

Hepburn Shire Council higher cap application

Submission received via email

Date submitted: 3 April 2025

Submission written by: James Patrick

I am writing to strongly oppose the proposed rate cap application made by Hepburn Shire Council.

The proposed increase of 10% is significant and will place an unfair burden on local residents, especially at a time when the cost of living is causing many to feel financial strain and cut back on essentials such as food, medicine and energy usage as we head into winter. Council and the ESC must recognise that many of us are already stretched thin, and further financial strain will only exacerbate existing money challenges.

Something I find particularly concerning is the lack of meaningful community engagement on this issue. Council have referenced previous engagement on the issue which has flaws from a best-practice engagement perspective. For example, Hepburn began their "Financial Vision Survey" with the assumption that higher revenue was needed to meet revenue shortfalls and sought residents' views on meeting said shortfall.

Good public participation is grounded in the belief that those affected by decisions have the right to be involved in the decision-making process, and that their contributions will influence the outcomes (International Association for Public Participation, 2018). When assumptions are made without a genuine effort to understand the community's unique needs and interests, it undermines the promise of meaningful involvement and results in poor outcomes. This can be seen in Hepburn 'cherry-picking' elements from their past engagement that purport to indicate support for a rate increase above the cap when there is significant community resentment and concern in Council seeking to increase rates. The line that "Results showed that 61.56% of respondents found a rate rise above the imposed State Government rate cap was acceptable" shows a twisted analysis of results in this particular question when the answer with by far the most support was "No rate variation".

I understand that the ESC allows past community engagement to inform applications for rate increases above the cap. However, the fact that residents were only informed of this proposed rate

increase after the application was submitted is a significant concern. I subscribe to the Hepburn Life monthly email newsletter and the application was not mentioned prior to March 2025. This undermines trust and excludes the community from having a more direct say in concrete decisions that affect us, particularly when engagement processes have issues in the first place as highlighted above. Transparency and consultation should be the foundation of local government actions, but in this case, the process has been anything but open and seemingly driven with a preconceived outcome in mind rather than genuine engagement.

In light of the inadequate community consultation and the burden this significant rate increase would place on households, I urge the ESC to reject the proposed increase and encourage Hepburn Council to better engage with residents meaningfully in order to achieve budgetary savings that are acceptable.

