

Willoughby City Council

Plan for community engagement on Willoughby City Council financial sustainability options

August 2023

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Executive summary

This plan has been prepared on the expectation that Willoughby City Council will be resolving, on 28 August 2023, to commence community engagement on three financial sustainability options.

This plan has been prepared to outline how the Council will undertake community engagement in relation to this proposal.

The plan has been guided by Willoughby City Council's Community Engagement Strategy, and the Council's Communication Policy, along with relevant NSW Government guidelines for Special Rate Variations (SRVs).

This plan seeks to ensure that any decision that the Council makes, in relation to its financial sustainability, has the benefit of well-informed, broad-based and genuinely inclusive community feedback.

The plan will be implemented over a six-week period, from Monday, 25 September to Friday, 5 November 2023. The first two weeks of the plan will be focussed on awareness-raising, including through:

- Mailout to all ratepayers
- Social media promotion, including through a video
- Hand distribution of flyers to local businesses and passers-by
- Placement of outdoor signs in various town centres
- Media release
- Promotion on home page of the Council's website, and on the Council's Have Your Say portal
- Council newsletters
- A webinar

The final four weeks of the plan will be focussed on engagement (in other words listening) activities, including via:

- An opt-in survey on our Have Your Say portal
- In-person community engagement sessions across the LGA, of which five will be targeted to residents and two to businesses
- In-person events specifically targeted at Mandarin and Cantonese speakers, with translators
- A survey of randomly-selected residents, which will be designed so that the survey recipients reflect broader community demographics

The results of the above activity will be reported to the Council's November meeting.

Matters considered in the preparation of this plan

The following matters were considered in the preparation of this plan.

Office of Local Government guidelines

In 2020, the NSW Office of Local Government produced guidelines for applications for Special Rate Variations (SRVs). These guidelines provide six criteria which will be used by the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal when assessing SRV applications.

Criteria two asks councils to provide “evidence that the community is aware of the need for an extent of a rate rise”.¹ The guidelines go on to state that the “Council’s community engagement strategy for the special variation must demonstrate an appropriate variety of engagement methods to ensure community awareness and input occur...the IPART fact sheet includes guidance to councils on the community awareness and engagement criterion for special variations.”

The guidelines have a heavy emphasis on making the community aware of any SRV proposal and being factually clear when doing this. In addition, the guidelines require councils to consult with the community about an SRV proposal.

Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) fact sheet

In September 2022, IPART published a fact sheet which provides further guidance on how Councils should engage with communities in relation to a proposed SRV.² This fact sheet says Councils should consider undertaking the following activities:

- mail-out to all ratepayers, with a reply-paid survey
- fact sheets
- media releases
- online surveys
- surveys of ratepayers, random and appropriately stratified to capture the population characteristics of the local government area
- public meetings
- listening posts
- resident workshops
- online discussion forums, and
- discussions with particular community groups

It also says that IPART will place ‘particular weight’ on how transparent councils have been with their community when explaining:

- the proposed cumulative SRV rate increases including the rate peg for each major rating category (in both percentage and dollar terms)
- the annual increase in average rates (in both percentage and dollar terms) that will result if the proposed SRV is approved in full (and not just the increase in daily or weekly terms)
- the size and impact on rates where an existing SRV will continue, expire, be renewed or replaced at the end of the current financial year or during the period when the requested SRV will apply

¹ Guidelines for the Preparation of an Application for a Special Rate Variation to General Income, NSW Office of Local Government, page 9

² Community awareness and engagement for special variation and minimum rate increases, IPART 29 September 2022

- the rate levels that would apply without the proposed SRV, also clearly showing the impact of any expiring SRV
- productivity enhancements or cost containment strategies undertaken by the council and potential alternatives to the SRV.

Apart from making communities aware of the SRV, the fact sheet also states that “councils should also show how they considered and responded to issues of concern within their community.”

Willoughby City Council Community Engagement Policy and Strategy

In May 2023, Willoughby City Council adopted a Community Engagement Policy and Strategy.

The Policy says the Council will have regard to the following principles when undertaking community engagement;

1. Community engagement will be easy-to-understand. It will be accessible and available and in a form that facilitates community participation.
2. Community engagement will be inclusive. It will actively seek views that are representative of the community to participate in decisions that affect them.
3. Community engagement will be meaningful. It will provide a platform for community to express their views and their input to be taken into consideration within Council’s decision-making process.
4. Community engagement will be early and ongoing, with the community enabled to participate in Council’s work at key stages during a project’s lifecycle.
5. Community engagement will be visible. Council will seek to go to the community who are affected by or interested in a decision to seek input and feedback.
6. Community engagement will be responsive, with the Council to engage in a systematic, structured and timely manner including being transparent about the feedback it has received and how this feedback has been considered.

It should be noted that the Council has already, in part, met principle 4, by undertaking early engagement on a potential SRV as part of the consultation on the Long-Term Financial Plan in May-June 2023.

The Community Engagement Strategy explains how these principles will be put into action.

It defines a series of mandatory and optional steps which need to be taken for a range of projects, from projects considered to be *Level 1 – High interest or impact LGA wide* through to *Level 4 – Low interest or impact – local only*.³

This engagement is assessed as being *Level 1 – High interest or impact LGA wide*. Below is an assessment of the activities which are mandatory for such projects, and the activities which should usually be undertaken.

Table 1: Activities which are either mandatory or usually undertaken for Level 1 – High interest or impact LGA wide projects under the Willoughby Community Engagement Strategy

<i>Mandatory activities</i>	<i>Activities which are usually undertaken</i>	<i>Activities which are occasionally undertaken</i>
Have Your Say page	Media release	Newspaper advertisement

³ Section page 27, Willoughby Community Engagement Strategy

Inclusion in monthly Have Your Say newsletter	Leaflet / fact sheet	Letters to directly affected stakeholders
Council News newsletter	Map	Social Media paid advertising
Allow people to subscribe to project updates	Have Your Say newsflash	Business or public space inception survey
Publicly-available phone and email contact	Emails to indirectly affected stakeholders	Phone survey
Have Your Say portal page and survey	Customer Service Centre material	Site tour
Engagement plan	Posters and leaflet distribution	Engagement incentive
Engagement outcomes report	Translated explanatory material	Interactive map
Participants invited to address Council meeting	Public Have Your Say stall	Town Hall meeting
Participants informed of final decision	Tactics to engage with hard-to-reach groups	Stakeholder meetings or briefings
	Drop-in session or webinar	
	Stakeholder meetings or briefings	


The Community Engagement Strategy also defines Willoughby's different stakeholder groups for engagement purposes. ⁴ It asks that consideration be made to engaging with these groups, when drawing up an engagement plan.

⁴ Willoughby Community Engagement Strategy, page 16

IAP2 Spectrum

In line with global best practice, Willoughby City Council utilises the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum (IAP2 Spectrum). The Spectrum is a toolkit which can be used by project managers when designing engagement activity, to ensure that the level of engagement and the mediums utilised are in line with the level of community interest, and ability to inform the decision making process.

Table 2: IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum



Participation status	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 the 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 decisions.	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.

As this engagement involves seeking community views on a range of options, and undertaking informed conversations with the community about these options, it is appropriate to set the IAP2 Spectrum level for this project at the Involve level.

Council's Communications Policy

The Council has a Communications Policy ⁵, which states that the Mayor and CEO are the Council's official spokespeople. The CEO can also delegate this role to Directors and Managers.

Plan objective

This plan seeks to ensure that any decision that the Council makes, in relation to its financial sustainability, has the benefit of well-informed, broad-based and genuinely inclusive community feedback.

Key stakeholders

Primary engagement targets

Willoughby City Council has 32,457 rateable properties. The owners of these properties will be required to pay any proposed SRV. As a result, this engagement plan reserves the greatest level of effort to reach and engaging with ratepayers and considers them to be primary engagement targets.

As can be shown from the table below, any rate increase will have a comparatively higher impact on business ratepayers, due to the fact these ratepayers pay a far higher percentage of their land value on rates, compared to residential ratepayers.

As such, special effort will be made to communicate and engage with business ratepayers, along with business tenants who often are responsible for directly payment of Council rates through their lease agreement.

Table 3: Assessable Willoughby properties by rating category

Category	Number of properties	Rate amount paid per \$100 of land value (2023/24) ⁶	Rates yield
Residential	29,428	5.2 cents	\$32m
Chatswood Town Centre businesses	954	65 cents	\$7.44m ⁷
Business in the rest of the LGA	1,951	35 cents	\$12.77m
Chatswood Chase retail centre	1	\$1.97	\$940,000
Chatswood Westfield retail centre	10	\$1.83	\$1.2m
Strata Storage Facility on the Eastern Valley Way at Roseville	113	60 cents	\$100,000
TOTAL	32,457		\$54.45m

This plan also considers IPART to be a primary stakeholder, given it will assess and determine the Council's application.

⁵ Willoughby City Council Communications Policy, August 2014

⁶ Subject to minimum rate

⁷ This excludes Strata Storage Facility at Roseville and Chatswood Chase and Chatswood Westfield.

Secondary engagement targets

In addition, the following stakeholders are considered to be secondary targets for engagement activity, as they are either:

- Indirectly impacted by the proposed change; or
- Have the potential to disseminate information to, and collate feedback from, a wide group of individuals

Substantial effort will be made to reach and engage with these stakeholders, but not to the same extent as ratepayers.

Table 4: Secondary engagement targets

Stakeholder	Why a secondary target
Residential renters	Although residential renters will not receive rates notices, and therefore are less likely to be interested in the issue, their rents may be increased by a small amount to reflect the rate increase
Business organisations	The LGA has three formalised business groups – the Chatswood Chamber of Commerce, Naremburn Chamber of Commerce and Artarmon Village Inc. These organisations are a conduit to reach, and likely to represent, business owners in their area
Other local stakeholders	This will include Progress Associations and other relevant local environment and community groups, who represent local interests.
Local State MPs	As rate rises need to be approved by the NSW Government, it is appropriate that local MPs are briefed on the issue

A table outlining how we intend to reach out to the above primary and secondary stakeholders is outlined at Attachment A.

Accessing non-English speaking ratepayers

As noted above, for high interest / LGA-wide matters such as this engagement activity, the Community Engagement Strategy says the Council will usually seek to engage with 'hard to reach groups' including the use of 'translated material'.

The 2021 Census results show that 6.8 per cent of Willoughby's population, or 5,166 residents, do not speak English well, or at all, which is a higher percentage than the Sydney average. While precise figures are not available, it can be reasonably assumed that this same percentage can be applied to property ownership in the LGA. As such, it is important that any engagement effort considers the need to target non-English speakers.

Across the LGA, some 65 languages are spoken at home. For the purposes of this plan, it is proposed to concentrate engagement effort on the four most common languages spoken at home, which are Mandarin, Cantonese, Japanese and Korean.

Table 5: Percentage and number of Willoughby residents who speak a language other than English at home

Language	Number	Percentage of Willoughby population
Mandarin	9,751	12.9%
Cantonese	5,863	7.8%
Japanese	1,789	2.4%
Korean	1,755	2.3%

Hindi	1,071	1.4%
Armenian	767	1.0%

It should be noted that Mandarin speakers will be assisted via Mandarin-speaking translators and written information in Simplified Chinese, while Cantonese speakers will be targeted via Cantonese translators and written information in Traditional Chinese.

A summary of engagement activities to reach non-English speakers is explained on page 13.

Engagement timing

Below are the proposed key steps in relation to engagement activity.

It is intended that engagement activity is concentrated in the six weeks between 25 September and 5 November 2023, with the first two weeks of the engagement period largely set aside to communicate the concept and to invite community members to register to attend events.

Figure 1: Proposed engagement steps



Proposed promotional activity

A range of promotional activities are proposed, under the over-arching message of ‘Securing Willoughby’s Future: have your say’.

Media

A media release will be issued to local media and published on the Council’s home page.

Social media

Council’s existing Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter accounts will be used to promote engagement activity. Some posts will be boosted through advertising.

A 2-3 minute long video, explaining the financial sustainability options, will be distributed via social media and also be shown in the video screen on the Customer Service Centre.

Mailout

There will be a mailout to all ratepayers, allowing ratepayers to access a brochure which will explain:

- Council’s recent and projected financial issues, which have led to this process
- Details about each of the financial sustainability options.
- Information about the engagement process

Outdoor signs

Large and small pavement signs will be placed in various town centres. The proposed location of the signs is at Attachment B.

The electronic sign in the Customer Service Centre foyer will also promote the engagement project.

Enewsletters

The engagement project will be promoted to subscribers of Council's suite of newsletters.

Brochure and flyer distribution

Brochures and flyers will be available for the community to pick up at the Council Customer Service Centre, Dougherty Centre, Chatswood Library and a range of other Council venues.

The flyers will also be hand delivered to local business occupants and, if time permits, to passers-by, at local town centres (including Chatswood, Castle Cove, Naremburn, Willoughby, Artarmon, Northbridge and Castlecrag).

Some prominent and community-minded businesses (ie: chemists and coffee shops), will also be asked if they would be able to distribute flyers to their customers.

Emails

Direct emails will be sent to a range of local stakeholders, including Progress Associations, Chambers of Commerce, multicultural community leaders, local faith groups and volunteers.

Personalised letters

Personalised letters will be sent to representatives of Chatswood Chase and Chatswood Westfield, with an offer extended for Council staff to meet with these representatives. Such an approach is appropriate, given these two organisations paid proportionately high rates amounts.

Similar personalised letters, and invitations to meet, will be sent to State MPs.

Newspaper advertising

This project will be prominently included in the Council's regular full-page advertisement in local publications.

Website

This project will be publicised on the home page of the Council's main website, via a:

- Banner at the top of the home page
- Feature panel at the bottom of the home page (replacing the existing feature panel on the Perception Survey)

A new hub will also be created on the Council's Have Your Say portal (see further below).

Proposed engagement activity

Have Your Say hub

A new hub with multiple pages will be created on our Have Your Say site, where community members will be able to learn more about the financial sustainability options, and related engagement activities.

Specific features of the Have Your Say portal will include:

- Frequently asked questions
- Survey
- Online rates calculator
- Pages in Traditional Chinese, Simplified Chinese, Korean and Japanese
- Ability for people to view a statement about how the Council has recently found, and will continue to find, savings and alternative revenue sources.

Submissions and comments process

On the Have Your Say site, visitors will be asked to fill out an online survey.

This survey will be developed by an independent market research company with expertise in SRV applications, and will align with the questions in the randomly-selected survey (explained further below).

Visitors will also be able to upload a submission.

Have Your Say portal email and password registration will be required to fill out the survey, or upload a submission, to ensure multiple voting does not take place.

Visitors will also be invited to send a letter via the post, to cater for people who may be less comfortable in using technology.

Email comments will not be encouraged, due to the difficulty of managing, verifying and collating these emails. However, unsolicited email comments will be accepted.

Opt-in community engagement sessions

It is proposed to hold nine in-person community engagement sessions.

Five of these sessions will be targeted at residents (at Chatswood, Naremburn, Castle Cove, Artarmon and Willoughby) while one will be targeted at Chatswood businesses and one will be targeted at businesses in the rest of the LGA.

Two sessions will also be held, with a translator, for Mandarin and Cantonese speakers.

At these sessions, the Council will present information on the financial sustainability options and participants will have the opportunity to ask questions and make comments. These sessions will be independently facilitated.

In addition, an online only webinar will be held early in the engagement process. This will be recorded and made available on the Have Your Say website as an education resource.

An indicative schedule of events and activities is available at Attachment C.

Randomly-selected community survey

A randomly-selected survey of around 400 residents will also be undertaken, to ensure we receive feedback from a sample of people who represent our broader demographics, and not just people who self-select to provide feedback.

As part of this survey, residents will also be asked if they are local business owners or occupiers, so we capture feedback from this cohort.

Stakeholder roundtable

Local stakeholders, including Progress Associations and Chambers of Commerce, will be invited to a roundtable to discuss the project.

Activity to reach non-English speakers

The following activities are proposed to reach and engage with non-English speakers:

- Providing translated information on one of the brochure pages in Traditional and Simplified Chinese, Japanese and Korean
- Establishing Have Your Say pages in Traditional and Simplified Chinese, Japanese and Korean, and (if funds are available) making fully translated versions of the brochure available on the above pages
- Activating a Google translate function for all other Have Your Say pages, including the survey page, to allow any person to translate the page from English to any other language
- Setting up two translated community information sessions, one in Mandarin and another in Cantonese.
- Sending Council's media release to non-English speaking media outlets
- Sending emails to local multicultural community leaders, local faith groups and volunteers.

Consideration had been given to setting up Council accounts on social media platforms used by Willoughby's Asian language-speaking community (such as WeChat). However, this wasn't further considered, as the Council would only have few followers at the time of engagement, and because this would need to be further considered as part of the Council's social media strategy.

Spokespeople

Under the Council's Communication Policy, the Mayor and CEO are the Council's spokespeople. The CEO can delegate spokespeople roles to senior staff.

The Mayor will be the primary spokesperson for this project. Below is a proposed breakdown of spokesperson duties:

Table 6: Proposed spokespeople and their duties

	Mayor	CEO	Senior staff ⁸
Sign-off on consultation letter to community members	X		
Narrates video	X		
Quoted in media release	X		
Media interviews and responses	X		
Social media posts	X		
Presenting at Council and other events		X	X
Meeting key stakeholders	X	X	X
Referenced in Mayor's column in	X		

⁸ Includes Director, Customer and Corporate, Chief Financial Officer and Project Manager

regular advertisement			
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In addition, talking points and frequently asked questions will be supplied for Councillors to use, if they choose to do so.

Attachment A – How the Council will seek to make stakeholders aware of this engagement

Table 7: Proposed awareness-raising tactics for each stakeholder group

Stakeholder	Personally addressed letter	Flyer distribution	Outdoor signs	Media / Social media / Video / Advertising / Council newsletters	Direct email	Invitation to meeting or roundtable	Invitation to community engagement event
Residential ratepayer	X	X	X	X			X
Business ratepayer (excluding Chatswood Chase and Westfield)	X	X	X	X			X
Chatswood Chase and Westfield	X		X	X		X	
Residential renters		X	X	X			X
Business renters		X	X	X			X
Local stakeholder groups			X	X	X	X	
State MPs	X					X	

Attachment B – Proposed outdoor sign approach

Below is an analysis of the proposed approach to promoting financial sustainability options in outdoor areas in each of the LGA's major centres. These locations may be changed in response to further outdoor inspections.

Table 8: Proposed outdoor sign location

Centre	Approach
Chatswood	Large pavement stickers at north and south entrance to Chatswood Mall, and two in Victoria Avenue Two outdoor A-frame signs in Chatswood Mall
Chatswood West	Small pavement sticker outside library entrance Sign in library noticeboard
Northbridge	Large pavement stickers outside entrance to Northbridge Plaza and in Bellambi St Square Four other small pavement stickers Sign in library noticeboard
Artarmon	Large pavement stickers at either end of Wilkes Avenue road closure Four other small pavement stickers Sign in community noticeboard
Castlecrag	Large pavement sticker outside Quadrangle shopping centre Two other small pavement stickers Sign in community noticeboard
Castle Cove	Two small pavement stickers Sign in community noticeboard Sign in library noticeboard
North Willoughby	Small pavement stickers at each corner at intersection of Penshurst St and Victoria Avenue
Naremburn	Four small pavement stickers around town centre Sign in community noticeboard Sign in library noticeboard
St Leonards	Large pavement stickers outside Sydney Trains station entrance in Herbert St and Pacific Highway Two other small pavement stickers
Willoughby South	Four small pavement stickers near the corner of Frenchs Rd and Willoughby Rd

Attachment C – Indicative calendar of events

Community engagement events are proposed at the following times and locations. All events are proposed to run from 7pm to 8:30pm.

Table 9: Proposed location and time of engagement events

Event	Audience	Location	Date
Webinar	All	N/A	Tuesday, 10 October
In-person engagement event (translated)	Cantonese speaking community members	Chatswood Council Chambers	Tuesday, 17 October
In-person engagement event	Residential ratepayers and renters	Willoughby Uniting Church	Wednesday, 18 October
In-person engagement event	Residential ratepayers and renters	Artarmon WLC Community Hall	Thursday, 19 October
In-person engagement event	Business ratepayers and renters from outside Chatswood town centre	Willoughby Park Centre (Chowne Hall)	Tuesday, 24 October
In-person engagement event	Business ratepayers and renters from Chatswood town centre	Chatswood Council Chambers	Wednesday, 25 October
In-person engagement event (translated)	Mandarin speaking community members	Chatswood Council Chambers	Thursday, 26 October
In-person engagement event (may also be a webinar)	Residential ratepayers and renters	Chatswood Council Chambers	Tuesday, 31 October
In-person engagement event	Residential ratepayers and renters	Naremburn Community Centre	Wednesday, 1 November
In-person engagement event	Residential ratepayers and renters	Castle Cove Community Learning Centre	Thursday, 2 November

These events are shown on the calendar below:

September 2023

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
27	28 Council meeting	29	30	31	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25 Engagement commences	26	27	28	29	30

October / November 2023

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10 Webinar	11	12	13	14
15	16	17 Cantonese speaking event at Chatswood	18 Event for residents at Willoughby	19 Event for residents at Artarmon	20	21
22	23	24 Rest of LGA business event at Willoughby	25 Event for Chatswood businesses at Chatswood	26 Mandarin-speaking event at Chatswood	27	28
29	30	31 Event for residents at Chatswood	1 Event for residents at Naremburn	2 Event for residents at Castle Cove	3	4
5 Engagement ends	6	7	8	9	10	11

