

Submission to IPART from Nick Collis-George 11.5.2015

Methodology for Assessment of Council 'Fit for the Future' Proposals

IPART has invited submissions in regard to five questions in Section 1.6.1. This submission addresses Questions 1 and 4.

Question 1

How should the key elements of strategic capacity influence our assessment of scale and capacity? Are there any improvements we can make to how we propose to assess the scale and capacity criterion, consistent with OLG guidance material?

Question 4

How should council engage with their communities when preparing FFTF proposals? Are there other factors we should consider when assessing councils' proposals using the measures and benchmarks for these criteria?

Introduction

I am concerned that a number of councils will disregard the recommendations of the ILGRP, including my own, Mosman Council (29,000 residents). These councils will claim they have no need to merge and have sufficient scale and capacity, referring to their community consultations to support 'no merger' policies.

I support the Government's 'Fit for the Future' reform agenda and use of the 'scale and capacity' criterion as a threshold criterion to determine whether councils are 'Fit for the Future'.

I support the objectives to:

- create high capacity councils that can better represent and serve their local communities on metropolitan issues, and be true partners of State and federal agencies
- establish a more equitable pattern of local government across the metropolitan area, taking into account planned development
- underpin Sydney's status as a global city
- support implementation of the Metropolitan Strategy, especially the planning and development of major centres and the preparation and implementation of sub-regional Delivery Plans.

I support the approach whereby councils that do not submit the same proposal as preferred by the ILGRP must present a sound argument, e.g. using a business case. This must demonstrate why the option proposed is superior to the merger option, and how it meets the key elements of strategic capacity in Box 3.1.

Box 3.1 Key elements of Strategic Capacity

- 1 *More robust revenue base and increased discretionary spending*
- 2 *Scope to undertake new functions and major projects*
- 3 *Ability to employ wider range of skilled staff*

- 4 *Knowledge, creativity and innovation*
- 5 *Advanced skills in strategic planning and policy development*
- 6 *Effective regional collaboration*
- 7 *Credibility for more effective advocacy*
- 8 *Capable partner for State and Federal agencies*
- 9 *Resources to cope with complex and unexpected change*
- 10 *High quality and political and managerial leadership.*

Question 1

How should the key elements of strategic capacity influence our assessment of scale and capacity? Are there any improvements we can make to how we propose to assess the scale and capacity criterion, consistent with OLG guidance material?

Councils that do not submit the same proposal as preferred by the ILGRP are required to address each of the elements in Box 3.1.

The assessment of the elements 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 9 relate directly to the resources available to the council. Their business case needs to demonstrate a significant increase in the council's resources, in particular financial resources.

Elements 6, 7, 8 and 10 go to the question of capacity to provide representation and leadership at a regional level, which can be tested by asking the question: Does the council represent a significant number of residents in its region or is it a minor party among larger and influential councils?

Question 4.

How should council engage with their communities when preparing FFTF proposals? Are there other factors we should consider when assessing councils' proposals using the measures and benchmarks for these criteria?

A council's credibility and viability is in question if its FFTF application is based on flawed community consultation. This includes where limited information or options have been provided to residents or where balanced arguments have not been presented.

This is particularly important where councils do not submit the same proposal as preferred by the ILGRP.

I propose these measures and benchmarks:

1. Have merger options been reasonably researched, to what extent were the options explored by internal research, or discussions with other councils, or external expert consultants? Were the options constrained by existing council policy e.g. a no merger policy?
2. Using the information provided, were ratepayers able to understand how merger options may work to enable them to make an informed decision to either support or reject merger options?
3. Were the arguments for and against mergers fairly presented and balanced? Was equal or fair space provided in materials for views for and against? Was equal or fair time given to the views for and against at public meetings?

4. Were draft materials referred to interested and expert parties to check for fairness and balance e.g. ILGRP, OLG, recognised experts, residents who had registered an interest in the issues?
5. Were council community consultation committees or official communications e.g. website, emails Facebook, Twitter, pushing a particular point of view leading up to and during the consultation period that may have affected the consultation?
6. What is the quality and quantity of the responses? Does this represent a significant, representative and informed community response?

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission, which I would like to be made public.

Nick Collis-George

