

Fair Go Rates system

Engagement technical working group

Notes from meeting 9 (5th meeting for 2017) 16 November 2017

Organisation	Name	Organisation	Name
Attendees			
Development Victoria	Mark Ritch	KJA	Kathy Jones
Essential Services Commission	Andrew Chow	Hume City Council	Joel Farrell
Essential Services Commission	Angelina Garces	Mitchell Shire Council	Rosemary Scott
Essential Services Commission	Lisa Horsburgh	Monash City Council	Ross Goeman
Essential Services Commission	Freya McCormick	Victorian Local Governance Association	Bo Li
Latrobe City Council	Edith Heiberg	Wyndham City Council	Binda Gokhale
Local Government Victoria	Faith Chang		
Apologies			
Baw Baw Shire Council	Malcolm Lewis	Melbourne City Council	Georgie Meyer
Essential Services Commission	Michelle Bryne	Municipal Association of Victoria	John Hennessey
Greater Geelong City Council	Laura Potter Erin McHugh	Strathbogie Shire Council	David Woodhams
Knox City Council	Kim Rawlings	Yarriambiack Shire Council	Ray Campling
Manningham City Council	Juanita Haisman		

Purpose of the working group

In 2016 the Essential Services Commission established a local government engagement technical working group. The group is a forum for sharing ideas and expertise in community engagement with the aim of building capacity across the local government sector. The group is a conduit between the sector and the commission and helps the commission to tailor and refine its guidance on the engagement requirements for applications for a higher rate cap.

Purpose of this meeting

This meeting was the final meeting of the engagement technical working group. The purpose was to reflect on the last two years and celebrate the achievements of the working group, and to consider how the commission can best support the sector in 2018 and beyond.

Welcome

Andrew Chow thanked the members of the working group and the independent chair, Kathy Jones, for their work and achievements over the past two years. The group's expertise and advice has been invaluable to the commission in the first years of the Fair Go Rates system, and has helped to ground the work of the commission in the experience of the sector.

Recap of last meeting

The group reviewed the notes from the last meeting on 14 September 2017, and agreed to publish them on the commission's website.

The group noted that the community engagement reference material is being revised and will be published on the commission's website around the end of November/ December, along with the final *Deliberation at scale: Principles and practical ideas for small rural councils* paper.

Community engagement forum

The group reflected on the community engagement forum and made observations, including that:

- there was a shift in attitudes throughout the day, with participants becoming better engaged and participating more as the day progressed
- there was a shift in understanding throughout the day from thinking that a citizens jury is necessary/expected, to understanding that it is really about effective continuous engagement and building community financial capacity
- the forum helped communicate that the community engagement expectations of the Fair Go Rates system are not so different to the general business of a council
- there was a good representation of people who weren't engagement practitioners
- it was great to hear from state agencies and have them in the room, and this also helped get executives from councils there
- informal networking happened throughout the day, but the group sessions really helped to facilitate networking.

The group discussed what may have prevented people from attending the forum, including:

- not being aware of the forum, or not being aware until the last minute
- the misconception that it was only relevant if you are thinking of applying for a higher cap
- being very close to the IAP2 forum.

Although a good mix of council staff attended, there were no councillors. The group noted that it is difficult for councillors to attend during the day, due to their work schedules. Also, the forum may have been perceived as too targeted (on rate cap) to generate councillor interest.

Key lessons from forum

- It's important to target those that are hard to reach, but need support.
- It's important to target all councils, not just those considering applying for higher caps.
- It is not just about communication and engagement people, but other areas of councils too.
- Councillors could be better targeted through a broader, after-hours session (e.g. on financial literacy and the role of engagement).
- Gravitas is important (e.g. having policy makers there).
- The community is an important audience.
- Engagement is also about strategy and social research, not just community development.
- The focus needs to be on principles and outcomes (not tactics).
- Long-term financial sustainability and engagement are not mutually exclusive.
- One size does not fit all is the right approach.

Reflections on the past two years

The working group reflected on a number of topics, including:

- their own development, and how much their understanding of the Fair Go Rates system and the role of community engagement has increased over the past two years. However, this is not the experience of all councils and council staff, and the commission needs to continue actively engaging with the sector
- the issue of councils that should consider applying for higher caps, but are not applying. There are a number of barriers to this, including:
 - negative community and media perceptions, even when applying for a higher cap may be a financially responsible decision
 - councils thinking they can not apply for just one more year (but the cumulative impact of this is significant)
- how the conversation has matured over the past two years
- the challenges of planning engagement on local government issues in a way that aligns with other levels of government, to minimise engagement fatigue or confusion
- the issue of varying approaches and requirements across state government agencies
- whether the commission should shadow councils or do secondments to the local government sector. (The working group supported this in principle, but noted that the commission would need to maintain impartiality. Shadowing/secondments could be possible with councils that aren't looking to apply for a higher cap in the near future)
- that the commission should remain clear on the role of councils versus the role of the commission, and should not set unrealistic community expectations of council engagement. Community needs and preferences on engagement need to be established on a case-by-case basis, and this is the council's role. However, there is a role for the commission to engage with communities at a state-wide level, and provide information on the Fair Go Rates system
- the engagement skills gap in the local government sector. Skilled engagement practitioners are gravitating to citizens juries and infrastructure projects, particularly as engagement is transitioning into a more of a social science discipline
- the challenge of engaging on long-term needs when people are behaviourally biased to focus on short term needs.

Aspirations and recommendations for 2018 and beyond

The group agreed on some aspirations and made a number of recommendations to the commission for 2018 and beyond.

Aspirations

- Convergence around engagement from state government agencies (i.e. the commission, Local Government Victoria, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Victorian Auditor-General's Office) – e.g. common frameworks, shared tools
- Integrated engagement experience for the community (between different levels of government)
- Build capacity in the community by all levels of government
- Improvement in the skills base of the engagement profession
- Build status of engagement in councils
- Shared resources across local government sector

Recommendations

- Stay focused on the idea that no one size fits all when it comes to council community engagement.
- The commission can address the gaps in community understanding through helping to build council capacity.
- Need to keep communicating to those councils who are not considering applying for a higher cap immediately – it's important to communicate the value of building community capacity over time.
- De-politicise rate caps as much as possible. The communication around recognising good performers should include those that have sought a variation (not just those who operated within the minister's cap).
- Provide information for emerging community leaders/councillors, which can be distributed through peak bodies.
- Collaborate with other relevant agencies to review documents and other initiatives as required.
- Group needs to review value of the commission's resources and other outputs going into the future (new Local Government Act will be a trigger to reviewing material).
- Produce case studies (and promote) at right time.
- Consider continuing and expanding the engagement technical working group as a community of practice.
- Consider having commission staff shadow or do secondments to councils.
- Keep focusing on council staff who aren't engagement practitioners.
- Do events specifically targeted to councillors – e.g. on financial literacy and the role of engagement. This could potentially be done with Local Government Victoria.

Actions

Action	Deadline	Responsibility
1 Circulate notes from the final meeting for any feedback from the working group.	ASAP	Essential Services Commission
3 Invite any working group members not present at the final meeting to contribute their reflections or recommendations.	ASAP	Essential Services Commission, working group
2 Publish notes from the final meeting on the website	December	Essential Services Commission