Goal 5	Council will explain productivity improvements and cost containment strategies in Council's IP&R documentation.

OBJECTIVES

A number of objectives have been developed to ensure that Council is enabling the communication and engagement process. These objectives are specific, measurable, achievable, and realistic:

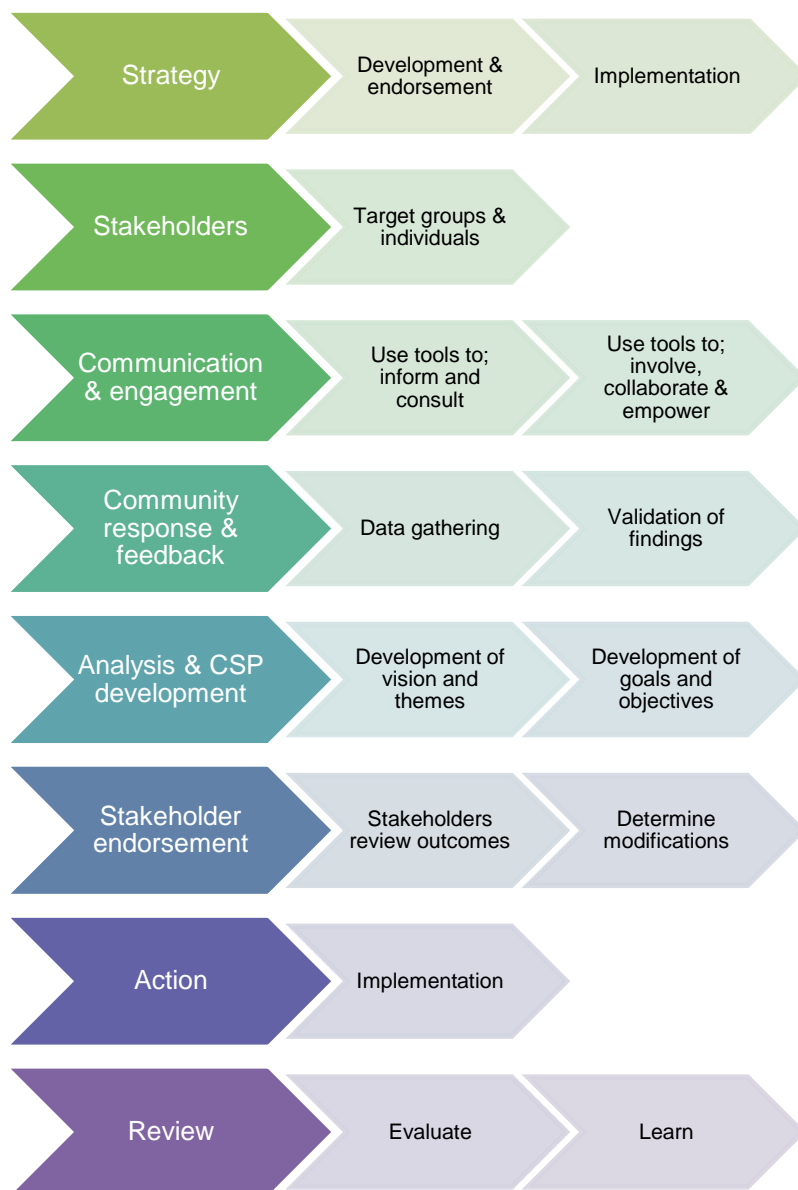| 1	Council wants the community to understand what the impact of the SR will have on them.
2	Council wants to raise awareness about the need for special rates.
3	Council wants to know what assets the community use.
4	Council wants to understand where financial priorities should be focussed.
5	Council wants feedback about the vision for the future and Council's long term sustainability.
6	Council wants to build its reputation amongst the community for being transparent and a conduit for change, built on community need and perception.

STRATEGIES AND KEY PRINCIPLES

Council understands that developing strategies to ensure the success of this engagement platform include:

- providing accurate financial information to the community
- enhancing assets/services via a SV
- keeping the community informed about potential financial impacts.

These strategies will only be successful if engagement activities are coordinated or overseen by Council staff or independent consultants such as facilitators, or a combination of both, they need to:

- know enough about the purpose of the community engagement
- clearly articulate everyone's role and ensure they understand each role
- be suitably skilled (trained and experienced).

If Council looks at the key directions of the project plan (as listed below) the strategies will flow on through each phase and build momentum ensuring that communication and engagement is successful.

Strategy	Development & endorsement	Implementation
Stakeholders	Target groups & individuals	
Communication & engagement	Use tools to; inform and consult	Use tools to; involve, collaborate & empower
Community response & feedback	Data gathering	Validation of findings
Analysis & CSP development	Development of vision and themes	Development of goals and objectives
Stakeholder endorsement	Stakeholders review outcomes	Determine modifications
Action	Implementation	
Review	Evaluate	Learn

Using public information, consultation, involvement and collaboration with a clear purpose and strong strategy ensures productive and effective outcomes. The International

Association for Public Participation (IAP2) outlines the drivers for a successful engagement framework. IAP2 outline that the key to public participation is the following principles:

- inform (provide information)
- consult (obtain feedback)
- involve (consider public views)
- collaborate (share ideas)
- empower (enable the community to make decisions).

These principles together with corresponding methods of engagement as outlined below will provide Council with a clear and successful process/structure (not all of these methods will be used for the SR):

	Inform	**Consult**	**Involve**	**Collaborate**	**Empower**
Goal	One way communication to provide balanced and objective information to assist understanding about something that is going to happen or has already happened.	Two way communication process aimed at obtaining feedback on ideas, alternatives and proposals to inform our decision making.	Participatory process designed to help identify issues and views to ensure that concerns and aspirations are understood and considered.	Working together to develop an understanding of all issues and interests to work out alternatives and identify preferred collective solutions.	To build the capacity of the community to lead their own plans for change.
Role of community and/or stakeholders	Listen	Contribute	Participate	Partner	Lead
Examples when this engagement level may be appropriate	Sharing with the community what special rates are all about	Using social media to seek feedback on community comments regarding special rates	Asking Council Committees and community members for their feedback and how the implementation of a special rate will affect them	Stakeholders working with Council to identify preferred solutions or alternatives, for example IPART are a key partner	E.g. Building capacity skills and knowledge of residents so that they can spread their knowledge throughout the community
Methods/tools	✓ Website ✓ Advertisements in local media ✓ Media releases ✓ Radio segments ✓ Brochures/fact sheets ✓ Flyer in rates notices ✓ Social media	✓ Surveys ✓ Precinct Meetings ✓ Online surveys ✓ Public feedback /Submissions ✓ Public & online ✓ Social media	✓ Facilitated workshops ✓ Attend community groups, meetings & functions ✓ Relevant interest groups	✓ Advisory or reference groups ✓ Committees ✓ Consensus building ✓ Participatory decision making ✓ Participant led workshops	✓ Facilitation of networks ✓ Practical skills workshops ✓ Training events ✓ Delegated decisions

Adapted from: Bang the Table (2014). What is community engagement, exactly? Available at: http://bangthetable.com/what-is-community-engagement/,

Situation analysis

Typically, factors internal to Council are generally classified as strengths and weaknesses, and external factors are classified as opportunities and threats. This can of course depend upon the project. Through careful consideration and focussing on any opportunities available Council can tap into an array of new engagement possibilities.

Strengths

Questions Council should ask include; what do we do better than any other council considering we don't have the big budgets of the larger councils, what unique resources can we tap into that others can't and what is special about us?

Weaknesses

Questions Council should ask include; what is it that we should avoid, what do we normally do that doesn't work and what do the community perceive to be our weaknesses?

Opportunities

Questions Council should ask include; what are some really good opportunities that can be seen or used to Council and community benefit, what are some practices that we haven't used but are being used by our counterparts that are working really well and what changes in demographics are taking place.

Threats

Questions Council should ask include; what are some obstacles that Council will face, are there any budgetary constraints that will impact the project, are there standards or services that are changing that may have impact?

Strengths	Weaknesses
- Council has sound knowledge of the project. - Council staff are well trained and understand their legislative requirements. - Council is connected to its community and has a track record of thorough engagement. - Council understands the need for community engagement to ensure that better decisions and outcomes are generated. - Council has an appreciation of the	- Council will be engaging with a large resident population. - The process will take a great deal more time due to the volume of residents to be consulted. - Few staff are trained in planning legislation. - It may be difficult to assess the views of the silent majority. - Councillors may not be engaged in the process.

constraints and opportunities associated with the planned engagement. • Council has set realistic expectations.	

Opportunities	Threats
• A more comprehensive approach to data collection can be undertaken due to additional resources, such as the IRIS telephone survey. • Council will have an unprecedented opportunity to revitalise services and its strategic direction should special rate be approved. • The community will generate a diversity of viewpoints for Council to capture. • Strategy will overcome the problem of late stage delays and the need for reactive engagement measures, and sometimes community opposition.	• Residents may not be targeted and can potentially feel more marginalised. • Staff may not feel engaged with a community driven action plan as opposed to a staff initiated strategy. • Residents may be aggressive or self interested. • Residents may have unrealistic expectations. • It may be difficult to manage conflicting views or prioritise views. • Local conflicts may influence participation and the type of techniques selected.

TARGET AUDIENCE

It is important to ensure that the broader the access to community opinion, the better information and understanding will be for stakeholders to make informed decisions and understand the impact that a SR will have.

Council is mindful that there is a need for a greater sense of involvement to achieve a mutual sense of ownership over Council decisions. This can be achieved through identifying target audiences through the following avenues:

a)   Community members and organisations who have an active interest and have a strong view about, all phases of the SR.

b)   Community members and organisations who may have particular expertise or an actual role on behalf of those who may be directly affected.

c)   Community members and organisations who will have a general interest in giving feedback or taking part in Council initiated projects such as a SR.

d)   Groups and individuals who are not directly affected by the issue but have been encouraged to take an active interest by those who are affected, as often is the case in the Hunters Hill community.

e)   People who would normally feel excluded or under represented.

f) Communities of interest whose activities might be affected by a proposal.

The Hunter's Hill Council community is an active and engaged group. Council has developed strong working relationships with many community groups and individuals.

Council will also develop and identify any partnerships between groups and individuals and any issues that may link or have past association with target audiences.

More specifically, Council has already identified the following target audiences:

Council will engage with the following individuals/groups	- rate paying residents - Councillors - Section 355 Committees/working parties/Council advisory groups - community activists - precinct committees - residents from CALD groups - residents who have access issues - elderly residents - young families
Audience requirements	- language barriers - people with access issues - people who are visually impaired - people with disabilities - people who have not previously engaged with Council

Further considerations if and when holding community forums/face-to-face focus groups are:

- Understanding when the community are most likely to be available to participate.
- Selecting venues across the region to ensure that any community members who may not be in a position to travel can still participate.
- Ensuring that there are a variety of locations selected to engage with the community which ensures a 'neutral' approach.
- Ensuring that access is available for people with disabilities at each venue.
- Ensuring the size of the venue suits the audience, i.e. a 400 seat Town Hall may not be appropriate for an expected attendance of only 50 people.
- Ensuring accessibility of parking.

KEY MESSAGES

The key messages that Hunter's Hill Council will consistently use throughout the engagement process will provide an achievable level of community expectation.

The key messages that Hunter's Hill Council will use are:

	KEY MESSAGES
1	Special rates are used to fund key asset maintenance and upgrades.
2	Special rates will enable Council to be financially sustainable into the future.
3	Special rates are implemented by councils across NSW as a means of maintaining community assets.

TOOLS

It is vital to check that all publicity needs are satisfied by the 'information giving techniques' selected at the planning phase. Important considerations will include the answers to the following questions:

What tools will be used? For example, print, radio, web, socials, video, logos, etc.

What will be the timing of the tools used to engage?

Who will be responsible and which staff are needed to undertake particular strategies?

How much lead time is needed for preparation, translation, distribution, booking, advertising space, etc?

How the style of the publicity might appeal to different groups within the community, such as should the printed material be produced in appropriate community languages or in large text for those with vision impairment?

In developing the engagement tools to be used with the Hunter's Hill Council community it is important for Council to both consider what 'normally' works as well as other avenues for capturing information/data by the use of more non-traditional methods.

The table on the following page demonstrates the tools used for a Level 1, 2 or 3 status project. In short, these levels demonstrate the need for prolonged engagement tackling a diverse array of Council matters/issues, and at the same time needing a significant budget to undertake the strategies and actions.

	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3
LARGE	- Press release - Newsletter - Public Exhibition - Telephone feedback line - E mail information/feedback line - Internet Web site - Social media promotion - Advertising/public notices - Shopping centre display - Consultant - Focus groups - Signage/banners - Letters to community groups/businesses - Follow-up survey/feedback - surveys	- Information and education campaign - Promotions and campaigns - Workshop series - Polling and surveys - Radio networks - Independent mediator - Pamphlets and explanatory booklets - Posters - Letterbox drop	- Seminars/conferences - Deliberative poll - Discussion papers - Complaint handling and feedback system - Focus groups - Banner - Advisory Committee
MEDIUM	- Press release - Fact sheet - Letter - Interview - Publishing details - Newsletter - Public Exhibition - Signage/banner at site	- Workshops - Public exhibition - Telephone feedback line - E mail information line - Polling and surveys - Internet Web site - Radio networks	- Focus groups - Advisory committee - Customer Service - Consultative committee - Networking
SMALL	- Letter - Publishing details - Newsletter	- Letter - Interviews - Meeting - Inquiry and responses	- Public Meeting or workshop or forum - Circulation of meeting notes - Complaint resolution

Social Media/Outside the box

Whilst Council will be using traditional forms of communication and engagement it will also be important to determine the realms of 'new' engagement methods. As social media becomes more of the norm and in many cases the only form of communication used by segments of the community it is important for Council to engage across this platform. Asking the community to contribute their opinions and ideas could include:

- uploading photos
- posting messages
- working with schools to create artworks/poems
- writing/posting stories

Questions that will be used to start the social media conversation include:

- Do you know what your rates are used for?
- Do you want Hunter's Hill Council to be financially sustainable into the future?
- What would you like your rates to fund?

TIMELINE

The SR timeline gives Council a sequence as to when each key objective needs to be completed by:

Special Rate Timeline	
2 July 2018	Council endorses IP&R documents
27 Aug 2018	Report to Council on SR Community Engagement Strategy
Sept 2018	IPART releases Rate Peg
10 Sept 2018	Community engagement to begin
2 Nov 2018	Community engagement to conclude
12 Nov 2018	Report to Council outlining intent to apply for SR
14 Dec 2018	Notification of intent to apply to IPART due
12 Feb 2019	Special variation applications due to IPART
12 Mar 2019	Minimum Rate Variation applications due to IPART
15 May 2019	Determinations announced by IPART

MEASURING SUCCESS

It is important for Council to measure whether the SR engagement process was successful. To achieve this Council has developed a series of measures 9which are essentially key questions) including:

- Were the objectives of the engagement strategy achieved?
- Did the process enable everyone to have their say?
- Were the views of the community acted upon by Council?
- Did participants feel that their opinions mattered?
- Which engagement techniques drew the highest response rates and also the highest level of satisfaction from which participants?
- Was participation representative of a diversity of views?
- Did people with special needs (e.g. disabled access, child care, etc) feel that their needs were adequately met and their views adequately listened to?

IN SUMMARY

This Policy also seeks to improve Council's engagement processes and outcomes through encouraging a consistent approach and continual learning through evaluation, and through expanding the range of engagement methods used. Council will use the information contained within this document