



KJA

engaging solutions

Fit for the Future

Facilitated Workshops for Kyogle Council with  
Richmond Valley Council and Lismore City Council

FINAL

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## Introduction

KJA was engaged by the Office of Local Government to provide facilitation for meetings between the General Managers and Councillors from the Kyogle, Richmond Valley and Lismore City Councils. These discussions were prompted by Kyogle Council with a request for bipartisan talks to explore the possibility of a voluntary merger.

The recommendations of the Independent Local Government Review Panel include the following:

- Kyogle: Northern Rivers Joint Organisation or merge with Lismore City or Richmond Valley
- Lismore: Northern Rivers Joint Organisation or merge with Kyogle
- Richmond Valley: Northern Rivers Joint Organisation or merge with Kyogle

Both Richmond Valley and Lismore City Councils accepted the invitation extended by Kyogle Council to engage in these discussions to be Fit for the Future. Although none of the three Councils committed to a shared Merger Business Case, they agreed to work together on defining a future position.

## Tailored Engagement Program

### Principles of engagement

- All discussions are held in confidence;
- Goals and shared objectives will be established at the outset of each workshop to facilitate group ownership of the process; and
- KJA will facilitate the process, not drive a predetermined outcome.

The Engagement Program was designed based on background research including a background briefing with each General Manager. A detailed Engagement Plan was developed considering the information gathered, including meeting and workshop dates and draft agendas. The final program delivered included:

- A facilitated session with each council separately (three workshops in total) for the Councils to develop an understanding of each council's current state, and the opportunities and challenges presented by a merger. This workshop considered the vision and values for each Council with a view to comparing outcomes as the workshops progressed.
- Two paired workshops with representatives from two Councils participating in each session (Kyogle Council and Lismore City Council, followed by Kyogle Council and Richmond Valley Council). Councils worked together to explore and discuss opportunities, and identify common values and synergies with a view to identifying whether a merger path is possible.
- An optional workshop was made available for Councils who may wish to pursue further discussion regarding a potential merger. This workshop was not utilised.

## Workshop Design

Our workshop design for this project was guided by a set of KJA principals that underpin all facilitations. These include:



**Constructive:** Our agendas are constructive and tailored to encourage genuine conversations to understand the position of each individual council. The agenda will hone the key discussion points and be created to ensure time is used efficiently.

**Focused:** Our approach is geared towards focusing workshop participants on the subject of a merger and ensuring the conversations seek to explore opportunities.

**Outcomes:** We facilitated the process to achieve the outcome that the merger potential was fully explored, with Councils sharing their plans, current position, challenges and issues, to make an informed decision on their path for Fit for the Future. A summary workshop outcomes statement was provided to workshop participants.

**Workshop objectives:**

Workshop Objectives were refined for each session. The working objectives for this program included:

- Explore the opportunities for Kyogle and Richmond Valley or Kyogle and Lismore City Councils to work together to become Fit for the Future, most particularly through investigating merger options
- Bring the views of each participating Council to the table for discussion and develop a shared understanding
- Agree on a position with a view to delivering a Council/s that are Fit for the Future
- Strengthen working relationships

## Workshop Outcomes

### Workshop 1, 2 and 3

The initial workshops with the individual Councils were an opportunity for Councils to be clear on what they bring to the table. These sessions explored the objectives and vision of each Council, garnered information and views about their future, their objectives, values, expectations and local agendas.

- **Workshop 1: Kyogle Council - Thursday 12 March**

Kyogle Council expressed a clear interest in pursuing discussions with both neighbouring Council, however identified reservations about a possible merger with either of the Councils, citing communities of interest, local identity and representation as key challenges. Additionally, the financial challenge of maintaining and replacing timber bridges in the Council area is also considered a key impediment in progressing a merger. Although expressing a clear vision for the region, Councillors rated their progress towards this vision as low.

- **Workshop 2: Richmond Valley Council- Friday 13 March**

Richmond Valley Council has resolved to stand alone in their Fit for the Future submission. They were very pragmatic in their approach to the discussions, citing a number of items as deterrents to merging. These included but were not limited to: the timber bridge issue; their position as a recently merged council; their current broad geography stretching from the ocean to rural areas; and a clear level of comfort in their current administration and model of representation. Richmond Valley is confident in their financial and administrative strength however was pleased to discuss working with Kyogle to support them in other ways.



- **Workshop 3: Lismore City Council - Monday 16 March**

Lismore Council entered discussions with the position that they are confident in their position to stand alone, meeting 4 out of 7 Fit for the Future criteria. They were however keen to consider any challenges to their approach to test the robustness of their decision. Lismore Councillors generally consider they are well progressed on delivering their vision for their LGA. Issues of representation, the financial burden of the timber bridges and a low level of communities of interest were cited as key challenges to a merger with Kyogle. Further, confidence in their current financial position and the strength of their community engagement and service administration were considered to obstruct progressing any merger discussions. Lismore were however pleased to discuss working with Kyogle to support them in other ways.

### **Workshop 4 and 5**

The shared sessions were delivered in two workshops. Each workshop was attended by two councils (Kyogle Council and Lismore City Council, followed by Kyogle Council and Richmond Valley Council). These workshops enabled the councils to meet and consider a shared way forward. The recess between the individual and the shared sessions provided space and time for consideration of issues identified and provided opportunities to seek answers or further investigate issues.

This second round of workshops aimed for the groups to gain clarity about whether there is potential to work towards being a merged entity. To ensure a very clear takeaway from each session, a later stage of each workshop included a clear question directed to participants “do you support these two councils moving to consider a Merger Business Case?” (a Merger Business Case is the tool provided by OLG to allow two or more Councils to investigate the financial implications of a merger.)

- **Workshop 4, Thursday 26: March Kyogle Council with Lismore City Council**

This workshop was held in Lismore, in the evening after a shared meal at 5:30pm. The majority of Councillors plus each General Manager were in attendance.

The workshop agenda considered challenges and opportunities and a regional vision. There were many opportunities identified and at the same time, many challenges. There was general acknowledgement that the challenges identified highlighted the differences between the two Councils. The group identified a number of key challenges that are considered to stand in the way of a merger. These include representation, maintenance of local identity, differing communities of interest when considering each LGA in its entirety and Kyogle’s significant infrastructure backlog. There was minimal support for the idea that these challenges could be overcome. These challenges had previously been identified in the first round of workshops.

The majority did not support progressing to a Merger Business Case. There is no intention in either Council to pursue a Merger Business Case with the other. There is however an improvement in relationships between the Councils, and a clear understanding that each Council is pleased to work with the other, particularly to support Kyogle in their position on Fit for the Future.

Lismore was clear on its commitment to be a good neighbour, acknowledging some shared communities of interest with Kyogle. Lismore Councillors consider the Council to be a well-established Council with a clear vision and a majority view that the Council is working successfully to meet their vision as a regional centre. Lismore identified opportunities to support Kyogle and offered a number of ways to work together including advocacy on rating and infrastructure backlog and offered support in Kyogle’s operational activities including waste services.



- **Workshop 5, Friday 27: March Kyogle Council with Richmond Valley Council**

This workshop was held in Casino following a shared meal at midday. The agenda followed a similar agenda to Workshop 4 with a consideration of opportunities and challenges and a conversation about regional growth and future vision. The majority of Councillors plus each General Manager were in attendance.

Following Richmond Valley's individual workshop, and the identification of Kyogle's infrastructure backlog as a key impediment to merging, the Richmond Valley General Manager delivered a presentation on Council's position re Fit for the Future which included a rudimentary financial assessment of the impacts of a merger. This presentation highlighted that from a financial perspective; the impost on Richmond Valley's financial position was minimal and could likely be managed so that the impact of Kyogle's infrastructure backlog (ie the timber bridges) was negligible. Both groups of Councillors were surprised with these indicative results.

With the financial information presented, some Richmond Valley Councillors considered the other challenges to merging to be manageable. Richmond Valley Councillors also acknowledged their current Council resolution to 'stand-alone' in their Fit for the Future submission. At the start of the final exercise, there was interest from some Richmond Valley Councillors to progress to a Merger Business Case with Kyogle, however the majority of workshop participants did not agree to pursue this path and the final agreed position of the workshop was that Kyogle and Richmond Valley not proceed to a Merger Business Case.

#### **Final position**

- Lismore City Council – stand-alone submission, and a commitment to support Kyogle where possible in their future activities
- Richmond Valley – stand-alone submission, and a commitment to support Kyogle where possible in their future activities
- Kyogle Council – undecided on status for submission



## Details of the Facilitation Team

### Natalie Boyd

Project Director



Natalie Boyd has more than 20 years experience in the communications and consultation sectors. Natalie works extensively with local government on developing community strategic plans, conducting policy reviews, special rate variation communications and running deliberative democracy programs. Recent clients include Willoughby, Blacktown, Shellharbour, Dubbo and Coonamble Shire Councils. Her areas of expertise include managing stakeholder relationships on high-profile and high-impact projects, including the Royal Botanic Gardens Master Plan, the Sydney Airport Master Plan and the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority's Bays Precinct plan. Natalie has also undertaken national consultation programs for COAG, and helped set strategic direction for clients such as Health Infrastructure NSW.

### Darryl Watkins

Project Director



Darryl Watkins has extensive experience as a senior advisor for state and Commonwealth Ministers, including the Office of the Premier of NSW and the Federal Minister for the Environment and Minister for the Arts. With a background in high profile, politically sensitive environments, Darryl's strengths include team leadership, negotiation, policy and strategy development, issues management, stakeholder consultation and written and verbal communication skills. From his government experience, Darryl has an in-depth understanding of complex and sensitive environmental issues and the importance of balancing commercial considerations, community impacts and regulatory requirements. Darryl also brings a wealth of expert knowledge in government, budgetary and public policy processes from experience in advisory and strategic roles in tourism, industrial relations, ageing and disability, planning, resources, arts and regional development.



## Ian Colley

Facilitator



Ian has a rich background in senior public policy roles, and has designed and facilitated hundreds of projects in business, government and community settings. Before setting up his consulting practice in 1996, he was a senior Ministerial advisor on education and training, then Program Director for the Dusseldorp Skills Forum. Ian currently teaches facilitation and leadership courses at the University of Technology, Sydney. He also chairs community liaison groups for clients including Barangaroo, Orica, and NSW Ports. Ian has worked with American Express, Barangaroo Development Authority, City of Sydney, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, IBM, NSW Department of Education and Training, NSW Department of Housing, NSW Department of Planning and Infrastructure and Natural Resources.



**Sydney Office**

Level 9, 2 Elizabeth Plaza, North Sydney NSW 2060  
PO Box 302, North Sydney NSW 2059  
T 02 9955 5040 F 02 9955 5901

**Melbourne Office**

Level 10, 71 Queens Road, Melbourne, VIC, 3004  
PO Box 7692, Melbourne VIC 3004  
T 03 9514 1600

E [info@kjassoc.com.au](mailto:info@kjassoc.com.au) [www.kjassoc.com.au](http://www.kjassoc.com.au)