



Essential Services Commission - Advice from Independent Engagement Expert

Queenscliff

19 June 2017

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

Outlined below is my response to their original application and my additional comments when supplementary information was provided later in the process.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kathy Jones', is centered within a light gray rectangular box with a subtle grid pattern.

Kathy Jones
Executive Chair





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

The Borough of Queenscliff undertook its engagement program on the rates capping issue after it made its submission to the ESC for a higher cap. However, the justification for this is valid – it was part of a continuum of engagement which included consultation for council’s 2017/2021 plan and the 2017/2018 Implementation plan and budget. The timing was staggered to better use existing resources. Council has presented an impressive Community Engagement Policy which has been cited as the framework for its approach to engagement on this issue. Its existence validates council’s approach to engagement around the higher rate cap and the coming year’s budget. Council developed a very thorough public information bulletin. **Does the engagement program contain clear accessible and comprehensive information and follow a timely process to engender feedback from the community? Does it satisfactorily detail the following? What council did to engage with their ratepayers and communities, what information was provided during the engagement process, how this information was presented and how feedback was gathered and what this feedback was.**

When viewed holistically, council’s engagement program for the past 6 months has been extensive and well targeted at different demographics relevant to the area and certainly in keeping with its Engagement Policy.

50% non-resident ratepayers group by holding public meetings in Melbourne. They have included non-ratepayer adjacent communities in their consultation activities as they are ‘communities of interest’.

The Community Summit and concurrent Children’s Summit concepts are impressive. A more detailed outcomes report specifically on these events would be useful evidence of whether community capacity around understanding budgets and trade-offs is being built using such an excellent representative sample. Council has submitted appropriate evidence of information shared to show how it was planning to respond to the community’s needs. The Community Information Bulletin is thorough and well prepared. The approach used is in keeping with council’s engagement policy.

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

50% of rateable properties are owned by non-resident ratepayers. This is a challenging demographic for the council’s engagement program. The engagement program for the specific rate capping issue was only undertaken after the council resolution and less than 6 weeks was allowed for the process. Council has responded well to these challenges by showing how their community engagement is ongoing as well as issue based. They have used the Coastal Management Plan as a case study of their achievements in working with the community to identify sustainable solutions for the area.

Related issues in value and efficiency

One of the issues raised by the community is the cost of engagement. The ongoing program approach to engagement that the council uses is a good way to ensure there is value for money.



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

The agenda for the public information sessions does not show a section specifically on trade-offs. That being said, the public information bulletin produced is very clear on this and the discussion notes certainly refer to this. More broadly, the application details a number of case studies which show how engagement has helped council to develop policies and practices by assessing differing community views. The case studies also detail how council has targeted different demographic and geographic target groups in their engagement programs.

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

and/or service provision and how council maintains ongoing communication with its community.

The report on the public information sessions certainly shows that a sophisticated discussion took place around the allocation of the additional funds raised by a higher cap, and council is to be commended for its focus on ensuring that both local and non-resident ratepayers contributed to the discussion. The application does not specifically explain how unmet expectations of ratepayers will be managed. Council, however, does note that it will continue the discussions through the 2017/2018 budget engagement process. Council's Engagement Policy could be improved with a focus on evaluation. It could then be used to measure and to manage the outcomes of the rate capping and budget engagement processes.

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

In their application council cites the results of the 2016 Community satisfaction survey showing dissatisfaction with maintenance levels as evidence of the community wanting more money allocated to this issue. This evidence does not show that the ratepayers either understand or accept that a higher rate cap is the best way forward.

The vast majority of ratepayers involved in the targeted higher rate cap engagement (both permanent and non-resident) are opposed to the increase. In its analysis of the survey results council has noted that ratepayers were against the higher cap on principle and did not generally understand or engage with the complexity of the issue. This is a typical result from a survey. Experience has shown that the complexity of the issue is best dealt with through a face to face discussion.



The report on the engagement specifically for the higher rate cap provides an excellent analysis of issues raised and clarified at the face to face meetings, though the numbers of attendees are low. Hopefully, these results will be shared with the ratepayers and in particular those who attended the forums.

How were these views taken into account by council in making their decision?

There is no evidence for this due to the fact that the decision to apply for the cap was made before the specific engagement process. That being said, council sought community input before it flagged its decision to the ESC that it wished to make an application. This was an important step in the process and should be acknowledged.



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