



What Shall We Do With Central Darling?

**Ensuring sustainable, democratic local governance in remote
New South Wales communities**

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About LogoNet

LogoNet Australia is an informal network of people across Australia seeking to advance fresh thinking about the future of local government and community governance. It was established in 2016. An early initiative was the nation-wide 'LogoNet Dialogue' to explore the case for, and ways to promote, effective place-based governance and local democracy as vital elements of Australia's federal system. This culminated in the publication *Place Based Governance and Local Democracy: Will Australian Local Government Deliver?*

Amongst other activities LogoNet members have partnered with the Municipal Association of Victoria for the 2017, 2018 and 2019 Future of Local Government conferences; facilitated exchanges of information and ideas with like-minded people and organisations in Canada, New Zealand and Britain; and initiated discussions with the London-based Local Government Information Unit (LGiU) to establish LGiU Australia, which provides daily news updates and frequent briefing papers on key issues for local government and governance.

The LogoNet website is maintained as a resource for anyone interested in the future of local government, local democracy and community governance in Australia. It provides a platform for members to publish reports and opinion-pieces; a source of 'fresh thinking' on local governance, including notes on recent publications; a point of linkage with related organisations across Australia and overseas; and an archive of material on local government reform and older publications that may be hard to find.

For more information, go to www.logonet.org.au

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WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH CENTRAL DARLING?

Ensuring sustainable, democratic local governance in remote New South Wales communities

By early next year the New South Wales government needs to make a decision on the future governance of Central Darling Shire in the state's far west. The Shire has been without elected local government and controlled by a state-appointed Administrator for almost a decade. With a population of fewer than 2,000 people, it covers a vast area and faces complex socio-economic and environmental challenges. These include matters that are also of direct concern to the federal government, notably Aboriginal disadvantage and representation, and management of the Murray-Darling Basin.

A return to democratic governance could occur at the state-wide local elections in September 2024. But what form of local democracy will deliver the best results for Central Darling's scattered, diverse and disadvantaged population? And what complementary arrangements are needed to tackle the 'wicked' problems facing Central Darling and surrounding areas that 'conventional' local government will never have the capacity to resolve?

1. Introduction

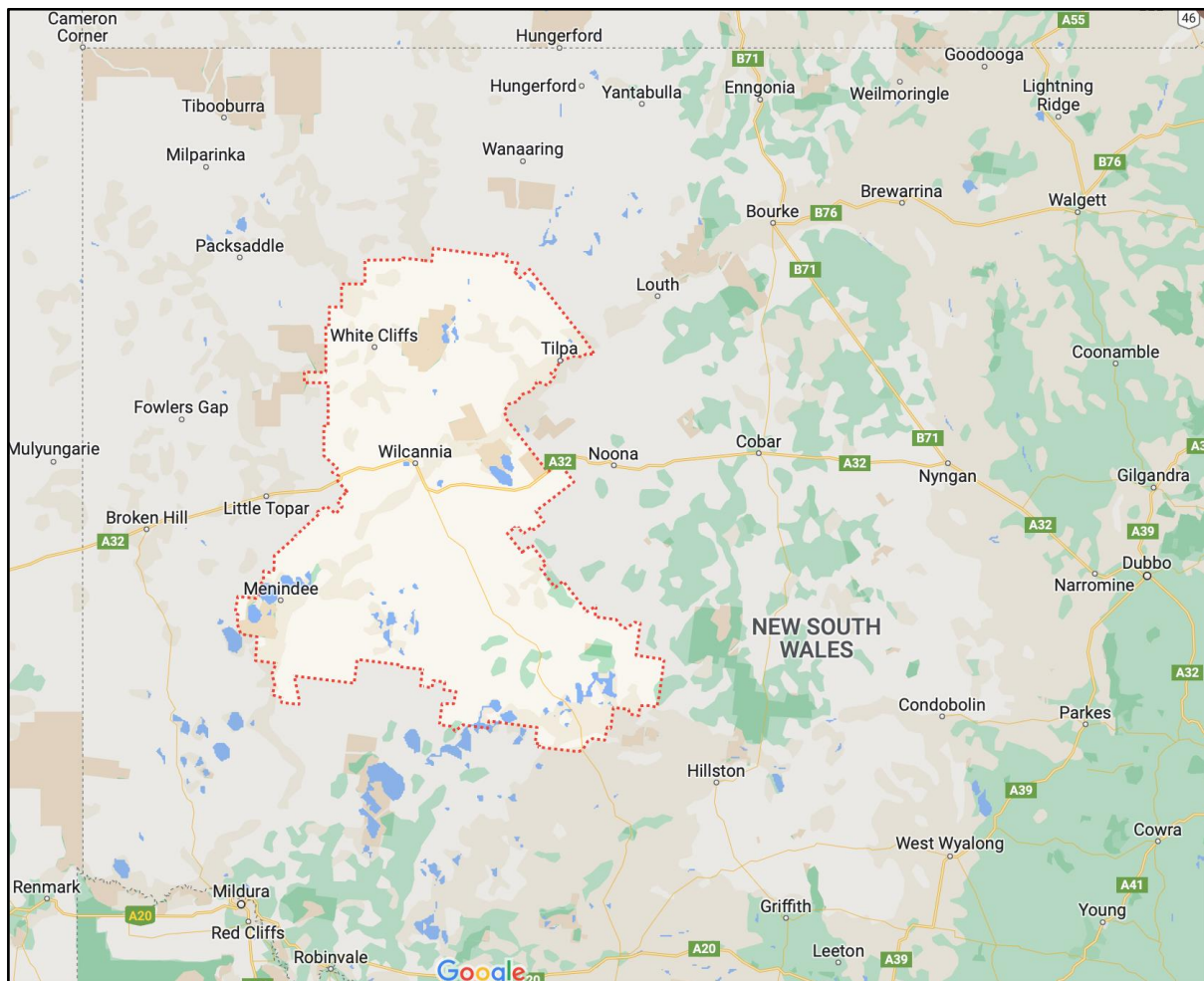
Central Darling Shire is located in the remote Far West of New South Wales (NSW), stretching between 100 and 300 kilometers east and south-east of Broken Hill, and adjoining the state's extensive Unincorporated Area to the north and west (see **Figure 1** and **Figure 2**). By area, it is the largest local government in the state, covering some 53,500 square kilometers, mostly semi-arid pastoral country. This is around 80% of the size of the state of Tasmania. However, while Tasmania is home to about 560,000 people, Central Darling has a population of fewer than 1,900 – the lowest of any local government area in NSW. And half or more are Aboriginal peoples.

This paper explores the troubled history of local government and governance in Central Darling over the past decade, and the factors underlying that history. Since 2013, the Shire has been without an elected local council, with decision-making in the hands of a sole Administrator. This may well be the longest period of administration for any council, not only in NSW but in Australia as a whole. A return to some form of democratic local government is possible in late 2024, when elections will be held for all NSW councils. But what form of local governance and democracy would best suit the characteristics of Central Darling and its diverse communities that make it a unique amongst NSW local governments? What level of local administration and quality of service delivery is affordable for all concerned? And how can the roles of local, state and federal governments, emerging arrangements for Aboriginal self-governance, and new approaches to community democracy and service delivery be combined to address Central Darling's longstanding social, economic and infrastructure challenges?

2. Local Governance in Remote Australia

Central Darling epitomizes the challenges facing local governance throughout remote Australia (Morris 2011; Morton 2012). Other than Victoria and the ACT, all mainland states and the Northern Territory have vast remote areas peppered with small, isolated towns and settlements, many of which are home to Aboriginal peoples with ancient, enduring ties to their country.

Figure 1: Central Darling Shire in the Remote Far West of New South Wales



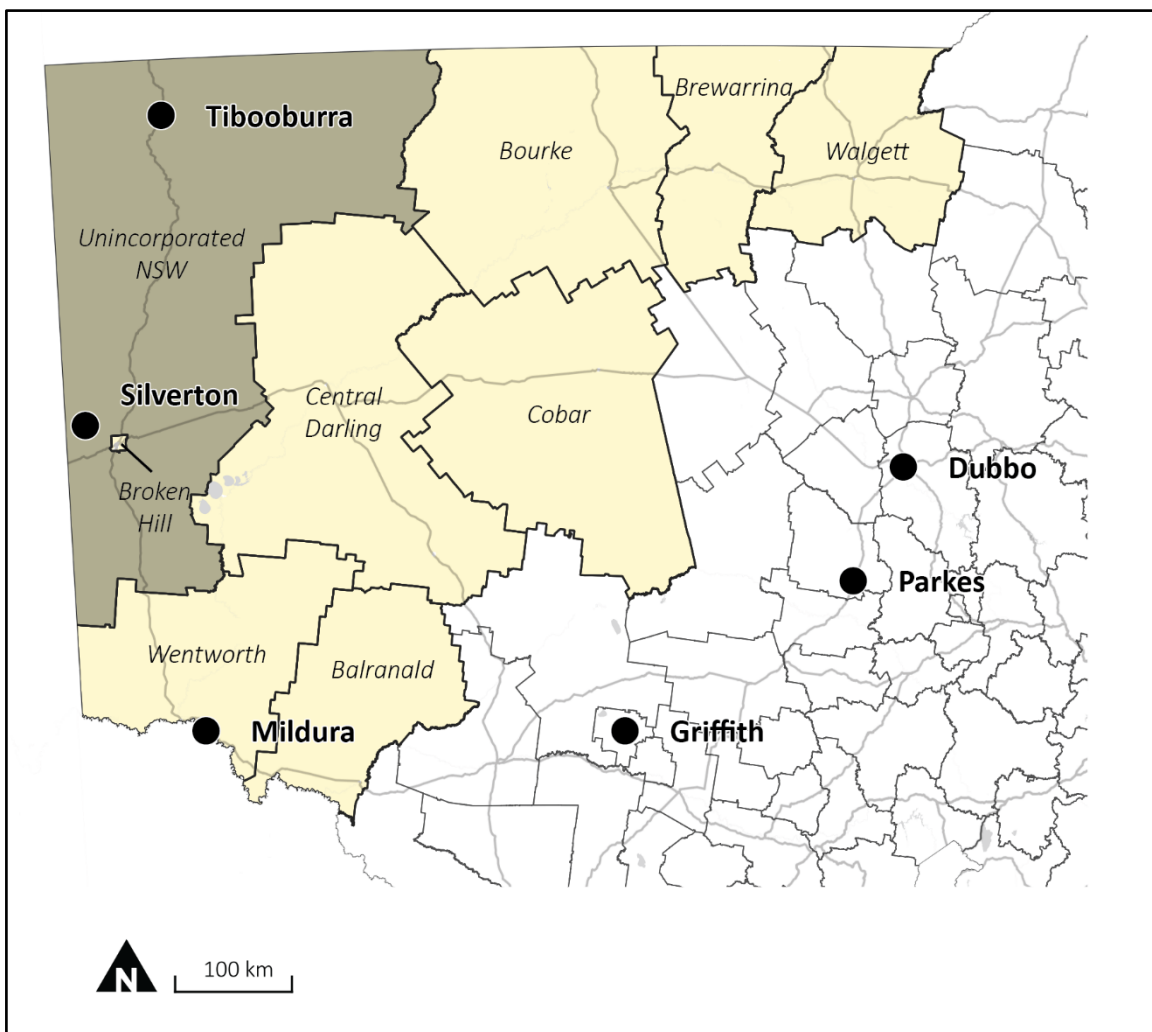
Despite the proliferation of these small communities and over 200 years of European settlement, the design and delivery of effective, democratic governance for remote regions remains a conundrum for federal, state and territory governments alike. At its heart lies a myriad of questions: How do we fulfill obligations to provide adequate, affordable services and social support to these communities? Who pays? What are the options for ensuring effective democratic representation? How might traditional Aboriginal governance systems intersect with processes and structures introduced through European settlement? What oversight is necessary to ensure integrity and local involvement in decision-making and the equitable allocation of scarce resources? And so on. These issues have variously been pondered, pursued, deferred or ignored by governments at all levels, typically without clear and consistent resolution.

Current systems of remote area governance differ markedly from state to state. Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland have opted to divide the whole of their remote regions into

local government areas – often the size of small countries. In the Northern Territory provision has been made for dispersed Aboriginal communities to have appointed Local Authorities that sit under and advise Regional Councils on truly local issues. In Queensland there are 12 dedicated Aboriginal Shires (mostly former missions), as well as several others with a majority of First Nations peoples, including in the Torres Strait. They all enjoy the same status as other local governments.

Most of South Australia is unincorporated. Around 20% of the state, mainly in the far north-west, comprises Aboriginal freehold lands with their own systems of governance established under special legislation. In other remote regions local governance is supported by the state’s Outback Communities Authority, which works with community organisations established under the Associations Incorporation Act. The Authority also collaborates with Aboriginal community groups in three small towns.

Figure 2: Far West Local Governments and the Unincorporated Area



Source: Authors

The remote Far West of New South Wales is mostly divided into local government areas that operate under the same legislation as all others. However, as noted earlier there is an extensive Unincorporated Area in the north-west corner of the state, adjoining Queensland and South Australia. It has no dedicated state body for oversight and support – administration is fragmented across several

agencies, notably transport, regional development, Crown lands, environment, water, national parks and local government. Two small settlements – Tibooburra and Silverton – have elected ‘village committees’, established as incorporated associations.

In all these arrangements, there is an uneasy tension between the need for decentralized decision-making to respond to local community needs and aspirations, and the ‘business as usual’ model of centralized control at all levels of government in Australia. Federal, state and local government systems most commonly reflect the ‘head office’ model – a single or dominant location at which elected officials meet, decision-making occurs and senior managers direct planning and service delivery. Our nation as a whole is run from Canberra, our states and territories are run from their respective capital cities, and our local governments have their administration centres from which the elected council and executive operate. And ironically, *local* government is overseen and directed centrally by a range of state ministers and agencies that typically apply what are essentially one-size-fits-all templates, usually with minimal parliamentary scrutiny.

In urbanised settings such as our cities, regional centres and larger towns, these centralised systems operate reasonably well in terms of democratic representation and governance. However, fundamental questions arise as to whether they can ever effectively serve remote communities. When hundreds of kilometers separate small, distinctive population centres in remote areas, what level of understanding and insight can a single group of elected councillors, let alone a distant state or federal office, have of these communities and their particular issues and needs? How can good decisions be made without the logistics and resources required to support true equity in democratic representation, governance and service provision?

As noted above, the Northern Territory has recognized the need for a level of representation and a measure of self-governance for remote Aboriginal communities within regional council areas. South Australia has also put in place tailored systems of local governance for its remote regions and settlements. Queensland supports small Aboriginal shires. The key point is that to varying degrees those governments have accepted the challenge of ensuring that the voices of remote communities are heard, supporting a more appropriate response to their needs and aspirations.

So, there are already models for decentralised governance in places like Central Darling. They may not be perfect, but can be emulated or adapted as required. The key will be to match tailored local systems with new ways of working on the part of central government agencies, and with sustainable funding arrangements.

3. Governance Challenges in Central Darling

3.1 Disadvantage

The over-riding challenge for ‘good governance’ in Central Darling is addressing and overcoming disadvantage. This takes several forms: remoteness; a harsh climate characterized by low rainfall and summer heat, with periodic droughts and floods; scarcity of natural resources and a weak economic base dependent largely on extensive grazing; a minimal tax base for local government; failing and sub-standard infrastructure and urban amenity; severe problems of access and communication (see below); plus a large proportion of the population – mainly Aboriginal people – experiencing poor

health and wellbeing associated with chronic long-term unemployment, a lack of potable water, limited access to fresh produce, as well as overcrowded and dilapidated housing.

In recent years, Central Darling Shire and its communities have been in the news for all the wrong reasons. In 2019, and again in early 2023, there were mass fish kills in the Baaka (Darling River) at Menindee and elsewhere, raising serious issues about the adequacy of natural resource management in the Murray-Darling Basin and Far West NSW in particular.¹ In late 2021, Covid-19 swept through Aboriginal communities in Wilcannia, necessitating significant intervention from government agencies, the Australian Army and a range of not-for-profit organisations to provide temporary isolation facilities, medical care, food and water supplies and other assistance. In 2022 and 2023 there have been periods of intense and prolonged rainfall and the Baaka has delivered record floods with almost unprecedented flows from upstream. The road network was cut and suffered severe damage, as did other infrastructure, dwellings and rural properties (although some stations and farms have been able to capitalize on favourable growing conditions).

To date, these emergencies have generated brief periods of national attention and short-term boosts to resources, but the underlying problems of deficient environmental management, inadequate funding for infrastructure and services, socio-economic disadvantage and fundamental issues of human rights still await action. It appears that very little has been done to build the capacity of the Shire Council and the broader network of responsible agencies to ensure effective coordination in the planning and delivery of appropriate services to Central Darling communities. The same applies to the Unincorporated Area, albeit to a lesser extent.

3.2 Access and service delivery

A fundamental requirement for the delivery of effective governance and services in remote communities is access, whether by road, rail, air or telecommunications. In turn, access is dependent on diverse, reliable infrastructure to connect communities locally, regionally and beyond. Despite everything that is understood about these imperatives, Central Darling Shire is a prime example of how a raft of impediments to access and connectivity can create barriers to democratic representation and obstruct the delivery of sound governance and much needed services.

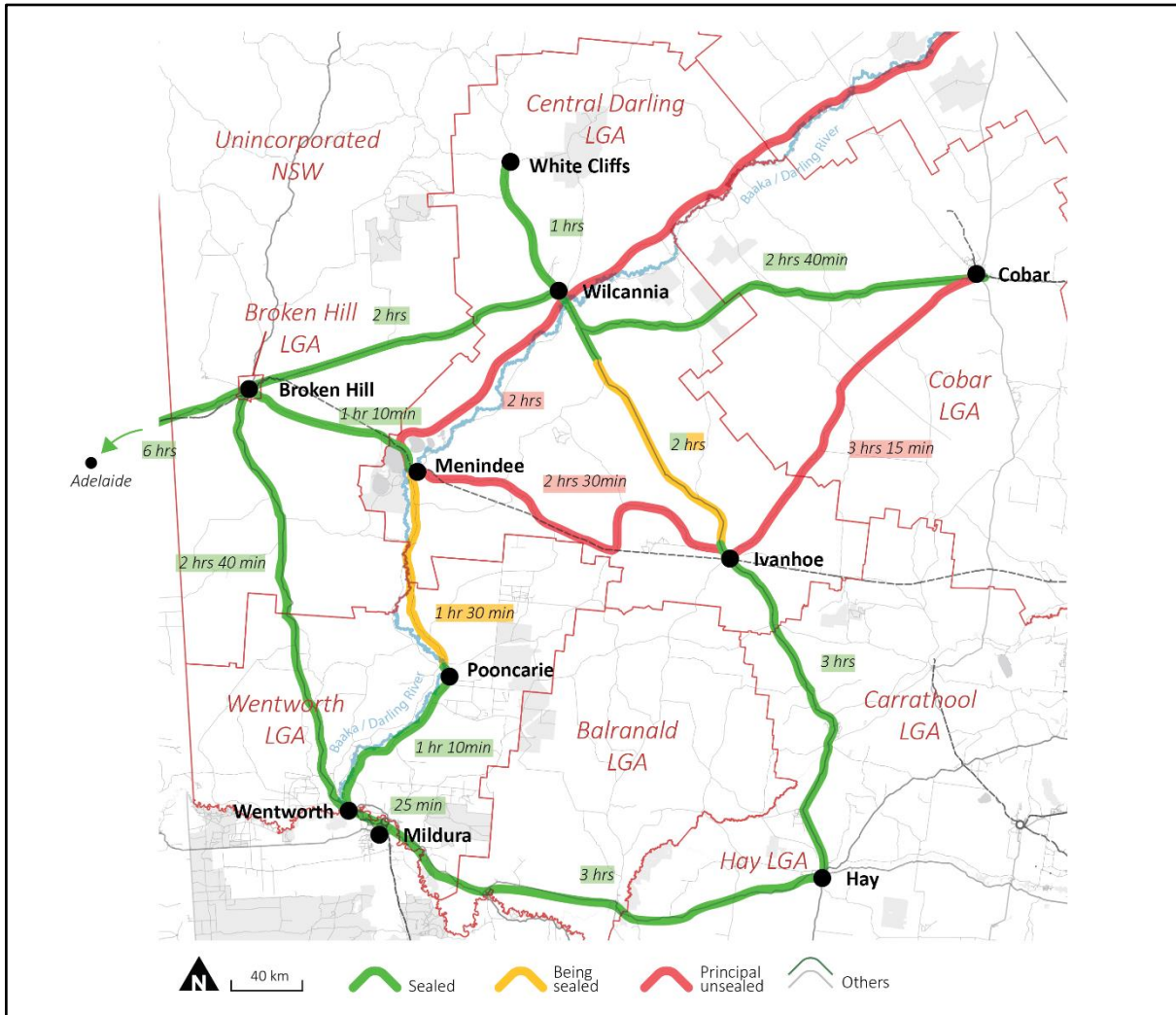
While the Shire's population is concentrated within the four main towns of Wilcannia, Menindee, Ivanhoe and White Cliffs, none of them could be described as the 'primary centre'. Wilcannia's population is around 750 people. Menindee's official head count is around 550, but the local health centre reports around 850 names on its books. Ivanhoe's population is a little over 250 and White Cliffs records around 150. This pattern of several dispersed towns is quite different to that of other Far West shires and points to the need for a tailored response in terms of local governance.

Aside from their location within the same vast local government area and cultural connections between Aboriginal communities, these towns have precious little commonality or connection – they are simply too far apart to facilitate any enduring social or economic bonds. They depend on a patchy local and regional road network for links with each other and with regional centres such as Broken Hill, Cobar and Hay (see **Figure 3**). Many connecting roads across the Shire are unsealed and can be

¹ See for example: 'Millions of fish dead in the worst mass kill ever to hit Menindee region, in NSW's far west', ABC News 18.3.23; and 'Menindee fish kill may have been partly caused by release of 'black' and clean water by authorities, researchers claim', Guardian Australia 11.4.23

impassable for weeks or even months at a time during and after rains. Heavier rain can also create problems with the sealed road network, including closures due to flooding and longer-term damage. Rail services to far western NSW have been continuously scaled down over many years and passenger services these days are few and far between. Air travel to and from Broken Hill can be prohibitively expensive.

Figure 3: Central Darling Local and Regional Road Networks



Source: Authors, based on map prepared by Central Darling Shire Council.

Adding to these connectivity challenges is a lack of affordable, reliable telecommunications infrastructure. Rural-remote communities often have limited or no access to the NBN; mobile phone services are patchy at best and subject to frequent outages; internet speeds are in many cases chronically slow and may be available only via satellite link; and data charges are disproportionately high.

This combination of remoteness and poor access infrastructure has created a profound lack of equity between larger regional centres and the small communities of Central Darling, as well as between localities within the Shire. There is still no direct, all-weather road access between Wilcannia, Menindee and Ivanhoe: sealing the Cobb Highway between Ivanhoe and Wilcannia is well advanced, but there are no plans to upgrade the Wilcannia-Menindee and Menindee-Ivanhoe roads. Menindee

is best placed with a sealed road to Broken Hill and a journey time of just over an hour, while work is under way to provide a sealed link south to Pooncarie and thence Wentworth and Mildura.

4. Aboriginal Community Services and Governance

4.1 Population Characteristics and Service Delivery

While the overall population of Central Darling has been gradually decreasing, the proportion identifying as Aboriginal has grown and is increasingly younger than the rest of the Shire’s population (see **Table 1**). At the 2021 Census Aboriginal people officially made up around 36% of the Shire’s population, but the true figure may well be as high as 55%, because around 19% of respondents did not identify their Indigenous status. This compares to about 5% on average across NSW, suggesting that most of those living in Central Darling who did not identify their Indigenous status could have identified as Aboriginal. An Indigenous population of around 50% in Central Darling would compare to 3.4% for NSW as a whole, and 3.2% for Australia.

Table 1: Census Data 2016 and 2021

	Wilcannia	Ivanhoe	Menindee	White Cliffs	Total Shire
2016 Total Population	745	327	551	148	1,833
2016 Indigenous Peoples	61.2%	16.3%	36.1%	0	39.5%
2021 Total Population	735	261	537	156	1,725
2021 Indigenous Peoples	51.4%	22.6%	32.6%	3.2%	36.5%
2021 Indigenous Not Stated	22.4%	14.9%	17.5%	0	19.1%
2021 Median Age Total Population	32	42	50	56	42
2021 Median Age Indigenous Peoples	27	39	29	32	30

Source: ABS 2016 and 2020 Census of Population and Housing Snapshots

Support for service delivery to Aboriginal communities, other than ‘basic’ municipal services provided by the Shire Council (urban infrastructure and facilities, waste management, water, sewerage and drainage) is shared between federal and state governments. Aboriginal people are particularly dependent on income and rental support, social housing, community and health services, and disability and aged care. As discussed in section 6.1, the federal government is also the primary source of external funding for municipal services through financial assistance and roads grants to the Shire. However, potential linkages between those grants and other funding streams of importance to the wellbeing of Aboriginal communities – and to *Closing the Gap* between outcomes for Aboriginal peoples and other Australians – have yet to be pursued to any meaningful extent. This reflects a disconnect between different systems of local governance and amongst the raft of agencies involved.

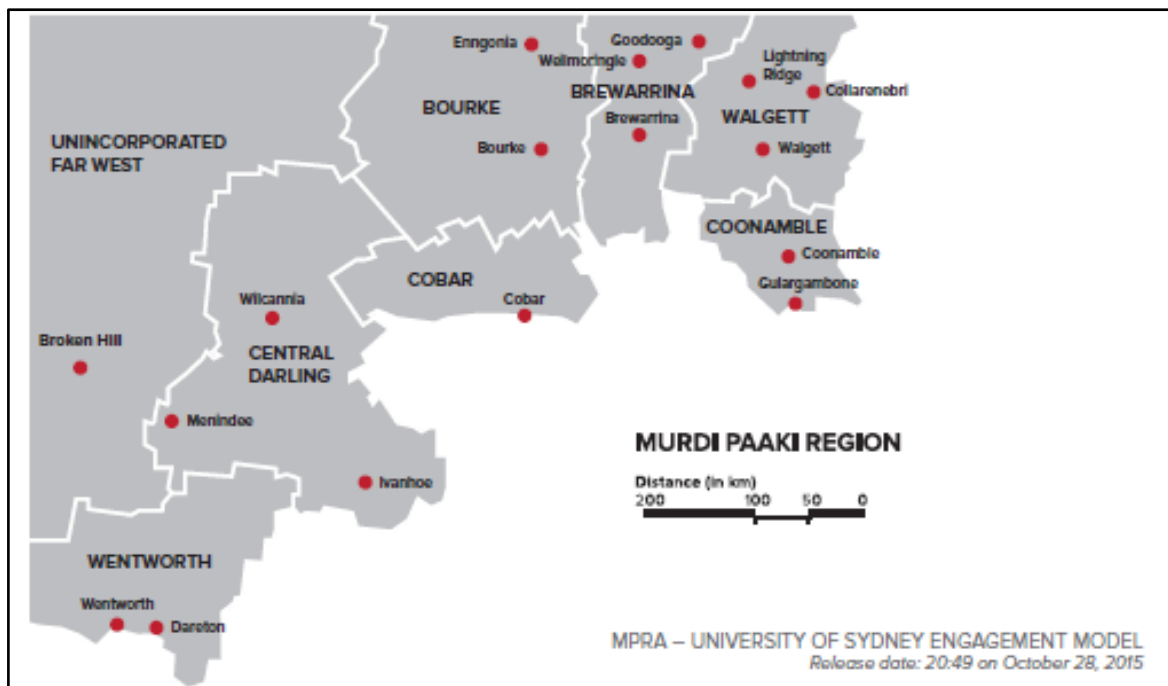
A number of the community service providers in the Shire are Aboriginal community-controlled organisations that have been in existence for 20-30 years or more. These include Maari Ma Health Aboriginal Corporation; Murdi Paaki Services Limited (MPSL), which is involved in housing; and the Regional Enterprise Development Institute Ltd (REDI.E), an employment, training and enterprise support service. Apart from police, education and health, key state and federal community service providers typically lack a substantive ongoing presence in Central Darling. To a significant extent, the Aboriginal community-controlled organisations are the backbone of service provision for their communities, and their boards tend to rely on the same small group of people.

4.2 Governance

Turning to systems of Aboriginal community governance and self-determination, there are several overlapping strands.² First, the Barkandji and Malyangapa Peoples are the native title holders over much of Central Darling, and have established the Barkandji Native Title Group Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC to hold their rights and interests. Also, the Ngemba/Ngiyampaa People have launched a claim over an area in the east of the Shire. However, while the native title system requires title holders to establish a prescribed body corporate to hold their rights and interests, very little has been done to support those bodies in their duties and functions. Moreover, largely only lip service has been paid to recognising and respecting Aboriginal law and culture concerning local governance.

Second, Central Darling is within the Murdi Paaki region (see **Figure 4**). The federal (primarily) and state governments provide funding for the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly (MPRA), Murdi Paaki Services Ltd and the network of Aboriginal Community Working Parties (CWPs) that advocate on behalf of local communities through the Assembly. The Assembly was formed in 2004 to prosecute a visionary agenda for regional autonomy and self-determination following the abolition of the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. In itself, the MPRA is not a fund holder or a service delivery organisation. The MPRA, *'operates in accordance with the ... cultural practices and traditions of the people and Nations of the region'* and *'recognises and respects the cultural authority of the Traditional Owner groups within the region'* (MPRA 2019). At present, ongoing federal funding for Murdi Paaki is in some doubt and may depend on the outcome of the upcoming referendum on a Voice to Parliament. The future of state funding also appears uncertain.

Figure 4: Murdi Paaki Region and Location of Community Working Parties



Source: MPRA 2019.

² The following discussion draws on Wensing (2021).

Each CWP develops its own locally relevant governance practice within the boundaries of the Murdi Paaki Charter of Governance, ensuring that all Aboriginal people in a community can participate, if they wish. In Central Darling there are CWPs for Wilcannia, Menindee and Ivanhoe. The nature and scope of their activities is a matter for Aboriginal law and culture, and depends on local leadership and support, which tends to vary from place to place and over time. They may or may not choose to participate formally in broader systems of governance, such as legislated local government or regional bodies.

Third, there are five Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs) in Central Darling. These are established under the NSW Aboriginal Land Rights Act. LALCs are able to claim Crown land that is not required for an essential public purpose and that is not subject to an application for a determination of native title. Each LALC currently receives an annual funding grant of about \$150,000 - \$170,000 from the NSW Aboriginal Land Council (NSWALC). LALCs may also raise extra funds by other means such as government grants, donations and through bequests from deceased estates. Membership of LALCs is open to all adult Aboriginal people residing or owning land in the LALC's area, or having a sufficient historical or cultural association with the area.

It is important to note that the 'boundaries' between the Barkandji and Malyangapa Peoples and the Ngemba/Ngiyampaa Peoples as native title holders/claimants bear no relationship whatsoever to local government boundaries or the LALC areas established under the NSW Land Rights Act. There are fundamental differences between the native title and land rights systems that give rise to underlying tensions between holders of those different forms of title, and which state and federal governments seem reluctant to address. That local, state and federal electoral boundaries do not map on to Aboriginal nations in any meaningful way adds another layer of aggravation.

Fourth, the NSW government is committed through its OCHRE (Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment) initiative to *a different way of working with and in support of Aboriginal communities by building strong working partnerships that have at their heart respect for local Aboriginal culture, leadership and decision making*.³ In particular, the Local Decision Making (LDM) component reflects an ongoing commitment to support Aboriginal self-determination and priorities, and to transfer control of program design, delivery and evaluation to Aboriginal communities. In this context, the government has signed two Accords and a Social Housing Agreement with the MPRA, which is thus a significant player in the State's initiatives.

Fifth, the federal government's commitment to establishing a Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament, most likely with supporting regional and local Voices, and with strong links to broader initiatives around *Closing the Gap*, may well have a significant impact across Far West NSW. The MPRA is already seen to provide a good example of Aboriginal regional governance. Moreover, the Australian Local Government Association is a signatory to the 2020 National Agreement on *Closing the Gap*, and the NSW government and Local Government NSW (the state association of councils) have an intergovernmental agreement on strategic partnerships, including the *Closing the Gap* partnership with the NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations (CAPO, which represents the interests of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations in NSW).

³ see NSW Government Aboriginal Affairs: <https://www.aboriginalaffairs.nsw.gov.au/our-agency/staying-accountable/ochre/>

Under the National *Closing the Gap* Agreement all of the Parties agreed to prepare Implementation Plans for their respective jurisdictions. The NSW Government has released a 130-page Implementation Plan for 2022-2024 in conjunction with the NSW CAPO and Local Government NSW (NSW Government 2022). The Plan identifies over 70 specific actions across five Priority Reforms and 17 Socio-economic Outcomes (taken from the National Agreement), all of which have some relevance to Aboriginal peoples living in Central Darling (NSW Government 2022, pp.4-8). **Table 2** extracts those items that appear particularly relevant to consideration of future options for local and community governance.

Table 2: Key Governance Provisions in the NSW Closing the Gap Implementation Plan 2022

Priority Reform/Socio-economic Outcome	Key Action Areas
Priority Reform 1: Formal partnerships and shared decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All Aboriginal communities have access to partnership arrangements in their local community and on policy issues impacting them, where their voice can be heard.
Priority Reform 3: Transforming government organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government organisations and services are responsive to the needs of Aboriginal people. Government organisations and services are culturally safe.
Priority Reform 4: Shared access to data and information at a regional level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aboriginal communities have access to government data and insights in formats that enable local decision-making and shared decision-making with government.
Socio-economic Outcome 9: Aboriginal people secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The supply of regionally informed housing is increased, as is the capacity of the community-controlled sector to deliver housing to Aboriginal communities. The Aboriginal Community Housing Provider (ACHP) sector is strengthened.
Socio-economic Outcome 12: Aboriginal children are not over-represented in the child protection system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aboriginal communities are empowered to design, deliver and oversee local services, supports and processes.
Socio-economic Outcome 13: Aboriginal families and households are safe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Solutions are led by Aboriginal people and communities with a focus on long-term and generational change.
Socio-economic Outcome 15: Aboriginal people maintain a distinctive cultural, spiritual, physical and economic relationship with their land and waters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The land dealings system and interaction between Aboriginal Land Rights and Native Title are improved. Aboriginal people’s ownership of, legal interest over and access to ... inland water is increased/improved upon. Joint-management arrangements and opportunities for land, sea and inland water are improved.

Source: NSW Government 2022, pp.4-8.

These contextual factors have a strong bearing on shaping future local governance arrangements for Central Darling and the future wellbeing of its communities. Clearly, a viable local governance option needs to have the capacity and where-with-all to engage constructively with the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly and its Community Working Parties, with the native title holders and their prescribed bodies corporate, and with the Local Aboriginal Land Councils. Such engagement needs to value Aboriginal cultures, embed Aboriginal voices, respect Aboriginal peoples' rights and interests and promote healing and respect. Future arrangements must also have the flexibility to adapt to changes that may flow from the advent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament, further *Closing the Gap* initiatives, native title determinations, and treaty developments at state and/or regional levels.⁴

This also requires careful and respectful consideration of the roles and aspirations of the varied Aboriginal organisations and interests in the area, and their willingness and capacity to participate in a future 'governance alliance' with other stakeholders in order to deliver on agreed community outcomes. Such an alliance may well have to encompass a wider region than just Central Darling Shire, given similar issues facing the adjoining shires and the Unincorporated Area, as well as the varied 'boundaries' applying within different systems of governance and legislation.

5. The Shire Council: Recent History and Enduring Problems

5.1 Deficits and Distrust

Central Darling Shire Council was established in its current form in 1959, no doubt with great optimism for the future, but over recent decades its fortunes have steadily declined. Today, it faces ongoing democratic and financial deficits, and widespread community distrust.

As noted earlier, in addition to being the largest shire (by area) in NSW, Central Darling holds the unenviable record of having been without democratic local government for a decade. The elected councillors were first suspended in December 2013 and then dismissed 10 months later after a public inquiry found them responsible for the Shire's financial problems (see section 5.5). Prior to their suspension, the Council comprised nine councillors elected to represent three wards. The last election was held in September 2012. Since 2013, a succession of appointed Administrators and General Managers have been the face of both local and often state government, working on the 'frontline' and frequently bearing the brunt of community frustration and anger about substandard services and infrastructure and an overall lack of resources for communities within the Shire.

The Council is largely powerless to address this situation. With such a vast and challenging area to oversee and an extremely modest income from rates, fees and charges, it is almost totally reliant on grants and project funds to cover any costs beyond staffing and routine administration (see section 6.1 below). There are only some 55 employees, and a significant number of key administrative positions are staffed remotely, given the difficulty of attracting suitable personnel to Central Darling. The organisation is spread thin across the Shire: its main administration office and works depot are located in Wilcannia, where the General Manager and Administrator are based, but the Council necessarily also operates small service centres and works depots in Menindee, Ivanhoe and White Cliffs.

⁴ With the change in government in NSW following the State election in March 2023, Western Australia is now the only jurisdiction that has not committed to undertaking treaty developments.

There are harsh realities in this centralised system for the Council and its communities alike. For the Administrator, General Manager and other staff, a visit to Menindee, Ivanhoe or the small community of Tilpa involves a round trip of at least 300km or several hours of precious work time on the road. If the road is unsealed and weather-affected it is often closed, preventing visits. As a result, the presence of the Shire's senior management in these outlying communities is relatively infrequent (see **Figure 3** above).

For communities beyond Wilcannia, the net effect is often collective feelings of neglect and disinterest on the part of key decision-makers, despite all their efforts to visit and spend time in each community. The sentiment is largely one of: *'they make decisions about us, but they don't know us and they don't understand us because they rarely come here'*. There is a prevailing sense that every other town gets the lion's share of resources and attention, and that calls for equity between communities are ignored. The reality is that there are few resources to share. During preparation of the Shire's new Community Strategic Plan (CSP), it became clear that tens of millions of ongoing supplementary funding – that is, over and above the Council's 'secure' recurrent revenues – will be required over the coming decade simply to continue 'bare bones' operations (see section 6.1).

It appears that the former NSW Minister for Local Government intended to – or was at least considering – a return to democratic governance in September 2024, when local elections will be held across the state. An email sent by the Office of Local Government (OLG) to the Administrator and General Manager in February 2022 stated in part that:

In October 2019, the then Minister announced that the administration period had been extended until 2024 and stated that: 'the additional period of administration will allow for development of a robust and effective long-term plan to guide future governance and delivery of services and infrastructure to local communities throughout the Central Darling Shire.'

To assist in the preparation of a long-term plan, the Office of Local Government has been working with a consultant to prepare a series of potential governance options for Central Darling...Once this preparatory work is completed, it is the Office of Local Government's intention to commence consultation with the Central Darling community in mid-2022.

To date, however, only one brief meeting to discuss governance options has been held between the Minister and a small number of community representatives in Wilcannia, towards the end of 2022, and the consultant's report has not been publicly released. Moreover, following the state election in March 2023, there has been a change in state government and the appointment of another new minister. If democratic governance is to be restored in September 2024, a decision to do so will have to be made within the next 6-9 months and the form that future 'local government' should take has to be determined (see sections 6.2-6.3). Given the complex issues involved, those decisions cut across the responsibilities of several ministerial portfolios.

5.2 Reviews in 2010-13

Central Darling Shire's financial woes were first examined in 2010 with the then NSW Division of Local Government (DLG – part of the Department of Premier and Cabinet) initiating a *Promoting Better Practice* review, which was completed in 2011. The report of this review presented 56 recommendations for improvement, but also highlighted the likely financial difficulties the Council would face in the future. Having made little progress in implementing any of the recommendations, the Council once again came under the state government's spotlight in early 2013 when the Division

conducted an on-site review. This second review found the Council to be in an even worse position than in 2010, leading to the suspension of elected councillors in December 2013 (Colley 2014).

Meanwhile, in 2012 an assessment of the Council's medium-term financial sustainability was carried out by the NSW Treasury Corporation (TCorp), along with a broader review of local government's performance, structure and future directions across NSW as a whole by the state-appointed Independent Local Government Review Panel (ILGRP 2013a). TCorp had been commissioned by DLG to undertake sustainability assessments of all NSW councils as an input to the ILGRP's work. In the case of Central Darling, TCorp (2013) noted operating deficits in each of the three previous years, the limited scope to increase own-source revenues, a growing infrastructure backlog, and potentially declining service levels. It concluded (p.33) that:

... we consider Council to be in a deteriorating financial position and to be unsustainable. The current version of the Long Term Financial Plan (LTFP) highlights that Council cannot maintain service levels without operating on a funding deficit... Council has insufficient financial resources to meet its future capital expenditure requirements.

The Shire's financial sustainability was rated as 'Very Weak' with a 'Negative Outlook' – the worst rating of any council in NSW. Whether the Council itself could have been expected to make any significant improvement to this dire assessment, remains a matter for debate.

At the same time, a specific focus of the ILGRP's broader brief was to consider the future of local government across the Far West region, including Central Darling and all its neighbours. Responding in part to TCorp's findings, it proposed a wholesale restructuring, including establishment of a Far West Regional Authority to handle strategic coordination, planning and program management issues (ILGRP 2013b, p.25). The Authority would bring together all three levels of government, Aboriginal communities and other stakeholders.

The ILGRP argued (2013b, p.18) that '*achieving necessary change would require a significant paradigm shift in the way governments, their agencies and communities think and operate*'. For Central Darling, having regard to TCorp's findings, it saw little value in attempting to maintain a 'conventional' local government. Accordingly, it recommended that the Shire be unincorporated and the area placed under direct management by the Regional Authority, along with the existing Unincorporated Area. However, to ensure local democracy, elected 'community boards' were proposed for Wilcannia, White Cliffs, Menindee, Sunset Strip and Ivanhoe (ILGRP 2013b, p.31). These would be an upgraded version of the existing Silvertown and Tibooburra village committees, with more responsibilities and bigger budgets, supported and overseen by the Regional Authority.

5.3 Far West Initiative

Part of the state government's response to the ILGRP's reports was to explore a *Far West Initiative*. An advisory committee was formed, including representatives from each local council, the Murdi Paaki Assembly, non-government service providers, and the state and federal governments. In October 2016, the now Office of Local Government (OLG) released papers on *Improving outcomes for the people of Far Western NSW* (OLG 2016a; 2016b). These recognised the potential need for both local government reform and establishment of an overarching statutory regional body to handle certain

‘higher order’ functions and strategic issues. The objective would be to address the underlying problems and challenges facing the Far West, including in particular Aboriginal disadvantage.

However, faced with intense opposition from some local councils, the government abandoned the initiative in early 2018, replacing it with a \$20m funding package and the establishment of new Joint Organisations of Councils covering the northern and southern sub-regions of the Far West (Druce 2018). A high level of grant funding, chiefly for works projects, has been maintained since then, but to date the available evidence points to a continuing lack of attention to the underlying problems of remoteness and social disadvantage, and a lack of local democracy.

The Far South West Joint Organisation incorporates Balranald, Broken Hill, Central Darling and Wentworth councils. Technically it still exists, but there is little evidence of significant ongoing activities. According to the meeting schedule on the organisation’s website, the most recent minuted board meeting was held in April 2021. This leaves the region without any effective vehicle to advance the work of local government, coordinate local activities where necessary, or advocate collectively for communities on the many issues that require concerted address.

5.4 Suspension and Interim Administration

Following the suspension of councillors in December 2013, and acting in response to immediate concerns about Central Darling’s parlous financial position, the NSW government appointed an Interim Administrator to prepare and implement a ‘Recovery Plan’ (Wright 2014). The Plan focused on the need to improve political leadership, financial management and operational efficiency, and included substantial cuts to services to help ‘balance the books’. It did not examine in any detail the longer term sustainability, socio-economic and environmental issues facing the Shire. The Interim Administrator concluded that (p.25):

*The issues facing the Central Darling Shire Council are serious and complex and they will take some considerable time to resolve...The long-term solutions involve substantially pared back services and, in all probability, fewer jobs at the Council... the Council has, for some considerable time, been spending more than it receives...Equity in the Financial Assistance Grants system [presumably meaning the distribution of federal grant funding amongst councils] would be beneficial but it is not the panacea to the Council’s ills. **The real and pragmatic answer is to cut costs** [emphasis added].*

He also commented that (p.26):

The challenges faced by remote rural communities generally are poorly appreciated by our more urban population and the difficulties and costs of running a local government authority in these locations cannot be overstated (Wright 2014, p.26).

It is debatable whether ‘Macquarie Street’ has ever grasped the full implications of the Interim Administrator’s proposals and remarks, coupled with TCorp’s 2013 judgement that Central Darling Shire had become unsustainable. It would seem not.

5.5 2014 Public Inquiry and Dismissal

The Recovery Plan was apparently written on the basis that an elected council might shortly be reinstated. But in June 2014, at the end of the maximum six months period of suspension, the Minister for Local Government announced a public inquiry into the Council and appointed Richard Colley as Commissioner. The focus of the inquiry was to assess whether the Council had properly carried out its functions of financial management, asset management, legislative compliance and community leadership. It was also to address the likely capacity of the Council to resolve outstanding issues, including the establishment of a secure basis for its future sustainability.⁵

The Inquiry reported in October (Colley 2014) and placed responsibility for the Council's financial position squarely on the shoulders of the councillors. The Commissioner's report argued that a future elected council would be unlikely to implement and sustain the difficult and unpopular changes required to improve the Shire's financial position. As a result, its central recommendation was that all civic offices be declared vacant immediately and that an Administrator be appointed until 2020. This long period of administration, extending over two electoral terms, commenced immediately on acceptance of the report and recommendations by the Minister for Local Government, and as indicated above it was subsequently extended for a third council term until 2024. Presumably the idea was that an Administrator could make unpopular decisions and somehow establish a stable platform for the return of councillors. With the benefit of hindsight, and again in light of TCorp's findings in 2013, this was at best wishful thinking (see section 6.1).

Significantly, while the Inquiry report focuses almost entirely on management and leadership issues internal to the Council, one recommendation points to other factors at play in the demise of the elected Council (p.10):

The Council, in consultation with the Office of Local Government, continue to explore and participate in the development of a new governance model in Far Western NSW, as proposed by the Independent Local Government Review Panel.

There is no commentary in the body of the report that elaborates on this recommendation or provides any background or rationale for its inclusion. It does, however, suggest a conclusion that the current model of governance is inappropriate for the Shire. And it may well be linked to observations in the report regarding the lack of community consultation by the councillors about the worsening financial situation (p.88):

The lack of community consultation and leadership appears to be the result of the following:

- *The disparate and remote nature of the towns within the Shire.*
- *The Councillors' total lack of understanding of the situation.*
- *An apparent inability to communicate the financial crisis and any potential remedy to the community.*

Despite the latter two points highlighting failings of the elected Council, the first (*'the disparate and remote nature of the towns within the shire'*) not only cites a reality beyond the Council's control, but may also have underpinned the Inquiry's recommendation to explore alternate models of governance for the Shire.

⁵ For further background and coverage of the Inquiry, see Drew and Campbell (2016).

Nevertheless, the questionable assumption of both the Interim Administrator's Recovery Plan and Commissioner Colley's report appears to be that 'better management' and acceptance of severe cuts to services can – and to a significant extent, should – provide the required pathway to long-term sustainability. Like the Recovery Plan, the Inquiry report had little to say about the underlying problems of remoteness and economic disadvantage, and the current deficiencies in community services and infrastructure, that might prevent even a hard-nosed Administrator from achieving the desired financial outcome.

In particular, the Inquiry report failed to explore the likely need for increased government support, including whether the Shire was receiving a 'fair share' of federal financial assistance grants (FAGs). That issue was raised in the Recovery Plan and again repeatedly during the Inquiry. The ILGRP's final report (2013, pp.46,50) had advocated further steps to redistribute FAGs and other grant funding to more needy local government areas, including rural and remote councils. Subsequently, some significant adjustments to the distribution of FAGs were introduced from 2013-14, including a sharp increase in the allocation for Central Darling – but not enough to eliminate its structural deficit.

In the years following the Inquiry, the Shire administration has sought to make ends meet by confining itself to what might be termed 'subsistence operations' and attracting capital grants. While currently this approach has changed the colour of the balance sheet from red to black, there has been little growth in dependable recurrent revenues. This has resulted in a growing list of community needs and priorities and an increasing backlog of asset management that cannot be addressed (see section 6.1).

5.6 Further Reviews

During the period 2019-2022, the NSW Office of Local Government (OLG) commissioned two major studies to explore the future governance of Central Darling. As yet, neither report has been made public. The first was an Options Study prepared by Deloitte, which considered in more detail some of the alternative approaches to regional and local governance in Far West NSW canvassed by the ILGRP. It was completed in 2019.

Then in 2020 OLG sought quotations for development of a '*Business Case for Central Darling Shire Council*'. A description of the project to be completed was provided as follows:

The objective of this work is to prepare a detailed, robust business case for Government on up to five potential governance models to deliver sustainable local government services and infrastructure to the Central Darling communities. This business case will provide a robust basis for future Government decision making about how best to govern Central Darling Shire.

That project was undertaken by SGS Economics and Planning and completed in early 2022. Thus, on at least four occasions in less than ten years, reviews initiated by OLG and its Minister have made clear the likely need to consider models of governance for Central Darling Shire other than the 'conventional' Council that was dismissed in 2014. The only conclusion to be drawn is that the state government is now well aware that the current model, based on representation by a centralised elected council, may well fail once again.

6. Designing Future Governance That Works

6.1 Financial Prospects

Despite a decade of austerity, the Shire Council's financial position remains precarious. **Table 3** provides a summary of the audited financial statements for the past three financial years. Own-source revenues (property rates, annual charges for water supply, sewerage and waste management, plus some other fees and charges) typically account for no more than 10-15% of total annual income. This primarily reflects the low value of urban property and very low rates charged on farmland and pastoral properties (about \$1,250 each on average).

Table 3: Summary of Central Darling Shire Audited Financial Statements 2019-20 to 2021-22

	\$M 2019-20	\$M 2020-21	\$M 2021-22
Income			
Rates, fees and charges, of which	14,892	12,028	14,544
- Rates and annual charges	2,348	2,396	2,321
- TfNSW State Roads (Cobb Highway)	11,337	7,746	9,120
Operating grants & contributions, of which:	11,549	13,677	12,507
- Federal Financial Assistance (FAGs)	6,000	6,036	8,568*
- Federal Roads to Recovery (R2R)	1,503	2,115	0.390
- TfNSW Regional Roads	3,716	3,208	2,808
Capital grants & contributions	2,728	7,021	18,530
Other	0.622	0.968	1,049
TOTAL	29,791	33,694	46,630
Expenditure			
Employee costs	4,778	5,646	5,706
Materials & contracts	13,973	16,506	15,443
Depreciation, amortisation	4,092	4,299	4,524
Other	855	1,140	0.458
TOTAL	23,698	27,591	26,131
Net Operating Result	6,093	6,103	20,499
Before Capital Grants (as in CDSC's Financial Statements)	3,365	(0,918)	1,969
Adjusted by reclassifying TfNSW 'fees and charges' as Capital Grants	(7,972)	(8,664)	(7,151)

Source: Central Darling Shire Annual Reports.

*Of this amount, \$5,191M was pre-payment of grants for 2022-23. This compares to \$3,121M in 2020-21.

The principal secure sources of recurrent revenue are federal financial assistance grants (FAGs), and to a lesser extent annual state and federal grants for road construction and maintenance. These provide the bulk of recurrent revenues and as much as a third of total income. Such heavy reliance on *federal* government support warrants particular attention in designing future arrangements for local and regional governance (see section 6.4).

This leaves the Council heavily dependent on one-off capital grants. Over the past three years these amounted to 50% of all revenues – that figure includes \$28M classified as ‘fees and charges’ but which was mostly provided for capital works – major upgrades and sealing of the Cobb Highway. If the Cobb Highway ‘fees and charges’ are re-classified as capital grants, the Council can be seen to record serious underlying operating deficits. It is also facing an increasingly severe backlog in infrastructure maintenance renewal as it acquires new and upgraded assets funded by grants. A 2020 assessment identified a yearly maintenance gap of some \$3.26M (Brearley and Hansen 2020).

Moreover, the recent level of capital works programs is unprecedented and the Shire’s revenue from that source will almost certainly fall away sharply beyond 2024-25, while the annual cost of asset depreciation will increase. Even allowing for associated cuts in expenditure, annual operating deficits (before capital grants) of several million dollars per annum appear likely.

All this suggests that in the medium term neither an Administrator nor a reinstated Shire Council would be any better placed to make ends meet than was the group of councillors dismissed in 2013. State *and federal* governments need to decide what form of local governance and what level of community services and infrastructure they are willing to fund, and how to get the best value for their ongoing outlays. Those decisions must also address critical questions about social equity and the clearly sub-standard quality of current service provision in Central Darling compared to other local government areas. ‘Doing the right thing’ by the people of Central Darling, especially Aboriginal communities, will inevitably cost more.

6.2 The People Have Spoken

In 2020, recognising the need to revise its Community Strategic Plan (CSP) and develop a suite of other plans to guide it, the Shire Council allocated substantial funds, obtained through a one-off grant, to a major community planning project. The project began in earnest in early 2021 and took two years to complete, interrupted repeatedly by the Covid-19 pandemic. Along with the CSP, it also produced Town and District Plans for six localities across the Shire (Wilcannia, White Cliffs, Tilpa, Ivanhoe, Menindee and Sunset Strip); an Advocacy Plan; a Disability Inclusion Action Plan; and a Tourism Action Plan.

During three phases of community engagement, the project attracted the participation of over 480 community members of all ages and backgrounds. Discussion during the engagement events focused on the identification of broad community goals and priorities for the decade ahead, the main issues and challenges faced by Central Darling communities that need advocacy and attention, and the individual needs and priorities of different localities and communities. The result was widespread agreement on the ten new plans for the Shire, its administration and its people.

Box 1 presents a range of goal and strategy statements from the various plans concerning future governance. These were generated through community consultation and adopted by the Shire Council. These statements clearly reflect similar sentiments – Central Darling communities remember the struggles of their previous elected council before dismissal and its inherent failings in governance and representation, and they don’t want those problems repeated. They see a need for new governance systems that are more culturally sensitive and inclusive, and that recognise the importance of engaging with arrangements for Aboriginal governance and service delivery. In

addition, they see the broader potential benefits of decentralised governance and the creation of community-based structures in each locality.

Communities were therefore unified in one critical perspective – none of them want the return of a ‘conventional’ elected council whereby a small number of councillors (most likely 7) are elected ‘at large’ by all residents and ratepayers as a single constituency, or by wards. As was the case in the past, it is extremely unlikely that such a council would provide balanced and equitable representation of Central Darling’s diverse peoples and communities, or its widely separated, distinctive townships. A new model must be developed – and quickly – to enable a return to democratic governance.

Box 1: Community Strategies for Improved Local Governance

- Design and implement governance systems within the Shire that are culturally responsive and ensure communities have effective local democratic structures and representation
- Ensure that Aboriginal communities and agencies within the Shire have an equitable role in designing and managing local governance systems and processes, and that governance systems include equal representation of Aboriginal and ‘white’ representatives
- Undertake ongoing engagement with shire communities to ensure their input in the design of local governance structures and services
- Establish town committees/councils to provide a collective/community voice and discuss local issues and priorities
- Establish local governance and control of funding and decision-making affecting Aboriginal communities
- Ensure that Aboriginal communities within the shire are directly engaged and represented in the design and delivery of local services so that those services properly reflect current and future needs
- Improve and increase interagency communication and collaboration to support effective service planning and delivery
- Manage governance of the Central Darling region in co-operation with other existing governance systems for Aboriginal communities, including Local Area Land Councils and the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly and its Community Working Parties
- Establish regular local Elders programs and an Elders Board to administer local lore for Aboriginal people, similar to arrangements elsewhere in NSW.

6.3 Exploring the Alternatives

As noted earlier, two recent consultant reports have reviewed options for future local governance. Neither has been published, but given the known problems and constraints it seems unlikely that the options considered would have differed significantly from those canvassed by the ILGRP and the *Far West Initiative*, or the ideas discussed with local communities during the Shire Council’s strategic planning project.

Based on the findings of the ILGRP and Commissioner Colley, the issues canvassed in the *Far West Initiative* papers, and the Shire's recent CSP documents and financial prospects, re-instating a 'conventional' shire council would achieve neither effective local democracy. nor sustainable local government. Moreover, it would not have the scope or authority to address the broader economic, social and environmental challenges recently highlighted by the Covid-19 epidemic and the Baaka-Darling fish kills. Given the ongoing lack of adequate recurrent revenues, another financial crisis would almost certainly arise in a few years – unless provision of services and infrastructure was cut to the point where 'local government' became meaningless.

Instead, a package of the following options appears worthy of support – and at least merits detailed investigation with an open mind. The overall objective would be to establish a new 'governance alliance' that brings together all key stakeholders in a concerted effort to address underlying problems and provide appropriate services and local democracy for all.

1. Replace the Shire Council with a state- and federal-funded Authority that brings together key government agencies and community representatives, provides an umbrella for locality-based bodies, and ensures regular contact and cooperation with Aboriginal governance systems and processes. The Authority might be limited to the current Shire boundaries, but its remit could more usefully include coordinated management of the Unincorporated Area, filling an evident gap in state administration. It might also have a broader strategic role across more of the Far West region (somewhat along the lines of South Australia's Outback Communities Authority and as suggested as part of the *Far West Initiative*) in order to address underlying economic, social and environmental concerns. If it assumes responsibility for the Unincorporated Area and/or a wider regional role, the Authority could be based in Broken Hill, where it would be easier to attract senior staff.
2. Formally recognise Aboriginal organisations – Land Councils, Native Title entities and service providers, as well as the Murdi Paaki Assembly and its Community Working Parties (if they so wish) – as part of the 'governance alliance'.
3. Establish four elected Community Councils, supported and overseen by the Authority, for the townships and surrounds of Wilcannia, White Cliffs, Menindee-Sunset Strip and Ivanhoe, together with an Advisory Committee representing the pastoral areas (including Tilpa). Each Council could have a discretionary budget and some locally-based staff led by an 'Area Manager'. They might forge close working links with their respective Local Aboriginal Land Council. This Community Council model could be extended to the existing Silverton and Tibooburra Village Committees.
4. Ensure equitable representation of Aboriginal peoples and communities on both the Authority and Community Councils.
5. Task the Authority with bringing together representatives of Aboriginal communities and their organisations, key state and federal agencies, and other sections of the Central Darling community, to explore *and support* models of governance and service delivery for Aboriginal peoples that have the capacity to join-up with the broader system of local and regional governance (to the extent they consider appropriate).

As always, the devil will be in the detail. However, the over-riding lesson of the last decade of state administration and ad hoc funding support through capital works projects is that effective local democracy and long-term, financially sustainable local government in Central Darling Shire require

fresh thinking and serious consideration of models successfully operating in other states and territories. This demands a collaborative approach that respects the views of local people and comes to grips with underlying challenges of remote area governance, rather than further attempts to paper over the cracks and defer the implementation of necessary change.

6.4 Engaging the Federal Government

While the administration of Central Darling Shire is dominated by the state government and its agencies, notably the Office of Local Government, apart from major capital works it is largely funded by the federal government. The Shire Council would collapse without federal FAGs and Roads to Recovery funding. Aboriginal governance and service delivery systems are likewise supported by a range of federal grants, and most likely the federal government will have an expanded role to play in ensuring the wellbeing and good governance of Aboriginal communities. Management of the Murray-Darling Basin and climate change impacts are also matters that increasingly demand a federal response.

This means that the federal government has – or should have – a keen interest in the effectiveness and sustainability of future governance arrangements for Central Darling, including the decisions that must be made soon about whether to persist with a ‘conventional’ Shire council or to formulate and implement a new model better suited to current and prospective circumstances – not only of the Shire but also a broader sub-region. Local *government* might formally be a constitutional prerogative and responsibility of the states, but in cases such as Central Darling where federal funding, the wellbeing of Aboriginal communities and environmental management are such crucial factors, that becomes something of a legal fiction. Any realistic assessment of future options must take into account the need for – and encourage – close federal engagement.

7. Conclusion: A Pressing Need for Leadership

As indicated at the beginning of this report, a decision on the future governance of Central Darling Shire must be taken soon. And as foreshadowed by the Office of Local Government in 2022, it needs to be taken in consultation with local communities. Their views have already been indicated clearly through the Shire’s strategic planning project, but further consultation is warranted on the basis of the fresh approach outlined in section 6.3.

Presently, of all the challenges facing Central Darling, in many ways the greatest is being played out not locally, but far to the east in ministerial and other offices of the state government. That challenge is about deciding who can and should take the lead in bringing together the several key ministers and agencies with responsibilities for ensuring good governance, adequate services and infrastructure, and sound environmental management for the people and places of Central Darling, the Unincorporated Area and the broader Far West.

A decade has passed since Central Darling Shire was placed under administration and since the Treasury Corporation and the Independent Local Government Review Panel reported on the serious financial problems and need for systemic change facing not only Central Darling but local governments across the whole of the NSW Far West. Balranald Shire is now also under administration, while recent reports highlighted the inability of Walgett Shire to provide its people with clean drinking water, surely

one of local government's most basic responsibilities.⁶ And the Menindee fish kills are just the latest example of the steady deterioration of the region's ecosystems.

Yet apart from the abandoned *Far West Initiative* and the subsequent one-off injection of \$20 million, which apparently achieved little by way of longer-term benefits, there is no evidence of any substantial, concerted effort to ensure an acceptable standard of living for the region's peoples, or to maintain – let alone restore – environmental quality. The nominated regional centre for most state departments and for the National Indigenous Australians Agency, is Dubbo, 560km by road from Wilcannia, 370km from Bourke and 300km from Cobar. Inevitably, the primary focus of those regional offices are the more densely populated areas of the Central West and the Western Slopes and Plains. Given limited resources, issues facing the distant Far West are all too easily overlooked – until a crisis looms.

Against this background, redesign and reinstatement of democratic governance in the Shire is currently left in the hands of the Office of Local Government (OLG), which is incongruous on three fronts. First, the OLG is based in Nowra, on the state's South Coast. Second, over the past decade it has been significantly reduced in status and influence. Third, the breadth and depth of challenges facing the Shire and its communities are so great, especially when broader sub-regional issues are also taken into account, that it is impossible to conceive an effective governance structure solely within the purview of the Minister for Local Government. It demands attention and action from at least four or five state ministers, and across all three levels of government. Their inputs and efforts will require coordination by an agency with greater reach, influence and capacity than the OLG, let alone a reinstated, under-resourced Shire – even if Central Darling communities wanted one.

Under the previous state government it appeared that the Department of Regional NSW, with the Deputy Premier as minister, was best placed to take the lead. At the time of writing the future status and scope of the Department is unclear, but given that its minister is also Minister for Western NSW, it seems reasonable to assume that it could play a coordinating role and be the 'parent' department for a multi-functional sub-regional authority. The only other option might be the Premier's Department, where OLG was once a Division, alongside Aboriginal Affairs.

Regardless of which agency carries this baton, all those involved would do well to learn from the events of the recent past. After ten years of administration and a string of reviews and inquiries, there is a compelling argument that re-establishing the business-as-usual model of governance, in the form of another under-resourced elected council, will simply not work. Going down that path would be the ultimate indicator of the unwillingness (or inability) of government to listen to communities and recognise the need for a change in direction.

As noted earlier, the need for change was acknowledged by Commissioner Colley in his Inquiry recommendation to explore a new governance model for the Far West along the lines proposed by the Independent Local Government Review Panel, and later pursued by OLG through the aborted *Far West Initiative*. It is also evident from OLG's more recent commissioning of two reports to examine options for Central Darling and make a business case – presumably for essential additional funding.

⁶ See 'The town where Coca-Cola runs more freely than drinking water' Sydney Morning Herald, 13 April 2023. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/the-town-where-coca-cola-runs-more-freely-than-drinking-water-20230410-p5cz93.html>

The key point being made in this paper is that there is simply no point in spending more money on a model of local government that has clearly failed and can hardly even begin to address the complex social, economic and environmental challenges facing its area and communities. To do so would represent a very poor return on investment for NSW taxpayers.

Time and effort should be spent on designing and implementing a new model that facilitates coordinated high-level management of Central Darling and the adjoining Unincorporated Area, as well as democratic community governance, and that has real capacity to make a difference. The Covid-19 crisis in Wilcannia and the unprecedented fish kills at Menindee are stark warnings that the time for kicking the can of failure ever further down the road must come to an end. Focusing on the formal structure of local government alone – and effectively in isolation – would in fact be tantamount to inaction. And the price will be years of increasing expenditures without lasting improvements – before yet another round of costly reviews to investigate the issues and explore the same alternatives.

That price would be paid by the entire population of Central Darling and the environment and ecosystems in which they live, but most of all by Aboriginal communities left to languish in their disadvantage. As a nation, we increasingly recognise and celebrate Aboriginal heritage and culture, and the connection of Aboriginal people to their country. We are taking positive steps to address social inequities and advance the rights of First Peoples through initiatives such as *Closing the Gap*, native title and land rights legislation, and the proposed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament. Better frameworks for local and regional governance that respect Aboriginal culture and enable Aboriginal and non-indigenous Australians to work together to address their respective and shared needs should be seen as an essential element of those efforts.

Central Darling could be an exemplar of how to embrace and effect real change. An opportunity – and an imperative – now exists for state and federal governments to make a long term commitment to a new ‘governance alliance’, anchored by a multi-partite authority, that explores innovative ways to enhance democratic representation and Aboriginal governance, and begins to tackle the deep-seated problems of remoteness, disadvantage and a damaged environment. Who will step up, take the lead and exercise the authority required to make that happen?

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