Our ref: *GC/Vkm:* *F- 1458 & D- 778478*

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To Whom It May Concern

Submission – Amendments to Model Code of Meeting Practice

Reference is made to the Office of Local Government's invitation for local councils to provide feedback on proposed amendments to the *Model Code of Meeting Practice for Local Councils in NSW* ("the Model Meeting Code").

At its Ordinary Meeting held 18 February 2025, Narrandera Shire Council ("Council") resolved to make submission regarding the Model Meeting Code amendments, expressing opposition to the following proposed changes:

1. Removal of pre-meeting briefing sessions,
2. Amendments to the role of the General Manager,
3. Restrictions on remote attendance by Councillors and Council staff, and
4. Removal of Council's ability to shorten the duration of speeches.

Further detail on Council's opposition to these changes is set out below.

1. Removal of Briefing Sessions

Briefing sessions with Councillors allow for shared knowledge and understanding and are a critical element of quality decision making. This is of particular relevance with things like budgeting and strategy development. Narrandera Council does not use briefing sessions to pre-determine matters going to a council meeting.

If briefing sessions are to be banned there must be provision for workshops or strategic planning sessions – we do not support the blanket banning on the basis that some councils may be abusing the system.

2. Amendments to the role of the General Manager

The changes to the role of the General Manager are also of great concern. The removal of the General Manager to provide advice on Notices of Motion in the business paper limits the ability of the Council to understand the implications of the decision from a financial perspective. Many issues emerge within the community that on merit could be supported but on balance cannot be afforded or would require the Council to make a substantial change to resource allocation. Having that information before the council included in the notice of motion would again add to the quality of decision making.

Council considers that the General Manager should determine which staff are present at meetings. Remuneration of staff is determined by a detailed position description and staff that are required to attend council meetings are acknowledged and rewarded for doing so. This change is even more concerning when coupled with the mooted change in the code of conduct of councillors which allows councillors to publicly question other council officials on the conduct of their duties. It seems to fly in the face of recent improvements in the depoliticisation of staff (e.g. recent amendments to senior staff contracts).

3. Changes to remote attendance at Council meetings

Council opposes the proposed changes to restrict remote attendance by Councillors staff at meetings. Councillors - particularly in rural areas - are rarely “full-time” Councillors and have a wide range of responsibilities beyond their civic duties, such as working other jobs, running businesses, and supporting families. The remote attendance provisions have encouraged increased diversity of representation on Council. The winding back of remote attendance capability will disincentivise members of the community from seeking election to Council and limit the ability of existing Councillors to engage in their role.

The proposed provisions limit the ability of sole traders and professionals in rural and regional communities to manage their responsibilities as a result of the vast distances that are often required to be travelled by those living and working in rural NSW. It is important not to limit the ability for diverse representatives to hold office and perform the duties of a Councillor.

This high threshold for unforeseen caring responsibilities may give rise to disputes and require Councillors to disclose sensitive personal information. It is recommended that the OLG produce additional guidance on what meets the threshold of illness or unforeseen caring responsibilities.

The removal of the ability of Council staff to attend meetings via audio-visual link is similarly regressive. In a geographically large local government area such as Narrandera Shire, Council staff often have to undertake duties away from the Council Chambers. It is important that staff have the option to attend meetings remotely, where they are unable to attend in person and the General Manager believes it is appropriate for them to attend. What happens when the next pandemic hits?

4. Removal of Council's ability to shorten the duration of speeches.

Council opposes the removal of clause 10.24 from the Model Meeting Code. This provision supports Council to facilitate well-run meetings and expedite the consideration of business at a meeting where it is warranted.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission.

Should you have any enquiries regarding this matter, please do not hesitate to contact Council's Deputy General Manager Corporate and Community Services, [redacted]

Yours sincerely,

[redacted]

General Manager

Enc: Nil