



Special Rate Variation - Community Engagement Plan

Goulburn Mulwaree Council

2023



Document status

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Contents

1	Context	1
1.1	Background	1
1.2	Engagement purpose and goals	1
1.3	Stakeholder analysis	1
2	Approach	2
2.1	Engagement complexity	2
2.2	Levels of engagement	2
2.3	Engagement mechanisms	4
2.4	Roles and responsibilities	6
2.5	Timeline	6
3	Action plan	8
3.1	Measures of success	10
4	Key messages	10
4.1	Frequently asked questions	11
5	Monitoring and risk	12
5.1	Monitoring	12
5.2	Risk assessment	12

Tables

Table 1	Stakeholder groupings	1
Table 2	Engagement mechanisms	4
Table 3	Roles and responsibilities	6
Table 4	Action plan	8
Table 5	Risk assessment	12

Figures

Figure 1	IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation	3
Figure 2	Community engagement timeline	7

1 Context

1.1 Background

Goulburn Mulwaree Council’s (‘Council’) Long-Term Financial Plan (LTFP), adopted in November 2022 indicated the need for Council to consider a permanent special rate variation (SRV) to ensure its ongoing financial sustainability. Council has now committed to exploring the option of an SRV application and will be undertaking community engagement on this SRV from September to 3 November 2023.

This community engagement plan outlines the approach, key messages, and timeline for community consultation on the potential SRV. This plan has been developed to ensure that it meets the SRV assessment criteria set out by the NSW Office of Local Government, which sets policy and oversees the local government industry, and the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART), who will assess any SRV application submitted. It has also been developed in compliance with Council’s Community Engagement Strategy, as well as the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2).

1.2 Engagement purpose and goals

The purpose of this community engagement is to ensure that the community is adequately informed and consulted about the impact of the proposed special rate variation and the impact of not applying for a special rate variation.

The objectives of this community engagement process include:

- to present the proposed SRV
- to identify the impact of the SRV on the average and minimum rates across each rating category
- to communicate to the community the timeline and process for any potential SRV application
- to gather and consider the community’s feedback to inform Council’s final decision on whether to move forward with an SRV application.

1.3 Stakeholder analysis

The key impacted stakeholders are those that pay rates or reside in the Goulburn Mulwaree local government area (LGA). Stakeholder groups have been identified below to ensure that the specific considerations of these groups can be integrated into the community engagement plan. These groupings are not mutually exclusive, that is individuals may fall into a number of different stakeholder groups. For example, individuals who own multiple properties in the LGA may be both resident ratepayers and landlord ratepayers.

Table 1 Stakeholder groupings

Stakeholder group	Who is in the group	Specific considerations
Resident ratepayers	Homeowners who are residents of Goulburn Mulwaree LGA	Proposed rate increases will be directly incurred by these stakeholders.

Stakeholder group	Who is in the group	Specific considerations
Renters	Renters who are residents of Goulburn Mulwaree LGA	It will be a decision of the landlord on whether and when any rate increases are passed on to renters.
Business ratepayers	Business property owners within the Goulburn Mulwaree LGA	Proposed rate increases will be directly incurred by these stakeholders. Where there are commercial leases in place, it will depend on the contract terms as to whether and when any increase will be passed to tenants.
Farming ratepayers	Farming property owners within the Goulburn Mulwaree LGA	Proposed rate increases will be directly incurred by these stakeholders. These represent the highest proportion of rates paid and are also the most geographically dispersed throughout the LGA.

Within each stakeholder group there will be a range of socio-economic factors that will need to be considered which will further inform not only the affordability of any SRV, but also may provide further insight to improve the consultation plan and key messages.

2 Approach


2.1 Engagement complexity

The level of complexity for this engagement activity is defined as ‘high impact – LGA wide’. That means that the issues will have a real or perceived impact across the whole LGA. The issue has the potential to create controversy and has a high level of potential community interest.

2.2 Levels of engagement

The level of engagement is defined from the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation in the following figure. This spectrum outlines the level of engagement required depending on the purpose and desired outcome of the project.

Figure 1 IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation¹

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION 					
	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

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To meet the assessment criteria for an SRV application, Council must:

1. Demonstrate that the **need and purpose** of a different rate path for the council’s General Fund is clearly articulated and identified in council’s Integrated Planning and Reporting (IP&R) documents.
2. Evidence that the **community is aware** of the need for and the extend of a rate rise.
3. Show that the **impact on affected ratepayers** is reasonable
4. Exhibit, approve and adopt the relevant **IP&R documents**.
5. Explain and quantify the **productivity improvements and cost containment** strategies in its IP&R documents and/or application.
6. Addressed any other matter that IPART considers relevant.

Council has already exhibited its IP&R documents under criterion three and adopted the LTFP with a proposed SRV option over two years. Council proposes to exhibit the current LTFP as part of the SRV community engagement process.

To meet criterion two, Council would only need to undertake engagement at the “inform” level, but a “consult” level would further demonstrate Council’s ability to meet criteria one and four.

¹ International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Australasia, 2018. *IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation*. Retrieved from: https://iap2.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/2018_IAP2_Spectrum.pdf.

As a result, this community engagement plan is drafted to meet both the **inform** and **consult** levels of engagement. This means that Council will provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternative, and preferred solution and to obtain the public’s feedback on analysis and alternatives. Council will keep the public informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision made by Council.

2.3 Engagement mechanisms

Given the complexity of the project and proposed level of engagement, the following mechanisms for community engagement are proposed:

- local newspaper notices, radio advertisements, and media statements
- other printed communication material (e.g. physical newsletter)
- online submissions
- information forums - mostly face to face
- social media.

This community engagement will operate in two phases:

1. **inform**: to raise awareness and inform all stakeholder groups of the options being considered
2. **consult**: to seek considered community feedback on these options to inform the Council in their final deliberations on a potential SRV application.

It will also seek to include both push and pull engagement mechanisms in each phase:

- push mechanisms will actively get information from the Council into the public, for example – media releases, newspaper notices, online submissions.
- pull mechanisms will provide places and resources that members of the public can seek out to further inform themselves or provide feedback, for example – website, events.

The proposed mechanisms to be used for this engagement are outlined in the table below.

Table 2 Engagement mechanisms

Mechanism	Phase of consultation	Push or pull mechanism	Reach (stakeholder groups)
Media releases	Inform	Push	All
Newspaper notices	Inform	Push	All
Conventional mail out	Inform	Push	Can be targeted for different groups
Media interviews	Inform	Push (where requested by local media)	All
Online engagement platform	Inform and consult	Pull	All

Mechanism	Phase of consultation	Push or pull mechanism	Reach (stakeholder groups)
Reference materials for Council call centre and customer service teams	Inform	Pull	All
Face-to-face and online forums	Consult	Push	All
Online submission	Consult	Pull	All
Pop up information stalls at Goulburn Square, Villages, and Council Chambers	Consult	Pull	All
Social media	Inform	Push	All

These external community engagement mechanisms will be coupled with internal communications to inform all staff about the proposed SRV options and process and provide them with information to direct questions from members of the public that may arise in their day-to-day interactions. This will include:

- all staff meeting
- information for frontline staff
- email updates to all staff

2.4 Roles and responsibilities

The roles of councillors, Council officers and Morrison Low in the engagement process are defined in the table below.

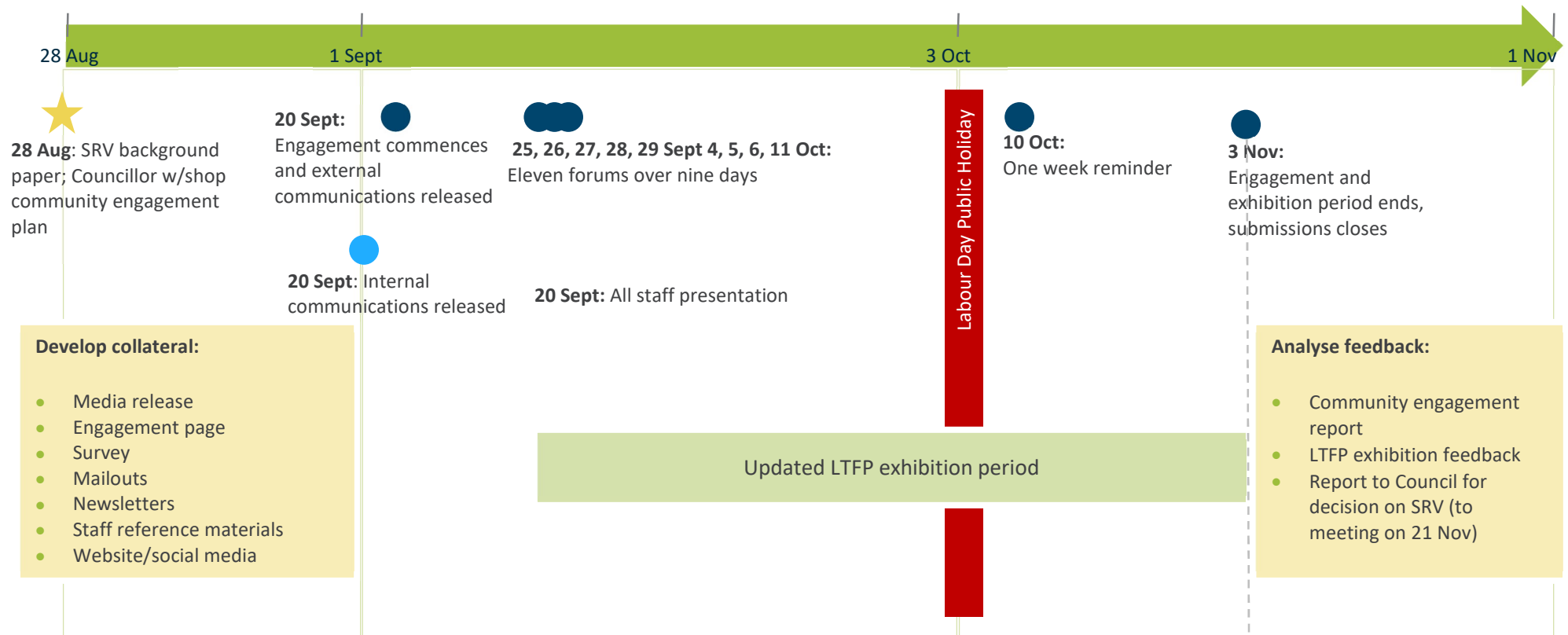
Table 3 Roles and responsibilities

Role	Responsibility
Morrison Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop SRV background paper Support the project management of the community engagement process Support with the preparation report on community engagement outcomes
Council's communications and engagement team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop material for the various written mechanisms Publish and release materials in line with this community engagement plan, including internal communications Coordinate focus group meetings Capture and record community feedback Monitor and review community engagement outcomes, recommend adjustments to the plan as required
The executive and management team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brief staff on SRV options, process, and community engagement activities Project management of the community engagement process Prepare report on community engagement outcomes
Goulburn Mulwaree Councillors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review community engagement plan Participate in media interviews and public forums, where required
The Chief Executive Officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Endorse community engagement plan, approve any adjustments to community engagement process as required Participate in media interviews and public forums, where required

2.5 Timeline

The high-level timeline, with key milestones, is mapped out in the figure on the following page. Further detail on tasks and dependencies is provided in the supporting action plan.

Figure 2 Community engagement timeline



3 Action plan

Table 4 Action plan

Ref	Action	Responsible	By when
1.	Community consultation on an SRV adopted in the Delivery Program.	Council	20 September through to 3 November 2023
2.	Prepare and finalise SRV content/background paper.	Morrison Low	12 September 2023
3.	Release general communication on the Council's decision to proceed to consultation on the SRV and councillor briefing session.	GM/Director	20 September 2023
4.	Draft copy for website(s), newsletters, e-mails, social media, briefing packs, FAQs and physical collateral. Exhibit LTFP document.	Communications team	20 September 2023
5.	Develop online submission form for council website	Communications team with assistance from Morrison Low	20 September 2023
6.	Develop reference material for call centre and customer service staff.	Communications team	20 September 2023
7.	Establish engagement webpage.	Engagement team	20 September 2023
8.	Schedule eleven public forums (over nine days) – Towns and village sessions.	Engagement team	20 September 2023
9.	Approve all content for community engagement.	CEO/Director	20 September 2023
10.	Brief staff on SRV process.	CEO/Director	20 September 2023
11.	Release internal communications via staff news.	Communications team	20 September 2023

Ref	Action	Responsible	By when
12.	Brief call centre and frontline staff (providing reference materials).	Communications team	20 September 2023
13.	Engagement webpage available to the public.	Communications team	20 September 2023
14.	Release media statement.	Communications team	20 September 2023
15.	Publish community newsletters, and newspaper notices with SRV details.	Communications team	20 September 2023
16.	Schedule and manage any media interviews requests.	Communications team	20 September 2023 through to 19 November 2023
17.	Facilitate forums.	Council/CEO/Directors	25 September 2023 through to 11 October 2023
18.	Close engagement, exhibition of updated LTFP and survey and gather all community feedback.	Communications team	3 November 2023
19.	Analyse submission results and draft community engagement report.	Morrison Low	9 November 2023

3.1 Measures of success

A final community engagement report will be produced to document the outcomes of the engagement process, and also to clarify the extent to which the community engagement activities reached all relevant stakeholder groups. Measures to understand the level of reach and participation in the engagement process will include:

- attendance at forums
- SRV related inquiries through customer service
- number of submissions on the SRV proposal
- number of page 'clicks' to the engagement site.

4 Key messages

The key messages for the community should clearly communicate what is not negotiable and what aspects are open for community feedback to inform the decision-making process.

Non-negotiables include:

- the legislative requirement for the Council to employ sound financial management principals
- the current core deficits in the Council's base case scenario need to be addressed, targeting small surpluses over time to ensure the ongoing financial sustainability of the Council.
- We have already implemented a range of efficiency and productivity improvements to create operational savings, however an increase to our rate income is an option we must look at if we want to continue to deliver the services and projects our community has told us they want and need.

Community feedback is sought to understand:

- the level of special rate variation required to ensure financial sustainability.

In order to support these key messages and the development of collateral for the community engagement activities, a background paper will be developed on the SRV, outlining the need for and analysis of the financial impact.

In addition to this background paper, key messages in any community communications and collateral will include:

- how community members can seek further information or have their questions answered
- how community members can provide their feedback on the SRV increases proposed
- what to expect after the community engagement activity is completed, including IPART's public submission and assessment process.

4.1 Frequently asked questions

A set of frequently asked questions (FAQs) and their responses will be developed for this engagement process. While every effort is made to ensure that this is a complete list of FAQs at the commencement, these questions will be regularly reviewed and updated throughout the engagement process.

The below is a starting list of the questions we expect to develop for the FAQs:

- How does Council work out what rates to charge each resident?
- How will the 2023 general revaluation impact my rates?
- What is a base rate/minimum rate?
- What is an ad-valorem?
- How will the proposed special rate variation impact my rates?
- Why do we need an increase to our rates?
- What is the alternative to the proposed rates increase?
- What action has Council taken to address its financial situation?
- Can't you get more funding from other levels of government to help pay for things?
- What is the annual operational budget for the Goulburn Mulwaree Council?
- Who is IPART and what do they do?

Should a common issue be highlighted during the engagement process it could be added to the FAQ's list.

5 Monitoring and risk

5.1 Monitoring

During the consultation process, the level of engagement will be monitored by Morrison Low and the Council’s communications and engagement team.

Any proposed adjustments to the plan will be approved by the Chief Executive Officer before implementation.

5.2 Risk assessment

The table below documents the key risks associated with this community engagement. The risk ratings are assessments of the residual risk after the documented risk responses are implemented.

Table 5 Risk assessment

Risk	Risk response	Residual likelihood	Residual consequence	Residual risk rating
Engagement doesn’t meet IPART assessment criteria.	Engagement plan and activities analyse and integrate requirement to meet criteria.	Low	Medium	Low
Impact on ratepayers of raising rates at a time of increasing inflation and cost of living pressures.	Clearly quantifying the impact of the SRV on average rates across all categories. Outlining the measures taken to find efficiencies and cost savings within council operations before considering the SRV.	Medium	Medium	Medium
Timing of rates increase close to next local government election.	Key messages on the Council’s obligation for sound financial management principles and need to apply for the SRV.	Medium	Medium	Medium