

**Submission
No 21**

**JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON PROTECTING LOCAL WATER UTILITIES
FROM PRIVATISATION**

Organisation: Port Macquarie Hastings Council

Date Received: 3 November 2023

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The Hon. Stephen Lawrence, MLC
Chair - Joint Select Committee on Protecting Local Water Utilities from Privatisation
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000 (Email: waterutilities@parliament.nsw.gov.au)

Dear Mr Lawrence

Submission - Inquiry into Protecting Local Water Utilities from Privatisation

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry. The provision of safe, reliable and affordable water and sewerage services adds to the lifeblood of rural and regional communities and as such Local Water Utilities should stay in local community ownership though the local council or county council.

Port Macquarie-Hastings Council believes one way that improvements to the functioning of Local Water Utilities, including strengthening protections of public ownership could be made, is through a review and amendments to the Local Government Act 1993. This legislation already includes protection of other community assets such as Community Land. Having recognition of public ownership and restrictions around the sell-off or privatisation of water and sewer assets in the Local Government Act would provide a high level of assurance to the community around the on-going protection of the public assets, it would also require an Act of Parliament to amend.

For context Port Macquarie-Hastings Council is located on the Mid North Coast, with 88,311 residents across a 3,686km² area that extends from the coast to the hinterland. Council is also a Local Water Utility servicing approximately 80,000 connected customers with four water treatment plants, two off-river storage dams and eight wastewater treatment plant. Council's water and sewerage assets are valued at over \$1.088Billion.

Council's 2022 community survey found that sewerage and water services have an 83% and 85% service importance rating respectively and an 88% satisfaction rating, being among the highest rated Council service for importance and satisfaction.

Through the development of Council's Community Strategic Plan in 2020/21, there was a consistent message from the community around having stable infrastructure, including water security and dependable sewage services and how these contribute to and enhance liveability for a region. Having water and sewage assets in public ownership allows for greater community involvement in planning and decision making and transparency through the Local Government Integrated Planning and Reporting framework. There would be a significant risk that if the local water utility function was removed from councils that this important connection with and involvement from the community would be lost.

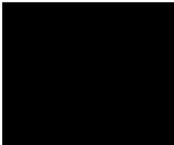
Equally as important is the recognition of the uniqueness of communities and their needs. Amalgamating local water utility function across large geographic areas also has the potential to introduce significant risk to the provision of services that best serve those unique communities.

Recent improvements via the Government's Town Water Risk Reduction Program with the introduction of the new regulatory and assurance framework, which supports aligning local water utility strategic planning with the existing Local Government Integrated Planning and Reporting framework, is a welcome step forward. Further enhancement to the governance and functioning of a local water utility, including strengthening protections of public ownership, could be made through a review and amendment of the Local Government Act.

Council thanks the Committee for undertaking this inquiry. Ensuring the on-going public ownership and enabling on-going community involvement and transparency for the provision of safe, reliable and affordable water and sewerage services will lead to only positive outcomes on all aspects of community life across regional NSW.

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me on telephone 02 6581 8111 or email [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely



Jeffery Sharp
Director Community Utilities

Cc Mayor Peta Pinson
Mrs Leslie Williams - Member for Port Macquarie
Mr Michael Peter Kemp - Member for Oxley