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Minister leaves merged councils hanging



Gundagai Independent, Gundagai

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NSW Labor has criticised Minister for Local Government Wendy Tuckerman for refusing to provide any clear direction regarding possible demergers of councils throughout NSW.

The NSW Government's 2016 forced mergers policy has wreaked financial havoc among a number of communities, with Cootamundra-Gundagai Regional Council among the most vocal regarding their desire to demerge.

Last year, two electoral proposals to demerge Cootamundra-Gundagai and Snowy Valleys Council were examined by the Local Government Boundaries Commission but were ultimately rejected by the former Minister for Local Government, Shelley Hancock.

Under questioning from Mark Buttigieg MLC in budget estimates yesterday, Minister Tuckerman said she would not "speculate" on any proposals to demerge until she saw a report regarding a proposal.

The Minister would also not commit to reversing the decisions regarding Cootamundra-Gundagai and Snowy Valleys demergers.

Shadow Local Government Minister Greg Warren said he was hopeful the new Minister would not string communities along like her predecessors, however the signs were not encouraging.

"The Minister was asked several times whether she would allow communities to demerge if they wished to, but she failed to provide a clear answer," Mr Warren said.

"Communities should be able to decide their own fate – it's not a difficult concept to understand or commit to.

"NSW Labor has vowed to listen to the desires of communities but the NSW Government continues to refuse to do likewise."

Mr Buttigieg said the Minister's non-committal responses would only increase the frustration and angst of communities throughout the state.

"The Minister had the opportunity to provide some clear answers and direction to those many communities that had been impacted by the forced mergers," he said.

"Minister Tuckerman clearly did not make the most of that opportunity."

Statistics from the Office of Local Government show the operating performance ratio (OPR) show eight out of the 20 worst performing councils in terms of OPR were merged councils.

OPERATING PERFORMANCE RATIOS, 2019/20 (%)	
Liverpool Plains	-35.3
Bathurst	-21.8
Hilltops	-21.4
Broken Hill	-20.4
Cootamundra-Gundagai	-19.5
Central Coast	-15.9
Camden	-14.3
Murray River	-14.2
Dungog	-13.6
Kiama	-13.3
Wollondilly	-12.7
Coonamble	-12.2
Snowy Valleys	-11.1
Greater Hume	-10.5
Federation	-10.4
Burwood	-9.5
Upper Hunter	-9.5
Murrumbidgee	-9.1
Waverley	-8.3
Georges River	-8.2

A negative OPR essentially means a council is spending more money than it is receiving. Councils highlighted are merged councils.