

# Rural Advocacy Strategy

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## **Council Plan:**

*Our Vision: A sustainable Council for a liveable community: A shared journey.*

*Our Mission: Our mission is to provide a supportive and positive environment enabling the people of Buloke to work to achieve satisfying and productive lives.*

*Strategic Objective 5: Influencing governments to improve liveability for rural communities.*

## **Actions:**

- *Develop “minimum service levels” for rural residents for advocacy with Victorian and Commonwealth Governments.*
- *Utilise collective advocacy in a range of media fora and platforms.*

## **Introduction:**

In the recent past, the Buloke Shire Council provided services to its residents that were in excess of the financial capacity of the organisation. This led to a situation whereby the Council became financially unsustainable. In order to address this issue Council has had to reduce the level of services provided to residents to ensure that it can continue to serve its community.

A hard lesson that has been learned during this period of time is that the level of services that can be provided to rural residents is considerably less than those that can be provided to residents in more densely settled areas. This is especially inequitable for residents in large shires with small populations. The lack of availability of these services results primarily from the much higher costs arising for their provision given a range of factors including:

- Lack of economies of scale
- Large distances and time required to deliver services.
- More people with lower incomes and other socio-economic factors.
- A higher proportion of aged people in the population.
- Lack of competition from service providers and suppliers.
- Difficulties in the recruitment of staff and skilled contractors.
- Frequent market failure resulting in premium prices for goods and services.

In revising its Council Plan, the Buloke Shire has taken this difficulty into account and set the above actions to influence governments to improve liveability for rural communities. In order to implement these actions the Council need to address the actions in a co-ordinated strategic manner by developing its Rural Advocacy Strategy.

## **Strategy:**

The strategy to be adopted includes:

- engaging with other municipalities and agencies to advocate on equitable services, and

- mobilising the community to participate in advocacy issues.

It is important that this is done in a measured way with adequate preparation and without simply raising community expectations and then dashing them. Consequently there need to be 2 sets of actions.

Other municipalities and agencies that need to be engaged with are:

- ✓ Rural Councils Victoria (RCV),
- ✓ Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV),
- ✓ Loddon Campaspe Councils,
- ✓ North West Municipalities Association (NWMA),
- ✓ Local Government Victoria (LGV)(Nick Foa),
- ✓ Loddon Mallee Regional Management Forum (RMF),
- ✓ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (includes Local Government and Environment; Adam Fennessy),
- ✓ Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources (includes Agriculture and Regional Development; Richard Bolt),
- ✓ Department of Treasury and Finance (includes Roads; David Martine),
- ✓ Regional Development Australia,
- ✓ Minister for Local Gov (Natalie Hutchins),
- ✓ Minister for Regional Development (Jaala Pulford).
- ✓ Local members of the Victorian Parliament.
- ✓ Local members of the Commonwealth Parliament.
- ✓ Federal Ministers, e.g. Health, Local Government.

The Buloke Community Engagement Strategy includes methods to involve and collaborate with the community in implementing an advocacy strategy such as this. These include using the Community Forums and other community stakeholder groups to involve the community in the issue and then collaborate on advocating for the desired outcome. This would include discussion of Council's actions and working with the community to plan joint action. It could also include the setting up of a working group to co-ordinate Council and community action.

Action could include articles in local and metropolitan media, a media campaign, working group activities, lobbying of Rural Councils Victoria, MAV, Victorian Government and Commonwealth Government. Undertaking this strategy will cost less than \$10,000.

Community stakeholder groups include the Community Forums, sporting groups, senior citizen organisations and Probis groups, progress associations and businesses.

**Objective:**

A key objective to be sought by this Strategy is to influence a change in funding policies by the Victorian and Commonwealth Governments to provide a more equitable distribution of grant funding structured to enable the sustainable provision of minimum local government service levels to rural Victorians.

**Message:**

The success of this campaign will be highly dependent on developing a powerful message and selling it consistently over the remainder of the Council term. The message is set out on the attached “Minimum Local Government Service Levels for Victorians”.

**Discussion:**

Small rural shires have major barriers to their capacity to provide basic services to their residents. These include the factors listed in the introduction to this Strategy as well as small population sizes and a consequent lack of capacity to pay for services. A number of reports have demonstrated this in the past and local government has responded positively by focussing on improving efficiencies, sharing services, innovative service provision and enhanced management. A great deal of progress has been made, and continues to be made, with many of these shires reaching high levels of efficiency but the problem remains.

There comes a time when it becomes apparent the residents of these shires have been left with inferior services and poor community outcomes and liveability. The residents of these shires make a considerable contribution to the nation’s GDP, as well as paying rates, income tax and GST the same as their metropolitan colleagues but do not receive the minimum level of services. This is clearly inequitable.

This situation reflects poorly on the Victorian Local Government Sector, as the small rural municipalities created at amalgamation are not financially sustainable under the current funding models if they are to deliver a reasonable standard services to their constituents.

The Local Government Act requires councils to “work in partnership with the Governments of Victoria and Australia” in order to “.. achieve the best outcomes for the local community” and to “.. improve the overall quality of life of the people in the municipal district.” This responsibility is not being met by these partners under the current fiscal arrangements.

The Whelan report into Local Government financial sustainability in 2010 found that “A permanent, adequate, annual operating entitlement” was required to enable eighteen small rural councils in Victoria to remain financially viable (*page 18, abridged report*). This report proposed a recurrent annual payment to these councils of \$27 mill, with Buloke’s “entitlement” being \$1.98 mill.

The Victorian Auditor-General’s Report of June 2013 on the “Organisational Sustainability of Small Councils” noted the increasing reliance of small shires on government grants. It also noted that “own-source revenue”, e.g. rates and charges, continued to decrease in proportion to the overall budgets of the small councils concerned (*page viii, Findings*). This trend is further evidence of the continued deterioration of the financial sustainability of small rural councils.

The provision of Financial Assistance Grants under the current structural arrangements, even when these are not frozen, is not sufficient to address the disadvantage faced by small rural shires so that the minimum level of services can be provided by sustainable councils.

What this advocacy strategy seeks to do is not to suggest the changes and solutions that might remedy the problem but to seek agreement to the concept that all Victorians, including the

residents of small rural shires, are worthy of a specific minimum set of service levels. It is not until agreement on this can be reached that the methods of achieving this outcome can be formulated.

**Action Plan:**

Suggested work plan as follows:

1. Strategy to Briefing on 4 February and then to Council on 11 February.
2. Develop media campaign in conjunction with this action plan.
3. "Minimum Local Government Service Levels for Victorians" document to RCV, MAV, RMF , NWMA, Loddon Campaspe Councils and LGV as follows:
  - a. Mayor and CEO to present "Minimum Local Government Service Levels for Victorians" to Loddon Campaspe Councils at meeting featuring Sustainability of local government on 2 Feb.
  - b. CEO to present "Minimum Local Government Service Levels for Victorians" to Wimmera Mallee CEOs at their meeting on 12 February.
  - c. Councillors and CEO to present "Minimum Local Government Service Levels for Victorians" to MAV at the meeting on 18 February.
  - d. Mayor and Acting CEO to present "Minimum Local Government Service Levels for Victorians" to NWMA on 27 February.
  - e. Mayor and CEO to present "Minimum Local Government Service Levels for Victorians" to RCV at its meeting of 13 March.
  - f. CEO to present "Minimum Local Government Service Levels for Victorians" to RMF at its meeting in March.
  - g. Mayor and CEO to present "Minimum Local Government Service Levels for Victorians" to Nick Foa at a meeting in Melbourne in March.
4. Hold Community Forum Summit in February/March to discuss Council Plan and "Minimum Local Government Service Levels for Victorians".
5. CEO and Mayor to attend sporting groups, senior citizen organisations and Probus groups, progress associations and business groups over remainder of year commencing in March/April.
6. Letters to Regional Development Australia, Adam Fennessy, Richard Bolt and David Martine in April signed by the Mayor, with follow up phone calls to each from the CEO.
7. Contact small rural municipalities to assess interest and possible actions.
8. Invite local members of Parliament to briefing sessions to discuss the issue with Councillors over the 2015 calendar year.
9. Set up community working group in May and develop an action plan.
10. Develop a RCV working group to take issue to Commonwealth Government.
11. Mayor and CEO to meet with the Victorian Minister for Local Government in Melbourne in July 2015.
12. Mayor and CEO to accompany RCV delegation to meet with the Commonwealth Minister for Local Government in Canberra in September.

# Minimum Local Government Service Levels for Victorians

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All Victorians should have access to levels of service that enable liveability and safety. Victorians pay income tax, GST and rates and are entitled to a level of reciprocity in the service levels they receive.

The services set out in this document detail a minimum set to be provided by local government for their communities. Most communities will have levels in excess of these but none should fall below them.

- A responsive and effective municipal council.
- All weather access roads to all inhabited residences.
- A road network that meets the needs of local industry.
- Kerbside waste and recycling services for all townships over 50 people
- Urban drainage systems to cope with a minimum 20 year rainfall event
- Footpaths to safety standards in the central business, hospital and school areas
- Access to public facilities including
  - o Recreation Reserve
  - o Functional Meeting Space
  - o Park and playground
  - o Public toilet
  - o Swimming pool
- Immunisation for children on a monthly basis
- Local statutory and strategic planning services
- Environmental health enforcement
- Enforcement of Local Laws and building regulations
- School crossing supervision on major roads
- Community planning on a community (town) basis
- One hour of HACC services every 2 weeks for eligible clients, e.g. domestic assistance, personal care or respite care.
- Weekly access to library books and services within a 50 km distance.
- Maternal and Child Health Services in in all towns over 500 people.
- Access to an annual youth event.
- Transport to essential appointments for frail aged people.
- Meals on Wheels
- Child care and kindergarten services in all towns over 500 people.
- Municipal emergency services
- Access to business development information and support.

Small rural shires have major barriers to their capacity to provide basic services to their residents. These include:

- Lack of economies of scale
- Large distances and time required to deliver services.
- More people with lower incomes and other socio-economic factors.
- A higher proportion of aged people in the population.
- Lack of competition from service providers and suppliers.
- Difficulties in the recruitment of staff and skilled contractors.
- Frequent market failure resulting in premium prices for goods and services.
- Small population sizes and a consequent lack of capacity to pay for services.

To address these issues, local government has focussed positively on improving efficiencies, sharing services, innovative service provision and enhanced management. A great deal of progress has been made, and continues to be made, with many of these shires reaching high levels of efficiency but the lack of sustainability of small rural shires remains.

Despite these efforts it is apparent the residents of these shires have inferior services and poor community outcomes and liveability. The residents of these shires make a considerable contribution to the nation's GDP, as well as paying rates and taxes, the same as their metropolitan colleagues, but do not receive the minimum level of services. This is clearly inequitable.

The Local Government Act requires councils to "work in partnership with the Governments of Victoria and Australia" in order to "... achieve the best outcomes for the local community" and to "... improve the overall quality of life of the people in the municipal district." This responsibility is not being met by these partners under the current fiscal arrangements.

The provision of Financial Assistance Grants under the current structural arrangements is not sufficient to address the disadvantage faced by small rural shires so that the minimum level of services can be provided if the shires are to remain sustainable.

What this document seeks to do is not to suggest the changes and solutions that might remedy the problem but to seek agreement to the concept that all Victorians, including the residents of small rural shires, are worthy of a specific minimum set of service levels. It is not until agreement on this can be reached that the methods of achieving this outcome can be formulated.