

**Research in Local Government Context B  
Subject 15624**

***The Challenges of Engaging Communities:  
Will the small rural voices be heard in a  
merged regional council?***



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## INTRODUCTION

The New South Wales (NSW) government has embarked on a program of local government reforms following a gathering in 2011 of all NSW councils in Dubbo called Destination 2036 that helped to inform an Action Plan as part of a ‘journey towards stronger, more sustainable local government’ (OLG, n.d.b). Progress through the Action Plan has seen the formation of the Acts Taskforce for review of local government legislation and the establishment of an Independent Local Government Review Panel (ILGRP)<sup>1</sup> to look at ‘options for local government structures, governance models and boundary changes’ (OLG, n.d.c).

The ILGRP finalised its *Revitalising Local Government* report following public exhibition in 2014 for consideration and action by the NSW Government (OLG, n.d.c). The NSW government instigated its *Fit for the Future* Program ‘transforming the system of local government to ensure that councils are *Fit for the Future* and ready to deliver the quality services and infrastructure that communities deserve’ (NSW Government, n.d.). Informed by the ILGRP report and through the Fit for the Future program, a package of reforms – including council mergers – was proposed.

The merger of Orange City Council and Cabonne Council was included in the report recommendations by the ILGRP (refer Appendix 1). The inclusion of Blayney Shire Council was also suggested, resulting in a forecast Local Government Area (LGA) population of 73,100 in 2031 and spanning 7,835 km<sup>2</sup> (ILGRP 2013:91). The report also stated, in reference to Blayney Shire Council, that ‘it could remain sustainable as a separate council for several decades but amalgamation would provide for a higher capacity base’ (ILGRP 2013:91). Following sustainability assessments of NSW councils undertaken by the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) in 2015, the government announced proposed mergers across NSW in January 2016 that included the merger of Blayney Shire, Cabonne and Orange City Councils.

Structural reform of local government has been ongoing for many years both nationally and internationally with small councils being amalgamated into larger councils. While the justification for such reforms has been on service delivery and economic grounds, there are other implications that warrant consideration. According to Dollery and Crase (2004:274), ‘Effective participatory democracy is facilitated through small councils where citizens feel they can influence local outcomes.’ The recent merger reforms proposed by the NSW state government currently under consideration have created angst amongst many communities in NSW (Samson 2015; Foley 2015; Schoen 2015; and McNally 2016).

The overall objective of this research study was to investigate the concerns of the small rural communities in light of the proposed merger of Blayney Shire, Cabonne and Orange City Councils taking on board their concerns, and to develop strategies for the new council to engage and empower these communities and foster a relationship of trust and harmony.

The study will also focus on the development of models of engagement that will facilitate collaboration between the small communities and the new council. One possible model that will be investigated is the role of town and village committees, as either a council committee under section 355 of the Local Government Act (LG Act) or as an incorporated association for a village or town, as a means for communities in rural towns and villages to

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<sup>1</sup> The Independent Local Government Review Panel was headed by Graham Samson (Panel Chair), Jude Munro AO and Glenn Inglis.

participate in the decision making of the proposed merged council and to foster collaboration. Councils are able to delegate some functions and responsibilities to a section 355 committee. Through this delegation a council can appoint community representatives to manage facilities (management committee) or provide advice to council on specific issues (advisory committee) or coordinate specific events (event committee). Such committees act on behalf of the council and are bound by a charter and associated council policies. (Coolamon Shire Council 2013). As O’Toole (2006:15) argues

local associations are able to monitor the structures of the local state, communicate their issues and concerns to their municipalities and negotiate not only for better resource allocation, but for greater legitimacy in local governance arrangements.

The research has been embarked upon to assist and inform the newly merged council on the outcomes of the project<sup>2</sup>. This is with a view to communities, particularly in the rural areas, gaining better acceptance of the merger and not experiencing any loss as a result of the merger through a number of recommended strategies.

The study is of importance as there is a risk and community concern that the small communities will lose representation and the capacity to have their concerns known and taken account of in the larger merged council (Cabonne Council 2016; Cabonne Anti-Amalgamation Steering Committee 2016; Blayney Shire Council 2016). Cabonne Council in its submission stated, ‘A key concern here is a loss of self-determination resulting from a loss of representation and the real potential for the larger city based population to cause the merged council to become ‘city centric’.’ While having direct relevance to the needs and concerns of small rural communities in this specific region of NSW, the research also has potentially wider implications for local governance in Australia and internationally.

The key questions that the research addresses are as follows:

1. How effective are current methods of community engagement and community involvement in the small rural communities of the current Blayney, Cabonne and Orange City Councils?
2. What are the concerns, if any, of the merger impact on community consultation and engagement in small rural communities?
3. What is the most effective way in which a larger merged council can build trust, foster relationships and empower small rural communities to work with council to deliver the best community outcomes?
4. What mechanisms will ensure that small rural communities in a large regional council obtain fair and equitable representation and retain a voice in their future?

This dissertation is divided into five sections. The first section provides an overview of the local context and characteristics of councils included in the proposed merger of Blayney Shire, Cabonne and Orange City Councils. A comparison is provided of the similarities and differences of each LGA. The second section reviews the relevant literature drawing on the body of work and research surrounding local government consolidation and amalgamation both nationally and internationally. The impacts on rural communities from local government reform is also reviewed.

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<sup>2</sup> The researcher is an employee of the Blayney Shire Council and has worked in NSW local government, in rural areas, for thirty-two years.

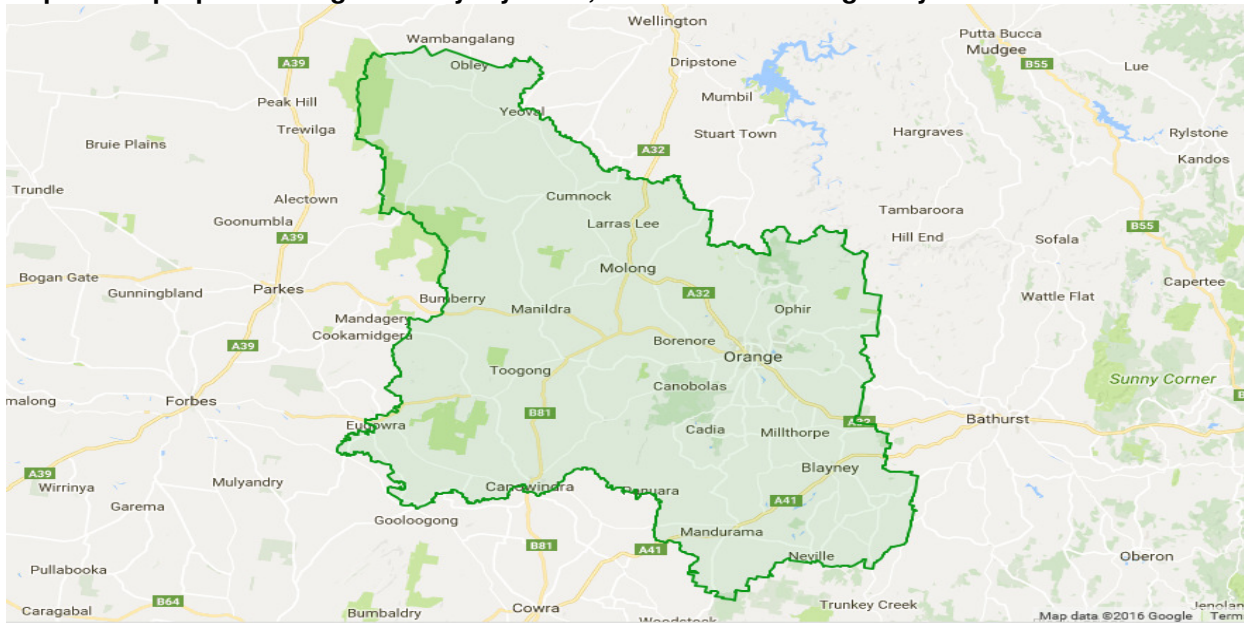
The third section outlines the research design, methodology and data collection process used to help inform the research. The fourth section examines the findings from interviews undertaken providing insights and responses from interviewees with some analysis to interview questions posed.

Finally, presentation of the conclusion based on the research and findings with a number of recommendations tabled for consideration by the new council to action so as to enable the communities in the rural towns and villages to be heard.

## LOCAL CONTEXT

The Blayney Shire, Cabonne and Orange City LGAs are situated in the central west of New South Wales. The city of Orange is located 255km west of Sydney and 280km north of Canberra. Map 1 shows the proposed merger area incorporating the Blayney Shire, Cabonne and Orange City Councils.

**Map 1: The proposed merger of Blayney Shire, Cabonne and Orange City Councils**



Source: <https://www.strongercouncils.nsw.gov.au/pending-councils/blayney-shire-cabonne-and-orange-city-councils/>

Orange City Council is an urban council with a relatively small area of 284 km<sup>2</sup> (OLG n.d.a) and has 12 elected representatives. The municipality of Orange was formed in 1860 to oversee a LGA of one square mile and a population of 400 (Orange City Council n.d.c). The city of Orange was proclaimed in 1946. Orange City Council has its office and facilities in Orange. A large part of the council area is rural and much of the land is used to support forestry, mining, sheep and cattle grazing, crops, orchards and viticulture. The urban area supports expanding residential growth with industrial and commercial land use.

Cabonne Council is a rural council that covers a large area of 6,026 km<sup>2</sup> (OLG n.d.a). It was formed in 1977 following the amalgamation of Boree Shire, Molong Shire and a large part of Canobolas Shire Council (Rutherford 1979). Its administrative headquarters are located in the town of Molong, 31km from Orange, and a large part of the Cabonne Council area surrounds the Orange City LGA. It also has an office situated in Cudal with an array of facilities across its LGA including nine swimming pools and five works depots. The council has 12 elected representatives. A large part of the Cabonne LGA is nature reserve, national park and conservation area. The area supports industries including mining and farming, sheep and cattle grazing, grain growing, timber, orchards and viticulture.

Blayney Shire Council is also a rural council covering an area of 1,525 km<sup>2</sup> (OLG n.d.a). The Council was proclaimed in 1978 following the dissolution of Lyndhurst Shire Council (Blayney Shire Council n.d.c). Its administrative headquarters is situated in Blayney, 34km from Orange and the council has 7 elected representatives. Blayney Shire has its facilities located in Blayney. It largely supports primary industries including beef, dairy,

lamb, wool, viticulture, orchards, potatoes, canola and other grains. Other industrial activities in the Blayney Shire include manufacturing, transportation and food processing.

Mining is a significant industry in the region with the Cadia Mine operated by Newcrest Mining, one of the largest gold mines in Australia, located 20km from Orange. The Cadia Mine is situated in the Blayney Shire LGA while the co-located Ridgeway Mine, also operated by Newcrest, is situated in the Cabonne LGA.

Table 1 provides an overview of council profiles included in the proposed merger. The proposed LGA will be 7,835 km<sup>2</sup> in area with a current population of 62,616.

**Table 1: Council Profiles**

	<b>Blayney Shire Council</b>	<b>Cabonne Council</b>	<b>Orange City Council</b>	<b>New Merged Council</b>
Population <sup>(1)</sup>	7,409	13,776	41,431	62,616
Area <sup>(5)</sup>	1,525 km <sup>2</sup>	6,026 km <sup>2</sup>	284 km <sup>2</sup>	7,835 km <sup>2</sup>
Councillors <sup>(1)</sup>	7	12	12	12 <sup>(2)</sup>
Residents per Councillor <sup>(1)</sup>	1,058	1,148	3,453	5,218
Employees (Full time equivalents) <sup>(3)</sup>	72	166	377	615
Operating Income <sup>(3)</sup>	\$18.3m	\$38.2m	\$122.6m	
Operating Expenditure <sup>(3)</sup>	\$15.9m	\$34.2m	\$79.8m	
Rates & Charges Income <sup>(3)</sup>	\$9.8m	\$12.2m	\$36.7m	
No. of Rate Assessments - Residential <sup>(4)</sup>	2,802	4,512	15,958	
No. of Rate Assessments - Business <sup>(4)</sup>	262	425	1,269	
No. of Rate Assessments - Farmland <sup>(4)</sup>	735	1,963	377	
Total Assets <sup>(3)</sup>	\$222m	\$575m	\$1.1b	
Infrastructure Backlog <sup>(3)</sup>	\$8.9m	\$10.1m	\$7.8m	

1. Merger Proposal 2016: Blayney Shire Council, Cabonne Council, Orange City Council, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Estimated Resident Population 2014; and NSW Office of Local Government, Council Annual Data Returns (2013–14).
2. Recommendation of Council Boundary Review Examination Report - Merger Proposal: Blayney Cabonne and Orange City Councils 2016.
3. Respective council 2014/15 Financial Statements:  
 Orange City Council <http://www.orange.nsw.gov.au/site/index.cfm?display=148524>  
 Blayney Shire Council <http://www.blayney.nsw.gov.au/ArticleDocuments/297/Annual%20Report%202014-2015.pdf.aspx>  
 Cabonne Council <http://www.cabonne.nsw.gov.au/sites/cabonne/files/public/images/documents/cabonne/integrated%20planning/Cabonne%20Council%20-%20Financial%20Statements%20%282014-15%29.pdf>
4. Merger Proposal 2016: Blayney Shire Council, Cabonne Council, Orange City Council, NSW Office of Local Government, Council Annual Data Returns (2013–14).
5. OLG Council Directory <https://www.olg.nsw.gov.au/local-government-directory>

The new LGA will comprise some 25 villages with current populations as small as 150, five towns with a population of over 1,000 people, and one large regional city, Orange. Table 2 shows the towns and villages within the proposed LGA.

In January 2016 the NSW Government appointed a Delegate to undertake an assessment of the Merger Proposal and compile a Council Boundary Review Examination Report. It recommended the proposed merger of Blayney Shire, Cabonne and Orange City Councils



be approved and proceed (Pearson 2016). A review of the merger proposal including the process by the Delegate was undertaken in early 2016 by the NSW Boundaries Commission pursuant to section 263(3) of the LG Act. This review considered factors including financial advantages and disadvantages, impact of change on historical values, communities of interest, attitude of residents, impacts on service delivery and rural communities. In April 2016 the Commission concluded that the Delegates Report had met the relevant requirements under the LG Act and considered all relevant issues. (Local Government Boundaries Commission 2016). In April 2016 Cabonne Council pursued legal action against the NSW Government over the handling of local government mergers (Griggs 2016). In May 2016 the proposed merger was given in principle support by the Minister for Local Government subject to the decision of the courts (Toole 2016). The outcome of legal action had not been finalised at the time of writing of this paper. (October 2016)

**Table 2: Population Statistics of city, towns and villages with proposed LGA**

<b>Cabonne Council</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Blayney Shire Council</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Orange City Council</b>	<b>Population</b>
Borenore	432	Blayney	3,355	Huntley	307
Canowindra	2,381	Carcoar	695	Lucknow	326
Cargo	541	Lyndhurst	219	Orange	35,990
Cudal	653	Mandurama	496	Shadforth	247
Cumnock	613	Millthorpe	1,109	Spring Hill	282
Eugowra	914	Neville	222	Spring Terrace	280
Manildra	728	Newbridge	183	Other	605
Molong	2,515	Other	706		
Mullion Creek	576				
Nashdale	367				
Ophir	150				
Yeoval	426				
Other	2,525				

Source: ABS Census Data (2011)

Research has found that council mergers have the potential to harm or erode collaborative arrangements between small towns and councils (Dollery and Crase 2004; Smailes 2002) and diminish local representation (Spicer 2012). The risk associated if this merger proceeds is that the small rural communities may suffer as a result of being a minority group.

Table 3 shows distances of villages furthest from Orange. Being so far away from the administrative centre of Orange, up to 95 kilometres, these settlements are at risk of being ‘forgotten’ in terms of strategic planning by the new council and advocacy for their locality and may be disadvantaged, subject to arrangements made, in terms of access to representation and council services.

**Table 3: Villages in proposed merger furthest from Orange**

<b>Village</b>	<b>Km</b>	<b>Village</b>	<b>Km</b>
Yeoval	95	Neville	58
Eugowra	81	Mandurama	56
Canowindra	61	Newbridge	49
Lyndhurst	60	Manildra	46
Cumnock	59	Cudal	39

## **THE DEBATE AROUND COUNCIL MERGERS**

One of the main drivers of local government consolidation and amalgamations has been the argument by government that mergers deliver benefits to communities such as operational efficiencies, economies of scale, economies of scope and financial benefits (Dollery & Crase, 2004).

According to the ILGRP (2013:13) 'The world is changing rapidly and the system of local government must also change if it is to remain 'fit for purpose'.' Structural reform of local government around the world has seen consolidation of councils with the outcome being bigger councils and larger LGAs (Bish 2001; Smailes 2002; Aulich et al. 2011; O'Toole and Burdess 2002; Alexander 2012; O'Toole 2006; Douglas 2005; Martin 2011 and Talbot and Walker 2007). Much of the consolidation has been in the form of mandatory amalgamations and mergers forced upon communities. Such reforms have presented challenges for both communities in dealing with such change, and newly formed councils in building trust and fostering relations, to work together (Smailes 2002; Dollery & Crase 2004; Alexander 2012; O'Toole 2006; Douglas 2005; Talbot and Walker 2007).

The following issues are explored in this literature review:

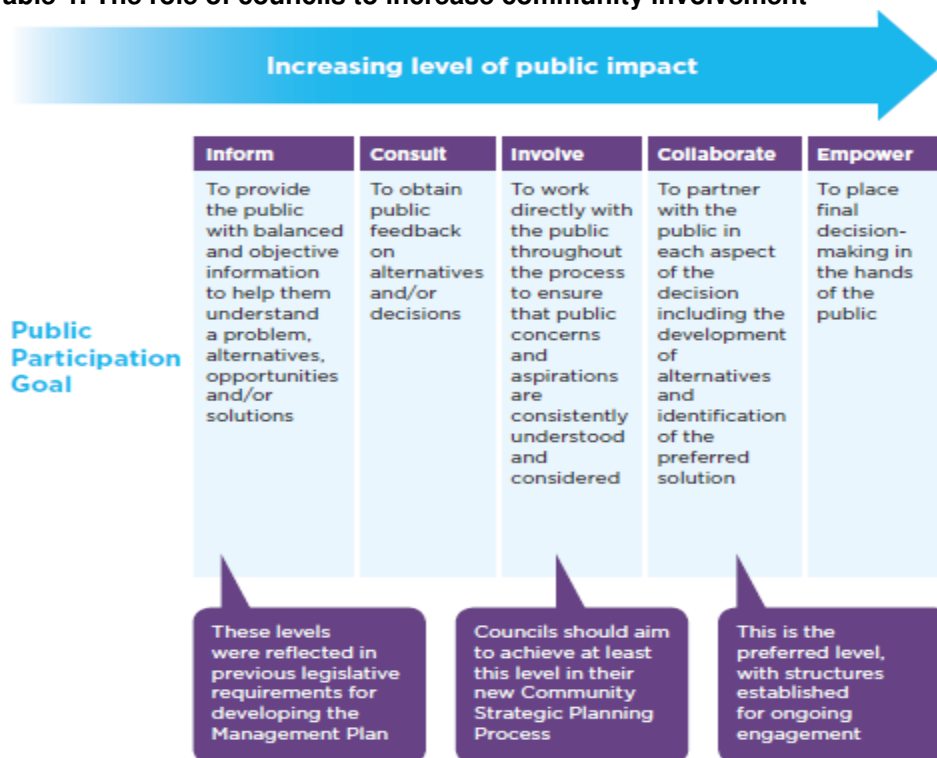
- What are the challenges experienced by communities with community involvement following a council merger?
- What strategies help communities accept mergers and foster trust between community and council?
- What modes of community involvement have been implemented to facilitate and enhance participation in local and community governance following a merger?

### Challenges of Small Communities in a Large Regional Council

The non-economic costs to the communities in a newly merged LGA include the potential loss of autonomy and identity (Alexander 2012; O'Toole 2006; Smailes 2002). Further, according to Martin (2011) community engagement is integral to the success of a newly merged council in its pursuit towards community empowerment and active community involvement in decision-making. For the purposes of this study community engagement 'is about members of a community participating in decisions and actions that help to shape their community' (Fraser Basin Council 2003, cited in Tamarack 2004:14). It is also recognised as a tool to strengthen community capacity and contribute to positive and sustainable change (Queensland Department of Emergency Services 2002, cited in Tamarack 2004:27).

Community empowerment refers to the process of gaining influence over conditions that matter to people who share neighbourhoods, experiences or concerns' (Fawcett et al., cited in Tamarack 2004:39). In local government, empowerment of communities places 'final decision-making in the hands of the public' (NSW Premier and Cabinet - Division of Local Government 2013:38). The 2012 changes to NSW Local Government legislation saw the introduction of Integrated Planning and Reporting with an emphasis on development of aspirational and holistic community strategic planning processes with greater involvement by the community. This strategy for increased focus upon greater community participation and impact can be summarised in Table 4.

Table 4: The role of councils to increase community involvement



Source: NSW Premier and Cabinet – Division of Local Government (2013:38) *Integrated Planning and Reporting Manual for Local Government in NSW – Planning and Sustainable Future*

This table highlights that while councils may be at differing stages with community involvement, the aim is for councils to mature and evolve through the framework progressing through the model from informing communities towards greater community empowerment. Empowered communities can actively push agendas or reforms and hold local government officials to account on delivery of plans or promises.

In research of case studies in New Zealand and Australia, Aulich et al. (2011) argue that consolidation of local councils works most effectively after extensive consultation with the community, including local and regional stakeholders. He further concludes that inadequate engagement and consultation with all those affected reduce or offset potential benefits of consolidation, especially by increasing uncertainty and anxiety about the future, and compounding the inevitable disruption associated with significant change. (Aulich 2011:9)

This view is credible as raising community awareness to change, the potential benefits of mergers both short term and long term and how challenges and concerns of communities will be managed help to garner support and inform the community. Furthermore, such community preparation will assist to deliver better outcomes for the community as compared to a radical mandate thrust upon communities similar to that of the Kennett reforms in early 1990s where councils were drastically cut from 210 to 78 (Alexander, 2013).

The lack of support for mergers in Victoria can be contrasted with the South Australian policy of voluntary amalgamations with no restriction or direction on size, shape or strategic intent, and demonstrates the merit of handing power to the people to determine merger outcomes (Aulich et al. 2011). He also found that the Local Government Association of South Australia had developed manuals and a framework that helped to

assist councils to assess its amalgamation options. This process of giving elected representatives the leadership to resolve what would be in the best interests of their community helped to achieve outcomes that may not have been achievable otherwise.

In addition to engagement and empowerment of communities in embracing proposed change it is also integral that upon proclamation a newly formed council embarks on an ongoing strategy to engage and empower its community. This will alleviate concerns over the perceived reduction in community engagement as expressed in research on the South Australian council amalgamation experience (Aulich et al. 2011).

This notion is also supported by Smailes (2002), in his research of geographical and socio-economic changes in the Gilbert Valley of South Australia. He argues that how small communities are engaged in a bigger council and how the new council is run contributes to the success or otherwise of community sustainability in small communities.

An engagement strategy that embraces community empowerment and facilitates ongoing community involvement through a number of mechanisms for participation, including community governance, can help to strengthen communities through building social and community capacity (Bolitho 2013). Such a framework also facilitates local access and input into the services and operations of council through drawing on local knowledge that can influence council policy on local matters and helps to foster a sense of empowerment in the community.

Onyx et al. (2007) argues wider utilisation of capacity in groups and social capital networks to empower communities more broadly is required to maximise their contributions towards community outcomes.

Another important aspect in a new merger on communities and community engagement and empowerment is action taken by council in response to the consultation undertaken. The responsiveness by councils to engagement activities in each town is crucial and can otherwise result in what Stoker (2011, cited in Martin 2011:15) referred to as 'consultation fatigue' by communities. Stoker and colleagues identified lack of responsiveness by councils as a significant obstruction to engagement of communities in research undertaken and developed the CLEAR model for effective community engagement, shown in Table 5 (Lowndes, Prachett and Stoker 2006).

Such a model for engagement in a new council would facilitate broader community participation, help deliver the sense of satisfaction of being heard and sense of contribution to what is happening in their local community. It also facilitates community ownership of decision-making that can translate into community members advocating for council. In a small rural community context this can be invaluable as the wider community attitudes can be influenced and community support garnered.

**Table 5: The Clear Tool**

<p>The CLEAR tool develops from a framework for understanding public participation which argues that participation is most successful where citizens:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>C an do</b> – that is, have the resources and knowledge to participate;</li><li><b>L ike to</b> – that is, have a sense of attachment that reinforces participation;</li><li><b>E nabled to</b> – that is, are provided with the opportunity for participation;</li><li><b>A sked to</b> – that is, are mobilised by official bodies or voluntary groups;</li><li><b>R esponded to</b> – that is, see evidence that their views have been considered.</li></ul>
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Source: Lowndes, Prachett and Stoker (2006) *CLEAR: An auditing tool for citizen participation at the local level*

A model of good practice for community engagement and empowerment was the City of Montreal Charter of Rights and Responsibilities, developed in 2006 that recognises the values and principles of community participation. Its intent was to embed the rights of citizens and followed an extensive process of community consultation (Smith, 2007 and Brunet-Jailly and Martin, 2010). The appointment of an ombudsman to oversee Charter enforcement and facilitate resolution of citizen complaint reinforced its existence (Smith, 2007).

### Communities of Interest development in a newly merged Council

Community of interest refers to 'a geographically connected population which shares common social and economic interests' (Local Government Boundaries Commission 2016:6). Alexander (2012) and Talbot and Walker (2007) found that harmful effects were experienced by communities in terms of communities of interest as a result of mergers and amalgamations. The loss of identity in rural areas was cited by Alexander (2012) as an outcome of the structural reforms in rural Victoria in the early 1990's. These outcomes are plausible and understandable consequences of such structural reforms due to the sudden nature of the mandate, lack of community consultation in the process and the community perception in the lack of regard in determining of LGAs to amalgamate.

Both Alexander (2012) and Talbot and Walker (2007) attribute the lack of consideration of communities of interest in the amalgamation process to damage caused by it and the ongoing bitterness of communities, even with the passage of time. However, a newly merged council can seek to address this through community development strategies to foster collaboration between individual communities to work towards development of common goals. Such strategies are correlated with the community engagement and empowerment framework and can contribute to influencing community sentiment. Aulich et al. (2011) found that through a Place Management Community Engagement approach, councils can facilitate development and growth of communities of interests whilst encouraging more active community involvement.

## STRATEGIES TO HELP COMMUNITIES ACCEPT AMALGAMATIONS AND FOSTER COUNCIL TRUST

### Facilitating Representation in a merged Council

Representation refers to the role of the elected members or councillors to act, speak for advocate or engage on matters on behalf of its residents within their LGA. A common thread throughout the literature was the perception by communities of a loss of representation, particularly in the rural areas, as a result of mergers and amalgamations (O'Toole 2006; Alexander 2012; Smith 2007; and Aulich et al. 2011). Referring to the Victorian amalgamations of the mid 1990's Mowbray (1996, cited in O'Toole 2006:303) suggests 'The dual effects of amalgamations and the loss of local representatives created disillusionment among many people at local level'. Dollery and Crase (2004) and Bish (2001) also acknowledge better representation of ratepayers in smaller councils. The loss of electoral representation is supported and is considered an inevitable consequence of mergers.

The above argument is also supported by Dollery et al. (2010), in a model for sustainable amalgamation, who suggest the retention of an administrative presence and rotation of council meetings across the new LGA. This can help to facilitate community access to council and allow communities to address elected representatives (Dollery et.al. 2010).

Such measures have the ability for impacts of amalgamations upon communities to be lessened and can contribute to community sustainability through retention of a council presence and providing an avenue for better community participation.

Facilitating access to councillors was also an important factor in the Toronto case study (Smith 2007 and Bish 2001). They cite zoning of an amalgamated council into four zones with standing committees and introduction of a framework whereby communities addressed standing committees, rather than the full council, also contributed to the disconnect felt by communities to the council.

Additional measures considered key in a newly amalgamated council identified by Aulich et al. (2011) are high levels of councillor representation, introduction of a ward system, and the importance of political leadership, good faith and responsiveness. Such measures have merit where legislation permits (number of elected representatives) and delivers equity (ward system).

Interestingly, from the Greenough- Geraldton case study and interviews, Aulich et. al. (2011) conclude in their findings that there was little community concern for local democracy and representation. Contributing factors cited include; full appreciation of loss of representation by community not yet recognised, structures in place and institutional arrangements to substitute representation and facilitate access to the community and improved Council awareness to accountability and transparency aspects to the community with measures put in place.

These findings in part, reinforce that through the development of means for communities to access a newly merged council and elected representatives they are likely to feel a connectedness thereby gaining trust in council and thus more likely to participate to the contribution of wider community outcomes.

### Fostering a Sense of community following a merger

Sense of community in this paper refers to 'belonging and connectedness; inclusion; positive relationships; and collaboration' (Department of Health and Ageing 2012:7.) The Local Government Association (2013) suggests that the role of local government has evolved to fostering a 'sense of place' to facilitate self-determination. It is further suggested that local government plays a significant role in the promotion of 'sense of community' through development of unique characteristics, image and style.

The detrimental impact upon sense of community by past mergers and amalgamations in rural communities has been highlighted in a number of studies. Based on case studies of Geraldton-Greenough and Onkaparinga Aulich et al. (2011) conclude that to counteract the loss of sense of community and representation a need for a large number of councillors and a ward system of representation is required and that this would be part of a strategy supplemented by a place management mode of community engagement.

The role of shire councils and small communities in building a sense of community can be attributed to the role they play in working collaboratively with the community in the delivery of outcomes and services, helping to build relationships, foster trust and to work as one to fulfil community aspirations. A newly merged council is likely to struggle to fill such a void immediately as a former council would be steeped in history of working together with its community and would be a significant change to implement.

Smailes (2002) in research as part of an ongoing study of geographical and socioeconomic changes in rural areas of South Australia considered how the 1997 mergers to form the District Council of Clare and Gilbert Valleys affected communities in the “minority” towns. It was found that while performance of elected representatives was praised and advantages of scale acknowledged, there was lacking a sense of community and a strong sentiment of loss of voice and self-determination, (Smailes 2002). He also suggests the effect of amalgamation upon individual community sustainability is dictated by how the new entity operates in practice.

The lack of a sense of community with the larger council area is an understandable consequence of amalgamation as each community had its own council and therefore connection or social interaction. With an amalgamation it will be incumbent upon the newly formed entity to genuinely seek to foster of a sense of place and promote a sense of community. Such a strategy is also integral to facilitation of community empowerment, building of community spirit and a sense of belonging.

Alexander (2012) found that mergers in rural Victoria involved significant cost to identity and that a broader sense of community had not been uncovered through results analysis. The work of Alexander (2012) also attributes a failure of binding the community and building of trust or interaction across communities to the amalgamation of Buloke Shire and that it had undermined local government in that area. Circumstances surrounding the merger in this research (Kennett reforms) and the failure of the new council to work collaboratively with the small communities with a place management approach may have also contributed to the outcome.

Such community strengthening activities were found lacking by Douglas (2005) in rural Ontario in Canada. He also points to role of the local government practitioner as being central to building a sense of place by developing an understanding of community issues through being part of the community and not a significant distance away from the community at central headquarters.

## COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE AND AMALGAMATIONS

Governance refers to the role of 'government plus looser processes of influencing and negotiating with a range of public and private sector agencies to achieve desired outcomes' (Hambelton, 2004, cited in Pillora and McKinlay 2011:5). Community governance refers to the devolving of power and decision-making to communities.

Local government has seen the emergence of community governance from the United Kingdom associated with the 'localism' initiatives implemented to devolve power of general competence and greater autonomy on provision of services to local government. The more significant and second phase of this was the 'double devolution' of power giving communities the opportunity to 'challenge' councils to pass facilities or services to community control should they feel they can deliver such services better (ILGRP 2013).

Through community governance structures, such as council committees or incorporated community committees, communities are able to influence decision-making of council, advocate for the community or help to deliver community outcomes (O'Toole and Burdess 2002). They are also an excellent conduit and sounding board to elected representatives for consideration of new policy. Appendix 2 includes table of community governance structures in the form of committees and examples.

The role of community governance in amalgamations and strengthening communities has been examined and acknowledged by a number of scholars (O'Toole and Burdess 2002; Douglas 2005; Simpson 2003 and O'Toole 2006). O'Toole and Burdess (2002) highlight the role of local development groups in small towns to fill the void of the former local council in coordinating activities and advocating for their community. This research of ten Victorian towns found groups established structures and agencies that function for the wider benefit of communities and provided a limited range of services. They conclude that these committees, as part of community governance framework, have assumed the mantle of local government authorities as significant advocates for their community in other tiers of governance (O'Toole and Burdess 2002).

Council leadership in community governance has an essential role to play to achieve the best outcome for communities. Pillora and McKinlay (2011) emphasise the importance of strong civic leadership for mobilisation of external stakeholders and communities. Douglas (2005) also reinforces the role of local government as an integral to establishment of community governance structures.

The role community governance structures play in sustaining communities is potentially invaluable (Pillora and McKinlay, 2011; Douglas, 2005). Council support with committees to facilitate their sustainability and therefore long-term contribution is essential. Depending on the nature of the structure this could be, for example provision of secretarial support, training or financial contribution towards insurance.

The recognition of risks inherent with empowering communities is also evident. Herbert-Cheshire (2000) acknowledges empowerment of communities in a community governance capacity as a greatest virtue and also a burden of responsibility on the community. This is attributed to delegation of responsibility to stretched (capacity) and busy community members. Simpson et al. (2003) and Smailes (2002) also express caution of capacity building applying undue pressure on small communities. Further challenges identified were the composition of committees being skewed towards particular interests or not being representative of communities (O'Toole and Burdess 2002; Smailes 2002; and O'Toole



2006). These risks require councils to work with these groups to facilitate outcomes that contribute towards their ongoing sustainability. Bolitho (2013) identifies strategies to counteract these challenges including using councillors as advocates and chairpersons, retired committee members as mentors, review of committee composition, charters, effectiveness, and representativeness against wider community.

A further risk consideration is a recent event where the Wellington Times (2016) references the mass sacking of volunteers, following the merger of Dubbo City Council and Wellington Council into Western Plains Regional Council. This was as a consequence of the former section 355 committees no longer being recognised under the new council. Highlighted in this scenario is the need for a cautious approach in taking such action to avoid community backlash and damaging community relations with such valuable resources, who may be utilised to advocate for the new council.

## SUMMARY

The literature review highlighted a number of outcomes arising from local government amalgamations. An overview of the issues explored in the review of literature is provided:

The literature identified a number of challenges being experienced by communities with community involvement following a council merger.

Aulich et al. (2011) found that communities felt uncertainty and anxiety about the future where consultation was inadequate with promotion of the merits of consolidation. Smith (2007) also found that if community support for amalgamation was garnered better community outcomes would have transpired. Smailes (2002) recognised that poor engagement in rural communities, following an amalgamation, resulted in communities feeling of loss of autonomy and being voiceless. He also cites that community pride and goodwill suffered, that may have been utilised by council for the greater good can have flow on effects to sustainability of small rural communities.

The denial of an opportunity for communities to access elected members to seek support, advocate or engage as an outcome of amalgamations in a rural context was also acknowledged (O’Toole 2006; Alexander 2012; Smith 2007; and Aulich et al. 2011). Communities were also found to have suffered from a loss of identity following amalgamation (Alexander 2012). Talbot and Walker (2007) and Alexander (2012) acknowledge that a failure to consider communities of interest in the amalgamation process contributed to the poor community sentiment following the event. These somewhat unsavoury outcomes experienced by communities highlighted in the literature also present an opportunity to learn from.

A number of strategies to facilitate acceptance of mergers by communities and foster community trust were recognised in the review of literature.

A key strategy to foster acceptance of the merger and community trust with the new council is to facilitate access to representation through the retention of an administrative presence in existing “pre-merger” locations and rotation of council meetings across the new LGA (Dollery et al. 2010). Bish (2001) and Aulich et al. (2011) highlight a Place Management Community Engagement approach as a means to encourage and promote community involvement that can help to deliver community outcomes and help communities of interest to flourish. Such an approach can also facilitate empowerment of communities to achieve aspirational goals.

Aulich et al. (2011) also identified other strategies to assist newly merged councils to foster trust of communities including introduction of a ward system, to facilitate representation in areas and give communities a voice, political leadership and responsiveness, to follow through on undertakings to communities so as to provide reassurance and show integrity. Bish (2001) cites use of governance structures, particularly in smaller areas, as a strategy for communities to retain a voice, feel empowered and build a sense of community. Such governance structures have also been recognised by O’Toole and Burdess (2002) and Bolitho (2013) as a means for communities to contribute to the affairs of council.

The modes of community involvement to facilitate and enhance participation in local and community governance following a merger referenced in the literature were varied.

Facilitating access to elected representatives and council meetings, to access the public forum to address councillors, has been cited as a means for community to influence local governance (Dollery and Crase 2010; and O’Toole 2006). Community governance structures were recognised for the role they play in strengthening communities following amalgamations (O’Toole & Burdess 2002; Douglas 2005; Simpson 2003; and O’Toole 2006). Community governance structures, including council committees or incorporated committees, also assist facilitate community influence of council decisions and help communities participate in delivery of community outcomes (O’Toole & Burdess 2002). The role such structures play in coordination of activities and community advocacy for small communities was also acknowledged.

Bolitho (2013) recommends the review by councils of committee effectiveness, use of councillors as advocates; committee charters, mentoring of new committee members, and assessment of representativeness as controls to keep such governance structures dynamic and relevant. They also cite use of other mechanisms to supplement governance structures including network forums; multiple stakeholder summits; and online mechanisms as means to further facilitate community involvement.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This study was undertaken as exploratory research. The objective of the study was to examine what challenges small local governments faced in the event of amalgamation and how best to engage and empower small communities as part of a larger merged entity so as to ensure that these small communities do not feel disempowered. The research was undertaken under the constructivist paradigm and was suited to this approach as it required interviewing key informants. ‘Underpinning the constructivist paradigm is the supposition that knowledge is socially constructed by people active in the research process and researchers should attempt to understand the complex world of lived experience from the viewpoint of those who live it’ (Schwandt 2000, cited in Merten 2015:16).

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

Two competing narratives were used to gather data from interviewees with the research study seeking to interact and engage with community representatives of towns and villages, as well as with local government practitioners in the relevant councils.

Interviews conducted were semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. These assisted to bring out the emotions, concerns, fears or otherwise of the representatives of small communities surrounding the proposed merger and general managers of councils involved in past mergers or this proposed merger. The semi-structured in-depth interview was selected as the favoured method as it gives the interviewee the ability to speak openly and elaborate on responses and the researcher ‘the space to seek clarity as to what the interviewee actually means and why they gave a particular answer’ (Morris 2015:10). The researcher was also able to build rapport and trust with the interviewee to help facilitate more open discourse. According to Morris (2015:5) ‘It gives the researcher the opportunity to establish why people construct the world in particular ways and think the way they do.’

These responses were considered essential to the overall project, being able to observe, engage and interact with interviewees to provide the researcher with meaningful data. The use of such an inductive approach to collect subjective knowledge from interviewees enabled me to answer my research questions.

For the purposes of the research study, a village committee is defined as an incorporated representative body that can speak on behalf of its small community. This may also be in the form of a town committee or progress association or similar representative group. Semi-structured in-depth interviews of these groups enabled the researcher to engage with representatives of the small rural communities to delve into the underlying concerns and factors that their community have with the proposed merger of their council.

#### Village Committees

A total of seven representatives of incorporated village committees (or equivalent bodies) in the proposed merged council area were interviewed, comprising of four from Cabonne, two from Blayney and one from Orange. The president, chair or delegate of that group was interviewed to speak on behalf of their respective communities. These numbers were determined based on populations and the numbers of small towns and villages in the respective council areas, subject to responses and availability. The justification for this was that these communities are within the merger proposal area and the number consulted

considered of a manageable size to extract sufficient data to assist to respond to research questions posed.

Interviewees were invited to participate through email contact to incorporated village, town and progress associations in the merger proposal region where contact information was held and forthcoming by the respective council or where contact information was held in the public domain. Included in the email was an introduction by the researcher and a research proposal that provided an overview of the project. An address to a public meeting of village and town association representatives in the Blayney LGA at the Blayney Shire Community Centre also provided the opportunity to distribute the research proposal to all attendees, raise awareness and garner support from town and village representatives. Morris (2015:55) states ‘In many instances recruitment of interviewees is challenging’. This proved the with arousing interest of representatives outside of the Blayney LGA through use of “cold call” emails and required, at times, numerous follow-up emails.

Upon confirmation of the commitment of town and village committee representatives to participate, all interviewees were sent an email confirming their involvement with a view to scheduling an appointment at a venue of their choice. Also included in emails was the project information sheet (refer Appendix 3), a consent form (refer Appendix 4) and the research questions (refer Appendix 5). Interviewees engaged represented the following towns or villages:

- Blayney LGA: Millthorpe and Blayney.
- Cabonne LGA: Canowindra; Cargo; Molong; and Yeoval.
- Orange LGA: Spring Hill.

A one on one interview was held with each interviewee at mutually agreed venues. This entailed some interviewees attending Blayney Shire Council, the researcher travelling to towns or villages for a meeting with interviewees at a community hall or venue, or both parties meeting at a central neutral location such as the Orange City Library.

All interviews (village committee and council) were scheduled for an hour however in some cases, this was extended to one and a half hours as participants were eager to express or expand upon their views. All interviews were also audio-recorded to ensure the as it ‘allows you to capture exact words used’ (Morris 2015:69). It also helped the researcher to accurately transcribe interviewee sentiments and feelings and focus on the interview and probe appropriately. All of the interviewees were comfortable being interviewed and many were welcoming of the opportunity to participate and express the feelings and desires of their respective communities.

The researcher provided an assurance that all data would be treated confidentially and all would be de-identified so as to provide the opportunity for interviewees to be candid and speak openly. Accordingly, pseudonyms have been used and councils have not been named throughout the presentation and analysis of findings. All data collected from the interview process, paper and electronic including consent forms and answers to research questions, were secured in a safe location with restricted access.

Table 6 provides an overview of sampling of village committee representatives using semi-structured in-depth interviews.

**Table 6: Outline of sampling for Village Committees (Semi-structured in-depth interviews)**

Interviewees	No. of Semi-structured in-depth interviews	Comments
Representative (e.g. President / Chair) of village or town representative body	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 25 villages in merger proposal area of Blayney Shire, Cabonne and Orange City Councils.</li> <li>• Villages in merger proposal region invited to participate where contact details were able to be sourced.</li> <li>• 7 Semi- structured in-depth interviews held:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2 from Blayney LGA;</li> <li>4 from Cabonne LGA; and</li> <li>1 from Orange LGA.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

### General Managers

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with General Managers of councils in a regional / rural setting, with experience in an amalgamation of small rural villages and a large rural or regional centre. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were also conducted with General Managers of councils within the merger proposal area.

Interviewing General Managers was considered important so as to provide the researcher an “inside view” from a council perspective on challenges, experiences and strategies proposed or used to allay community concerns and galvanise their community.

Six General Managers or their designate were interviewed. Three were from Bathurst Regional, Tamworth Regional and Warrumbungle Shire Councils and three councils from within the merger proposal area of Blayney, Cabonne and Orange.

The justification for selection of councils outside of the area was that the aforementioned councils have villages within their LGAs and were subject to council amalgamations in the past that involved a large regional centre and small rural towns and villages. The councils within the merger proposal area were sought to gauge concerns and potential solutions that may be under consideration and assist to comprehend current community engagement and empowerment practices in place.

Interviewees were invited to participate through email contact to the respective General Managers. Included in the email was an introduction by the researcher and a research proposal that provided an overview of the project. Follow up emails and phone calls were used as required to garner support. Similar to the experience with village committee representative the use of “cold call” emails proved particularly challenging.

Upon confirmation of the commitment from each General Manager to participate an email was forwarded confirming their involvement with a project information sheet, consent form and the research questions (refer Appendix 6).

A one on one interview was held with each General Manager at their respective council office. Where the General Manager was unavailable the Director Corporate Services was interviewed. The Directors at Warrumbungle Shire Council and Cabonne Council were interviewed in place of their respective General Manager.

Table 7 provides an overview of sampling of council General Managers using semi-structured in-depth interviews.

**Table 7: Outline of sampling for Councils (Semi-structured in-depth interviews)**

Interviewees	No. of Semi-structured in-depth interviews	Comments
General Managers of Councils (or designates)	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All 3 councils in merger proposal region interviewed i.e. Blayney; Cabonne; and Orange.</li> <li>• 3 councils that have experienced amalgamation of towns and villages with a city or large rural centre.                      Bathurst Regional Council;                      Tamworth Regional Council; and                      Warrumbungle Shire Council.</li> </ul>

### Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted with representatives of village committees or groups provided the opportunity for those representative bodies not engaged to contribute to the study and was considered a sound strategy to broaden the field of interviewees.

Village, town and progress association representatives were invited to participate through “cold call” email contact to village, town and progress associations where contact information was available or contact information held in the public domain. These groups were also invited to share the email through their committee network. Included in the email was a research proposal that provided an overview of the project. A public meeting of village and town association representatives in Blayney that the researcher was able to address provided the opportunity to distribute research proposals to all attendees, raise awareness of the project and attract participants. Email addresses of interested participants were collected and followed up by email with a project information sheet, copy of questions (refer Appendix 7) and consent form.

Focus Group meetings were open with attendees only required to express preference as to meeting time and no follow up was undertaken. No attendee was refused participation and this resulted in a duplication of representation with a representative from Blayney in attendance. The focus groups also provided the opportunity for representatives from localities and rural areas not recognised as a town or village to attend.

Three focus group discussions were convened with two in the Blayney LGA at the Blayney Shire Community Centre and one in the Orange LGA at the Spring Hill Community Hall. There were twenty-two attendees across the three sessions. Interviewees in attendance were from the following towns, villages and localities:

- Blayney LGA: Blayney; Kings Plains; Browns Creek; Barry; Lyndhurst; Neville; Newbridge; Carcoar
- Cabonne LGA: Guyong.
- Orange LGA: Huntley; Lucknow; Spring Terrace and Spring Hill.

Each focus group meeting was scheduled for one hour and was extended to accommodate participants who were eager to expand upon their views. Interviews were electronically recorded to assist with transcribing of sentiments and feelings helping the researcher to focus upon questioning and delving deeper when necessary.

## LIMITATIONS

A number of limitations were identified in the research project including number of interviewees, challenges with size of area and role of the researcher.

The size of the sample for this research project is far from representative and caution should be taken with the interpretation of results. For semi-structured in-depth interviews, a representative random sample size that can be generalised to the population was not sought. According to Morris (2015:63) 'the key aim should be to interview a range of interviewees who will be able to give you insights into the research question/s under review'. For the purposes of this research study a manageable sample size was obtained, having consideration of time and cost constraints, with a view to the collection of sufficient data.

Given the tyranny of distance across the region of the proposed merger and challenges engaging some groups, nine villages and towns were not represented and this is a limitation of the research.

While an independent approach to the work has been undertaken, a limitation must be acknowledged as the researcher is an employee of one of the councils to be merged.

## PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

This section summarises the findings from the interviews and focus group discussions with Village Committee and Progress Association members and interviews with councils through the General Managers (or delegate). It is presented in two parts: Part A discusses community views on their council’s community engagement and involvement practices and what effects the merger will have. Part B examines a council perspective of community involvement practices.

### PART A: VILLAGE COMMITTEES

The findings are detailed under five headings:

- Community engagement and its impact
- How councils advocate for its communities
- Perceptions of what will occur if the merger goes ahead
- Preferred methods of being heard once the merger is a *fait accompli*
- The economic impact of the merger

#### Community engagement and its impact

Interviewees were asked how councils kept their communities informed. Most of the interviewees expressed the view that their councils do indeed keep their communities informed by using a variety of methods - mainstream media, access to documents, meetings, and more modern methods using technology such as websites and social media.

For example, an interviewee who is President of the Town Association stated,

*Council engages our group through emails, survey monkey, towns and villages email list, Towns and Villages committee quarterly meetings. .... Direct communication from council is much better.... Newspaper; social media is also used. Depending on what is going on – targeted meetings. Councillor attendance at meetings [Mayor / councillors]. Staff access – General Manager and staff. It is very easy to get a council response. (James, Town > 1,000)*

Another interviewee who is a long term resident, committee member and President stated,

*[There are] A number of ways our group is engaged. Council publications; close relationship with the General Manager and Mayor; attendance at meetings by Mayor, Councillors and General Manager. .... When there is a new elected council they are invited on a walk around the village. It is an effective way, at the commencement of their term, to have a look at what we are hoping to achieve in that time. (Helen, Town > 1,000)*

*Council is very proactive in getting issues pertaining to a particular area out to the community for comment. .... Communication styles has varied with each General Manager at the helm. Each have their unique style. [It] Also depends the group you're dealing with. Where you have proactive members in both council and groups you see the better outcomes. (A number of interviewees in Focus Group 1 comprising members of town or village associations in towns and villages in the region)*



An interviewee who is a long term resident, business owner and current President of a representative group from a town in the proposed merger area stated,

*Two councillors in [our] village are in tune with what is happening in the area and are proactive. (Paul, Town > 1,000)*

Through engagement and keeping communities informed, councils are able to foster good relations and help build mutual trust.

*[We have a] Good relationship [with council] and access to works staff when required. This gives an opportunity for an informal meeting to discuss an issue or solutions rather than have to pen a letter through the hierarchy. (Helen, Town > 1,000)*

*Two delegates of [our] committee are councillors and one, if not both, attend meetings or they send a report as to what is happening in the area and council knows what we are up to as well. (Paul, Town > 1,000)*

The relationship between keeping residents informed and the fostering relations to build trust accords with the study done by the Tamarack Institute. It found that the overall benefits of community engagement can include creating higher quality solutions, increasing conflict management and resolutions, strengthening a sense of community and creating communities that take a greater responsibility for what is happening in their area. (Tamarack Institute 2002:4)

Through effectiveness of communication councils are able to facilitate outcomes and relations are galvanised. Interviewees spoke highly of its interactions with councils,

*[We have] Never had such a good relationship with council. [Council's] Attitude is “what can we do?” and “how can we help?”. Even when we get knocked back we are given options to do other alternate things. (Helen, Town > 1,000)*

*Largely because of council's proximity to villages we have the ability to talk to workers who will take on board enquiries or requests. (An interviewee in Focus Group 2 comprising members of small villages < 1,000)*

Interviewees expressed a level of pride as to how successful their local council was in engaging its community and involving them in the affairs and operations. This may have also been influenced by attitudes towards the pending merger, however responses observed appeared genuine in their praise for their local council.

The above responses also highlight the importance of communities being engaged, kept informed and having the feeling of a sense of autonomy. Through such action by councils, relations between councils and communities lead to collaborative partnerships being formed with solutions and outcomes jointly developed. This is consistent with research by Bolitho (2013) where it was identified that through a community engagement strategy that fosters community involvement on an ongoing basis, councils are able to facilitate strengthening of communities and growth of social capital.

It was also evident that where council fails to build relations with communities and foster trust the consequences can be dire. Some interviewees spoke of how they feel disengaged with their council and how there is trust lacking between them and council. An interviewee who lives on a rural property, works in an industry where neighbourhood engagement is key and is a committee member of an association in a village stated,

*Council consults community on significant developments in the area. ... Council doesn't engage well. In a lot of cases it has to be initiated by the community. ... Council uses local paper and website however isn't proactive in engaging prior to project planning. No talking to local residents in advance of a proposed project. You need to take the time to engage people not just token visits after the event. (Alison, Village < 1,000)*

*Building of trust between council and community is so important and sadly it is lacking in our case. (An interviewee in Focus Group 3 comprising members of village associations and villages in the region)*

It is also often the case that communities need to be heard to help foster relations between local governments and their citizens.

*Council staff need to also engage with village communities. A recent experience with a consultation session reflected a level of arrogance by staff and a failure to engage with the community. (Alison, Village < 1,000)*

These comments align with research by Smailes (2002) citing how a lack of community engagement and empowerment by a council can alienate and disenfranchise communities. This was certainly the sentiment expressed by the above interviewees. As a researcher this was very surprising as the merger has not taken effect yet it was evident there are poor relations being experienced by some communities. There may have also been contributing circumstances to these feelings as interviewees cited a number of recent unpleasant experiences at consultation meetings held by the local council with the residents on matters that the community was divided on.

### How Councils advocate for its communities

Councils and councillors have a responsibility to make decisions that impact upon communities, their livelihoods and well-being. Involving communities in council decision making is essential to fostering trust between councils and communities. Community participation in council is also important for raising of concerns and is seen as fundamental to communities contributing to self-determination.

A common thread amongst interviewees was advocacy was facilitated through representation and access to elected representatives. An interviewee who was a former councillor, committee member for over thirty years and current President stated,

*[A] Dedicated councillor to the committee in our village helps to facilitate representation. .... Councillor contacts are freely available. ... Ward [electoral] system helps to ensure representation with an elected representative from the local area. (Greg, Village < 1,000)*

Other interviewees shared similar experiences:

*[We participate] Through the Villages section 355 committee. Minutes [are] fed to full council. ... Council sees the group as a voice for the community and seek us out when they require input.... [Council] includes our group in relevant council decision making. ... There is councillor access and presence at meetings. (James, Town > 1,000)*

*We are invited and welcomed by council. Have access to council meetings and councillors. Councillors take more ownership of decisions made. .... Through the section 355 committee process we are heard. .... There is a culture of being open and accessible to the community by councillors (An interviewee from Focus Group 1 comprising members of town and village associations in towns and villages)*

The responses highlighted that councils were consistent in their approach in facilitating access to councillors and staff and for raising matters with the elected body. A notable difference in approaches articulated was however the formal structures established to consult villages / associations. Some interviewees discussed how their committee (an incorporated association) has a seat at the table on a council section 355 committee. This committee has an elected representative and outcomes of their meetings tabled before council. Another approach was having dedicated councillors allocated to villages and the council would act as a stakeholder on the association committee, taking back to council any issues. The final approach saw a dedicated council section 355 committee for each town or village with a councillor and minutes passed back through a meeting of council. All councils however had council section 355 committees for other purposes that facilitated participation and enabled access.

The feelings expressed by interviewees of effective representation and access helping to facilitate advocacy are consistent with Dollery and Crase (2004) and Bish (2001) who assert that small councils have better representation.

There were also other approaches used by councils identified. One innovative approach is a proposed Development Coordinator Program that Council provides funding for village groups (in a cluster formation) to engage a coordinator that seeks to assist groups to source grant funding. It also provides financial support for administrative costs to help sustain the incorporated village associations so as to enable their continued participation with council. One interviewee stated,

*We feel we are well heard. Through inviting councillors to walk around village. .... Through access to Mayor, Councillors and General Manager at meetings or outside. .... The Development Coordinator program is believed to help us to be heard even more with someone putting in the hard work putting the submission together. .... (Helen, Town > 1,000)*

Interviewees spoke of current experiences with loss of representation with their current council, while not currently in a merged council scenario, and is consistent with research by Smith (2007) and Bish (2001) that found loss of representation contributed to a disconnect felt by communities. One interviewee stated,

*[Our] Community feels they are not very important as councillors do not come to the village. ... Sadly, the local group in the village dissolved as it was having no success with influencing council. Infrastructure was left to deteriorate. (Interviewees in Focus Group 3 comprising members of village associations and villages in the region)*

### Perceptions of what will occur if the merger goes ahead

Interviewees expressed much passion when asked about the proposed merger. There was an array of concerns of what the proposed merger would bring. A concern echoed throughout the research was the potential loss of representation in the proposed merger. These concerns align with research by Alexander (2012), where he found that a reduction in political representation had occurred to communities in the Buloke Shire following amalgamation during the 1990's. The justification for such views by interviewees was that the number of councillors currently covering the proposed merged council area is 31 and the recommended number of councillors for the newly formed council is 12 (Pearson 2016). An interviewee who was also a former councillor in a small village commented,

*It is a concern in the new council that the number of councillors representing the areas are going to be reduced. So representation is likely to be diminished. ... I do not believe that over the long term that they can guarantee equitable representation and that may lead to a city centric council. But when you get a council that does not understand the needs and aspirations of rural communities the distant villages will not have representation and will feel disenfranchised with the process and local government. (Greg, Village < 1,000)*

*To stand up on council following the merger, and if you are from a village, you will need to be really dynamic and recognised. The majority of people and votes will reside in Orange so it is going to be those candidates that will be more recognisable. So my fear is we are going to lose representation and the council is going to be city-centric. You are going to have to be a big identity to get elected. (Paul, Town > 1,000)*

*[We] Don't like it. The merger is not going to save money aside from cutting back on administrative overheads and employment, with less staff and representation. .... The only other alternative is to have wards structured with a bias to ensure representation in the rural areas and a lesser valued vote in the urban areas. (Alison, Village < 1,000)*

The suggestion of a rural vote carrying more weight to address loss of representation was certainly not anticipated and is not considered feasible in reality. It does however reflect the level of concern felt.

Interviewees expressed other fears, reflecting on current experiences with their local council and how the merger may impact on groups in villages. The fear of burdening volunteers through the devolution of responsibilities by councils is supported by research undertaken by Herbert Cheshire (2000), Simpson et. al. (2003) and Smailes (2002), that identified the risk of burdening and placing undue pressure on volunteer groups.

*[Our] Group is not really excited about it. Feeling is that council has broken down a lot of barriers and is actively engaging with community. .... There is some trepidation of what the merger is going to bring. Our group will be part of a much bigger pond. ... It is likely in a bigger council more will fall on groups like ours. Village committees have other interests and things to do so council needs to be mindful about adding burden on groups. (James, Town > 1,000)*

*The enlargement of the rural areas in a particular local council area will lead to the domination of the urban centre over it. The rural villages and centres will suffer greatly resulting in more local centralisation. (Alison, Village < 1,000)*

*A big concern is for retention of facilities in the villages. A bigger council is going to have to run on a business model that may see facilities like pools close. .... Fear is in our village that children will not learn to swim due to loss of such facilities. I don't think that the new council over time will understand the culture of small towns. (Greg, Village < 1,000)*

An unexpected concern expressed was whether a larger merged council would advocate as strongly for a village. This is consistent with research by Talbot and Walker (2007) where they found that participants believed that politicians and political parties would be less responsive to rural communities as they do not carry the weight of votes. An interviewee spoke of his experience,

*Another form of representation that has been successful is involving the local council to advocate on behalf of a town or village when another sphere of government is threatening to withdraw services. The fear is [in the merger] the bigger the local government entity the more the chance it will follow the decision of the higher sphere of government. (An interviewee in Focus Group 2 comprising members of small villages < 1,000)*

There were also some strong sentiments expressed by interviewees around politics in the Chamber. Reference was made to how in the small rural councils in the region there are no political parties and decisions are not made on political grounds however with a large merged council this may not be the case. An interviewee commented,

*[We are] very against the merger. It will be the loss of small villages and the bureaucrats in Sydney don't see it and don't realise what communities are. .... With a bigger entity politics always enters the Chamber. Political aspirations and politics play a part in bigger councils and it can become very factional. It is not good for the workings of a council. (Paul, Town > 1,000)*

*Hope that the merged entity does not become a politicised council that will see decision-making on party grounds rather than for the greater good. (Focus Group 1 comprising members of town and village associations in towns and villages)*

The sentiments expressed by interviewees on the impact of the merger and fear of being worse off in terms of services and loss of voice through diminished access and representation may be attributed to interviewees being long-term residents in small villages. A number of interviewees have links to their town or village that go back generations and were passionate in expressing their views and concerns around the proposed merger and anticipated diminishing strength of their locality within the new council. All found it difficult to comprehend how their locality will prosper or benefit as a result.

It was anticipated that discussion of this subject would evoke overwhelming opposition and much emotion as the merger proposal is still under consideration and communities are in limbo. Media reports on the progress of legal challenges was expected to bring out such reactions, so it was surprising that five of the interviewees argued the merger would also provide benefits. Such responses may be influenced by what stage interviewees are in

the “cycle of change”. A number of potentially positive aspects of the merger were identified by interviewees. An interviewee who is a resident of a town with a population > 1,000 and is proactive on a number of associations including being a committee member of the town association stated,

*There are merits for tourism and promotion [on a regional basis] and will benefit the community. (Sandra, Town > 1,000)*

*As a small council with a limited budget there has never been a specific allocation of funds to the village that is spent per a community / council agreement. The bigger council gets a bigger pool of money that gives them resources to allocate to communities. (Tina, Village < 1,000)*

*The proposed merger may bring new leadership and opportunity for the community to be heard. The worry is that villages will not have a voice as the concentration of population and votes for elected representatives [will be] in the urban area. (An interviewee in Focus Group 3 comprising members of village associations and villages in the region).*

*The committee has never voted on whether it is a good idea or not however there is a view that the merger is inevitable. So hopefully what might be lost on access may be made up by scale resources, bigger better programs. ... We will work out a new way to deal with the new council. Council will also have to work out how it will do business with the villages. .... The merger also brings opportunities for it to promote our village culture and promote it on a grander scale. It will also be able to attract regional funding, something a small council cannot. (Helen, Town > 1,000)*

#### Preferred methods of being heard once the merger is a *fait accompli*

How a newly merged council interacts with its community will be integral to its ongoing success. Interviewees highlighted a number of mechanisms for engagement and being empowered that could be embraced by the new entity. Key points centred around representation, access to the elected body, access to council offices, structures for facilitating participative democracy, councillor remuneration and the formalisation of relations. Each is discussed in turn.

Interviewees spoke of the importance to rural communities of access to elected representatives and retention of council offices in smaller settlements. James from a small community (less than 1000) spoke about the challenges posed by distance:

*Making sure councillors are going to be representative [will be important]. .... Same with accessibility to the staff. How you get it will also be a huge challenge. Rotation of council meetings to bring councillors and staff to different locations possibly coupled with site visits or familiarisations. Accessibility will be a huge issue and it will be whatever can be done to break that down. (James, Town > 1,000)*

Participants in Focus Group 1 felt that it was essential that there be branches of council in the various localities,

*The new council [councillors] needs to get out there seeing what the issues are and responding. .... Access to council offices. There can be centralised administration but there needs to be diversified points of sale. ... Retention of existing structures.*

*.... Needs to be visits by the General Manager and some councillors once or maybe twice a year to the villages. (Focus Group 1 comprising members of town and village associations in towns and villages)*

*There has to be face to face meetings with council representation. Rotation of council meetings to facilitate access by communities to elected representatives and staff. ... Office and facilities presence in the Shire to access staff. (An interviewee in Focus Group 2 comprising members of small villages < 1,000)*

These ideas are consistent with research by Dollery et al. (2010) on the Sustainable Amalgamation Model for Country Councils that proposed retention of shire council offices facilitating rotation of meetings and access to elected members. It further suggested strategic (or controlled) adjustment of staffing also facilitating access while minimising any detrimental economic impact. Such responses were anticipated as such engagement and access helps to foster trust that can translate to collaborative arrangements and outcomes.

### Governance

Interviewees also suggested governance structures such as section 355 committees so as to help communities to have a sense that they will be heard:

*Council may convene a section 355 committee separate to village committees. This would give regular access to council through the section 355 committee. ... In so far as future committees being community driven or council [section 355 committee] the more council takes something over the less people will come. (Helen, Town > 1,000)*

*There needs to be a community committee, be it section 355 or incorporated, but more importantly there needs to be that community involvement. (An interviewee in Focus Group 3 comprising members of village associations and villages in the region)*

*Going to need a village/community committee that reports to council. There is going to be around 20 villages that are wanting to have a say and be heard. It is a mammoth task. (Paul, Town > 1,000)*

These views are supported by Bolitho (2013) who recognises the role council committees play in providing the link between council and the wider community and facilitating input into council decision-making.

A concern of an interviewee not anticipated by the researcher was around councillor remuneration. A recent council report read by the interviewee intrigued her as to how little was paid to councillors for the volume of work commanded. She cited that in a bigger council more would be demanding of elected representatives across a wider population and increased remuneration may attract higher calibre candidates,

*Better remuneration for elected representatives [is required] to attract quality. (Alison, Village < 1,000)*

The notion of increased remuneration for councillors was not found in literature associated with structural reform of local government however was considered worthy of notation.

### *Empowering Communities and Ensuring Community Engagement*

An interviewee discussed community plans and funding programs to empower communities in decision-making and help to achieve their aspirations,

*It is up to each village to determine its community aspirations. You can't impose them on communities. .... [A] Small communities' committee / workshop quarterly or biannually. These representatives would meet with council and councillors to discuss concerns and framework for council to engage and allay fears. It also gives opportunity for community planning. .... The shopping list idea that council, can say for your village you have \$10,000 to spend and this is what you can have for this much, be it bins, park benches or something else. Then the community elects what they would like. .... Give them the freedom and power to make those decisions and then they are done. (Greg, Village < 1,000)*

*[We would like] Community plans and a village enhancement plan [program] with allocated funds for community to have input into. (An interviewee in Focus Group 2 comprising members of small villages < 1,000)*

A number of interviewees spoke strongly on the importance of communication between community and council, for example:

*One of the concerns of our group is how is it that the villages just don't lose their voice in a larger council. It will be important to get that communication between council and community. (James, Town > 1,000)*

*[Also required are] Open forums in villages for community to have input and vote on. So community engagement occurs prior to it being presented to or imposed upon the community. .... Consultation needs to be at an early stage and involve all stakeholders. It needs to be an inclusive approach. The engagement and building of trust is terribly important. (An interviewee in Focus Group 3 comprising members of village associations and villages in the region)*

A constant refrain was that the new council must communicate with communities to obtain a sense of what they want and respond accordingly. This aligns with research by Aulich et al. (2011) who identified responsiveness by a new council as one of the important factors for success following inception. An interviewee stated,

*The merged council is going to have to be more proactive and ask the communities “what do you want us to do to involve you in this entity” and be responsive. If not, they will alienate the area. ... Need to hear and celebrate the diversity of the communities in the region. Need to embrace the uniqueness of each. (Sandra, Town > 1,000)*

Another suggestion unforeseen by the researcher was a documented agreement binding council as to how it would involve its community,

*There has to be some way to enshrine the engagement framework of the former council and have it recognised in the new merged entity. Possibly a Charter or Guarantee. (An interviewee from Focus Group 1 comprising members of town and village associations in towns and villages)*



This suggestion was raised on the one occasion and was not anticipated even though an equivalent reference was found in research by Smith (2007) and Brunet-Jailly and Martin (2010) about the City of Montreal Charter of Rights and Responsibilities. Similar to the idea by the interviewee, this Charter has sought to recognise principles and rights associated with community participation.

*Perceptions around the economic and social impact of the merger*

Concern about the economic effects of the proposed merger on rural towns and villages, while not a primary focus of this research was widespread. These sentiments are not unrealistic as research by Dollery et al. (2010), on the Sustainable Amalgamation Model for Country Councils, recognised the importance of maintaining an office presence local employment by a new council as integral to help sustain the local economy and community.

Interviewees expressed strong feelings on this subject. They viewed the reduction in council staff as posing a major economic threat:

*The closure of offices and facilities in villages will have a snowball effect on villages in terms of economic benefit and loss of businesses ultimately. This may be a slow process. A further risk is the flow-on to loss of services such as banking and postal services that can make villages or towns less attractive to live. Ultimately contributing to loss of population. .... Council contributes to “non-core” issues in villages such as doctor surgery / housing. Would a merged council do that or would they be happy for services to be centralised? .... Workers living and working locally also contribute to the local economy. (Paul, Town > 1,000)*

*Council staff live in the rural villages and contribute to the local economy. (An interviewee in Focus Group 2 comprising members of small villages < 1,000)*

Interviewees raised ongoing council employment of residents in rural villages as an ongoing strategy for community sustainability,

*It is difficult to see how we will be any better off with a regional council, in fact there is a fear there will be a loss of facilities in villages and more contracting. Contracting may have a detrimental effect on villages if [current] workers reside in these small villages. (An interviewee in Focus Group 3 comprising members of village associations and villages in the region)*

*[An] Equitable spread of traineeships is required across the local government area to compensate for loss of older staff that depart council to help sustain communities. .... There should also be some formula or guarantee that they will employ local people in local areas to help stimulate the local economy. ... Taking such services away will have a flow on effect on other services that may be taken away. (A number of interviewees from Focus Group 1 comprising members of town and village associations in towns and villages)*

The non-economic contribution of employment of local residents by councils, particularly to population diversity and the volunteer sector of communities was also recognised by an interviewee. This aligns with assertions by Dollery et al. (2010) where it was recognised the contribution of council employees to the volunteer sector and providing rural communities critical mass, to maintain schools for example.

*[A threat of the merger is] Loss of hotels and business in small communities. Economic downturn in small rural communities will lead to erosion of social infrastructure and services. Council needs to ensure economy is stimulated through retention of services. The threat is the little communities that lack the critical mass, we are talking sustainability of communities. Especially if the new council does not understand those dynamics and that they have their own identity, needs and desires. .... Anecdotally old amalgamations in the area have seen the diminishing of villages following the departure of shire headquarters. ... Another risk with centralisation of council services is the diminishing of population diversity and [the] volunteer base that such workers may contribute to. (Greg, Village < 1,000)*

These interviewees felt strongly about the risks and challenges, perceived or real, associated with population decline in rural areas and the need to maintain critical mass to help sustain other services such as schools, police and banking services. It may be argued that there are factors other than local government mergers that impact upon sustainability of communities and population decline in rural towns such as advances in technology, transport, centralisation of medical services and improved farming practices. The contribution of local government mergers to population decline in rural areas may be an area for further research.

## PART B: COUNCILS

The interviews with the six General Managers sought to identify strategies and the present practices of councils in regards to community involvement. The following issues are discussed in turn:

- How councils engage communities
- How councils give communities a voice
- How councils empower communities
- How councils foster a sense of community

### Effectiveness of council engagement with their communities / constituents

At present the councils use a number of means to engage their communities and keep them informed. Interviewees outlined that the major methods utilised included newsletters, adverts, media and social media.

*[We engage through] Quarterly ratepayer newsletters, weekly adverts, social media, detailed website [council's activities]; Your Say website for surveys and feedback, radio segments; media releases. (Jemma, Council A)*

*Council uses standard communications such as media and social media.... Council also encourages the community to get issues onto social media to engage with council. What this does is turns an issue from individual dialogue to council issuing information for general consumption. (Sue, Council E).*

Interviewees also spoke about face to face meetings being held,

*Annual [visits by councils and] meetings with villages where senior officers and councillors meet with various groups. .... Councillors meeting with community groups – once to twice a month. (Jemma, Council A)*

*Elected representatives, General Manager or Directors attend meetings of individual [incorporated] town and village association meetings. (Joe, Council B)*

*When we go to do more specific projects in towns we do public meetings and community consultation. .... Communities also have their say from consultation programs for each town and village that have been developed. (Lara, Council D)*

Also identified by interviewees were unique methods used to facilitate ongoing engagement with towns and villages including use of dedicated contacts for villages,

*There are twice yearly town meetings across towns. Councillors, General Manager and Senior staff go out to towns and villages with an agenda and then have general business [discussion]. .... We also have Development Coordinators – a model where Council pays .... each of the towns to employ a Development Coordinator. .... Their role is to get grants for the community but they also act as a conduit between council and communities to know what they feel and what are their issues. (Ron, Council F)*

Use of technology to reach out to communities was recognised by an interviewee,

*We have an after-hours session using video conferencing technology. Branch offices have the technology set up and councillors come to the central office and have a skype chat. People can go to the council offices or Skype in to participate in the afternoon chat. (Sue, Council E)*

Interviewees also acknowledged the importance of engagement of the community as a merged entity,

*It is important there are mechanisms in place for community to access councillors and staff. It might be a road tour followed by a community meeting where they would be invited to meet councillors and staff. (Lara, Council D)*

*Council will make a concerted effort to engage communities included into the merger so they can put a name to a face and establish those relationships. You could have a staff member or “small towns officer” that spends a day in each of the localities to work with them and build trust of Council. (Jemma, Council A)*

*It is about getting out to the community and being responsive so that feel they are being heard. .... Having cultural differences between councils, i.e. smaller rural councils and a large urban council coming together, will be a challenge. (Ken, Council C)*

The above views on strategies for engagement of communities following the proposed merger are sound and are supported by Aulich et al. (2011). He argues that with extensive community consultation of all stakeholders, consolidation of councils works most effectively. Smith (2007) and Alexander (2013) claim that with effective consultation, community acceptance and support can be garnered to help facilitate better community outcomes.

### How councils give communities a voice

The General Managers interviewed all stated that their council facilitated community representation and participation into governance arrangements of council. Similar strategies were utilised.

All interviewees outlined that their council used section 355 committee structures in some capacity,

*Representation is facilitated through the rural and village locality committees – section 355 committees of council. There are some 45 different ones e.g. sport and recreation committee, heritage committee, community committees. ... That outreach is important to council, there are a diversity of things that we do and we need that feedback. Committees are either specific to interests or localities. (Lara, Council D)*

*Council also has 50 – 55 section 355 committees and evolved from Community Development Committees for each of the communities and it was the way that council engaged. Initially the community champions that were elected were involved and it was a strong mechanism for representation as they know who to approach to get things to council. As things were being delivered by the regional council, it started to build capacity on the issues raised by communities, a lot of the community champions started drifting and lost interest. (Sue, Council E)*

Access to councillors was also facilitated through other means. One council's approach was through participation and membership of associations in each of their towns and villages. Onyx et al. (2007) found that such utilisation of capacity in groups is more empowering and helps to contribute to community outcomes. This was one of a number of alternate mechanisms to a council committee structure identified to access councillors and participate in council,

*Councillors are appointed as duty councillors or delegates to communities in villages. Committees are the community's committees. We got rid of a lot of council committees and made a determination that a lot of these villages had progress associations [an incorporated association for the betterment of a town or village] and it was found that it was better to work within an organisation that was in place and that they [the community] controlled rather than being a council controlled committee. Once it [a committee] is council controlled after a while the people do not feel they are achieving anything because they are being told how to run it. They also have a number of things that they do that council does not have a role in. Council is seen as a stakeholder. (Jemma, Council A)*

*We do not take council meetings outside of the urban area. .... Public forums are done in two ways. They [members of the public] can request a meeting with councillors about any subject for 30 minutes before a formal meeting and there is informal dialogue [forum]. The other [forum] made is during a council meeting [public forum session at every meeting] where the council can be addressed on any matter in the business paper. (Sue, Council E).*

The Development Coordinator model is a unique approach used by a council that appears to be effective in facilitating access to elected members,

*Town meeting findings are tabled at council meetings to inform all elected representatives. Through the councillors, communities are able to raise matters of concern. .... Councillors are spread widely so they are accessible to the community. With Development Coordinator [and community] meetings in the towns at least one councillor is in attendance (Ron, Council F)*

A large council, that had experienced a merger, implemented an innovative solution to dealing with communities through the appointment of dedicated staff that were charged with delivery of outcomes from the council committee and acted as a conduit to council

*Council has three Community Development Officers in the Communications and Engagement team that attend the section 355 committees. They are there to provide the link between the committee and council and to take ownership of recommendations. They see them [issues] through to outcomes. They are the internal advocate or champion for the issues, they have the internal conversations to get that matter on the agenda and make that outcome occur. (Sue, Council E)*

The different modes of facilitating representation and participation into local governance will be important for consideration in a merged council. A number of research articles discuss the implications of the loss of electoral representation due to mergers (O'Toole 2006; Alexander 2012; Smith 2007; and Aulich et al. 2011). O'Toole (2006) references disillusionment amongst communities resulting from amalgamation and loss of elected members. Thus in a merged council a variety of mechanisms in place for facilitating representation and participative democracy to compensate will be essential.

One council identified how its section 355 committees evolved and became counterproductive and not necessarily working in the best interests of the community,

*As things were being delivered by the regional council, it started to build capacity on the issues raised by communities, a lot of the community champions started drifting and lost interest. They became a vocal minority group rather than a representative group. A lot of good people left these committees and they became lobby groups that were working against council. These committees were dissolved and made specific purpose committees for each village or town. Committees created were public reserves committees; hall committees or historical committees so people in these communities with such interests were being represented. This also ensured a person elected to a committee with all the power yet no interest in the subject were not a delegate. (Sue, Council E)*

Noteworthy is that Bolitho (2012) reached a similar conclusion in her research. She found, amongst a number of lessons learned, that councils should ‘regularly review committees, including terms of reference, representativeness and effectiveness, including level of influence’ (Bolitho 2013: 24).

#### How councils empower communities

Councils identified a number of effective mechanisms to empower its communities. These are discussed in turn:

The general managers spoke about how community planning helps communities articulate their aspirations including projects in the short, medium and long term, for their town or village helps to empower communities,

*Council has facilitated users or interest groups to help them work towards their [Community Plan and Infrastructure Project] priority and vision. Council also acts as facilitator in response to an identified need to help them achieve their vision together. (Joe, Council B)*

*[Communities are empowered] Through the project perspective looking at what might be the future of those localities and what might be provided in the future through consulting and listening to the villages then determining their aspirations and goals. The empowerment of it is the opportunity to have input and being listened to. (Lara, Council D)*

A number of councils identified the funding of programs to help achieve their aspirational goals as a successful mechanism for empowering communities. Empowerment of communities can be facilitated through community involvement and engagement activities in pursuit of a shared vision. Pillora and McKinlay (2011:10) state ‘The basis of successful engagement is working from where people are and through reaching an understanding of and nurturing their aspirations.’ A variety of funding programs were identified that help communities to facilitate such achievements,

*Council's 'Big Book of Little and Not So Little Ideas' where each of the ideas and projects are invited from incorporated groups and captured, then council considers them and allocates resources. Another program was when council through its community meetings and online engagement invited from the community ideas and projects to the value of \$5,000. With the year end surplus, it allocated funds to the delivery of those projects. (Sue, Council E)*

*Council runs a village capital works program and the progress associations make bids for that money for expending on any infrastructure in that village, providing it is publically available. .... Council took the position that it would deal with the village committee rather than individuals for the needs of the village. The reason for this is that they have been involved in formulation of the village plans that then sets the direction then meeting with them each year and hearing what are their issues. .... Council leaves representation of committees to the community as the moment council dictates it then becomes a section 355 committee, council is accused of being controlling and people feel disempowered. Committees will have good times and bad times but it is up to them and that is very important one about empowering them. They are the ones who make the decision on their own basis. (Jemma, Council A)*

Funding programs that help to sustain village associations to facilitate networking and collaboration with council, in addition to renewal of community infrastructure was also discussed,

*Through the Village Enhancement Plan with council's project list [is determined], the funding is made available and communities are asked for their project list, we then determine priorities. Input and concurrence is sought to projects... We have a Financial Assistance Program which is very successful. Sometimes the only way we can empower these communities is to help them financially or provide assistance in-kind. Through funding public liability insurance, or infrastructure that can be how you empower these groups to achieve their goals. In terms of what we do in the future, one of the main objectives of the [proposed] Development Coordinator program is to empower those communities to achieve their goals and aspirations through sourcing of grant funding. (Joe, Council B)*

A powerful overview by an interviewee of the role of their council and what they are seeking to achieve by empowering communities was not anticipated yet very insightful,

*What we are trying to do is empower volunteers and community groups and give them a voice. It is important to council that villages remain autonomous and sustainable. Local government needs to be an enabler not an inhibitor. .... With volunteer groups you often do not need to do much as they have the passion, the enthusiasm and they just need a little help, like a door opened or a phone call or a little assistance. .... In a bigger council this will be more important as the council will be more focussed on bigger strategic things and you can't get [to] those smaller towns or little village groups. Whether it's the preschool or the local CWA their success will determine the success of the bigger entity. (Joe, Council B)*

O'Toole (2006) in his study of community governance in rural Victoria found that volunteer groups were crucial for strengthening community governance. Similarly, Smailes's, (2002) study recognised the high levels of social capital that has assisted to sustain small communities. This response may be attributed to where the council is working towards with its community relationship in terms of achieving their public participation goal (refer Table 4). It is however a sound philosophy or approach for a newly merged council to embrace.

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### Fostering a sense of community

Interestingly all councils shared equivalent views on the role of council fostering a sense of community. All interviewees acknowledged that it was the role of the community to build a sense of community and the role of council was to help facilitate it.

*Our towns have a sense of community but that is away from council. We as council can provide infrastructure to maintain a community or make it liveable, but a sense of community, is that something council can influence? Is that council's job? (Ron, Council F)*

*The amalgamation has helped to bind communities as they understand as a small community that if they don't gel as a community they have less chance of getting what they want in their locality. .... The way the communities celebrate is their own unique distinct way of their community e.g. ANZAC Day; Australia Day or other community event. You let them develop their own sense of community through how they interact. Council needs to ensure it delivers its services on a fair and equitable basis at the top [strategic] level so everyone underneath can maintain their identity. (Sue, Council E)*

*We would want villages to have their own community representation organisation and communities that should run independently. .... Meet with residents and get an understanding of their aspirations and what they would want their community to be. Also, to determine what is there that council can do to help them. Getting them to identify what is their community and telling council. (Jemma, Council A)*

Aulich et al. (2011) identified that through collaboration with communities, small councils help to foster trust and achieve community aspirations to help build a sense of community. The following responses by interviewees also express similar views,

*It [sense of community] happens to an extent spatially if you look at them now. They all have their specific flavours, natures, and cultures, so it is handling that within a boundary of a locality or village. That establishes the nature and catchment of that locality. To retain sense of community again you do that through consultation, through listening and through developing plans on what the future might hold. .... It is about each village or town being happy and proud of who and what they are and having that diversity across the local government area. Villages do not necessarily have to have an affinity with one another but you like them to be positive about their village and have their own aspirations, to get to a point to go forward with these villages working out what can be done and resourcing it. (Lara, Council D)*

*What we want is for each community to be unique rather than being one glob and be the same. It would be unfair for a council to impose upon villages that they must be part of one community. .... It is unrealistic to expect villages to have their sense of community is beyond their part. .... For the towns and villages to be viable we need to engage those people who aren't engaged in their communities to having a sense of community. (Joe, Council B)*



## **CONCLUSION**

This paper sought to identify concerns of small rural communities in the proposed merger of Blayney Shire, Cabonne and Orange City Councils and develop strategies for engagement and empowerment of these communities by the new council. The aim of these strategies is to help facilitate acceptance of the merger and develop relationships of trust and harmony so as to work collaboratively into the future.

Gaps were identified in the research and are suggested for future consideration including:

- Local government mergers in regional and rural New South Wales, post 2000, and their impact on rural towns and villages;
- The impact of local government mergers on the sustainability of rural towns and villages;
- Successful local government mergers and associated strategies.

An overview of the key questions that the research sought to address is provided as follows:

In regards to the question of how effective are the current methods used by councils to encourage community engagement and involvement in the small rural communities, the research found that a majority of interviewees considered their council to be very effective with their engagement and community involvement processes. Established communication channels and engagement mechanisms were praised by most interviewees giving them a sense of being informed of what is happening and providing them a voice. It was also recognised that their councils were proactive in going to community and facilitating solutions to needs of the community.

Many interviewees acknowledged how elected members were known to communities currently and involved themselves in community governance structures hearing the sentiments of community representatives and being able to articulate their views to the other councillors.

Some interviewees currently experiencing loss of representation and minimal consultation felt somewhat neglected and highlighted room for improvement for their council and an opportunity for fresh beginnings with the proposed merger.

Interviewees expressed a great deal of concern about the perceived impacts of amalgamation. Concerns included access to councillors and council meetings by rural communities and diminished representation resulting in a loss of autonomy by the community. Loss of equity in representation was recognised with the city, having the population and bulk of votes, likely to get the majority of focus over rural towns and villages. Concerns were also expressed that small villages would be forgotten given the small vote and the size of the LGA.

Concern was expressed over how the newly merged council is likely to support and follow decisions of other tiers of government and not be concerned with associated impacts of decisions on small rural localities.

Burdening of volunteers with more expected or required of them to deliver community outcomes or be heard by a newly merged council was identified. Concern over politics in the chamber of a larger council taking precedence over a focus for the greater good of the community was also referenced.

Sustainability of rural towns and villages was identified as a concern of communities and reflects the importance of the new council developing strategies to help keep towns and villages vibrant.

The research confirmed that rural communities are concerned about the impacts of the merger on their communities. The research also identified areas of concern that if concentrated upon by a newly merged council would help facilitate community acceptance of the merger and build community trust.

A number of strategies for a newly merged council to build trust, foster relations and empower small rural communities were identified. Facilitating accessibility of councillors and staff through governance structures, rotation of council meetings and regular visits to towns villages for formal and informal visits and meetings were recognised as effective strategies.

Through retention of council offices and facilities in towns and villages the newly merged council can avail communities access to council staff, meetings and services that can assist to build community trust. The establishment of community governance structures for communities to have a voice and facilitate input into council affairs and community outcomes can also help to galvanise relations between rural communities and the new council. Research found that such structures as council or incorporated committees with elected member presence are most effective in community views being informed to other elected members.

Working with the community to develop and enshrine the participation framework that will be mutually beneficial and strategies to assist the sustainability of the small towns and villages were also opportunities for the newly merged council.

An opportunity exists for the newly merged council to become a model for success through building relations and trust with its community through engaging, involving and empowering its rural towns and villages.

The interviews of councils identified a number of mechanisms and practices used in local government to engage, involve and empower communities that have assisted to inform recommendations to the new council. Providing the opportunity for communities to have input to their future of their town or village, for example through community planning, and the ability for communities to work towards achievement of those aspirations found to be effective means of empowerment. Facilitating community access to funding, be it council or other grants, was also identified as a successful strategy. The review of literature also found synergies with many of the research outcomes and assisted to inform the ‘solutions’, that are put forward in the form of recommendations, which are provided next.

It is hoped that the recommendations of this research will assist to inform a newly merged council and more importantly help the communities in rural towns and villages in the proposed merger of Blayney Shire, Cabonne and Orange City Councils to be actively involved with the new council and be heard.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SMALL RURAL COMMUNITIES TO BE HEARD**

A newly merged council in central west NSW, once proclaimed, will face many challenges. However, it will be imperative that it quickly develops strategies to foster community trust, acceptance of the merger, models for engagement and empowerment of the various communities and more importantly, be responsive to the requests and preferences of smaller communities. This will help to provide residents with a level of assurance that there will be no significant change or loss suffered with the new, larger local government entity. The following is a series of recommendations for a newly merged council encompassing Blayney Shire, Cabonne and Orange City Councils to help minimize the possible negative effects of the merger and facilitate small rural communities to be heard and involved in council affairs. The recommendations are based on the findings of this study. The recommendations are summarised under the following headings:

- Community Engagement
- Community Empowerment
- Community Governance
- Representation
- Sustainability of Rural Towns and Villages

### **RECOMMENDATIONS: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

#### **1. Develop a Community Engagement Strategy**

A documented Community Engagement Strategy is essential for articulating the principles and methods for engagement of the community. Such a document should be developed by the new council and be informed following consultation with the community prior to adoption so as to identify preferred methods of engagement. The finalised document should outline techniques to inform and assist practitioners on appropriate engagement methods. Methods and techniques should be wide-ranging and varied to enable the most appropriate to be selected for the circumstance and stakeholders.

Research undertaken has identified a number of processes for inclusion. Table 8 outlines several methods of engagement identified as useful by respondents in this study, and, whilst not exhaustive, are recommended for inclusion in a Community Engagement Strategy.

**Table 8: Recommended methods of engagement**

Newsletters	Fact sheets and flyers
Advertisements / Segments – newspaper, radio and television	Media releases – newspaper, radio and television
Community newsletters	Public meetings
Staff networks	Forums
Surveys	Workshops
Correspondence – hard copy and email	Technology – website and social media

## 2. Develop a Charter

A ‘Charter of Rights and Responsibilities’, similar to that of the Montreal model (see above), to enshrine the community participation framework should be given serious consideration by the new council. The charter should be developed with extensive community consultation, particularly with rural communities, to help facilitate their endorsement of the charter and more broadly the acceptance of the merged council. Some of interviews conducted with representatives of villages and towns highlighted the effectiveness of their current council with community interaction and involvement and much would be gained through their engagement and subsequent endorsement of a strategy.

## 3. Appoint Community Development Officers

Three Community Development Officers should be appointed by the newly merged council with sole responsibilities to work with rural towns and villages as a key reference point and conduit between council and communities. Their responsibilities would also be to help facilitate solutions within council through the relevant department, so as to ensure the new council is responsive to community requests. Their roles could be broadened to also attend meetings of town and village groups and they should also be responsible for relevant section 355 committee outcomes and recommendations. The new LGA could be split by regions or clusters so as to provide the Community Development Officer clarity on their area of responsibility.

## RECOMMENDATIONS: COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

### 4. Develop Community Plans for Towns and Villages

Community plans are a useful means to empower communities through their active involvement to develop such plans. The new council should embark on a strategy to develop community plans for all towns and villages with the active participation of communities. Associated with this process should be the identification of projects by the communities that the community would like over the short, medium and long term. This will help communities to articulate the aspirations and goals of their locality and more importantly inform the new council. These documents may also be used to help inform the new Community Strategic Plan and other documents including the Delivery Program, Long Term Financial Plan and Asset Strategies. The communities can also seek to deliver upon planned projects through other means of funding or delivery and such a process can help to bind communities, build capacity and help galvanise communities as projects they helped to identify are delivered upon.

### 5. Introduce funding programs accessible by communities

Funding programs available to community groups to access have the ability to assist communities to empower communities deliver upon projects they so determine. The new council should implement funding programs that incorporated groups are able to access to bring projects and programs to fruition. Also recommended is consideration of the provision of financial assistance to towns and village associations throughout the LGA with public liability insurance costs to assist with their sustainability. This may also assist to facilitate their participation and foster collaboration with council on other council activities, such as community events and projects.

While a policy framework and consideration of financial implications will be required for such funding programs, the opportunity to source funds by such groups can be very rewarding for communities and can assist them to achieve their aspirations. Examples of such programs identified in the research include:

- A Village Improvement Program (and a Village Enhancement Plan) that contributes to publically accessible infrastructure and projects. One model also involved the community with determination of funding allocation rather than council;
- The “Big Book of Little and Not So Little Ideas that compiles projects for prioritisation, assessment and funding on a merit basis;
- Invitation of community projects and ideas up to the value of \$5,000 that are prioritised, assessed on merit and funded from year end surpluses;
- Financial Assistance program for funding of public liability insurance for incorporated town, village and progress association committees; funding of rates and charges for charitable groups; and projects from incorporated associations. Projects should align with the council community strategic plan or town or village community plan and be available to the wider community to access.

An associated benefit of such community involvement is also their ability to assist to garner support within their communities to help to deliver better value and better community outcomes. Such collective efforts also help to bring communities together.

## 6. Development Coordinator Program

A Development Coordinator Program has the ability to help facilitate access to funding programs for community groups in towns and villages and to help communities source grant funding to bring projects to fruition. The new council should give consideration to the introduction of such an initiative to help empower communities to drive their own destinies and outcomes for their town or village. Such a program can also help to develop capacity of volunteer groups with scoping out projects and preparing them for seeking of funding; identification of funding sources; applying for grant funding and dealing with grant administration. This research also identified how Development Coordinators can also be a conduit to council on matters of importance in towns and villages and help to keep them informed. It is however not advocated that coordinators be spokespersons nor another layer of governance or administration to access council.

While the new council could opt to employ Development Coordinators the recommended model is for towns and villages associations (or through a cluster arrangement by area or region of a number of town or village associations) engage them so as to empower these groups and to remove any perceived council influence. This is also likely to see better outcomes than a council coordinated program as the community attitude of “leave it to council” is less likely to arise.

## RECOMMENDATIONS: COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE

### 7. Section 355 Council Committee structure

Involving communities in the decision making processes of council and giving them a sense of autonomy can be a powerful way to help build trust of communities and actively involve them in council. The new council establish a section 355 committee structure that embraces involvement of community members in making recommendations to council. The research identified section 355 committees with responsibility for council facilities and the new council should determine the purpose and functions for such committees.

Research also identified councils with section 355 committees in each town and village based on interests or by facility managed while with other council section 355 committees were based on a purpose and with membership from across the LGA. The new council should identify the best approach going forward.

It is strongly recommended that all current community representatives be retained and engaged by the new council through the review and determination of the new council section 355 committee structure. These representatives and their continued participation will be integral to the success of the transition of committees and fostering acceptance of the merger. Through retention of their involvement collective efforts may be harnessed to help advocate for the new entity in their respective communities.

Consideration should also be given to a Towns and Villages section 355 committee comprising representatives of incorporated town, village and progress associations as a means to of bringing them all the table to be heard and to facilitate ongoing engagement and collaboration. While the number of members would be significant the area covered very large, it would be a very useful means of keeping all groups engaged. To counteract this challenge an option may be to embrace technology or alternatively consider other solutions such as rotation of meeting locations.

Should a Towns and Villages section 355 committee not be viable, an alternative consideration may be to conduct forums or summits to bring together representatives of such towns and villages on a six monthly or annual basis.

Another model identified in the research, and a possible alternative, was allocation of councillors as “duty councillors” to the various incorporated town and village associations across the LGA. These councillors would then report back to the full council. As successful as this approach was reported to be this model is not seen as a viable option due to the volume of towns and villages in the new LGA and given the diminished number of councillors.

## RECOMMENDATIONS: REPRESENTATION

### 8. Access to Councillors

Availing the community access to councillors is seen as a fundamental democratic right to communities and was made abundantly clear by interviewees from the towns and villages. The newly merged council must develop strategies to facilitate access by the community to the elected members. The failure to do so would be seen by the rural communities as a sign of neglect and would confirm fears of not being in a merged entity.

A number of means were identified through the research including:

- Rotation of council meetings with public access to address elected members;
- Transparency of councillor contact information;
- Councillor presence at community meetings;
- Informal meetings by councillors with representatives of incorporated towns and villages committees;
- Meetings attended by Councillor / General Manager / key staff with representatives of incorporated towns and villages committees;

An innovative method of facilitating access to councillors identified in the research that is also recommended for consideration is regular skype meetings with the community whereby community members attend council offices across the LGA or dial in remotely to access meetings and participate.

## RECOMMENDATIONS: SUSTAINABILITY OF RURAL TOWNS AND VILLAGES

### 9. Retention of Council Offices and Facilities

Retention of council offices and facilities in towns and villages was raised by interviewees on numerous occasions as a major concern. The new council should seek to retain council office and facilities in the rural towns and villages to help keep the business sector and communities vibrant in these locations. Interviewees also cited such a strategy to helping towns and villages to be liveable and attractive to new residents to help communities and important services in those localities to be sustainable. The added benefit of this strategy entails facilitating access by the community to council staff, councillors and council meetings.

### 10. Retention of Employment Numbers in Rural Locations

The new council should seek to retain employment numbers in rural locations to help sustain businesses in towns and villages. While there is legislative support under the LG Government Act to this end, there were concerns expressed by interviewees from towns and villages in the research over reduction of employment numbers, particularly residing in towns and village, and the potential impact on local economies.

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## **LEGISLATION**

Local Government Act 1993 (NSW)

## APPENDIX 1: Options for Amalgamation around Regional Centres

Centre	Potential Amalgamation	Comments
Albury	+ Greater Hume (part or whole) Combined 2031 population 68,500	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Greater Hume’s long term sustainability is questionable, but it could continue as a council for some time</li> <li>Boundary changes to merge the southernmost parts of Greater Hume with Albury and/or Corowa appear warranted</li> </ul>
Armidale-Dumaresq	+ Guyra + Uralla/Walcha Combined 2031 population 46,700	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Amalgamation has been proposed on several previous occasions and strongly resisted – but the evidence from neighbouring Tamworth is that it would bring considerable benefits</li> <li>Community Boards should be established in the former shires</li> <li>An alternative is to merge Guyra (5,300) with Armidale (32,100), and Uralla (7,600) with Walcha (2,600)</li> </ul>
Bathurst	+ Oberon Combined 2031 population 57,900	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Oberon’s long term sustainability is questionable: it could continue as a council for some years but amalgamation would provide a higher capacity base</li> <li>A Community Board should be established in the former Shire</li> </ul>
Deniliquin	+ Conargo + Murray Combined 2031 population 18,400	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conargo and Murray create a ‘doughnut’ around Deniliquin</li> <li>Conargo Shire is based in Deniliquin and its projected population of just 2,000 is considered too small to warrant a separate entity</li> <li>Deniliquin is at present the largest urban centre but by 2036 Murray Shire will have a much larger population</li> <li>Wakool might also be included and would increase projected population to 21,200</li> <li>Community Boards should be established in the former LGAs</li> </ul>
Dubbo	+ Narromine + Wellington Combined 2031 population 60,800	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Narromine and Wellington may be sustainable into the medium-long term, although Wellington has a Weak FSR</li> <li>Community Boards should be established for Narromine and Wellington if amalgamation occurs</li> </ul>
Griffith	+ Murrumbidgee Combined 2031 population 21,900	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Murrumbidgee’s projected population of 1,400 is considered too small to warrant a separate entity, especially given its proximity to Griffith: a Community Board would be appropriate</li> <li>Also adjust boundary with Carrathool to reduce ‘doughnut’ effect around Griffith</li> </ul>
Orange	+ Cabonne Combined 2031 population 64,400	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cabonne may well be sustainable into the long term, but its recent and projected growth is overspill from Orange</li> <li>Some areas on the northern and western fringes of Cabonne are seeking to move to adjoining councils</li> <li>Blayney could also be added and would increase the projected population to 73,100: it could remain sustainable as a separate council for several decades but amalgamation would provide a much higher capacity base</li> <li>Community Boards should be established as required in the former LGAs</li> </ul>
Queanbeyan	+ Palerang Combined 2031 population 77,100	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Palering was created in 2004 and has been through a difficult establishment period: its financial position remains questionable and projected substantial growth is essentially ACT and Queanbeyan overspill</li> <li>There may be a case to divide Palerang amongst all its adjoining councils, but this would be very disruptive</li> </ul>
Wagga Wagga	+ Lockhart Combined 2031 population 75,900	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A Community Board would need to be established for Lockhart if a merger proceeded</li> </ul>

Source: ILGRP (2013) ‘Final Report of the NSW Independent Local Government Review Panel -Revitalising Local Government’

**APPENDIX 2: Committee Types and Roles**

	<b>Examples</b>	<b>Role/decision-making power</b>	<b>Example of remit</b>	<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
<b>Delegated or 'special' committees (Section 86 Victoria, Sections 355 &amp; 377, NSW)</b>	Hall/community hub/reserve/skate park committee (tends to be prevalent in rural/regional settings).	Power to make decisions and raise funds delegated through Local Government Act.	Management of community asset e.g. community hall, reserve, sporting infrastructure.	Provide skills not otherwise available. Community ownership of assets. Devolved public management.	Lack of broad representativeness/inclusivity.
<b>Precinct committees (Section 8, NSW)</b>	Council-supported system of committees involving core membership and open meetings.	Able to influence councils to consider appropriate place-based interventions and planning.	Obtain and distribute information and form two-way linkage between community and council.	Citizens keep in touch with development applications, traffic, landscape and service planning.	Resource intensive with detailed responses on specific issues regularly required.
<b>Advisory committee Skills based</b>	Arts	Able to make recommendations, and hence influence Councils, no formal decision making power.	Advise council on Arts based on knowledge of arts and culture of the area.	Provide skills not otherwise available. Acquisitions may contribute to value of investments.	Local knowledge may be partial.
<b>Advisory committee Issue based</b>	Recreational trails Community inclusion	Able to make recommendations and hence influence councils, no formal decision-making power.	Provide diverse perspectives to council on a contested issue or site. Provide perspectives on issue of community concern e.g. disability.	Provides an approach to stakeholder and advocacy management that acknowledges diverse viewpoints.	Interested parties may be unable to consider a public view. Can become stale, only serving group networking purposes.

*“The Challenges of Engaging Communities: Will the small rural voices be heard in a merged regional council?”*

	Examples	Role / decision-making power	Example of remit	Strengths	Weaknesses
<b>Advisory committee</b> <i>Working partnership based</i>	Sister cities	Provide advice, no formal decision-making power.	Advise on programming, protocol and so on.	Councils garner culturally relevant advice from members.	
<b>Advisory group</b> <i>'Community voice'</i>	Youth committees	Provide youth perspectives, no formal decision-making power	Advise on activities and approaches to youth participation.	Councils gain understanding young people's needs. Encourages networks, leadership development.	If action is not implemented and activities not meaningful, committees founder.
<b>Reference group</b>	Community centre development reference groups	Community agencies and members make recommendations and hence influence councils. No formal decision-making power.	Participate with design team on infrastructure project, facility design and development –  A kind of extended design charette.	Short term, purposeful with a view to community ownership.	Community vision and skills may not be available for future engagement.
<b>Council-supported community committees</b>					
<b>Facility management committee – incorporated community association</b>  <i>i.e. is a citizens' committee, but not a council committee</i>	Community centres	Authority to manage asset and make decisions about it, outsourced through lease or management agreement.	Contractual arrangement for management, that includes regular council liaison e.g. for management of community centre.	Purposeful approach that puts management of assets clearly in the community's hands. Takes care of employing facility staff, IR, legal issues, finances.	Community committees may lack governance experience.  Resource constraints.  Potential isolation from council and its programs and



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	Examples	Role/decision-making power	Example of remit	Strengths	Weaknesses
though extensive council liaison and support may be involved					expertise.
Community social support	Leadership advocacy/social justice e.g. humanitarian network, lifelong learning.	Independent	May advise councils informally on the basis of experience.	Connections into community.	
Special circumstance committee	Community recovery committee in LGA	Independent	Key role supporting community, providing consistent voice to council. Extensive Council liaison and support to enable vehicle for transformation.	Connections into community, Independence.	Strengths are difficult to replicate, as crises draw out a particular community capacity and government response, which is not available in normal circumstances.
Landcare/ Friends Groups	Friends of x Creek	Independent	Maintenance and development.	Community commitment to place and environment.	

Source: Bolitho (2013) The Role and Future of Citizen Committees in Australian Local Government

## APPENDIX 3: Project Information Sheet

### Project Information Sheet

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research project **“The Challenges of Engaging Communities: Will the small rural voices be heard in a merged regional council?”** being conducted by Anton Franze. The research is for a Masters thesis under the auspices of the Centre for Local Government of the University of Technology, Sydney.

The purpose of the research is to investigate the concerns of the smaller rural communities surrounding the merger and **to develop strategies on how to engage and empower the small rural communities in the outlying villages and towns of the proposed newly merged council of Blayney Shire, Cabonne and Orange City Councils, if approved. The research when finalised will be used to inform the new council on the strategies identified to engage and empower these communities.**

Your participation will involve **an interview** that will take approximately **one (1) hours maximum** of your time.

You can contact **Anton Franze** if you have any concerns about the research. You are also free to withdraw your participation from this research project at any time without giving a reason.

**Anton Franze (mobile telephone number: 0417 671 286 or email: [antonfranze@optusnet.com.au](mailto:antonfranze@optusnet.com.au))** can answer your questions about the project.

The research data gathered from this project will be published in a form that does not identify participants in any way.

#### Note:

Studies undertaken by the Centre for Local Government and Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government have been granted program approval by the University of Technology, Sydney, Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about any aspect of your participation in this research you may contact **Anton Franze by email [antonfranze@optusnet.com.au](mailto:antonfranze@optusnet.com.au) or on telephone 0417 671 286** or the UTS Ethics Committee through the Research Ethics Officer, [tel: 02 9514-9772]. Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.

## APPENDIX 4: Consent Form

### Consent Form

I *[participant’s name]* .....

agree to participate in the research project **“The Challenges of Engaging Communities: Will the small rural voices be heard in a merged regional council?”** being conducted by **Anton Franze, a student at the University of Technology Sydney.**

I understand that the purpose of the research is **to develop strategies on how to engage and empower the small rural communities in the outlying villages and towns of the proposed newly merged council of Blayney Shire, Cabonne and Orange City Councils. The research when finalised will be used to inform the new council on the strategies identified to engage and empower these communities.**

I understand that my participation will involve **an interview that** take approximately **one (1) hours maximum** of my time.

I am aware that I can contact **Anton Franze** if I have any concerns about the research. I also understand that I am free to withdraw my participation from this research project at any time I wish without giving a reason.

I agree that **Anton Franze** has answered all my questions fully and clearly. *[Note: not suitable for mailed questionnaires]*

I agree that the research data gathered from this project will be published in a form that does not identify me in any way.

Signature ..... Date .....

#### Note:

Studies undertaken by the Centre for Local Government (CLG) and the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) have been granted program approval by the University of Technology, Sydney, Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about any aspect of your participation in this research you may contact **Anton Franze on telephone 0417 671 286 or email: antonfranze@optusnet.com.au** or the UTS Ethics Committee through the Research Ethics Officer, [tel: 02 9514 9772]. Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.

## **APPENDIX 5: Interview Questions – Town / Village Committees / Groups**

### ***“The Challenges of Engaging Communities: Will the small rural voices be heard in a merged regional council?”***

Research project by Antonio Franze for the University of Technology, Centre for Local Government.

1. How does your council engage and inform you and your group?
2. How does your council include you and your group in its governance arrangements?
3. How does your council facilitate input by you or your community into projects and allocation of resources in your locality?
4. What other forms of involvement do you or your community have with your local council?
5. How effective would you consider these?
6. How does council ensure representation?
7. How do you feel about the proposed merger?
8. With reference to the proposed merger of Blayney Shire, Cabonne and Orange City Councils, what do you consider the strengths of existing community engagement and involvement of your council?
9. With reference to the proposed merger of Blayney Shire, Cabonne and Orange City Councils, what do you consider the weaknesses of existing community engagement and involvement of your council?
10. With reference to the proposed merger of Blayney Shire, Cabonne and Orange City Councils, what do you consider the opportunities of existing community engagement and involvement of your council?
11. With reference to the proposed merger of Blayney Shire, Cabonne and Orange City Councils, what do you consider the threats of existing community engagement and involvement of your council?
12. What methods of community engagement and involvement would you recommend for a merged council?
13. Do you have anything more to add?

## **APPENDIX 6: Interview Questions - Councils**

### ***“The Challenges of Engaging Communities: Will the small rural voices be heard in a merged regional council?”***

Research project by Antonio Franze for the University of Technology, Centre for Local Government.

1. What forms of community engagement does your council undertake?
2. How do you involve the small towns and villages within your local government area in the local governance of your council?
3. How does your council ensure it advocates for the interests of small communities and ensure representation of these stakeholders?
4. If legislation, time and resources permitted, in reference to the small towns and villages in your LGA, what modes of engagement would you seek to implement?
5. In reference to the small towns and villages in your LGA, how do you empower these communities to achieve their goals and aspirations?
6. With reference to these small towns and villages in a merged council, what would you consider are the strengths of your processes of community engagement and involvement?
7. With reference to these small towns and villages in a merged council, what would you consider are the weaknesses of your processes of community engagement and involvement?
8. With reference to these small towns and villages in a merged council, what would you consider are the opportunities of your processes of community engagement and involvement?
9. With reference to these small towns and villages in a merged council, what would you consider are the threats to your processes of community engagement and involvement?
10. In a merged council how would you seek to ensure small towns and villages maintain a 'sense of community'?
11. Do you have anything more to add?

## **APPENDIX 7: Interview Questions - Focus Groups**

### **Town / Village Committees / Groups**

#### ***“The Challenges of Engaging Communities: Will the small rural voices be heard in a merged regional council?”***

Research project by Antonio Franze for the University of Technology, Centre for Local Government.

1. How does your council engage and inform you and your group?
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3. How does your council facilitate input by you or your community into projects and allocation of resources in your locality?
4. What other forms of involvement do you or your community have with your local council?
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7. How do you feel about the proposed merger?
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13. Do you have anything more to add?