

Crucial report into council mergers not held by council minister, department

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James Robertson

The minister in charge of the state government's controversial council merger policy does not have a copy of the blueprint it is based on, it has emerged.

In the fierce debate about council mergers, no document is more shrouded in secrecy – and yet more central to government plans – than a KPMG study that prepared cases for about 40 council mergers it said would save taxpayers \$2 billion.



Gabrielle Upton does not have a copy of the blueprint that council mergers were based on, it has emerged.

The report nor the calculations behind it have been publicly released, something which recently cast a cloud on the legality of the approach the government took to mergers, including forcible mergers.

But it seems that the state government does not want the document circulating too far in its own ranks either.

Much of the advice behind the council merger process remains secret.

A freedom-of-information request this week revealed no copy of the report could be found in the files of the Local Government Minister's office, or the department in charge of councils, the Office of Local Government.

"If the Minister [and department] genuinely do not hold a copy of this pivotal report, then their actions throughout ... have frankly been a mockery," the opposition's local government spokesman Peter Primrose said. "How is it that they can have legitimately fulfilled their responsibilities? Or have they acted recklessly?"

Project 1 - Communications

Purpose: To ensure the benefits of local government reform are understood and to help minimise concerns within the community.			
Public information campaign – the case for change		16 Aug – 11 Sept	
Draft plans for communications and stakeholder management for reform announcement		22 Sept	
IPART final report on Council Submissions to Premier and Minister		16 Oct	
Final communications and stakeholder management materials		20 Oct	
Delivered (previous week)			
	Delivery Date	Owner	Status
	4 Sept	TB	
Key deliverables / activities			
	Delivery Date	Owner	Status
Communications terminology for reform milestones	10 Sept	TB	
	22 Sept	TB	

The Premier's department has commandeered much of the amalgamation policy, sources say.

But the minister is ultimately responsible for the law and the former local government minister who first advanced the mergers proposed within the KPMG report and later recommended the state's Governor approve the forcible merger of many councils.

Ms Upton's office said she had read the report and down played any problem with it being held by another department.

"The NSW government has thoroughly considered the community benefits of all merged councils and all proposed mergers," a spokesman said.

The report secrecy recently caused the government trouble in ongoing legal challenges to its [merger plans](#).

The Supreme Court recently found the process of merging two north Sydney councils was unfair, partly because the bureaucrat assessing the merits of the amalgamation needed to have access to the report to do a proper job.

Premier Gladys Berejiklian cancelled several pending mergers in regional areas soon after taking power after heavy political criticism of the policy in the state's regions.

But the issue continues to dog the government in urban areas with the added challenge of seven anti-merger challenges winding their way through the courts, including an upcoming High Court case by Woollahra Council.

The state government last year claimed all the "key elements" of the report had been released. But it later emerged more than 25 separate pieces of analysis by KPMG were being held as classified documents.



Anti-amalgamation activists doubt its findings but have [received blacked-out pages](#) when requesting it under freedom-of-information law.

A small section of the report was released but showed only some of the sources used to generate estimates. One academic critic derided it as "awash with errors".

Anti-merger campaigner Peter Primrose says it appears the government has been reckless, or ducked its disclosure requirements. Photo: Supplied

<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/crucial-report-into-council-mergers-not-held-by-council-minister-department-20170524-qwca8d.html>