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Sydney metropolitan area
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Local Government Review Panel,

Thank you for opportunity to provide input to [this review](#).

I am pleased to see that the panel's [proposed future directions](#) are motivated by a holistic approach. In examining the whole system of local government and focussing on **long-term strategic capability** we may build a system of government that can support rapid but **sustainable change** as residents and institutions face compounding challenges in the future.

Amalgamating large council areas into even larger mega-councils or counties **runs counter to this fundamental goal**. While a case may be made for merging lower-population, economically struggling rural councils, the arguments in favour of expanding councils to achieve a population and economic capacity to be useful evaporate as council sizes reach into the hundreds of thousands of residents. Instead, the impersonality, resistance to change, structural ossification, temptation to corruption and tendency towards irrelevance over time that characterise all large concentrations of power will **undermine sustainability and impede necessary change**.

As most of the [Sydney metro councils](#) and many metropolitan residents have asserted in submissions to this review, moderately sized councils are demonstrably more effective than mega-councils in councils' single most important charter: **local government**. The Future Directions report holds that there is "no evidence that loss of local identity is an *inevitable consequence* of creating larger local government areas" (your italics); it is, however, an overwhelmingly *likely* consequence. The report then outlines a range of **extra special efforts** that must be made to retain local relevance in amalgamated government areas, including a need for an **additional institution** of local boards. These extra efforts and overhead are a poor substitute for having appropriately sized councils that can keep the "local" in local government with no additional effort.

A number of moderately sized councils forms a **more robust** system of local government than a few mega-councils. As more and more power is concentrated into fewer hands, the **temptations to and payoff for pursuing self-interest increase**, as does the scope of damage when it occurs. A larger council is also a more attractive target for subversion and corruption by third parties, including industry groups and property developers. As the payoff for corruption, both internal and external, increases, residents, councils and the state government **will pay more and more** in damage, for additional

checks and red tape, and in lost opportunities. A larger number of **moderately sized councils reduces the temptations** to pursue self interest at communities' expense. When subversion inevitably does occur, the scope of damage is **naturally limited**.

In complement to higher robustness, a government of smaller councils is also better able to innovate, experiment, learn and apply world-leading governance. Smaller institutions incur less structural and communication overhead when implementing change. New approaches may be **tried more rapidly**, benefits shared swiftly, and mistakes remedied with lower cost. Encouraging **experimentation is crucial to innovation**. Experimentation necessarily carries with it a risk of being wrong, but when councils are smaller the mistakes will be smaller and thus experimentation less heavily penalised. On the other hand, a collaborating network of councils will suffer little delay in implementing the results of a successful experiment by one of their number, and will be better positioned to adjust innovative policy to the particular circumstances of their residents.

Genuine co-operation between moderately sized councils need not be difficult. Collaboration is frustrated by conflicting self-interest, but these **competing interests grow with institution size**. Overhead increases as power is concentrated. **Distributing authority and responsibility widely is a critical property of robust, sustainable systems of all types**.

I once again applaud the review panel and its Future Directions paper for undertaking an overarching goal of building a **sustainable system of local government**, robust, locally effective, and embracing of innovation and change. Amalgamating metropolitan councils does not serve this goal. Concentrating power and bureaucracy into few mega-councils will **undermine the local effectiveness** of government, **increase the risks** and costs of selfish parties both within and outside government, and **reduce councils' ability and incentives to innovate** and change.

Sincerely
Alex North