



CESSNOCK
CITY COUNCIL

CESSNOCK LGA
2025 

COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT SUPPLEMENTARY REPORT

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY



CESSNOCK CITY COUNCIL



SUMMARY

Highlights

Summary

The aim of the communications and engagement plan was to raise awareness in the community about the financial challenges facing Cessnock City Council and to inform the community about a proposed special variation application for 2026/27.



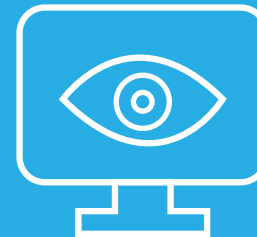
32
Total posts



11,593
webpage
visits



7
public meetings and
10
pop up
listening posts



278,116
Social media
views



21
Local/regional
media stories



1428
Total survey
responses



Two women are seated at a desk in an office, looking at a computer monitor. The woman on the left has long dark hair and is wearing a light blue short-sleeved shirt. The woman on the right has long blonde hair and is wearing a white floral-patterned top. The monitor displays the Cessnock City Council website, which features a blue header with the council's logo and name. The main content area is titled 'Online Customer Requests' and contains a list of links and information. The background shows two framed abstract paintings on the wall and a potted plant on the right. A large blue graphic element is in the top left corner, and a white curved line is in the bottom right corner.

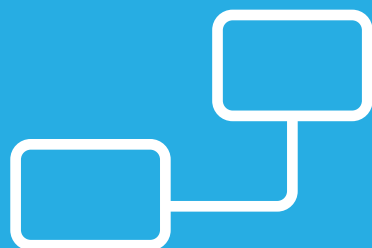
WEBSITE

Highlights

Website

11,593

Total
webpage visits



2

Pages



13

FAQs



21

Videos



10,232

Clicks/downloads



2,399

Use of digital
engagement features

In order to provide easily accessible information to the public, two web pages have been maintained from September 2025 and are updated as new information becomes available.

Website

Two web pages went live on 4 September – one on Council’s main website and another on its engagement site. The pages served unique purposes, with key information mirrored across both and cross linking featured prominently.

Financial Sustainability page – Council website

Between the 4 September – 15 December 2025 the page received **2780** views. Information included key documents including the Cessnock City Council Financial Sustainability Review by the University of Newcastle’s Institute for Regional Futures, a library of **21** videos, the digital fact sheet and survey, a suite of FAQs, Professor Biographies, media release and links to the public exhibition of the draft revised Long Term Financial Plan, and important links to the digital engagement ‘Financial Sustainability Community Consultation Page’ and IPART’s Special Variation website.

Have your say – Together Cessnock

The digital engagement ‘Financial Sustainability Community Consultation Page’ is the digital engagement home for community information and feedback. It supplemented the information and video library on the financial sustainability page with digital engagement tools including a digital version of the survey, key dates, and the ask a question feature. The ‘Financial Sustainability Community Consultation Page’ was placed prominently on the home page of Council’s Have Your Say website.

More information about the Have your Say page can be found in the Engagement section of this report.



Current Projects

Financial Sustainability Community Consultation Page

Join in the discussion around Council's potential Special Variation application

[View Project](#)



Long Term Financial Plan 2026 – 2035

Council has prepared a comprehensive revision of its Long Term Financial Plan

[View Project](#)



In This Section

About Council

Our organisation

How does Council work?

Our region

Local history

Customer Service Charter

Complaints

A history of our Council

Financial sustainability

Financial sustainability

At Cessnock City Council, we deliver a range of quality services and infrastructure that are valued by our community.

To do this, we rely on various funding mechanisms including rates.

For the last five decades, Council rate revenue and certain other council revenues have been regulated in NSW under an arrangement known as 'rate pegging'.

Acting on the advice of the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART), the NSW Government determines the percentage figure by which councils can increase their general rate income each year through its rate-pegging policy.

If councils want to apply for a larger increase they need to make a Special Variation application. IPART then considers the application and makes a determination.

Council has engaged an independent expert, Professor Joseph Drew, and his team of three professors to explore the matters necessary to prepare an application for a special variation and undertake community consultation.

Professor Drew previously prepared a review of our financial sustainability. The report is available to download on this page.



SOCIAL MEDIA

Highlights

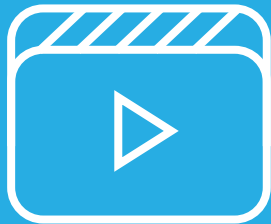
Social media



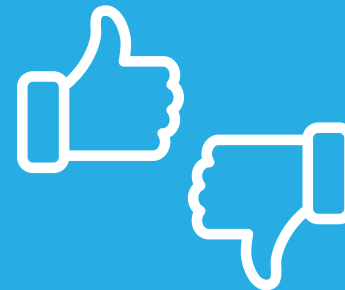
32
Total posts



278,116
Views



8
Reels



517
Reacts



1,140
Comments



145
Shares

Social media was used as a tool to share information to a wide audience and raise awareness in the community about the financial challenges facing Cessnock City Council, and to inform the community about a proposed special variation application for 2026/27.

Social media

Facebook and Youtube

Council's Facebook was utilised as the main social media platform due to this channel having the highest audience following and participation, rate of reach and engagement results. Youtube was used as a secondary platform.

The benefits of Facebook are in enabling community participation, community conversation, peer-mediating, easy post-sharing, and a variety of ways to communicate such as photos, long and short form captions, links and reels. The benefits of Youtube were long form video hosting and embedding directly into the website while also supporting comments and questions.

The results of awareness and engagement are the highest using social media across all other communication methods.



Social media posts and engagement

32 posts since September

DATE	POST DESCRIPTION	TYPE	VIEWS	REACTIONS	COMMENTS	SHARES
05/09/25	Intro video: a potential SV for Cessnock	Post	12,523	23	80	7
11/09/25	SV: what they are and why they are necessary	Post	7,166	4	45	1
16/09/25	Approaching an SV the right way	Post	3,008	4	5	-
19/09/25	Why engage independent experts	Post	2,934	8	7	-
04/10/25	Any questions about financial sustainability?	Post	2,760	-	8	1
15/10/25	What Prof. Drew & team have been working on	Post	2,951	1	-	7
18/10/25	Double feature: staff/management costs at Cessnock and who bears the cost of growth	Post	3,823	8	4	1
27/10/25	Why are we only now hearing this?	Post	7,384	15	17	5
29/10/25	Is this just propaganda?	Post	6,216	12	23	3
31/10/25	Letterboxing underway - physical survey drop-off locations open	Post/ carousel	26,487	46	130	22
05/11/25	Renters and a special variation	Post	7,585	15	23	2
06/11/25	Biased survey?	Post	6,831	14	33	-

DATE	POST DESCRIPTION	TYPE	VIEWS	REACTIONS	COMMENTS	SHARES
07/11/25	Council size and special variations	Post	6,117	8	23	-
09/11/25	Double feature: invitation to find out more at a public meeting and what's your solution?	Post	7,574	1	43	-
12/11/25	Comparing average rates	Post	11,585	19	35	-
13/11/25	Financial sustainability listening posts kick off	Post/ carousel	12,594	18	26	8
17/11/25	What your councillors have been doing	Post	10,598	20	52	2
18/11/25	Public meetings: times, dates and locations	Post	21,731	19	15	43
18/11/25	Context: other councils and SV applications	Post	6,064	7	33	1
19/11/25	SV and a future rates notice	Post	4,510	21	30	1
20/11/25	Council cost controls	Post	11,092	16	51	2
21/11/25	Common questions and feedback #1	Reel	2,806	21	28	-

DATE	POST DESCRIPTION	TYPE	VIEWS	REACTIONS	COMMENTS	SHARES
21/11/25	Come on down to Wollombi public meeting	Reel	3,574	9	11	1
22/11/25	Common questions and feedback #2	Reel	7,275	26	47	3
22/11/25	About to start a public meeting at Kurri Kurri	Reel	19,980	40	108	8
23/11/25	Common questions and feedback #3	Reel	3,749	13	17	6
23/11/25	Kicking off Branxton public meeting in 45 mins	Reel	10,033	23	39	1
24/11/25	About to present to ELT on feedback raised at public meetings so far	Reel	14,938	52	51	4
24/11/25	Invitation to digital public meeting this evening	Reel	13,434	36	87	10
24/11/25	Reminder: public meeting on YouTube council	Post	13,775	10	40	5
06/12/25	Additional public meeting – Laguna	Post	1,000	2	1	–
10/12/25	Updates to LTFP and Financial Hardship Policy	Post	6,019	6	26	1



VIDEO CONTENT

Highlights

Video content

30
Videos



21
YouTube /
website videos



8
Reels



77,446
Total views



1
Digital meeting
webcast



We utilised video content as a tool to assist in the provision of accessible information to keep the community abreast of developments, explain important concepts in an easily digestible way, and respond to community feedback.

Video content

Video content was used in a variety of ways to assist in the provision of accessible information to keep the community informed.

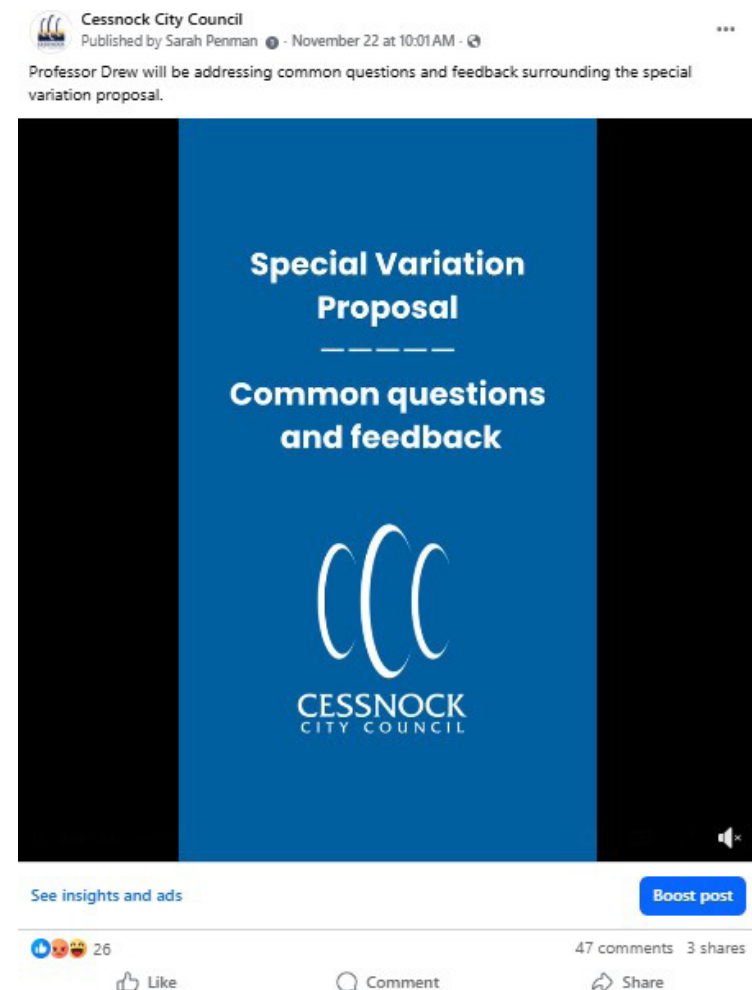
Video content was published using a range of platforms, including; social media, website and YouTube.

Online public meeting

A digital public meeting was webcast live on Youtube and promoted through Council's social media, website and via a QR code/link on the fact sheet. The online session achieved the highest attendance of all public meetings (**329** attendees online and in person) and included a lengthy Q&A session using the live chat feature on the YouTube platform to enable viewers to submit questions and comments.

Short reels

Eight social media reels were published on Council's Facebook page. The reels were used to promote attendance at public meetings and respond to common questions and comments raised by the community.



Independent expert videos

Professor Drew prepared a series of 5-10 minute videos to provide context on our financial sustainability journey, update the community on developments, explain important concepts and respond to community feedback.

The videos were regularly uploaded to Council's Financial Sustainability webpage: www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability



Video 1: Introduction to a potential special variation for Cessnock	+
Video 2: Special Variations - what they are and why they are necessary	+
Video 3: Special Variations - the right way VS the wrong way to approach them	+
Video 4: Special Variations - why engage independent experts?	+

- 21 videos are currently hosted on Council's website to provide awareness and wider context on our financial sustainability journey, receiving 1,336 views and addressing the following subjects:
- Introduction to a potential special variation for Cessnock
 - What are special variations and why are they necessary
 - The right way vs the wrong way to approach a special variation
 - Why engage independent experts
 - Things Professor Drew and his team are working on
 - Who bears the cost of growth?
 - Staff and management cost at Cessnock
 - Why are we only now hearing this?
 - Is this just propaganda
 - Renters and a special variation
 - Biased survey?
 - Council size and special variations
 - Invitation to find out more
 - What's your solution(s) to the financial predicament?
 - Average rates in neighbouring councils
 - What your councillors have been doing
 - Other councils and SV applications
 - What does an SV mean to your future rates notice?
 - Common questions and feedback
 - Professor Kim video
 - Council cost controls



NEWSLETTERS & OTHER OWNED MEDIA

Highlights

Newsletters & other owned media

1

CFO column in
rates newsletter



3

Media release/
mayoral columns

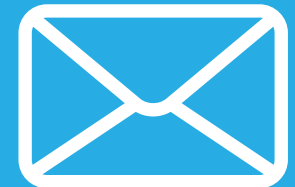


4

E-newsletter
articles



- Letterbox drop to ratepayers, residents and businesses in the LGA
- direct mail to ratepayers outside LGA
- email to mining ratepayers



The letterbox distribution and mailout provided an equitable and visible way to directly reach residents and ratepayers who may not use digital communication methods or consume local and regional news media.

Other owned media

Letterbox distribution and mailouts

Council engaged a private distributor to letterbox **30,000** Special Variation Fact Sheets and Surveys across the LGA.

Council also used Australia Post to post a mail-out to **4681** out of area ratepayers which included the Special Variation Fact Sheet and Survey. An email copy of a Fact Sheet and Survey was also sent to all mining ratepayers.

Council additionally letterboxed **898** dwellings in the Wollombi Valley over the 3 and 4 December 2025 ahead of the additional public meeting to be held in Laguna on Tuesday 9 December 2025.

More information about the letterbox distribution and mailout can be found in the Engagement section of this report.



Newsletters/eNewsletters

E-Newsletters were utilised as a relationship-based audience engagement tool as they are delivered directly to subscribers. This allowed content to be shared with key highlights and direct links to more information enabling community participation at a time and depth that suits them. E-Newsletters also enabled Council to collect measurable data of open rates, click-through rates and monitoring of interest in particular subcategories over time.

The newsletter sent with the July Rates Notice included a Financial Sustainability update from the Chief Financial Officer to continue early awareness raising. As this was the July Rates Notice it was sent to all ratepayers via regular Australia Post mail distribution methods.

Media release/mayoral columns

Council prepared and issued a media release and two mayoral columns. Each were published as a record in the news section of Council's website, and the media release was also published on the financial sustainability page.

NEWSLETTER/E-NEWSLETTERS			
Date	Publication	Headline	Audience
21/07/25	Cessnock City News (rates newsletter)	CFO Update	All Cessnock ratepayers
17/09/25	Cessnock City eNews	Independent expert enlisted to guide financial sustainability	community members/ subscribers
03/11/25	Environment and Waste eNewsletter	Special rate variation information	subscribers with an interest in enironment updates
16/11/15	Advance Greater Cessnock eNews	Have Your Say on Council's Proposed Rate Change	Cessnock business community subscribers
19/11/25	Cessnock City eNews	Public meetings on Special Variation proposal	community members/ subscribers



MEDIA COVERAGE

Highlights

Media coverage

22

Local/regional
media stories



370,100+

Total reach



9

Broadcast



13

Print/online



2

Long form
interviews



**also included in broadcast*

The communications and engagement plan leveraged local and regional media to amplify important messages – focused on key milestones – to raise awareness and inform the community about the financial challenges facing Cessnock City Council and informing the community about a proposed special variation for 2026/27

Local and regional media coverage

As a rural and regional area, the Cessnock community utilise a wide variety of channels to receive their news and community updates. Some of these channels are locally and community-owned. These provide a trusted and place-based news coverage option that feels relevant and speaks to local and familiar subjects and locations for residents. Some residents may rely on local news for information about the Cessnock LGA in particular.

Local channels commonly and predictably share local government news as a main distribution source. All major local and regional news channels shared key information regarding Council's financial sustainability journey through 2025 as documented below.

Media coverage

BROADCAST MEDIA		
Date	Channel	Reach
16 April 2025	ABC Newcastle	14k
17 September 2025	2NUR	1k
21 October 2025	NBN Newcastle	81k
22 October 2025	2NUR	1k
23 October 2025	ABC Newcastle	6.1k
5 November 2025	2NUR	1k
21 November 2025	2CHR	1k
24 November 2025	2NUR	1k
24 November	2CHR	1k

Note: 1k figure is used where audience reach is unavailable or publication is not picked up in media monitoring

PRINT AND DIGITAL MEDIA			
Date	Publication	Headline	Reach
2 July 2025	Newcastle Herald	Cessnock Council to further investigate a potential rate rise for residents	35k
3 July 2025	Newcastle Herald	Independent report calls on council to raise rates	40k
10 July 2025	Newcastle Herald	Councillor opposes external advice on city's financial status	40k
5 September 2025	Newcastle Herald	Economics experts called in to advise on proposed rate rise	44k
9 September 2025	Newcastle Weekly	Independent expert enlisted to guide Cessnock's financial sustainability	6k
20 October 2025	Newcastle Herald	Council calls extraordinary meeting to discuss rate hike	50k
5 November 2025	Newcastle Herald	Cessnock's massive rates rise plan to sort finances	42k
7 November 2025	Branxton Greta Vineyard News	Consultation to begin on possible rate increase	1k
7 November 2025	Branxton Greta Vineyard News	Mayoral column	1k
14 November 2025	Hunter River Times	Mayoral column	1k
25 November 2025	Branxton Greta Vineyard News	Local government rate increase	1k
1 December 2025	Our Own News (Wollombi)	Notice to the Wollombi Valley Community	1k
1 December 2025	Our Own News (Wollombi)	Summary of the recent Cessnock City Council presentation	1k



ENGAGEMENT

Highlights

Engagement



1,428
Total survey
responses

10
Pop up
listening posts



7
Public meetings
(including a
digital session)

577
Attended public
meetings

44
Conversations at
listening posts



13
13 questions through
'Ask a Question' tool



2,399
Use of digital
engagement features

The communications and engagement plan focused on raising awareness and informing the community being the first level of the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. Engagement methods utilised reflected the demographics and geography of the Cessnock LGA.

Engagement

Methods

- Have your say webpage
- Letterbox distribution and mail out
- Fact Sheet
- Digital and hardcopy survey
- Invitation to public meetings flyer
- Ask a question
- Pop ups/listening posts
- Public meetings
- Community-initiated feedback



Have your say – Together Cessnock

The digital engagement 'Financial Sustainability Community Consultation Page' is the digital engagement home for community information and feedback. It will be live throughout the duration of consultation prior to a potential application to IPART, after an application has been submitted and is under review by IPART and in the post-review decision period.

Between the 29 October – 15 December 2025 the page received **8813** views. Information included key project dates, key documents including the Cessnock City Council Financial Sustainability Review by the University of Newcastle's Institute for Regional Futures, the Fact sheet – Proposed Special Variation, and the public exhibition of the draft revised Long Term Financial Plan, as well as a full schedule of pop up and public meeting dates, times and locations, staff who's listening bios, FAQs and important links to Council's Financial Sustainability Website including videos, IPART's Special Variation website, and Council's Youtube page for the Digital Public Meeting Session.

Letterbox distribution and mail out

Council engaged a private distributor to letterbox **30,000** Special Variation Fact Sheets and Surveys across the LGA. The letterbox distributor contracted by Council is an experienced and long-term mail distribution company operating since 1989 and citing multiple other local councils and state services such as Service NSW as a client. The distributor is also a signatory to the Distribution Services Board (DSB) ANZ Code of Practice. The DSB is the self-regulatory body ensuring responsible letterbox distribution standards across Australia and New Zealand. The Code includes a commitment to ensuring that any delivery with which they are associated is consistent with a high standard of performance.

The Fact Sheet and Survey were delivered as one item to each dwelling and business within the Cessnock LGA, calculated by **25,765** total dwellings and **3,480** total businesses (Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics and National Emergency Management Agency). The distribution occurred from Wednesday 29 October – Friday 14 November 2025. A GPS tracking link of all letterboxing teams with map overlay was provided to enable Council to track the coverage across the LGA in real time and can be found in the Engagement annexure in the report below.

Council also used Australia Post to post a mail-out to **4681** out of area ratepayers which included the Special Variation Fact Sheet and Survey. As well as email to send a Fact Sheet and Survey copy to all mining ratepayers.

In response to feedback received regarding potential non-receipt of the Fact Sheet and Survey during the public meeting in Wollombi, Council additionally letterboxed 898 dwellings in the Wollombi Valley over the 3 and 4 December 2025. Councils letterbox handout included a copy of the printed Fact Sheet and Survey same as previous letterbox distribution. The survey return date was also extended and an addendum message provided with an invitation to an additional public meeting to be held in Laguna on Tuesday 9 December 2025.

Fact Sheet

The Fact Sheet: Proposed Special Variation was authored by independent expert, Professor Joseph Drew and heavily informed by Office of Local Government guidelines. The Fact Sheet was four A4 pages with an attached two-page survey. While it was authored independently, the fact sheet was folded to display the Council logo and header, and printed in a matte finish.

The fact sheet included information about the Special Variation

application process, the cumulative impact of the proposed variation including rate peg, what the purpose of the SV would be for, research history to date, hardship policy and upcoming community engagement opportunities. As well as QR code directing the community to easily access a copy of the digital survey.

In addition to being distributed via letterbox, copies of the fact sheet were available and provided to community members at all pop up sessions and public meetings. As well as hard copies available at Council Administration Building, Cessnock City Library, Kurri Kurri Library and the Hunter Valley Visitor Information Centre in Pokolbin

Digital and hardcopy survey

The digital and hardcopy surveys were authored by independent expert Professor Joseph Drew and focused on the criteria from the Office of Local Government guidelines. Copies of hardcopy surveys were available alongside the fact sheet at Council Administration Building, Cessnock City Library, Kurri Kurri Library and the Hunter Valley Visitor Information Centre in Pokolbin. Completed hardcopy surveys were also able to be returned by community at these locations. **1249** surveys were received during the initial mail-out.

Invitation to public meetings flyer

A flyer with the full list of public meetings and what to expect was provided to community attending or walking past pop up stalls. Multiple copies were provided to be distributed via community members to their neighbours or other community groups. Copies were also provided at Council buildings including Council Administration Building, Cessnock City Library, Kurri Kurri Library and the Hunter Valley Visitor Information Centre in Pokolbin next to the hardcopy survey collection box.

Ask a Question tool

An open Ask a Question tool has been available on the Financial Sustainability Community Consultation page via Together Cessnock since launch date on 23 October 2025. To date, the tool has 51 visitors engaged 10 contributors asking 13 questions. Out of 13 questions asked, 12 questions were answered publicly enabling the broader community access to question and answers in real time. One question was withheld due to use of language and personally identifiable information

Questions asked from the community	Answers provided by Council
1. How much is council contemplating raising the rates by. What is the shortfall and why?	<p>Council’s Long Term Financial Plan (LTFP) indicates multiple years of ongoing operating deficits when capital grants and contributions are excluded. As a council, we have been upfront for several years about budgetary challenges we are facing in this local government area. Future funding obligations have been consistently included as a specific risk in every Operational Plan for the past two terms of Council. These budget challenges are largely due to factors such as a rapidly growing population, an ageing and growing asset base, cost shifting by successive state governments, and increases to costs and materials outpacing allowable rate increases capped by the state government. Many of these problems are not unique to our Council, and are faced by numerous other councils.</p> <p>An independent Financial Sustainability Review into our financial health, by the University of Newcastle, confirmed that rising costs and decades of underfunding have placed pressure on Council’s ability to deliver services and maintain infrastructure. The Financial Sustainability Review recommended additional revenue to maintain existing services and fix critical infrastructure gaps. It will be complemented by a suite of other important sustainability measures. We’ll be leveraging the independent expert advice from Professor Drew and his team to inform decision making. A recommended figure will be shared with the community during the upcoming consultation, following completion of research and analysis by Professor Drew’s team.</p>
2. Question withheld due to language and privacy	Not applicable

Questions asked from the community	Answers provided by Council
<p>3. Council workers going on holidays, in council cars on council fuel – seems extravagant don't you think? Other councils in the area only allow their vehicles to be used for work purposes – and they're not jacking up the rates on their residents.</p>	<p>Council manages its fleet with eligible employees through a vehicle contribution agreement, which sets a rate for weekly employee payments to cover fuel consumption for private use. The terms contained in the agreement are regularly reviewed and updated to ensure our fleet management practices are providing value for money. Our approach to managing our fleet is consistent with many other councils.</p> <p>Applications for a 'special variation', which is where councils apply for a larger rate increase, are relatively common and are something that is necessary for nearly all councils across NSW from time to time. In terms of other councils in the area, Maitland, Port Stephens, Upper Hunter and Central Coast have each received a special variation in recent years, and Muswellbrook Shire Council has indicated it too plans to lodge a formal application for a special variation with IPART by 3 February 2026.</p>
<p>4. All of the "City-wide Pop Ups/Listening Posts" operating between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday. How can an individual who works full time participate in this part of the process if there are no sessions outside of business hours?</p> <p>Additionally, all of the Public Meetings are occurring after the survey closes, which seems a little counter productive.</p>	<p>Hi (name withheld), We're sorry to hear that the schedule of pop ups isn't convenient for you. There are a variety of ways to join the discussion on the proposed special variation. The pop ups are one of the ways where you could ask a question, seek clarification, or find information like the factsheet or FAQs, just as you can on this webpage. The idea is to have a variety of tools to provide choice for participation. We have tried to reach a wide area with 10 pop-ups at localities across the LGA as an additional method of engagement with the community.</p> <p>It should also be noted that each of the six public meetings are scheduled outside of business hours and we hope one of these occasions is suitable for you. We also appreciate our LGA has a wide variety of employment types including shift workers, casual and part-time staff to cater for. The survey closes ahead of the public meetings in order to provide time for Professor Drew to review the survey responses so he can address them in his presentation at the public meeting. Thank you for your feedback and for participating in the conversation.</p>

Questions asked from the community	Answers provided by Council
<p>5. What percentage of the council income is made from rates? How will the other streams of income be affected?</p>	<p>Hi there. Thanks for asking us about the percentage of Council income that is made from rates. The breakdown of Council's revenue streams including the percentage of income made from rates in 2023 and 2024 is available on the last page of the Special Variation factsheet here under Figures 1 & 2. The Figures show that in 2023 rates provided 29% of Council revenue and in 2024 rates provided 23% respectively. The other streams of income will be unaffected by the proposed Special Variation.</p> <p>The Special Variation would only apply to the rates portion of income. It does not apply to other charges on your rates notice such as the Domestic Waste Management Services Charge or the Hunter Water Catchment Contribution. In addition, we are proposing to apply any approved permanent SV to the ad valorem component of the rates only (not to the base rate). We will also shortly be posting a video from Professor Drew where he responds to this question.</p> <p>Thank you</p>
<p>6. I tried to submit my completed Proposed Special Variation Survey on line over 30 mins ago. After hitting 'submit' it appears to have gone into an endless loop. Anyone else with this problem, or is it just me?</p> <p>Follow up to question: Hi again, Just letting you know that I completely re-did the survey again, and it submitted ok in about 2 seconds. Computers!</p> <p>Thanks again for your help</p>	<p>Hi (name withheld) Sorry you are experiencing difficulty submitting your survey response. We recommend trying a different web browser. For example if you are currently using Internet Explorer, you might like to try again via Google Chrome or Firefox. Please note the survey will be active until 11.59pm tonight on Monday 17 November if you would prefer to try again later.</p>

Questions asked from the community	Answers provided by Council
<p>7. Has a full financial audit been completed prior to putting the sv towards part, if not why has this not been done, if it has what steps besides asking for an sv have been do to curtail the need for one.</p>	<p>Hi (name withheld) Thank you for raising an important question. Council's Annual Financial Statements are audited each year as required under the Local Government Act 1993. You can find the most recent audited Statements on this page, as well as the last five years.</p> <p>Additionally, Council has conducted a comprehensive review of its current Long Term Financial Plan (LTFP) which is now on public exhibition for community feedback. You can read the Plan yourself via Together Cessnock here. The LTFP was independently reviewed. The LTFP is a 10-year forecast and includes a program of efficiency measures, updated economic conditions, new asset management information, reprioritised capital works and population growth forecasts. The LTFP covers scenarios with different service levels, the funding requirements of each and a viability of these different options.</p>
<p>8. The Minns government is supporting 15 of the recommendations of the inquiry into the ability of local Government to fund infrastructure and services. One recommendation is the SV applications will be used solely by council to fund specific projects or programs supported by the community. Is council applying to IPART by submission of a comprehensive Spending Review as is required for permanent increases to rates? if so, to ensure transparency please publish a full copy of this review on councils website.</p>	<p>Hi (name withheld), thanks for your question. The NSW Government announced its intention to support many recommendations from the NSW Parliament's Upper House inquiry into the ability of local governments to fund infrastructure and services in May 2025. The Office of Local Government (OLG) has not yet provided a timeline on implementation of these recommendations.</p> <p>IPART published an updated set of guidelines for the Special Variation process in late October. Cessnock City Council is working with relevant State Government agencies to progress an application consistent with these guidelines. The guidelines published this year do not include a comprehensive spending review pathway proposed in the recommendations of the inquiry.</p> <p>Council has however conducted a comprehensive review of its current Long Term Financial Plan (LTFP), which has been independently reviewed and is on public exhibition until Friday 19 December for community feedback. You can read the Plan yourself via Together Cessnock here.</p>

Questions asked from the community	Answers provided by Council
<p>9. I have attended a listening post in addition to a public meeting with Professor Drew but have not been provided with an answer to the following question- what is the amount of developer contributions currently held by council and why have these contributions not been used for local infrastructure such as road improvements when the required nexus and need exist?</p>	<p>Hi (name withheld), Thanks for raising (another) question! As at 30 September as per the Quarterly Budget Review Statements adopted by Council, we hold \$54.4m. In the first quarter of the year we received \$1.6m and spent \$2.3m. These are used by Council in line with the Delivery Program that maps out our forward works program.</p> <p>Council is committed to using Developer Contributions as a higher priority, though it should be noted that generally Council is also required to spend some of its own funds on these projects. Works proposed under the contributions plan represent infrastructure to be funded via a variety of sources. In some instances, the total cost of work is to be funded pursuant to the local infrastructure contributions provisions of the Act. In other instances, the cost is to be borne by a combination of local infrastructure contributions under this plan, local infrastructure contributions received under previous contributions plans, Capital Works Fund, and/or other funds.</p> <p>The scenarios in the Long Term Financial Plan (LTFP) highlight the importance of Developer Contributions and how we may be able to apply it in the future. The LTFP is currently on public exhibition here: Long Term Financial Plan 2026 – 2035 Together Cessnock. Kind regards</p>
<p>10. How many people have responded to each of the two surveys ?</p>	<p>Hi (name withheld),</p> <p>Thanks for your question regarding the number of surveys received as part of community consultation undertaken for the proposed Special Variation.</p> <p>If Council adopts a recommendation to apply to IPART for a Special Variation the survey results will form part of the application which is submitted to IPART and made available on IPART's website. Alternatively, if an application does not proceed Council will look to publish the results through an alternate manner such as via Council's website. Please stay tuned. .</p>

Questions asked from the community	Answers provided by Council
<p>11. I note from the NSW response to the recommendations following the Inquiry into the ability of local government to fund infrastructure and services dated May 2025 that Special variations will only apply to specific council projects or programs and that a Comprehensive Spending Review that forensically examines expenditure as well as revenue will be required for an IPART application for permanent rate increases . I note that Professor Drew in his video and at the public meeting I attended stated that he has been working on the application for a SV for a period of 6 months (May 25?) and had notified IPART of the proposed SV already.</p> <p>Has council rushed through this SV application for a near 40% rate increase to avoid the consequences and scrutiny of having to provide the Comprehensive Spending Review to IPART and the prohibition of using SV for permanent rate increases.</p>	<p>Hi (name withheld), Council indicated that it would consider a need to apply for the Special Variation in our draft Delivery Program that was publicly exhibited in April 2025. In May 2025, the NSW Government announced its intention to support many recommendations from the NSW Parliament’s Upper House inquiry into the ability of local governments to fund infrastructure and services. The Office of Local Government (OLG) has not yet provided a timeline on implementation of these recommendations.</p> <p>At its meeting on Wednesday 22 October 2025, Council resolved to notify IPART that Council is considering a Special Variation application. A decision to lodge an application to IPART has not yet been resolved by Council.</p> <p>Council has been monitoring developments closely to understand the pathway to progressing an application for 2026/27 and we are following current guidance published by IPART in October 2025. Thanks for asking the question.</p>
<p>12. Councils financial records show that for the 3year period -2020 to 2022 legal costs amounted to \$2.417 million. The same records show that for the three period of 2023 -2025 legal cost amounted to \$11.5 million. This is a dramatic spike of \$9 million.</p> <p>Please explain the reason for this dramatic increase in legal costs. Is it anticipated that these costs will continue at this level and have they been taken into account in considering future expenditure.</p> <p>Is this increase in expenditure a reason why there is an anticipated deficit this year of approximately \$8million.</p>	<p>Hi (name withheld),</p> <p>Thank you for asking your detailed question.</p> <p>Primarily the increase in the 2023-2025 is the airport hangar decision. It is not anticipated to be at this level in the future and is expected to return closer to historic norms, noting that the period 2020-2022 were lower as debt recovery actions were on hold during the lockdowns. The increase in legal fees in past years has no impact on the deficit for this year, which is driven by structural budgetary challenges.</p>

Questions asked from the community

13. At the council meeting of 22/10/25 Councillors Dixon asked the Chief Financial Officer a question to the following effect " what is the estimated cost of the community consultation including the distribution of the fact sheets, survey and prepaid envelopes to every household farm and business? The CFO indicated he would have to take the question on notice as the costs were dependent on how many people use the prepaid envelopes To get back to the Council and that was a bit of a variable figure.

Can you please advise the answer to the Councillors question ?

Answers provided by Council

Hi (name withheld),

Thank you for asking a follow up question to the Council meeting on 22 October 2025 for a response to the question asked of the Chief Financial Officer taken on notice.

The total cost of engagement for the Special Variation is estimated at \$41,500 exclusive of GST. This includes the printing, posting and letterbox drops but does not include staff costs.



Pop ups/listening posts

Pop ups were held in a wide variety of village areas to ensure proximity and ease of access for the community; localities included Branxton, Cessnock, Heddon Greta, Kurri Kurri, Millfield, Neath, North Rothbury/Huntlee, Pokolbin, Weston and Wollombi. Venue types were chosen to meet community where they are and provide natural exposure to the project in popular locations including shopping centres, cafes and recreational sites.

Attendance across pop ups totalled 44 people. The focus of the pop ups was to promote the survey and upcoming public meetings. While quantitative results were lower than expected, qualitative results were high in questions and feedback provided documented in Table 1.

POP UP LISTENING POSTS DETAILS				
Date	Time	Venue	Questions/Feedback	Numbers
Thursday 13 November	10am – 12pm	Cessnock Village Shopping Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Questioned the dollar figure for rate increase• Concern for people who can't pay the increase and may end up having their home repossessed• Cost of living• It's hard to understand the information if you've had limited schooling• Too much spending in vineyard and not other parts of the LGA – is the problem there isn't enough money or is it spent in the wrong area• Interest in community engagement activities• Pensioners who can't afford the increase and would have to cut down on food• Understanding of the processes that councils are under pressure• Thought they had heard council blame the need for rate rise on mismanagement• Suggested other revenue raising ideas like charges for heavy vehicles• Build the bypass• Completed survey but left at home. Copy completed on site• Left the responsibility of completing survey with my husband. Imagine many people are not happy about it	9

POP UP LISTENING POSTS DETAILS

Date	Time	Venue	Questions/Feedback	Numbers
Thursday 13 November	2pm - 4pm	Wollombi Tennis Club	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest in attending public meeting 	1
Friday 14 November	11am - 1pm	Huntlee Shopping Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It will stop investors • It should only go up by CPI same as wages • Propaganda • What will I get for the rate rise • Developers provide infrastructure • It will have flow on effects to tenants • Increase to rates will discourage growth • Understand council perspective because of working life • Understands people would be concerned about the amount of increase sought • Asked about difficult customers and community attitudes and behaviours towards Council staff regarding the rate increase • Don't get out due to health and feel they miss things • Large rise • Did not receive mail out 	7
Friday 14 November	3pm - 5pm	Branxton IGA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living elsewhere with a rental property in the area • Question if it is a one-off rate increase • Thought it was reasonable • Factsheet copies provided • What are you doing here • Don't like renewable energy stuff • State of the roads isn't good • You've got a hard job • Good that you're doing this • What charity are you from • I don't live here • Recognition of staff • Didn't receive fact sheet in mail 	7

POP UP LISTENING POSTS DETAILS				
Date	Time	Venue	Questions/Feedback	Numbers
Friday 14 November	3pm – 5pm	Branxton IGA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Then one remembered they did receive it • If rates are less than 35% of councils income, what about the other 70% of councils income? • What is happening to the capital grants and capital works • People they know didn't receive the fact sheet • Approximately 50 hard copy fact sheets and surveys were provided for distribution to people they know as well as copies of the public meeting invitations 	7
Monday 17 November	11am – 1pm	The Central Millfield Cafe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is going to hurt a lot of people and why? Who is responsible? • Why do we need extra garbage bins? • Look at efficiencies first before spending money on something that will hurt people • Questioned why one staff person can't be here at a time • Feedback provided that they only have little money • Photograph taken of staff • Most councils are doing it tough aren't they • Lived in Millfield for years and love the country feel • Replies on public transport and would like to see more buses • Asked about what is proposed for the rate increase • There should be a layman's terms on the front of the Fact Sheet 	7
Monday 17 November	3pm – 5pm	Hunter Valley Visitor Information Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questioned the phrasing of survey questions as a matter of moral blackmail • Would like to see two sides for and against • Thought the Fact Sheet was junk mail at first • Street isn't kerbed and guttered, can't leave driveway when it rains • Only potholes are getting filled • Why aren't capital grants included • Why is the survey closing before the public meeting 	2

POP UP LISTENING POSTS DETAILS

Date	Time	Venue	Questions/Feedback	Numbers
Monday 17 November	3pm - 5pm	Hunter Valley Visitor Information Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to submit to IPART is important to them • Discussion about base rate and ad valorem difference • No mention of Australian problems like high interest rates • No demographic study • It's wrong to burden future generations • Why can't developers pay more • What other revenue options are available • Borrow to fund infrastructure • Developer contributions – what about increase to developers? Why do we need to make up the difference? • No opportunity to provide ideas in the survey apart from Question 9 • This will devastate the community • Why are we suddenly liable for new growth 	2
Tuesday 18 November	9am - 11am	Hedleigh Park, Heddon Greta	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upgrade the roads in the area • Understand how the system works • Look at temporary cheaper maintenance solutions • Invest in more youth programs • Fairer distribution of funding • Council is prioritising their agenda not what is best for the community • All work is centred around Cessnock and wine country • Is this one off or permanent • It's got to happen • Understanding it's like everything it all has to go up • Did receive the Fact Sheet • Wants a roundabout • We might attend the public meeting • Want more grocery shops in area • Nothing for kids in the area • Get developers to put in services to the community first and profit second 	7

POP UP LISTENING POSTS DETAILS				
Date	Time	Venue	Questions/Feedback	Numbers
Tuesday 18 November	9am – 11am	Hedleigh Park, Heddon Greta	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where is the money going Where are the Councillors here? Picked up a copy of Fact Sheet and is going to take to a parent Positive feedback received about Council being there Talk about drainage works What is and isn't working 	7
Tuesday 18 November	3pm – 5pm	Maybury Peace Park	Not applicable	-
Wednesday 19 November	9am – 11am	Neath Hotel and Cafe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How long is Council here today 	1
Wednesday 19 November	2pm – 4pm	Kurri Kurri Library	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Council should go into administration Thought Mayor and Councillors wages had gone up It's a big increase Where to sign to sack Council staff When is the meeting What went wrong? What will we get out of this? Worry for the future and if it will be needed again in 5 to 10 years Will projects be put on hold? Is there something better than quick fixes for roads? What are the independent experts qualifications? Didn't like the survey as it was leading Is this about the rate rise? Not too concerned about it and will be able to afford it The price of things have been going up Looked closely at all the information and understand it What percentage of projects are being finished within budget Does anyone in Council work with community groups to submit grants My rates will rise as I'm rural Hard to read the Fact Sheet but is aware of the SV 	5

Public meetings

Council with an independent expert facilitated 7 public meetings in total. The public meetings were chosen to meet a balance of location coverage as well as venue size and availability. Public meetings, with facilitation support from Council staff, included a presentation by an independent expert for 1-1.5 hours followed by a live question and answer session. The question and answer session continued until no further questions were raised.

On Monday 24 November, a live digital public meeting of the Special Variation by independent expert Professor Drew was broadcast via YouTube and shared via Council's Facebook page to enable broad participation options for the community.

PUBLIC MEETINGS				
Date	Time	Venue	Questions/Feedback	Numbers
Friday 21 November	4pm to 6pm	Wollombi Tennis Club	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why were the mail outs not sent to everyone? • Why was this timing chosen? • Why was this venue chosen – need a bigger venue? • Can you say this is gross financial mismanagement from Council? • Why is there no one on the front line of Council that makes decisions here? • Can we recommit to doing this meeting as there hasn't been enough communication? • Do you think it will get passed by IPART? • Are you capping the base rate? • Shouldn't Council be run as a not for profit or a business? • Why is it almost 40 percent proposed and why is it permanent? • Why is Council's rates down 29 percent last year and now its 22 percent? • Seems like capital grants are more than the rates Council collects • What can we do to get more of the fuel excise to go towards our roads? • If there are already people behind on rates and on payment plans, has this been considered? • Question about categories of rates • Can we limit or defund certain works or projects in order to not have a rate increase? 	55

PUBLIC MEETINGS				
Date	Time	Venue	Questions/Feedback	Numbers
Friday 21 November	4pm to 6pm	Wollombi Tennis Club	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What sort of things were thrown out from asset spending? • Is it correct to say that increased developments are not pro rata with our affordability? • The 39% doesn't tell us how we compare with other councils. Revenue is lying by not using a dollar comparison • If this percent goes through as permanent, but you're saying we won't see anything? • If we aren't going to see anything new for 10 years will council push for road grants? 	55
Saturday 22 November	11am to 1pm	East Cessnock Bowling Club	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the 58 things you've suggested for Council to do? • Isn't new housing another source of revenue? • Disappointed this isn't an open mic. Staff should be sacked • Can we adjust Councils boundaries? • Clarification on pie graph • Can you tell us the top 3 things you would recommend to reduce expenditure? • Did you recommend the rate freeze? • With the SV can you spread it over a few years instead of 1 year? • What are the hardship options for ratepayers who will struggle? • Hardships are being sugarcoated • Do you look at staffing as a whole or indoor and outdoor staff? • Is it possible to give extra time to complete Survey 2? • People that received the fact sheet thought it was shady food vouchers • Survey was focused towards a specific outcome • Is council going to sell and reduce land like soccer fields and how about the airport? • Has any discussion occurred about the waste management centre? • If approved what is the mechanism to report to IPART and ratepayers? 	30

PUBLIC MEETINGS				
Date	Time	Venue	Questions/Feedback	Numbers
Saturday 22 November	11am to 1pm	East Cessnock Bowling Club	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there a chance the proposal is rejected and if so what is the next step? Why don't the people in Council do the analysis? Based on what has been said today I'm wondering what Council can put into place so we will be set for life Can consideration be taken for acreage? 	30
Saturday 22 November	5pm to 7pm	Kurri Kurri Senior Citizens Hall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All bodies undertake community consultation and do what they want anyway Why is ratepayer money being spent on this independent guy Dislike of Cessnock being seen as a little county How are other Councils going with their rate rise? If we had a swinging seat and decent federal members we would have better facilities Where would we be now if we had the max rate cap increase over the past 20 years? How can we stop government cost shifting to local government? Every 4 years we have an election do the plans change? What's the status of the Long Term Financial Plan? Will landlords get tax deductions? Do you know the state government metric and has it changed? Is this for one year and what projects are we going to get, who decides where the money goes? What can be done to stop increases? How can Cessnock generate more income? Why is the financial burden being put onto ratepayers? Are you an advocate for the council to decide what happens with their money? Our land value went up and rates have doubled, what do we get with that? How much do we make out of the waste management centre? 	45

PUBLIC MEETINGS				
Date	Time	Venue	Questions/Feedback	Numbers
Saturday 22 November	5pm to 7pm	Kurri Kurri Senior Citizens Hall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will the roads have enough budget to be fixed? • Is there a hardship policy? • There's not many Councillors here and why is this on a weekend? 	45
Sunday 23 November	12pm to 2pm	Branxton Community Hall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much is council holding in developer contributions? Where has the money gone? • Why are we doing things for tourism? • If the SV would take 2 goes and if there's the chance it wouldn't cover our debt, what's the point? • How much ratepayer money goes outside the boundaries? • What is the state of our roads? • Is the hardship policy is that on a fixed or variable rate? • What happens if someone applies under the hardship policy and doesn't get it? • How can we be in financial troubles when we are doing all these new developments and getting contributions from them? • Why is council holding developer contributions? • What is happening with this particular capital works project? • If the financial situation has been that dire why are we finding out about it now? • Have Council thought about offloading land to other councils? • Clarification of where the SV would be applied to rates • Can you explain any more detail about what the implication was to ratepayers for administration under Central Coast Council? • Appreciate Council coming to us, will the money be spent wisely? 	74

PUBLIC MEETINGS

Date	Time	Venue	Questions/Feedback	Numbers
Sunday 23 November	6pm – 8pm	East Cessnock Bowling Club	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council could be making money in other areas • What guarantees are there that Council will do the right thing? • Can we look at capital cost reduction? • Have we been overrun with population growth, can we push suburbs onto other Councils? • No objection to the SV as long as there's transparency and value for money • Increase on waste management fees when some rural areas don't have a bin service • Roads need refurbishing, can Council tender it to a contractor? • Can we delay the increase by 12 months to give the community time to digest everything? • For many years Cessnock roads have been the worst in the state, we deserve roads to last for 10 years • When will IPART make the decision? • For 50 years we have been behind the times and the new Council is coping it • Is there any point to having input to IPART? • Why do we get charged metropolitan rates instead of regional for rates? • Is there any way we can get more assurance of efficiency and hold people accountable? • What is the legal requirement for communication by Council? • A lot of people got the fact sheet and thought it was a sale or flyer • Conversation with two couples where one person in the dwelling got the factsheet and the other thought they didn't 	19

PUBLIC MEETINGS				
Date	Time	Venue	Questions/Feedback	Numbers
Monday 24 November	5.30pm to 7.30pm	Council Chambers and YouTube	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where did you source the template for this slide deck? We understand that this current monstrosity of a mess isn't the fault of the current mayor or councillors, those responsible already jumped ship. They need to be investigated and prosecuted for Any wrongdoings found Cessnock LGA has one of the lowest avg incomes in the state as per the 2021 census, the general manager earns more than premier, how do you justify slogging the residents 40% due to council mismanagement You mentioned earlier that you recommended a base rate freeze for if the increase goes through. Is this something that would be likely to happen? Thank you for the presentation and information. You said early in the presentation that the SV was to buy time for the actual solution – what is the actual solution? How many works projects are coming in on time and on budget? How do we see if council are spending rates correctly and works are being done efficiently? The GM earns 497k per year, the premier earns 416k in 2025? Our Mayor is pushing for expenses to be pushed back to State, if that happens will the SV reduce? If not for next year, for future years, if Council doesn't have as much expenses to pay for? Why wouldn't an administrator be a better option considering the problems that exist that are not adequately addressed and sees ongoing expenditure far in excess of your \$2000 per km for dirt roads If Developer contributions have a cap, is Council also applying to increase the cost to developers as well as to residents? You said you need to be trained to look at the financial statements to see where there is a problem – is the CFO of Cessnock Council trained to see issues? 	327

PUBLIC MEETINGS

Date	Time	Venue	Questions/Feedback	Numbers
Monday 24 November	5.30pm to 7.30pm	Council Chambers and YouTube	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You mentioned you have thought of half a dozen changes to your report based on feedback, what are those? So how is the census data wrong? he stated the abs data is incorrect, the abs has the avg weekly income in the lga at 696 and the weekly across the state at 813. So either the ABS is lying or the professor has no clue 6 SVs in the last 25 years, each time for road maintenance, infrastructure etc. Can you show where previously granted SV's have delivered on what they were promised for before we are hit with another? SV or not, the underlying problem is that Local Government is merely a revenue raising instrument for State government, who then refund a portion and tell Council how its to be spent. As a new home owner (new build within the last year) How can a 40% rise be considered affordable? Why should new residents where our developers have funded infrastructure see such a big increase. Considering that CCC is the 2nd fastest growing region in the country, should we be slowing the developement of the region due to the increase cost on council for every house built? Have you estimated the default on rates if this increase is approved and, if so, what is it? Suggestion - expert economists donate their advice and time instead of billing more than the average wage If the money is well spent , well explain why the rates are increasing but cessnock council are still doing the same job multiple times rather than fixing once take 21 bends at least 7 times a year Just start putting lines through expenditure to the tune of \$20mil. The roads can't get much worse, screw it. So why not bill longer term residents a higher rate than new home owners? 	327

PUBLIC MEETINGS				
Date	Time	Venue	Questions/Feedback	Numbers
Monday 24 November	5.30pm to 7.30pm	Council Chambers and YouTube	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To follow up from that why is it 40% in one year? surely a smaller rise over a few years would offer the same result over a more realistic timeframe. • what are the odds this special variation will actually get approved? • With the future growth projected in Cessnock is going to help or going put further strain on the Cessnock council • what happens if the council goes into administration? • What assets have you considered selling? • so the 40% sv is to support financial stability of CCC and provide services for the community, how will the 40% support the communities "own" financial stability? • there gonna stand there and hold a broom or shovel a bit longer • Is the rapid growth of the LGA linked to the state strategy or to the 15-minute city concept? • surley fix once costs less than emplying 14 people to fix the same stretch 7 or more times a year but then rates hike hmmm. 5 years and 3 of them the road has been re opened since part tar rest a minimum of 7 times a year to fix so wherer is this funding going • Can't we just sell the LGA to Elon Musk? worked for Twitter? • The 40% is not a one time increase correct? It will stay at the increased rate moving forward? • how do we get more investment from state and federal governments • Hypothetically lpart approves the increase and Council Flounders the money and nothing changes? Who is held Liable? • You are comparing our rates with others. Aren't those other councils' rates similarly skewed and you are comparing like with like rather than nonsense with nonsense and Cessnock rates are high. 	327

PUBLIC MEETINGS

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Date	Time	Venue	Questions/Feedback	Numbers
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PUBLIC MEETINGS

Date	Time	Venue	Questions/Feedback	Numbers
Monday 24 November	5.30pm to 7.30pm	Council Chambers and YouTube	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is Cessnock Airport as a losing asset considered as State significant infrastructure, or could it be sold for significant \$\$ to zero the debt?? You say 'we' but I didn't bungle expenditure, I didn't set bad policy, I didn't misrepresent councils financials ... you wanted to say something wasn't fair before, how is this fair? Why isn't the government at all levels (local, state, federal) being held accountable for the situation we're in rather than the rate payer footing the bill every time the council runs out of money? so if government already know of living crisis and financial crisis, why are they making the issue worse hiking a rise is just going to cause more damage surely 	327
Tuesday 9 December	4pm – 6pm	Laguna Community Hall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We haven't had the opportunity to discuss how many pools we want in the LGA, whether we want a performing arts studio, state of the roads. Shouldn't this happen before SV? Concerns about the consultation including the survey questions Question on weighting of qualitative verses quantitative responses in the surveys Wollombi Valley don't have a reasonable level of services – pools, performing arts, and have the ongoing dirt roads and no rubbish service. The context is important Complaint about the set-up of the digital meeting If we are paying 40 percent more are we going to get investment in this area This is not good and there are no Councillors or Executive present Thinks we are employers and Council is telling us what we should pay them Comment about putting debt on children Asking about one year temporary verses permanent rate increase 	27

PUBLIC MEETINGS				
Date	Time	Venue	Questions/Feedback	Numbers
Tuesday 9 December	4pm – 6pm	Laguna Community Hall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disappointed Councillors aren't here but asked about OLG criteria 4 and 6 and to confirm its not going to be sustainable after this SV Rates in rural areas verses smaller blocks in town compared to levels of service Impact of reduction on base rate for rural areas Council planned works, defer netball and football stadium How are we going to pay rate increases without income increases? Owns a farm and rents out one room but otherwise self-funded retiree 	27

Community-initiated feedback

221 submissions and emails

Council received over **221** enquiries from the community through emails, letters and submissions. There were 6 common templates which became community campaigns shared through Facebook community groups. These templates were duplicated by community members and sent as individual submissions to Council and Councillors.

The community-initiated campaigns focused on strong opposition to the rate rise. Issues raised included the increase being too much over one year, cost of living, Council should demonstrate efficiencies first, biased framing and limited options in the survey, accessibility of community consultation, poor roads and gutters, community absorbing shock of land valuations, seeking shared benefits from significant projects and a perception that Council is once again turning to residents for more money.

Wollombi Valley

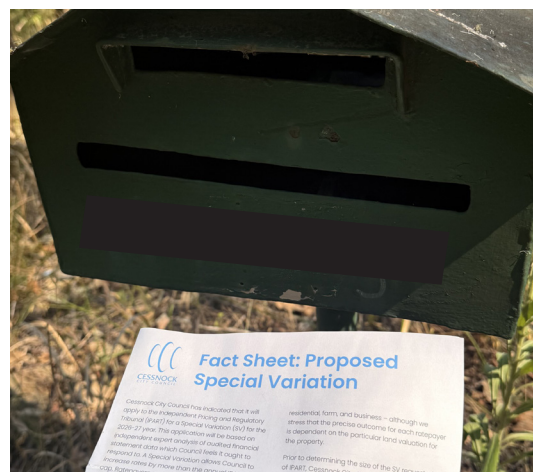
Following critical feedback at the initial public meeting held in Wollombi regarding non-receipt of the Factsheet and Survey, Council met with community associations from the Wollombi Valley who raised further questions for consideration after reviewing the draft Revised Long Term Financial Plan and Financial Statements.

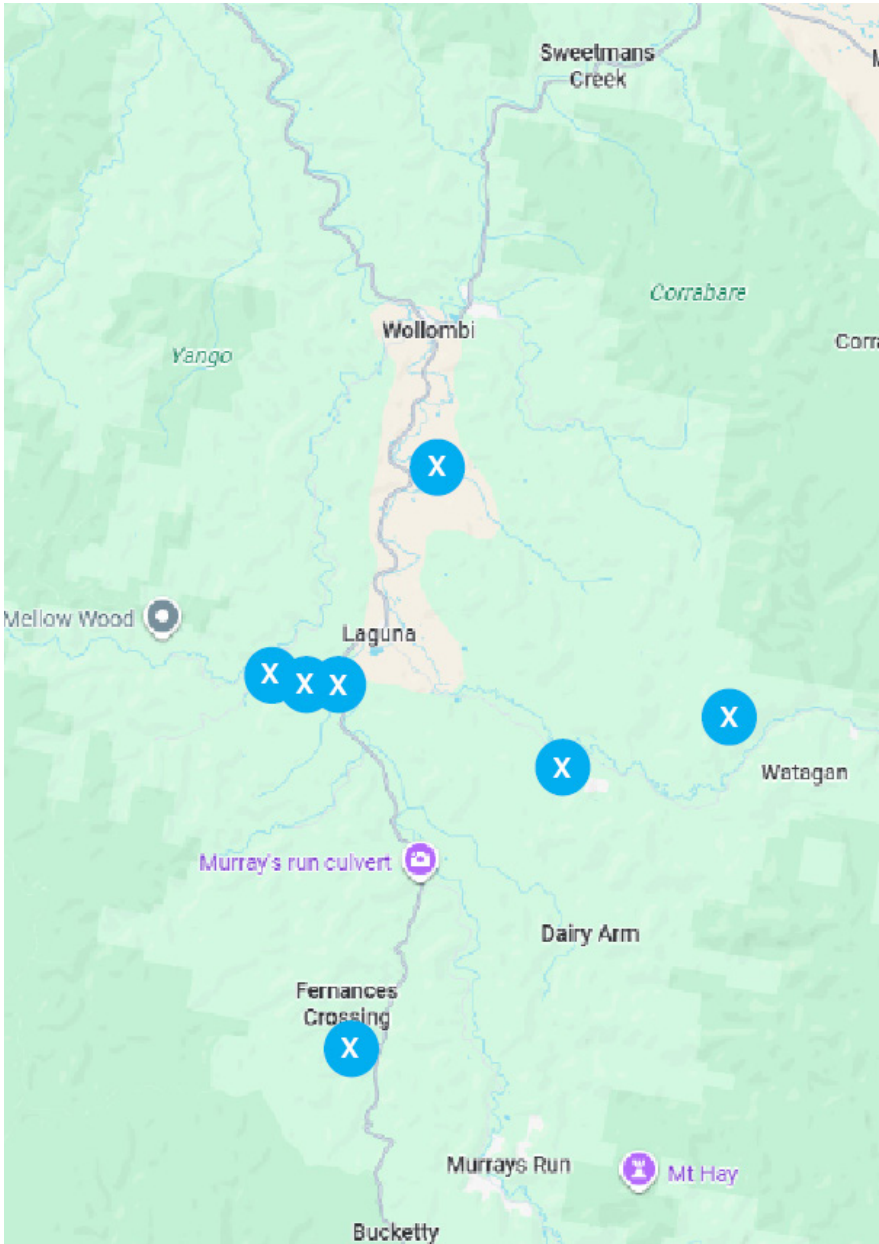
The alleged non-receipt of the Fact Sheet and Survey were responded to with an additional letterbox distribution, public meeting and an extension of the first survey submission date.

In addition, posters and copies of the fact sheet and notice of additional public meeting (see Engagement annexure) were placed in local businesses, and Council posted into the Community Facebook page. The community-run newsletter for the Wollombi Valley 'Our Own News' shared news of the proposed Special Variation in their newsletter and via email to their members/subscribers.

While letterboxing the area on Wednesday 3 December and Thursday 4 December to promote the additional public meeting, Council Officers sighted copies of the original fact sheet and survey delivered in the initial run the previous month in a number of letterboxes across the area. Photo evidence collected by Council Officers and approximate locations are provided below (see pages 54-55).

In addition to the supplied GPS tracking, the presence of the fact sheet and survey in letterboxes, including in areas several kilometres from Great North Road, appears to show that the contracted letterbox distributor made an effort to reach these remote locations.





Map and photos illustrating found locations of fact sheet



Public meetings in Wollombi Valley

The feeling towards Council, paying current rates, community consultation and the proposed Special Variation were audibly and visually evident during both the first and second public meeting held in the Wollombi Valley. The community feedback received demonstrated a general lack of trust in Council, views of a 'tick a box' consultation process and a perceived lack of return on investment on rates being paid in the area over time.

The commentary of community members at both sessions is not dissimilar to feedback from other community members based on a long-term felt experience of needing to advocate for their valley.

A total of 82 people attended across both public meetings. While many community members voiced their frustrations, protested and some walk-outs occurred, others also stayed for the duration until the end of the q&a session and displayed engaged and active listening behaviours.

The two public meetings were held in the only local public venues which enable access for people with mobility concerns. Other suitable venues would have required substantial travel times for local residents. Additionally, a digital session was held.

Community petitions/campaigns

Utilising change.org the community initiated an online petition calling on the community to sign to stop 'Cessnock Council's excessive 39.9% rate hike proposal'. The author cites the increase would be a substantial financial burden when coupled when high cost of living, stagnant wage growth and businesses still

recovering from impacts of global and economic challenges. As at 16 December 2025, the petition has received 4604 signatures.

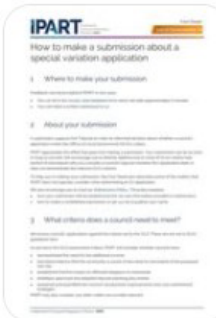
At both public meetings within the Wollombi Valley a printed hardcopy community-initiated petition was also available and circulated amongst attendees for reading and signatures.

There were also many instances of individuals commenting on social media posts on Council's page or in community groups advising people not to participate in the survey. Examples below.



Trudy Whitcombe

I urge residents NOT TO FILL IN THE SURVEY. It is written to manipulate Ipart as it is a requirement of Ipart that council proves residents have read and understand the submission for the special rate rise. Please see section 3, point 2 of the Ipart information below. Then when you read the survey you will see how council has written a biased survey that gives them the results they need



Cessnock Community Noticeboard · Join
Milly Field · November 2 at 3:37 AM · 🌐

TLDR summary from recent posts:

⚠️ Cessnock City Council is proposing a 39.9% rate increase in ONE year (2026–27). This is not spread out, not temporary, and it becomes the new base rate forever.

🚫 Don't fill out the council survey- it's cleverly designed to be proof you are informed.

💬 Instead, email IPART the independent tribunal who has final approval of the proposal increase, at regina.choi@ipart.nsw.gov.au

(See comments in other posts for more information)

👍👎 65

👍 Like

💬 Comment

🔗 Share


57 comments 32 shares

Key engagement findings

Key finding 1: Personal hardship and cost of living

The highest proportion of feedback received from the community raised concerns regarding the ability for themselves or others in the community to pay the rate increase. The community was particularly concerned about what would happen for people like pensioners who wouldn't be able to afford the increased cost, and who would not manage a payment plan either. At the time of pop up and public meeting engagement, the reviewed hardship policy with additional hardship measures was in the process of being adopted by Council.

The concern of personal hardship was raised in the context of the size of the rate increase sought with 39%. The community enquired whether it could occur in a staged format over a number of years considering the issue has developed over a number of years.

In the digital survey results,  was mentioned 170 times; cost of living was mentioned 137 times, struggling 99 times, pressure 44 times, pension 41 times, hardship 38 times and bills 23 times.

"A 39% rate increase will have a significant negative impact to all rate payers in the area, why should we have to strain our personal budgets because the council has poorly managed their budget and the way it has spent"

"As a ratepayer I feel like we are the target foremost rather than halting or stopping non essential projects. This SV will have a neagtive feedback from the community due to the extreme increase during such a finicial stressful time (sic)."

"I understand the need, but my family couldn't afford to pay a 39.9% increase. We literally live week to week and the cost of living increases we have seem in all other areas, eg food and basic living expenses mean we are at capacity. We got behind in our rates this year, I honestly don't know how we would manage this increases, other then taking money from our groceries each week."

Key Finding 2: State of the roads and existing infrastructure

Across all methods of engagement, the community displayed concern for the current state of the roads in the LGA where they feel the focus is on pothole refilling rather than replacement. Concerns were raised about roads close to driveways for properties and the nature and potential dangers of the roads during wet weather conditions. The community questioned whether the rate increase would produce improved road quality standards.

The word 'road' was raised in the digital survey 216 times in the open survey responses and 'pothole' 37 times.

"The existing infrastructure is aging and requires not only ongoing maintenance but in some cases replacement'.

"Absolute joke. Fix the roads and you will have happier ratepayers"

"Why are we paying for infrastructure that is not getting fixed! Our roads a terrible and you are spend a fortune on road base materials just for them to wash away (sic)"

Key finding 3: Perceived value of current rates

The community raised common concerns and questions about what services and infrastructure they received for the current amount of rates paid. Questions were raised around a lack of street lighting, kerb and guttering, and stormwater and sewer systems close to their own properties and that within town centres. The perception being that the current rates aren't producing visible and evident changes within proximity to their own property which is contributing to a reluctance to pay more with no tangible return benefit expected.

Many comments were received regarding a perception that council expenditure is focused on the CBD within the suburb of Cessnock or in the Wine Country area in the suburbs of Lovedale and Pokolbin, and that rates are being paid for legacy decisions the community feels like it had no say in like recreational and entertainment facilities around the LGA. Particularly in the rural areas of Wollombi and Laguna there was a perception that rates are being paid for services the community doesn't use itself. Bin collections was also often raised despite not being funded by rates.

"In our valley we have no services, no pools or performing arts, we have the ongoing dirt roads and no rubbish collection"

"We will get no more services. Just maintaining what we have which is poorly done."

"I reside in an area of Cessnock where there is no curb and guttering and our roads are appalling. The amount of rates we currently pay is not reflected in the services we currently receive and I can't imagine that with a huge rate increase we will see any improvement."

"I already feel like we get very little value for our rates – I live on an unsealed road, no kerb or guttering, not even any stormwater management even though we are charged for it. No direct connection to the water main, no sewage. No kerbside pickup."





Key finding 4: Growth and development and priority decision making

During the engagement phase it was evident many community members were new to understanding Integrated Planning and Reporting Requirements and Developer Contribution process requirements of Council, or community members who have not previously engaged with Council on providing feedback and input into Council plans.

The community asked about how they can provide feedback on which projects Council should focus on and what projects it can cut. They questioned how Developer Contributions are collected and what they are spent on, and why Council is prioritising growth if it comes at an unsustainable cost. Community sentiment was that with new developments come additional ratepayers which should cover the cost, and so they questioned where this money was going.

“Rapid population growth means more rate payers so why are you suggesting this is the cause for more money needed”

“I don’t know why “Cessnock can’t afford new growth” can’t be a reason to reject new development applications, seeing that the ratepayers who end up funding the growth get no say on whether we want to pay for the growth.”

“Have we been overrun with population growth, can we push suburbs onto other Councils?”

“What about increase to developers? Why do we need to make up the difference? Why is Council holding on to Developer Contributions?”

Key finding 5: Efficiencies and accountability

The community often voiced dissatisfaction in Council's efficiencies and productivity and concluded the rate rise is due to Council's mismanagement of funds. The community commonly enquired about staff resourcing, staff pay and benefits, Councillor pay and wage increases, and stated staff were time wasting, inefficient and lazy and should be sacked.

The community felt that Council should be managed like a personal budget where you should be spending within your means, looking internally at your own misspending first and when money needs to be found to borrow it and some debt is required. The community raised that they are not asked about where Council spending should occur and where it should be cut. This includes a strong perspective shared that ratepayers are Councils employers, and as the employers they deserve to know what Council is doing and where the money is going.

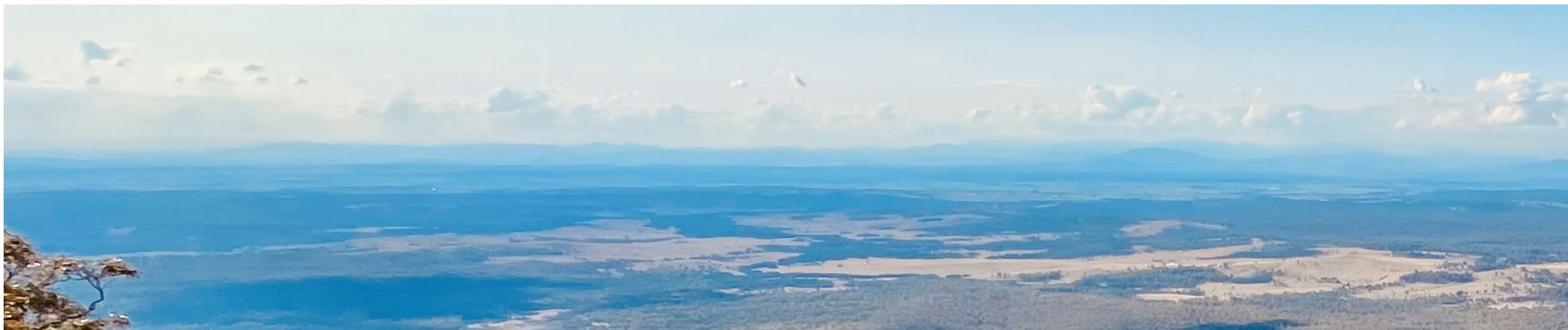
"The SRV doesn't address the root cause: staff incompetence or

at the very least, suitability of staff in current decision-making roles that have led the council to this allegedly poor financial state (sic)"

"Intervention is required. It's not for the rate payer to fund the deficiencies in councils ability to manage a budget. You've got employees taking fully funded council vehicles on private holidays - like other councils these vehicles should be for strict work use only."

"Any person or part involved in council spending in the last 10 years should be held accountable, this is 100% about blaming them!! What on earth have they been spending the money on? It certainly hasn't been on services or maintenance our region is a disgrace."

"Transparency and fairness in staffing and remuneration should be a priority before asking the community to bear additional financial burdens."



Key finding 6: Quality of the fact sheet and survey

The community raised concerns of bias and propaganda regarding the design of the survey which was provided with the hardcopy of the fact sheet in the letterbox distribution and linked via the digital survey. The survey was designed by an independent expert to understand the community's view of the status quo and monitor any learnings pre- and post public meetings.

The community wanted a question asking if they supported or opposed the rate variation increase. Feedback was provided that the style of the questions was leading the community to provide certain types of response by pressuring a moral argument around putting debt onto future generations.

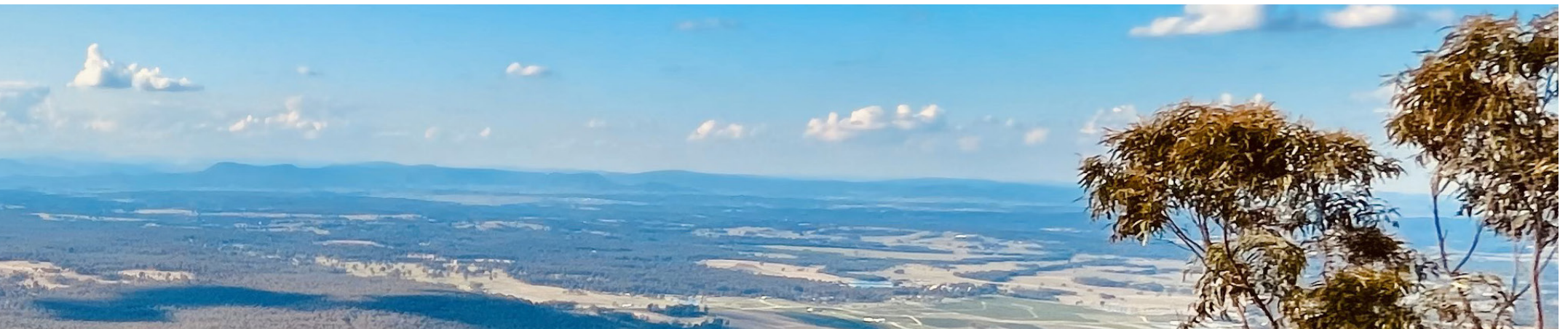
Encouragement was provided to the community during public meetings to utilise the open text fields to write whatever feedback they wish to provide to Council and to IPART and each survey

response would be reviewed by the independent expert. The community were also critical of the tight timeframes provided to respond to the survey and reported non-receipt of the fact sheet during delivery.

"This survey is ridiculously biased and the questions are leading. How much did you pay a consultant to create this drivel?"

"The survey is not acceptable. It refuses to acknowledge the fault or miss management of the council. The detail does not expose what caused this predicament and without investigation we are doom to repeat."

"The survey, as presented, falls well short of an unbiased or informative consultation. Several questions are worded like riddles, and the accompanying explanations appear one-sided, heavily favouring Council's agenda. Many residents – including myself – found the wording confusing and the message guilt-driven, rather than transparent or educational."





INTEGRATED PLANNING & REPORTING

Highlights

Integrated Planning & Reporting



56
Submissions

15
Pop up
face to face
sessions



1,166
Have your say
page visits



2
Community
satisfaction surveys



610
Use of digital
engagement features

The Delivery Program, as part of the IP&R suite of documents, highlighted to the community the potential requirement for a Special Variation application approaching.

Integrated Planning & Reporting

Community Strategic Plan 2040

Under the Local Government Act 1993, the Integrated Planning and Reporting process includes a suite of documents with an overarching Community Strategic Plan which must cover a minimum timeframe of 10 years. Cessnock City Council's CSP 2040 identifies our community's main priorities and aspirations for the future and strategies for achieving these goals.

CSP 2040 and associated suite of documents were endorsed by Council to go on public exhibition in April 2025 and adopted by Council at its meeting in June 2025.

Delivery Program 2025–2029

Council's Delivery Program, based on a four-year delivery plan, maps out a pathway for the first stage towards achieving the goals in the CSP. The final adopted version available via

Council's website since June 2025, includes a full page spread of information on a potential Special Variation. The Delivery Program also includes an overview of demographics in the Cessnock LGA, as well as Council's assets and services.

Community consultation included surveys, online discussions, community events, workshops and local conversations ensured that our community had the opportunity to participate in the development of our plan. Community feedback in the development of the Delivery Program resulted in the Top 3 Community Priorities being:

1. Roads

- "Prioritising infrastructure particularly roads and traffic control."
- "Traffic management in the Cessnock area; the new estates are outgrowing the traffic control; congestion is a major problem including damaging the road."
- "Roads near school are not safe because of speeding and disrepairs."

2. Costs

- "Rising cost of living in the area, specifically housing prices."
- "Rising prices in food shopping and house prices, daily living expenses."

3. Recreation and Leisure

- "Lack of infrastructure for community."
- "More recreational activities, e.g. introduce a cinema, gated playgrounds."
- "More pedestrian paths and cycleways."

CSP 2040 – community involvement

February 2023	Community Satisfaction Survey	Phone survey, independently managed 400 participants
June 2023	Australian Liveability Census	Online benchmarking survey, independently run Over 15,000 responses
June to October 2024	Community Pop Ups	12 Face to Face sessions. 400+ conversations
June to October 2024	Formal submissions portal	Community comments and submissions
June to October 2024	'Have your Say' digital forums campaign	337 page visits 192 contributions
February 2025	Community Satisfaction Survey	Phone survey, independently managed 402 participants
April to May 2025	Public exhibition	Have your say page 829 visits, 418 participants, 360 downloads
April to May 2025	Community Pop Ups	3 Face to Face sessions in Cessnock, Branxton and Kurri Kurri

A woman with dark, curly hair and round glasses is sitting at a wooden desk in a modern office. She is wearing a brown polka-dot shirt and is looking at a silver laptop. Her hands are on the keyboard. In the foreground, there is a metal mesh pen holder with a yellow pencil. The background shows a glass-walled office with other desks and people working. The lighting is warm and modern.

SOCIAL MEDIA ANNEXURE



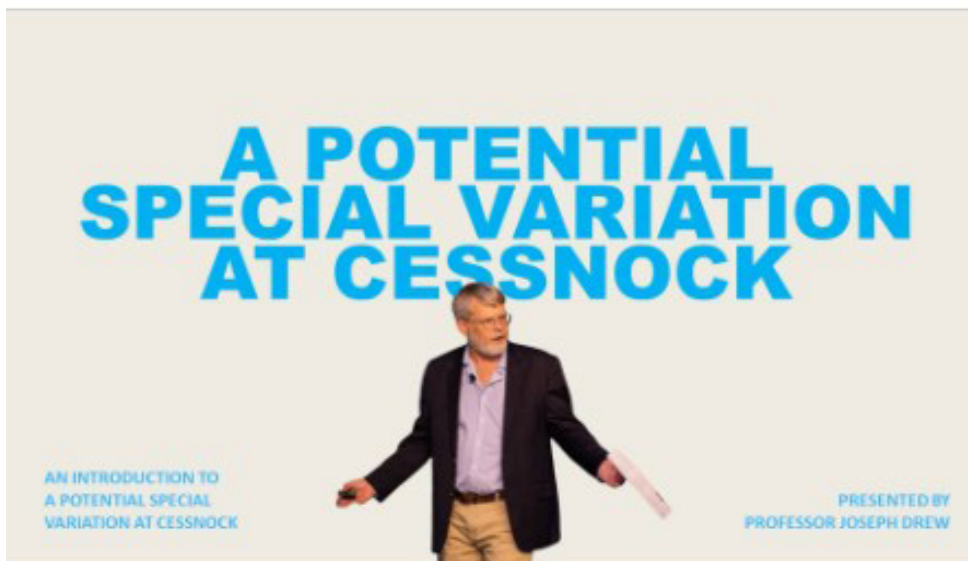
Cessnock City Council

Published by [redacted] · September 5 · 🌐

...

You would have heard that we're working towards a financially sustainable future. We've engaged an independent expert, Professor Joseph Drew, to explore the matters necessary to prepare an application for a special variation and undertake community consultation.

To learn more and watch his introduction video, please visit <https://www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability>



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🗨️ Comment

🔗 Share

80 comments 7 shares



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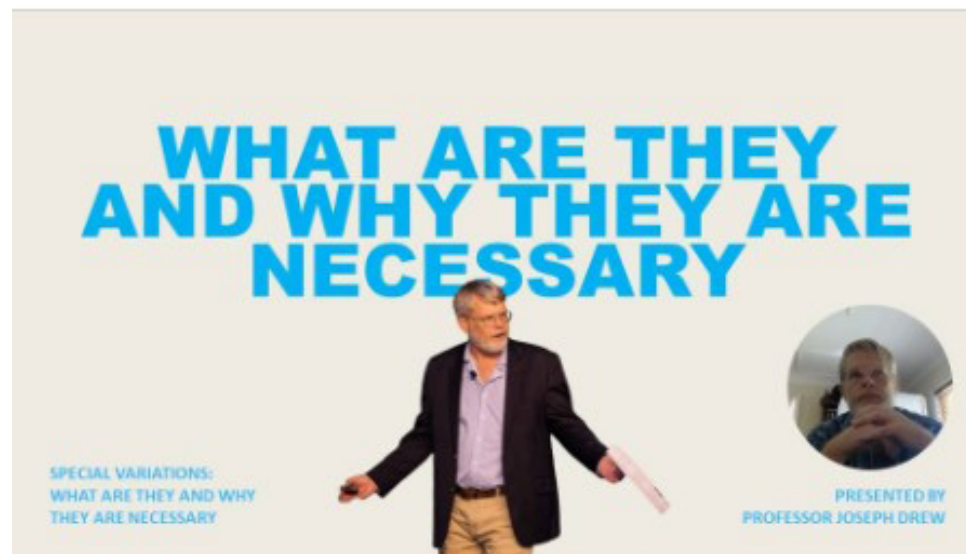
Published by [redacted] · September 12 · 🌐

...

Last week, we shared that Professor Joseph Drew has been engaged to explore the matters necessary to prepare an application for a special variation and undertake community consultation.

Professor Drew has prepared a second video about special variations and why they can be necessary. We've also prepared some responses that answer some of the common questions you've asked about special variations.

To read the FAQs and watch the video, visit www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability



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45 comments 1 share



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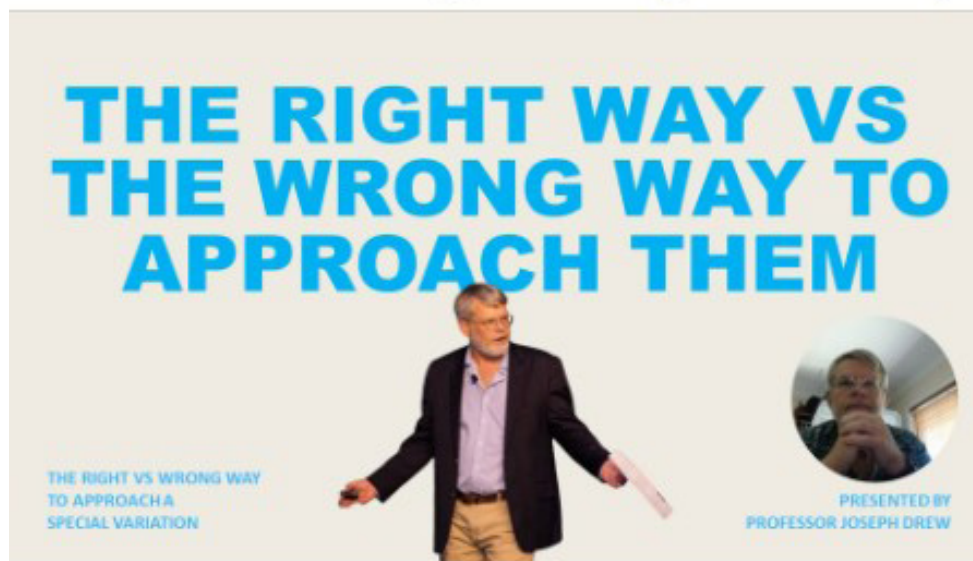
Published by [REDACTED] · September 16 · 🌐

...

Professor Joseph Drew and his team are continuing their investigations and exploring matters necessary to prepare an application for a special variation.

In the meantime, Professor Drew has prepared another video that he has asked us to share. This one is about the right and the wrong way to approach a special variation.

To watch Professor Drew's latest video, visit ➡ www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability



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4

5 comments



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Cessnock City Council

Published by [REDACTED] · September 19 · 🌐

...

Professor Joseph Drew has mentioned that he is happy to answer questions from the community and share his insights as he and his team explore all matters necessary to prepare an application for a special variation.

In this video Professor Drew answers a question that has been asked by several social media users: why engage independent experts to support us with the special variation process?

To watch Professor Drew's latest video or any of his previous videos, visit ⓘ www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability



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8

7 comments



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Cessnock City Council

Published by [redacted] · October 4 ·

...

? QUESTIONS ABOUT FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY 🗨️

Over recent weeks, we've been working to answer your queries surrounding our efforts towards financial sustainability and the work of Professor Drew and his team.

You can find videos from Professor Drew and responses to many frequently asked questions here

📄 <https://www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability>

So our question to you is, do you have any other questions about our efforts towards financial sustainability? If the answer is yes, go and submit it here 📄

<https://together.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financial...>

SPECIAL VARIATION GOT QUESTIONS?



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8 comments 1 share



Cessnock City Council

Published by [redacted] · October 15 ·

...

Professor Joseph Drew and his team have been busy continuing their investigations and exploring matters necessary to prepare an application for a special variation.

In this video Professor Drew details some of the key activities his team has been working on over recent weeks.

To watch Professor Drew's latest video or any of his previous videos, visit 📄

www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability

SOME OF THE THINGS MY TEAM DOES IN A SPECIAL VARIATION



PRESENTED BY
PROFESSOR JOSEPH DREW

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Published by [redacted] · October 18 ·

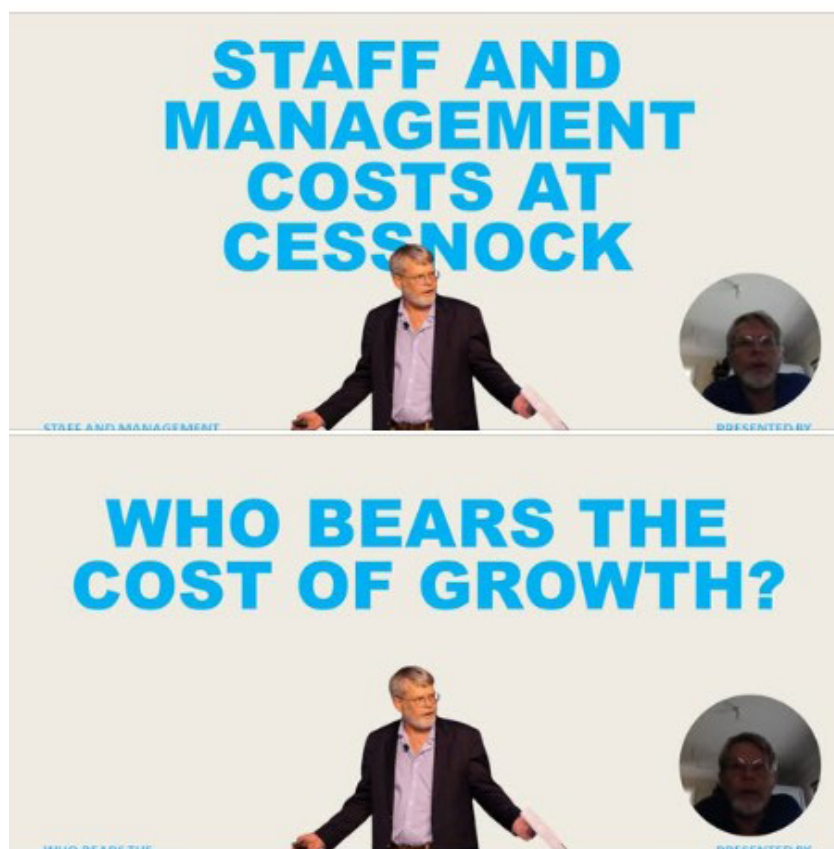
Financial Sustainability - double feature

We have added two new videos on our financial sustainability webpage where Professor Drew answers questions that have come from councillors and members of the community.

In these videos, Professor Drew:

- compares staffing and management costs at Cessnock with other comparable councils; and
- outlines the costs associated with development, and who bears these costs.

To watch Professor Drew's latest videos or any of his previous videos, visit www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability



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Daniel Watton - Mayor of Cessnock and 7 others · 4 comments · 1 share

[Like](#) [Comment](#) [Share](#)

Cessnock City Council
Published by [redacted] · October 27 ·

SPECIAL VARIATION SURVEY NOW OPEN

We've added more resources to our Financial Sustainability page including a fact sheet and survey on the proposed special variation. A printed version of the fact sheet and survey are also being distributed across the LGA, and to ratepayers outside of our area.

Another insightful video from Professor Drew is also live on the page. In this video Professor Drew addresses a comment by a community member on one of our recent posts.

View the new resources and have your say at <https://www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability>



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15 · 17 comments · 5 shares

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Cessnock City Council

Published by [redacted] · October 29 ·

...

Professor Joseph Drew has put together another video answering a question asked in a recent post.

In this video Professor Drew discusses approaching a proposed special variation in the context of facts, evidence and audited financial statements.

To watch Professor Drew's latest video or any of his previous videos, visit www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability



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Cessnock City Council

Published by [redacted] · October 31 ·

...

Distribution of the proposed Special Variation fact sheet and survey to residents, businesses and farms across the Cessnock LGA is now underway. If you'd prefer to complete a physical survey, there are four drop-off locations available:

- Council Administration Building in Cessnock (open Mon-Fri)
- Cessnock Library (open Mon-Sat)
- Kurri Kurri Library (open Mon-Sat)
- Hunter Valley Visitor Information Centre (open 7 days)

You can also mail your completed survey to PO Box 152 Cessnock NSW 2325.

Please ensure your submission is received before Monday 17 November 2025, as Professor Drew will be reviewing responses ahead of the upcoming public meetings, where he'll discuss the results and key themes raised by the community.

Alternatively, you can scan the QR code included on the survey to complete it online, or via the following link: <https://together.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financial...>

Please note: the drop-off locations can be found inside each of the council facilities near the entrance.



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Cessnock City Council

Published by [redacted] · November 5 · 🌐



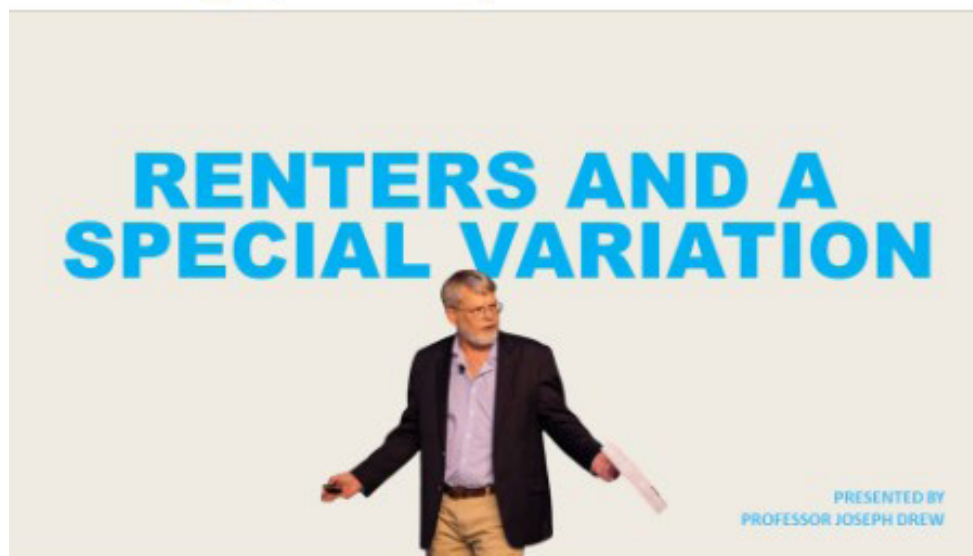
🏠 Renters and a special variation 🏠

The subject of how a special variation could impact renters has been raised in the comments of previous posts.

In this video Professor Drew discusses rental agreements, tax deductions and rates.

To watch Professor Drew's latest video or any of his previous videos, visit ⓘ

www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability



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23 comments 2 shares

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Cessnock City Council

Published by [redacted] · November 6 · 🌐



🗣️ Professor Drew address claims of survey bias !?

In this video Professor Drew discusses bias and own bias, OLG Guidelines, underlying facts and opportunities for input.

To watch Professor Drew's latest video or any of his previous videos, visit ⓘ

www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability



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👍 Like

🗨️ Comment

🔗 Share

33 comments



Cessnock City Council

Published by [redacted] · November 7 · 🌐

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🗣️ A bigger or smaller LGA

In this video Professor Drew responds to comments on a recent post about whether amalgamation or splitting the council into smaller areas would support financial sustainability, and the evidence for each approach.

To watch Professor Drew's latest video or any of his previous videos, visit www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability



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23 comments

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Published by [redacted] · November 9 · 🌐

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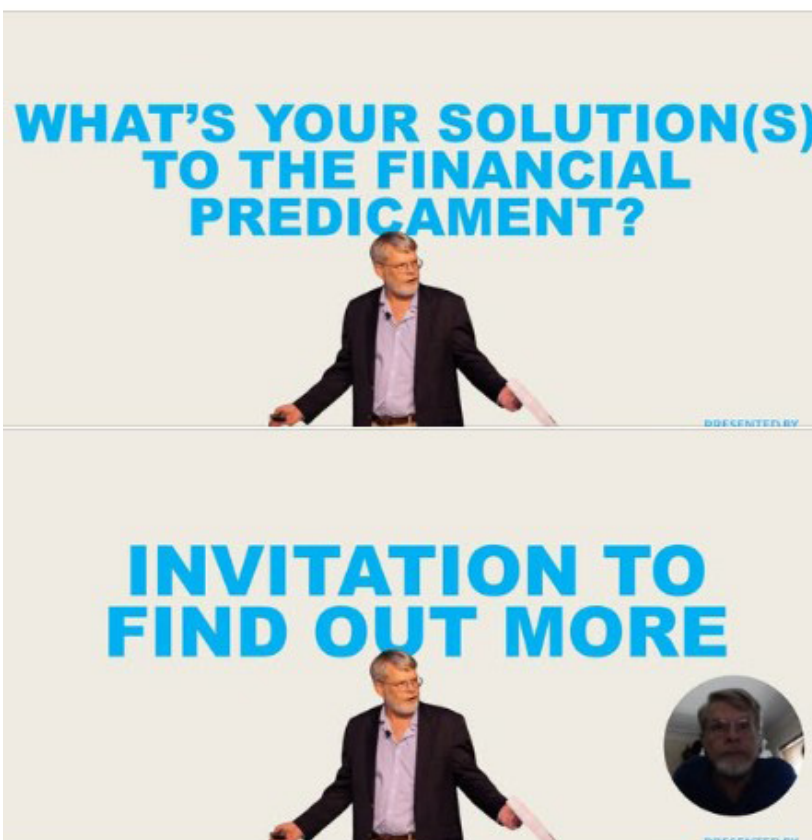
🗣️ Financial Sustainability - double feature

We have added two new videos on our financial sustainability webpage where Professor Drew:

- 💡 discusses the need for solutions to address financial sustainability challenges; and
- 💡 invites you to attend one of the upcoming public meetings.

To watch Professor Drew's latest videos or any of his previous videos, visit www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability

If you are unable to make it to one of the public meetings, we are also holding a digital session on our youtube channel. More details 🗣️ <https://together.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financial...>



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Boost post

👎 1

43 comments

👍 Like

🗣️ Comment

🔗 Share



Cessnock City Council

Published by [redacted] - November 12 -

...

🔴 Comparing average rates 🟡

In his latest video Professor Drew discusses the pitfalls of comparing averages and outlines better approaches.

The video is now live on Council's financial sustainability page 🙌

www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability



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35 comments

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💬 Comment

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Cessnock City Council

Published by [redacted] - November 13 -

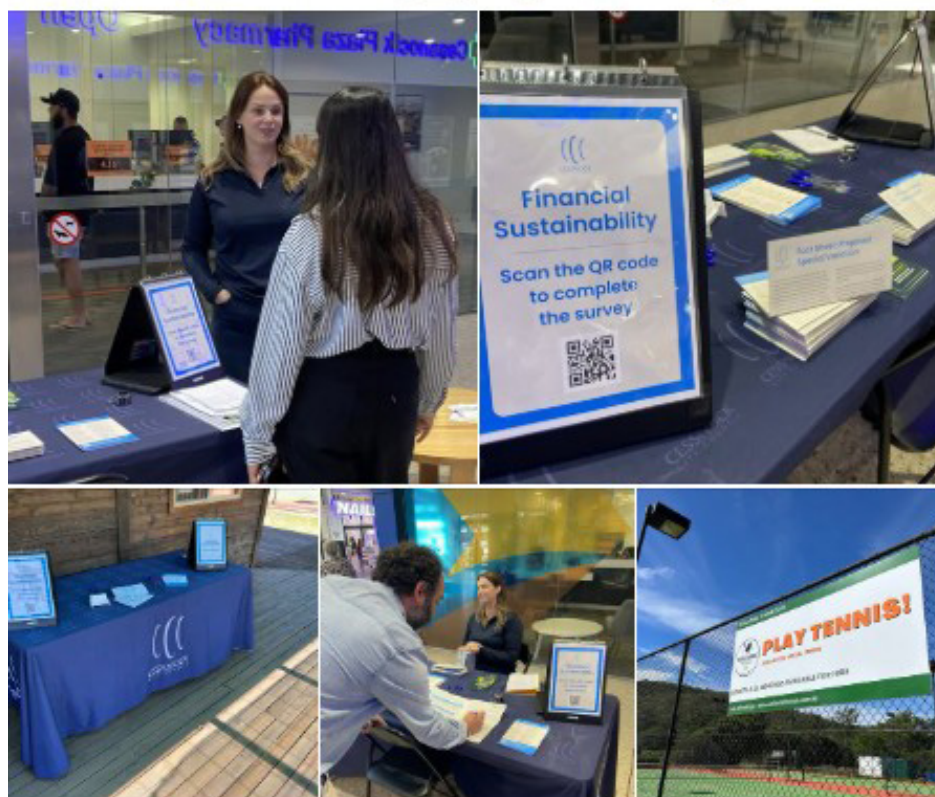
...

🔔 FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY LISTENING POST SERIES KICKS OFF 🗣️

It was great to hear from community members in Cessnock and Wollombi today, where we held the first two sessions in our series of listening posts.

We're holding the sessions to raise awareness of the upcoming public meetings and to hear your feedback.

We have another eight listening posts at locations across the LGA over the coming week and hope to see you there. For times and locations 📍 <https://together.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financial...>



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Boost post

👍👎👤 18

26 comments 8 shares

👍 Like

💬 Comment

➦ Share

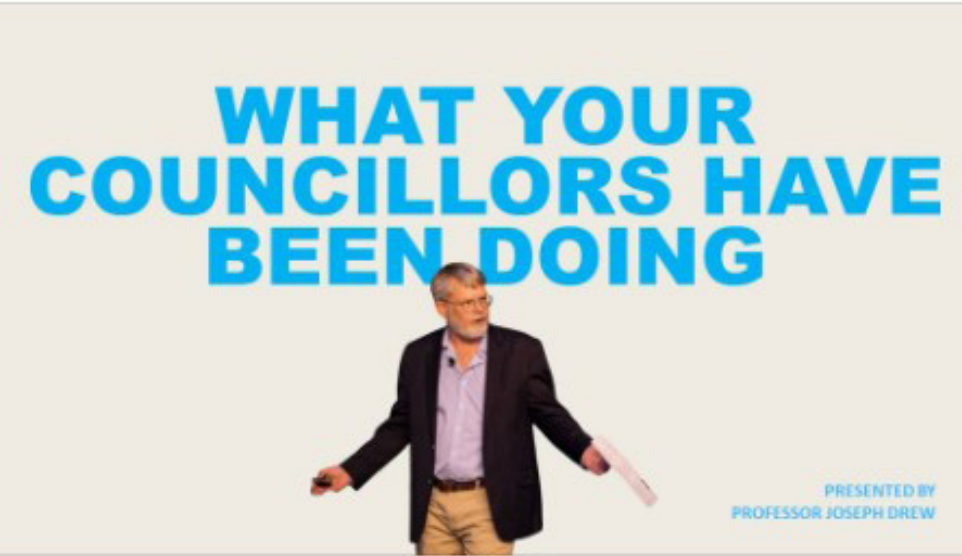
Cessnock City Council
Published by [redacted] · November 17 at 7:10 PM · 🌐

📺 **SURVEY CLOSES TONIGHT & WHAT YOUR COUNCILLORS HAVE BEEN DOING** 🗣️

In a new video, Professor Drew details the active role councillors have played as community representatives as we work towards financial sustainability.

Additionally, there's still time to Have Your Say on the proposed Special Variation, with the community survey closing tonight.

To fill out the online survey or watch Professor Drew's latest video, visit www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability



PRESENTED BY
PROFESSOR JOSEPH DREW

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👍👤 Daniel Watton - Mayor of Cessnock and 19 others 52 comments 2 shares

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Cessnock City Council
Published by [redacted] · November 18 at 6:08 PM · 🌐


SPECIAL VARIATION PUBLIC MEETINGS

Professor Drew is currently reviewing the feedback provided in the community survey ahead of the upcoming public meetings, which will be held across the LGA, according to the below schedule:

- 📅 Friday 21 November
 - 🕒 4pm to 6pm
 - 📍 Wollombi Tennis Club, 2979 Paynes Crossing Road, Wollombi
- 📅 Saturday 22 November
 - 🕒 11am to 1pm
 - 📍 East Cessnock Bowling Club, 6-12 Victoria Street, Cessnock
 - 🕒 5pm to 7pm
 - 📍 Kurri Kurri Senior Citizens Hall, 132 Barton Street, Kurri Kurri
- 📅 Sunday 23 November
 - 🕒 12pm to 2pm
 - 📍 Branxton Community Hall, 35 Bowen Street, Branxton
 - 🕒 6pm to 8pm
 - 📍 East Cessnock Bowling Club, 6-12 Victoria Street, Cessnock
- 📅 Monday 24 November
 - 🕒 5.30pm to 7.30pm
 - 📍 Digital Online Session from Council Chambers, 62-78 Vincent Street, Cessnock and our YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@CessnockCityCouncil>

We encourage everyone to come along to a meeting to learn more and hear responses to the questions raised by our community.

Find out more here 📄 <https://together.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financial...>



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👍👤 Daniel Watton - Mayor of Cessnock and 18 others 15 comments 43 shares

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Cessnock City Council
 Published by [redacted] · November 18 at 7:48 PM · 🌐

⋮


CONTEXT - OTHER COUNCILS AND SV APPLICATIONS 📄

The size of special variation applications by other councils has come up in survey responses, along with an option of delivering an SV over multiple years.


In this video Professor Drew explores these subjects and provides some further context.

To watch Professor Drew's latest video or any of his previous videos, visit www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability ⓘ



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 Published by [redacted] · November 19 at 6:03 PM · 🌐

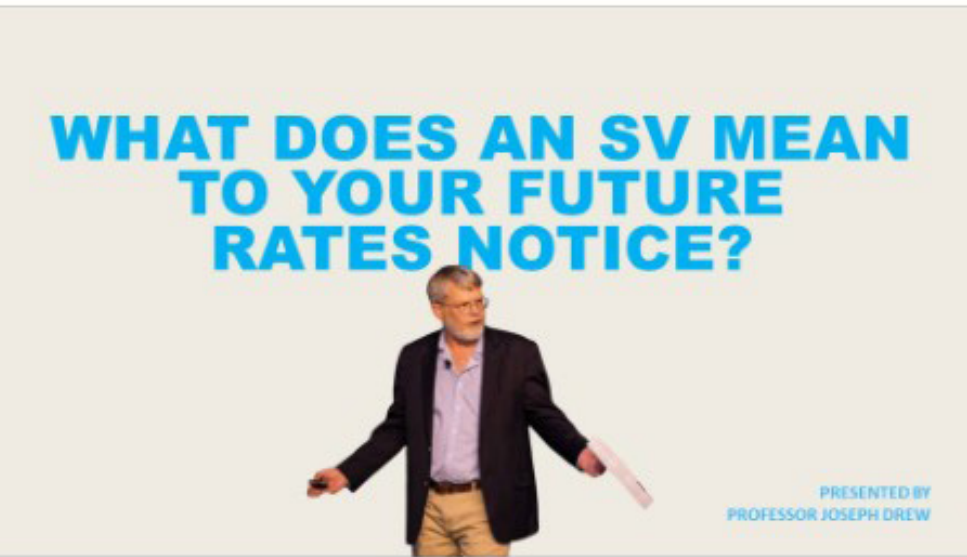
⋮


SV AND A FUTURE RATES NOTICE 📄

There have been many questions about how and where an SV would apply to the different components that make up a rates notice, including at our recent pop up listening posts.


In his latest video Professor Drew gives a break down on what an SV would mean for a future rates notice.

To watch this video or any of Professor Drew's previous videos, visit www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability ⓘ



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30 comments 1 share



Cessnock City Council
 Published by [redacted] · November 20 at 6:27 PM · 🌐


LET'S LOOK AT COST CONTROL ⚠️

The topic of cutting costs has been commonly raised as a solution to financial sustainability challenges in comments here and in survey responses.

In this video, Professor Drew takes a deeper look at the subject of efficiency and cost controls of Cessnock and other comparable councils.

To watch this video or any of Professor Drew's previous videos, visit www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability ⓘ




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Cessnock City Council
 Published by [redacted] · November 21 at 11:30 AM · 🌐

Professor Drew will be addressing common questions and feedback surrounding the special variation proposal.


Special Variation Proposal

Common questions and feedback







CESSNOCK
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28 comments

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 **Cessnock City Council**
Published by [redacted] · November 21 at 3:51 PM · 🌐

Come on down to the Wollombi public meeting on the proposed special variation starting at 4pm.
Details of other public meetings - www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability



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👍👎🗨️ 9

11 comments 1 share

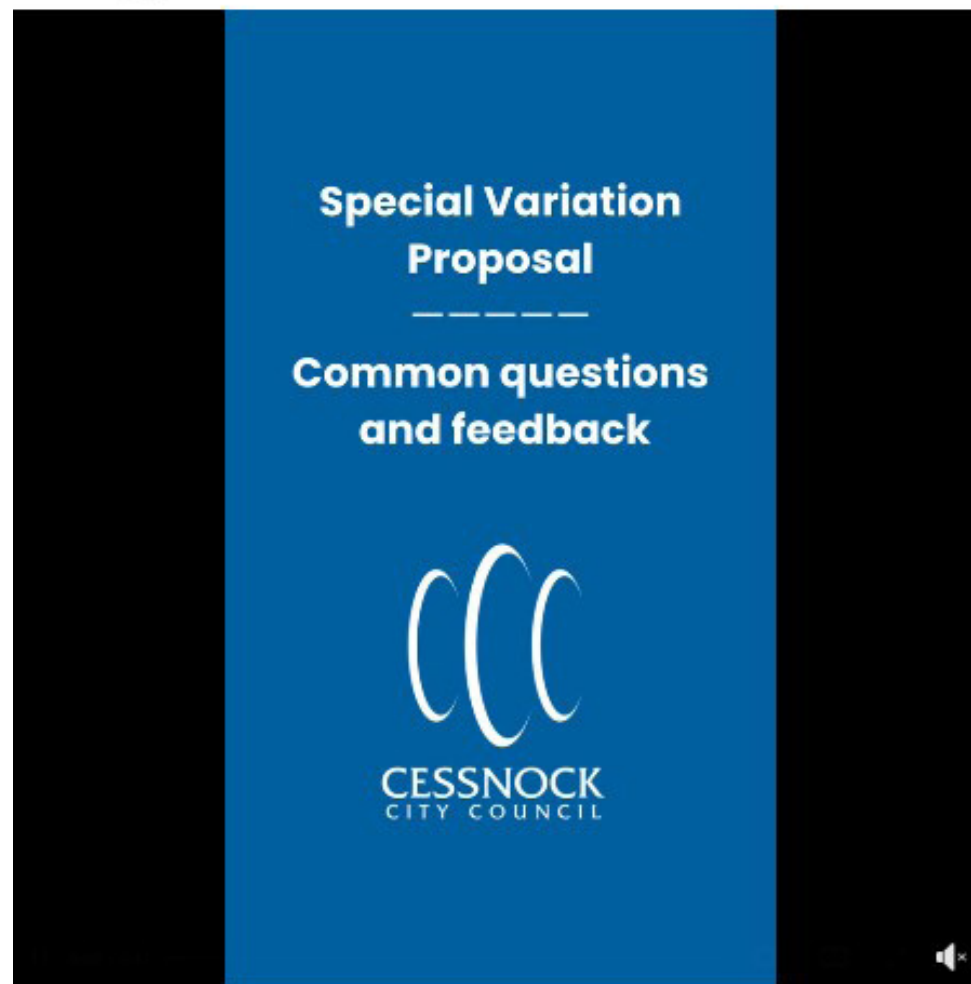
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 **Cessnock City Council**
Published by [redacted] · November 22 at 10:01 AM · 🌐

Professor Drew will be addressing common questions and feedback surrounding the special variation proposal.



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47 comments 3 shares

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 **Cessnock City Council** is at Kurri Kurri Senior Citizens Hall.
Published by [redacted] · November 22 at 4:43 PM · 🌐

We're about to start the Kurri Kurri public meeting on the proposed special variation. Details of other public meetings - www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability



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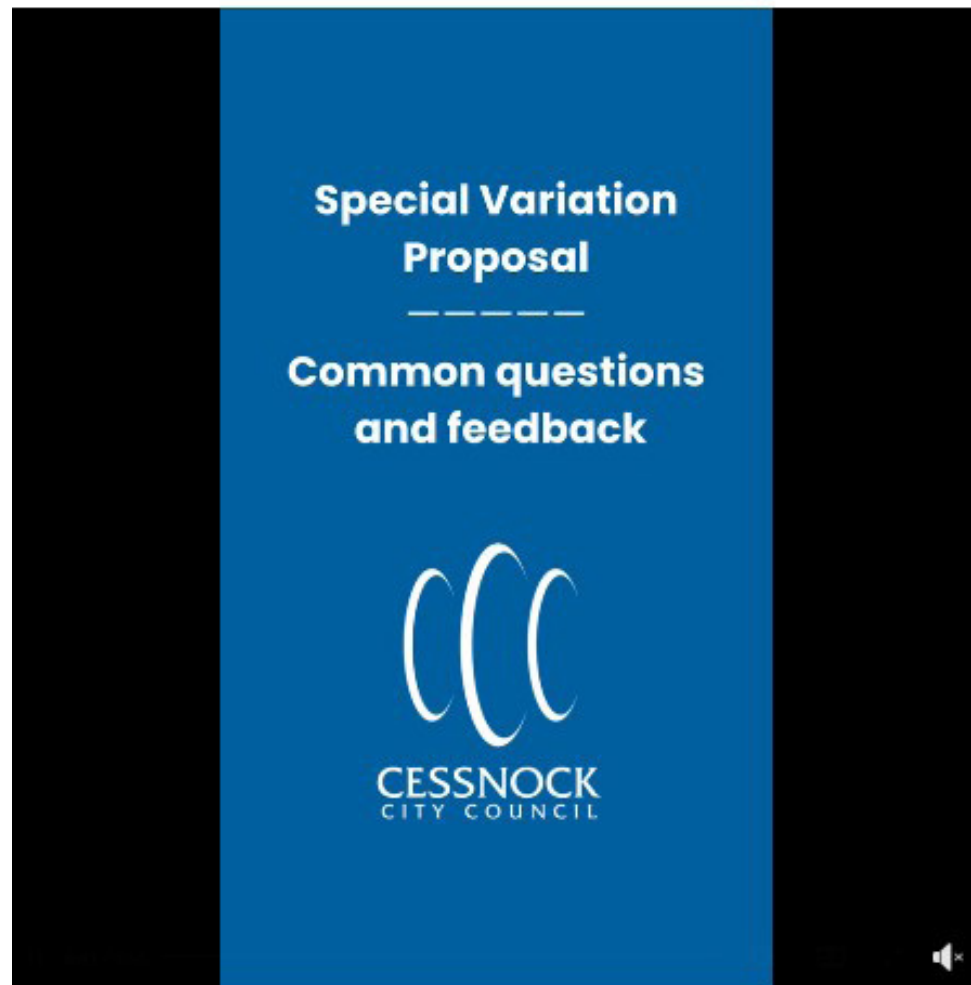
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 **Cessnock City Council**
Published by [redacted] · November 23 at 10:40 AM · 🌐

Professor Drew will be addressing common questions and feedback surrounding the special variation proposal.



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17 comments · 6 shares

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Cessnock City Council is at **Branxton Community Hall.**

Published by [redacted] · November 23 at 11:21 AM ·

We're kicking off our next public meeting in about 45 minutes at Branxton followed by ECBC this evening. Full details here - www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability




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23

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Cessnock City Council

Published by [redacted] · November 24 at 9:53 AM ·



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NSW RFS Lower Hunter and 51 others

51 comments
4 shares

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Cessnock City Council
Published by [redacted] · November 24 at 1:25 PM · 🌐

Professor Drew asked us to share this video with an invitation to join him at the online public meeting this evening at 5.30pm on our youtube channel here:
<https://www.youtube.com/@CessnockCityCouncil>



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87 comments 10 shares

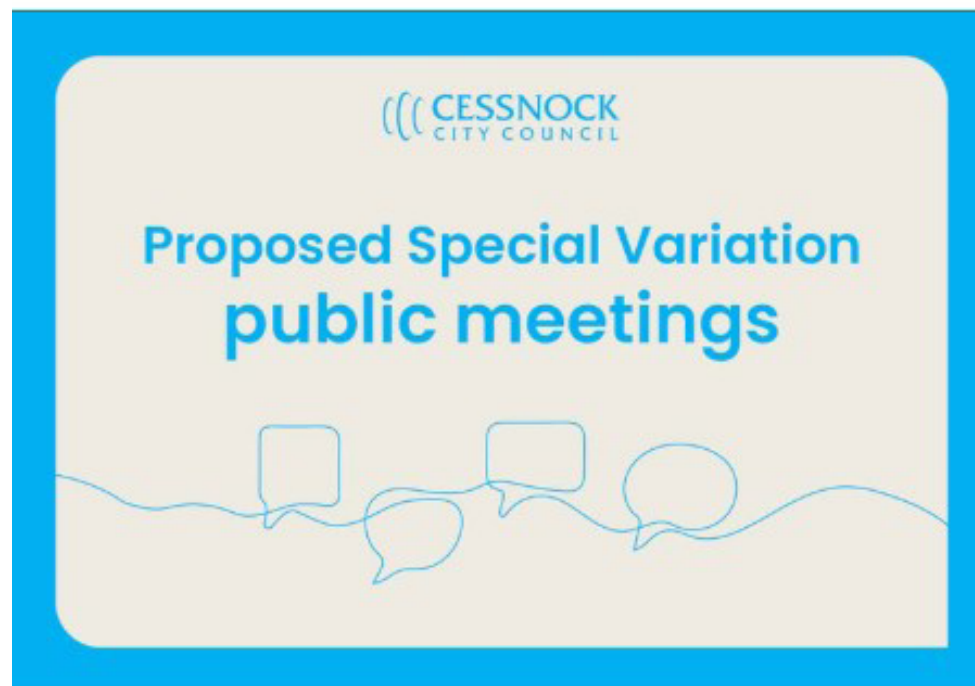
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Cessnock City Council
Published by [redacted] · November 24 at 2:55 PM · 🌐

🔔 REMINDER: Our final Special Variation Public Meeting is on tonight from 5.30pm to 7.30pm.

This session will run mainly online via our Youtube channel to support those who can't attend in person. Limited seating is available in the Council Chambers, but online participants will have priority to ask questions. If time permits after the online Q&A, in-person attendees may also have the chance to ask Professor Drew a question (he will be joining the session remotely as well).

📅 Monday 24 November
🕒 5.30pm to 7.30pm
🌐 <https://www.youtube.com/@CessnockCityCouncil/streams>
📍 Council Chambers, Administration Building
62-78 Vincent Street, entrance via Cumberland Street, Cessnock



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40 comments 5 shares

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Cessnock City Council
December 6 at 8:18 AM · 🌐

...

Additional public meeting – Laguna Community Hall

In light of feedback regarding widespread non-receipt of the Special Variation factsheet in the Wollombi Valley, an additional public meeting is scheduled.

📍 **Laguna Community Hall**

🕒 **4.00pm-6.00pm**

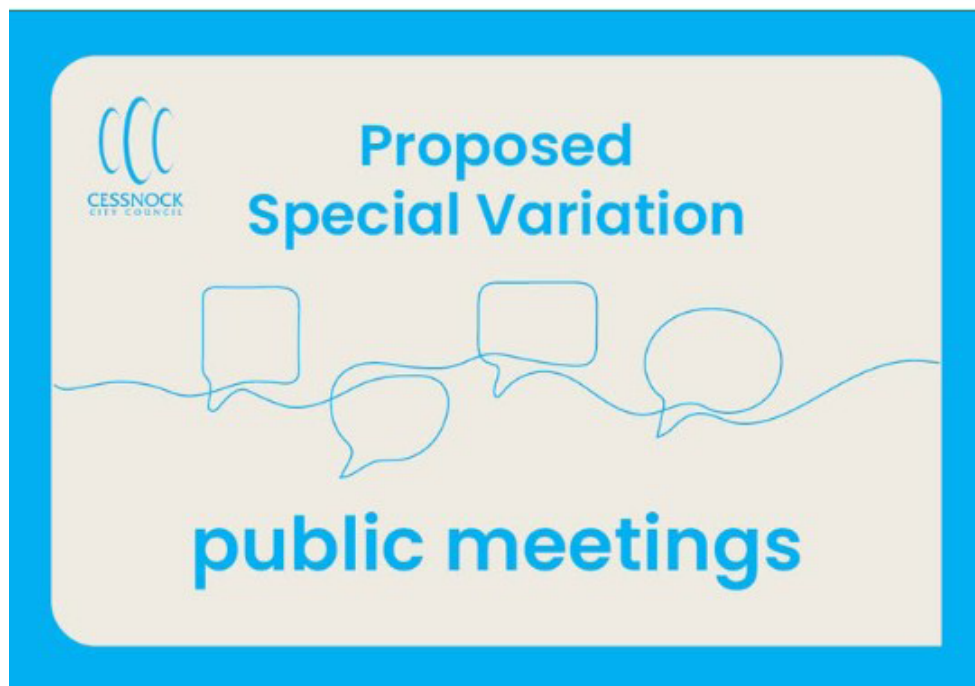
📅 **Tuesday 9 December**

The public meeting will incorporate a presentation followed by a live Q&A with Professor Drew who will be joining remotely.

Special Variation Survey extended to 4pm, Tuesday 9 December

You can return your completed survey at the additional public meeting or use the following link before 4pm, Tuesday 9 December

<https://together.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financial-sustainability-community-consultation>



👍 2

1 comment

👍 Like

💬 Comment

📄 Send



Cessnock City Council

Published by [redacted] · December 10 at 7:17 PM · 🌐

...

Updated Long Term Financial Plan and Hardship Policy

In our ongoing conversation about a proposed special variation, we're often asked about other things we're doing as part of our financial sustainability journey.

Council recently adopted an updated Hardship Policy. The review introduces expanded hardship provisions to provide targeted assistance to both pensioner and non-pensioner ratepayers, and also for valuation-driven rate increases.

Our updated draft Long Term Financial Plan (LTFP) was often raised during our recent public meetings on the proposed special variation and remains on public exhibition until 19 December 2025.

You can find both of these items on the financial sustainability page on Council's website, via the following links: <https://www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability>

Visit the LTFP engagement page here: <https://together.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/long-term-financial...>



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26 comments 1 share

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OTHER OWNED MEDIA ANNEXURE

CFO Update



Last month, Councillors voted to adopt our Community Strategic Plan, which sets out our long-term vision for our region. The CSP paints a picture of optimism for our future, while recognising the challenges we

face as a growing community. We have been upfront for several years about budgetary challenges we are facing as a council.

These budget challenges are largely due to factors such as an ageing and growing asset base, cost shifting by successive state governments, and increases to costs and materials outpacing allowable rate increases set by the state government. These problems are not unique to our Council, and are faced by the vast majority of the local government sector.

We recently completed our 2025 Community Satisfaction Survey. Consistent with previous years, the results show that our community places a high value on the services that we deliver and that they want us to deliver more.

Over the past four years, we have focused on doing just that. We have drawn on reserves to significantly increase our works program and dedicated more funding for important things like road maintenance.

We have a record of careful budget management. The financial situation facing Cessnock City Council is a result of structural challenges baked into how the local government sector operates across NSW. No single decision of our Council has led to this.

Amid these challenges, our Council has remained an efficient organisation when it comes to its people. An independent financial review has found that Cessnock City Council had the absolute lowest staff expenditure when assessed against other comparable councils in each of the past four years.

Cessnock LGA also has the lowest average rate charges in the Hunter relative to land value, and among the lowest rates of comparable councils across the state. If our Council is to continue providing the exceptional services and infrastructure to cater for our rapidly-growing region – and which our community has told us it expects – the structural challenges mentioned above need to be resolved. It's critical that we take steps toward achieving financial sustainability.

It's evident that we don't have a spending problem, but an income one. We will have to address issues on the income side while continuing to review our spending. When we know what that looks like we will have an open and honest conversation with you, as ratepayers, about it.

Matt Plumridge
Chief Financial Officer

Cessnock City News (21/07/25)

Independent expert enlisted to guide financial sustainability

Published on 05 September 2025

Cessnock City Council has engaged an independent expert, Professor Joseph Drew, to support its drive towards financial sustainability.

This significant step in Cessnock City Council's financial sustainability journey involves an extensive consultation process with the community, led by Professor Drew, to explore all relevant factors required for an application to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) for a special variation.



Commencing last week, this latest engagement follows Council's commissioning of the University of Newcastle in late 2024 to undertake a review of its financial sustainability, which was also led by Professor Drew. The work is orientated towards providing Council and IPART with a robust evidence brief and the report will principally be orientated around audited financial data, as well as Australian Bureau of Statistics figures, of Cessnock and other councils.

Professor Drew is a leading scholar in local government finance, previously serving as Professor of Local Government Economics at the University of Newcastle's Institute for Regional Futures and now retired from full-time work. He has an extensive academic background, including qualifications as an accountant, economist, natural law philosopher, and mathematician. Professor Drew has published numerous books and articles in top-tier journals and has consulted for various governments and organisations both in Australia and internationally.

He will be joined in this phase of work by Professors Yunji Kim (Seoul National University), Masato Miyazaki (Saitama University) and Diogo Culhna Ferreira (Lisbon University).

Cessnock City Mayor Dan Watton stressed the importance of independent expertise to guide Council's drive towards financial sustainability, and welcomed the engagement of Professor Drew and his team of three scholars.

"As a fast-growing local government area, Council finances are increasingly under pressure as we work to deliver the range of quality services and infrastructure expected by our community," said Cllr Watton.

"These budget challenges are largely due to factors such as an ageing and growing asset base, cost shifting by successive state governments, and increases to costs and materials outpacing allowable rate increases capped by the state government.

"These problems are not unique to our Council, and are faced by the vast majority of the local government sector.

"It's vital that Council continues to do the work to achieve a financially sustainable future, and the independent advice from Professor Drew's team will provide the foundations to make informed decisions guided by the best evidence."

Professor Drew will be leading a series of community engagement sessions in November. In the meantime, [visit this webpage for more information](#).

Tagged as:

Media Releases

Independent expert enlisted to guide financial sustainability



Professor Joseph Drew

You would have heard that we're working towards a financially sustainable future at Cessnock City Council.

We've engaged independent expert Professor Joseph Drew and his team to explore the matters necessary to prepare an application to IPART for a special variation and undertake community consultation to support our drive towards financial sustainability.

This significant step comes after Council commissioned the University of Newcastle in late 2024 to undertake a review of its financial sustainability, which was also led by Professor Drew. The current work is aimed at providing Council and IPART with a robust evidence brief and the report will principally be orientated around audited financial data, as well as Australian Bureau of Statistics figures, of Cessnock and other councils.

Professor Drew is a leading scholar in local government finance, previously serving as Professor of Local Government Economics at the University of Newcastle's Institute for Regional Futures and is now retired from full-time work. He has an extensive academic background, including qualifications as an accountant, economist, natural law philosopher, and mathematician. Professor Drew has published numerous books and articles in top-tier journals and has consulted for various governments and organisations both in Australia and internationally.

[Click here for more information including FAQs and helpful video content](#)

Cessnock City eNews (17/09/25)

Mayoral Column - 5 November 2025

Published on 05 November 2025

You would have heard that Cessnock City Council has indicated it intends to apply to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) for a Special Variation on rates for next financial year, with rigorous work currently taking place by independent experts.



Earlier this year, Council engaged Professor Joseph Drew and his team of three professors to support our drive towards financial sustainability. Their investigation, analysing audited financial data, will form the basis for an application to IPART. In the latest important step in this process, Councillors voted to commence an extensive community consultation.

The distribution of a fact sheet and survey is underway across the LGA. I urge residents to read-up on the issue and look at the data and independent analysis with an open mind.

We'll be holding a range of face-to-face opportunities in November, including six public meetings and 10 pop-up sessions.

The six public meetings are:

Friday 21 November

4pm to 6pm – Wollombi Tennis Club

Saturday 22 November

11am to 1pm – East Cessnock Bowling Club

5pm to 7pm – Kurri Kurri Senior Citizens Centre

Sunday 23 November

12pm to 2pm – Branxton Community Hall

6pm to 8pm – East Cessnock Bowling Club

Monday 24 November

5.30pm to 7.30pm – Council Chambers (digital session via Council's YouTube channel)

The pop-up sessions are scheduled between 13-19 November at locations around the LGA. Check out Council's Financial Sustainability webpage (www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability) for the details. You'll also find plenty of resources on the page including the financial sustainability report, FAQs, useful videos recorded by Professor Drew, and a digital version of the fact sheet and survey.

Our extensive community consultation is designed to support accessibility and provide broad avenues for community participation. A final decision is yet to be made and community feedback is important.

Meanwhile, Council is calling on passionate young people aged 11 to 18 who live, work or study in Cessnock LGA to apply for the 2026 Youth Ambassador Program. The voices of young people are very important in our community and this program gives youth representatives a unique platform to influence local decision-making and help shape the future of services and initiatives relevant to them and their peers. I encourage those interested to apply by 17 November via the expression of interest form on Council's website. Parent/guardian consent is required.

The holiday season is approaching so now is the time to get your best singing voice ready for Carols in the Park at Cessnock Sportsground on Friday 5 December. Gates open at 5pm, carols start at 6.30pm, and fireworks are at 9pm. Bring a picnic rug, family and friends, and some Christmas cheer! [Visit the Carols event page here](#), for more information on this free, family-friendly event.

Tagged as:

Mayoral Column

Special Rate Variation Information

Council has indicated we intend to apply to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) for a Special Variation on rates for next financial year, with independent experts Professor Joseph Drew and his team of three professors engaged to support our drive towards financial sustainability.

We have commenced extensive community consultation. The distribution of a fact sheet and survey is underway across the LGA, and six public meetings and 10 pop-up sessions have been organised and will be held later in November. Details can be found on Council's Financial Sustainability [webpage](#), where you'll also find plenty of resources including the financial sustainability report, FAQs, useful videos, and a digital version of the factsheet and survey.

Our extensive community consultation is designed to support accessibility and provide broad avenues for community participation. A final decision is yet to be made and community feedback is important.



Environment and Waste eNewsletter (3/11/25)

Have Your Say on Council's Proposed Rate Change

Council has indicated we intend to apply to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) for a Special Variation on rates for next financial year, with independent experts Professor Joseph Drew and his team of three professors engaged to support our drive towards financial sustainability.

Extensive community consultation is well underway, with the distribution of a fact sheet and survey across the LGA. A series of 10 listening post pop-up sessions has begun ahead of six public meetings scheduled from 21 to 24 November (including a digital session to be webcast on Council's YouTube channel). Details can be found on Council's Financial Sustainability [webpage](#), where you'll also find plenty of resources including the financial sustainability report, FAQs, useful videos, and a digital version of the fact sheet and survey.

Our extensive community consultation is designed to support accessibility and provide broad avenues for community participation. A final decision is yet to be made and community feedback is important.

Advance Greater Cessnock eNews (16/11/25)

Public meetings on Special Variation proposal



Council has indicated we intend to apply to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) for a Special Variation on rates for next financial year, with independent experts Professor Joseph Drew and his team of three professors engaged to support our drive towards financial sustainability.

Extensive community consultation is well underway, with six public meetings scheduled to take place across the LGA from 21 to 24 November (including a digital session to be webcast on Council's YouTube channel). These meetings, which will include a presentation by Professor Drew and an opportunity to ask him questions, follow 10 listening post style pop-up sessions at various locations and a community survey. Details about the upcoming meetings can be found on [Council's Financial Sustainability webpage](#), where you'll also find plenty of resources including the financial sustainability report, FAQs, useful videos, and a digital version of the fact sheet.

Our extensive community consultation is designed to support accessibility and provide broad avenues for community participation. A final decision is yet to be made and community feedback is important.

[Click here to visit Council's YouTube channel, where you can stream the 24 November public meeting](#)

Cessnock City eNews (19/11/25)



MEDIA ANNEXURE

Independent report calls on council to raise rates

Alanna Tomazin

CESSNOCK council faces a "serious financial sustainability challenge" and the "community simply cannot afford any further delay", an independent report has found.

Council commissioned the report by the University of Newcastle's Institute for Regional Futures, which has suggested council rates would need to increase for the area to meet financial sustainability needs.

Severe revenue constraints, compounded by cost pressures related to growth, state government policies and ageing infrastructure, are driving significant challenges.

Professors behind the report called on Cessnock City Council to put forward a Special Rate Variation (SRV) proposal for the round closing February 2026.

An SRV is a formal request made by a local council to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) to increase property rates above the standard rate cap set by the state government.

"Every year that a council puts off collecting a reasonable quantum of taxation is a year that ultimately will have to be caught up on," the report said.

"It would thus be prudent for council to get on the front foot and take appropriate action to permanently alter its revenue path as soon as possible. Delays will only increase the pain and costs down the track."

The council discussed the adoption of an SRV application to be made at its April meeting, but said this would need to be determined at a future date after the next report was completed.

Nine councillors voted for and one against, for the general manager to engage the independent advisor to provide further advice to the council on the potential for an SRV and report to the council on the recommendations of the advisor before any decision is made on an SRV application.

A Cessnock City Council spokesperson said the council faced budgetary pressures due to the structural challenges of the local government sector in NSW.

The initial findings of the report suspected council executives were aware of the issue for many years, but had delayed action in an effort to be kind to ratepayers.

Newcastle Herald
(3/07/25)

CESSNOCK COUNCIL

Newcastle Herald
(10/07/25)

Councillor opposes external advice on city's financial status

Alanna Tomazin

A CESSNOCK councillor has pushed back on calls to engage an independent advisor to do the work he says council staff are capable of.

Councillor Quintin King voted against a motion for the general manager to engage the University of Newcastle to provide further advice to Cessnock City Council on the potential for a rate rise after its independent report found Cessnock faces a "serious financial stability challenge".

Nine councillors voted for further investigations to take place to determine if the council should make an application to lift rates by more than the statewide cap before the February 2026 deadline.

"The reason I voted against that is because we've already got very capable accountants, in my view, on the payroll," Cr King said.

"I don't believe we need to pay \$90,000 for someone else to come and tell us something that we already know, but that's just my opinion."

Cr King said he had several concerns regarding "how council is going about this".

"... because we just passed a lot of our Integrated Planning and Reporting documents which is delivery program, operational plan and long-term financial plan ... my view is there wasn't too many efforts being made to look for savings," he said.

He said he would like the council to look internally for any excess where savings can be made.

"And then, when we consider a special rate variation, the burden on ratepayers wouldn't be as great as it would otherwise be. That's my only beef with it; I haven't taken any predetermined decision," he said.

Cr King said the general public may not be aware that only about 30 per cent of the council's expenses are covered by rates.

"... which is why we find ourselves in this position now, because we're set at a rate peg and that rate peg does not always keep up with inflation," he said.

Cr King said residents may be feeling the stress as everything continued to rise in cost.

"It's electricity costs ... everything is going up. This would be an extra cost again. I just want to make sure that we do everything reasonably possible to lighten that burden on residents," he said.

He encouraged residents to speak up with their concerns by contacting the council.

Council commissioned the April 2025 report by the University of Newcastle's Institute for Regional Futures, which suggested council rates would need to increase in order to meet financial sustainability needs.

Revenue constraints, compounded by cost pressures related to growth, state government policies, and an ageing infrastructure, are driving challenges for the council.

Economics experts called in to advise on proposed rate rise

Simon McCarthy

A HUNTER council will pay to bring in a team of independent local government finance experts to advise on its application to lift rates above the annual cap.

Cessnock City Council has been mulling a rate increase since late last year when it commissioned the University of Newcastle's Institute for Regional Futures to review its financial sustainability.

Now, retired economics professor Joseph Drew, who led the review, finding the council faced a "serious financial sustainability challenge" and the "community simply cannot afford any further delay", will head up a team of three scholars who will guide the council's application, due in February.

Cessnock was the fastest-growing council outside of Sydney in 2024, demographic data has shown, driven by long-term internal migration trends from the cities to the regions, which sped up during the COVID pandemic.

Cessnock's population has grown between 30 and almost 50 per cent in the past two decades, according to data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

New housing approvals, which correlate to the potential for increased local government costs, also outpaced surrounding Hunter councils between 2023 and 2024.

As residents flock to the regions, a state parliamentary inquiry in 2024 found

keeping financial sustainability was the most pressing modern challenge for local governments as councils shoulder costs that were once propped up by state and federal counterparts, while federal assistance grants as a portion of federal taxes collected have halved over the last 30 years.

Council voted to approve bringing in an "independent adviser" after considering the university's review in May. But dissenting councillor Quintin King, who was the only vote against the plan, argued the cost of independent advice was steep to do the work council staff could handle internally.

"We've already got very capable accountants, in my view, on the payroll," Cr King said at the time.

Dr Drew will lead a team of three academics from universities in Seoul, Saitama and Lisbon to "explore all relevant factors required for an application" for a rates rise, the council said.

"As a fast-growing local government area, council finances are increasingly under pressure as we work to deliver the range of quality services and infrastructure expected by our community," mayor Dan Watton said.

"These problems are not unique to our council, and are faced by the vast majority of the local government sector. The independent advice from Professor Drew's team will provide the foundation to make informed decisions guided by the best evidence."



Independent expert enlisted to guide Cessnock's financial sustainability

ROD THOMPSON

SEPTEMBER 9, 2025

Cessnock City Council is enlisting the help of an independent expert to guide its financial sustainability moving forward.

Professor Joseph Drew will be joined by Professors Yunji Kim (Seoul National University), Masato Miyazaki (Saitama University) and Diogo Cuhna Ferreira (Lisbon University) in leading an extensive consultation process with the community.

They'll explore all relevant factors required for an application to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) for a special variation.

This latest engagement follows council's commissioning of the University of Newcastle (UoN) in late 2024 to undertake a review of its fiscal long-term stability.

Council calls extraordinary meeting to discuss rate hike

Gabriel Fowler

A HUNTER council has called an extraordinary meeting to discuss a significant rate hike for residents.

Cessnock councillors will meet on Wednesday, with council staff recommending they endorse a proposal to start the process for a special rate variation.

The council is citing "financial sustainability challenges", saying that without more revenue, it will not be able to maintain service levels, invest in asset

renewal and achieve long-term sustainability.

The council engaged a team of independent local government finance experts, led by economics professor Joseph Drew, to advise on its financial situation and the need and merit of making an application to lift rates above the annual cap.

The report found the community could not afford "any further delay".

The issue will come before the council at a meeting on Wednesday, where councillors will discuss

whether or not to take the next step, which is to notify the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) of its intention to consider a special variation application.

Before any application can be made, IPART and the Office of Local Government require the council to consult with the community. The council's approval on Wednesday night would set in motion a "comprehensive community engagement process" to gauge community awareness, sentiment and willingness to support a rise.

Debate has already begun online after the agenda was posted on social media and has attracted plenty of comments, most of them from people opposed to the idea.

The consultation will involve sending out a fact sheet and survey to every household, farm and business in the area, as well as to ratepayers living outside the Cessnock local government area.

There will also be four community information sessions and engagement

sessions during which people can learn more about what the rate variation would fund, how it aligns with the community's priorities, and what the council intends to do to pursue efficiencies and cost savings, as well as the implications of going without a rise.

Cessnock council has been mulling a rate increase since late last year, when it commissioned the University of Newcastle's Institute for Regional Futures to review its financial sustainability. Cessnock was the

fastest-growing council outside of Sydney in 2024, demographic data has shown, driven by long-term internal migration trends from the cities to the regions, which sped up during the COVID pandemic.

IPART, which annually caps council rates, is expected to review applications for special rate variations above the annual rate peg between February and May next year.

Most Hunter councils received an additional hike due to their growing population.



Newcastle Herald (5/11/25)

Opportunity to Understand and Comment on Special Rate Variation

Council has indicated it intends to apply to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) for a Special Variation on rates for next financial year, with rigorous work taking place by independent experts.

We have been working with Professor Joseph Drew and his team of three professors to support our drive towards financial sustainability. Their investigation, analysing audited financial data, will form the basis for an application to IPART.

We have now started extensive community consultation and are distributing a fact sheet and survey across the LGA. I urge residents to read-up on the issue and look at the data and independent analysis with an open mind.

We are holding a range of face-

to-face opportunities in November, including six public meetings and 10 pop-up sessions.

The six public meetings are:

Friday, November 21: 4pm to 6pm

– Wollombi Tennis Club

Saturday, November 22: 11am to

1pm – East Cessnock Bowling Club

and 5pm to 7pm – Kurri Kurri Senior

Citizens Centre

Sunday, November 23: 12pm to

2pm – Branxton Community Hall and

6pm to 8pm – East Cessnock Bowling

Club

Monday, November 24: 5.30pm

to 7.30pm – Council Chambers

(digital session via Council's YouTube channel)

The pop-up sessions will run until

November 19 across the LGA. Check

out Council's Financial Sustainability

webpage for details ([www.cessnock.](http://www.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability)



BY CESSNOCK CITY MAYOR
DANIEL WATTON

nsw.gov.au/financialsustainability), where you'll also find other resources.

Our extensive community consultation is designed to support accessibility and provide broad avenues for community participation. A final decision is yet to be made and community feedback is important.

Cessnock's massive rates rise plan to sort finances

Gabriel Fowler

IT'S time to talk about a potential rate rise of nearly 40 per cent thanks to years of cost-shifting, waste levies, and the inability of former councils and governments to keep pace, says Cessnock mayor Daniel Watton.

That increase is worth about \$535 to the average ratepayer, increasing their annual rates from \$1343 to \$1878 and moving Cessnock City Council to the top of the Hunter councils' food chain. If approved, the 39.9 per cent increase would bring in an additional \$20 million per annum.

However, Councillor Watton says, in truth, the increase is worth only \$17 million because of the \$3 million it costs the council to pay the state government's waste levy.

Cessnock City Council is classified as a Metropolitan Levy Area for the purposes of determining fees and levies. That means it is charged \$174 per tonne of waste, the same rate applied to inner Sydney councils. In contrast, the Regional Levy Area councils are charged \$100 per tonne. The council is hoping that Cessnock MP Clayton Barr's representations to Minister for Climate Change, Energy, and the Environment Penny Sharpe will result in a meeting with her.

"It's a really good time to remind the community what impacts our bottom line as a council, such as this unfair levy," Cr Watton said. "If they agree this isn't right,

they should contact their MP as well, rather than it coming from a whingeing councillor or a whingeing mayor."

The council is hosting forums with Professor Joseph Drew, who has done a forensic analysis of the council's financials, as part of its community consultation process before making its application to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal for a special rate variation.

"It's one of those things we couldn't kick down the road any further," Cr Watton said.

"A lot of councils do have to go through this process very unfairly. I think it's a result of cost-shifting from state onto local councils when you consider that with our particular council, rates take care of 30 per cent of our income, the rest is supposed to be made up of grants.

"But we've got 40 tonnes of waste going through our waste facility. That's \$3 million."

Cr Watton said Cessnock was the fastest growing local government area in NSW and is shouldering heavy housing targets imposed at the state and federal government levels, but the costs of infrastructure associated with that growth are falling to the council.

"When Cessnock was built, they didn't build roads intended to facilitate 70,000 people, and that will hit 120,000 by 2040 or more," Cr Watton said. "I don't think they envisaged that."

Public consultation to begin on possible Cessnock rate hike

Cessnock councillors have endorsed a recommendation to begin community consultation on a possible rate increase, authorising the General Manager to notify the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) of Council's intention to consider a Special Variation application.

The move marks the first formal step in exploring a potential rate rise, focusing on community engagement and transparency before any decision is made. While no rate increase has been approved, the decision enables Council to begin discussions with residents about the city's financial future.

The proposal follows concerns raised in the University of Newcastle's Institute for Regional Futures report, which highlighted ongoing financial sustainability challenges for Cessnock City Council. In April this year, councillors agreed to seek independent advice on whether a Special Rate Variation (SRV) might be needed to secure long-term stability. Under the Local Government Act 1993, councils can apply to IPART for permission to raise income above the annual rate peg. However, before an application can proceed, councils must conduct meaningful consultation to

demonstrate community understanding and support for the proposal and its potential impacts.

Council's recent Financial Sustainability Review and Long-Term Financial Plan identified a structural funding gap that could affect its ability to maintain service levels, renew infrastructure, and ensure long-term stability. The consultation period will give residents a chance to learn about these challenges, explore potential options, and express their views on whether a Special Rate Variation should be pursued.

Cessnock mayor, Dan Watton, said that he would urge all residents and ratepayers to... consider attending one of the six upcoming public meetings. "I'd also reiterate that a final decision is yet to be made and community feedback is important." Councillor James Hawkins described the process as a vital step in ensuring transparency.

"This is the consultation phase of Council's long-term financial sustainability process," Cr Hawkins said. "I hope everyone takes an interest in the information that independent finance experts have investigated and published. Council will be facilitating drop-in information sessions throughout the LGA, as well as online interaction

with Professor Drew and his team, Council's website, and social media platforms."

Cr Hawkins said staff already work efficiently with limited resources, noting this would be the first Special Rate Variation in many years. "The situation is the cumulative result of rate pegging that's been in place since 1977," he said.

"Councils across the state are putting forward their cases for an SRV, and IPART looks at each on its individual circumstances." Councillor Mitchell Hill said rising costs and decades of restricted rate growth had left councils across NSW facing difficult choices.

"Many past councils have confronted the need for increases in revenue in the face of NSW Government-imposed rate caps and ongoing increases in cost shifting and operational expenses," Cr Hill said. "Often, a choice has been made to 'tighten the belt' where possible, and not increase rates in an effort to reduce financial burdens on the community."

He said that after years of holding off on rate adjustments, "very few savings can be found within the organisation," adding that the upcoming consultation would allow residents to "hear directly about the financial sustainability of their



council, give feedback on a proposed special variation, and hear how additional funds would be used to continue delivering services." Councillor Mitchell Lea said he was pleased the public would have an opportunity to participate. "I'm glad the community will get to have their say," he said. Councillor Sophie Palmowski also welcomed the consultation, describing it as a rare chance for residents to influence how their money is spent.

"It's not often the community has the opportunity to influence how their hard-earned money is spent through

rates or taxes," Cr Palmowski said. "This consultation provides residents with a genuine chance to share their views on an issue that directly affects them." Online discussion on local social media forums appears largely unified in opposing any rate increase, with many residents expressing concern about the cost of living and Council's financial management. Community consultation will now begin, with information sessions and surveys planned to gather feedback. The results will guide councillors on whether to proceed with a formal Special Variation application to IPART later this financial year.

Local Government Rate Increases

Cessnock City Council, like many regional councils, is struggling to continue offering to residents the level of service that they expect. This is simply a cost-of-living crisis. Over the few years, households have experienced the same pressures; that is, the cost of everyday living expenses have risen faster than their wages. Councils have had the same problem; the cost of their resources that they have to buy, have risen faster than the CPI – the measure of inflation. As all Cessnock City Council LGA residents would attest to, the rates charged by Council in recent years have remained fairly constant; whereas, the cost of roadworks and residential services have increased by a much greater amount. It has now reached the point where Council needs to increase rates by a significant amount; probably by as much as forty per cent in order to continue with the same level of services and to fix our many local roads that are in urgent need of repair.



Fr Raphael



Fr Solomon

Ideally, rates should have been increasing by say five percent per annum instead of hardly moving at all over the last decade. This means that now we have to take the rates to a

much higher level. Before this happens, Council are holding a series of information sessions in order to explain the situation to residents. There will be six formal public meetings, the first one being held today, November 21, at Wollombi Tennis Club from four to five this afternoon. The next one will be tomorrow, November 22, at the East Cessnock Bowling Club (ECBC) from eleven am to one pm. Also tomorrow, at Kurri Kurri Senior Citizens Centre from five to seven in the evening. Then again on Sunday, November 23, at the Branxton Community Hall from twelve noon to two pm and at the ECBC again from six to eight in the evening. Lastly,

on Monday, November 24, at the Council Chambers in the form of a digital session via Council's YouTube channel.

Fr Solomon and Fr Raphael

Members say



Dan Watton
Cessnock City Council Mayor

You would have heard that Cessnock City Council has indicated it intends to apply to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) for a Special Variation on rates for next financial year, with rigorous work currently taking place by independent experts. Earlier this year, Council engaged Professor Joseph Drew and his team of three professors to support our drive towards financial sustainability. Their investigation, analysing audited financial data, will form the basis for an application to IPART. In the latest important step in this process, Councillors voted to commence an extensive community consultation. The distribution of a fact sheet and survey is underway across the LGA. I urge residents to read-up on the issue and look at the data and independent analysis with an open mind. We'll be holding a range of face-to-face opportunities in November, including six public meetings and 10 pop-up sessions. The six public meetings are:

Friday 21 November: 4pm to 6pm – Wollombi Tennis Club
Saturday 22 November: 11am to 1pm – East Cessnock Bowling Club
5pm to 7pm – Kurri Kurri Senior Citizens Centre
Sunday 23 November: 12pm to 2pm – Branxton Community Hall
6pm to 8pm – East Cessnock Bowling Club
Monday 24 November: 5.30pm to 7.30pm – Council Chambers (digital session via Council's YouTube channel)
The pop-up sessions are scheduled between 13-19 November at locations around the LGA. Check out Council's Financial Sustainability webpage (www.cessnocknsw.gov.au/financialsustainability) for the details. You'll also find plenty of resources on the page including the financial sustainability report, FAQs, useful videos recorded by Professor Drew, and a digital version of the fact sheet and survey. Our extensive community

support accessibility and provide broad avenues for community participation. A final decision is yet to be made and community feedback is important. Meanwhile, Council is calling on passionate young people aged 11 to 18 who live, work or study in Cessnock LGA to apply for the 2026 Youth Ambassador Program. The voices of young people are very important in our community and this program gives youth representatives a unique platform to influence local decision-making and help shape the future of services and initiatives relevant to them and their peers. I encourage those interested to apply by 17 November via the expression of interest form on Council's website. Parent/guardian consent is required.

The holiday season is approaching so now is the time to get your best singing voice ready for Carols in the Park at Cessnock Sportsground on Friday 5 December. Gates open at 5pm, carols start at 6.30pm, and fireworks are at 9pm. Bring a picnic rug, family and friends, and some Christmas cheer! Visit cessnocknsw.gov.au/carols2025 for more information on this free, family-friendly event.

Cheers, Dan



Phillip Penfold, Mayor of Maitland

The weather is warming up, and so is Maitland's events calendar. Lace up your skates and roll into a night fun at the Maitland Roller Disco at Harold Gregson Reserve. Skaters of all abilities are welcome to enjoy an evening of music, tasty treats from a variety of food trucks and a live DJ spinning tunes as you glide around the rink. Food lovers can also mark their calendars for Street Eats, returning to Bakers Brickyard Park in Raworth on Friday 21 November from 5pm to 8pm. Bring a picnic rug and enjoy a relaxed evening of delicious food, live music and family-friendly entertainment. With the Christmas countdown underway, it's also the perfect time to start your festive shopping at The Levee's Black

NOTICE TO THE WOLLOMBI VALLEY COMMUNITY

Committee members of the Wollombi Valley Chamber of Commerce and the Wollombi Valley Community Association attended a meeting arranged by Cessnock Council at Wollombi Tennis Club on 21 November 2025 in relation to Council's proposed Special Rate Variation.

Notwithstanding the manner in which the meeting was organised and conducted, we understand that budget repair is required to address Council's financial situation and to support its sustainability into the future. 38 Councils in NSW have applied for Special Rate Variations over the last 5 years, citing inflation, especially in relation to the cost of maintaining infrastructure and operations. Cessnock Council's situation is compounded by the vast network of local roads, as we in the Valley are acutely aware, the maintenance of which is beyond the financial and practical means of Council.

Cognisant of cost living pressures and the significant burden the proposed 39.9% SRV would have on residents of the Wollombi Valley, we are seeking information on all alternatives considered. Further, given the history of gross neglect of our local roads and infrastructure and the limited services available in the Valley, we are seeking evidence of structural reform and information on, and input into, Council's future investment plans.

While we consider some rate rise is inevitable, we are concerned to ensure that residents are appropriately informed going forward, and that we take every opportunity to improve outcomes for Wollombi Valley. We are keen to hear from community members who have ideas that support sustainability of our Villages and community into the future, particularly in relation to Council services, investment or other support. Please send any thoughts or ideas to wollombivalleycommunity@gmail.com or info@wollombivalleytourism.com.au

Additionally we encourage anyone who wishes to make submissions on the SRV to do so directly to Council or to <http://together.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/long-term-financial-plan-2026-2035> or to the

Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal - <https://tinyurl.com/CCCrates>

We thank the Mayor for attending the meeting in Wollombi. We will be seeking further engagement on this issue and considering submissions to other appropriate forums.

Wollombi Valley Chamber of Commerce Inc

Wollombi Valley Community Association Inc



Our Own News (1/12/25)

Branxton Greta Vineyard News (7/11/25)

Summary of the recent Cessnock City Council presentation

COUNCIL PROPOSES 39.9% RATE RISE

Council recently held a series of briefings on its proposed application to IPART (<https://tinyurl.com/IP399>) for a Special Variation to raise rates across the LGA by 39.9%. Below is a summary of the presentation at the recent Wollombi session.

Proceedings were opened by the Cessnock Mayor, Daniel Watton. Daniel introduced the consultant - Professor Joseph Drew - a local government expert, who led the council review and is writing the application to IPART for an increase in rates. See <https://tinyurl.com/WC399> for a description of the review.

The essence of the application is to prove its reasonableness. The bulk of Joseph's presentation thus covered the evidence of reasonableness:

1. Budget projections show ongoing deterioration over the next 10 years if rates are not raised.
2. The rates in Cessnock are low compared to similar Councils.
3. There are compounding factors; compared to similar Councils, indigeneity is three times the average, but we are on the median with state pensioners.
4. Analysis of ABS data proves the affordability of the rise to rate payers.
5. NSW Treasury recently and independently rejected a loan application by Cessnock Council on the basis of financial unsustainability.
6. The efficiency of our Council is middle-of-the-ground against an international 'Council Efficiency' metric, when compared to others. (Between median and average).
7. The largest budget line is roads.
8. Staff is 23% and are paid in the lowest tier compared to other Councils.
9. Management salaries are below par; there is no glaring evidence of mismanagement and it is an effective management team.
10. As part of his analysis he did a culling of dud and non-deliverable budget items, resulting in minor savings.
11. He also made recommendations about balance sheet write-off practises, that have been incorporated going forward and further highlight the long-term budgetary non-viability.
12. If rates are not raised, the Council will be declared bankrupt in a few years' time - the downside of this is that Administrators focus on cashflow and balance sheet decisions and community considerations take a back seat. The community is often left worse off than before (but with a balanced budget and fewer communal assets).
13. His advice is that if a rise is successful, not to pursue a leadership spill - the current team is doing well under the circumstances, and it will be important to retain organisational knowledge to see any change through.
14. He talked through case studies of how other jurisdictions had responded to rate rises, and the good and bad outcomes.
15. One of his recommendations is if a rise is granted, that 'benefits harmonisation' should be done, to ensure fairness of application and economic efficiency of a new budget.

Marcel van Rooyen

Our Own News (1/12/25)

RULES FOR QUESTION TIME.

- Please be constructive. We all want the best outcome for the community.
- Give good reasons for your position.
- Try to suggest something better.

Positive constructive feedback can lead us to the best outcome for all.

Grandstanding is an obstacle to better outcomes.

This is not a forum for political campaigning.



ENGAGEMENT ANNEXURE



A4/A3 posters displayed at hard copy survey drop-off points



A4/A3 poster used at pop up listening posts



Proposed Special Variation Invitation to public meetings

Over recent months, Council has been working with an independent expert Professor Joseph Drew, and his team of three professors on our drive towards financial sustainability.

Council has indicated that it will apply to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) for a Special Variation (SV) for the 2026–27 year. This application will be based on independent expert analysis of audited financial statement data.

The purpose of the SV is to commence the journey to financial sustainability, with a view to maintaining service levels wherever possible, in response to very significant cost pressures which have outstripped revenue for many years.

Public meetings will be held at the below locations to present the case for an SV and receive community feedback.

Wollombi Tennis Club

2979 Paynes Crossing Road, Wollombi
4–6pm, Friday 21 November

East Cessnock Bowling Club

6–12 Victoria St, Cessnock
11–1pm, Saturday 22 November

Kurri Kurri Senior Citizens Centre

132 Burton St, Kurri Kurri
5–7pm, Saturday 22 November

Branxton Community Hall

35 Bowen St, Branxton
12–2pm, Sunday 23 November

East Cessnock Bowling Club

6–12 Victoria St, Cessnock
6–8pm, Sunday 23 November

Digital session

Youtube/Council Chambers
62–78 Vincent St, Cessnock
5.30–7.30pm
Monday 24 November
Scan the QR code to
visit our channel



Join the conversation

Scan the QR code or visit <https://together.cessnock.nsw.gov.au/financial-sustainability-community-consultation> to read the factsheet, read the Council Financial Sustainability Review, ask a question, or participate in consultation opportunities

A5 Flyer handed out at pop up listening posts

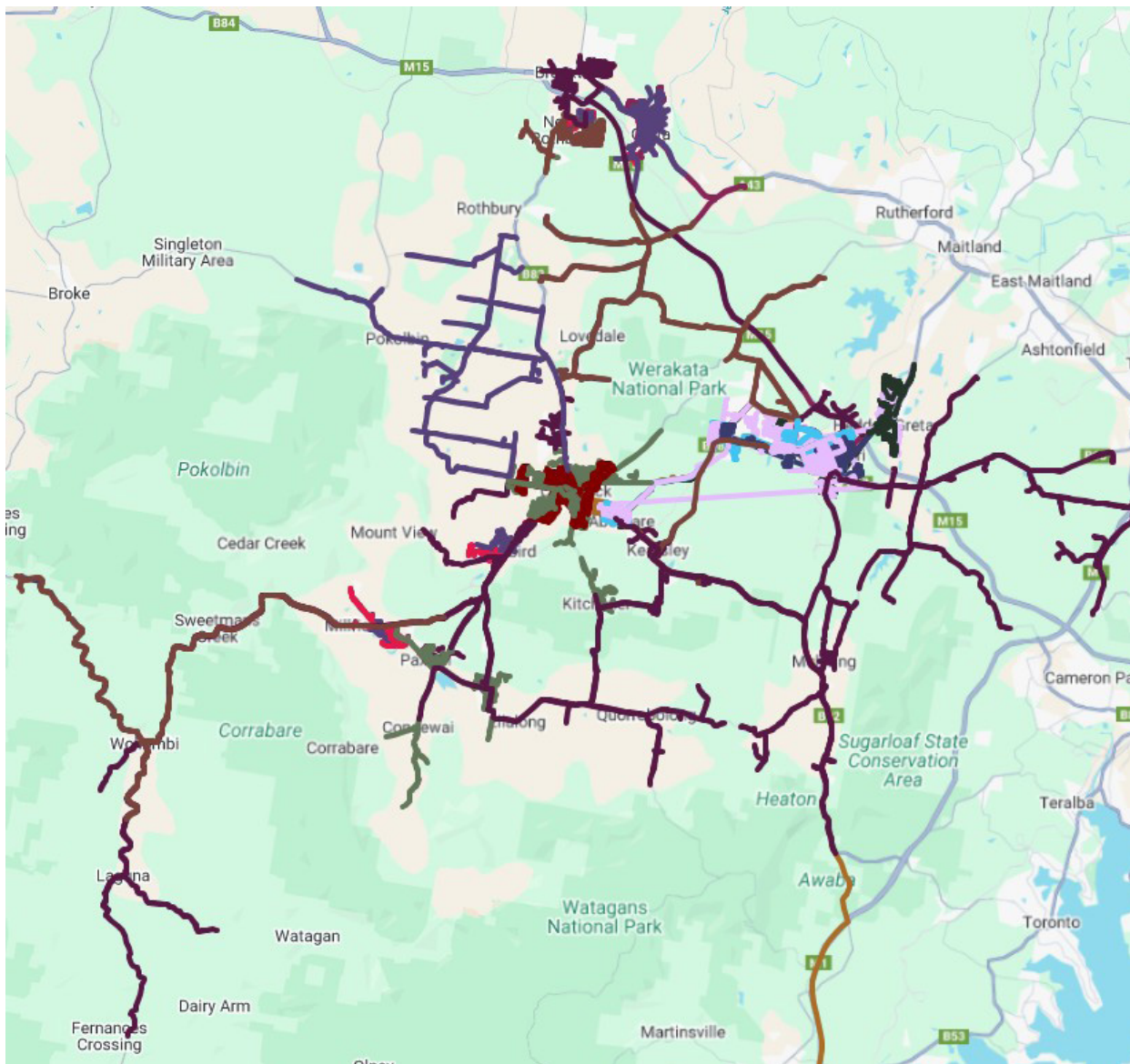


Financial Sustainability

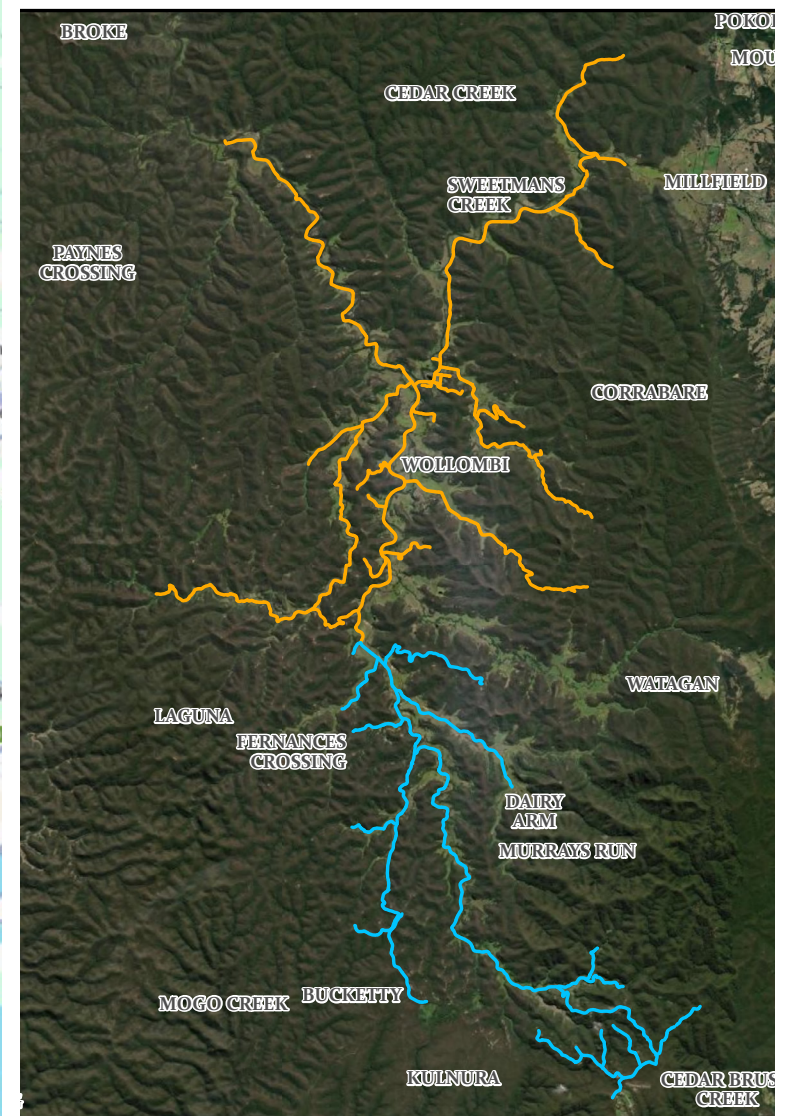
Scan the QR code
to complete
the survey



A4 posters used at pop up listening posts



GPS tracking map supplied
by letterboxing contractor



Representation of additional letterboxing
undertaken by Council Officers on 3-4 December



Special Rate Variation

An important part of our Council's role is to lead and work with our community to build a diverse and resilient area by fostering sustainable growth, enhancing community services, and maintaining the quality of life for our community. To achieve these goals, we rely on various funding mechanisms including rates.

Since 1977 our rate and other revenue streams have been regulated in NSW under an arrangement known as rate pegging.

The Rate Peg is the maximum percentage amount a council can increase its income from rates, and has two (2) components to the calculation:

- Local Government Costs Index (LCCI): designed to reflect the costs that councils incur when providing goods and services to their communities including labour, construction, and administration cost
- Residential population growth (specific to each council) to cover the increase in costs associated with delivering local government services in growing council areas

The Rate Peg amount is determined annually by the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART), which is the independent pricing regulator for water, energy, public transport and local Government.

Every year our Council produces a document called the Long-Term Financial Plan which forecasts our position in 10 years' time. For a while now, we have been forecasting a big shortfall and have tried to bring the budget back to surplus while containing asset maintenance. Recently, these forecasts changed for the worse reflecting structural issues.

The high inflationary cost increases have meant our predicted losses have become too big to be tackled through cost cutting alone for several reasons:

- The rising cost of materials, labour and contractors
- The government's rate peg has not kept up with inflation
- Rate income only provides 22% of council income
- The overall condition of many Council assets – such as roads, buildings and pools – presents high costs for replacement and maintenance
- An increasing community expectation around the quality of these assets
- Limited alternative revenue opportunities
- Federal Government slashing distribution of tax income to local government
- State Government shifting costs onto local government

In 2021-2022 the cost to NSW local councils of cost-shifting was \$135 billion, which is \$460.07 per ratepayer. Our Council must divert this amount from the services and infrastructure we provide to our community in order to fund the unavoidable cost of services, programs and functions that are imposed by the state or federal governments.

Our Council is currently responsible for managing more than \$1.3 billion worth of public assets including roads, parks and open space, buildings, stormwater drainage and an airport. Over the last five (5) years, the cost of materials, wages, and maintaining or replacing our assets has increased at a greater rate than the income our Council can generate.




A Special Rate Variation (SRV) allows us to increase rates above the rate peg increase.

An SRV may enable our Council to increase general income beyond the rate peg limit so that we can continue to fund specific projects, address infrastructure needs, and improve financial sustainability.

Our Council will consider submitting an application for an SRV for the 2026-27 financial year. IPART will determine the SRV application, which can only be made after Council resolves to apply for an SRV.

The Long-Term Financial Plan outlines Council's forecast position under various scenarios.

Cessnock City Council Delivery Program 2025-29, pp 54-57



Financial Sustainability

Additional Public Meeting

Laguna Community Hall

4pm-6pm

Tuesday 9 December

A4 poster displayed at local businesses

Additional public meeting – Laguna Community Hall



In light of feedback regarding widespread non-receipt of the fact sheet in the Wollombi Valley an additional public meeting is scheduled.

Laguna Community Hall

4-6pm

Tuesday 9 December

The public meeting will incorporate a presentation followed by a live Q&A with Professor Drew who will be joining remotely.

Special (Rate) Variation Survey extended to 4pm, Tuesday 9 December

You can return your completed survey at the additional public meeting or use the QR code here or on the first page of the survey before 4pm, Tuesday 9 December.



DL letterboxed to Wollombi Valley on 3-4 December (stapled to Fact Sheet and Survey)



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