



BELLINGEN
SHIRE COUNCIL

Community Engagement Plan

Special Rate Variation

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Introduction

Bellingen Shire Council's Community Engagement Plan for the application of a Special Variation is based on our commitments to the Community Vision aspirations of:

The Bellingen Shire of 2035 is a community that is informed and engaged with a strong sense of civic leadership. The Council is well governed, future focused and responsible in its service delivery and proactive in representing the needs of our community.

Strategic Directions

- Deliver cost effective solutions and service that meet the needs of our community
- Facilitate inclusive community consultation and stakeholder engagement
- The principles of social justice underpin our activities and decision-making processes

This engagement plan outlines Council's approach to engaging the community for the application of a special variation and has been developed using relevant planning and reporting legislation and the Council's adopted Community Consultation Principles and Engagement toolkit

Planning and reporting legislation

The application for a special variation is guided by the requirements of the Office of Local Government's *Guidelines For The Preparation Of An Application For A Special Variation To General Income*. These guidelines set the criteria against which applications will be assessed and provide information on how and when to apply.

Integrated planning (IP&R) and special variations

The Integrated Planning and Reporting (IP&R) framework provides a mechanism for councils and the community to engage in important discussions about service levels and funding priorities and to plan in partnership for a sustainable future.

The special variation guidelines and IPART's assessment process are based on an expectation that councils will have engaged the community in a discussion about the funding required to deliver community priorities through the IP&R process.

Community Strategic Plan.

Council undertook an extensive engagement exercise to review and update its Community Strategic Plan (Community Vision) in 2021. The new Community Vision 2035

The Bellingen Shire Community Vision 2035 has been prepared with regard to the social justice principles of access, equity, participation, and rights, and addresses social, environmental, economic and governance matters. This Plan sits at the top of Council's planning hierarchy and relates to other plans as shown in the diagram below. This diagram also shows how community input along with monitoring and reporting fit into the process.



Figure 1: Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework

The 10-year Bellinghen Shire Community Vision overarches the Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework. It is reviewed in line with the electoral cycle. The Delivery Program informed by the Vision corresponds to actions with delegated responsibilities within the annual operational plan. It is reported on six monthly to Council.

The themes within the Vision are formed from the community's needs and aspirations and are used throughout key planning and reporting at Council. The five Community Vision themes are:

- Resilient Economy
- Community Wellbeing
- Places for people
- Our Living Environment
- Civic Leadership

Social Justice Principles

- **Equity** – there should be fairness in decision making, prioritising and allocation of resources, particularly for those in need. Everyone should have a fair opportunity to participate in the future of the community. The planning process should take particular care to involve and protect the interests of people in vulnerable circumstances.
- **Access** – all people should have fair access to services, resources, and opportunities to improve their quality of life.
- **Participation** – everyone should have the maximum opportunity to genuinely participate in decisions which affect their lives.
- **Rights** – equal rights should be established and promoted, with opportunities provided for people from diverse linguistic, cultural, and religious backgrounds to participate in community life.

The principles of social justice are demonstrated during the consultation activities associated with the application for special variation. The principles are reflected through:

- A broad range of community members have the opportunity to understand and be informed about the application process and associated outcomes
- targeted consultations ensuring specific members of the community are provided with the opportunity to be heard
- testing the objectives of the application against the possibility that there could be disadvantage
- ensuring accurate and meaningful social research
- ensuring that opportunity is provided through the range of communication options available to become involved

Our Community Engagement Framework

Community engagement is a key priority for our community and for Council and is fundamental to Council's operations. Community engagement plays an important role in making Bellingen Shire a great place for residents and people who work in and visit the area.

It is a two-way process through which the community's aspirations, concerns, needs, and values help inform Council's decision-making process.

The end result is not necessarily about gaining universal support for a project or a decision. It is about fairness, transparency and involving key stakeholders in Council processes, as and when appropriate.

We value our community as a source of local expertise and actively seek community feedback. We ask for and listen to your ideas, feedback, and concerns in order to make informed decisions that are in the best interest of the whole community.

We undertake community consultation:

- where community input can improve a project or enhance decision making
- to help identify community needs
- in response to expressions of community interest
- when Council resolves to consult the community
- when required by law or by agreement with a government agency or statutory body.

Bellingen Shire Council's Community Consultation Principles are implemented through the Community Engagement Framework and associated toolkit, using consultation plans and strategies.

Council's Community Engagement Framework is based on international best practice as endorsed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2).

In developing our consultation plans, assessments are undertaken on:

1. the level of impact; and
2. the level of consultation required to devise consultation strategies.

Levels of impact

Level 1 High Impact – Shire Wide: The proposal will have a real or perceived impact across whole Shire or on a number of different parts of the Shire or on a number of different population groups across the Shire.

Level 2 High Impact - Local: The proposal will have a real or perceived impact on a particular locality or suburb or on a number of different parts of the Shire or on a particular population group.

Level 3 Lower Impact - Shire Wide: Recurrent large-scale programs and activities which impact across the Shire, but which have a low potential for dispute or require relatively minor behaviour changes by residents.

Level 4 Lower Impact - Local: Small change or improvement to service or facility at a local level.

Levels of consultation

Inform: To provide the public with balanced and objective information, to make them aware of and assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, and/or solutions.

Consult: To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives, and/or decisions.

Involve: To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public and private concerns are consistently understood and considered.

Collaborate: To partner with the public in each aspect of decision making including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.

Community Engagement Plan for the application of a special variation

In line with the election cycle for Local Government, the Bellingen Shire Community Vision has been reviewed and a final plan adopted. The plan has been informed by ongoing consultations undertaken by Council since the last review in 2016.

Further, and in response to the requirements under the OLG's guidelines for application for an SV, Council has established an appropriate variety of engagement methods to ensure community awareness and input occur. These methods are outlined in the following engagement plan.

Purpose of the consultation

- To fully inform the community about Council's application for a special rate variation.
- To clearly communicate the full impact of the proposed rate increases to ratepayers.
- To clearly articulate that the SV will result in a permanent increase in the council's total income.
- To clearly communicate what the SV will fund.
- To ensure broad community awareness and input into the SV process.
- To make the community aware of the need for and extent of the rate rise.
- To obtain feedback from the community.
- To engage in a genuine and open dialogue with the community and take on board suggestions and feedback.

Key messages

- Bellingen Shire Council's financial position has been affected by global inflationary pressures such as elevated oil prices and supply chain disruptions.
- Over the 12 months to September 2022, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose by 7.3%, with the Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) now forecasting a December 2022 CPI of 8%.
- The ongoing pandemic, Russian invasion of Ukraine, strained supply chains and rising international inflation all present risks to the global and domestic outlooks.

- As a result of this, the RBA expects inflation to remain high for a number of years.
- In addressing the impact of the inflationary pressures on Council's finances, Council has identified a number of budgetary savings and operational efficiencies facilitated through its Financial Sustainability Strategy and Action Plan.
- A key action within the strategy is the use of SV's to offset the impact of the inflationary pressures facing Council.
- In addressing this action and ensuring ongoing financial sustainability, Council's Long Term Financial Plan has forecast the use of two years of 8% SV's per year (including the rate peg) for 2023/24 and 2024/25 and two years of 6% SV's per year (including the rate peg) for 2025/26 and 2026/27 (compounding to 31.06% over the four-year time period).
- We have undertaken an analysis of council's fuel, electricity, wages, superannuation, emergency services levy and premium categories as a snapshot of the increases which equates to \$1.349M.
- The additional income generated from the 2020/23 rate peg of 2.5% is \$220k and alone cannot adequately address the inflationary pressures on Council's finances.
- The proposed SV will allow Council to continue to maintain services and progress its infrastructure renewal program.

Risks

Risk	Mitigating strategy
Lack of understanding of project	Ensure communication is well written, simple, and effective. Distribute widely using a range of mediums.
Disproportionate responses from interest groups	Ensure that engagement tools provide both a qualitative and quantitative component and that survey tools utilise statistical principles drawing upon random and statistically valid samples.
Lack of support for the SV application	Explain all options clearly to the community so that feedback is well informed.

Impact level

Using Bellingen Shire Council's adopted Community Engagement Framework and toolkit, this project is assessed as having a level 1 high shire wide impact. It is important to understand the level of impact as this influences the extent and nature of the consultation activities.

Level of consultation

The level of participation for this project has been assessed as Consult. This establishes the 'contract' with the community and helps underpin the nature of Council's community engagement activities.

Stakeholder groups

All Bellingen Shire Council residents, ratepayers, landowners, and business owners,

Council reports/resolutions

Ordinary Meeting of Council 23 November 2022

RESOLVED (Cr Tree / Cr Cook)

That Council notify the NSW Independent Regulatory and Pricing Tribunal (IPART) of its intention to lodge an application for a Special Variation (SV) for the 2023-24 to 2026-27 financial years.

For (Mayor Allan, Cr Cook, Cr Brotherton, Cr Glyde, Cr Tree)

Against (Cr Fenton, Cr King)

Motion has been Carried

The Engagement Plan for the application for SV has been prepared in line with the Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework and as required by IPART and the Office of Local Government.

Consultation Activities

Bellingen Shire Council will undertake a range of consultation activities designed to inform and educate the local community about application for special variation, particularly how the proposed rate increase options will impact ratepayer over the next four years.

Ratepayers will be made aware of the consultation via the following means

- Mail out to all residents
- Newspaper advertisements
- Media releases
- Fact sheets
- Community newsletters
- social media campaigns

Importantly, ratepayers will be given the opportunity to have their say on the application for SV process, with Council using a range of tools which are accessible to all residents and regularly used by Council to gather feedback from the community.

- Community drop in forums in Dorrigo, Bellingen, and Urunga
- SV Information Centre via the Have Your Say section of Council's website
- Documentation on public exhibition
- Rates calculator so residents can understand individual impact

Engagement will be undertaken in three phases. Phases one and two will include engagement with the community through the various mediums as outlined above. Phase three will be predominantly about receiving and assessing the information and feedback from phases one and two.

The planned community engagement schedule is as follows:

Engagement Activity	Phase 1 - December 2022	Phase 2 – January 2023	Phase 3 - February 2023
Inform			
Community drop in sessions x 3		x	
Mail out to all residents	x		
Notice/newspaper advertisement	x	x	

Engagement Activity	Phase 1 - December 2022	Phase 2 – January 2023	Phase 3 - February 2023
Media Release/s	x	x	
Website SV information page	x	x	x
Community newsletters	x	x	
Social media promotion	x	x	
Consult			
Bellingh Webpage including survey	x	x	
Community drop in sessions x 3		x	
Invite submissions	x	x	
Social media promotion	x	x	
Public exhibition	x	x	

All submissions will be collected, considered, and reported to Council, and where required, incorporated into the final application to IPART in March 2023

