

Draft Submission to latest stage of FOLG

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the options outlined as the outcome of Stage Two of the current review.

Councils play a vital role in the social, economic, and environmental well-being of their communities and we reiterate our support for an increased emphasis on resourcing and empowering councils to support, co-ordinate and facilitate wellbeing, resilience, connectedness, identity, and culture at a local level.

Summary Response to Options Paper

Council resolved at its January meeting to support the option of Mandated Shared Services, acknowledging that one size does not fit all as far as the 29 councils are concerned, and that a hybrid solution or a spectrum of models may be the most practical approach.

Council is most concerned that the role of local government as a voice for the community and effective advocate, facilitator and delivery partner is not lost or diluted in the reform process. Decision-makers must know and be part of their community if the community is to receive a fair go.

Among the varied roles of local government, the role of facilitator, co-ordinator and partner would benefit from greater definition. Currently it relies on local relationships and personality and is not recognised as a key role.

In supporting mandated shared services to be delivered at regional or central level, Council considers that establishing the appropriate governance structures will be key to success. Councils must be able to continue to effectively influence service delivery, particularly for external facing services that need to be responsive to diverse local conditions, but also in relation to the potential for shared 'back offices', where the scale, scope and staging will require careful transition planning.

Given the complexity inherent in setting up shared services, it would help if State resourcing were considered in the early stages, especially if a 'clean slate' approach is taken. Ideally, this would see interim teams operate alongside the people conducting BAU so that changes are not delayed by being done 'off the side of the desk', which is certainly a consideration in smaller councils.

Detail

Council makes the following additional comment on specific service areas that may be considered for central or regional delivery.

Planning

This Council has already suggested the concept of a regional pool of specialists to be called on at need. Nevertheless, we strongly suggest that local strategic land use planning such as the ability to develop a Settlement Strategy, be retained at a local level, as well as the approval of residential DAs, as these are key drivers of local character.

Major and contentious development proposals requiring more specialist knowledge and greater capacity should be dealt with at regional or central level.

Compliance

Other service areas where rural and regional councils struggle to attract and retain skilled specialist staff include environmental health and building and plumbing compliance. The community is often frustrated by our inability to respond quickly.

That said, the building permit process is largely administrative and therefore location agnostic. Centralising this service has the potential to create greater consistency across the State and reduce confusion in the construction industry.

Infrastructure

We have previously stated that road and bridge construction and renewal could probably be done more cost effectively at a regional level. As it is, Circular Head has to outsource the bulk of this work and there must be economies of scale that could be achieved at a higher level. This will not apply to all councils but for us it does.

Waste Management

Acknowledging the current State Government reform in this area, we accept there is a case for regional or central management of waste to generate the economies of scale that support investment in the 'circular economy' and improved environmental outcomes.

Consolidated Business Services

We believe that a shared back office in some shape is a means for councils to increase their sustainability and facilitate modernisation through consolidated investment.

We have a long-established and intentional resource-sharing arrangement with Waratah-Wynyard Council, including common strategies in key policy areas, and continue to actively work towards a more integrated back office.