

## **INQUIRY INTO LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

**Organisation:** Serving Mosman

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The Director  
General Purpose Standing Committee #6  
Parliament House  
Macquarie Street  
Sydney NSW 2000

Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> July 2015

Dear Committee,

**Inquiry into Local Government in New South Wales: Submission from  
Cr Tom Sherlock / Serving Mosman**

I have had the benefit of reading submissions from several other groups, in particular those from Save Our Councils Coalition and from Mosman Mayor and economist Peter Abelson. I agree with and commend their submissions.

This may be considered a supplemental 4-page submission focusing on only two areas (both attached):

1/ Developments in society and technology have only accentuated the need and opportunity for effective local government

2/ What is the agreed reform agenda on Local Government in NSW, and has the NSW Government kept faith with NSW Councils?

"Serving Mosman" is a community-focused local political party that we created to rally local support in Council matters. I am a second term Councillor.

I'd like to thank the Committee for this opportunity to make a submission. Our communities across NSW, I feel, need your perspective and wisdom to help avoid poor decisions with sorry consequences.

Kind regards

Cr Tom Sherlock  
Serving Mosman

## 1/ Developments in society and technology have only accentuated the need and opportunity for effective local government

The NSW Government process for FFTF seems to me to ignore some of the most fundamental and important reasons why effective Local Government is needed in NSW. It discounts the people and communities of our state in a spurious focus on dogma, specifically that bigger is always better.

Many social commentators have observed a weakening of the social fabric of Australian society, particularly amongst the young. There is a reduced "sense of community". The Australian Multicultural Council's report "The Australian Community" (December 2013) noted that while Australia "compares exceptionally well on broad measures of social cohesion and wellbeing", there has been "a marked increase in reported experience of discrimination and a decline in levels of personal and institutional trust".

Hugh Mackay, in his recent book "The Art of Belonging" lists many reasons why communities are under pressure. These include the decline in the birth-rate, increased use of the car, increased rate of divorce, increased number of single-person households, greater mobility, use of technology as an alternative to physical interactions, and ubiquitous personal music devices.

Many of the greatest challenges that we have in Australia and NSW have critical well-documented social and community dimensions: mental health, drug abuse, divorce, domestic violence, youth suicide and obesity. Add to this list the need to provide an engaging and supportive community for aged residents. These are some of the challenges that Councils are best placed to address, at a community level. Well-intentioned and expensive programs managed at State or Federal level, which lack an effective Local Government connection, are often doomed to failure. In my view, State and Federal Governments need to recognise and support this vital role of Local Government. And if it's not local enough, the value and role of "Local" Government will be lost.

The essential basis for Local Government and its size and scale and focus is that, despite the passage of time and developments in technology, human beings are still social animals. We still need to be part of communities and have community connections in order to live healthy and fulfilling lives. We still need to "belong".

I strongly believe that effective Local Government is a powerful means to enable and develop active and vibrant communities. Rather than focusing on Local Government as an arm of State Government, and creating arbitrary quasi-financial hurdles, State and Federal Government should recognise, understand and foster the "art of local government" – this is the art of developing, supporting and empowering healthy NSW communities.

## 2/ What is the agreed reform agenda on Local Government in NSW, and has the NSW Government kept faith with NSW Councils?

In summary, no. While there has at times been an inclusive and wide-ranging discussion of issues to be addressed in Local Government in NSW, the FFTF agenda has been boiled down to just one thing - forced amalgamations.

The table below shows the 12 key initiatives from Destination 2036 and their current estimated status.

Ref	Initiative	Current estimated status
1	Establish Local Government as an employer of choice.	<b>Gone backwards.</b> The lack of genuine constructive engagement by the State Government and insecurity generated by FFTF have made it significantly more difficult to attract and retain quality staff.
2	Encourage and facilitate innovation.	<b>Gone backwards.</b> Whereas Councils were previously working together, the FFTF process has led to regression. One example would be Warringah Council attempting to pull out of SHOROC, a ROC widely recognised for its innovation and ability to work effectively with State Government.
3	Ensure the Local Government Act supports stronger local government.	<b>Uncertain.</b> Minister Toole's comments on the Local Government Act seem geared towards making forced amalgamations easier rather than enabling "stronger local government".
4	Ensure strong and effective local governance.	<b>Gone backwards.</b> A key tenet of strong local governance is the link between the community and its council. The FFTF process has resulted in instances of poor governance as councils are intimidated into merger proposals without the broad community support of a referendum.
5	Review the revenue system to ensure greater flexibility and self reliance.	<b>No progress.</b> Rate capping remains the ongoing regime, and there appears to have been little consideration of this or other progressive revenue measures.
6	Develop strategies that maximise opportunities to secure funding from other levels of government.	<b>No progress.</b> The dominant flow of changed revenue flows seems to be away from local government. Changes in library funding and in funding for aged care services are two recent examples. Cost shifting continues.
7	Establish a range of funding models to enable the long-term maintenance,	<b>No progress.</b> If there's one thing that the TCorp assessment made clear, it is that asset management and asset accounting vary

	replacement and creation of different classes of assets.	widely across NSW. This is one area where the State could add value, but to date has not.
8	Develop a number of different structural models for Local Government.	<b>The focus area for FFTF.</b> "A number of different structural models" seems to have morphed into "amalgamation is the answer for all".
9	More clearly define the functions, roles and responsibilities of Local and State Government.	<b>No progress.</b> The State seems to have the frankly arrogant view that Local Government exists purely as an appendage of the State Government, with no intrinsic role. There seems to be no recognition of the community leadership role of Local Government.
10	Align State and Local Government planning frameworks.	<b>Steady progress.</b> There have been a number of strategic regional plans, and the Greater Sydney Commission has the potential to be an effective planning coordinator. In my own area SHOROC and NSROC are working together with NSW DoP on the Northern Region Strategic Plan.
11	Negotiate a new Inter-Governmental Agreement (IGA).	<b>No progress.</b> The State Government seems to have no interest in this.
12	Recognise Local Government as a legitimate and important sphere of government.	<b>No progress.</b> State Government seems to have no interest in this. Potential mega-councils might be seen as more important, but they will have lost much of their legitimacy as "Local" Governments. In my experience many very large councils are simply unable to maintain connection with and knowledge of their communities.