

INQUIRY INTO LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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General Purpose Standing Committee No 6.

This submission relates to Terms of Reference 1 (a), (b), (c) ,(g), (h), (n) and (o).

Criteria for assessing local government institutions.

One problem with local government in New South Wales is that residents in Council areas take local government for granted.

Publicity in the media has mainly been on matters of corruption in Councils or, in recent weeks, the possibility of forced council mergers.

A Local Council is much more than a name on a garbage truck or a name on the letterhead of a Rates notice. Councils deserve more credit for the real 'local' government work they do which does not involve money.

I am concerned that the dominant criteria in the 'Fit for Future' IPART process are financial. I looked in vain for assessment for the social capital role of Councils. Where is there a recognition of the work the libraries do – the homework clubs, the reading story sessions for preschoolers and their migrant Mums and Dads. Where is the recognition of Councils' outreach to pensioners to help them keep fit and be IT skilled? Who provides venues for community groups and events in parks and playgrounds? Where is recognition of Citizenship ceremonies and the social and cultural harmony events Councils host, and the many evening and weekend events that councillors attend?

I have lived in three Local Government areas over the past 20 years : Strathfield Council, Blacktown Council and Hurstville Council.

Blacktown is one of the largest councils. It not it is not required to consider a merger. It has one councillor for 20,832 people . Its 15 councillors try very hard to meet the needs of a multicultural mix of people with some of the highest rates of unemployment in Sydney and the largest Aboriginal population in Australia. Is this an ideal situation? There is no way 1 councillor for 20,000 can give the same sense of community one for 6,000 can provide, as in Strathfield. It is granted that a well run council is presumed, with the majority of councillors concerned about the common good of the community, rather than making money for profit or being unduly influenced by developers.

On the financial criteria, I understand Strathfield Council currently meets the 'Fit for future' benchmarks.

I think that the 'one size fits all' philosophy of governments at state and federal level over the past 20 years has hindered progress. It would be more sensible to make judgments for reform on rewarding what is working well. There is no clear evidence from other mergers eg in Queensland that larger councils are necessarily more efficient or cost effective.

Small local councils more accurately represent the ethnic mix of council areas than do state or federal elected members. They give an opportunity for more people to take part in local government.

I understand there is legislation which empowers the state government to take over a council where it is incompetent or undertaking corrupt activity, but not where a Council is working competently and honestly.

Strathfield Council and Canada Bay councils are free of debt. Why should their rate payers be burdened with the debts of other councils? Is there a fairer way of achieving a better outcome for debt laden councils? A council with debt may not be incompetent – the debt could have been for needed infrastructure for that area and is being budgeted for in rates from that area.

The 'self-regulation' of the building industry in Sydney means Council regulations for safety are not being properly observed. We have more hope of protecting residents through local small councils than large mega ones ,where supervision and following through on complaints can be incredibly slow.

The Auckland City mega council is being quoted as an example for Sydney to follow. However, the current mergers do not propose a similar devolution of power as in Auckland. The cost of the mergers in Auckland has been greater than the financial benefit so far.

Co-operation can occur without takeovers. For example , I understand that recycling and waste disposal is one area of current co-operation and use of shared facilities between councils.

One unexpected side of this inquiry could be a recognition of the benefits of truly local government. Whatever is most effectively done locally should be done at that level.

Where stand alone Councils are working well and have good plans for coping with the challenges of multicultural Sydney, they should not be merged. Forced mergers without compelling reasons are not only undemocratic, they are self-defeating.

How can the criteria for assessing Councils be widened to take into account both financial and social capital concerns?

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