



Mr Andrew Barr MLA

Chief Minister
ACT Legislative Assembly
GPO Box 1020
Canberra, ACT 2601

24 August 2023

Dear Chief Minister

The Future of the Molonglo Valley Community Forum

The Molonglo Valley Community Forum (MVCF) is a local district advocacy group and Canberra's eighth community council. Our experience over the past two years leads us to believe that the requirements of the community council deed grant are not conducive to best practice community engagement, and that significant change is required to ensure the residents of Canberra's nine districts are provided with genuine fora for community advocacy and engagement.

To resolve what we believe to be significant and growing inadequacies in the ACT Government's community engagement model, we recommend the following three actions be undertaken as a matter of priority:

1. Establish the **ACT Government Districts Office** with District Directors and stakeholder engagement
2. Establish the **ACT District Planning Advisory Group**
3. Treat the Molonglo Valley as a **district in its own right**.

More detail on these actions is provided below.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

ACTION 1: Establish the ACT Government Districts Office and District Directors

The MVCF proposes the creation of the **Districts Office** within the Chief Minister's office. The role of the Districts Office would be to:

- establish **District Directors** as single points of contact for each district in the ACT
- progress the key initiatives outlined in each *District Strategy*, ensure service and funding equity on a per-capita basis, manage escalations, and **develop district-level solutions** across all ACT Government Directorates

- develop a cohesive and inclusive **district-level engagement strategy** that utilises numerous models of community engagement, including four townhall meetings per year per district, and
- ensure residents are provided with **structured and regular opportunities** for MLA and ACT Government engagement.

ACTION 2: Establish the ACT District Planning Advisory Group

The MVCF proposes the establishment of an **ACT District Planning Advisory Group**, with representation from each of Canberra’s nine districts. This Advisory Group would be consulted by ACT Government Directorates on district-level initiatives, such as those outlined in the new *District Strategies*.

The ACT District Planning Advisory Group would be distinct from the ACT Government’s Environment and Planning Forum (EPF), which features representation from a broader range of stakeholder groups. The MVCF envisions the EPF continuing in a modified form, to provide an ongoing feedback mechanism for groups with a focus on city-wide environment and planning issues.

ACTION 3: Treat the Molonglo Valley as a district in its own right

The Molonglo Valley is presently treated by the ACT Government as part of Woden-Weston Creek. This is evident from the “Our CBR” newsletter, which features separate editions for Belconnen, Tuggeranong, Gungahlin, Central Canberra, while amalgamating “Woden, Weston Creek and Molonglo”.¹

The MVCF submits that residents of the Molonglo Valley do not see themselves as part of the Woden Town Centre catchment. This is especially true for residents of Whitlam and parts of Denman Prospect, who have stronger ties to Belconnen due to their closer proximity. It is reasonable to say that this view is reciprocated.

With a forecast population of 86,000 residents by 2060,² the Molonglo Valley will be on par with the current population of Gungahlin, and larger than the total combined population of Woden and Weston Creek. There will come a time when it is no longer be tenable to treat the younger and larger Molonglo Valley as merely an extension of Canberra’s established districts.

To this end, the MVCF is strongly of the belief that **the Molonglo Valley should be treated as a district in its own right**, with its own District General Manager in the proposed Districts Office. In the short term, the additional workload associated with coordinating new infrastructure and services in a fast-growing area will compensate for the district’s comparatively smaller initial population.

¹ <https://www.act.gov.au/our-canberra/woden-weston-molonglo>

² https://www.treasury.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/2181985/ACT-Government-population-projections-2022-2060.pdf

BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

At the end of 2020, local residents campaigned for a community council for the Molonglo Valley. The Molonglo Valley Community Forum (MVCF) was a non-political and secular group established to fill this role of a district advocacy group, with the objective of preserving and improving the social, cultural, economic and environmental wellbeing of the Molonglo Valley and its community.

Perhaps idealistically, the MVCF believed that the establishment of a government-recognised community council would provide the Molonglo Valley with a voice. This voice would enable our district to achieve something approaching per-capita equality with other Canberra districts in terms of community, health and municipal services.

In some areas, this has been achieved. The MVCF have developed productive working relationships with a handful of individuals from ACT Government Directorates, including the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate, the Suburban Land Agency and the Education Directorate. This has enabled community input to feed into government decision-making, resulting in improved outcomes for residents of the Molonglo Valley.

Unfortunately, the above examples are largely the exception to the rule. Other areas of the ACT Government have been far less willing to engage with the MVCF. There have been instances where the MVCF have had to escalate the issue to the relevant Minister's office or threaten to go to the media before the Directorate would engage with the MVCF in even a perfunctory manner.

It has become clear to the MVCF that the support for the community council model is limited, and consequently so is the effectiveness of community councils as fora for meaningful community engagement. The issues with the current approach, which we believe can be addressed with the actions outlined in this letter, are expanded upon below.

ISSUE 1: Community Councils as volunteer-based organisations

Community councils in the ACT are made up of volunteer residents. Each community council receives a small amount of deed grant funding each year from the ACT Government, but no administrative support is provided. To ensure continued funding, community councils are required to spend their limited time and resources on burdensome administrative duties and deed grant requirements of questionable value. Related and other administrative duties detract from the capacity of these volunteers to engage with and form partnerships with government, stakeholders and the communities they represent.

Due to the competing demands of family, work and other community groups, combined with this lack of administrative support from the ACT Government, community councils are hamstrung in their ability to attract and retain the diversity of talent required to be genuinely representative. If a council is seen to be unrepresentative of the community it serves, it is unlikely to be trusted as a true voice by elected officials, bureaucrats, and the communities of that district.

There is significant administration and organisation that a community council committee must dedicate to:

- running nine public meetings a year
- holding regular committee meetings
- ongoing advocacy through submissions, inquiries and lobbying
- incorporated entity requirements – insurances, elections, annual returns (each community council must arrange their own insurances)
- community building activities and applying for grants, and
- attempting to engage with local MLAs, who have no requirements or apparent desire to regularly turn up to community council meetings.

The overall time commitments required to run a community council make it extremely difficult for working-age residents or those with family responsibilities to commit to participating in community council activities. This significantly affects the credibility of these councils in the eyes of the wider community and severely limits their effectiveness.

ISSUE 2: Townhall meetings with no MLAs or ACT Government representatives

You have previously commented that community councils play the role of townhall meetings in the ACT.³ Unfortunately, as MLAs are not required to attend the nine public meetings community councils run as a condition of their deed grant funding, meetings are largely ineffective as places for residents to air their concerns with their elected representatives as issues arise.

It has become clear that community council meetings are not townhall meetings, but rather community group meetings, where the onus falls back on the community to subsequently raise their concerns with the ACT Government via other channels. This risks a “pressure cooker” situation, where key issues remain unaddressed until they become impossible to ignore, rather than being proactively dealt with by government.

It is in the interests of our elected MLAs that they are made aware of issues in their electorate well before this point is reached. Any future engagement model should therefore provide residents with the opportunity to respectfully engage with their elected representatives and ACT Government officials in a safe, predictable and structured setting.

ISSUE 3: Community councils as launchpads for political campaigns

There is a history of community councils being used as platforms for committee members to build profiles ahead of launching political campaigns. This issue has been a problem for many years and is not restricted to any one individual or political party.

It goes without saying that members of the community should not be permitted to use the funding and profile afforded by community councils in this manner. This is

³ https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=388078182292535

not the purpose of townhall meetings or community engagement, and is not an appropriate use of ratepayers' money.

Unfortunately, this is an inevitable outcome of an engagement model which favours those with personal agendas, rather than those who most effectively represent the interests of residents in their district. An engagement model which prioritises participation from a broad cross section of the community, rather than motivated individuals, is inherently less likely to be captured by political interests.

ISSUE 4: No one point of contact for escalation

The MVCF are constantly asked to raise matters with the ACT Government on behalf of the community. This has often meant searching for the right people within the ACT Government, which can sometimes take months and very rarely achieves the desired result.

As Canberra continues to grow, our districts would benefit from a single point of contact who engages with all the relevant Directorates and ensures that priorities are managed at a district level. This is what our call for an ACT Government Districts Office and District Directors is intended to achieve.

NEXT STEPS

The MVCF Committee have considered the issues outlined in this paper and have unanimously determined that it is no longer tenable for us to participate in the ACT Government's community council model in its current format.

The MVCF will therefore **not be seeking renewed Deed Grant funding** under the current contractual obligations. The MVCF will revert to being an incorporated association funded by membership fees and community donations.

We encourage you to consider the recommendations for the ACT Government in our three-point action plan, listed above. We are happy to meet with you to explain and discuss these recommendations.

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely,



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