

PROMOTING BETTER PRACTICE PROGRAM

REVIEW REPORT

WALCHA COUNCIL

February 2015



Office of
Local Government

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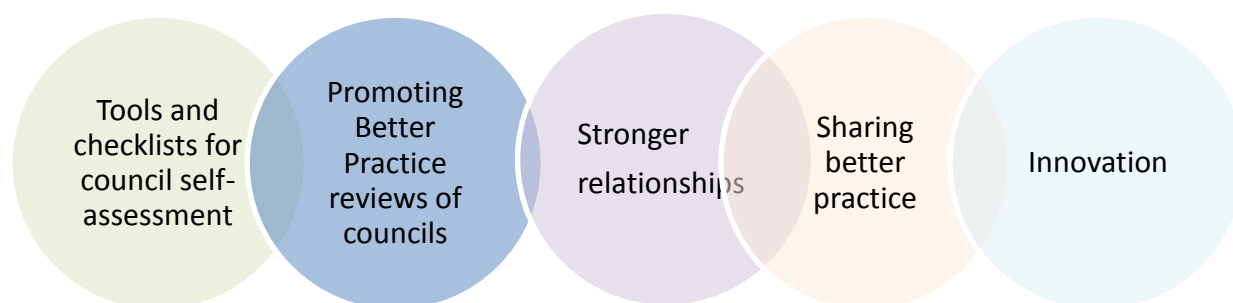
1 PROMOTING BETTER PRACTICE

The Program

By promoting better practice, the Office of Local Government aims to assist in strengthening the local government sector by assessing performance and promoting continuous improvement.

The Program includes:

- working with councils to identify, share and promote better practice in key areas
- working cooperatively with councils to promote strong relationships within the sector.
- providing councils with feedback on areas requiring improvement or further development, and assisting them in developing solutions.
- identifying trends and issues arising from council reviews to support policy and legislative changes for the local government sector.
- encouraging and facilitating innovation within the NSW local government sector.



Promoting Better Practice reviews

Reviews of individual councils are designed to act as a ‘health check’ to examine the extent to which there are appropriate strategies, policies, systems and procedures in place at the strategic and operational levels.

The reviews are conducted by a team from the Office of Local Government in collaboration with councils. During a visit to council key strategic areas are examined together. A key outcome is a report which reflects the findings of the review but most importantly contains a Review Action Plan with strategies to facilitate better practice and increase council’s overall capacity to deliver appropriate services to its community.

Key strategic areas considered

Leadership and governance examines how the elected body and the council organisation provide leadership within the local community. It considers all the means by which a council is directed and controlled to ensure effective decision making and ensure the organisation is meeting its legal and ethical obligations. Council's regulatory and enforcement framework is also considered.



Councils work with their communities to prepare a community strategic plan which covers a minimum of 10 years and forms the foundation of its service delivery. The focus is on how well council engages its community in planning, and how well the Community Strategic Plan; Delivery Program, and Operational Plan capture the community's aspirations and goals. The extent to which strategic land-use planning matters are integrated into the council's implementation of the Integrated Planning and Reporting framework are also considered here.

Capacity to deliver considers the current and future financial capability of a council to sustain its operations and deliver appropriate services to the community as set out in the Community Strategic Plan, the Delivery Program and Operational Plan. The quality and utility of the council's long-term financial planning, asset management, and workforce planning is a key part of this assessment.

Services to the community relates to how the facilities and services in council's Community Strategic Plan, Delivery Program and Operations Plan have been translated into action. This includes looking at how the council informs the community of its performance in delivering services and facilities according to Plan, and how it measures customer satisfaction or receives community feedback to inform ongoing planning.

The review process

The review team consisted of Caroline Egberts, Principal Program Officer, Ross Bailey, Senior Program Officer and Erika Missingham, Program Officer.



2 ABOUT WALCHA SHIRE

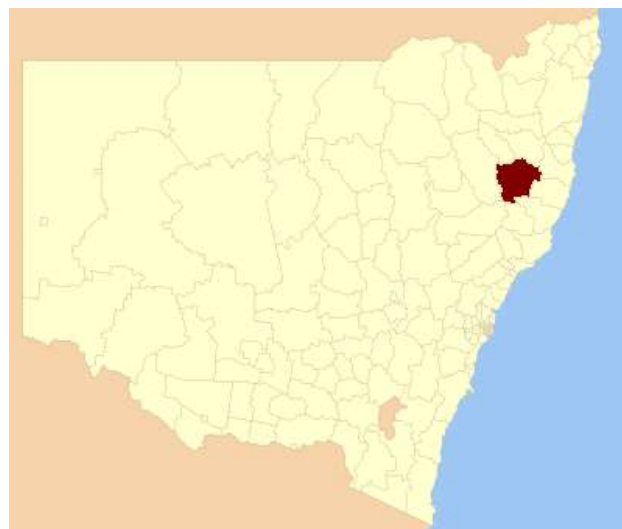
The Walcha Council lies between the intersecting traditional lands of the Anaiwan (Nganyaywana), Birpai and Dunghutti people. The Anaiwan and Dangaddii people have lived in the Walcha region for about 6,000 years.

Situated 420km from Sydney, the Shire is home to the Macleay Gorges and boasts some 205,000 hectares of dedicated National Parks, wilderness and State forests. Parts of the Werrikimbe National Park are World Heritage listed.

The Walcha local government area covers an area of 6,267 km², and is a significant primary producing area. It is one of the largest stock carrying areas in Australia. Other industries and produce include:

- production of high quality native hardwoods
- increasing softwood production
- fine wool growing
- trout fishing, boasting some 1,500 km of trout streams.

More information about the Walcha Council is presented on the next two pages.



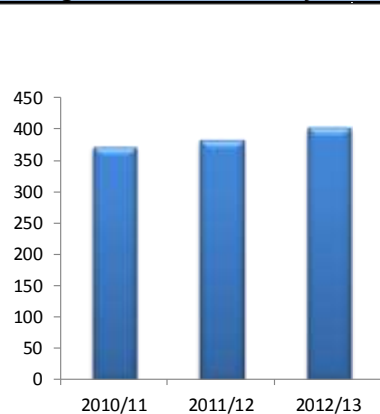
Walcha Council



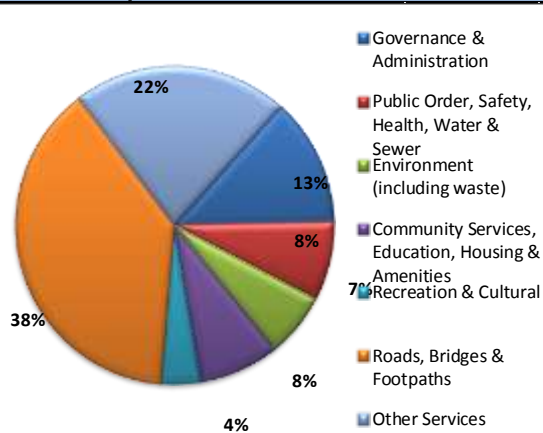
Walcha Shire has an area of approximately 6,266.9 km² with a population of 3,088. Located in the New England region, its major industries are agriculture in the production of livestock, wool and timber. It is home to the Macleay Gorges, National Parks, wilderness and state forest. The Shire is also known for its trout fishing with 1,500kms of trout streams.

| Your Local Population | | | Your Council | | |
|---|---------------------------------|-----------|--|--------|-----------|
| | LGA | Group Avg | | LGA | Group Avg |
| Five year population change (%) | -3.8 | -0.9 | Councillors (No.) | 8 | 8 |
| Population aged 19 or less (%) | 23.5 | 26.0 | Population per Councillor (No.) | 386 | 413 |
| Population aged between 20 & 59 (%) | 46.5 | 48.3 | Equivalent Full Time Staff (EFT) (No.) | 67 | 70 |
| Population aged above 60 (%) | 29.9 | 25.7 | 2012/13 Revenue (\$'000) | 11,466 | 15,538 |
| Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders (%) | 7.4 | 9.9 | 2012/13 Expenses (\$'000) | 13,548 | 14,307 |
| Language Spoken Other than English (%) | 1.9 | 2.3 | Residential Pensioner Rebates (%) | 27 | 24 |
| Socio-Economic Index Rank (1 low, 152 high) | 84 | n/a | Population Density (residents per km ²) | 0.49 | 0.72 |
| Your Local Economy | | | Your Public Facilities | | |
| | LGA | Group Avg | | LGA | Group Avg |
| SALM Unemployment Rate (%) | 3.8 | 5.0 | Public Swimming Pool Complexes (incl rock pools) (No.) | 1 | 2 |
| Avg Taxable Income (\$) | 31,741 | 35,220 | Public Halls (No.) | 0 | 5 |
| Avg Household Family Size (No.) | 2.9 | 3.0 | Public Libraries (No.) | 1 | 1 |
| Largest Industry Employer | Agriculture, forestry & fishing | | Open Public Space (ha) | 32 | 79 |
| Value of DAs determined (\$'000) | 2,547 | 5,873 | Total Road Length (km) | 918.5 | 1325.9 |
| Active Businesses in LGA (No.) | 664 | 457 | Access to Internet at Home (%) | 61.7 | 58.8 |

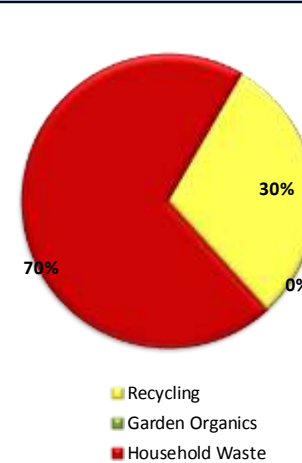
Average Residential Ordinary Rates



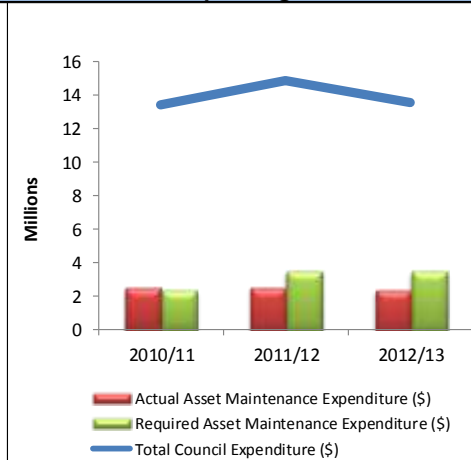
Expenditure on Services



Council's Waste Services



Council's Spending on Assets



In 2013 TCorp assessed your Council's current Financial Sustainability Rating as Weak with a Negative outlook.

In 2013 the Infrastructure Audit assessed Council's infrastructure management to be Distressed.

Promoting Better Practice Review Report – Walcha Council

| Contacting Council | Your Council's Finances | LGA | Group Avg | Your Council's Services | LGA | Group Avg |
|---|---|----------|---|---|----------|-----------|
| 2 Hamilton Street Walcha NSW 2354 Postal Address: PO Box 2, Walcha NSW 2354 Phone: 02 6774 2500 Fax: 02 6777 1181 Email: council@walcha.nsw.gov.au Web: www.walcha.nsw.gov.au | Avg Ordinary Residential Rate (\$) | 401.33 | 357.70 | Governance & Administration Expenditure per capita (\$) | 568.01 | 752.29 |
| | Avg Ordinary Business Rate (\$) | 666.67 | 693.86 | Environmental Expenditure (including waste) per capita | 284.97 | 237.56 |
| | Avg Ordinary Farmland Rate (\$) | 3,266.84 | 2,408.48 | Water & Sewer Services Expenditure per capita (\$) | 301.17 | 486.17 |
| | Avg Ordinary Mining Rate (\$) | 333.33 | 29,660.61 | Community Services, Education, Housing, Amenities Expenditure per capita (\$) | 356.87 | 362.69 |
| | Total Land Value / Total Rate Revenue (\$) | 309.86 | 185.51 | Recreational & Culture Expenditure per capita (\$) * | 178.11 | 301.24 |
| | Typical Residential Water and Sewer Bill (including usage) (\$) | 845 | 1,094 | Public Order, Safety & Health Expenditure per capita (\$) | 46.96 | 164.77 |
| | Avg Domestic Waste Charge (\$) | 304.88 | 234.55 | Other Services Expenditure per capita (\$) | 965.67 | 863.71 |
| | Own Source Revenue (%) (TCorp Benchmark 60%) | 62 | 44 | Library Services Expenditure per capita (\$) | 41.13 | 52.38 |
| | Grants & Contributions Revenue (%) | 34 | 49 | Library Circulation per capita (Items) | 3 | 5 |
| | Operating Performance Ratio (%) (TCorp Benchmark >-4.0%) | -26.1 | -7.6 | Domestic waste not going to land fill (%) | 47 | 25 |
| Unrestricted Current Ratio | 2.8 | 4.9 | Development Applications (mean gross days) | 31 | 35 | |
| Outstanding Rates & Annual Charges (%) | 7.7 | 10.5 | Development Applications determined (No.) | 37 | 37 | |
| Debt Service Cover Ratio (TCorp Benchmark >2.0) | 29.0 | 43.3 | Companion Animals microchipped (No.) | 1,185 | 1,429 | |
| Cash Expense Cover Ratio (Mths) (TCorp Benchmark > 3 mths) | 4.0 | 8.9 | Companion Animals microchipped and registered (%) | 38 | 50 | |
| Demographics of Population of LGA | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Your Council's Community Leadership | | | | Your Council's Assets | | |
| Development Applications determined by Councillors (%) | | 8 | 9 | Roads, Bridges and Footpath expenditure per capita (\$) | 1,685.56 | 1,375.16 |
| Audited Financial Reports submitted by due date (Y/N) | | Y | n/a | Building & Infrastructure Renewal Ratio (%) | 43.7 | 101.4 |
| Code of Conduct Complaints (No.) | | 0 | 0 | Infrastructure Backlog Ratio (%) (TCorp Benchmark <20%) | 10.4 | 7.5 |
| Complaints investigated requiring action (No.) | | 0 | 0 | Road Length per '000 capita (metre) | 297.4 | 433.7 |
| Cost of dealing with Code of Conduct Complaints (\$) | | 0 | 1,074 | Asset Maintenance Ratio (TCorp Benchmark >1.0) | 0.7 | 0.9 |
| Population per EFT Staff (No.) | | 46 | 50 | Comparative Information on NSW Local Government | | |
| See Appendix 1 for definitions, calculations & benchmarks See Appendix 3 for Council Groups | | | | Measuring Local Government Performance 2012-13 | | |

3 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Promoting Better Practice Review of Walcha Council took place in May 2014.

Leadership and governance

- Governance structures, systems, policies and processes appear satisfactory to meet most current circumstances. High risk areas that require attention include the need for more regular meetings of the leadership team, the development of a business continuity plan and introducing an internal audit program which extends to Council's procurement activities.
- Programs and procedures for enforcing or ensuring compliance with laws to protect the community and the environment appear satisfactory.

Planning for the future

- Most requirements relating to planning and delivering services to its community in an integrated manner have been met. The Community Strategic Plan is well set out and easy to read.
- A range of enhancements have been suggested to improve the Community Strategic Plan, Community Engagement Strategy and the Delivery Program 2013-2017 (which includes the Operational Plan 2013/14).

Capacity to deliver

- The TCorp Financial Assessment, Sustainability and Benchmark Report stated that Council is in a weak financial position. Based on its current Long-Term Financial Plan this position is likely to deteriorate in the future.
- Council has recorded deficits before capital grants and contributions over the last five financial years (to 30 June 2013), and its current Long-Term Financial Plan is forecasting deficits for each of the next ten years. This places Council in a distressed financial position and puts its ongoing sustainability in question.
- Council advised that it was in the process of reviewing its finances. The impetus for this review was the discovery that its annual depreciation charge appears to have been overstated in previous years. Council expects depreciation will reduce by approximately \$1.5 million. Moving forward, Council should review its Asset Management Plans and

Long-Term Financial Plan with a view to including strategies to strengthen its ongoing sustainability.

Services to the community

- Council's work to cultivate the town of Walcha as an *Open Air Gallery* of sculptures, artworks and creative street furniture make the town distinctive and attractive. This is considered to be an example of better practice for a small community.

4 LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE



Councils are best placed to provide civic leadership locally. Good governance means having effective and efficient structures, systems, policies and processes in place that support decision-making to ensure Council is achieving its strategic and operational objectives, and thereby promoting community confidence in Council.

Good governance is:

- accountable
- transparent
- consistent with relevant legislation
- responsive
- equitable and inclusive
- effective and efficient
- participatory¹.

Walcha Council's Governance

Council's governance structures, systems, policies and processes appear satisfactory to meet most current circumstances. A number of areas which potentially expose Council to significant risk have been identified and are discussed later.

Issues and challenges

New England Strategic Alliance of Councils (NESAC)

- Over the last ten years Council advises that it has been focussed on external pressures such as potential amalgamation and Council's role in NESAC, which was formed in 2004. Armidale-Dumaresq, Guyra, Uralla and Walcha councils, as well as the New England Weeds County Council, formed the alliance in an effort to avoid a perceived forced amalgamation by the NSW Government.
- The model for the Alliance was based on extensive business process reviews, benchmarking and continuous improvement programs, which rested on a joint information technology and connectivity platform and shared service arrangements over nineteen different operational areas.

¹ *Good Governance Guide – Helping Local Governments Govern Better, Local Government Professionals (Vic); Victorian Local Government Association; Municipal Association of Victoria; Department of Planning and Infrastructure Victoria;*

- Walcha Council withdrew from the Alliance in February 2009. Uralla Shire Council resolved to withdraw from NESAC in late August 2009. While Guyra Shire Council and Armidale Dumaresq Council continue to work together, the Alliance at that time ceased to operate as originally contemplated.
- A review of NESAC in 2009 found that the reasons for the failure of the Alliance were complex and interrelated, and included a flawed structure, the lack of a sound governance framework, the failure to make ongoing use of project management methodologies, and “ultimately, a loss of common will to make the Alliance a success.”²
- A further independent review of the delivery of local government services provided by each of the former participating NESAC councils was undertaken in 2010. Walcha Council expressed its strong desire to remain an autonomous entity. It argued that Walcha is a distinct community of interest in its own right, satisfying the majority of its social, cultural, educational, recreational and economic needs from within the Shire area. The review supported Walcha Council’s claims of a unique community of interest and was not included in its recommendation that the existing areas of Armidale Dumaresq, Guyra Shire and Uralla Shire Councils should be amalgamated.

Although some time has passed since Walcha Council withdrew from the Alliance in February 2009, Council reports the experience continues to have a lasting impact on the community. It also impacted on Council’s operations. For example, the General Manager’s involvement in NESAC matters was very time consuming. Even Council’s exit from NESAC has meant that a number of functions managed by the Alliance (such as business continuity and internal audit) have returned to Council.

Forging a relationship with Tamworth Regional Council

- Council has described that it has historical ties and significant service links to Tamworth including library, hospital and police services.
- Over time the Walcha and Tamworth Regional Councils have developed a positive working relationship and have completed significant joint projects such as the construction of the Woolbrook Bridge. The bridge services communities along their joint boundaries.

² *DLG Review of New England Strategic Alliance of Councils – December 2009, p.3*

- Both Councils are currently exploring and negotiating minor re-alignments of their adjoining boundaries in order to rectify anomalies around communities of interest.

Key Strengths

- Councillors expressed that a key strength is how Council engages in a transparent, and participatory way with the Walcha community to understand and advocate on its behalf. Key examples they cited included responding to perceived amalgamation threats, participation in NESAC and lobbying to retain key services in Walcha.
- The Walcha community has articulated a clear and simple Vision Statement: *To be a vibrant, welcoming and resilient community that supports our citizens, businesses, industries and environments.* The Vision appears to guide the aspirations, strategies and activities in the Community Strategic Plan and Delivery Program.
- The Council meeting attended by the review team was well-chaired by the Mayor. The proceedings were orderly and easy to follow.
- The review team met with the majority of councillors, who appeared to understand their role in general terms and believed that mobilising against external threats had forged strong links with the community and developed a cohesive organisational culture.

Opportunities/Areas for development

- Building upon current good meeting practice, the Office of Local Government will provide the Mayor and General Manager with information to help ensure all meeting procedure is in accordance with the *Local Government Act 1993* and *the Local Government (General) Regulation 2006*.
- Undertaking an audit of councillors' skills and tailoring training for councillors individually and as a group is suggested as an effective way of enhancing the knowledge and skills of the elected body.
- More regular meetings of the leadership team are suggested to facilitate effective management of major Council projects and implementation of the Delivery Program and Operational Plan. Relevant decisions should be communicated to staff after each meeting.
- All organisations have values that can be seen in the way they do their work and the conduct of their staff whether they are documented or not. Walcha Council has not documented its organisational values. The Independent Commission Against

Corruption recommends that: *‘For public sector employees to know whether their decisions and behaviour are in the public interest they need a set of written guiding values’*. The values should focus on two essential concepts: impartiality and public accountability. Many agencies also endorse other values, such as respect, excellence and consumer service that support the particular work that they do.

- Business continuity and internal audit are key examples of functions that NESAC was coordinating but which have now returned to Council. To complement and strengthen the impact of Council’s Risk Management Plan, the following actions are viewed as a priority:
 - Development of a business continuity plan to enable Council’s internal and external services to recover from a range of disasters in a matter of hours.
 - Development of an internal audit program to provide a systematic and proactive assessment of the effectiveness and reliability of Council’s internal controls and processes. This will help Council to achieve its desired outcomes, and to comply with legislation as well as its own internal policies and procedures.
 - All aspects of Council’s procurement, disposal and tendering policies/procedures should be reviewed and strengthened as part of the proposed internal audit program.
- Support of Council’s committees could be enhanced by providing them with a copy of the Code of Conduct, information about relevant procedures, and by exploring and pursuing opportunities for training.

Council’s regulatory arrangements

This part of the review considered how Council is enforcing or ensuring compliance with laws to protect the community and the environment. Examples of areas enforced by local councils include: swimming pool legislation, unauthorized land use, signage and building work, storm water pollution, backyard fires, removal of noxious weeds, dog attacks, breaches of ‘Council Tree and Bushland Preservation Orders’, and abandoned shopping trolleys.

Legislative requirements also encourage councils to prepare a number of policies and plans such as a Companion Animals Plan. Regulation is important to support a wide range of social, economic and environmental goals as identified in the Community Strategic Plan.

Key Strengths

- A proactive program is in place for monitoring compliance with the environmental requirements which Council is responsible for regulating.
- A system for reporting and investigating reports of non-compliance or unauthorised development is in place.
- *The Walcha On-site Sewage Management and Strategy Plan* was developed in consultation with householders, the broader community, local environment groups and relevant government bodies with responsibility for the environment. An on-site sewage management register is kept which lists key information, and risk is assessed according to the Management Strategy.
- A Companion Animals Plan, consistent with the Office of Local Government guidelines, is in place. The plan is well presented and easy to read. Some useful information about responsible pet ownership is easily accessed on Council's website.

Opportunities/Areas for development

- A review of Council's compliance with companion animals matters was undertaken prior to the visit to Council. It found that Council had not finalised three out of five dog attack reports. A member of the review team met with council staff and alerted them to this, and it was immediately rectified.
- While Council has some useful information about responsible pet ownership on its website, information about registration fees has not been updated since the increase in January 2014. It should also be noted that registration fees will be reviewed in accordance with the CPI Index on 1st July every year.

The Council's response – Leadership and governance

Since the Office of Local Government's visit, the Council has received the advice regarding meeting procedures and modified the 'Committee of the Whole' procedures.

Also, a range of training was offered to all councillors with a consensus reached that the majority required financial training. As a result, a workshop was conducted by Local Government NSW Learning Solutions.

The Mayor has also recently attended a Mayoral weekend in Sydney conducted by Local Government NSW. One councillor has completed the Executive Certificate for Elected Members (5 days), an AICS Company Directors Course (5 days), AICD Governance and Finance for Registered Organisation (1 day) and a (½ day) Media Course.

The leadership teams are meeting at least monthly, with actions minuted and relayed to all participants. It is planned to increase these to fortnightly in the New Year.

It is proposed to prepare and adopt a set of organisational values when preparing next year's Operational Plan. These will be then communicated to all staff through a series of staff meetings.

The Council acknowledges that Internal Audit and, more broadly, Risk Management is a major concern. The Council has allocated additional resources in the current budget and it is envisaged that the Council will have an Internal Audit Function and Committee in place for the next financial year.

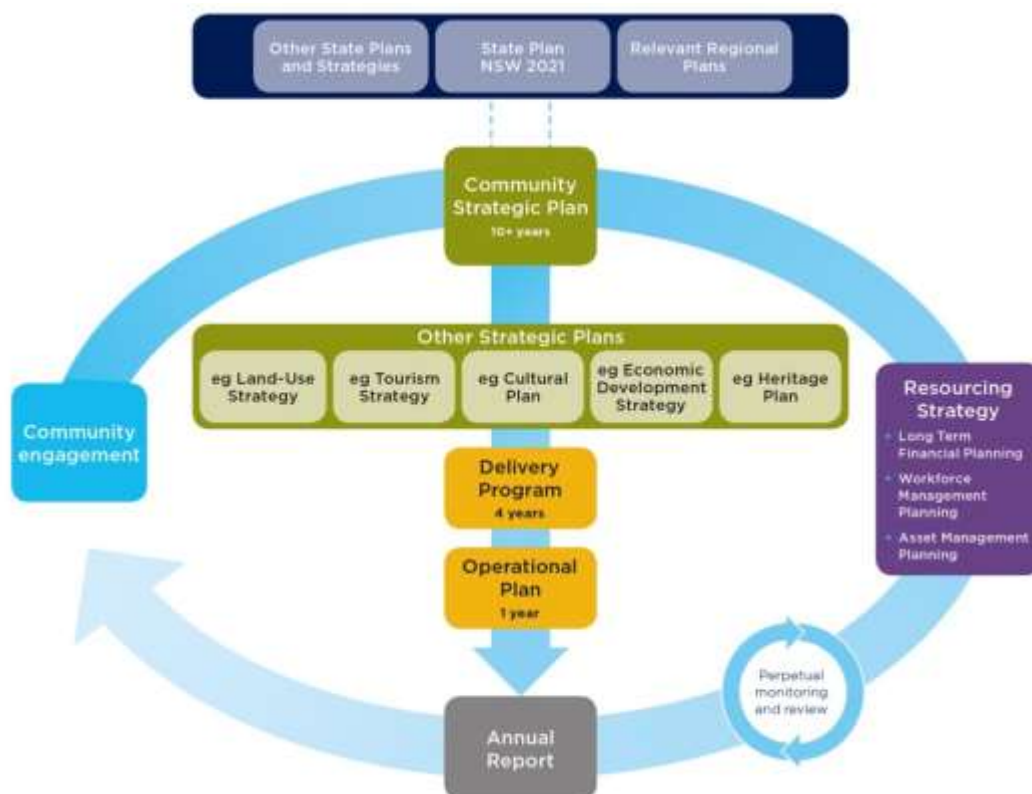
Members of Council committees will be provided a copy of the Code of Conduct and basic instructions on the relevant procedures.

With the small number of dog attacks in Walcha, the staff did not make themselves familiar with the Companion Animals Register. Once it was brought to the Council's attention, a review confirmed that the relevant information had been included on the Register, but the reports are still required to be finalised. The Council will endeavour in the future to ensure all relevant staff are adequately trained to follow required companion animal business processes accurately and efficiently.

The fees and charges on the Council web page have been updated, and the Council will update its business processes to ensure that when changes to fees occur that all advertised fees are updated to reflect this.

5 PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

The Integrated Planning and Reporting framework aims to improve the sustainability of local communities by encouraging councils, residents and State agencies to work together on long-term plans and strategies. The Community Strategic Plan is supported by a four-year Delivery Program and an annual Operational Plan.



Issues and challenges

The key issues and challenges identified by the community and articulated in the Community Strategic Plan 'Walcha – 2025' include:

Improving the economic sustainability of Walcha.

Maintaining the feel and identity of Walcha

- Representation and leadership
- Reversing decline and achieving critical population size
- Age succession of volunteers
- Retaining families in Walcha
- Public community transport
- Maintaining health providers, police and key agencies

- Self-sufficiency in energy and water
- Remaining an appealing competitive community
- Transportation and the road network.

Retaining and Attracting Young People in Walcha

- Promote trades apprenticeships and traineeships.

Maintaining Viable and Sustainable Agriculture

- Outside pressures eg unreasonable rules and regulations imposed by others
- Education partnerships with city-centric sensitivities around agriculture
- The potential effect of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority.

Attracting New Enterprises and Jobs

- Using broadband to attract new enterprises
- Difficulty of attracting support funding.

Environment

- Climate change
- Renewable energy.

Key areas of strength

- The Community Strategic Plan is well set out and easy to read.
- Council has prepared a satisfactory Community Engagement Strategy.
- By citing the relevant goals in the *NSW State Plan 2021* under the corresponding goals and strategies of *Walcha 2025*, the links between the documents are clear and apparent.
- All councillors the review team met with indicated that they enjoy strong links with the community. Most found that the community strategic planning process was a worthwhile foundation for understanding the aspirations of their community. Engaging with their community is viewed as a priority.

Opportunities/Areas for development

- Council's capacity to meet the challenges of and deliver the activities within Walcha 2025 is covered in the next section, Capacity to Deliver.
- The extent to which strategic land-use planning matters are integrated into the Community Strategic Plan appears limited. This could be better articulated similar to the way in which the connections between the NSW State Plan 2021 and Walcha 2025 have been made.
- While the Walcha Council Community Engagement Strategy contains five strategies (inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower) to engage with the community. It is suggested that the document could be easier to read and comprehend if each strategy was discussed on its own rather than repeated throughout the document.
- The Delivery Program 2013-2017 (which includes the Operational Plan 2013/14) reproduced on the website needs to display a four-year timeframe. Currently only the 2014 and 2015 years are indicated.
- Generic timeframes are included for some activities, making it difficult to determine when during the term of the Delivery Program some actions or tasks will be implemented. Indicative completion dates should also be displayed for each activity.
- As the Delivery Program sets out what Council will achieve during its four-year term, the actions and tasks identified should clearly be within Council's area of influence. For example, the community identified a priority need for a Bureau of Meteorology weather station to be established in Walcha to be included in Walcha 2025. This outcome is not within Council's scope in its own right. Rather, investigating the need for and advocating for a weather station are tasks appropriate to its role and responsibilities. Lack of clarity in this area may confuse community expectations.
- Performance indicators have not been included for all activities. Where they have been included, they could be strengthened to ensure progress toward a goal or output is measured. For example, some possible elements of a performance indicator could include volume or quantity, cost, timeliness, quality and customer satisfaction.

The Council's response – Planning for the future

The Council acknowledges the Review Team's recommendation to better integrate land-use planning into the Strategic Plan, and will implement the recommendation when the Plan is next reviewed.

The recommendation with regard to the Community Engagement Strategy will be implemented when the Strategy is reviewed, which is scheduled in the next couple of months to coincide with the community engagement required for 'Fit for the Future'.

The comment and recommendations on the Council's Delivery Program are acknowledged and it is agreed that there is need for improvement. The Council has recently purchased new software for the Integrated Planning and Reporting framework, and all documents are currently being reviewed with a view to increasing clarity and more meaningful timelines and performance indicators.

6 CAPACITY TO DELIVER

This section considers the current and future financial capacity of Council to sustain its operations and deliver appropriate services to the community as set out in the Community Strategic Plan, the Delivery Program and Operational Plan. The quality and utility of Council's long-term financial planning, asset management, and workforce planning are an important part of this assessment.

Issues and challenges for Council

The challenge to be financially sustainable is significant and ongoing for Walcha Council. Council has limited options to increase its revenue and faces increasing expectations for community services from its community.

The NSW Department of Planning and Environment projections forecast a small reduction in the population (down from 3,021 in 2011 to 2,840 in 2021).

Sustainability

A financial review was undertaken by the review team. Financial records reviewed included Council's financial statements for the last six years (to 30/6/2013), its forecast for the 2013/14 year (Quarterly Budget Review Statement), its Long-Term Financial Plan, and the TCorp Financial Assessment, Sustainability and Benchmarking Report. The review of these documents highlighted that Council was in a financially weak/distressed position and its ongoing sustainability is questionable. This assessment is based on:

- Council has incurred deficits before capital grants and contributions in the last six financial years (expenditure greater than revenue). The cumulative deficit for this period was in excess of \$13 million.
- Council is forecasting an operating deficit before capital grants and contributions for the 2013/14 financial year (Quarterly Budget Review Statement).
- Council's ten-year Long-Term Financial Plan is forecasting significant operating deficits before capital grants and contributions.
- Council has not budgeted for the full amount of its estimated asset maintenance in its Long-Term Financial Plan.

- Council has not included the full amount of asset replacement costs in its Long-Term Financial Plan.

TCorp – Financial Assessment, Sustainability and Benchmarking Report

In March 2013, the NSW Treasury Corporation (TCorp) released its financial assessment for Walcha Council based on its review of Council's most recent four years of consolidated financial results (the 2011/2012 financial statements) and a detailed review of Council's ten-year Long-Term Financial Plan. The key focus areas were:

- The financial capacity of Council
- The long-term sustainability of Council
- The financial performance of Council in comparison to a range of similar councils and measured against prudent benchmarks.

Overall, T-Corp reported that in terms of sustainability, Council is in a weak position and, based on its current Long-Term Financial Plan, this position is likely to deteriorate in the future. This will lead to Council being unsustainable if corrective action is not taken.

The TCorp *Financial Assessment, Sustainability and Benchmarking Report* describes sustainability as “a local government will be financially sustainable over the long-term when it is able to generate sufficient funds to provide the levels of service and infrastructure agreed with its community”.

Discussions with Council on sustainability issues

Discussions on financial sustainability were held with the Mayor, General Manager and senior Council staff. Council advised that it has already commenced action to achieve sustainability. The actions include:

- Council is nearing completion of a detailed revaluation of its assets and their expected useful life. Council believes that its depreciation charges over the last few years have been over-stated, and now forecasts that this depreciation will decrease by around \$1.5 million per annum.
- Council is considering a special rate variation application for 2015/16.

- A small boundary change is being considered with Tamworth Regional Council which will increase Walcha Shire's rate base. The increase in revenue would be minor and not have a major impact on Council finances.

Opportunities/Areas for development

- Council is finalising the revaluation of all its assets, as well as determining their useful life. Once completed, this will allow all Asset Management Plans to be updated incorporating more accurate data and the full maintenance costs of each asset.
- This work will also enable Council to update its Long-Term Financial Plan and Delivery Program to reflect the changes in its Asset Management Plans.
- The Walcha Long-Term Financial Plan does not have any key performance indicators, so these will need to be included when the Plan as part the scheduled updates.
- Council's quarterly budget review statement does not comply with the relevant legislation or guidelines prepared by the Office of Local Government. In particular, the report is not accrual based and lacks key performance indicators.
- The majority of councillors the review team met with believed that the current quarterly budget review report format could be improved. For example, the report included information that was not relevant and lacked detail in other areas. More information was required on Council's current financial position. It appears that the councillors and senior staff should get together to decide on the content of the report, and especially matters regarding finance issues.
- Council should continue to review its expenditure and services provided in order to reduce costs.
- Workforce management has also been identified as an area requiring priority attention. The Human Resource Manager position was vacant for a significant period of time but has recently been filled.
- Council's Workforce Management Plan does not cover the four-year period of the Delivery Program as required, provide details of how strategies are to be implemented, or include measurable key performance indicators. These matters should be addressed in the next update of the Plan.
- Council should consider developing a Human Resources Policy/Procedure Manual.

- Currently access to all policies and procedures is only provided to supervisors or the Human Resources Manager. All policies should be made available on Council's intranet.
- Council does not have an Equal Employment Opportunity Management Plan.
- Council does not have a policy/procedure that requires managers to assess the performance of their staff against identified performance targets identified in the Delivery Program and Operational Plan. Council should consider developing a performance assessment system/procedure as a matter of priority.

The Council's response – Capacity to deliver

The Council has substantially completed the revaluation of all of its assets, and this has had a dramatic effect on Council's operating result. Depreciation has reduced from \$4,300,000 in 2013 to \$2,622,000, with the Council recording a small deficit of \$12,000 in 2014 compared to a deficit of \$2,082,000 in 2013.

The information from the asset revaluation will now be incorporated into a review of the ten-year financial plan, which will form part of the Council's 'Fit for the Future' proposal. The Council acknowledges the financial reporting shortcomings identified in the review. The General Manger is currently developing a plan to improve all facets of the Council's financial reporting to incorporate the recommendations from the review. It is envisaged that this plan will be implemented by 1 July 2015.

The Human Resources Manager has recently returned to full-time work and is giving priority to implementing the recommendations of the review. The Workforce Management Plan will be reviewed by March 2015, and the remainder of the recommendations are to be completed prior to the end of 2015.

7 SERVICES TO THE COMMUNITY

This section focuses on the range and quality of the services and facilities Council provides for the community. Social planning and services provided to cater to the needs of social justice groups within its community are also considered.

Issues and challenges for Council

- A large proportion of Council's expenditure is spent on road construction and maintenance.
- The constraints of raising revenue in a small rural local government area impacts on the capacity to deliver all the services the community aspires to have available.
- Council advises that the review and removal of services previously supplied by the Federal and State Governments leaves an expectation for Council to step in and provide services.

Key areas of strength

- Despite the above challenges, Walcha as a small rural community, has successfully fought to retain a range of essential services. For example, the community has collectively worked hard to advocate maintaining three doctors, health facilities, two schools and a pre-school. Council lobbied for and was successful in retaining the Walcha Road Police Station. This included maintaining police numbers and vehicles.
- The *Southern New England Social and Community Plan* was jointly developed in 2010 by Armidale Dumaresq Council, Guyra Shire Council, Uralla Shire Council and Walcha Council. The Plan identifies the needs and priorities for community facilities and services for this region. It focuses on the social justice target groups of children, young people, women, people with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Council uses the Social and Community Plan to inform its Community Strategic Plan.
- *Walcha Together* is an incorporated body consisting of community and business representatives which promotes tourism and economic development. It encourages new businesses as well as existing businesses to move forward and increase productivity. The organisation works in partnership with Council, local businesses and relevant government agencies.
- Council has cultivated Walcha as an *Open Air Gallery* of sculptures and artworks. A number of sculptures by both local and overseas artists have been established in and around the town. Presented in a variety of media including landscaping, street furniture

and murals, the sculptures make the town distinctive. From a local perspective, the Gallery gives an additional dimension to the quality of life of residents and provides a source of expression for resident artists. The Gallery also provides economic stimulus by becoming a draw card for tourists and visitors.



Walcha's Street Furniture Project was completed as part of the Public Art Plan (first adopted by Walcha in 2001) and forms part of the Open Air Gallery, resulting in eight separate original hardwood pieces. As well as providing a form of expression for local artists, the artwork is of practical use to residents and visitors to the town.



Opportunities/Areas for development

- While the *Walcha Social Plan* (part of the *Southern New England Social and Community Plan*) is accessible on Council's website, it is unclear as to which period of time that it covers. Also, the website text refers to legislation which has been amended. *The Local Government (General) Regulation 2005* no longer requires councils to adopt a Social/Community Plan every five years. However, the needs of social justice groups (i.e. children, young people, people with disabilities, older people, women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and people from diverse sexualities) are now to be addressed in a council's Community Strategic Plan and Delivery Program.

The Council's response – Services to the community

The Council has removed the out-dated Social Plan from its web page. All social justice groups are included in the Council's Community Strategic Plan and Delivery Program.

8 BETTER PRACTICE EXAMPLES³

| BETTER PRACTICE EXAMPLES | DESCRIBE THE INITIATIVE AND WHY IS IT CONSIDERED BETTER PRACTICE? |
|--------------------------|---|
| Open Air Gallery | <p>A number of unique sculptures/artworks by local, national and overseas artists have been established in and around the town.</p> <p><i>“Walcha has found a way of signposting its continued vitality. For a modest investment of ratepayers’ funds, the Council has given the town a special place on Australia’s cultural map. This has come about with the assistance of artists and supporters who have donated a great deal of time and expertise to create this unique facility. It is an example of many individuals working together for the good of a community in which they share strong family and sentimental ties.”⁴</i></p> |
| Street Furniture Project | <p>Completed as part of the Public Art Plan (first adopted by Walcha in 2001) and forms an integral part of the Open Air Gallery. As well as the aesthetic value the furniture plays a practical part of the town’s streetscape and ambience. The project was achieved as a result of a partnership between a number of participants and supporters including Walcha Council, the Third City of the Arts (NSW Ministry for the Arts and Armidale Dumaresq Council), Walcha Arts Council, NSW State Forestry, Fennings Timber and National Parks and Wildlife.</p> |

⁴ Definition of Better Practice, Office of Local Government

Better practice

- Beyond or above minimum compliance requirements, published guidelines or in some way better than standard industry practice.
- Innovative and/or very effective.
- Contributes to continuous improvement within the local government sector.

⁴ John McDonald, Art critic, Sydney exhibition, Walcha Open Air Gallery 2003.

9 ACTION PLAN

NEXT STEPS

Walcha Council faces some significant challenges, particularly around financial sustainability in a tightening economic environment. The challenges facing Council are not exclusive to the Walcha Shire and many of them are discussed in the Independent Local Government Review Panel's final report. Overall, Walcha Council is aware of the issues and challenges confronting it and is taking action to address those matters within its sphere of control. It is advocating on behalf of the community on the priorities identified in the Community Strategic Plan.

The following Action Plan presents an opportunity for positive improvement and change by identifying areas for development and appropriate actions to address these.

| AREA FOR DEVELOPMENT | PRIORITY | ACTION PROPOSED | TIMEFRAME | RESP | PROGRESS REPORT | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|--|---------|-----------------|---|
| LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE | | | | | | |
| 1. | Councillor development. | <i>Med</i> | Consider undertaking an audit of councillors' skills and tailoring training, for individual councillors and as a group, to inform its training plan for councillors. | Ongoing | GM | Initial training workshops conducted. Mayor attended Mayoral Weekend conducted by Local Government NSW. Additional training to be offered in the second half of 2015. |

| AREA FOR DEVELOPMENT | | PRIORITY | ACTION PROPOSED | TIMEFRAME | RESP | PROGRESS REPORT |
|----------------------|---|---------------|--|-------------|------|---|
| 2. | Senior management/leadership meetings. | <i>High</i> | Meetings to occur more frequently (ie fortnightly) with relevant decisions to be communicated to staff after each meeting. | Fortnightly | GM | Currently meeting monthly - planned to increase frequency to fortnightly in 2015. |
| 3. | Organisational values. | <i>High</i> | Document Council's organisational values to, at a minimum, cover impartiality and public accountability. | May 2015 | GM | |
| 4. | Internal audit. | <i>High</i> | Develop an internal audit function and program. | June 2015 | GM | |
| 5. | Procurement, disposal and tendering. | <i>High</i> | Give priority to procurement, disposal and tendering policies and procedures as part of the proposed internal audit program. | June 2015 | GM | Purchasing Policy reviewed and updated in March 2014. |
| 6. | Supporting Council's committees (s355). | <i>Medium</i> | Provide each committee with a copy of its Code of Conduct and relevant procedures, and explore opportunities for training. | Oct 2015 | GM | |

| PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|--|------------------------|--|-------------|--------------------------------|----------|
| AREA FOR DEVELOPMENT | PRIORITY | ACTION PROPOSED | TIMEFRAME | RESP | PROGRESS REPORT | |
| 7. | Information about companion animals registration fees on Council's website to reflect the increase introduced in January 2014. | | Update the companion animals registration fees on Council's website to reflect the increase introduced in January 2014. | Dec 2014 | Director Enviro Services | Complete |
| 8. | Integration of plans. | | Better integrate strategic land-use planning into the Community Strategic Plan. | Oct 2016 | Director Enviro Services | |
| 9. | Walcha Council Community Engagement Strategy. | | Revise <i>Walcha Council Community Engagement Strategy</i> to make it easier to read and comprehend. | March 2015 | GM | |
| 10. | The Delivery Program 2013-2017. | | Update Delivery Program to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Display a four-year timeframe. • Include indicative completion dates. • Ensure the actions and tasks identified are within Council's area of influence. • Include performance measures for all activities. • Strengthen existing performance indicators. | June 2015 | GM | |

| CAPACITY TO DELIVER | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|--|---|------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------|
| AREA FOR DEVELOPMENT | PRIORITY | ACTION PROPOSED | TIMEFRAME | RESP | PROGRESS REPORT |
| 11. | Asset Management Plans. | <p>Update Council's Asset Management Plans to incorporate the findings of Council's review/revaluation of its assets and their useful life.</p> <p>Update Asset Management Plans to include full asset maintenance costs and the full replacement cost of all assets.</p> | June 2015 | GM Director Eng Services | Substantially complete |
| 12. | Integration between the Delivery Program, the Long-Term Financial Plan and the Asset Management Plans. | Update the Long-Term Financial Plan and the Delivery Program to reflect the revised Asset Management Plans. | April 2015 | GM | |
| 13. | Long-Term Financial Plan. | Revise the Long-Term Financial Plan to include Key Performance Indicators. | April 2015 | GM | |

| AREA FOR DEVELOPMENT | PRIORITY | ACTION PROPOSED | TIMEFRAME | RESP | PROGRESS REPORT |
|----------------------|---|--|-----------|------------|-----------------|
| 14. | Quarterly Budget Review Statement (QBRS). | Review the QBRS to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • comply with the Regulation and Office of Local Government guidelines • respond to councillor feedback • be accrual-based and include key performance indicators. | June 2015 | GM | |
| 15. | Workforce Management Plan. | Update the Workforce Management Plan to include details of how strategies are to be implemented and how they will be measured. | June 2015 | HR Manager | |
| 16. | Performance assessment. | Develop a performance assessment system/procedure for all staff. | Dec 2015 | HR Manager | |
| 17. | Human resource policies and procedures. | Ensure all staff have easy access to all relevant policies and procedure manuals. Develop an intranet site. | Dec 2015 | HR Manager | |

| AREA FOR DEVELOPMENT | PRIORITY | ACTION PROPOSED | TIMEFRAME | RESP | PROGRESS REPORT |
|----------------------------------|---|---|-----------|-------------------------|--|
| 18. | Equal Employment Opportunity EEO. | Develop an Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Management Plan, and incorporate it into the Workforce Management Plan. | Dec 2015 | HR Manager | |
| SERVICES TO THE COMMUNITY | | | | | |
| 19. | Information about the <i>Walcha Social Plan</i> (part of the Southern New England Social and Community Plan). | Update website to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • include the period of time that the social plan covers. • remove references to the <i>Local Government (General) Regulation 2005</i>. • advise that the needs and strategies for social justice groups are now addressed by the Community Strategic Plan and Delivery Program. | Dec 2015 | Director Eviro Services | Out-dated Social Plan removed from Website. Completed. To be reviewed when plan is next updated. |