



Essential Services Commission - Advice from Independent Engagement Expert

West Wimmera

7 July 2017

Thank you for the opportunity to review the submission from West Wimmera 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.



Kathy Jones
Executive Chair





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

Council is seeking a 'cash injection' to ensure that services can be provided and assets maintained. Additional information about their engagement activities was provided to the ESC as a result of the initial analysis of their application.

Specifically, council has now provided a copy of its excellent engagement policy and detail on the forums held to discuss the higher cap with the community. It has also now provided written commentary to the commission on the outcomes of the forums. This additional information has certainly added to the value of the application but there is still little evidence of two way interaction in the sense that there is no evidence of reporting back to the community on the outcomes of the forums. Council has noted that feedback is encouraged as an ongoing process but it would be useful to understand what the actual outcome and the scale of that feedback is, and how the feedback is reported to the community.

Related issues in Trade-offs and alternative funding

Council has provided additional information about two community forums which includes the Powerpoint presentation for the forums. This information is a good analysis of council's budget constraints and the impacts of rates on the budget and on individual ratepayers. It clearly articulates what the higher cap will mean for individual ratepayers and what the alternative solutions to a higher cap could be.

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.

There is no evidence that an engagement program for this particular issue has been created. An assumption can be made that the plan followed the principles of the Engagement Policy but there is no specific evidence for this.

There is, nevertheless, information provided about the two forums held specifically on the rate cap increase issue. Additional detail has been provided on these forums but there is no evidence around who attended, and how the discussions were reported back to the participants and the community. That being said, council has described a number of engagement events that they regularly undertake which provide a useful dialogue with the community including local dinners and involvement in the Your Council surveys.

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

Council has provided a copy of its very thorough Community Engagement Policy. It has also noted the standard tools it is using for engaging with the community around the 2017/2018 budget. In its additional information, council has related the content of the discussions at the forums back to findings from other engagement activities such as the Customer Satisfaction Survey and its regular community council meetings.



Council has noted it is limited in the scale of the engagement programs it can undertake because of its size and resource constraints.

That being said there are good descriptions of the reasons for the sorts of tools generally used by the council including the face to face attendance at meetings and dinners. It would be useful to know how the outcomes of these face to face meetings are managed and in particular how they lead to influencing council decision making.

Related issues in value and efficiency

Please see above.

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.

Council has noted that from their experience it is best not to mince their forum style meetings, as it limits free flowing discussion. But it would nevertheless be useful and helpful to report the outcomes to the community in order to help manage people's expectations – particularly those who attended the forums and opposed the higher cap.

Information about priorities and impact is certainly contained in the application and in the presentation to the forums. However there is no evidence that that these issues were discussed more broadly with the community – beyond those who attended the forums.

It would be useful to also understand the demographics of the participants in the forums as against the general demographics of the community.

Similarly, this could be shown in relation to the dinners/ community group meetings and the community survey. Whilst web based engagement has been discounted, council is beginning to use Facebook and the interactions around its use are increasing.

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.

There is no actual data around this issue. Council has explained how it engages on its general budget cycles which shows how council decision making is reflective of rate payer understanding.

Council has said that participants didn't want to lose their services but the ratepayers on fixed incomes didn't want to pay higher rates. Council has not specifically shown how this can be managed as a possible public issue, particularly as the 3.5% requested increase is a compromise.



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

In the first tranche of additional information submitted, council notes it was “satisfied that the majority of our community members who attended the sessions left supporting the application for an increased rate increase after exploring alternatives and have clearly indicated that they do not accept a reduction in service levels.”

There is no formal record or summary of the ratepayers views submitted with the application, neither has a breakdown of people attending the forums been submitted, though later clarification has provided detail on the general demographics of the council and the demographics of those attending the sessions.

The additional information and analysis is anecdotal and there is no evidence of it having been distributed to the community.

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

Council has noted in its analysis of the forums that the discussions had a direct impact on the vote of four of five councillors because of the discussions around trade-offs. This is an important outcome but it would be useful to report this back to the community in some way.

Comments about gaps in contents.

See above regarding the lack of evidence of actual feedback to the community on the outcomes of the forums. Would be useful for council to show how it undertakes engagement more generally in the budget cycle process – particularly around previous outcomes of that engagement.

Additional advice provided as part of further ESC and Council Consultation

Thank council for the additional clarifications.

The issue is that, the council is taking the trade-off decisions based on their understanding of the requirements of their community or at least those engaged with the various engagement programs they have undertaken around budget priorities. The compromise of the 3.5% is very important concept for people to understand as it will mean some ratepayers will be disappointed that not all assets/services can be maintained and others will focus on the fact there is an increased cap at all. There is no evidence to show that the explanation of the lower cap is owned, or at least understood by the community.

That being said, the various feedback mechanisms that council is using are very worthwhile. It would be good to have included examples of the actual reasoning around the 3.5% and how it reflects a trade-off between people’s desire for services and asset maintenance and the ability of the ratepayer base to pay.



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