“Wentworth Shire Council is ready to take regional leadership to a new level.”
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Executive Summary

This submission is in response to the Far West Initiative Consultation Paper released on 29 August 2016.

Council, on 14 December, resolved as follows:

“That Council notes the Local Government Reform December 2016 update and resolves that the arguments raised in response to the consultation paper entitled “The Far West Initiative – Improving the outcome and other options for the people in Far Western NSW” be incorporated into a submission due 16 December 2016.

That Council adopt the draft submission and authorise the Mayor and General Manager to make any amendments before the final submission is lodged.”

Wentworth Shire Council is of the firm view that there are options available to the State Government to improve the outcomes of the people and its councils in the Far West.

Council argues that leadership and a flexible regional approach is needed to make a difference to service delivery outcomes in the Far West and move towards the vision of the Destination 2036. It also argues that there should be a recognition that councils in the Far West may never meet the sustainable criteria set for the rest of the State because of its unique challenges and that this should not result in an area subjected to lower standards than the rest of the State.

The economic, social and environmental gaps between the Far West and the rest of rural NSW must be closed.

A significant change is possible for the Far West! The opportunity for meaningful collaboration must be seized and to ignore the Far West is not an option.

Council argues that an area of NSW which is deemed to be complex, unique and challenging requires a solution which optimises outcomes for individual areas of a region and at the same time optimises outcomes for the collective region. The challenges include remoteness, tyranny of distance, declining total population, declining regional GDP growth rate (lowest per person in the country – declining by 4.3% since 2011-12, manufacturing decline of 20% over the past decade alone), and cross border engagement with three States, to name a few.

At the core of Council’s response is a recognition that partnerships are not confined to one footprint, no matter how it is defined. Council has a 360 degree approach to its regional partnerships, decision making and strategic opportunities.

Council is ready to provide regional leadership and has a position to remain a standalone Council, wishes to provide more locally based services, does not wish to merge with any other council, favours the membership of and further development of the Far West Initiative Organisation (FWIO) concept (as it acknowledges that it must participate in a regional group) with the flexibility for Council to affiliate with the eastern Joint Organisation, whilst acknowledging that its strategic ties with the south will always be strong.
A Case to the North

This paper provides a detailed response for a regional approach to the north because of the extensive work undertaken by the State Government and the Far West Councils through the Far West Initiative Advisory Committee which commenced in August 2015.

In appendix one is Council’s response to the 10 online questions posed by the Office of local Government.

An Affiliation to the East

An affiliation to the east is complementary to Council’s overall 360 degree model and draws on the advantages and opportunities previously submitted to the Independent Local Government Review Panel (ILGRP) in 2013. Copies of submissions by the Wentworth Shire Council to the ILGRP are included in appendices 2, 3, and 4. Whilst somewhat dated these submissions support the importance of Council being affiliated to the east.

Council’s position is mindful of the following should it align only with the east:

- Council may not retain the exemption from the fit for the future process which all councils except for the Far West councils were required to go through.
- Council may not retain the “standalone” council status of Far West councils by virtue of being in the Far West Initiative.
- Council may not receive potential financial benefits for the Far West, if any. Increased grants may be provided to the Far West because of its unique and complex nature.

Strategic Links to the South and West

Council has significant links to the Sunraysia Region which comprises Wentworth Shire Council of 26,000 square kilometres and Mildura Rural City Council which has a similar area. Over 50,000 people live within a radius of 30 kilometres of the Chaffey Bridge which divides both councils.

The link to the west is simply an acknowledgement of the proximity and strategic links the Sunraysia Region has with South Australia.

These links were highlighted in the recently released draft Far West Regional Plan.

Exit Strategy

Council argues that within four years of the implementation of a regional body, assuming Council is part of that body, there should be a review of the efficiency and effectiveness of the regional body.

Council should have the right to make a submission to the State Government for a change to its regional membership should Council believe that a change is warranted and would clearly benefit the residents of the Wentworth Shire Council.
1. Introduction

In 2011 all councils met in Dubbo to consider 2036 vision which effectively commenced the reform process. The State Government sets up an Independent Local Government Reform Panel (ILGRP) to make recommendations to the Government about local government reform.

The ILGRP conducted consultations in Wentworth Shire Council in 2013 and made two submissions to the ILGRP.

The ILGRP submitted its final report to the Government in October 2013. Wentworth Shire Council responded by making a submission in April 2014.Whilst dated somewhat now, this submission which includes the original 2013 submission is reproduced in appendix 2 by way of background information in order to convey the challenges facing the Shire and the importance of the strategic links to the east and south.

The Government produced a response to the ILGRP’s recommendations in September 2014. The Government response to the ILGRP’s was in principle support for the establishment of a Far West Authority. In August 2015 the Government formed the Far West Initiative Advisory Committee to develop a new governance model. The Committee, represented by Cr McKinnon and observer General Manager Peter Kozlowski, met several times.

The Office of Local Government released a consultation paper on 29 August 2016 entitled “the Far West Initiative - Improving Outcomes for the People in the Far West”. A series of consultation meetings were held and a request for submissions due by 16 December 2016.

2. The Regional Case to the North

This paper provides a detailed response in relation to the Far West Initiative Consultation Paper which was released on 29 August 2016, and recommends a regional approach in the Far West and for Wentworth Shire Council to be full member of the FWIO (Far West Initiative Organisation) Board, which will provide a high level strategic link to the State and Federal Governments.

Wentworth Shire Council supports this regional approach because it will allow the following:

1. Each council to remain standalone.
2. Merger proposals to be taken off the table.
3. Justification for not pursuing the fit for the future process, as the Far West region has unique and challenging issues which contrast to the rest of the State, requiring a solution which recognises that “one size does not fit all”, and an acknowledgement from the State that a margin of tolerance for performance indicators should be afforded to the region because it is unlikely that benchmarks will be reached under normal circumstances unless favourable policy intervention occurs.
4. The high level State Government/Local Government/Federal Government strategic collaboration, service coordination and other considerations which have been sought for decades. Refer to recommendations.
5. The continuation of decades of collaboration between the Far West eight councils, as reflected by their membership of the Western Division Group of Councils, albeit at a recommended higher level of cooperation, commitment, support and strategic intent.

The considerations (referred to in point 4 above) are presented in the form of recommendations.
Standalone Council Entity

1. That the current Shire boundary remains unaltered and that Wentworth Shire Council remains a “standalone” Council.
2. That the State supports the principle of councils in the Far West becoming stronger and underpinning locally based service delivery.

The Minister has stated that the Wentworth Shire and none of the other Shires in the Far West Initiative will be merged by virtue of being in the Far West. It is unclear whether this exemption will be maintained if a council was to leave the Far West and join fully with a Joint Organisation.

Wentworth Shire Council believes that councils in the Far West could take a stronger role in service delivery but this would require appropriate funding to be provided. Stronger councils would complement increased local decision making and reduce the need for as much fly in fly out service delivery.

Strategic Focus

3. That the FWIO operate at a high strategic level over the full FWI footprint.
4. That the FWIO be an enabler, influencing body, and be able to look at strategic opportunities, including significant capital works.
5. That the FWIO sets the priorities for the Board to consider.
6. That a priority for the FWIO be to form a formal partnership with the Federal Government to ensure that it engages with the FWIO and is part of the overall drive to better outcomes.
7. That a priority for the FWIO be to develop a regional economic development plan, with an entrepreneurial focus, in the first two years.
8. That strategic and service delivery decisions be largely left to the FWIO and not arbitrarily imposed by the State Government.
9. That all governments align their service delivery boundaries with the FWIO boundary.

The FWIO appeal is that it could realise the vision of 2036 for local government and achieve improved outcomes for the Far West sought by the State, local government and its communities. In Council’s view this can only happen if a governance framework is set up that operates at the highest government levels. The FWIO must focus on regional priorities and not get bogged down in the local operational service detail.

The first year needs to focus on developing partnerships and formalise the commitment from all parties. Another priority is the need for an economic plan for the Far West. Recent reports of declining per capital GDP in rural NSW since 2011-12 are of concern.

Arbitrary decisions on which functions should be delivered by the region as opposed to councils, without appropriate business analysis and a supporting business case, will not be helpful for moving forward and likely to the strategic effectiveness of the FWIO.

Wentworth Shire Council seeks a regional body which is underpinned by a strategic maturity from all participants that will deliver real results over time.

Governance Structure

10. That FWIO membership comprise a Minister appointed by the Premier, 8 Council Mayors, 1 unincorporated representative, 1 State representative, 1
Federal representative, and chaired by a member elected by the FWI membership.

11. That each council has equal voting rights.
12. That the Mayor represent council on the FWIO.
13. That General Managers attend and contribute to the FWIO Board meetings.
14. That statutory appointments be non-voting members on the FWIO.
15. That attendance at FWIO Board meetings be mandatory for coopted members based on priorities being considered.
16. That a minister underpin the FWIO. This was strongly raised by residents at consultation meetings.
17. That the FWIO considers coopting cross border representatives, as required. Wentworth Shire Council is closely aligned with Mildura’s community of interest.
18. That the democratic principle be enshrined in legislation for membership of the majority of the FWIO Board.
19. That FWIO meet at least four times a year, twice in Sydney and twice in the Far West (different locations), with other meetings set by the FWI Organisation.
20. That the administrative centre for the FWIO (if required) be decided by the FWIO Board.

Residents at the consultation meetings called for a Minister to be at the table. It is argued that the complexities of the Far West warrant strong political links and, therefore, a minister should be appointed to the FWIO. It is acknowledged that the appointment of a minister is a decision for the Premier and a separate approach should be made accordingly.

It is acknowledged that the role of Mayor has been enhanced in changes to the Local Government Act. It is argued that if the Mayor is unable to fulfil the role as representative for whatever reason the Deputy Mayor should become the representative.

In order for the FWIO to develop the strategies and policies required to deliver the outcomes desired a number of key personnel, from governments and the community, would need to be coopted from time to time. It is argued that personnel coopted for limited periods should not have a voting right.

The FWIO must meet regularly and build in the operational cost of doing so to allow proper strategic deliberations to occur.

Performance and Accountability

21. That an annual review of progress made by the FWIO be presented to the communities at public meetings in the Far West and to the relevant minister.
22. That after four years of operation the FWIO should undertake a comprehensive review of its effectiveness.

The development of a community engagement strategy is crucial to ensure that the various communities continue to support the work of the FWIO. These strategies may need to be developed on a sub-regional basis because of the diverse communities in various parts of the Far West footprint.

A review, funded by the State Government, should include an analysis of whether each Council area has achieved its expectations and whether there is a case for change in terms of a council(s) realigning with another region. Presentations should be made to the State and the Far West communities.
Flexibility and Partnerships

23. That FWIO members be allowed to formulate partnerships with any combination of its members and/or external parties based on specific services or issues.

24. That consideration of matters on a sub-regional basis be allowed where appropriate.

25. That because the Wentworth Shire Council has a significant alignment with the Murray and, in view of it close proximity with Mildura Rural City Council, planning decision forming and making should occur on a sub-regional basis.

Wentworth Shire Council believes strongly that it should maximise its strategic advantage and delivery outcomes by seeking the best deal for its communities. Essentially Council looks to forge partnerships, where possible, on a 360 degree basis and not align itself entirely with one region.

The Shire is part of a significant rural regional area (Sunraysia Region) with a population of over 60,000 within close proximity of the Murray River. The development of strategic economic, environmental and social considerations in the Sunraysia Region are critical to the ongoing development of the Shire which is particularly evident in the fields of strategic and land use planning.

It is important to ensure that the size of the Far West and variety of issues do not stifle planning considerations in the far south west when they may not have much in common with the northern part of the Far West which may be up to 1000 kilometres or up to 12 hours travel distance away.

Funding Consideration

26. That the State acknowledges that doing business in the Far West, across a footprint which represents 40% of NSW (larger than the State of Victoria which is 71.6% of the FWI footprint), requires special financial consideration from the operational requirements of the Joint Organisations in rural NSW.

27. That the FWIO operates on a basis which does not create a fourth tier of government and that its operating costs be commensurate with the functions and responsibilities for which it is accountable to the residents of the Far West.

28. That the State Government fund the FWIO operation for four years (years 1-4) during which time the FWIO focuses on the identification of baseline service data, engagement strategy, service review priorities, priority issues to be addressed, production of a FWIO regional plan based on the triple bottom line, how the FWIO can be sustainably funded from year 4 and beyond, and is subject to the four review previously mentioned above.

29. That the intent is, subject to the four yearly comprehensive review, that in the medium term (years 5-8), the FWIO works towards a financially sustainable operating model, and that all councils are also financially sustainable.

30. That the FWIO should be funded by the three levels of government in proportion to the levels of services the three levels provide in the Far West. Therefore if Councils provide 10% of the total services provided in the Far West it should provide 10% of the operational costs associated with running the FW Organisation.

31. That if a service is reviewed and it is deemed necessary to increase the funding for the service, assuming the additional cost will not be funded externally, then the source of funds must come from the existing total pool of funds which is expended to provide the current services in the Far West. So, if one service increases in expenditure it must be funded from the existing services by way of an equivalent amount as a result of a reduction in funding.
from another service (service reduction) or as a result of efficiency savings generated by a review of a service (productive gain).

32. Therefore, it is proposed for each level of government to continue to contribute ongoing funds on a proportional basis, equivalent to the percentage of service delivery provided in a baseline year (i.e. 100% of service delivery in the Far West is made up of a percentage from local government, a percentage from State government and a percentage from the Federal Government).

33. That a baseline year (starting point) for service delivery be identified. Future service reviews may alter the mix of service delivery percentages in the Far West.

34. That in the long term (year 9+) the principles underpinning the medium term funding be maintained unless specific partnerships developed across the three levels of government, which in turn, may alter the percentage mix of service delivery between the three levels of government.

35. That the FWIO and its member councils have access to low interest loans under TCorp irrespective of their fit for the future rating and for the purposes of new and backlog infrastructure.

36. That incentive grants be provided to FWIO member councils based on their rate of sustainable improvement or potential for economic growth.

The funding of a Far West regional body is crucial to its success. However, all levels of government need to acknowledge that it may not be possible for the Far West, with low levels of population and its current levels of economic investment, to achieve the sustainability Government is looking for. Therefore, there is a need to acknowledge that support for the region may be disproportionate to the rest of the State.

A possible additional funding source for the Far West could involve the current financial assistance grants distributed to each council throughout the State. It is recommended that the formula for distribution be modified to allow more funding to be made available to Far West councils. This could be achieved by modifying the disability factors in the grant formula, essentially favouring Far West councils in relative terms to the rest of the councils in the State.

At the consultation meetings in September 2016 residents in a number of Shires were generally in agreement that a regional approach in the Far West should not result in another layer of bureaucracy or government. Council supports that view and is looking at a streamlined approach to regional coordination of policy development and service delivery.

However, if clear cases for improved services can be articulated to the community then an expanded capacity (resources) to deliver these services is likely to be considered on their merits and also met with a higher probability of acceptance.

In order for meaning and real change to be achieved it will be necessary for the State to provide additional funds to the FWIO and its councils, particularly in the first four years, and possibly longer subject to a review of the effectiveness of the FWIO.

Work to date on reforming the Far West has focused on governance and very little resource or time devoted to looking at the mix of who does what or who should do what in terms of service delivery.

Whilst this may be a frustrating scenario to the average resident it has to be acknowledged that a complete service review of all services, if it is done well, will take time and resources, but there will be benefits. The challenge is for the collective leadership from all levels of government to make the move forward.
Business Planning and Modelling

37. That the FWIO produces a business and financial plan in its first year so that each council and the Body can measure its performance.

This is a practical recommendation to demonstrate that the new body has made progress and has a plan. It is essential in terms of bringing the community along the reform journey.

Service Delivery and Outcomes

38. That all services currently delivered in the Far West potentially be improved and delivered more efficiently and effectively with better outcomes.

39. That core functions of the FWIO be at a high level, including intergovernmental collaboration, regional leadership and advocacy, and relevant and agreed to strategic planning.

40. That operational services not be prescribed by legislation and that changes only be made after a rigorous process outlined below and agreed to as a priority by the FWIO.

41. That baseline service delivery data of the three tiers of government be established as one of the first priorities of the FWIO. This work which expands on the modelling undertaken by the State for the Far West Initiative Advisory Committee should be funded by the State and completed with the first four year term of the FWIO.

42. That changes to baseline (current) service delivery be subject to a detailed business case for change. Therefore, no arbitrary decisions on which level of government should deliver a service or be responsible for a function should be made without appropriate baseline data, business analysis, and community and government consultation.

43. That all changes to baseline (current) service delivery be subject to community consultation.

44. That the principle of locally based decision making and service delivery be at the forefront of service delivery because of the uniqueness, complexity, remoteness and challenges of the Far West. A strategy that reduces the reliance in fly in fly out workers and professionals should be developed.

45. That the FWIO conduct a satisfaction survey(s) in the Far West after the second year of operation.

It is important for the FWIO to work in an atmosphere of trust and credibility in terms of its operations. Wentworth Shire Council does not oppose a review of services but does oppose arbitrary decision making in relation to who is responsible for which function or who provides which service without proper analysis of data.

Council has and will continue to argue that locally based service delivery in the Far West is the most effective form of service delivery. The challenge is how to fund those services and how to assess the effectiveness of the myriad of services provided by the three levels of government.

Some of the risks and opportunities Council is mindful of in terms of the Far West Initiative Organisation are listed below.

Risks:
- The focus on priorities may be more socially based rather than economically based due to the significant issues faced by councils in the north of the Far West Initiative.
- Planning oversight may continue from Dubbo and may hold Wentworth Shire’s growth back if a sub-regional approach is not adopted in a meaningful way.
The priorities of the Far West region may focus on issues/needs that Wentworth Shire either already has resolved or has in place, which moves the thrust of the regional engagement at the State and Federal level to issues/needs of the northern councils.

Opportunities:

- If the State accepts Council's argument that the Far West should have a Minister at the table this would potentially provide a significant impetus for change which is unlikely to occur in the same way with the other 11 Joint Organisations in rural NSW who would not have a Minister. Clearly, the Far West would be advantaged compared to the rest of the State, but is that a bad thing?
- If the State continues to argue the uniqueness and complexity of the Far West then the funding model (including grants for councils) could be greater than what is likely to be provided to the rest of the State via the Joint Organisations.

3. Regional Affiliation to the East

The case to the east is complementary to Council's overall model in that it draws on the advantages and opportunities previously submitted to the Independent Local Government Review Panel in 2013. A copy of this submission is included in appendix 2.

It should be acknowledged that Council's efforts have been focused on the Far West Initiative since the formation of the Far West Initiative Advisory Committee in August 2015 (FWIAC) and the decision by all eight councils in April 2016 to look more closely at possible joint regional arrangements. It should also be acknowledged that Wentworth Shire Council has not been involved closely with the development of the Joint Organisation concept affecting councils to the east of the Far West footprint.

It should be noted that the Far West model is fundamentally the same as the joint organisation model with the main differences being how the Far West is perceived by the State Government in terms of uniqueness and complexity, and membership.

An affiliation to the east is likely to result in a non-voting right. The eastern Joint Organisation is likely to be made up of at least 10 councils. The headquarters could be in Griffith or Deniliquin or a central location geographically.

Why is an eastern affiliation important to Council?

1. The historical alignment to the Murray River and various common interests have been strong.
2. Council shares many cross border issues with its interstate neighbours.
3. Significant number of services delivered cross border.
4. Significant percentage of the population of the Wentworth Shire works in Mildura.
5. Wentworth Shire’s synergies lie with the Sunraysia Region (WSC 2013 June submission)
6. Council would not want to lose the benefits of partnerships established by the Riverina & Murray Organisation of Councils (RAMROC) across the areas of waste management, environmental management, and engineering.
7. The eastern joint Organisation may prove to be better resourced than the Far West but that is still largely an unknown at this time.
8. Wentworth Shire Council has worked with RAMROC councils for many years and more frequently than the Western Division Group of Councils which occupies over 80% of the same as the FWI footprint.
9. Wentworth Shire is located in the Federal Electorate of Farrar and the State electorate of Murray which is both aligned to the east and not the north.
4. Strategic Links to the South and West

Council has significant links to the Sunraysia Region which comprises Wentworth Shire Council of 26,000 square kilometres and Mildura Rural City Council which has a similar area. Over 50,000 people live within a radius of 30 kilometres of the Chaffey Bridge which divides both councils.

In November 2016 Hon. Greg Pearce MLC, Chair State Development Committee, visited the Wentworth Shire and saw development on both sides of the Murray River. When referring to Mildura and town on the NSW side of the Murray River he said in Hansard “this area is pretty much integrated into one centre in that region. I was impressed by the facilities.”

The link to the west is simply an acknowledgement of the proximity and strategic links the Sunraysia Region has with South Australia.

5. What Wentworth Shire Council Will Do Irrespective of What the Government Decides

Irrespective of the ultimate decision by the State Government the Wentworth Shire will do the following:

1. Facilitate and progress the TriState partnership with Mildura Rural City Council and other relevant councils to advocate for cross border regional matters of significance.
2. Continue to be an associated member or form partnerships with relevant bodies and councils on the basis of strategic significance 360 degree around the footprint of the Wentworth Shire Council.
3. Continue to travel extensive distances in order to influence regional and State decision makers in NSW irrespective which regional body Council is a part of.
4. Continue to benefit from the substantial regional population of the Sunraysia Region (approx. 60,000 and the majority of that population being within 25 minutes of the Chaffey Bridge which connects Wentworth Shire Council and Mildura Rural City Council). Benefits include substantial range of regional service delivery, large workforce recruitment opportunities and strategic capital city transport connections. These benefits are not matched by other regions until you reach the regional areas of Dubbo (10 hours away), Albury (8 hours away) and Wagga (7 hours away).
5. Continue to have easy access to the Wentworth Shire through one of the busiest airports in rural Australia (Mildura Airport).
6. Provide opportunities for State staff to decentralise and work locally through potential Office space which can be provided by the Council.
7. Operate on a regional basis in either the Far West or to the East (opting out is not an option) in accordance with State Government policy.
8. Participate in one or more regional grouping of councils, whether it be the Far West Initiative Organisation or the Joint Organisation to the east, or as it currently stands participate as one of 11 councils in the Western Division Group of Councils (Western Division) or one of 14 councils in the Riverina and Murray Region of Councils (RAMROC).
9. Advocate for a transcontinental rail link, international tourism, and local service delivery (WSC submission to ILGRP March 2013).
10. Develop a state of the art regional landfill facility which will have the capacity to cater for the Sunraysia Region and beyond.
11. Advocate for investment into renewable energy opportunities which has long been on the agenda of the Wentworth Shire Council.
12. Pursue the planning framework and investment strategies which have seen the Sunraysia Region grow over recent decades so there is a better balance across the
NSW and Victorian parts of the Region rather than the skewed levels of development that exist today.

13. Harness the existing regional synergies and advocate for an expanded service delivery model through local government.

6. Exit Strategy

Council will argue that within four years of the implementation of a regional body, assuming Council is part of that body, there should be a review of the efficiency and effectiveness of the regional body.

Why? Council believes that enormous expense, time and collective commitment have been expended in a lengthy process which started in 2014 in relation to the Far West and far back in relation to the whole local government reform process. Council firmly believes that the process warrants an appropriate public accountability in terms of its performance. It is argued that at least four years of operation is needed before a comprehensive report is made public.

Council should have the right to make a submission to the State Government for a change to its regional membership should Council believe that a change is warranted and would clearly benefit the residents of the Wentworth Shire Council.

7. WSC Notes Taken at Community Consultation Meetings

There were four consultation meetings held in Wentworth Shire and the General Manager attended meetings in Balranald, Broken Hill, Bourke and Brewarrina. Notes can be made available if they are deemed to be of value.

It should be noted that all communities expected the Government to consult further with Far West communities before the Parliament and/or the Minister made a final decision.

8. Further Supporting information

Call Peter Kozlowski, General Manager, for further information on 03 50275002.

9. Appendices

Appendix one is the online feedback form with Council comments and appendix two is Council’s response to the final report of the independent Local Government Review Panel (April 2014) by way of background to this submission.
APPENDIX ONE TO THE FAR WEST INITIATIVE CONSULTATION PAPER

FAR WEST INITIATIVE CONSULTATION PAPER - FEEDBACK FORM

First Name*Peter
Last Name*Kozlowski (on behalf of Wentworth Shire Council)
Email* peter.kozlowski@wentworth.nsw.gov.au
Organisation
Wentworth Shire Council Position as at 16/12/16.

Questions

1. **What can be improved for communities in the Far West? Eq. Health services, roads, schools, youth services?**

   All services can be potentially improved if all governments can coordinate their efforts and work together.

   Any change to services needs a business case and any change should be underpinned by consultation with the community. It is noted that three of the four services listed in the question are not currently core business for Wentworth Shire Council.

   Refer to Wentworth Shire Council’s detailed submission dated 16/12/16 to the FWI Consultation Paper for further information.

2. **What should the Far West organisation be responsible for? What should local councils be responsible for?**

   This can only be answered after a proper review process is undertaken. This should occur before any decisions are made.

   Local Government service delivery is “locally based” and, therefore, should be responsible for all local services and could potentially provide other services if appropriately funded from local, State and Commonwealth Governments.

   Service delivery should be more locally based and there should be less fly in fly out (FIFO) service delivery.

   Wentworth Shire has a 360 degree approach to developing appropriate partnerships with neighbouring councils or agencies from other levels of government and requests that the flexibility inherent in the 360 degree approach be maintained. Council does not want to pass up opportunities to form partnerships which could be beneficial to Wentworth Shire.

   Any legislation that is contemplated in relation to service delivery in the Far West should allow Council to take up opportunities into the future. In the case of Wentworth Shire Council a partnership arrangement could be with Mildura Rural City Council, or with a specific agency or, perhaps, a combination of councils and agencies.

   Refer to Wentworth Shire Council’s detailed submission dated 16/12/16 to the FWI Consultation Paper for further information.
3. **How should the community be represented on the Far West organisation? Should they have voting rights or be observers?**

The Far West organisation should operate at a high level and without a Minister around the table it is hard to see the organisation making serious inroads into the issues that have been identified for further consideration.

Fundamentally the community should be represented by the democratically elected councillors. However, various representatives from peak bodies or State and Federal agencies could be coopted to assist a regional body. Voting rights should be restricted to democratically elected representation and State and Federal representation if significant government funding is provided.

It is proposed that four meetings be held per annum with two located in Sydney and two in the Far West. Additional meetings which are likely to occur at least monthly could be conducted using video conferencing facilities. Council is adamant that meetings to deal with sensitive and/or complex issues must be considered at meetings where relevant people are present (Video Conferencing is not appropriate for these type of meetings).

*Refer to Wentworth Shire Council’s detailed submission dated 16/12/16 to the FWI Consultation Paper for further information.*

4. **Should each council have equal voting rights on the Far West organisation or should voting be based on population?**

Each council should have equal voting rights.

*Refer to Wentworth Shire Council’s detailed submission dated 16/12/16 to the FWI Consultation Paper for further information.*

5. **Should mayors be the council representative on the Far West organisation or should the council vote to decide its representative?**

The Mayor should represent Council.

*Refer to Wentworth Shire Council’s detailed submission dated 16/12/16 to the FWI Consultation Paper for further information.*

6. **Should statutory appointments be made to the Far West organisation to ensure the board has decision makers with a balance of expertise? Examples of statutory appointments could include Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly, Non-Government organisations, other regional organisations.**

No statutory appointments with voting rights should be appointed.

Appropriate persons as non-voting members can be coopted, as required, such as General Managers and State and Federal Government department heads.

Because the Far West footprint is large it will be necessary to operate on a sub-regional basis for some matters. The links between how issues or priorities are escalated need to be built into the governance model for the Far West. This model could include a matrix of community committees which provides feedback through to the main Far West Organisation. This same consideration could assist in providing feedback on issues where similar groups across the FW footprint may have differing views because of their geographical location or association with a particular group name (e.g. different indigenous groupings).

*Refer to Wentworth Shire Council’s detailed submission dated 16/12/16 to the FWI Consultation Paper for further information.*

8 councils (one councillor representative each), 1 Minister, 1 Unincorporated Area, 1 Department of Premiers & Cabinet, and 1 Federal Government representative.

Refer to question 6 – The Far West body should have a workable number of people around the table. Wentworth Shire Council has proposed at least 12 voting members but would expect a number of co-opted non-voting members to be present depending on the issues to be dealt with. The number could easily be greater than 15. It is well known that the dynamics of a group struggles with high numbers.

Council argues that the core numbers proposed should represent all residents in the Far West and that the matrix of committees or other groupings can be the link to the Far West body rather than having excessive numbers around the table. The number of groups to be represented could be daunting. Which groups misses out?

Refer to Wentworth Shire Council’s detailed submission dated 16/12/16 to the FWI Consultation Paper for further information.

8. **What funding models for the short, medium and long term should be considered for the Far West organisation?**

Short term (years 1, 2, 3, 4): a seeding grant from State Government which would provide the support to form the Far West Organisation.

Medium term (years 5, 6, 7, 8): The following comments on medium term funding are based on the assumption that no “new” money will be available to the Far West beyond the seeding grant (above) and the short term seed funding is approved.

Council supports a small administrative support team which operates on a “lean and mean” principle.

Council argues that Far West Organisation should be funded by the three levels of government in proportion to the levels of services the three levels provide in the Far West. Therefore if Councils provide 10% of the total services provided in the Far West it should provide 10% of the operational costs associated with running the FW Organisation.

If a service is reviewed and it is deemed necessary to increase the funding for the service, assuming the additional cost will not be funded externally, then the source of funds must come from the existing total pool of funds which is expended to provide the current services in the Far West. So, if one service increases in expenditure it must be funded from the existing services by way of an equivalent amount as a result of a reduction in funding from another service (service reduction) or as a result of efficiency savings generated by a review of a service (productive gain).

Therefore, it is proposed for each level of government to continue to contribute ongoing funds on a proportional basis, equivalent to the percentage of service delivery provided in a baseline year (i.e. 100% of service delivery in the Far West is made up of a percentage from local government, a percentage from State government and a percentage from the Federal Government).

A baseline year (starting point) for service delivery would need to be identified as future service reviews may alter the mix of service delivery percentages in the Far West. Therefore, the mix of which level of government provides the services may also change.

Long term (year 9, 10+): medium term contributions maintained unless specific partnerships developed across the three levels of government which in turn may alter the percentage mix of service delivery between the three levels of government.

Refer to Wentworth Shire Council’s detailed submission dated 16/12/16 to the FWI Consultation Paper for further information.
9. **Who should a Far West organisation report to? What would this look like?**

The Far West Organisation should report to the relevant Minister.

The Minister would bring a level of authority which should command a sense of urgency, commitment and accountability. The presence of a Minister should provide the necessary link between State and local government officials which is needed to make a significant impact on desired outcomes.

Refer to Wentworth Shire Council’s detailed submission dated 16/12/16 to the FWI Consultation Paper for further information.

10. **Do you have any other comments to make?**

Residents should be given the opportunity to view the final recommendations about the Far West based on feedback from the public and non public consultation meetings before a decision about the Far West model is made.

If a Far West Organisation is formed all decisions about service delivery, particularly those recommending a change in service delivery, should be based on a business case and that the residents are consulted about the changes.

Refer to Wentworth Shire Council’s detailed submission dated 16/12/16 to the FWI Consultation Paper for further information.

**Supporting Documentation**

Upload ONE document (pdf or word) to support your answers to this feedback form. Please note that file upload is limited to 10MB.

**Supporting Document**

| Choose File | No file chosen | UPLOAD |

You MUST click on the UPLOAD button to attach the document before clicking on the SUBMIT button. Files must be less than 10 MB.

Allowed file types: pdf doc docx.

PREVIOUS PAGE SUBMIT
Council’s Response to

The Final Report of the
Independent Local Government Review Panel

April 2014
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Introduction

In March 2013 the Wentworth Shire Council provided a submission to the Independent Local Government Review Panel. After considerable deliberation and discussion with regional groups of which we are a part, our Council strongly believes that our original submission, without significant change, provides the way forward for a strong, sustainable local government unit in the far south west corner of NSW.

A copy of the original submission and a recent letter to Premier O'Farrell detailing some policy considerations are attached as part of this submission.

Our Plan for the Future

In our first submission to the Review Panel we clearly articulated the five major areas that needed to be addressed in order to get the Wentworth Shire moving as a standalone local government unit. Quite simply, our plan for the future is to:-

1) Create more freehold allotments and remove the barriers to development
2) Ensure that the Sunraysia Region is connected to high speed internet (the NBN) as soon as possible
3) Actively pursue the transcontinental rail link to capitalize on our strategic tri-state location
4) Capitalize on the international tourism appeal of Mungo National Park.
5) Ensure that decisions about our region are made by our region, with government service providers based in our region.

Comments on the Panel’s Final Recommendations

The Revitalising Local Government report by the NSW Independent Local Government Review Panel (Oct 2013) makes several recommendations that will directly impact on the Wentworth Shire Council.

Wentworth rejects the Panel’s proposed Western Authority

Wentworth Shire is aligned regionally to the east through the Riverina & Murray Regional Organisation of Councils (RAMROC), and to the south as a part of the cross border region of Sunraysia, which includes Mildura. We choose to be involved through the RAMROC group of Councils because of the natural synergies that we have with other member Councils.

Council does not agree that it should be part of the Western Authority, as proposed in chapter 5. We strongly reject any proposal to bundle us into a regional structure with other areas in the far west that are in a much worse predicament than ourselves and with which we have no shared communities of interests.

At this point in time, Council is confident that with proper financial and structural support the ROC model would provide this council and other member councils with the regional advocacy, the regional strategic planning activities and shared regional services that would be suited to our needs. Council supports RAMROC being part of the proposed pilot program in this regard.

However, this Council remains open minded about the Western Authority concept and would be interested in being involved in the ongoing development of the proposal if we could be convinced that it was in the long term best interest of our community.
Wentworth rejects the proposed merger with Balranald

Supporting Information of the final report (volume 3) discusses the new model for Local Government for Far West NSW. The Panel proposes fully shared administration for Wentworth-Balranald, but with elected councils, office facilities and operational staff retained in each location (Box 3, pg 31, The New System of Local Government for Far West NSW).

We view this as the first step in merging the two Councils.

The Wentworth Shire Council does not support a merger with the Balranald Shire.

In advocating for shared administration and the Western Authority, the Panel contends that each Council needs to better engage with Aboriginal Communities, and work in partnership with Federal and State Government to address population decline and social, economic and environmental challenges (pg29).

Wentworth contends that it is State Government decisions that continue to constrain our growth.

The Wentworth Shire is not in the same predicament as Bourke, Brewarrina and Walgett. Our aboriginal community is only one small part of an otherwise vibrant community, and it would be wrong to place the needs of the Aboriginal community above the needs of the majority of the Shire’s population.

Of course it is to be expected that when the State Government established an aboriginal settlement at Namatjira Avenue on the outskirts of the Dareton township all those years ago, that aboriginal population growth would be concentrated in Dareton. But if servicing the needs of the Aboriginal community is the Panel’s driver for change in Local Government arrangements for the Wentworth Shire, our Council contends that the State Government needs to recognise that it would be more cost effective to enter into partnership arrangements with Mildura based service providers who understand and support the needs of the local region, rather than to force an unnatural alliance through the proposed Western Authority.

Conclusion

This Council is of the opinion that the Revitalising Local Government report and the Panel’s recommendations for Wentworth will not improve the sustainability of the Wentworth Shire, nor will it improve our service delivery capabilities.

The Wentworth Shire Council area is unique because of its proximity to, and affinity with, Mildura and the wider Sunraysia region. This already provides the basis for a regional concept, which if adequately funded could deliver expanded services far more efficiently that through the proposed Western Authority.

Over many years, this Council has been advocating that Local Government is best placed to be the lead agency for service delivery in our region. Instead, State Government continues to fund a myriad of service providers, to the extent that it is impossible to map the extent of funding that is being provided.

Our Council has been working tirelessly to improve the long term prosperity of the region and our own long term financial viability; however, there are layers of State policies and politics that continue to be our greatest impediments.
Attachments

1) Copy of letter to Premier O'Farrell

2) Copy of the original submission to the Independent Local Government Review Panel
The Hon. Barry O'Farrell MP  
Premier of NSW  
Governor Macquarie Tower  
Level 40, 1 Farrer Place  
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Premier

I refer to my unanswered letter to you of 12 December 2012.

Unfortunately there is no way of “sugar coating” our Council’s opinion that the Wentworth Shire has been largely ignored by your Government with few Ministerial visits and little acknowledgement of the views expressed in our letters and submissions. The “NSW NOW” slogan of your Government has not reached Wentworth yet.

Frankly our Shire would be better off in Victoria! In one minute we can drive over the border to thriving Mildura which has population of circa 60,000, a Government Minister visiting every second week, tens of millions per annum in State infrastructure investment and policies to encourage business and population growth. Why the NSW Government will not remove policy impediments to allow Wentworth to share in this opportunity perplexes us.

Wentworth has the opportunity to piggyback off the growth of Mildura in exactly the same way that Wodonga has piggybacked off the growth of Albury. For Wentworth to grow we don’t need a regional hospital, arts centre or regional airport as Mildura has all these facilities already. We have the land, rivers and location but are constrained in taking advantage of these opportunities by State policies.

Since our current Council was elected in September 2012 we have very actively sought to lobby your Government, in particular by suggesting predominantly budget neutral policies that will help grow Wentworth Shire. We have spent many hours preparing submissions to the Independent Local Government Review, to the Deputy Premier in relation to Western Lands, to the Transport and Roads Ministers re Wentworth’s exclusion from the State Transport and Infrastructure Plans and to the Planning Minister re Planning policies.
I can assure you that Council is also working very hard to do all within our control to grow our Shire including:

- Television advertising to encourage Victorians to move to NSW
- Reviewing our organizational structure to make our Shire more growth orientated and efficient
- Encouraging Victorian developers to operate in our Shire

A strong partnership between the State Government and Council can drive the momentum to achieve outcomes we both desire, and that is why we are requesting you implement the attached list of policies. We would welcome a visit by you or the Deputy Premier to Wentworth and look forward to your reply.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Donald McKinnon
Mayor
GROWING WENTWORTH REGION
WHAT CAN THE NSW GOVT. DO?

BACKGROUND
Why is the Sunraysia area developing in such a lopsided fashion? Wentworth Shire has 7,000 people while Mildura Shire has around 60,000. Major residential and commercial developments such as shopping centres and the Marina are being built in Mildura with nothing comparable in Wentworth. Victorian Sunraysia has seen the creation of a major almond industry with negligible plantings in NSW Sunraysia. The majority of Sunraysia’s horticultural development is in Victoria with diverse and growing plantings of nuts and vegetables. Wentworth is under economic pressure like many pockets of regional NSW but the difference with Wentworth is that we have significant opportunities that are being blocked by out-dated State Government policy settings.

WHY IS WENTWORTH DIFFERENT?
- adjacent to Victorian regional city of Mildura where major medical, retail, commercial and education facilities serving Wentworth are a 5 minute drive away
- approx. 1,000 km of riverfront to Murray, Anabranch and Darling rivers
- circa 3 million hectares of land with circa 300,000 ha close enough to the river to be suitable for irrigation, i.e. there is no shortage of prime agricultural land, only a shortage of affordable irrigation water
- Mildura was planned out for development by the Chaffey Brothers/Victorian Government over 100 years ago while the Western Lands Commission has controlled most NSW Sunraysia land
- Key NSW Government offices are located 1100 km away in Sydney or in regional cities remote from Wentworth:
  - Dubbo – 8 hour drive to deal with NSW Education, Department of Planning and Western Lands Office – no air or public transport services
  - Albury – for Regional Development Committees - 6 ½ hour drive – no air or public transport services
  - Broken Hill – for Far West Health – 3 hour drive
  - Deniliquin/Griffith – for State Water/ DECC – 4 ½ hour drive – no air or public transport services
POLICY SUGGESTION 1: FREEHOLD WESTERN LANDS LEASES IN WENTWORTH SHIRE

- Wentworth Council has a policy of requesting the NSW Government freehold all land within 20km of our major townships in order to put Wentworth on a level playing field with Mildura.
- Ideally we seek to freehold all Western Lease Land and similar grazing/farming leases/occupancies in Wentworth Shire and effectively excise our Shire from the Western Division.
- The previous NSW Labor Government encouraged freeholding of leasehold land in the Eastern and Central Divisions of NSW at 3% of capital value stating: “It is no longer essential these lands are held in public ownership to maintain environmental and conservation controls over them”. Dept. Lands website/perpetual leases 2008.
- The Western Lands Act 1901 does not encourage economic diversification as leases are limited to a particular Purpose/s and it is a lengthy process to change this. Western Lands Division (WLD) staff makes it very clear to leaseholders that their rights are limited to the Purpose/s in their lease and they are “leaseholders not landowners”. It is in NSW’s interest to encourage leaseholders to seek investment and diversification of operations away from pure grazing. Whether it be cropping, horticulture, farm tourism, rural living, gravel extraction, feed lots, renewable energy or minerals exploration, diversification will make the Western Division more viable.
- Council believes freeholding of the land close in to our townships would lead to a significant increase in investment in our Shire.

POLICY SUGGESTION 2: USE PLANNING TO ENCOURAGE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

It took approximately ten years for Wentworth’s LEP to be put in place during which period there were NO REZONINGS in Wentworth Shire. The negative effects of this development freeze are still being felt. It is our firm belief that Council needs to have the flexibility to respond to local planning conditions. We are elected to represent the needs of our constituents, and are unable to adequately perform our duties when state planning rules conflict with the needs of our community.

We request the Government:

1. Cease blocking the economic development of Wentworth by recognising:
   - People want to live on river and on rural lifestyle lots of varying sizes and will travel to Wentworth from far away to do so.
   - We have 1000 km of riverfront so we can protect both the riverine environment and provide for riverfront lifestyle. Wentworth needs riverfront development to be viable.
   - Rural land subdivision is not harmful and allows legitimate diversification away from agriculture for landowners and the economy.
   - In Wentworth Shire there is no shortage of agricultural land, just a limit on affordable irrigation water.

2. Continue its stated policy of return of local planning powers to Wentworth Shire by:
   - allowing Council to determine Planning Proposals of less than $5 million value without reference to the Department of Planning;
   - not requiring us to report to Dubbo, 850 km away;
   - re-writing the Department of Planning’s Draft Murray Regional Plan so it supports and does not override our LEP; and
• consolidating and streamlining planning referrals for Development Applications and Planning Proposals – DPI or the NSW Office of Water currently object to almost all Planning Proposals in our Shire.

POLICY SUGGESTION 3: MAKE WENTWORTH SHIRE A SERVICE NSW ONE STOP SHOP
In order to support our request to be made a One Stop Shop for NSW Government local services we would also like to draw your attention to the unsustainable structure of the NSW Government as it relates to our shire. The page one map provides you with a snapshot of the thousands of kilometres that are need to be travelled in order to meet with various departments. More importantly however, our geographic isolation creates an extraordinary disconnect between government bureaucrats and our local communities, each of which have their own idiosyncrasies, issues and needs. It is simply not possible to deliver quality government services from thousands of kilometres away.

With adequate funding and resources, it is our firm belief that our Council would be better placed to deliver many of the government services currently being provided from afar. We believe that by offering a one-stop shop solution, we can deliver enhanced, affordable and equitable service delivery tailored to the needs of our Shire. The hub for our area of 26,000 sq. kilometres must be within our Shire to provide our residents with Government within reach.

We have the firm view that as a strongly focused Council with solid financial and governance structure that we can be trusted to do more to support the economic drive we all desire and need. Our frustration is not only because of missed opportunities but the continuing “red tape” syndrome smaller councils face. We are becoming focused more on the tangle that red tape produces than focusing on the outcomes of the community. We believe you should ease the reporting requirements for small Councils.

The One Stop Shop pilot could involve an initial referral of powers to Council in key areas such as Planning, Western Lands/Crown Lands and RMS as follows:
• referral of Planning powers to Wentworth Shire
• referral of Western Lands and Crown Lands powers to Wentworth Shire
• referral of RMS powers to Wentworth Shire in relation to speed limits (within State limits) and road-side signage
• video conference facilities at the Shire and any regional NSW State offices we are required to deal with

We are convinced that being part of a 60,000 population region we can attract suitably qualified staff to run a number of services that the State currently runs.

POLICY SUGGESTION 4: ENGAGE WITH MAJOR HORTICULTURAL COMPANIES TO SECURE INVESTMENTS IN WENTWORTH REGION
The Victorian Government has recently worked with Olam to establish a large almond processing plant (cost $55 million) in near Mildura in addition to the 12,000 hectares of almond orchard in and around the Mildura/Swan Hill region. NSW Government has assisted other large-scale horticultural projects in the east of the State. DPI should see Wentworth Shire as an opportunity for large-scale efficient agriculture as we have the land and access to water. Large-scale horticulture investors are again looking for locations for major developments and NSW should try and secure them.
The NSW Government should be congratulated for its water policies, which have reduced the adverse impacts of Federal Murray Darling buybacks. However, Government water buybacks have distorted the water market and it continues to be the case that buybacks are increasing the cost of agricultural water. This is a barrier to new horticultural developments.

**POLICY SUGGESTION 5: INCLUDE WENTWORTH IN NSW INFRASTRUCTURE AND TRANSPORT PLANS**

Wentworth has no projects of significance in the State Infrastructure Plan or State Transport Plan. While Wentworth is fortunate to have the Silver City Highway and Sturt Highway running through our Shire we have a significant backlog in local road funding.

Providing our area with a fair share of infrastructure and road funding support the horticulture, tourism and mining industries.

Increasing freight transport also necessitates investment in a new Murray Bridge crossing in Wentworth Shire. We request that RMS commence planning for that now.

Further the rail freight line to Melbourne stops at Mildura(Yelta) and requires a short extension to connect with the transcontinental line near Menindee. This extension can cater for the growing mineral sand industry. This industry is currently impacting our roads network.

**POLICY SUGGESTION 6: FACILITATE COUNCIL USING PUBLIC LAND FOR COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

A number of the States environmental and tourism icons such as the Murray Darling Junction, Perry Sand Hills, Mungo National Park and the Buronga Bridge Reserve are all located on Crown Land in Wentworth Shire.

Unfortunately Crown Lands have at best marginal focus in the tourism and community opportunities these lands present to Wentworth.

We request the NSW Government gift to Council all publicly managed Crown Lands in Wentworth Shire with this land to be managed by the Shire for community and environmental benefit.

We also seek the support of the NSW Government in relation to the Barkinji Native Title Claim, which potentially restricts opportunities in our community.

**POLICY SUGGESTION 7: INTEGRATE WENTWORTH AND MILDURA’S HEALTH SERVICES**

We call on the NSW Government to immediately review of the diminishing level of health services being provided in our Shire, and a firm commitment to correct the inadequacies. We have an old small hospital at Wentworth and duplicated medical facilities at Dareton. Our local health facilities are part of Far West Health and report to Broken Hill.

The reality of our health services is that a significant proportion of the services are provided in Mildura, Adelaide or Melbourne.
Albury and Wodonga Health Services have merged under a cross-border NSW Victoria agreement and we see no reason why the same model would not be appropriate for Wentworth and Mildura.

**POLICY SUGGESTION 8: MAKE MINING WORK FOR WENTWORTH**
Mineral sands mining in Wentworth Shire generates hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue for the mining company and circa $15 million per annum in royalties for the State Government. The exploration and mining has been supported by the road network our Shire built over decades.

Unfortunately this mining activity generates very little of benefit to our community and actually runs down our rural road network. We have had to take the mining company to Court just to get our rates paid and the mining company is appealing the decision.

We seek the Government's support for fair contributions to the Shire via both rates and road contributions by mining companies.

We also seek inclusion in the Resources for Regions Scheme which currently does not apply to our Shire.

**POLICY SUGGESTION 9: PROVIDE RESOURCES TO ADDRESS INDIGENOUS ISSUES**

Wentworth has many of the issues that exist nationally associated with indigenous disadvantage and we seek:
- a commitment to work with Council to address issues of Social Housing policy;
- adequate school resources to deal with truancy and behavioural issues, and
- provision of adequate police numbers to operate a 24 hours per day policing service
Submission to

Independent Local Government Review Panel

22 March 2013
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Introduction

On 21 December, 2012, the Wentworth Shire Council, wrote to the Minister for Local Government, the Hon. Don Page, to present a preliminary view on the Local Government Review could be beneficial to the Wentworth Shire Council. This document elaborates on that initial letter and represents Wentworth Shire Council’s formal submission to the Local Government Review Panel.

Wentworth Shire is unique. If viewed in isolation, Wentworth’s population is just over 7,000 but it is part of a much larger and growing regional location with a population base of close to 60,000 people. The problem is that Wentworth’s remoteness from its state capital and other major NSW towns, makes it impossible for Wentworth to be included within larger NSW regional approaches.

The Independent Local Government Review Panel recognizes the need for Local councils to embrace challenges and realize their potential, and the Wentworth Shire is ready, willing and able to tackle its future. However, it needs assistance from all levels of government to effect the structural adjustments that are needed to facilitate the required changes.

It seems evident to the Wentworth Council that because of its geographic location, it has long been viewed as being a problem area that is just too difficult to service. The benefit of the Local Government Review is that it provides the Wentworth Shire with an opportunity to be a part of the solution for the future.
1. What Makes Wentworth Unique

Located at the junction of the great Murray and Darling Rivers, the Wentworth Shire covers an area of 26,000km², is 1,075kms from Sydney, 585kms for Melbourne and 420km from Adelaide, and is home to just over 7,000 people. Agriculture is the largest industry, with the value of commodities approaching $140M (ABS,2006), derived predominately from intensive irrigated horticulture.

Immediately adjacent to the Wentworth Shire, on the Victorian side of the Murray River, lies the thriving and growing region of Mildura. With a population base approaching 60,000, Mildura provides the critical infrastructure and services required to support the greater Sunraysia region. Mildura is home to the busiest inland airport in Victoria, has established regional hospital and medical facilities, private and public schools, a large TAFE college, and a retail sector supported by major multi-national chains.

What needs to be understood is that whilst the Wentworth Shire is remotely located from its State capital, it exists because of its relationship with Mildura.

However, the question of how to best service Wentworth is historically problematic.

Wentworth’s two closest NSW neighbours are Balranald and Broken Hill Shire Councils. The townships of Balranald and Broken Hill are 186kms and 267 km’s away from Wentworth, respectively, with the Balranald Local Government area (LGA) covering an area of 21,699km² and Broken Hill LGA covering an area of 170.40km².

Balranald Shire has a similar situation to Wentworth being large in area and sparse in population, with a population density (population/area) of just .10 compared to Wentworth at .30 and Broken Hill at a density rate of 116.30. (Figure 1)

In terms of service provision and decision making, Figure 2 demonstrates the enormous distances between Wentworth and where decisions are made.

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1 Comparative Information of NSW Local Government Councils 2010/11. Division of Local Government ISSN 1038-9504
Where Wentworth Shire Decisions are Made
2. The Constraints That Are Holding Us Back

2.1. The lack of development

There is a stark contrast in fortunes between the Wentworth LGA and its neighbouring Victorian counterpart in Mildura. This can be evidenced in the number of residential building approvals over the past 10 years (fig. 3). Each year, Mildura’s building approvals are significantly greater than approvals in the Wentworth Shire. Similarly, ABS data reveals that in every industry sector across the Mildura and Wentworth Region, employment in the Mildura Rural City Council area is significantly higher than in the Wentworth Shire.

The critical question is why – why is there such a stark contrast between a Victorian municipality and the adjacent NSW LGA, when they are literally located just 5 minutes away from each other. Council is adamant that it will unlock the potential of the Shire and the far south west corner of the State, and align the resultant growth more in line with that experienced in Victoria (Mildura).

Notwithstanding the long standing issues that the Wentworth Shire has had with the making of its Local Environmental Plan (LEP), one of the biggest constraints to development with the Wentworth Shire lies in the huge amount of leasehold land within the Shire.

Approximately 97% of land within the Wentworth Shire is Crown land, and the challenge is that modern lending and development practices now actively encourage free-hold title, rather than leasehold land. To put it more succinctly, leasehold land is a deterrent to private developers. In an era when time is money, developers want to be able to purchase land and commence development in the shortest possible timeframe. They certainly do not tolerate the time delays of having land converted to freehold title and then potentially going through a zoning application, when there is an abundance of land ready to develop in Victoria.
The Wentworth council is determined that it will do everything in its power to deliver growth and prosperity to the Shire. To this end, it has:

- **enlisted** - regional support from Western Division councils to convert leasehold land to freehold around our towns and villages.

- **undertaken** - a new initiative to market its potential through its TV campaign called “WE WANT YOU”. This will be a continuing program.

- **commenced** - developing a comprehensive marketing program which will focus on development and lifestyle opportunities.

### 2.2. The long term impact of the Community Strategic Plan (CSP) priorities

It is evident from the CSP that the community is placing importance on economic development and growth, public amenity and access, and sound public administration and management.

A small rate-payer base and rate capping makes it extremely difficult to deliver all that the community expects from Council, placing pressure on Council to critically analyse the services it provides to the community, and the way in which those services are delivered.

Wentworth Shire residents are also motivated by the services that their Victorian counterparts receive, however they show little regard for cost and economies of scale. For instance, if Mildura has recycling then Wentworth Shire residents expect that their Council will provide the same.

In the current environment of increased service expectations, rate pegging results in NSW Council’s being faced with the impossible dilemma of trying to provide the required levels of service within their limited means. In rural areas, the options to generate additional revenue are limited, particularly in an environment where the majority of the rate payer base is ageing. Where it is appropriate to charge minimal amounts or nothing at all on occasions, Council will seek to continue providing a range of free services to support the aged and other disadvantage groups. However, within the continuum of user pays on the one hand and local government’s community obligation on the other, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find the right balance.

### 2.3. Escalating employment related costs

The 2010/2011 Financial Statements of Council reveal that employee benefits and on-costs total $6,714,000 for the financial year or 33.22% of the total income from continuing operations ($20,209,000). Whilst this was a reduction from the 2009/10 figure of $6,643,000 (or 36.79% of total income of continuing operations), there is a strong desire of Council to contain employment related costs over the term of the delivery program.

The specifics of employee benefits and on-costs are as follows:

- **Award Provisions** – staff are employed under the Local Government (State Award) which provides for a 3.25% salary increase in the 2012/13 and 2013/14 financial years. For the purposes of the Long term Financial Plan it has been assumed that the same rate of salary increases will apply each year.

- **WorkCover premiums** – as a consequence of claims history and the ageing workforce profile, it has been assumed that workcover premiums will increase by 5% p.a. over the term of the Long Term Financial Plan.
• **Superannuation Fund Contributions** - under changes in the 2010-11 Federal Budget, the superannuation guarantee (SG) rate will gradually increase from 9% to 12% between 1 July, 2013 and 1 July 2019. This proposed increase has been factored in to the Long Term Financial Plan. (NB at the time of writing these changes had not received royal assent, and are not law). Employees are able to nominate their superannuation fund of choice, under the Industrial Relations Act 1996, Sct.124 (1).

• **Superannuation Defined Benefit Scheme** – as a consequence of the Global Financial Crisis, the Local Government Superannuation Scheme advised Council on 16/08/10 that its share of the $286,059,000 deficit was $648,265.00. The additional contributions required to fund this shortfall have been factored in to the Long Term Financial Plan.

• **Annual Leave and Long Service Leave entitlements** – over an extended period of time, longer serving employees have accrued excessive amounts of annual leave ($643,000 in 2011, up from $604,000 in 2010). Accrued long service leave entitlements totalled $784,000 in 2011, up from $769,000 in 2010. Over the past 3 years, in an effort to manage these excessive amounts of leave, and reduce the liability to Council, a “leave plan” has been implemented.

• **Staff Gratuity Scheme** – a staff gratuity scheme was originally adopted by Council on 4/11/96 to reward long standing employees (those who complete 10 years of service). Through this scheme, employees who complete 10 years of service are eligible for a gratuity of $1,500.00, and for every year completed after that, a gratuity of $300.00. In 2011, the accrued liability for the gratuity scheme amounted to $193,000.

Council is actively seeking ways to improve its efficiency and supplement its existing own source income. The newly elected Council has initiated an organisational review and is seeking to implement a new leadership model, a streamlined workforce structure and efficient service delivery practices in order to reduce workforce costs.

### 2.4. The infrastructure backlog

In February 2013, the NSW Treasury Corporation (TCorp), provided the Wentworth Shire Council with a sobering independent assessment of its financial situation. TCorp described Wentworth’s financial position as being weak, with several issues that need to be addressed to ensure that it does not become unsustainable.

The report points to economic decline, an ageing population, current planning regulations, population decline and a growing (or perhaps understated) infrastructure backlog, as being the specific risks to Council. Whilst Council appreciated the independent assessment, what it found interesting was the methodology for assessing the infrastructure backlog.

The methodology adopted by the TCorp consultant differed from the approach used by the consultant engaged by Wentworth Shire Council to prepare the Asset Management Plan. The adopted Asset Management Plan of Council takes the view that there is a delicate balance between what Council can afford to service, and the service level that ratepayers demand.

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expect. Under the adopted approach, Council establishes the level of service it is able to provide and accepts any residual risk between the service provided and the asset renewal.

The result of differing consultant methodologies is that under Council’s adopted Asset Management and Long Term Financial Plans the Shire remains viable, whereas under TCorps model, the financial sustainability is considered to be weak.
3. How To Get The Wentworth Shire Moving

3.1. Wentworth needs freehold land

Wentworth Shire Council needs freehold land to be made available within a 20km radius of each township in order to actively encourage further development.

Sadly, we are constrained by a state government planning system that looks only at the history of demand and population statistics within the Wentworth statistical area, rather than looking at the history of demand for the region in which we live, which includes Mildura. The result is that based on the statistical model used State Planning bodies advocate that Wentworth does not need any more residential land. This is hard to fathom when Mildura’s population continues to grow and grow. You only have to look at the Mildura experience to know that people want to live in the Sunraysia area. Our people view themselves as being part of the Sunraysia region, and this means that Wentworth needs to be on an even playing field with Mildura when it comes to development. When making decisions about the Wentworth Shire, the State Government (and its departments) need to consider us in the context of a much larger region, not as an isolated NSW Shire. The river should be what connects us, not what divides us.

The Wentworth Shire Council firmly believes that the State Government could affect significant and lasting change by enacting legislation to convert Crown land to freehold title. This one act could stimulate immediate economic activity and lasting demographic change.

The following diagram (fig 4) provides an indication of how the proposed 20km radius around the townships impacts on the overall land tenure across the shire.
3.2. **Wentworth needs the NBN**

The nbn4Mildura-Wentworth Digital Community Strategy recognizes that the Mildura-Wentworth region is an innovative and prosperous that is a leader in the uptake of new technologies. Geographical isolation has driven the need for effective communication solutions that improve the region’s population lives, works and plays.

Telecommunications are identified as being crucial to the growth and sustainability of business and industry in the Mildura-Wentworth region.

3.3. **Wentworth needs the Transcontinental rail link**

For over a decade, Mildura and Wentworth been advocating for a Transcontinental Rail Link that would enable the movement of freight from Melbourne through to Perth. In November 2011, the Victorian Government indicated that it would seek Federal Government support for a full feasibility study for this project. The on-going development of the mineral sand sector in the region as well as the opportunity for Melbourne-Perth freight were both cited as key reasons for the project.

One of the current issues being faced by Wentworth is the increase volume of B-Doubles as carting mineral sands from the mine sites near Pooncarie through to the rail freight hub in Mildura. The increased volume and axle weight reduces life of the road pavement, leading to significant increases in cost to Council.

The proposed route for the Transcontinental line would reduce, if not eliminate the need for trucks to be travelling on the shires road network.

Wentworth Shire is looking for the NSW State Government to join Victoria in lobbying the Commonwealth for funding for a full feasibility for the Transcontinental Rail Link project.

3.4. **Wentworth needs International Tourism (via Mungo National Park)**

6.5mm of rain is all it takes to turn an internationally acclaimed National Park into an international public relations disaster.

Mungo National Park is located in the middle of the World Heritage listed Willandra Lakes, and is described as one of the world’s very special places. A site that boasts over 400 centuries of continuous human habitation, human skeletons and artefacts that date back over 50,000 years, and a 25km semicircle of huge sand dunes. Mungo is one of the oldest places outside of Africa to have been occupied by modern humans since ancient times.

Mungo is situated just 110km from Mildura, which is a short 70 minute flight from Melbourne, making it easily accessible to national and international tourists – just as long as it does not rain and the 88kms of unsealed road becomes impassable.

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Fig. 5 Qantas magazine featuring Mungo National Park
Wentworth Shire Council is seeking to tap into the enormous international tourism market, using Mungo as the draw-card.

Our approach is two-fold. Firstly, to ensure that there is all weather access to Mungo National Park via the Arumpo Road, and secondly, to provide a sealed runway to the Wentworth airport to encourage fly-in fly out niche tourism market to flourish.

The NSW government, through Roads and Maritime Services, has recently committed to undertaking the required engineering studies to seal the Arumpo Road. The next challenge will be to secure the required funding to undertake the upgrade. And, in relation to the sealing of the airstrip, Wentworth Shire Council recently lodged a successful EOI for Round 4 funding through the Regional Development Australia Fund and is in the final stages of preparing its full application for funding.

3.5. Wentworth Council needs local service delivery

Wentworth Shire Council has long advocated that Local Councils, particularly rural Councils, are well placed to provide a wider range of State Government services than it currently does. Figures 1 and 2 highlighted how the tyranny of distance is impeding service provision across the Shire, but it does not need to be this way in Wentworth. Wentworth Shire has the capacity, and the ability, to deliver so much more.

Two of the common themes that emerged from the Stage one consultation undertaken by the Local Government Review Panel were the need for local people to make local decisions, and for local people to provide local service. This is hard to achieve when local decisions are being made by State Government departments that are spread across 7 different locations, all of which are hundreds of kilometers away from Wentworth.

It would appear that the Federal Government is attempting to address this issue through its use of the Regional Development Australia (RDA) model. Currently however, Wentworth Shire sits in the RDA Murray region, which is located in Albury. However, the most synergistic relationship from a regional perspective for Wentworth, would be to share an RDA region with Mildura, why?. Once again, this initiative is seemingly stifled because of the great divide between state borders.

Within the Wentworth Shire there are multiple examples of both State and Federal Governments funding a myriad of agencies to deliver services that could be delivered by Council. Within each department or agency, Councils included, there exists a layer of administrative bureaucracy that requires funding, yet rather than trying to drive services through local Councils, Councils are overlooked as being part of the solution. The most recent example is that of the changes to the Catchment Management Authority (CMA’s), where Council has been completely overlooked as part of the solution.

Council’s capacity to deliver more services because of its unique regional profile with Mildura Rural City Council is being overlooked.

Wentworth Shire is ready, willing and able to provide a range of State Government and community services.
4. Governance Models For The Future

It seems evident to the Wentworth Council that because of its geographic location, it has long been viewed as being a problem area that is just too difficult to service. The benefit of the Local Government Review is that it provides the Wentworth Shire with an opportunity to be a part of the solution for the future. Therefore in this section, several Governance Models are explored, with a view to proposing a solution for Wentworth.

4.1. Proposed Governance Models

a) Amalgamation Model

When looking at the question of amalgamations, the issues faced by Wentworth are not dissimilar to the Council’s name in Western NSW, and it begs the question who would we amalgamate with and why?

The key concern is that Wentworth has about amalgamations is that the two adjoining NSW Shires are substantially different in their economic DNA, with Wentworth Shire being the only Shire where the majority of its economic activity stems from irrigated horticulture. The issues faced by the Wentworth Shire such as industry & commodity group issues, climate change issues, regional and cross border issues are all significantly different to those issues being experienced by Balranald and Broken Hill Shires. The Jeff Tate consulting report produced for the review panel highlighted the need for a clear rationale behind amalgamation. The geographic distances between the shires would negate any push to achieve better economies of scale. If it was not for the river that divides the two states, the only amalgamation that would make any sense would be to amalgamate Mildura and Wentworth Shires.

Our council intends to investigate new and lasting resource sharing initiatives with Mildura.

b) Boundary Change Model

With amalgamations providing little if any benefit to the Wentworth Shire, a boundary change might be of some small benefit.

The only township of any significance between Wentworth and Balranald is Euston, a township of 795 people. In many respects it could be strongly argued that Euston has more in common with Wentworth than it does with Balranald, and would therefore be better serviced by the Wentworth Shire than Balranald Shire.

Euston is 106km east of Wentworth, and is serviced by National Highway Route A20, which traverses through to Wentworth. (fig. 6).

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5 Assessing processes and outcomes of the 2004 Local Government boundary changes in NSW, Jeff Tate Consulting, January, 2013.

March, 2013
Like Wentworth, the predominate industry is irrigated horticulture, and as is the case with Wentworth Shire residents, Euston residents have a natural affinity with Mildura. There are established transport, health and educational linkages between Mildura and Robinvale. Like Wentworth, Euston is considered to be part of the greater Sunraysia region, so why wouldn’t State Government look to be in harmony with the natural synergies within the region.

As suggested in the Tate Consulting Report, for the boundary change to be successful, extensive consultation and support would be required to progress the idea of extending Wentworth Shire to incorporate the Euston township and immediate surrounds.

c) THE ROC MODEL & WHY IT IS WRONG FOR WENTWORTH

It is evident from the review of submissions report distributed by the panel that several respondents are looking to the existing ROC model as a part of the solution.

The floor in this thinking is that it assumes that the existing ROC model provides the right foundation for proposed changes.

Currently Wentworth Shire sits in the Riverina and Murray ROC, or RAMROC, with meetings predominately being based in Jerilderie. As highlighted in section 1, the tyranny of distance (1056km return) imposes a significant burden on Wentworth, which at best means that the Mayor and GM might attend meetings, but often it is just not practical to send staff to many of the forums and meetings that are predominately held in Jerilderie and Albury.

d) THE REGIONAL COUNCIL/AUTHORITY MODEL

The Regional Council/Authority option for governance is currently being explored by the Northern Territory Government. The two options being explored in this model essentially provide for local representation via multiple Local Authorities who are connected with a much larger regional authority (option 1) or regional council (option 2). The essential difference between the two options is that the regional authority option appears to provide the opportunity, over time, to take on what essentially appears to be the role of Regional Development Australia (RDA) committees.

To contextualize the Northern Territory proposal into a model for NSW, it is conceivable that new Regional Councils could be established as an overarching Governance body for multiple smaller areas, each of which would be represented by a Local Authority. The role of the local Authority would be to provide local representation and clearly defined local services. Over time, as State and Federal Governments gain confidence in the capacity of the Regional Councils to deliver desired results, they could be transformed into Authorities with the capacity to be funded directly by Federal and State Governments.

Wentworth Shire Council’s argument is that we are unique. Our proximity and affinity with Mildura already provides a regional concept, which, if adequately funded, could deliver expanded services.
4.2. Wentworth’s Preferred Governance Model

LOCAL DECISIONS FOR LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Wentworth Shire Council contends that it is in a unique position. We are simply too remote for amalgamations to work, and alternative governance models creating larger regions offer no solution to the existing problems being experienced as a direct consequence of the tyranny of distance. Whatever the model adopted by NSW in the future, Wentworth will strongly advocate that its regional synergies are with Mildura.

Wentworth also believes that it is vitally important that local communities retain their ability to make policy. As highlighted in the Nov. 2012 issue of Corruption Matters\(^8\), the stripping of power from local communities can cause a disconnect between policies, procedures and programs directed from above and the operational realities of service delivery at the coalface, and this is something that Wentworth Council wants to avoid at all costs.

HARNESS THE REGIONAL SYNERGIES AND INCREASE THE SERVICES PROVIDED

Wentworth Shire contends that the most realistic and viable solution for this Shire is to harness the existing regional synergies, and to partner with State and Federal agencies to deliver an expanded range of services.

Under this model, State and Federal Governments could channel funding directly to Council to provide an agreed level of services. Council, in consultation with its Mildura Council and other stakeholders, would determine the most effective delivery mechanisms for those services, thus enabling local people to have a voice in the decisions that are made.

Wentworth’s expanded service delivery model ticks many of the boxes highlighted in both the Tate Consulting report and the Northern Territory model, particularly:-

**A FRESH START**

- Harnessing regional synergies and expanding the service delivery model provides an opportunity of a fresh approach to the delivery of services in the region and to the existing funding model of Councils. Local communities naturally look to their Local Council for the delivery of essential local services.

**COMMUNITIES OF INTEREST**

- There is one common denominator within the Mildura-Wentworth region, and that is the Murray River. This river, the revenue that is generated from it through horticulture, agriculture, and the problems associated with it through flood, and drought are common across both the Local Government Areas.
- Tourism and mining sectors are also common denominators
- Cross boarder synergies and anomalies are also shared.
- The river is what joins us, and should not be a barrier to creating natural synergies.

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\(^8\) Corruption Matters, Independent Commission Against Corruption, Nov. 2012.
LOCAL REPRESENTATION & DECISION MAKING

- State and Federal Government service delivery can be enhanced in this region by enabling local people to have representation in the decisions that are made.
- The local council would be responsible for determining which services that are required within their respective communities, thus maintaining a level of employment within each area.

ECONOMIES OF SCALE

- The expanded service delivery model could also look to provide shared services such as Strategic Planning; Human Resource and financial services, together with major road and infrastructure services, and could also perform the functions of a regional water authority.
- The local Council could actively pursue government tenders to expand the services provided within the Sunraysia region.

EASILY ACCESSIBLE

- The most strategic component of the expanded service delivery model for Wentworth is the easy accessibility that a major regional airport brings. Mildura receives daily direct commercial flights from both Melbourne and Sydney, making it very easy for service providers and funding bodies to visit the host (and visa versa).

Throughout the discussions about the Local Government Review the notion of voluntary amalgamations and boundary changes has been constantly reinforced as a preferred option.

It is now recognized that there are many barriers to amalgamations including fear of the unknown and concern about job security and conditions, representation of smaller communities in a larger Council structure and the future economic viability of smaller rural communities (Tate Consulting, p37). Wentworth would also contend that individual Councils perhaps do not have the expertise or the financial capacity to fully explore holistic solutions.

Wentworth would look to the State Government to provide assistance to establish the expanded service delivery model. Extensive consultation, planning and support would be required to ensure that the end result is a positive one for all parties concerned.

*We are ready to work closely with the State Government at a level that has not been seen before.*
5. Conclusion

Within this submission, Wentworth Shire has endeavored to provide the Local Government Review Panel with an insight into the Wentworth Shire, its current situation, its capacity and its constraints.

The submission also details the five major items that are needed in order to get the Shire moving, these being the need for freehold land; the need for the NBN; the need for the Transcontinental rail link; the need for International Tourism and the need for local service delivery.

What is evident to Wentworth is that for an extended period of time it has been seen as a problem area because of its geographic location. Wentworth wants to be part of the solution, not the problem and has therefore explored several of the governance models that are being explored by the Local Government Review Panel and others.

*We argue that Wentworth Shire Council is unique. Our proximity and affinity with Mildura and the wider Sunraysia Region already provides a regional concept, which, if adequately funded, could deliver expanded services.*

*Having explored several potential solutions, Wentworth Shire is of the opinion that its current form with possible minor boundary changes can provide a realistic, feasible and long term solution.*