

\$4.5 million spent on government ads to convince MPs

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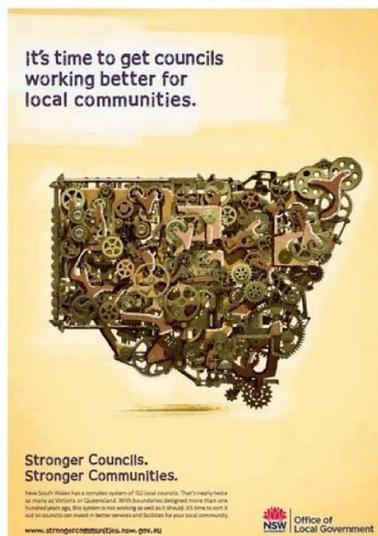


NEWS: Rally. No Forced Council Mergers Snap Rally. Mayors, Save our Councils Coalition, MPs, Community members and Councillors. Photograph by Edwina Pickles. Taken on 22nd Jan 2017.

The state government spent nearly \$6 million advertising two controversial, and later wholly or partially shelved policies, with fact-free and "emotive" appeals designed to persuade the community but even MPs themselves, an independent review has found.

In a report released on Thursday, the state's Auditor-General found government advertising for plans to merge dozens of NSW councils and an abortive ban on greyhound racing included advertisements that were inconsistent with guidelines requiring public information be objective and fair.

Extraordinarily the local government department, which spent \$4.5 million advertising the benefits of a proposed major merger of the state's councils, conducted a cost-benefit analysis that found the campaign's main benefits included boosting MPs' confidence.



"Advertising was expected to 'increase confidence of Members of the Legislative Assembly and Members of the Legislative Council to support the reform legislation'," the Auditor found.

Both campaigns were also found to have "adopted subjective or emotive messages designed to build public support for government policy".

The pre-campaign research for the council advertising campaign segmented the community into "apathetic", "apostle" or "combatant" groups based on assessed local levels of support for the proposal to merge councils.

"Campaign research identified statements that were most likely to reduce resistance to mergers," the report said.

Early parts of the campaign relied on subjective assertions such as that the council "system is broken" and vague references to "[a] brighter future", but the only facts mentioned were that the state had 152 councils and they had existed for more than a century, the report said.

The Auditor found that speed with which both campaigns were mounted saw regular review processes by-passed or truncated and that both the council regulator and justice department found it difficult to "demonstrate that value for money was achieved".

The \$1.3 million "Dogs deserve better" campaign for the state government's ultimately overturned plan to ban the sport of greyhound racing relied on confronting imagery such as "gun targets, blood smears and gravestones" and included factual errors about the lifespan of racing dogs and greyhound racing's legal status globally.

The Auditor found no specific breaches of the laws governing government advertising but made four recommendations for improved transparency, particularly when the need for ads is deemed "urgent".

In its response to the report The Office of Local Government said it would welcome additional guidance on the fair presentation of public information.

The Justice department argued that "emotive language is an effective tool to engage audiences".

The merger of a number of rural and regional councils and more than a dozen others [fighting the state government's plans in court were later scrapped](#) after Gladys Berejiklian became the new Premier of NSW early this year.

Her predecessor, Mike Baird, sensationally dumped the proposal to ban greyhound racing in the face of [widespread criticism, particularly from the media](#).

The report comes after surging expenditure on advertising by the NSW government which spent almost \$85 million on public messages last financial year or 50 per cent more than the previous year.

Government advertising had been falling since the coalition took over from heights of nearly \$120 million per year in 2008 under the previous Labor state government.

<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/government-advertising-factfree-and-to-bolster-mps-review-finds-20171102-gzdp7v>