

INTRODUCTION

Strathfield Council has the scale and capacity to stand alone based on the key elements outlined in the IPART methodology. Strathfield Council is currently 40,000 in population but is projected to increase in population by 100% by 2031.

Council fully considered the two options identified by the Panel report of a merger of Inner West councils or retaining Strathfield Council and establishing a Joint Organisation to maximise regional cooperation and resources sharing, and to partner with State agencies in strategic planning and service delivery. The Strathfield community overwhelmingly supported the second option as the community's preferred option. Strathfield Council meets the scale and capacity criterion however, it would be enhanced by the formation of a Joint Organisation or through the establishment of a Joint Organisation Strathfield Council meets the scale and capacity criteria.

The idea that efficiency and effectiveness of a council is dependent on size is not supported by many:

Professor Brian Dollery: *"A common argument advanced by proponents of Australian local council amalgamation proposals is that 'bigger is cheaper' due inter alia to the existence of substantial economies of scale in local council service provision. This argument typically asserts that local councils with larger populations can provide municipal services at lower costs per unit of output than local authorities with smaller population bases, thereby conflating population size with the theoretically distinct concept of scale economies... We conclude that it is fallacious to use population size for a proxy for scale economies in Australian local government."* (Dollery, Byrnes and Crase, "Australian Local Government Amalgamation: A Conceptual Analysis of Population Size and Scale Economies in Municipal Service Provision", Australasian Journal of Regional Studies, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2008)

Professor Percy Allen: *"Local government reform should recognise two fundamental realities, one of which is administrative and the other political. At the administrative level the efficiency and effectiveness of a local council is not a function of size. All the empirical evidence suggests that big is not better when it comes to local government. Where economies of scale are relevant (eg public works and maintenance depots), the most practical solution is fee-for-service shared service centres, not amalgamations. The political reality is that people believe that small is beautiful - they want their local council centred on their neighbourhood. People identify with distinct localities, not amorphous regions. People want their local councillors to address micro-issues at street and precinct level. People expect state government to address wider regional issues and set regional visions and strategies with active input from local councils and ROCs."* (Allen, P, "Why Smaller Councils Make Sense", Australian Journal of Public Administration, vol. 62, no. 3, pp. 74-81, 2003)

Council has reviewed each of the key elements of Strategic Capacity identified by the Panel and can demonstrate substantial strategic capacity, as indicated by the following:

1. Robust revenue base and increased discretionary spending

Strathfield Council is a financial sustainable council and has carefully and prudently managed its resources and provides cost efficient services to its community.

Council's Long Term Financial Plan projects Strathfield Council satisfies all of the State Government's key financial indicator benchmarks (with the exception of Debt Service Ratio) by 2019/20 and beyond. In comparison, based on modelling undertaken by expert consultants Morrison Low, an amalgamated Inner West Council only achieves 4 out of the 7 benchmarks by 2019/20.

Strathfield Council provides cost efficient services at rates lower than larger councils and has a history of cost containment and strategies to address rising costs eg water and energy cost containment through Council's energy and water management plans.

Strathfield Council has a strong mix of business, industrial and residential precincts across the council area, which produces a robust revenue base and is not reliant on grants or other external funding to deliver existing operations or capital works.

Strathfield's external auditor Hill Roger Spencer Steer has stated that Strathfield Council was in a sound financial position as part of its 2013/14 financial statements audit.

Over the next 2–10 years, Council projects continued improvements to Council's operating result, additional rate revenue and improvements to discretionary spending.

2. Scope to undertake new functions and major projects

Strathfield Council is undergoing significant population growth with requirements for new and renewed infrastructure planning to meet diverse and increasing community needs.

Delivery of a large and diverse \$5.9 million capital works program in 2014/15.

Council resourcing is directed to areas of community priority eg spending on roads is higher than comparable councils (Local Government comparison report 2012/13) based on directions established by Council after extensive community consultation.

Community surveys indicate high levels of satisfaction with Council performance including the Local Government in NSW Future Directions Opinion Poll commissioned by the Independent Local Government Panel in 2013 indicating over 70% satisfaction with Sydney Metropolitan Councils.

Successful track record in undertaking new functions and services required for the community through planning for anticipated community needs. This includes Powells Creek Masterplan and associated new infrastructure and community facilities, projected facilities for growth in Parramatta Road corridor including open space acquisition, new parks eg 'Loftus Park', Arnotts Reserve, an open space adjacent to new residential development in the Columbia Lane precinct.

Progressing the redevelopment of the rail/bus interchange and revitalisation of the Strathfield Town Centre.

Review of Development Contribution Plan in 2014/2015 following adoption of new Local Environmental Plan and supporting studies to plan for new infrastructure for population and building growth. Implementation of new facilities as set out by long term development plans such as libraries, new parks and embellishment, road upgrades etc.

3. Ability to employ a wider range of skilled staff

Strathfield Council employs staff utilising a wide range of skills, experience and competencies in jobs requiring core and specialist disciplines.

Council's current skill base meets and/or exceeds local government requirements.

Strathfield is located in the centre of Sydney with a strong public and private transport network providing accessibility and interconnectivity across Sydney, which enhances Council's status as accessible and desirable place to work.

Council operates cost effective services as demonstrated by its reducing real operating cost per capita. This is partly due to Strathfield Council utilising multi-skilled disciplinary teams. Council utilises consultants and contractors where required for specialist projects.

Council is an attractive employer across management and service areas and strategically placed to attract a wide range of skilled staff.

Council has a strong record in advocacy, supporting and promoting regional partnerships, creativity, innovation and community leadership which demonstrate the diverse high level of skills within the organisation.

4. Knowledge, creativity and innovation

Strathfield Council is an innovative and creative council with extensive knowledge of its local area and community. Council's community strategic plan 'Strathfield 2025' focused on innovation and creativity in key themes such as connectivity and prosperity and opportunities.

Council's core values are founded on integrity, respect, teamwork and professionalism which are integrated into Council's strategic and operational planning and directly linked to individual staff performance workplans and reviews.

Strathfield has received a number of awards and industry recognition for activities, projects and programs across the organisation's responsibilities.

Strathfield has recently implemented the Digital Local Government Program to establish digital facilities and communications and will be launching the Digital Economy Strategy for Strathfield in 2015/16 to support development of digital strategies for the local community and economy.

Regional events such as the Strathfield Spring Festival, Cooks River Fun Run and Strathfield Food Festival and Good Food Month

5. Advanced skills in strategic planning and policy development

Strathfield Council has advanced skills in strategic planning and policy development, which supports the Strathfield community strategic plan 'Strathfield 2025'. This plan contains five themes which set out the key strategic goals for the Strathfield community now and into the future, which are supported by other strategies, plans, resources and actions. Strathfield 2025 is based on five broad themes:

- Understanding how Strathfield connects and integrates with the broader Inner West and Sydney region is critical to providing transport that is easy and safe to use, planning infrastructure that is adequate for growth and improving information and communication technologies to connect to local community to the world.
- The wellbeing of the local community is supported and enhanced by providing safe, clean, healthy and attractive environments, access to public spaces and community facilities, and opportunities to participate in programs and activities.
- Providing opportunities for prosperity through innovative business development, improving regulatory systems and promoting a sense of civic pride creates economic benefits.
- Supporting high quality, well planned and sustainable urban and natural environments that balance well designed and innovative development with existing local character whilst protecting and enhancing the natural environments.

These goals are underpinned by a commitment to making improvements to infrastructure and delivering and facilitating better services by responsible management of community assets and consistent delivery of efficient and effective services. In addition:

- Council has adopted and regularly reviews community, development, environmental and planning policies including Local Environmental Plan to ensure that Council's planning processes are current and are reflecting the changing local, state and federal policy environments.
- Well-developed planning processes in transport planning, heritage, section 94 planning and corporate strategies.
- Adopted Community Strategic Plan and other IP&R documents such as long term financial planning and asset management planning. Performance measurements are integrated into the Strategic Plan, Delivery and Operational Plan and closely aligned with service standards and individual staff workplans. Performance achievements are monitored and reported on a regular basis.
- Regular community consultation and advocacy on major community issues.
- Program initiatives - catchment management and sustainability programs.

6. Effective regional collaboration

Strathfield Council supports effective regional collaborations and has a successful track record in regional collaboration to achieve positive outcomes, which include:

SWIFT NSW Shared Library Management System agreement which includes Ashfield, Botany Bay, Burwood, Marrickville, Kogarah and Strathfield Councils

Member and host of Cooks River Alliance – a collaboration of eight councils that work closely with local communities to engage and educate for improved health of the river and its tributaries. The alliance has reduced pollution, developed sustainable water sources, building capacity across member councils and is creating water sensitive communities along the Cooks River.

Member of the Parramatta River Catchment Group – a collaboration of thirteen councils and state agencies to improve the health of the Parramatta River and its tributaries. This group has developed water sensitive urban design, biodiversity programs and developed Coastal Zone Management Plans. Strathfield is a key member driving the current Living River Strategy.

Established regional partnerships to address removal of weeds, feral animals, environmentally sustainable business practices, catchment management and regional planning across Councils functions

Working with SSROC on cooperative purchasing arrangements, waste and street lighting improvement programs

Regional service delivery addresses local emergencies

Range of community services delivered in partnerships with other councils, state and federal agencies and private organisations

Range of environmental services and sustainability initiatives with other councils and state authorities such as the Inner Sydney Regional Food Surveillance Group working with other Inner Sydney Councils and NSW Food Authority, Reduce Illegal Dumping Initiative, Treading Lightly sustainability community education.

7. Credibility for more effective advocacy

Strathfield Council is an effective advocate for its community and regularly advocates on issues of significance to its community.

Representation on Sydney Metropolitan Mayors Association

Lobbying for additional schools in Strathfield due to population growth.

Advocating to State Government for improvements to transport particularly upgrades to state and regional road networks.

Advocacy to State Government for Light Rail Network from Strathfield to Parramatta.

Advocacy to state and federal governments for the Strathfield Town Centre project – rail/bus interchange and revitalisation of the Strathfield Town Centre.

Fought to preserve important heritage items and conservation areas from demolition or neglect and advocated to State Government for stronger heritage laws and policies.

8. Capable partner for State and Federal agencies

A range of programs are delivered in cooperation with State agencies including:

Participating in state government initiatives eg Joint Regional Planning Panel (JRPP) on planning, Parramatta Road Urban Renewal Strategy precinct panel, central subregional planning technical working group and Westline partnerships.

Strong history of successfully administering State and Federal grant projects such as Cooks River Alliance 'place.people.connections' project which runs from 2013-2017, Digital Local Government Program etc.

9. Resources to cope with complex and unexpected change.

Strathfield has demonstrated its capacity to deal with complex and unexpected change. Change is a constant in local government with changing priorities or policies of state or federal government as well as those of the community or unforeseen natural disasters. Council is adept at dealing with change and has sufficient resources, staff resources and assets to effectively cope with complex and unexpected changes:

Council sets aside contingency funds which can be drawn upon to deal with disasters and emergencies.

Emergency and disaster recovery plans are in place across all critical Council functions.

Council has adopted business contingency plans.

Council encourages active volunteer programs and has adopted policies to promote volunteering opportunities in programs such as Bushcare.

Council has implemented risk management systems and procedures to minimise and manage events.

Council employs a wide range of skilled and qualified staff with transferable skills.

Council has access to additional external labour resources (agency) to perform work if/when required.

10. High quality political and managerial leadership

Strathfield has strong political and managerial leadership and governance as evidenced by:

Management and leadership programs such as Australian Applied Management Colloquium.

Strong and experienced executive management

Induction and training for staff with access to training and further education through short courses, conferences, further education opportunities, secondments and higher duties prospects, and various in-house training workshops.

Comprehensive induction and continuous Councillor training and development

Council has ready access and utilises external consultants to perform specialist work if/when required.