



North Sydney Council

SPECIAL RATE VARIATION

Overview

North Sydney Council is facing significant financial challenges and is currently in an unsustainable financial position. Despite efforts to improve financial management through organisational restructuring and other improvement initiatives, the increased costs of the North Sydney Olympic Pool redevelopment, reductions in other sources of revenue, and rising infrastructure backlogs require immediate response to ensure long-term financial sustainability.

These challenges are compounded by increased service delivery costs, ageing infrastructure, and the needs of a growing population. Without intervention, the funding gap will continue to widen, impacting Council's ability to maintain services and invest in essential infrastructure.

To address these issues, Council has developed a draft Long-Term Financial Plan (LTFP), which includes a proposed Special Rate Variation (SRV). The SRV will strengthen Council's financial position, reducing deficits, and providing the necessary resources to deliver services and infrastructure for the community, ensuring a positive legacy for future generations.

Council has also considered the feedback provided by the community during the 'Have your say on North Sydney's next ten years' consultation in May and June 2024 which, combined with key research, has shaped eight draft Informing Strategies. These strategies will guide the new Community Strategic Plan, focusing on enhancing quality of life, strengthening community, and delivering responsive services and infrastructure that meet the evolving needs of our population. Central to the realisation of these strategies is Council's long-term financial sustainability.

What is a Special Rate Variation (SRV)?

A Special Rate Variation (SRV) refers to an increase in total general rates that is greater than the published rate peg. Each year, the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) sets a rate peg for each council, which is based on the expected cost increases that councils will incur. When councils need to increase total rates by more than the rate peg, they must apply to IPART for an SRV.

For an SRV to be approved, councils must demonstrate that they have met the criteria set out by the Office of Local Government, including demonstrating that there is a need for the SRV, ensuring that the community is aware of the proposed SRV, understanding the community's capacity to pay for the increase and making sure that the Council's planning and reporting documents (particularly its Long-Term Financial Plan) reflect the need and scope for the proposed SRV.

For North Sydney Council, the proposed SRV is critical to:

- strengthening and stabilising finances and reducing the structural deficit
- the delivery of current service levels
- addressing a growing backlog in infrastructure maintenance and renewal
- reducing internal and external debt associated with the North Sydney Olympic Pool redevelopment
- securing financial sustainability to meet the needs of a growing and changing population



Message from Mayor Zoë Baker

Dear North Sydney Community,

At the recent local government elections, I ran on a platform that included strengthening Council's financial position and continuing to increase transparency, accountability and strong governance in all of Council's operations. Those promises were not lightly made. The commitment was made in the context that Council's finances were unsustainable without urgent action and given with the full understanding that Council is facing significant challenges.

Addressing these financial challenges will require difficult decisions to be made in order to repair the impacts of more than a decade of chaos and neglect by former councils. We cannot 'kick the can down the road' for another future council to clean up.

The redevelopment of the North Sydney Olympic Pool has increased debt and reduced reserves, limiting Council's ability to invest in essential infrastructure. The legacy of poor decisions made about the North Sydney Olympic Pool redevelopment has created financial pressures that we cannot ignore.

Whilst upgrade and stabilisation works were necessary, an independent review found that early planning and oversight were deficient, undertaken without any real community consultation and compounded by a flawed decision to enter into a construction-only contract before final construction drawings were provided. The original budget was never sufficient in the first place, considering the risks that had been accepted by the former Council. This directly led to significant additional costs that now impact all of us.

At the same time, revenue has declined, while rising costs and growing demand for services have added further strain. Many Council assets require urgent upgrades after more than a decade of underfunding. Despite savings made from recent efficiency measures, many of Council's systems are shockingly outdated, which continues to hinder progress.

These pressures have placed Council in an unsustainable financial position, threatening Council's ability to maintain the essential services and infrastructure our community depends on.

The North Sydney community highly values the services and infrastructure the Council provides. Without decisive action, we risk not being able to maintain these at the levels our community expects.

Council, therefore, proposes a Special Rate Variation as part of its Draft Long-Term Financial Plan.

The proposed Special Rate Variation aims to stabilise finances, reduce deficit and debt as well as provide resources to meet the needs of our growing community. This proposal is also informed by extensive community consultation and feedback, undertaken in mid-2024, which emphasised the importance of long-term sustainability and responsive service delivery.

Since I became Mayor, I have very publicly stated that we, as a community, would have to have an open, honest and difficult conversation about how to repair and protect Council's financial health, vital community services and assets. This newly elected Council is determined to tackle head on the significant financial challenges and work to ensure Council, and the vital community services it provides, are in better shape than we have inherited.

I understand that this is incredibly frustrating – especially at a time when everyone is under pressure from the rising

cost of living – and many people will feel angry about having to address these issues at all. It's especially challenging knowing that this outcome could have been avoided with better governance and decision-making in the past. I share that frustration and anger. There is absolutely no satisfaction in 'I told you so', having been one of only three councillors to sound the alarm against the financial impacts of decisions of the former Council, including voting more than 23 times against the redevelopment of the North Sydney Olympic Pool.

However, this Council has an obligation and commitment to transparency and accountability as we work to restore financial security and long-term sustainability.

One of the most responsible and prudent steps is to explore a Special Rate Variation.

This Council is committed to ensuring the community has a voice and we need your input throughout this process. Together, we can decide on the best path forward. No decision will be made without being informed by your views in this community consultation. It is not 'window dressing' – it is real and meaningful consultation.

Please visit

yoursay.northsydney.nsw.gov.au

to share your feedback and register to attend our community forums.

Finally, this Council is committed to responsible financial stewardship. We owe it to you and to future generations to tackle these challenges now.

Yours faithfully,

Zoë Baker

Why does North Sydney need to consider an SRV?

Several factors have contributed to Council's current financial challenges:

North Sydney Olympic Pool redevelopment: This major project has significantly impacted the Council's financial position. External debt has increased, and internal reserves have been drained, further reducing Council's asset renewal capacity. In addition, ongoing costs associated with interest repayments and future renewal costs will add to operating deficits.

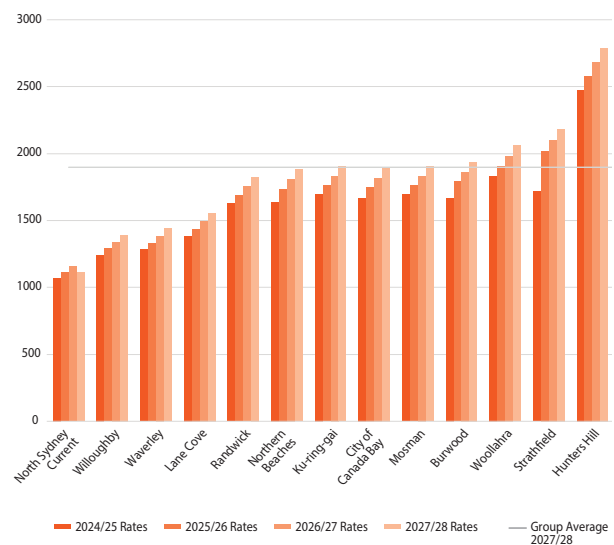
Declining revenue from other sources: Traditionally, around 45% of total operating revenue has been generated through user charges, fees, and other non-rate income. This includes on-street parking fees, fines, advertising revenue, and commercial rental income. While this strategy has lessened the financial burden on residents and businesses, it has also exposed the Council to financial shock and fluctuations in income. Since the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, adjusting for inflation, income from user charges, fees, and other revenue streams, it is estimated that revenue for the current fiscal year is down by \$9.9 million. The cumulative effect of declining revenue has also impacted reserve levels and capacity for infrastructure renewal.

Asset maintenance and renewal: Current estimates of infrastructure backlog indicate a history of underinvestment in asset renewal, which has compounded over time and further exacerbated funding challenges. In particular, 62% of Council building assets have been assessed at a rating of less than 'good', which limits their ability to best service the community. Addressing this backlog will require targeted, sustained investment to bring infrastructure management up to a level that meets both current and future community expectations.

Cost increases: Costs have increased faster than revenue in recent years. While IPART has addressed some of these issues through rating reforms implemented in July 2024, historical gaps remain, exacerbating the financial strain. Like many councils, we have had to cut back on asset expenditure, leading to a growing backlog of capital works.

Outdated information systems and technology: Over the past two years, Council has actively reviewed its operations to identify opportunities for improvement. While progress has been made, Council's ability to generate efficiencies is constrained by its outdated suite of information systems and technology. These systems are not integrated, require excessive manual intervention, and lack the sophistication needed to support timely decision-making. The inefficiencies caused by these systems are a major source of frustration for the workforce and, indirectly, for residents and customers, negatively impacting the overall customer experience.

Historically low rates income: Historically, residential rates have remained low due to availability of other sources of income. This is no longer sustainable. The following chart shows a comparison of current and forecast residential rates with other councils in the region and across Sydney. This does not factor in SRVs currently being proposed in these council areas.



Outside of an SRV, what is Council doing to improve its performance?

Council has initiated a comprehensive program of review and improvement to ensure the effective use of public funds. In 2023, a major realignment of the organisational structure was implemented, establishing a clear leadership and service unit framework designed to enhance role clarity, accountability and communication, while reducing duplication and improving collaboration across the organisation. Additionally, over \$6.4 million in employee benefits and oncosts were reallocated to streamline leadership structures and address critical resource needs in areas such as risk management, commercial property management, parks and gardens maintenance, organisational improvement, technology, and strategic planning.

Ongoing and future review and improvement programs include the introduction of:

- **A process mapping initiative**, initially targeting 250 high-priority processes, with plans to expand to 1,000 over time. This effort aims to identify opportunities for greater operational efficiency.

- **A new service level review framework** to ensure that Council's services are aligned with the evolving needs and expectations of the community.
- **Service unit planning** to identify workforce development priorities, opportunities for process improvement, and areas for financial review.
- **A development and performance framework** to support the creation of a high-performing workforce.
- **A new workforce strategy** aimed at positioning Council as a competitive employer in a challenging environment marked by skills shortages.

Despite these significant commitments to improve organisational efficiency, Council's ability to generate efficiencies is constrained by its information systems and technology.

What options is North Sydney considering?

Council is consulting on four SRV options, which present different levels of financial strength and sustainability for North Sydney. Options one, two and three are different in size and reflect a different level of benefit. Options 2a and 2b provide the same benefits but have different implementation paths.



Option 1: Financial repair

focuses on financial repair, improvement to governance and administration, the delivery of critical infrastructure backlog projects and managing debt repayments.



Options 2a & 2b: Strength and sustainability

includes everything in Option 1 as well as delivery of community infrastructure and service priorities developed in response to widespread consultation in May and June 2024.



Option 3: Future growth

delivers everything in Options 2a and 2b, as well as additional funding to bring building infrastructure to a 'good' condition, over a ten-year period commencing in year 4.

Rate path proposals:

All options include the rate peg	2025-26	2026-27	2027-28	Cumulative ¹
Option 1: Financial repair (3 year SRV)	50%	5%	5%	65.38%
Option 2a: Strength and sustainability (2 year SRV)	50%	25%	Rate peg	87.50%
Option 2b: Strength and sustainability (1 year SRV)	75%	Rate peg	Rate peg	75%
Option 3: Future growth (3 year SRV)	60%	20%	10%	111.20%
Rate peg (base case)	4%	3%	3%	

¹ The Office of Local Government SRV Guidelines require Council to communicate the cumulative impact of the proposed rate increase over the years of implementation. Option 2a is proposed to be implemented over two years and 2b is proposed over one year, therefore their cumulative rates in the table are compounded over two years and one year, respectively. However, this doesn't allow for an accurate comparison with options 1 and 3, which span three years, as the rate peg increases will then apply to options 2a and 2b after the SRV is implemented. If the assumed 3% rate peg is applied for years two and three, the comparison rate for option 2a is 93.31% and for option 2b is 85.66%.

What does each SRV option provide?

	Option 1	Option 2 (a and b)	Option 3
Deliver current services and address operating deficits	●	●	●
Deliver required systems replacement in Governance Strategy	●	●	●
Maintain infrastructure renewals (80% renewal rate in first two years and 100% thereafter)	●	●	●
Repay 70% of borrowings	●	●	●
Reduce infrastructure backlog ²	●	●	●
Deliver expanded services and new and upgraded infrastructure identified in the Informing Strategies ³	●	●	●
Improve building assets to a 'good' condition, with \$15.5M per year from Year 4 to address backlogs	●	●	●

² Critical infrastructure addressed in first two years, \$15M per year (indexed) from 2027-28 to bring assets to a satisfactory condition

³ In May and June 2024, the Council launched an extensive community engagement initiative, 'North Sydney's Next Ten Years'. This initiative included discussion papers, expert panels, workshops, and information sessions. Over 1,000 surveys were completed, alongside significant feedback from in-person engagements. In parallel, independent consultants conducted research into key areas including open space and recreation, culture and creativity, social inclusion, integrated transport, and economic development. This research provided valuable insights that helped shape the priorities for North Sydney's future. The ten-year draft Informing Strategies are currently on exhibition until Friday 10 January and we welcome community feedback at yoursay.northsydney.nsw.gov.au

Projects identified within these strategies include, but are not limited to, the delivery of a community facility at Berrys Bay, upgrades to North Sydney Indoor Sports Centre, improved drainage infrastructure for sports fields, major upgrades to North Sydney Oval, upgraded amenities at Tunks Park, footpath improvements, cycling infrastructure, upgrade and expansion of Stanton Library, Cremorne Plaza and Langley Place upgrade, and other public domain upgrades in town centres.

What is a minimum rate?

A minimum rate is the minimum amount of a rate that can be levied on each parcel of land. Individual rates are calculated on the unimproved land value of a property. This can mean that the rates paid by individual houses on a block of land can be significantly more than for units on land of a similar value. Unit holders receive the same level of services from councils and often have comparable ability to pay rates as those in houses. For councils like North Sydney, minimum rates help ensure a degree of equity between the rates paid by ratepayers in units and houses.

What are the proposed changes to minimum rates?

North Sydney has one of the lowest minimum rates in metropolitan Sydney. Over 77% of residents currently pay the minimum rate and this does not support the level and variety of Council services currently offered to each household. To improve equity and ensure revenue keeps pace with growing unit developments, Council proposes increasing minimum rates in 2025-26 to:

- \$1,300 for residential properties
- \$1,400 for businesses

After 2024-25, minimum rates will increase by the approved rate path, which may either be one of the proposed SRV options or the rate peg.

Minimum rates:

All options include the rate peg	Current 2024-25	2025-26	2026-27	2027-28
Residential Rates				
Option 1: Financial repair (3 year SRV)	\$715	\$1,300	\$1,365	\$1,433
Option 2a: Strength and sustainability (2 year SRV)		\$1,300	\$1,625	\$1,674
Option 2b: Strength and sustainability (1 year SRV)		\$1,300	\$1,339	\$1,379
Option 3: Future growth (3 year SRV)		\$1,300	\$1,560	\$1,716
<i>Rate peg (base case)</i>		\$744	\$766	\$789
Business Rates				
Option 1: Financial repair (3 year SRV)	\$715	\$1,400	\$1,470	\$1,544
Option 2a: Strength and sustainability (2 year SRV)		\$1,400	\$1,750	\$1,803
Option 2b: Strength and sustainability (1 year SRV)		\$1,400	\$1,442	\$1,485
Option 3: Future growth (3 year SRV)		\$1,400	\$1,680	\$1,848
<i>Rate peg (base case)</i>		\$744	\$766	\$789

For comparison purposes, it is important to note that in addition to the minimum rate, residential ratepayers pay an average of \$129.34 in infrastructure, environmental and main street levies – calculated as a base amount plus an ad valorem component based on their land value. These special levies will not be charged in addition to the minimum rate under the new SRV proposal. Instead it is proposed that this special levy income, which is currently levied as a separate charge, be rolled into the ordinary rate revenue. If your property is subject to a minimum, this means that these levies will not be an additional charge in future.

What do the proposed SRV options mean for rates?

The rates you pay depend on the unimproved land value of your property. The average rates that would result from each of the SRV options are outlined below.

Council has also recently reviewed its rating structure and proposes the removal of the infrastructure, environmental and main street levies mentioned above, which are currently paid separately to rates. The income from these levies would be incorporated into the ordinary rate charged. This would mean that total permissible rates income is raised entirely through ordinary rates, making the Council's rating structure simpler and more equitable. Residents are paying approximately 90% of all the levies, whereas they pay 60% of total ordinary rates and receive approximately 60% of the benefits from Council services. These changes mean that residents would pay 60% of the total permissible income and businesses pay 40%. The averages below show this change, with the levies that are included in the average for 2024-25 and rolled into ordinary rates from 2025-26 onwards.

Proposed rates:

All options include the rate peg	Current 2024-25	2025-26	2026-27	2027-28
Residential Rates				
Option 1: Financial repair (3 year SRV)	\$1,040 ⁴	\$1,511	\$1,586	\$1,665
Option 2a: Strength and sustainability (2 year SRV)		\$1,511	\$1,888	\$1,945
Option 2b: Strength and sustainability (1 year SRV)		\$1,762	\$1,815	\$1,870
Option 3: Future growth (3 year SRV)		\$1,611	\$1,933	\$2,127
<i>Rate peg (base case)</i>		\$1,048 ⁵	\$1,080	\$1,112
Business Rates				
Option 1: Financial repair (3 year SRV)	\$6,724 ⁶	\$10,601	\$11,131	\$11,687
Option 2a: Strength and sustainability (2 year SRV)		\$10,601	\$13,251	\$13,648
Option 2b: Strength and sustainability (1 year SRV)		\$12,267	\$12,739	\$13,121
Option 3: Future growth (3 year SRV)		\$11,307	\$13,569	\$14,926
<i>Rate peg (base case)</i>		\$7,396	\$7,618	\$7,847

How can I find out more and have my say?

Council is committed to engaging with the community and is actively seeking feedback on the SRV proposal, updated Long-Term Financial Plan, Delivery Program, Asset Management Strategy and Informing Strategies. Community consultation is open from Wednesday 27 November 2024 to Friday 10 January 2025. Please visit yoursay.northsydney.nsw.gov.au to learn more and have your say.

Next steps

Once the community consultation period concludes, Council will review the feedback received. A report will then go to Council for their consideration of the feedback. Council will decide whether to proceed with the SRV application. If Council decides to proceed, the application will be submitted to IPART in early 2025. IPART will conduct its own consultation, with public submissions likely to be sought, before they make their determination in May 2025. If the SRV application is successful, Council will then need to resolve to include the SRV in its rates from 1 July 2025. The new Community Strategic Plan, Delivery Program, Resourcing Strategy and Operational Plan will also come into effect from 1 July 2025.

4 Average Residential Rate for 2024-25 includes infrastructure and environmental levies. Current average residential ordinary rates (excluding levies) are \$915.

5 The Average Residential Rate for 2025-26 reflects Council's intention to remove the levies and raise total permissible rates entirely through ordinary rates. This will redistribute the revenue collected by total levies (approximately 90% of levies are currently paid by residential ratepayers) across the ordinary rate category split of 60%/40% Residential/Business respectively.

6 Average Business Rate for 2024-25 includes the infrastructure, environmental and main street levies. Current average business ordinary rates (excluding levies) are \$6,455.