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JOINT ORGANISATION

Members: Gwydir Shire Council, Gunnedah Shire Council, Liverpool Plains Shire Council, Moree Plains Shire Council, Narrabri Shire Council, Tamworth Regional Council and Walcha Shire Council

Associate Member: Uralla Shire Council

Working together to increase the sustainability and effectiveness of Local Government

Chairperson of the Namoi Councils Joint Organisation Evidence to NSW Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No 6 Inquiry into NSW Local Government Reform

To the Chair and Members of the General Purpose Standing Committee No 6 Inquiry into Local Government in NSW, may I thank you for the invitation and opportunity to be give evidence to this Inquiry.

I give evidence in my capacity as Chairperson of Namoi Councils, which has operated as a voluntary regional organisation of councils in the north-west NSW for many years and up until December 2014.

During that time, Namoi Councils' members have developed a strong record of jointly collaborating on regional issues for the mutual advantage of their region and their communities

Since January 2015, Namoi Councils has operated as a Pilot Joint Organisation following selection by the Minister for Local Government as one of 5 Pilot Joint Organisation across NSW to work in partnership with, and assist, the NSW Government in the co-design of a robust and flexible model for a Regional Joint Organisation.

As you would be aware, Namoi Councils Joint Organisation lodged a formal written submission to the Inquiry. The key theme of the submission is support for the establishment of Regional Joint Organisations as a key part of the overall NSW Local Government Reform Program.

Namoi Councils Pilot Joint Organisation comprises as members, Gwydir Shire Council, Gunnedah Shire Council, Liverpool Plains Shire Council, Moree Plains Shire Council, Narrabri Shire Council, Tamworth Regional Council and Walcha Council.

Uralla Shire Council is currently an associate member.

Member Councils members are excited and enthusiastic at the mutual benefits which will be delivered to their communities by becoming a positive partner working with the NSW Government to achieve sustainable local government reform in NSW.

In the context of Inquiry Terms of Reference (I), Namoi Councils strongly support cooperative models which have proven to be very effective in a number of situations in the past, and across a number of jurisdictions.

The Namoi Councils support the overall intent of "*Fit for the Future*". While there are still strong areas of concern relating to several of the benchmarks and measures adopted, member Councils agree that the process has resulted in a serious and careful review of operations and procedures by member Councils.

That being said, concerns remain regarding the role of amalgamations, and, in particular, the justification for amalgamation. However, the recommendations for the role of JOs in achieving appropriate scale and capacity where this is appropriate in terms of optimising resources across the member Councils.

Namoi Councils is confident that the JO model provides appropriately for enhancing economic efficiency and strategic capacity in a way that amalgamations cannot. In particular, it means that the natural scale economy of any service can be optimised – whether that is across one council, two Councils or the entire JO membership.

May I identify the defining features of Namoi Councils and perhaps the reasons for its selection as a Pilot JO:

- There is an existing strong history of effective collaboration between member Councils and an equally strong commitment to pursuing the Joint Organisation model for even more effective representation of the region.
- The Namoi Councils is comprised of a unified group of Councils with a diversity of regional contexts. Member Councils have a divergence of social and commercial drivers, from coal to food production, but share common priorities for sound infrastructure investment, asset management and good strategic landuse planning.
- Namoi Councils have a strong, innovative leadership with an existing professional skills base to deliver a sophisticated Joint Organisation model.
- Namoi JO member Councils are already working together on identifying strategic priorities for the region. The pilot Joint Organisation has provided a

vehicle for developing concepts of Joint Organisation structure, greater use of community strategic planning in relation to achieving regional priorities and goals, and more effective engagement and collaboration with NSW Government Departments and Agencies.

- Namoi Councils has the capacity and commitment to pick up and run with the *Fit for the Future* reforms and deliver better government within the region and in NSW.

Joint Organisations offer the following benefits to member Councils:

- (i) Structure and governance which is flexible and equitable to all members.
- (ii) Efficient and lean resourcing for the Joint Organisation which is able to flex up and flex down using the internal resources available to each member rather than committing to a model with recurrent administration costs.
- (iii) Coordinated and professional advocacy of regional issues through a unified regional voice.
- (iv) Mechanisms for improving engagement with State Government agencies with a regional focus.
- (v) Developing astute and thoughtful strategies for both planning and delivering regional infrastructure assets in a way which delivers a legacy, not a liability, for future generations in the region.
- (vi) A commitment to **NOT** building a 4th Tier of Government and **NOT** creating another level of bureaucracy.
- (vii) Developing performance measures for the effectiveness of regional strategic planning and prioritisation, regional leadership and advocacy, and interagency engagement.

The challenges remaining for building an effective and practical Joint Organisation Model include:

- JO Enabling legislation with legal, governance, management and operational efficacy
- JO State Government policy framework
- Legislation to embed a direct nexus between the State Plan and Regional Strategic Plans
- JO legitimacy for key partnership role played in regional strategic planning
- Coordination of State Agency collaboration with Joint Organisations

- Department of Premier & Cabinet as State/JO coordinator with regulatory back-up
- JO serving the best interests of member Councils
- JO collaboration to assist member Councils remain sustainable and "*Fit for the Future*"
- JO role, if any, in proposals for the merger of member Councils.

Going forward, Namoi Councils offer a mature capacity for an effective and productive strategic collaborative approach to regional social and economic development under the structure of a Joint Organisation proposed as a key part of the *Fit for the Future* Local Government Reform Package.

That concludes my evidence and thank you for the opportunity to make the views of the Namoi Councils Joint Organisation known to the Inquiry.

Cr Col Murray
Chairperson
NAMOI COUNCILS JO

18 August 2015.