Masters of Research Thesis

Title:

Fit for the Future, (Not) Fit for the Community: A Critical Analysis of NSW Council Amalgamation and Community Opposition

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Fit for the Future, (Not) Fit for the Community

Abstract

The NSW State Government announced its local government strategic reform program *Fit for the Future (FFTF)* in 2014. At the centre of the NSW Government's plan was the desire to reduce the number of local government areas (LGAs). This research found that council amalgamation remains a central policy goal of local government strategic reform. Despite the goals of the State Government, the *FFTF* reform were opposed throughout the process. This opposition arose from both local communities and local government. Despite a growing body of existing literature exploring Council reform in NSW, a critical gap is observed. To date, analysis of local government reform fail to examine the rationale and strategy of community opposition. In order to better reveal the insights of the amalgamation process, this project adopted a case study approach by examining the proposal merger of Ryde, Lane Cove and Hunters Hill councils. A qualitative mixed methods approach is adopted. Within the context of the neoliberal and post-political form of governance, this research reveals the State Government objectives and strategies behind *FFTF*. Likewise, drawing on a post-politics and NIMBY framework, councils and community reasons and strategies in opposing council amalgamation is interrogated.

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First and foremost, I wish to acknowledge the valuable guidance provided by my supervisor Dr. Kristian Ruming; I could not have finished this thesis without his great support.
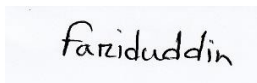
I would like to thank Macquarie University for proving me the scholarship to pursue my higher study. I am also grateful to all the academics and staff of Geography and Planning Department for their motivation. I am also incredibly thankful to the fellow HDR candidates, who provided me the appreciated peer support.

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Author Statement

I hereby declare that this thesis is an original work and has not been previously submitted to another university or institution for assessment. In addition, it comprises no material written or published previously by another person, except where references are made. An Ethics Committee Approval (No 5201600502) has been issued by for this research (Appendix 1).

Fariduddin

………………………………………….. 	Khandakar Al Farid Uddin 	17/11/2016

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List of Acronym

FFTF	Fit for the Future
JRA	Joint Regional Authority
LGAs	Local government Areas
ILGRP	Independent Local Government Review Panel
IPART	Independent Pricing and regulatory Tribunal
ISC	Implementation Steering Committee
NIMBY	Not in my backyard
NSW	New South Wales
NSROC	North Sydney Regional Organization of Councils
OLG	Office of the Local Government

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The NSW Government's plan to reduce the number of local government areas (LGAs) in the State from 152 to 112, has been controversial and contested, especially its attempts to force amalgamation on councils under its strategic reform program, *Fit for the Future (FFTF)*. The government stated strategic reform "will create new, stronger councils, improve council performance and strengthen the system of local government[1]." Opponents – including council staff, councillors, residents' groups, opposition political parties– say that the process is biased, undemocratic and politically charged and argued it will reduce the existing services, raise the rates and weaken the local democratic process.

In Australia, local government is an important tier in its governance and administration system, particularly in ensuring the provision of facilities and services to the local communities. However, local government is not recognised in the Constitution (Drew & Grant, 2016a; Rogers, 2016; Sansom, 2009). As Sansom (2009) argues:

> "Local government is not recognised in the Constitution and it is established under State laws, and all aspects of local administration are subject to State control (p. 8)."

Local government can be considered as a 'creature' of the State Government because its roles and authority are established by legislation and legal frameworks in each state. Tan & Artist (2013) argue that:

> "Local government in Australia is governed by the state legislation that outlines a council's purpose, processes, activities and operations. All state jurisdictions require councils, through their Local Government Acts, to prepare one or a series of plans which describe and forecast future activities (p. 8)."

Local government in Australia delivers a significant level of public services but, it is constrained due to its relatively weak legal and financial position (Ryan & Woods, 2015). Local government exhibits considerable diversity regarding the state-based legislative frameworks and their size and population (Sansom, 2009). Population size varies considerably. In urban areas councils can have populations of 100,000 or more. In contrast, about 200 local governments serve populations of fewer than 10,000 residents (Aulich et al., 2014; Ryan & Woods, 2015).

Structural reform through compulsory council amalgamation has been the primary instrument of reform in most Australian states (Aulich et al., 2014; Brian et al., 2008; Drew & Dollery, 2014; Drew et al., 2013; Sinnewe et al., 2015). Importantly for this research, State Governments define the powers of local governments and define the geographical areas for which local authorities are responsible. The total number of councils in Australia decreased from 1,067 in 1910 to 565 in 2013 (ILGRP, 2013). Structural reforms have always been contested, and the history of council amalgamations has been one of the long periods of antagonism and resistance.

The NSW Government introduced a series of local government reforms called the *Fit for the Future* (*FFTF*) in September 2014. *FFTF* is an outcome of various policy formulation efforts initiated since 2011 (see Chapter Four). The State Government launched various experts' panels and community consultation. After a series of discussion, the State Government proposed council amalgamation in 2015. As per the proposal, the number of councils in the Greater Sydney will be reduced from a total of 43 to 25. Outside of Sydney, the number of councils

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[1] . http://www.fitforthefuture.nsw.gov.au/: Accessed on 01 November 2016

will be reduced from 109 to 87. The amalgamations are generating a lot of opposition as well support to some extent.

The State Government has high aspirations:

> "It's time for a new era of local government… Local government reform is not just about proposed mergers…It's about making wider changes to the system to strengthen and improve the ability of councils to deliver the services and infrastructure the community deserves (Davies & Mckenny, 2015)."

The Premier heralded the mergers and said it would improve infrastructure and stabilize rates (Sansom, 2015). As per the State Government, the reforms will improve facilities and services for residents.

In contrast, the proposed council mergers have been criticised and opposed by some residents, community groups, and councillors. According to a report in the Sydney Morning Herald:

> "The strongest argument against amalgamations is that they lead to a diminution of representation for local communities. Recent research by the Australian Centre for Excellence in Local Government found that 75 per cent of Australians thought the local government was the tier of government best able to make decisions about a local area… Opponents of amalgamations warn local services tailored to the community are at risk in bigger councils. The argument goes that as councils become corporatised, they will cease to provide services that serve the particular needs of their area and provide a more vanilla offering. There will almost certainly be the loss of jobs, rationalisation of libraries and waste services, but potentially these savings will result in less pressure on rates (Davies, 2015)."

For many, the outcome of the reform process was to secure a preconceived objective, which downplayed democratic processes and public participation. This was perceived as detrimental to the local communities:

A Member of Save Our Councils Coalition argued:

> "*Fit for the Future* was reverse-engineered, [The government] had already made up its mind (Gerathy, 2015a)".

The Local Government NSW President stated:

> "[It's a] dark day for local democracy and a bully-boy farce (Edward, 2016)".

Save Our Councils spokeswoman claimed:

> "[The] benefit from huge mega councils will be developers (Gerathy, 2015b)".

Despite the push for amalgamation by the State Government, many residents, community groups, local councillors and council staff oppose the proposed mergers. In response, these stakeholders have initiated widespread protest movements.

This project aims to understand the policy and governance framework of the *FFTF* and analyse the strategies undertaken by the State Government. The community opposition reasons and applied resistance strategies will also be explored. This study is guided by the theories of neoliberalism, post-politics, and NIMBYism and analysed through an urban governance approach.

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**1.2 Research context and selection of research subjects**

The Australian local government amalgamation can be considered as 'amalgamation wars' (Tiley & Dollery, 2010). The State Governments have been the initiators of amalgamation, with an aim to achieve greater efficiency and better service delivery to local communities (Tiley & Dollery, 2010). As the third tier of government, local government in Australia is characterised by a series of tensions (Ryan & Woods, 2015). Under the neoliberal governance processes progressively implemented in NSW, economic performance has been prioritised in planning and decision-making mechanisms (Schatz & Rogers, 2016), leading to the emergence of the technocratic (post-political) planning process (Rogers, 2016). To examine the NSW strategic reform through council amalgamation, a post-political framework is adopted as theoretical lens. The post-political framework reveals the wider political process and limited participation options mobilised by the state government in an effort minimised opposition to council amalgamation and secure a desired political outcome. It also renders visible the spaces and strategies to opponents to challenge and destabilise the political efforts of powerful urban actors.

Under the neoliberal governance regime in NSW, the market is positioned as a decision-making instrument and express on behalf of the peoples (Rogers, 2016). The tendency of the NSW Government is to 'pay lip service' to the notions of public participation, while participation is often managed on the terms that are dictated by government and, increasingly, in ways that are deemed acceptable to private property interests (Schatz & Rogers, 2016). The *FFTF* program progressed by six different independent review processes (Drew & Grant, 2016b). However, the citizenship antagonism became significant (Van Leeuwen, 2013). A theoretical framework that draws upon neoliberalism and post-politics helps to explore underlying political and economic objectives of the NSW council amalgamation process. This is combined with analytical insights drawn from literature examining public participation and NIMBYism in order to understand community opposition and resistance strategies. In particular, this approach reveals how a state-led form of post-political planning represents the opposite to a public-led form of active participation.

The main research subjects include:

- State Government: The architects and supporters of NSW council amalgamation.
- Residents and community groups: Those who oppose council amalgamation and seek to protect their existing council.
- Councillors and council staff: Those who have mixed opinions on the amalgamation process. Some agree with the amalgamation program, while others are very antagonistic and against the program.

Figure 1: Research context and subjects

Fit for the Future, (Not) Fit for the Community
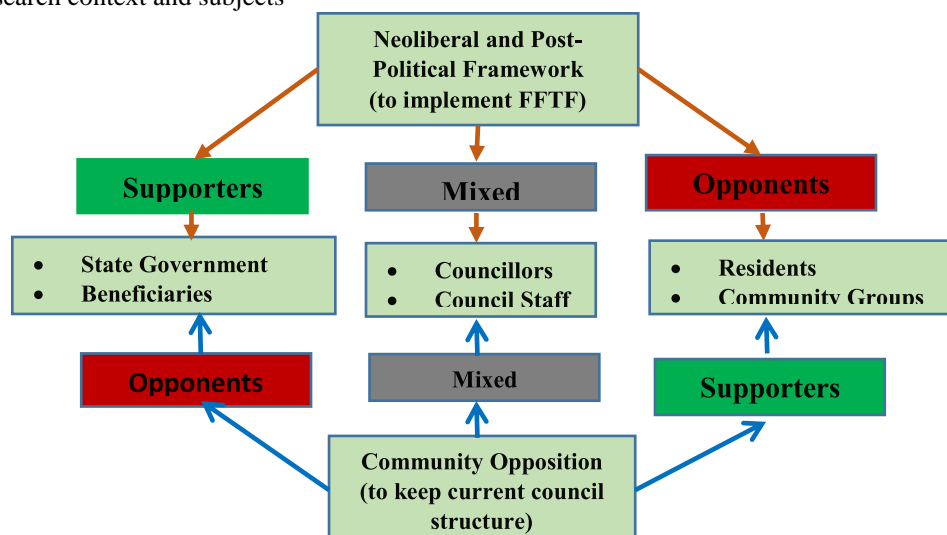
1.3 Objective and fundamental questions

The primary objective of this study is to analyse NSW council amalgamation and community opposition in the framework of neoliberalism, post-politics and community participation and resistance.

In doing so, this research will focus on four key questions:

i. What are the objectives of the NSW State Government's *FFTF* program as outlined in policy documents and media?

ii. What are the strategies mobilised by the State Government to implement *FFTF* reform?

iii. How have communities, councils, and their representatives reacted to *FFTF* program?

iv. What are the strategies mobilised by communities, councils and their representatives for opposition to amalgamation?

As the State Government declined the invitation to participate in this project, in addressing the research questions, data was collected from the available primary and secondary sources. State Government perceptions are analysed through available contents. The evidence is presented from the whole State of NSW as well as drawing on focused case studies of three local government areas in Sydney.

A case study approach is an experimental process to collect significant outcomes from a single case (Chapter Three). A mixture of qualitative and quantitative techniques is used to explore the research questions. The project has used a mixed-methods approach: two key methods are mobilised - content analysis and interviews.

This study was conducted in the proposed merger of three local government areas: Ryde, Lane Cove and Hunters Hill Councils – into a single case study. The case study provides insights into the amalgamation process because these three councils have received substantial public opposition. The study area also offers an opportunity to explore the purposes and strategies of the local actors who are seeking to resist the State Government's *FFTF* policy. This is not to suggest that the case study is representative of all sites of conflict around council amalgamation as it is likely that specific concerns will be raised at each site. However, the detailed examination of Ryde, Lane Cove and Hunters Hill, within the context of wider concerns around local government reforms, provides a detailed insight to the actions of key actors and the issues they are challenging.

1.4 Scope

While council amalgamation has been identified as an important issue facing NSW, there is shortage contemporary research and scholarship exploring the policy implementation and the impacts of a reformed local government system. Most of the present study is of size, scale, and efficiency.

Drew & Dollery (2014) reported that the proposed amalgamations would not secure enhanced financial sustainability in Greater Sydney, local government. Drew et al. (2015) research is on economies and scale of amalgamation. Ryan et al. (2015) research on citizens' attitudes to amalgamation reveals that residents are uncertain about amalgamation. Brian's (2015) critical assessment on the proposal to merger North Sydney and Willoughby councils and focused on the empirical basis of the scale efficiency and savings arguments. Research undetaken by Bell et al. (2016) is on comparative performance and process of council amalgamation over the year 2004 to 2014. They have found that merged council have not performed better compared to unmerged councils.

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On the other hand, Drew & Dollery's (2016) critical assessment of the *FFTF* process argue about errors and unreliable data. Drew & Grant (2016b) have done a case study on the contradictory opinions of independent agents of the *FFTF* process. Grant et al. (2016) have done research on recent Australian local government reform process.

Despite a growing body of literature exploring Council reform in NSW, significant gaps remain. So far, analysis of the governance of the *FFTF* process, or community opposition to it is absent. Scholarship needs critical knowledge and evidence about the reason and strategies behind the community opposition. This research fills this gap and analyses the governance framework and community opposition surrounding local government reform in NSW.

1.5 Structure of the thesis

This thesis has six chapters and is organized as follows. Following the introduction, Chapter Two discusses the theoretical background and definition of related theories like neoliberalism, post-politics, and NIMBYism. It also explains the issue of politics of planning and public participation. Chapter Three sets out the research methodology. It describes the meaning, opportunities and challenges of the research methods used. It also explains the details of the investigation process. Chapter Four focuses on the policy context; the NSW structural reform and the *FFTF* process. Chapter Five provides a detailed critical analysis of the local government reform process. This chapter gives an analysis at two scales: at a program-wide level and a more comprehensive analysis of the amalgamation tensions evident in the case study. Together the analysis of both levels provides valuable insights into the objectives, reactions, and strategies of opposition that surround the *FFTF* process. Finally, Chapter Six provides some concluding remarks. It summarises the research questions and discusses the constraints of this research and opportunities for future studies.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Geographical research offers much to the theoretical and empirical analysis of urban processes. The significance of urban geography is increasing as it examines urban economy, urban development, urban housing, urban politics, urban demographics and urban governance. Regarding the multi-dimensional urban research, Swyngedouw (2009) argues that:

> "…in recent years, urban research has become increasingly concerned with the social, political and economic implications of the techno-political and socio-scientific consensus that the present unsustainable and unjust environmental conditions require a transformation of the way urban life is organized (p. 601)."

An urban geography framework offers valuable insights into the processes of ongoing NSW local government reform and accompanying opposition. The local government reform process mirrors, and draws upon, recent efforts by the State government to reform the planning systems. Although planning as an activity is well established in Australia, what constitutes that activity is complex and is constantly changing and competing for challenges (Brunner & Glasson, 2015). To reduce complexity, streamline planning and development decisions and facilitated urban development opportunities, governments have initiated various reviews of their planning policies (Ruming & Gurran, 2014). Not surprisingly then, the last period has seen an almost endless stream of reforms in the State planning systems (Khan et al., 2015). Paralleling changes to planning systems, the journey of local government reform began in late 2011 when NSW councils came together for *Destination 2036* to discuss the long-term future[2]. The plan aimed to ensure better facilities and infrastructures to the residents. As a part of this larger reform package, the NSW Government released its *FFTF* program[3]. To increase planning and development efficiency, the *FFTF* proposed restructuring the size of various local councils across the state. Since the announcement of the *FFTF* program, it has been a controversial socio-political issue among the NSW Government, political parties, community groups and residents.

To draw a clear picture of the theoretical context, it is necessary to acknowledge its disciplinary position. In this regard, urban geography offers insights for exploring and analysing the process of local government reform and council amalgamation. Contemporary urban planning and geographical literature provide a useful theoretical toolkit for exploring these issues; in particular, the problems seem to be highly relevant to the theories of neoliberalism, post-politics, people's participation and NIMBYism. This chapter focuses on the literature related to urban geography, neoliberalism, post-politics, political issues in urban developments, people's participation and NIMBYism to establish a theoretical framework for empirical analysis of council amalgamation.

2.2 Urban Geography

Geography is a rigorous academic discipline to define because of its complex historical development (Kitchen & Tate, 2000). However, in a simple sense, geography can be defined as the exploration people in places (Gale, 1992). There are multiple geography sub-disciplines, each of which with their own theoretical, methodological

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[2] . https://www.olg.nsw.gov.au/strengthening-local-government/local-government-reform/destination-2036
[3] . http://www.lgnsw.org.au/key-initiatives/reform-fit-for-the-future

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and empirical emphasises (Kitchin & Tate, 2000). As part of the sub-discipline of urban geography, urban planning, development, reforms and urban politics (amongst other things) have emerged as central concerns. In this field, Clarke (2015) argues that geographers can also provide a sophisticated understanding of strategies used by politicians both to depoliticise issues and to address citizen disengagement.

Bengt and Per Gunnar (2016) argue that 'urban scholars have emphasized how power relations and differently positioned actors shape cities'. Cities are important geographical targets and institutional laboratories for a variety of neoliberal policy. The causes, trajectories, and ramifications of this urbanization of neoliberalism remain a matter of intense debate among critical geographers and other radical scholars (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). Thus, the analysis of politics is essential to exploring the ways cities evolve. Darling (2014) argues that:

> "the nature of politics, the political and the contours of politicisation have long been critically debated within geography as scholars have explored the ways in which claims to politics, political subjectivity and visibility are performed through the claiming and construction of space (p. 72)".

Cities have become the incubators for many of the major political and ideological strategies through which the dominance of neoliberalism is being maintained (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). To comprehensively probe urban reform politics, an interdisciplinary research framework like neoliberalism and post-politics is required, to consider both political action and communication (Shin, 2016). Within a neoliberal urban system, there are hidden actors responsible for delivering urban change. A contextual perspective on the political helps to reveal the unknown powerful actors and networks, which substantially contribute to the continuous reproduction of neoliberal urbanism (Wehrhahn, 2015).

In the context of NSW, neoliberal ideologies are significant in planning, as the market remains responsible for delivering the majority of urban changes. Gleeson and Low (2000) argue that:

> "…although the theory has governments in charge, the practice in Australia depicts states adjusting and responding to the needs of the market (p. 98)".

To understand the various dynamics of the major reform packages, such as *FFTF* a greater knowledge of neoliberalism and post-political is required.

2.3 Neoliberalism

Global processes of neoliberalism have influenced urban planning and reform in developed countries, such as Australian, since at least the 1980s (Beeson & Firth, 1998). The institutional forms and consequences of neoliberalism have varied significantly across spatial scales and among each of the major superregional zones of the world economy (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). The term 'neoliberalism' denotes new forms of political-economic governance premised on the extension of market relationships (Larner, 2006). The intellectual root of neoliberalism is a utopia of unlimited exploitation (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). Wehrhahn (2015) describes neoliberal urbanism as a process which relies on liberalisation, deregulation and denationalisation of state services, which reduces opportunities for public political action and community participation options, and in turn, raises antagonism.

The influence of neoliberalism is not only visible at the central government and governance framework; it is also evident at the grassroots level. Cox (2011) states that neoliberal policies are first promoted to the national scale

then disseminated at the local level. . For this reason, the way urban developments are managed and governed has been changed. Due to increased privatisation and the centralisation of the market as a delivery mechanism of previously state based services, we might now be entering a new post-political age which seeks to curtail antagonism and alternative political action which seeks to disrupt to the logic an operation to the neoliberal agendas. Neoliberalism and post-politics form is one of the core elements of a particular form of urban governance. Under the neoliberal urban governance model, post-politics is an important tool to conceptualise the process of urban strategic reform.

2.4 Post-politics

The implication of a post-politics form of governance is that participation and alternative politics are potentially stymied in an effort by powerful elites to secure a future political and market configuration most likely to secure their desire ends. In doing so this form of post-politics seeks to limits participation and eradicate opposition. However, it also opens space for antagonism in the society and sites of alternative political action. Before going to the discussion of post-politics, a definition of politics is essential. In general, politics is the process of making the collective and powerful decision in the society. It is also the activity through which people make, influence and amends the governance and policies. From the view of political science, Crick (2004) defines politics as,

> "…a distinctive form of rule whereby people act together through institutionalized procedures to resolve differences, to conciliate diverse interests and values and to make public policies in the pursuit of common purposes (p. 67)".

The government, as well as citizens, use politics to exploit their interest in any form of governance. Politics is the pre-condition of modern democracy, and active citizenship is the necessary condition of political freedoms (Crick, 2004).

In contrast, post-politics is a different form of politics. Zizek (2008) defines post-political politics as:

> "… politics in which ideological or dis-sensual contestation and struggles are replaced by techno-managerial planning, expert management, and administration, whereby the regulation of the security and welfare of human lives is the primary goal (online version part 2)".

Swyngedouw (2009), argues that urban post-political works parallel to the neoliberal market force. Post-politics systematically eliminates any debate, disagreement, and dissensus with a series of governance technologies that fuse around consensus and agreement. Swyngedouw (2009) also argues that the emergence of a post-political and post-democratic changing the nature of politics, the tactics, and processes of de-politicization.

Different scholars have defined post-politics as an instrument of the government to exclude citizen voices and establish a reworked state-centred managerial approach in policy making and implementation. Bond, Diprose, & McGregor (2015) argues that:

> "In the pursuit of global capital, the spaces for contestation and politics have been closed down in a variety of ways and the notion of power to the people has become power to a mantra of economic growth, this closure is often termed a post-political (p. 1162)".

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Inch (2012) describes post-politics as a managerial tactic mobilised by the government to resolve antagonism and shut out citizen expressions. In the same way, Mitchell (2013) defined post-political as suppression of the inherent conflictual or political nature of the social action.

Post-politics does not only limit citizen's voice or minimize the participation but also narrows down the option of political participation. The post-political consensus is characterized by Swyngedouw (2010b) as:

> "Post-politics reject ideological divisions and the explicit universalisation of particular political demands (p. 8)".

Populism is a way of downplaying and delegitimising dissenting voices. For Swyngedouw (2009), populism is a direct relationship between people and political participation. Instead of following the political science framework, the democratic forms of governments have, as a by-product of the pursuit on neoliberalism, tended to adopt post-political forms of governance. Swyngedouw (2010a) describes the framework of post-politics in the following way:

> "This post-political frame is structured around the perceived inevitability of capitalism and a market economy as the basic organizational structure of the social and economic order, for which there is no alternative (p. 215)".

The corresponding mode of post-political form is structured around conversational forms of participation, technocratic management and problem-focused governance (Swyngedouw, 2009). The post-political processes have adverse socio-political affects in politics and democracy. However, citizens' influence and opinion are necessary ingredients in politics that neither planning nor good governance can live without. Opponents of post-political forms of governance argue that the apparent eradication of 'the political' in its antagonistic way damages democracy and will only result in the expression of the conflict or antagonism in other forms or forums like community groups (Mouffe, 2005). For MacDonald (2015):

> "We are in a post-political era where states can effectively defuse conflicts and forge consensus around a rhetoric of growth, or instead in a time of increasing un-governability, where states are decreasingly able to manage diffuse processes and negotiate any sort of consensus (p. 134)".

However, the post-political framework may fail as it closes and limits the participation. Oosterlynck and Swyngedouw (2010) argue that:

> "The post-political, the avoidance of division and radical disagreement, generates deadlock and is bound to fail politically as its negotiated technical compromise will find itself confronted with the 'return of the political', the re-emergence of conflict (p. 1582)".

It is apparent that the state Government attempted to implement a post-political regime when establishing the *FFTF* program, through the mobilisation of technologies to develop a form of consensus. On the contrary, citizens opposed the post-political technologies.

2.5 Politics in Planning and Development

Political trend plays a key role in policy formulation process. Globally, plans have been motivated by the efforts to the shift from government to governance. As noted above, a marked urbanization of neoliberalism has been occurring in cities as they emerge as strategic targets for an increasingly broad range of neoliberal policy

experiments, institutional innovations, and politico-ideological projects (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). Scholars have identified strong ties with politics and policy making. For example, Inch (2012) argues that while the exact relationship with politics and policy making is debated, policy making and implementation follows political direction.

While neoliberalism has changed the nature of governance and politics, the on-the-ground results of these processes have been mixed. Urban planning initiatives of Australian governments have become controversial for using the political framework in reform and development attempts. Legacy (2015) argues that the attention and commitment of the Commonwealth Government are uniquely politicised to use infrastructure investment to support economic growth in cities. The proposed *FFTF* program where infrastructure investment and economic scale is among the important objectives the reform is likewise a reflection of politicisation of urban planning and restructuring.

As urban plans are being increasingly influenced by politics, while implementation has also become difficult. To show the close relationship between politics and development, Inch (2012) argues that:

> "development becomes progressively more politicised and harder to manage, the closer it gets to the ground (p. 529)".

Planning, development, and local government reform is an example of the transition of governance. Plan has recently been considered part of a putative post-political condition (Inch, 2012). Managing the political in planning has been facilitated by new elite governance institutions that aim to legitimise a planning process over actually offering a platform for new ideas, difference, and scrutiny to be observed (Legacy, 2015). MacDonald (2015) identifies the recent efforts in NSW to implement far-reaching planning systems reform including the efforts to reconfigure the local government jurisdiction and instruments are a remarkable example of post-politics.

A different Neoliberal objective to integrate grassroots people arises in front (Khan et al., 2015). However, engaging the community in the development process has become limited. In a democracy, the political process enables citizens to express their preferences for the type of goods and services they want governments to provide (Dollery et al., 2007). Another point to emerge from the debate on urban development politics is the importance of local context. Local context is inevitably situated within constraints imposed by broader structural features of the post-political arrangement of local resident's participation (Barlow, 1995). If there are a lack sufficient opportunities for citizens to engage with planning decisions meaningfully: resistance, antagonistic and conflicts are likely to emerge. And this resistance from the residents in the urban development process has been termed NIMBYism.

2.6 Public Participation and NIMBYism

Neoliberalism and post-political governance have weakened citizen participation and made public involvement more formal. People's involvement in the planning process is a form of democracy. However, democratic participation in urban development decisions is limited (Ruming et al., 2012). The process of plan-making needs to reflect the engagement of the public with those tasked with making policy (Legacy, 2015). Participation is clearly needed to secure acquiescence for planning decisions; there is perhaps a growing need for participation to be seen as effective. While the value of citizen participation is recognized both in academia and government, the

recent political form of governance show that political engagement is decreasing (Berntzen & Johannessen, 2016). Inch (2012) describes that:

> "The political profile of development means that planning issues are subject to high levels of scrutiny from the council, local press, and population. This creates a political and policy climate within which local politicians and officers seek to pursue various strategies that will allow them to manage the antagonism generated by development (p. 526)".

Huff (2015) claimed that democracy requires the active and continuing participation of all members and it requires seeing our actions about others' actions. In other words, democracy requires what Boyte (2008) calls "civic work." As with all inquiry, the trajectories of democracy cannot be determined in advance.

The techno-managerial post-political process of participation has changed the nature of public participation. Due to neoliberal and post-political agenda diverse conflict and antagonism has been seen in the urban development process. A post-political approach attempts to reduce conflict and achieve consensus via community participation. Following the post-political managerial approach, a different form of community concern has emerged. Participation has been transformed to opposition, to contribute in the urban policy and governance processes.

Not-In-My- Back-Yard (NIMBY) emerged as a popular analytical term in the 1980s to explore the opposition to locally unwanted land uses (Mairino, 2011). NIMBYism is an idea to oppose the siting of facilities in the neighbourhood (Esaiasson, 2014). Ruming et al. (2012) argues that:

> "NIMBY discourses often downplay the involved drivers, associations, and interactions that frame resistance (p. 421)".

NIMBY is also criticised for its theoretical background, with Petrova (2016)arguing NIMBY lacks robust theoretical frameworks or conceptual models to serve as the basis for generating hypotheses.

While often used as a perjorative term to charaterise selfish citizens concerned with portecting an establisehd lifestyle, recent analyses have repositoned the term NIMBY. The term NIMBY has emergaed as important instrument for communities to raise their voices against urban developments. NIMBY has come to represent a strategy for communities to resist policy inteventions they oppose. NIMBY increasing symbolises active citizenship and efforts by the general public to resist what it seeks as unjust politic decisions made by the ruling elite (Ruming et al., 2012). MacDonald (2015) argues that although the local governments have the constitutional and financial weakness, they are protected by a robust tradition of local democracy. She also claimed that popular democratic movements had played a significant role in Sydney's development. Parallel to this has been an increase in anti-development protest by resident groups, frequently taking the form of local NIMBY disputes.

NIMBY conflict arises when residents have different perceptions of gains and losses resulting from the development of certain projects. Wolsink (2000) defines NIMBY in a diverse way,

> "People that combine a positive attitude and resistance motivated by calculated personal costs and benefits… opposition to facility siting is equated with the Not-In-My- Back-Yard syndrome. This phenomenon has been analysed in many different cases of infrastructure services and of social facilities as well. The NIMBY can be seen as common sense, but it represents a particular social dilemma or game-situation (p. 51 & 53)."

Participation and reform consultation process can lead to conflicts as well. For example, Sun, et al. (2016) argue that public participation is one of the leading causes of the NIMBY conflict rather than a strategy for solving NIMBY conflict. Thus, NIMBY conflicts are an important factor for understanding urban development and policy formulation.

2.7 Conclusion

Urban governance and local government reform, especially urban development process in many countries have emerged as new forms of corporatist relationships (Barlow, 1995). This relationship is the outcome of neoliberalism and post-political framework of governance. This new transformation and approaches to planning are creating conflicts and controversies, despite efforts to formalise participation and minimise conflict. Decision-making must incorporate private as well as public and community sectors to minimise adverse impacts of post-political managerial authority. This approach increasingly relies on bargaining and negotiation (MacDonald, 2015). However, under the post-political governance system efforts are made to limit the negotiation. The argument, therefore, opens up wider concerns about the relationship between politics and policy making and the range of mechanisms available to governments to manage conflict produced through the policy process (Inch, 2012). In this project, council reform represents a form of neoliberal governance where the State Government attempts to roll-out a post-political strategy to reduce antagonism and secure their policy goals. The post-political strategy includes certain forms of community consultation but constructs in a particular way to limit actual politics. This is also done through a form of technocratic governance mechanisms. However, the process does not proceed as smoothly as hoped. Alternative sites and forms of conflict or protest arise. This project will explore, what the post-political strategies of government were and explore how the community opposite Council reform process.

Theory plays an important role by providing an academic context for empirical studies (Kitchin & Tate, 2000). A good theoretical background helps to make the research successful. Theory, methodology, and practice are strongly linked in research method (Kitchin & Tate, 2000). Research methodology guides the study to acquire the answers to research questions. The following chapter will describe the methodological background of this thesis and explicit the methods adopted to conduct this study.

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Chapter Three: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Human Geography observes human activity and people's relationships with their environment (Moseley et al., 2007). This research project falls within the sub-discipline of Urban Geography. Kitchin and Tate (2000) argue that:

> "The Human Geography researcher, by carefully generating and analysing evidence, and reflecting upon and evaluating the significance of findings, aims to put forward an interpretation that advances our understanding of our interactions with the world (p. 1)".

Over recent decades qualitative methodologies have dominated Human Geography research (Winchester, 2010). Qualitative research allows for a depth of understanding (Babbie, 2013). Qualitative research is concerned with: 1) clarifying human environments and human experiences within a multiplicity of theoretical contexts, 2) elucidating human environments, individual experiences and social processes (Winchester, 2010) and, 3) capturing an in-depth understanding of the interactional processes manifested during a particular study (Wainwright, 1997).

Research is the process of enquiry and discovery (Kitchen & Tate, 2000). It is a process we use to understand our world in a way that goes far beyond a simple sketch, common sense or narration (Lampard & Pole, 2015). It can also be said that research is an on-going series of actions intended to achieve a particular result (Matthews & Ross, 2010). It provides us with a picture of particular aspects of the world and by undertaking research we are helping to contribute to knowledge (Kitchen & Tate, 2000). The term research is used to mean the whole process, from defining a question to analysis and interpretation. 'Method' is a much more accurate term for the particular investigative technique employed. A variety of methods can be used as part of the research process.

This research project adopts a case study approach to help reveal the insights of the council amalgamation process of NSW. The council amalgamation process raises a series of questions around the politics of planning, democracy, public participation and community opposition. This process involves a number of key stakeholders including State Government officials, elected politicians, local councillors and local government officials, residents and community action groups. Rosenberg and Yates (2007) argue that when considering the phenomenon of interest, the case study researcher selects the methodological configuration most suited to answer the particular research questions. The methodological flexibility of a case study approach can give the researcher proper procedural steps required to ensure methodological rigour (Rosenberg & Yates, 2007). The case study approach mobilised in this research is similar to that adopted in other post-political analyses, such as Makarychev & Yatsyk's (2014) study of urban strategies. This chapter attempts to explain and justify the methodological issues of this research, as well as emphases on the sources and process of data collection for the authentication of this research output.

3.2 Case study approach

A case study research approach is an empirical method that consists of the detailed analysis of spatially and temporally circumscribed phenomena by drawing results from a single case (Ruzzene, 2011). It is a methodologically flexible approach to a research design that focuses on a particular example of the phenomenon being explored (Rosenberg & Yates, 2007). Use of case studies is increasingly being mobilised as an appropriate

and flexible approach to research, and its use is well established (Yin, 2003). Case study research offers detail study of the particular real-life situations (Luck et al., 2006). It emphases the individual case description, prediction, and control (Woodside & Wilson, 2003). Flyvbjerg (2006) analyses five common confusions of case study and argues that an individual case study is important to understand actual situations and human behaviour, as well develops the specific skills and collective knowledge for good research.

Concerning this research, the case study approach offers an excellent opportunity to explore the objectives and strategies of local actors who are seeking to resist State Government amalgamation policy. This method enables the examination of issues, such as the form of governance, politics of planning, implementation and level of public participation, antagonism and resistance.

There are multiple ways to articulate a case study approach in Human Geography. Stake (2000) has suggested three forms of case study research,

- Intrinsic: where the case is investigated for its sake.
- Instrumental: where the case is examined to understand related issues or phenomena of interest.
- Collective: where the single case (either intrinsic or instrumental) is extended to include many cases.

This research adopted an instrumental approach where the amalgamation of Ryde, Lane Cove and Hunters Hill councils is examined to understand local opposition better. The instrumental case study approach offers an opportunity to explore some of the key issues concerning the amalgamation processes by focusing on three councils.

While the case study approach has a number of benefits, it also raises a number of challenges. Rosenberg & Yates (2007) argue that the flexibility of case study research can cause confusion amongst new researchers. Woodside & Wilson (2003) also suggest that case study research may fail to confirm reported conversations, behaviours, and events, and fail to collect the necessary detail for gaining an in-depth understanding of the mechanics and reasons behind phenomena. In this regard, Ruzzene (2011) argues case study method is technically weak. However, Yin (1994) has pointed to the opportunities that a case study approach supports and argues that case study methods are especially useful where the boundaries between the phenomenon being explored and its context are not clearly evident.

To understand the case study research, it is helpful to conceptualize it as an approach to research rather than a methodology in its right (Rosenberg & Yates, 2007). Rosenberg & Yates (2007) suggest that a case study approach may comprise participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus groups, use of questionnaires or documentary analysis. Thus, within the context of a case study, an extensive selection of methods is available to suit the particular nature of the case study and the phenomenon in question. A qualitative mixed methods approach is adopted in this case study.

3.3 Qualitative approach

The selection of data collection methods in case study research is pragmatically driven by the nature of research questions. Methods may comprise qualitative or quantitative methods or a mixture of both (Morse et al., 2005). Qualitative research is a form of critical analysis in which researchers seek to explain what they see, and hear, and try to draw a complex and rich representation of the issue being researched (Creswell, 2009). According to Winchester and Rofe (2010), qualitative research is concerned with elucidating human experiences within a

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variety of conceptual frameworks. Qualitative data consists of words and pictures and are usually unstructured in nature (Kitchen & Tate, 2000). The participants' thoughts, ideas, and perceptions are the primary data of qualitative research and can be gathered in various ways (Bolderston, 2012). Winchester and Rofe (2010) identified three major types qualitative research:

- The oral (primarily interview based)
- The textual (creative, documentary and landscape)
- The observational

Among these, the oral, based on interviews are the most popular and widely used methods. Semi-structured or unstructured interviews are one of the most common forms of qualitative methodology (Matthews & Ross, 2010). The second primary type of qualitative research involves textual analysis of documentary sources, which may include maps, newspapers and planning documents (Winchester & Rofe, 2010).

Adopting a mixed method approach is useful where a research project aims to explore a range diverse issues. Mixed methods are very important in geographical research to understand and investigate human and physical issues (Cope & Elwood, 2009). Relying on a single method is not always sufficient in responding to the research questions and drawing on a range of methods can be very beneficial (Aminuzzaman, 2011). This study has used a mixed method qualitative approach, drawing on both oral (interviews with 13 informants) and textual data (documents analysis of newspaper articles, published reports and planning documents). This approach provides a rich data set for analysing issues surrounding council amalgamation.

A qualitative, mixed methods approach to research has also been adopted in much post-political research. For example, in their post-political analysis of climate change policy, Kenis & Mathijs (2014) analyse an extensive range of leaflets, press releases, booklets, and other documentary materials as well as conducting in-depth interviews. Likewise, O'Callaghan et al. (2014) post-political analysis of the process of development project used critical discourse analysis of print media as a primary methodology. Vento (2016) also uses mixed methods approach relying on interviews and analysis of newspapers in her post-politics study of urban regeneration mega projects.

This research project has therefore adopted an Instrumental case study approach using a mixture of qualitative methods, specifically interviews and documentary review, to discover the objectives and strategies of the NSW State Government's recent reform *FFTF* program, as well as the community's and council's reaction and opposition to amalgamation.

3.4 Methods

This research adopts an innovative methodological framework to explore a contemporary policy issue facing Sydney. This project takes a mixed methods approach to answering the research questions. Two key methods will be mobilised for this research: content analysis and interviews.

3.4.1   Content analysis

Content analysis seeks to identify and quantify patterns within the text (Kitchen & Tate, 2000). Content analysis is a research method that provides an organized and objective means to draw valid inferences from verbal, visual, or written data (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). Babbie (2013) defines content analysis as the study of recorded human communications. Various documentary sources for content analysis may include maps, newspapers and planning

documents (Winchester & Rofe, 2010). Content analysis is very time-consuming, involving reading and re-reading of a large amount of text. This project analysed various sources of textual materials including newspaper reports, magazines, previous research works, community groups flyers, press releases, booklets, multiple reports, websites and other materials obtained from the community groups and State Government. The first stage of this research analysed the available published material regarding *FFTF* to establish the conceptual framework. This research explored the websites of State Government and councils to collect policy documents for content analysis. Furthermore, electronic version of leading newspapers was analysed. Throughout the study this research explored various text materials (Table 1).

Table 1: List of documents analysed

Serial	Type of document	Number analysed
1.	Government reports and proposals	15
2.	Boundaries commission panel inquiry (Transcriptions of 48 verbal submissions)	01
3.	Government media release	08
4.	Resident's submissions	80
5.	Council reports and submissions	08
6.	Newspaper reports	65
7.	Magazine reports	05
8.	Community groups opposing materials (flyers)	04
	Total documents	186

The reports and submissions have been coded thematically using NVivo qualitative analysis software. Thematic coding helps to form key themes from a large amount of data and allows for data organization as well as exploration and analysis (Cope, 2010).

Content analysis has some significant advantages for exploring data. Downe-Wamboldt (1992) argues that content analysis discovers the most suitable interactions of evidence and categorizes them based on the explanations. Content analysis more appropriately addresses some topics than by any other method of inquiry, and it is very economical in terms of time and money (Babbie, 2013). Content analysis provides a mechanism to yield interesting and theoretically useful generalizations with minimal loss of information from the original data, providing knowledge and understanding regarding the phenomena under study (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). In this research project, content analysis has helped in revealing the background of the amalgamation process, while highlighting key arguments both in support of and opposition to the process.

3.4.2 Interviews

Current scholarship demonstrates that interviewing is a vital and vibrant research method (DeLyser & Sui, 2013). In the qualitative interview, an interviewer and a respondent have an interaction where the interviewer has a general plan of inquiry (Babbie, 2013). Research interviews are an excellent method of capturing opinions and experiences, in which there is verbal interchange where the interviewer attempts to elicit information from another

person (Dunn, 2010). Kitchin and Tate (2000) consider interviewing a complex social action used to learn about a person's experiences or thoughts on a particular topic. The most frequently used qualitative techniques is an interview, and it allows the researcher to produce rich and varied data in a less formal setting. Most importantly people can talk about their practices – interview-based research can reveal far more than words alone (Hitchings, 2012). Interviews can provide a rich source of data regarding on people's experiences, opinions, aspirations and feelings (Kitchin & Tate, 2000) and provide insights into the differing opinions or debates within a group (Dunn, 2010). Interviews are a way in which people can make meaning of their experiences (Seidman, 2013). In depth, interviewees provide an alternative means for exploring issues in more depth than is possible using questionnaires and give the researcher deeper insight into respondent's feelings and attitudes (Flowerdew & Martin, 2005). Interview enables direct communication between two people and helps the interviewer to gather information by interactive dialogue (Matthews & Ross, 2010). According to Dunn (2010), research interviews investigate complex behaviours and motivations and fill a gap in knowledge that other methods are unable to bridge efficaciously.

There are three major types of the interview; structured, unstructured and semi-structured (Dunn, 2010). Semi-structured interviews are used to collect data in a wide variety of research designs and are most typically associated with the collection of qualitative social data when the researcher is interested in people's experiences, behaviour and understandings and how and why they experience and understand the social world in this way… a benefit of using semi-structured interviews is its individual, rather that group nature (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Semi-structured interviews were used to gather qualitative data that reveals the strategies and actions of key players in their supporting or resisting the amalgamation process.

This research aimed to interview State and Local Government, State politicians, local councils staff, regional organizations, residents and community groups. These groups were chosen in order to gain important insights about the reforms. As *FFTF* has significant political importance in State politics, politicians were interviewed in order to understand their thoughts about the process. One regional councils organization was interviewed as it works as a facilitator for the regional councils. Finally, residents and community groups are an integral part of the reform objectives and *FFTF* opposition. Interviewing these groups was particularly important in gathering a deeper knowledge regarding community opposition to the amalgamation process.

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews of between 15-75 minutes long were conducted with 13 respondents. All participants were over 18 years old. Potential interviewees were identified from government, council and community group websites and via the existing Macquarie-Ryde Futures Partnership. A snowballing method was also used to identify potential participants. Emails were sent to potential interviewees from the official student email, asking whether they would be interested in taking part. The Macquarie-Ryde Futures Partnership is an existing research partnership between Macquarie University and the City of Ryde. Professor Richie Howitt is the Partnership Director. The Partnership helped me to recruit participants from management at Ryde Council. In some cases, where individuals could not be identified, emails were sent to the general email address of government departments and community groups. These groups were requested to nominate a representative. However, where potential participants did not respond to the initial email, follow-up contact was made through telephone.

All interviews were conducted at a suitable location and time to respondents. Interviews with representatives of State and Local Government took place at their offices. Interviews with residents and community groups took

place at a local café. All interviews were audio recorded. The audio recording helps ensure accurate data is collected. To assist the analysis, all interviews were fully transcribed by a transcription service that guarantees confidentiality. All identifiers (names, locations, dates) were removed from the recording to ensure privacy. Analysis and thematic coding of interview transcripts were then conducted using NVivo.

3.5 Ethical issues

All research methods necessarily involve ethical considerations. Research ethics, broadly define the conduct of researchers and their responsibilities and obligations to the research (Dowling, 2010). This study has been approved by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee (Appendix 1). Informed consent and issues of privacy and confidentiality are essential principles of research ethics (Eysenbach & Till, 2001). As this research has followed the ethical principles relating to the conduct of interviews, including those relating to the consent, privacy, and confidentiality of interviewees. Before the interview, the risks and benefits of participation were explained to participants so that they were able to make an informed decision as to whether to participate. Additionally, they were given a list of indicative questions and a written, information and consent form prior to the interview. All identifiers (names, locations, dates) were removed from interview transcripts to ensure participants' confidentiality. All the participants have elected to be informed of the research findings and will be provided with a copy of the written research results.

3.6 Constraints

This research project faced some constraints. First, the study took place within the context of on-going public and political debate surrounding the council amalgamation process. It is likely that this context limited the willingness of State Government politicians and officials to volunteer to participate. Second, residents seemed to have limited interest in taking part in the interviews. Third, the relatively short project timeline limited the opportunities to employ alternative recruitment methods, which might have increased the number of participants. This research offers a good general picture of council amalgamation based on the case study but it is not representative of the whole of NSW. Despite these limitations, a significant number of interviews conducted, and the range and the volume of textual sources of data explored are sufficient to provide valuable insights into the post-political debates surrounding council amalgamation.

3.7 Conclusion

This research has used an innovative mixed method approach. Mixed methods help the drawing out of data and avoid biasedness of single process approach (Denscombe, 2008). The mixed methods approach is best suited to the analyse of NSW council amalgamation within a neoliberal, post-political and NIMBY theoretical frameworks. Though there were some methodological constraints in this project, the method adopted has revealed important insights into the council amalgamation process. The research suggests some significant findings and will help to understand the recent council amalgamation debates better.

Before exploring the amalgamation process in detail, it is essential to understand the wider policy and research context. The subsequent chapter provides an overview of the NSW council amalgamation process and associated debates. This policy framework outlines the policy environment in which the proposed amalgamation of Ryde, Hunters Hill, and Lane Cove takes place.

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Chapter 4: Council Amalgamation in New South Wales

4.1 Introduction

Australia has a three-tiered system of government: Federal/Commonwealth, State, and Local. The Australia Constitution defines the responsibilities of the Federal and State Governments. Federal Government responsibilities include foreign relations, trade, defence and immigration, while the State and Territory Governments are liable for all matters not assigned to the Commonwealth. States are responsible for planning and major infrastructure and service delivery. Thus, States are the primary metropolitan managers (Sansom, 2009). Importantly, State governments are also responsible for legislating defining local government and have authority to implement local government reforms, such as council amalgamation.

Before engaging in the empirical study of community opposition to council amalgamation, it is necessary to explore the set of policy initiatives implemented by the State Government to reform Local Government. It is argued that these policy approaches are examples of neoliberal and post-political policy efforts, which support top-down, technocratic agendas, which limit or end public participation into certain forms and certain times in the policy development process. In order to analyse the State Government proposed council amalgamation objectives and process of, an understanding of *FFTF*, its aims and processes are required. This chapter outlines the story of NSW local government reform policy initiatives and progression of council amalgamation. This chapter also depicts the information of case study area and justification of selection of the study area.

4.2 Local Government of NSW

In NSW, the State Government enjoys almost unlimited regulatory powers over local government (Drew et al., 2015). Local government (also known as councils) is responsible for the provision of services and facilities to the local residents, with the *Local Government Act 1993* (2016) stating that:

> "A council may provide goods, services and facilities, and carry out activities, appropriate to the current and future needs within its local community and of the wider public, subject to this Act, the regulations and any other law[4]".

Residents elect their representatives to serve as councillors. A multi-faceted workforce manages the local council; with the Councillor and the Mayor working as local policy-making members of local government, supported by a (sometimes) large administrative staff responsible for delivering local services and facilities.

4.3 Council amalgamation in NSW

NSW local government has experienced a number of major reforms. Since 1906, the number of councils in NSW has reduced from 327 to 152. The last round of amalgamations occurred in 2003-04, where the number of councils reduced from 172 to 152 (ILGRP, 2013). The ILGRP report (2013) stated:

> "The world is changing rapidly, and the system of local government must also change if it is to remain 'fit for purpose' and around a third of all NSW councils are at risk from weak revenues, infrastructure backlogs and declining populations (p. 13)".

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[4] . NSW Local Government Act, Section 24, p.p 14

Fit for the Future, (Not) Fit for the Community

In 2011, the NSW State Government initiated the current round of local government reforms. The reforms were initiated under the broader goal of making the councils financially stronger and more service oriented. The reform process began in 2011 with a conference initiated by the Department of Local Government (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Fit for the Future (FFTF) program initiation[5]
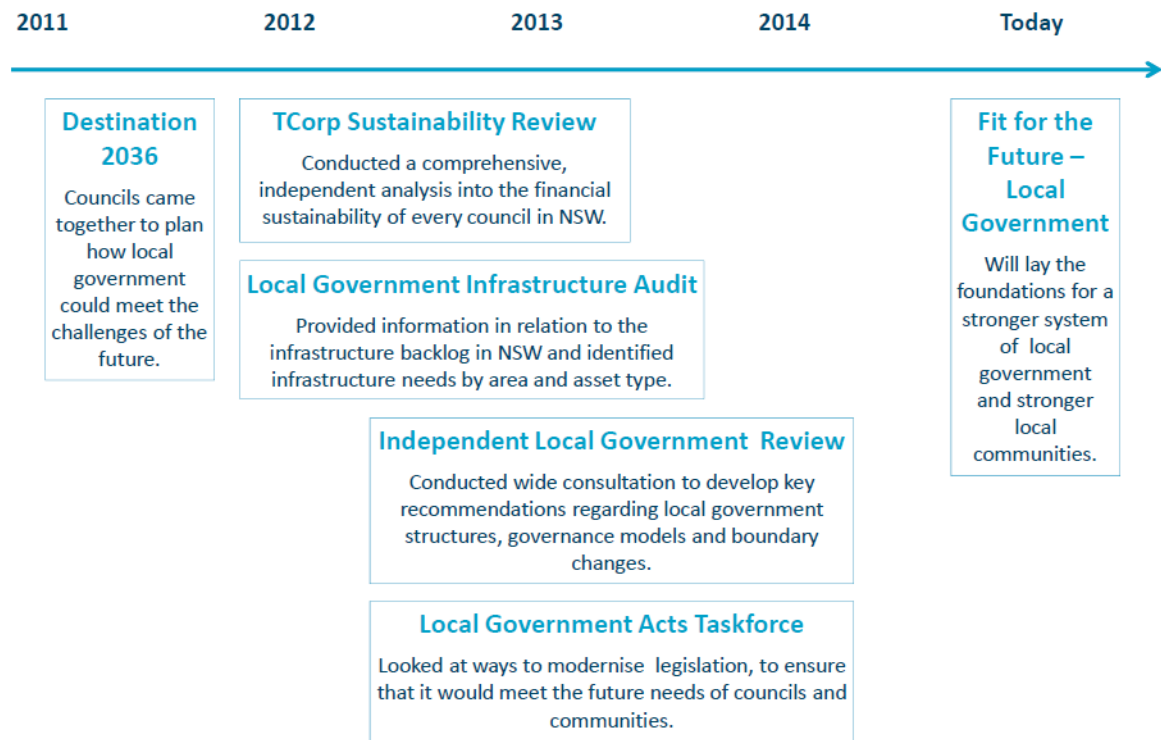
One of the most controversial and debated initiatives of *FFTF* program was council amalgamation. The State Government following various review panels recommendations initiated council amalgamation in 2015, seeking to reduce NSW total councils from 152 to 112. As a result, 20 new councils were created. However, the creation of further nine councils was delayed due to legal proceedings filed by one or more councils subject to amalgamation. This research explores one of the new council areas that challenged amalgamation process in court.

4.4 NSW Local Government recent reform initiatives

The amalgamation process of the *FFTF* program was complicated and involved a number of government agencies and independent panels. The government had to fulfil various requirements under the *Local Government Act* while also being conscious of political and community challenges. The remainder of this chapter outlines the *FFTF* process and associated debates.

4.4.1 Destination 2036

In August 2011, the Local Government Division of the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet which oversee the functionaries of the local government organized a two-day strategic planning workshop themed 'Destination 2036'. Over 350 participants consisting of Mayors, Councillors and General Managers of councils and Regional Organisations of Councils (ROCs) attended the workshop to generate strategies and action plan for

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[5] . OLG, December 2014

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stronger, sustainable and efficient local government. *Destination 2036 Outcomes Report (OLG, 2011)* indicated that:

> "It was a unique event, which provided the opportunity for the local government leaders to talk together about the future and plan for the kind of councils that communities in NSW require and deserve (p. 3)".

After the conference, the Minister for Local Government announced the formation of an Implementation Steering Committee (ISC). The *Destination 2036 Outcomes Report* was released in September 2011. The ISC received 73 submissions from conference participants in response to the report, with most supporting the Destination 2036 reforms. The ISC appointed a senior officers group to draft an action plan for Destination 2036 vision, based on the outcomes of the conference. The *Destination 2036 Action Plan* comprised five strategic directions, 12 initiatives and 34 actions to achieve the vision of strong communities through partnerships (Destination 2036 Implementation Steering Committee, June, 2012). Key objective of the action plan cantered on efficient, dynamic and innovative service delivery; robust and active local governance; financial sustainability, self-reliance and secure funding from other levels of government; different structural models; and strong relationships with state and local government.

The Destination 2036 Action Plan positioned council reform as ambitious and exciting, yet acknowledged the challenges associated with delivering the proposed reforms. The Action Plan placed considerable importance on experts' opinion and recommended the establishment of review panel of expertise to identify options available to improve the local government.

Thus, the State Government appointed an 'Independent Local Government Review Panel (ILGRP)', chaired by a local government expert, to recommend the options for local government strategic reform. An assessment committee to review the Local Government Act 1993 was also formed.

4.4.2 Independent Local Government Review Panel (ILGRP)

The Minister of Local Government appointed the *ILGRP* in March 2012. The *ILGRP* terms of reference was to investigate and identify options for governance models, structural arrangements and boundary changes for local government. The review panel did three rounds of consultation, research on council finance and boundaries, and consulted with councils and communities to develop strategies. The Panel took a number of steps, including surveys and opinion polls, web-based questionnaire and discussions to assess community attitudes to local government and potential reforms (ILGRP, 2013). The Panel completed its work in October 2013 and its final report *"Revitalizing Local Government"* and in early 2014 recommendations were in public for comment. The Panel made 65 recommendations divided into twelve key themes. Many of the *ILGRP* recommendations are especially relevant to this research. For example, under recommendation theme 8, it is mentioned that:

> "Council amalgamations [are] an essential component of reform, especially in metropolitan Sydney (ILGRP, 2013)[6]".

The *ILGRP Report* stated that NSW could not sustain 152 councils and be creating a sustainable system that can adjust with the challenges of a changing world must involve some reduction in the number of local government areas (p. 72).

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[6] . ILGRP Report 20163, p. 15

Fit for the Future, (Not) Fit for the Community

The report acknowledged implementation challenges, nothing that on the whole people appear satisfied with the performance of local government, that a significant minority of people are strongly opposed to council amalgamation in concern council areas becoming too large and loss of local representation and identity (ILGRP, 2013).

4.4.3 Local Government Act 1993 Review Taskforce 2012

As part of the reform initiatives, the Minister for Local Government appointed a four-member Taskforce to review the *Local Government Act 1993* in March 2012. The purpose of the review panel was to suggest necessary changes and framework that meet the needs of the public and the local government sector (Local Government Acts Review Taskforce, 2012). The Taskforce prepared a discussion paper and conducted workshops throughout NSW to discuss and refine the ideas. The taskforce finished its work in late 2013, and its final report recommendations were presented in early 2014.

The Taskforce recommended the formation of a new Act providing local government with 'a robust strategic planning mechanism' that is based on community engagement, expectations and aspirations, and financial responsibilities[7] and 'exercising democratic local leadership and inclusive decision-making'[8]. The report also emphasised 'working in cooperative arrangements with the community, other councils, State and Commonwealth Governments'[9], which include 'commitment to the community being at the centre of local government'[10].

The NSW Government delivered its response to the *ILGRP* and the *Taskforce* recommendations in September 2014 and announced, *'Fit for the Future'* program.

4.4.4 'Fit for the Future' program

The NSW Government introduced a series of reforms for Local Government called "*Fit for the Future"* in September 2014. *FFTF* was positioned as "A Blueprint for the future of Local Government" and formed a central part of a wider strategic reform initiatives being implemented by the State Government. *FFTF* claimed that:

> "The NSW Government is transforming the system of local government to ensure that councils are ready to deliver the quality services and infrastructure that communities deserve, the reform will create new, stronger councils, improve council performance and strengthen the system of local government as well as will deliver substantial savings and benefits for local communities in NSW[11] (Office of the Local Government NSW, 2014)".

In introducing the FFTF program to councils and residents, the NSW Premier, stated that:

> "To have a strong future, we need strong councils providing the services and infrastructure communities need (Office of the Local Government NSW, 2014)".

While the Minister for Local Government, claimed that:

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[7] . Local Government Act 1993 Review Taskforce 2012, recommendation no 3.0.0.1
[8] . Ibid 3.1.2.4
[9] . Ibid3.1.2.2
[10] . Ibid3.2.2.1. a
[11] . http://www.fitforthefuture.nsw.gov.au/ accessed on September 09, 2016

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"Together, State and local government in NSW will create stronger councils and stronger communities (Office of the Local Government NSW, 2014)".

The reform suggested three key changes[12]:

- Making new councils: It was claimed that some councils of NSW were too small. Councils with between 10,000 and 20,000 residents were identified as unable to provide modern services and infrastructures. Creating bigger council by merging existing councils was a solution by providing increased economies of scale and more efficient funding and expenditure mechanisms.

- Improving council performance: The need to improves the performance of councils was a key theme of the *Destination 2036 Conference.* It is also reflected in the later expert panel reports.

- Strengthening the structure of local government: To ensure more efficient economic performance and decision making central to strengthen the structure of local government.

The Office of Local Government developed various criteria to evaluate and identify council's area "unfit" and targeted for amalgamation. The criteria were grouped under four broader indicators of:

- Sustainability
- Efficiency
- Scale and Capacity
- Effective Infrastructure and Service Management

Under each category, many of financial benchmarks were established to measure operating performance and revenue, debt, the cost of renewing and maintaining assets and operating costs over time. This reform program required all councils to submit a proposal by 30 June 2015 outlining how the council will become 'Fit for the Future' or prove plans as to how the council will become sustainable in the long-term. *FFTF* required councils to prove their 'fitness' according to the indicators established by the State Government. As a tier of government absent from the Constitution and a "creature" of the State Government, local government has little option but to comply with the process established by the State Government. In order to implement the *FFTF* reforms, the State Government appointed Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) to give advice and assess the fitness of the councils and their submissions.

4.4.5 Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART)

IPART is the independent watchdog that determines the prices of services in NSW. It also assists as the financial advisor and policy think-tank of NSW Government. The NSW State Government-appointed IPART as the Expert Advisory Panel in April 2015 to evaluate the council *FFTF* submissions as either 'Fit' or 'Not Fit'.

All 144 councils, who were targeted, were required to submit *FFTF* proposals to IPART by 30 June 2015. IPART assessed submissions against State Government set benchmarks. As part of the assessment, IPART also invited ratepayers and other stakeholders to share their opinions about council amalgamations. IPART followed a structured process of evaluation (Figure 3).

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[12]. http://www.fitforthefuture.nsw.gov.au/next-steps-in-reform, accessed on September 09 2016

Figure 3: IPART assessment process[13]
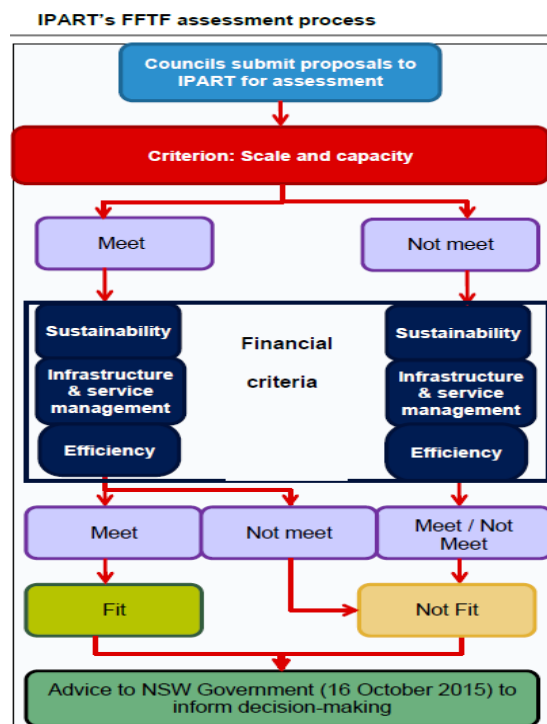
IPART received 139 local council proposals from 144 councils including four merger proposals (involving nine councils), 115 council improvement proposals, and 20 rural councils (IPART, 2015). In October 2015 IPART published its report and presented it to the government for implementation. IPART assessed 52 proposals as being 'fit' and 87 proposals as being 'not fit' for the future.

Upon receiving the report of IPART, the NSW Premier:

"With 60 per cent of councils not fit for the future, this IPART report shows the situation is now critical and that action is needed to ensure ratepayers get value for money and the services and infrastructure they deserve[14]''.

However, being identified as 'unfit' was opposed by many councils, especially as most councils passed all criteria except scale and capacity (Chapter Five).

4.4.6 NSW council amalgamation initiative (2015)

By considering ILGRP recommendations and IPART assessment the State Government finally declared wider merger proposal for councils. The proposal led the unveiling of 35 new councils across NSW.

"Improved infrastructure and services and stabilised rates will make ratepayers the big winners under a proposal for 35 new councils in NSW." (Office of the Premier, 2015)

Within the Sydney metropolitan area, 15 new councils were proposed by merging 33 existing councils. The amalgamation process would bring the total number of metropolitan councils down from 43 to 25. In regional

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[13] . IPART Report 2015

[14] . http://www.gloucesteradvocate.com.au/story/3434617/council-not-fit-for-the-future/

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NSW, 20 new councils are proposed, which would bring the total number of regional councils down from 109 to 87.

For regional councils the rational for proposed amalgamation centred on the small size of the councils and declining population. There was growing need to support regional centres and joining communities with facilities. For metropolitan councils, the rational for amalgamation centred on there being too many councils that were unable to fullfill the resident's needs. In addition, council amalgamation would reduce red-tape and linked shared services. The NSW Government stated that the proposed amalgamations would multiple benefits for councils and residents. Bigger councils would have a stronger balance sheet to meet local community needs and priorities. The amalgamation savings could support investment in local infrastructure and services or be utilised to address rate pressures.

The Minister for Local Government put forwarded 35 merged proposals to the Acting Chief Executive of the office of Local Government in January 2016. This is a proposal by the Minister of Local Government under the section 218E(1) of the Local Government Act 1993 (Local Government Act 1993, 2016). The proposal portrayed the projected impacts, benefits, and opportunities of the proposed amalgamation.

The Acting Chief Executive appointed the delegate for each proposal (Office of Local Governemnt, 2016). The delegate was required to collect submissions and conduct the public hearing to ensure that resident voices were included in the process. After finishing the local examination, the delegate submitted a report to the Local Government Minister. The delegate also submitted the report to the Boundaries Commission for their review and comments on the findings. Based on the delegates report and Boundaries Commission recommendations the Minister of Local Government would make decision to implement the amalgamation proposals.

4.5 Council amalgamation debates and opposition

NSW council amalgamation has become a very controversial issue, with arguments both in favour and against proposed amalgamation. The State Government has been vigorously advocated for the reform process. According to the Local Government Minister:

> "The proposed merger will create a council better able to meet the needs of the community into the future and will provide significant benefits for the community[15]".

Despite the push for amalgamation from the State Government, many residents, community groups, local councillors and council staff have opposed the proposed mergers (Figure 4).

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[15] . NSW Local Government Merger Proposal: Hunter's Hill Council Lane Cove Council City of Ryde Council, January, 2016, https://dpc-olg-ss.s3.amazonaws.com/761cb8403c841e5eedc226adfb2ee90d/Hunters-Hill-Lane-Cove-Ryde6.pdf, accessed on 14/09/2016

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Figure 4: FFTF Reaction[16]

One resident argued:

> "Amalgamation will not succeed, communities right across NSW will not wear it, regardless of what the Government is trying to do and to force it through[17]".

Ryde Council in their submission argued that:

> "Council does not believe that any evidence has been provided that the proposed mergers could make a substantial contribution to addressing financial problems[18]".

The Hunters Hill Mayor described the community concerns:

> "The main community concerns against amalgamation include potential loss of democracy, reduced sense of community as well as potential impacts on the quality and diversity of facilities and services[19]".

The ILGRP report acknowledged these tensions and observed that:

> "Supporters of amalgamation point to potential efficiencies, savings, and improvements to services, on the contrary, the opponents are chiefly concerned about loss of local identity and representation, as well as the risk of a large, inefficient bureaucracy". (ILGRP, 2013)

Despite attempts by the State Government to engage the broader community the council reform process, there was a lack of community support for council amalgamation. In response, some communities, councillors and council staff have become antagonistic and initiated widespread protest movements (Figure 5). Most councils are strong – often vehemently – opposed, and campaigns are launched to stave off any perceived threat (ILGRP, 2013).

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[16] . Source: https://pittwaterforever.wordpress.com/tag/bigger-councils-are-not-better/
[17] . Boundaries Commission Delegate Hearing at Hunters Hill Sailing Club, 2 February, 2016
[18] . Future Directions for Local Government City of Ryde Submission, p. 20
[19] . Lane Cove Council Mayor's Speech: Public Inquiry to Proposed Mergers, 2 February, 2016 Hunters Hill Sailing Club

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Figure 5: Council amalgamation opposition[20]

4.6 Case study area: Ryde, Lane Cove and Hunters Hill

It is not possible to conduct fieldwork across all council within the scope of this project. As such, this research has focused on the proposed merger of Ryde, Lane Cove and Hunters Hill Councils- all of which were declared 'unfit' by IPART.

According to the IPART assessment[21] these three councils satisfied the sustainability, infrastructure and service management and efficiency and financial standards overall but did not satisfy the scale and capacity benchmark, where scale and capacity was a threshold criterion which councils must meet to be FFTF. The State government announced the merger proposal in January 2016 (Figure 6).

After the announcement, the proposal of the amalgamation of Ryde, Hunters Hill and Lane Cove was sent to the boundary review delegate. The delegate received 457 submissions, among them, 58% opposed, 34% supported and 8% did not have any particular view about amalgamation. In addition, the decision to amalgamate the council resulted in the court case being lodged by Hunters Hill and Lane Cove councils on the basis of improper process.

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[20] . Source: http://www.governmentnews.com.au/2015/06/coalition-of-the-unwilling-fights-nsw-council-forced-mergers/

[21] . IPART Report Page 245, 269 and 341

Figure 6: Ryde, Lane Cove and Hunters Hill city council merger map[22]
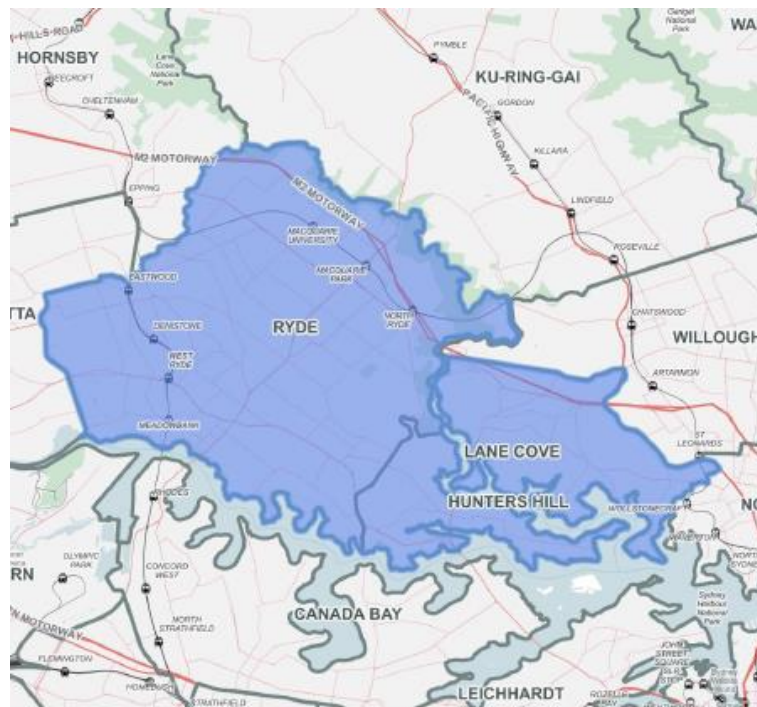
This case study site offers a valuable insight into the amalgamation process for two reasons. First, the proposed amalgamation brings together three very different councils in terms area, population size, socio-economic and cultural characteristics. For example, Ryde is a large council, Lane Cove is a medium council, while Hunters Hill is a small council (Table 2).

Table 2: Demographics of Ryde, Lane Cove and Hunters Hill Council[23]

Council	Area (km Sq)	Population (2011)	Projected Population (2031)	Operative Revenue (AU$ 2013-2014)
City of Ryde	40	108,700	153,600	96.1 million
Lane Cove	11	33,250	45,250	37.2 million
Hunters Hill	6	13,900	17,500	12.6 million

Second, the proposed merger of these three councils has received considerable public opposition. Across the council areas, a number of community opposition groups have been established, while local councils have also opposed the proposed merger. The case study site offers an opportunity to explore the objectives and strategic of local actors who are seeking to resist state government policy.

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[22] . NSW Local Government Merger Proposal: Hunter's Hill Council Lane Cove Council City of Ryde Council, January, 2016, https://dpc-olg-ss.s3.amazonaws.com/761cb8403c841e5eedc226adfb2ee90d/Hunters-Hill-Lane-Cove-Ryde6.pdf, accessed on 14/09/2016

[23] . IPART Report, p. 335, 263, 239

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The council amalgamation process in NSW is highly contested. The ongoing debate around council amalgamation and community reactions have a significant value in empirically and theoretical consideration. The policy reform process of NSW government can be defined as neoliberal and post-political theoretical framework of governance.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the policy framework directing council amalgamation in NSW. With an emphasis on top-down policy initiatives and expert advisory panels the councils reform process exhibits many of the characteristics of neoliberal and post-political approach to urban policy and governance that had emerged in recent decades. Prioritising financial objectives and performance can be viewed as a form of neoliberal governance where markets and economic performance are prioritised. While the *FFTF* process provided multiple points of community and key stakeholder input, but the capacity for these processes to influence the direction of the council reform process to appear limited. Drawing on the theoretical framework (Chapter Two), mixed method approach (Chapter Three), the following chapters explore in more detail the perceptions and experiences of community members and key stakeholder involved in the *FFTF* process. These issues are examined at both an overall policy wide scale (Chapter Five) and at the local level, through the examination of the proposed Ryde3, Hunters Hill and Lane Cove amalgamation.

Chapter Five: Critical Insights of NSW Council Amalgamation - State-wide and Local Accounts

5.1 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter Four, the NSW State Government's reform program *Fit for the Future (FFTF)* was complex and involved multiple stages. However, it appears amalgamation was the goal from the outset. Councils and communities argued that the reforms represented a form of policy development that depoliticised residents. For example, the Resident informant 3 argued:

> The whole thing is basically dishonest. It's verging on corrupt and not acting in the interests of the community. They're acting in the interests of political.

It is argued that this was a form of post-political action that removed political activity that critiqued and challenged the amalgamation processes. Shin (2016) argues that to comprehensive probe urban reform politics an interdisciplinary research framework that challenges neoliberalism and post-political urban governance is required. In challenging neoliberal and post-political policy processes, this study provides a critical analysis of *FFTF* reform initiatives. This chapter examines the forms of governance implemented by the NSW Government and analyses associated community resistance. The analysis reveals evidence of a neoliberal and post-political form of governance, disagreements and a high degree of community opposition. This chapter is divided in to eight sections: the neoliberal form of governance and post-political form of governance to scrutinise the governance patterns of the State Government; electoral politics and size-scale argument in the process; the scope and authenticity of public participation, and community opposition. Each section draws on evidence examining the reform process at the scale of the state, as well as more detailed analysis of the local government case study areas Ryde, Hunters Hill and Lane Cove. The evidence from the latter provides detailed insights into the council reform process that might otherwise be lost when focussing on the overall policy process.

5.2 Neoliberal urban governance

Neoliberalism denotes a new form of political-economic governance (Larner, 2006), where present forms of democracy fortify the flow of global capitalism (Bond et al., 2015). This form of governance has changed the attitudes of governments and has transformed the process of the legitimacy of the state (Olsen, 2006). The *FFTF* program is an expression or form of neoliberal governance, whereby residents and ratepayers are considered as customers and where the main focus of the government is to ensure efficiency by the means of merging councils and cost savings. The ILGRP Report (ILGRP, 2013) argued that:

> "One of the initiatives of the Destination 2036 Action Plan is to ensure strong and effective local governance and ILGRP term of reference was to investigate and identify options for governance models (p. 9-10)".

As a neoliberal form of reform, the focus was primarily on financial concerns. In April 2015, the Minister for Local Government argued:

> "NSW needs councils that are financially sustainable and able to deliver efficient and effective services (Calpis, 2015)".

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The main objective of *FFTF* from the government's point of view is cost effectiveness and savings. In announcing the amalgamation program, the NSW Government stated that:

> "Proposed mergers could result in up to $2 billion in efficiencies and savings, which could be invested in infrastructure, services and reduced rates (Office of the Premier NSW, 2015)".

The State's objectives for *FFTF*, therefore, align with Olsen's claim (2006) that the validity of neoliberal initiative is based on efficiency and cost effectiveness. The government pursued economic rather than community objectives. The logic behind the cost savings was outlined by the Premier:

> "I think having smaller head offices and having more money that goes towards child care, parks, sporting facilities, frontline services, I think that's a great thing for the state and that's what we're determined to deliver as part of these reforms (Edward, 2016)".

The claim of savings by cost-effectiveness, and better facilities because of these savings, is a form of neoliberalism. However, it was argued by opponents that savings would primarily come from cutting services. By challenging the claim of savings and financial benefits offer, one former Leichhardt councillor argued:

> "The predicted savings after 10 years of $75 million are produced through sacking staff, removing most elected representation and selling off council property…Rates for homeowners would also go up (Mcilroy, 2015)".

The removal of back-office and administrative functions, by cutting staff and, streamlining senior management roles, is a form of neoliberal governance (Olsen, 2006). Informants argued that a strong focus in the *FFTF* was centred on financial issues.

At the local scale, the case study revealed a high degree of scepticism about the validity of State Government claims about projected savings. Councils challenged claims around financial limitation and identified themselves as financially sustainable and as best-placed to provide local services. Council informant 3 argued:

> We are financially sustainable; we believe we have got such a broader revenue base to be sustainable. We have been a strong partner with government, with business and we can demonstrate that through many good examples.

Councils disputed the financial benefit accruing from amalgamation as inaccurate and claimed that the projected savings would lead to reduced efficiency, as a result of the cost of merging and the resultant staff cuts. Council informant 1 alleged:

> The costs of merging are not correct… we have cost it out at about $60 million, their [State Government] costs of merging are much less than that. The benefit that they have put out includes a donation of $15 million from the Government because they're giving councils $10 million and $5 million, so that includes their money which is our money anyway; it's taxes. So, our taxes are coming back around. Efficiency will be lost in the cost of merging. We have cost the merger of Ryde, Hunters Hill and Lane Cove to be about $60 million. We don't have $60 million; this must come from somewhere and it will come from cuts to staff and cuts to service or we'll have to borrow to fund that $60 million.

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Council staff argued that rather than savings, money would be wasted. The Council informant 5 cited the example of information technology services and argued:

> Amalgamation will cause wastage of money or duplication. We all run a different software system. Now there should be savings by having one software system but there will be a big cost in going to one system, both in terms of the cost of acquisition, but also the cost of retraining all of the organisation to move to a different system.

Residents also raised concerns about the cost of the merger, with opponents regularly using councils' cost estimates to justify their opposition to the merger process. For example, the Resident informant 4 argued:

> With the very high cost of the merger, Lane Cove Council did an assessment that the merger would cost the wider community in Ryde, Lane Cove, Hunters Hill $76 million. The State Government is going to contribute $25 million towards that cost. So, there will be a $50 million hole on day one of the new council, so what's the council going to do to fill this $50 million?.

The financial scarcity and motivation for cost savings may lead to privatisation, a key characteristic of neoliberal governance (Jessop, 2002). Communities and councils questioned the claimed financial benefits of *FFTF* and expressed their fears about the loss of assets, staff and local funding. Opponents claim that the neoliberal form of governance mobilised under *FFTF* sought to facilitate business and privatise services. The Council informant 5 argued:

> The community fears that they will lose some of those community assets. Most community assets are on community land. Councils would have to re-zone the land to somehow come up with some way of selling it or privatising it, or whatever they want to do.

Local government is principally a service-delivery organisation and works for the interests of communities. The case study councils argued that the neoliberal objectives of the State Government did not align with the communities' interests. Council informant 4 argued:

> Local government has the greatest connection with the people [of the three levels of government]. You start making those entities bigger you lose connectivity with your residents so I think that that is a major issue with a larger scale council.

Councils opposed to amalgamation want to maintain their status. Council informant 1 said:

> It was purely a political initiative. It was never, ever in the community's interest. Most communities believe that they're getting reasonable service. Amalgamation was never about giving the community a better deal, it was predominantly driven by [the] political thinking behind it. It disconnects between the State Government and the council and the community.

Neoliberalism as a form of urban governance generates benefit for private enterprise (Bond et al., 2015). There was a perception among councils and residents that the motivation behind *FFTF* was to benefit property developers. In her study of planning system reform, MacDonald (2015) argues that developers claim that over-regulation and a lack of political will ('too much democracy') hinders the development. The *FFTF* program also aims to facilitate flexible business and development applications, as the Premier stated:

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> "Fewer councils will mean a big reduction in red tape for the NSW community and the businesses that
> work with councils (Sansom, 2015)".

Similarly, the Minister for Local Government claimed:

> "The mergers would ensure councils have the strategic ability to address development applications in a
> timely manner. We want to get rid of some of the red tape even for mums and dads who want to put
> extensions to their houses (Tan, 2015)".

This position suggests a substantial alignment between the interest of the State Government and those of
developers as outlined by MacDonald (2015). The relationship between developers and the government is
evidence the neoliberal objectives of the *FFTF* program. Nevertheless, the State Government objectives of cost
savings and faster development have been criticised by councillors, council staff and residents. The former
Leichhardt Mayor argued:

> "Our residents know that [Premier] Baird's Liberals will seize this opportunity to slash basic services,
> ram through high-rise development. When the Premier looks at our community he doesn't see a
> constituency to serve, he sees only dollar signs and development opportunities (Byrne, 2016)".

Within a post-political framework, the concept of people power transforms to economic power (Bond et al., 2015)
and urban problems are framed as issues that can be resolved through increasingly privatise governance (Wilson
& Swyngedouw, 2014). Many opponents critiqued this transition. For example, the Chairman of the Resident
informant 4 argued:

> The Government wants Sydney to become more like Hong Kong. If you reduce your councils, you've
> got [big] councils all over the place. You can't have a master plan for high rise over the whole city. You
> combine councils so… it's very easy for the government to push through whatever they want to .

Under this post-politics framework, the corporate elite and their allies become privileged (Wilson & Swyngedouw,
2014). Opponents fear that the capacity for local communities to oppose certain developments will diminish. In
many cases, this opposition is supported by local government which wants to be seen as supporting the local
residents (Ruming & Houston, 2013). The Council informant 2 argued:

> The State Government motive is a development motive. The Government finds councils inconvenient,
> often unpredictable as councils are representing communities. If communities get up in arms and react
> to something that's taking place, the councils generally do that as well and therefore they might block
> things happening. So the State Government is attempting to remove that sort of empowerment, by moving
> all of the approval processes up to a much higher level, which is more separated from ordinary grassroots
> communities.

The Council informant 6 argued:

> [The reforms have claim] it makes it easier for them [State Government] to plan by having fewer bodies
> to deal with when we talk about major infrastructure like upgrades of major roads or putting new train
> lines through.

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It was claimed by the opponents that instead of facilitating local service, the State Government's goal was to initiate bigger infrastructure projects and streamline development. The above quotation hints at the planning and development benefits for the State Government with potentially less opposition to the smooth implementation of large infrastructure projects, such as WestConnex.

It is claimed that the main benefits of the reform may accrue to developers due to the removal of red tape, faster approval, larger projects and less community opposition. Furthermore, there is a fear that councils will be expected to act like an enterprise instead of a service organisation because neoliberalism promotes a market-led economy (Jessop, 2002) and promotes the extension of market relationships (Larner, 2006). Jessop (2002) argues:

> "… neoliberalism promotes market-led economic and social restructuring and in the public sector it involves privatisation, liberalization, and the imposition of commercial criteria in the residual state sector (p. 461)".

Amalgamation opponents were very concerned about the future of local government and individual councils. By opposing the *FFTF* initiative, one resident argued:

> "We just wait for an announcement by the State Government that future Local Councils will be run by private enterprises (Byrne, 2016)".

Residents were also concerned that they would lose community assets as merged councils developed and implemented new planning frameworks. The Council informant 5 said:

> The community fears that they will lose some of those community assets. Councils would have to re-zone the land to somehow come up with some way of selling it or privatising it.

The hegemony of neoliberal economic and technocratic rationalities has narrowed down the possibilities for politics (Bond et al., 2015). It is claimed that *FFTF* minimises democratic options. The Resident informant 4argued:

> Amalgamation involves lack of consultation; it reduces the whole democratic process. They're trying to squash democracy by the way they're doing it. It's a form of totalitarianism in a democratic system, the way it's imposed upon the community.

Opponents claim that local government, in its current form best addresses the needs and representation of local citizens. The Council informant 3 argued:

> Residents saw that loss of "local" in a larger entity. So that relationship to your local government, to your council, to your access to your council laws, was going to be watered down… they saw a sense of loss of local democracy and representation.

Issues of representation were a major concern. In particular, the number of elected officials and the capacity of elected officials, in new, larger councils, to represent the needs and concerns of a larger constituency were questioned. The Council informant 4 noted:

> We have 12 councillors… Our residents feel as if they have good representation because their councillors are accessible. Once you become a bigger council and you have a limited number of councillors. So, their ability to access, councillors to listen to their concerns becomes diluted and diminished.

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The Council informant 6 argued:

> Lane Cove could possibly only have three representatives instead of nine representatives. So, that reduces local democracy and access to councillors.

Importantly, the electoral politics of a new merged council also emerged as a concern at the local level. For example, it was claimed by Hunters Hill council that local councillors were not endorsed by major political parties (i.e council was dominated by independent councillors). In contrast, Ryde and Lane Cove were characterised as highly political at the local scale. For Hunters Hill the prospect of a more politicised local council was a concern. The Council informant 5 argued:

> The greatest fear is that the larger the council, the more influenced that council will be by politics. It will be very difficult for your local average person to become elected as a councillor because the cost of running a campaign to be elected compared to a campaign funded by a big party organisation will be very difficult.

In addition, it is claimed that the proposed councils will draw together very different communities, in terms of socio-economic status, ethnicity and age structures. It is claimed by opponents that these diverse local communities do not necessarily share same objectives. Thus, the capacity for a larger council to respond to local differences and needs will be diminished. The Council informant 5 stated:

> There is a lack of community of interest amongst the merging councils. Certainly, there's some, but it's not broad and it's not well identified.

While the Council informant 4 argued:

> We are very different areas. Even though we are merging together and we're next to each other geographically. Our residents have very different needs in our three areas.

From a neoliberal perspective, it appears as though the interest of private sector (and potentially major political parties) took precedent over public concerns or local issues. One of the themes which run through this process is the role of the property development industry and the claim that developers will benefit from the reform process. The empirical evidence of the policy focus on cost savings, efficiency, privatisation, corporate benefits, wastage of money characterise *FFTF* as a neoliberal project. In an effort to ensure the neoliberal objectives were met, the State Government applied a series of post-political strategies.

5.3 Scale and efficiency argument

As noted, the State Government claimed a range of benefits and opportunities delivered through the *FFTF* reforms. Many of the predicted benefits centre on better and more cost-effective service provision via bigger scale and capacity of councils. Analysis by KPMG[24] illustrated that new, amalgamated councils have the potential to generate net savings to council operations. The merger process is expected to deliver more than $61 million in net financial savings over 20 years (Council Boundary Review, 2016). Although the Government has a set of

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[24] . KPMG is a professional audit service company, appointed by State Government to analyse amalgamation cost efficiency.

objectives and has mobilised expert consultant reports to support its position, opponents claim the supposed benefits are exaggerated.

Opponents claim that the State Government overestimated the benefits and underestimated the real costs. The State Government argued that councils will save money and will be able to do more things due to their larger in size and capacity. Under *FFTF*, scale and capacity are equated with the population of councils. The State Government sets a benchmark of fulfilling the requirement of 'scale and capacity' at 150,000 people or more (Sansom, 2015). However, the figure was widely debated, with the State opposition informant 1 critiquing the validity of this rationale:

> There had been no real reason as to why, and no explanation as to where this term came from and its validity or its reliability… There is not one piece of evidence anywhere in the world that bigger is better.

One Greens MP argued against the size and cost saving:

> "Does bigger necessarily mean more efficient councils? No. Rates have exploded in Victoria, Queensland, the Northern Territory and Auckland, NZ, where councils have been forcibly amalgamated (Mcilroy, 2015)".

As a part of their opposition strategy, communities criticised the assumptions of the State Government and challenged the data about size and capacity. This suggests that the post-political efforts of the State Government failed, because expert testimonies and data were challenged. The efforts of the State government to develop a technocratic policy framework are disrupted by a challenge to the data which are supposed to be secure. These claims were mobilised within the case study areas, to oppose amalgamation. For example, the President of the Resident informant 3 argued:

> It's based on false assumptions and false data. Accountants can bend data so that multinationals pay no tax when they're earning billions of dollars; Mike Baird as a politician is doing the same thing; he comes from an accounting background.

As a benchmark, scale and capacity should apply equally for all councils. However, many claimed political considerations mediated size and scale criteria. For example, the former Leichhardt Mayor criticised the claim of scale and capacity, and in doing so linked it to claims of political consideration of size:

> "Bizarrely, Barnaby Joyce's [Deputy Prime Minister] local council of Walcha, with a population of 3,000 people, has been allowed to stand alone, whereas bigger council like Bankstown [was] deemed unfit (Byrne, 2016)".

Opponents argue that very few councils, prior to the merger process, have a population anywhere near 150,000 and that high target was a tool to justify council amalgamation. It was also a concern of opponents that joining smaller unfit councils may lead to a bigger unfit council. For example, a Labor spokesman argued:

> "It's like having two drowning people and the Premier's solution to save them is for them to both hold on to each other and somehow that's going to stop them from drowning (Gerathy, 2015a)".

The same arguments emerged in the study area. The Council informant 1 argued:

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> There are some country councils in regional NSW that have 6000 residents, they passed scale and capacity. Ryde Council has 115000 residents and growing, but they said it was unfit.

In response to amalgamation pressure, councils proposed an alternative governance model in their submissions - a Joint Regional Authority (JRA), responsible for delivering shared services for member councils. It was argued that a JRA would take the opportunity to streamline corporate and services functions of council, corporate areas like finance, IT and sub-regional strategic planning. The Council informant 3 argued:

> We proposed in our JRA initiative a shared services model. That was saying that we would take the opportunity to a joint regional authority to streamline our corporate services… To streamline those services and get economies of scale in delivering those services at a lower dollar figure across the three councils.

In support of a JRA model, the Council informant 2cited the reference of Legislative Council inquiry and argued:

> That JRA model was also unanimously endorsed by the New South Wales Upper House Legislative Council Inquiry into local government, which was conducted in 2015. All the members of that inquiry committee supported the endorsement of the joint regional authority. That committee included government members. So, there was no dissent about our proposal, and yet the Government has ignored that and are still pushing ahead with the merger proposal.

The government rejected the JRA proposal. Though this proposal overcame issues of scale and capacity, individual councils did not reach the benchmark set by the State Government. While, the JRA model ensured facilities for councils, it would not achieve the perceived political goals of securing Liberal votes, nor was seen to facilitate faster planning and development.

The State Government indicated that they expected significant reductions in staffing costs. A journalist argued that:

> "Forced rate cuts of almost 20%, only possible courtesy of almost 10,000 job losses and cuts in infrastructure spending (Mayne, 2015)".

Opponents feared that job losses would reduce the quality of service provided by councils and make it more difficult for citizens to engage with their local council. Opponents argued that the larger the authority, the less engagement they would have with their community. One resident argued:

> "The strength of the local government is that it is close to the 'grass roots' and individual councillors can directly deal with constituents without the imposition of paid staff. In relation to development and building applications, sites are inspected by all councillors as a group prior to the application being approved. I cannot see how this valuable procedure can continue with enlarged council areas (Marie, 2015)".

Despite the claim by the State Government that the motivation behind a benchmark of scale and capacity centred on cost efficiencies (which is core to the neoliberal policy agenda), this benchmark has the simultaneous benefit of limiting the number of councils involved in the planning process.

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Opponents argue the claims around scale and capacity are false and that benefits for residents will be minimal. Rather scale and capacity is an instrument of post-political governance seeking to ensure neoliberal and electoral benefits as well as faster the approval of planning and development. Furthermore, it will reduce the services provided by councils and increase the distance between residents and elected officials and council staff. Claims around scale and capacity is a central part of a post-political strategy seeking to implement reform that aligns with the neoliberal objectives of the State Government.

5.4 Post-political urban governance

Neoliberal forms of governance have had a significant effect on the nature of contemporary politics, leading to forms of post-politics (Bond et al., 2015). Urban governance has become a key site of the post-political era, where public decision-making aims to forge consensus rather than address conflicts (MacDonald, 2015). While the validity and transparency of the *FFTF* process have been questioned (Bell et al., 2016; Drew & Dollery, 2016), this project characterises the objectives and strategies of *FFTF* as a form post-political governance. The proposed mergers were informed by four years of consultation. However, the consultation process, for example review panel hearings and submissions, *FFTF* submissions, IPART assessment and boundaries commission review process, was a form of post-political technocratic policy development and implementation.

Throughout the process, the government attempted to limit disagreement by restricting space for community resistance. One resident commented:

> "The announcement was timed to be overlooked during the Christmas break. That seems a very sneaky way to announce something (Marie, 2015)".

Local Government also expressed this concern, with one Ashfield Councillor claiming:

> "The Government was making the announcement just before the holiday season to avoid proper scrutiny by council… It's just very deliberate to avoid the proper reaction, proper scrutiny from the residents, from the elected member and that's just not right at all (ABC News, 2015)".

The fact that the amalgamation announcement incurred over the Christmas break, accompanied by a short period for submissions over the holidays, is strong evidence of a post-political strategy. This was a strategy to reduce public input and emphasise expert and technocratic planning and policy development. However, it is also important to note that residents and council groups challenged this post-political effort.

While the Premier described the four-year process leading to the creation of new councils as, "long as well as painful at times" but one that had involved a lot of consultation (Kembrey & Saulwick, 2016), the form of consultation that was mobilised differed from that outlined in the Local Government Act. The Council informant 2 argued:

> [There is] a battle taking place here, a battle of ideologies, of policies. The bottom-line issue here is every citizen should have a direct say in how they're governed, and the Government has not allowed that to happen. The Government has overridden community opinion. It hasn't sought community opinion by way of a poll or a plebiscite.

One of the key elements of the post-political is the mobilisation of technocratic expert-driven representations or arguments. In the case of *FFTF*, a technocratic or expert-led process was mobilised to secure the vision supported

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by the State Government. Policy development did not include a poll or plebiscite, as stipulated in the Local Government Act. Rather, the State Government implemented alternative mechanisms, which were more likely to facilitate the desired goal of council amalgamation. One local government expert argued:

"Amalgamations are so unpopular with the local communities. We know from history, and any poll they have is always against amalgamation. It would put Baird in an acutely embarrassing position if they held plebiscites and people voted against amalgamation (Kembrey, 2016b)".

Post-politics follows consensual procedures that operate within an unquestioned framework of representative democracy (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014). Under *FFTF*, there were strict formal processes that limited options for representative participation. For example, the North Sydney Deputy Mayor said that he registered 10 minutes past the deadline and was initially told he may not be able to speak at the hearing. He argued:

"It's an absolute farce. It's all being controlled from the bunker in Macquarie Street and it's all designed to drive through an agenda (Gerathy, 2016)".

It is claimed that the outcome is pre-determined. The Shadow Local Government Minister argued:

"The Government has made its mind up. People are being asked to comment in 60 seconds or less in a couple of venues around the State just to tick the box (Gerathy, 2016)".

It is also claimed by the Local government expert informant 1 that:

It was obvious that the government had in mind some amalgamations, that was clear.

The claim of pre-decided amalgamation objective from a tech-managerial expert body of *FFTF* is the self-declaration of post-political form. The pre-determined set of an objective to amalgamate council strengthens the claim of post-political mechanisms. Opponents also claimed that there was limited space to manoeuvre within the policy formulation process. The push for council reform appeared to originate directly from Cabinet with little opportunity for debate within the wider government. The Council informant 2 argued:

There has been no forum for debate or discussion of this policy position within the party… It came out of nowhere. It was a decision made by Cabinet… and they're pushing ahead with it. There are a lot of… Liberal Party and National Party members who are strongly opposed to this.

The former Ku-ring-gai mayor argued:

"[The Boundaries Commission Delegate] report does nothing to dispel the cynicism surrounding the whole merger process that is being stage-managed by the government (McCallum, 2016)".

The process was designed to ensure that the State Government agenda was implemented, a claim that is supported when evidence from the case study is considered. The techno-managerial post-political form of policy development was criticised by the councils. The Council informant 1 argued:

Their [State Government] end game was to merge local government and the entire process has only served as a conduit to reach that end.

The Council informant 2 argued:

> The process wasn't a genuine consultation with the community; the government had already decided. It had already determined the outcome, and because the Local Government Act requires a process must be taken to achieve that outcome, therefore, had to tick the boxes. Government had already made the decision, but they had to go through the *Fit for the Future* process because they were required to do so by the legislation.

Council informant 7 identified State Government as the driver. By criticising the process of IPART, she argued:

> IPART have just replicated the information that they were given. They have a lot of disclaimer on their information, and their information relied on a report the government had done by a consulting company, and the basis of that report, and the lack of disclosure of all the assumptions in that report, are part of the matters that are being contested in the courts. So, it's not a black and white case, because interpretation of financial data has been flawed in the opinion of many.

So implementation is claimed to be biased, fabricated and a technique to deliver a council amalgamation decision. Moreover, the State Government authority to implement *FFTF* was also challenged by opponents. *FFTF* has not been voted on, it was not taken to the election and, therefore, it is claimed by opponents that the government does not have a mandate to implement reforms. Politically (electorally) this is a challenge for the State Government. Council informant 7 remarked:

> It's wrong to say that people object to the whole program. People object to forced amalgamations. Not having forced amalgamations was the State Government's policy going into the last election in2011. In 2015 election, they were silent on whether there would be forced amalgamations, and so the other objection arises from it not having been an explicit policy position. That policy position has never been put to the electorate, so several objections come from that as well.

The *FFTF* governance framework acted as a post-political strategy which consciously rejected political space of difference and attempted to ignore opinions of antagonism (Swyngedouw, 2009, 2010a). This study finds valuable arguments to support the claim that the State Government pursued a post-political form of governance to ensure their objective of council amalgamation. The State Government applied the instruments of post-politics; they have applied techno-managerial approach and experts panel to limit the options of participation. When claims of cost efficiencies and faster approval of development plan are seen to be at the foundation of the council reform process. Opponents also position electoral politics as a key motivation behind the efforts to establish a post-political regime that will support amalgamation.

5.5 The electoral politics in amalgamation process

It is claimed by many, that efforts to secure political position through electoral process lies at the core of the council amalgamation process. This is a different definition to the form of politics used in with post-political literature where politics is viewed as a form of active democracy and involvement in the society. It is more than just getting votes. The introduction of neoliberal governance is the way of controlling democracy by applying post-politics (Bond et al., 2015). However, electoral technocratic mechanisms work within an unquestioned framework of representative democracy (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014).

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The argument here is that the NSW amalgamation process not only removes spaces and opportunities for the public to be involved in urban politics (i.e. be involved in decisions) but it is also a way of securing electoral support (i.e. making sure liberal voting areas increase). For example, one resident argued:

> "Expansion of one area over another often left me seeing political favouritism, rather than a sound rational decision making (Saulwick, 2016)".

Opponents claim that the selection of councils to amalgamate has been based on primarily political consideration. The *FFTF* process was designed to identify a future council configuration that supported the electoral position of the current State Government. For example, the former Leichhardt Mayor argued:

> "A council with a population of 3000 people, has been allowed to stand alone. Meanwhile, the Labor dominated Canterbury and Bankstown Councils, each with more than 150,000 residents, have been abolished and merged…. The only places where Baird has backed down from amalgamation proposals are in electorates where Liberal or National Party MPs are fearful of being defeated (Byrne, 2016)".

Likewise, a Labor MP argued:

> "[Amalgamation is] a politically motivated attack on local government. Because the government cannot rely on support from the minor parties in the NSW Legislative Assembly (Hinman, 2016)".

Similar electoral politics emerged in the case study. By claiming the Liberal electoral benefits of amalgamation, the Council informant 1 argued:

> [An alternative amalgamation would have] meant Botany needs to go with Waverley. There are too many Labor voters in Botany so they didn't merge with Waverley. Kogarah, who wanted to merge with Hurstville and Rockdale… the Government said no, Kogarah, you're merging with Botany. Because then it's a Liberal council.

Subsequently, antagonistic residents opposed the amalgamation process as a form post-political power that sought to retain the electoral dominance of the State Government. The Resident informant 4 argued:

> The whole process is just to entrench the Liberal Party Government in power. It's not about the interests of the community. This community is a very cohesive community. Suddenly we'll be linked up with Ryde over there, who have absolutely no interest in what happens here.

In opposition to the electoral objectives of the State government, opponents mobilised local level democracy and people's representation as major concern and as central to their justification for opposing amalgamation. Resident informant 1 stated that 'governments do not care about local government, it is all about control and power'. He argued:

> Whether it's Professor [Brian] Dollery, whether it's Professor Percy Allan, whether it's overseas research that's been done, all the research indicates that local government operates better when it is truly local and it has the support of its community.

The formation of new councils was announced on May 12, 2016. For these councils, the elected councillors were removed and replaced by a State-appointed administrator. Opponents argue that the appointment of administrator quashed local democracy. The administrators, who were primarily former public servants, council managers and

mayors and former Coalition MPs, had the power of mayors and councillors (Melanie & Jacob, 2016). Nepotism and favouritism in recruiting administrators were also a big concern raised by opponents, as the administrators were seen as representative of the State Government who were charged pursuing its interest. The Resident informant 4 argued:

> The administrator who was not elected here is unknown to the community, nobody knows who he is, he has no knowledge of the community - and he's going to try and pull this thing together.

As an opposition strategy, councils also criticised the appointment of an administrator. The Council informant 1 stated:

> Council and the community were scared about the appointment of an unelected administrator. If the councils are merged, which is likely, the Government will appoint one person, unelected, unaccountable, to replace the Council. One person (the administrator) will replace 28 councillors in the study area… There is a lot of concern about public lands, there's a lot of concern about this autonomous decision making without opposition as there will be no debate in a council meeting. People are concerned about losing what they have got… The administrator may sell council buildings.

Under *FFTF* local government elections have been postponed until 2017. New councils will be without elected officials for 15 months. This is viewed as a political action because it allows the State Government to have a greater say over what is happening in these local councils. Departing Parramatta Mayor argued:

> "There will be nobody to promote the concerns of residents, the administrators will have all the powers of the former council, which means they will be able to decide which projects proceed and how funds are spent on upgrades up until the next council elections in September 2017 (Kembrey et al., 2016)".

It was argued by an opponent that the administrators are tools of the State Government and their main objective is the implementation of controversial infrastructure projects, such as the WestConnex motorway:

> "The administrator for newly formed Inner West Council, has been dogged by claims that he is a puppet of the government, put in place to allow for the construction of the project of 33-kilometre WestConnex motorway, is a highly controversial issue in the inner west, although councils themselves have no decision-making power over it (Kembrey, 2016a)".

The appointment of administration is a part of post-political. Delaying council elections, thereby extending the tenure of administrators, can assist the government to implement its neoliberal development plan, while limiting opportunities for protest from local councils.

Politically, the Federal Government is distancing itself from what is happening in NSW. The Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, was asked about community opposition in NSW but he distanced himself from the issue. Mr. Turnbull alleged that:

> "Local government is entirely under the jurisdiction of the State Government; everyone is entitled to express an opinion. I am the Prime Minister of Australia; this is very much a matter for the Premier and the Government of NSW (Tom, 2016)".

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However, the State opposition is trying to win political support by claiming that they will demerge councils. Opposition Leader Luke Foley has promised that:

"If elected in 2019 his party would create a process for demerging, councils that had been forced to amalgamate, they will allow local communities to determine their futures democratically (Melanie & Jacob, 2016)".

This is unlikely given the cost associated with the reform process, the long wait until the next election and the size of the electoral swing Labor needs to win government. It seems that the State Government is seeking to gain electoral benefits by applying a form of post-political governance, while opposition political parties are trying to secure support by appealing to community opponents. The Council informant 1 argued:

If you've got a government that's not willing to listen, they'll pay the price at the ballot box in three years' time'.

It is also unlikely that Labor will win the next election by using council amalgamation as political strategy. So it remains to be seen if the electoral revenge of opponents will come to fruition. In order to get support a more inclusive approach to decision-making is required (Legacy, 2015), however the spaces for contestation have been closed down in a post-political condition (Bond et al., 2015). The following section explores consultation and participation.

5.6 Public participation argument

The process of planning needs the engagement of people (Legacy, 2012).Participation is important for democracy and significant in the development of cities (Berntzen & Johannessen, 2016). In the case of NSW's planning reform strategies, the reform process exacerbated rather than defused conflicts as the State attempt to resolve conflicts by concentrating decision-making power in the hands of the Ministers and appointed experts (MacDonald, 2015). Similar claims are levelled at the *FFTF* process. Opponents argue that when *FFTF* was announced the Minister wrote to the councils requiring them to make a submission. There were no prior consultation or information sessions for local government in the early stage. Like the planning reform process, *FFTF* was also a top-down ministerial-led process. While many scholars argue that participation is a prerequisite for good governance (Legacy, 2015; Swapan, 2016), the State Government initiated a form of consultation that limited participation and, where participation was encouraged, set strict conditions around the form it took.

While limiting participation, the State Government embarked on a significant advertising and media campaign as part of a post-political strategy. They developed an online presence, issued the regular media release and ran advertisements in print media and commercial television. From a post-political perspective, the use of multiple forms of public information was a strategy to confuse the policy development process and generate a form of consensus around the need to amalgamate councils. Overall, the policy framework surrounding amalgamation was difficult to understand, meaning that some residents many not have engaged with the process. While others might have aligned with the message circulated by the State Government. The State Government attempted to convince the public of the value of amalgamation through the advertisements, which also worked as post-politics instruments to limit active public participation. A Save Our Council spokeswoman argued:

"Mike Baird has now wasted $1 million on TV ads trying to con the public that his forced amalgamation plan will leave local people better off (Gerathy, 2015b)".

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The State opposition informant 1 argued:

> The government has paid lots of money for advertising on radio and television to convince people. They keep trying to convince people that this is going to be great and they've got lots of smiling photos of children and people saying they're going to get all new services and resources.

In terms of formal participation mechanisms, opponents criticised the process surrounding the Boundary Commission Delegate hearings. The Greens argued:

> "Initially, individuals had been given six minutes and organisations 12 minutes to speak. On the day speakers were told that they had three minutes to make their case. This didn't faze those supporting the amalgamations, but it was very distressing for those arguing against, especially when the government delegate ordered security guards to bureaucratically enforce the time limits (Hinman, 2016)".

While at least one public hearing was held in each council identified for amalgamation public hearings were dismissed by critics as identified the hearing 'little more than a farce'. Delegates appointed by the Office of Local Government attended these meetings and reported back to the Minister for Local Government. The Premier argued the consultation was genuine:

> "Obviously, we've asked for these public meetings so the community can have a say. This is one of those issues that isn't easy (Gerathy, 2016)".

Alternatively, a Labor spokesman argued:

> "In some cases, speakers were being told they would only have one minute to make their case (Gerathy, 2016)".

The consultation and expert's panel process was also criticised by the residents in the study areas. Resident informant 1 argued:

> The process has been a sham. First, they had the panel... that was handpicked because Sansom [former chairman ILGRP] had done numbers of articles saying bigger was better. The number two on that panel had been the General Manager, Chief Executive of the Brisbane City Council or something, so it was always going to come back recommending amalgamation, because that's why they had been handpicked to do that

One opponent resident from Marrickville argued:

> "Residents attended a public inquiry to oppose amalgamation. About fifty people spoke in the session, and only five, including [an] Ashfield Liberal councillor and a self-described businessman, supported the plan (Hinman, 2016)".

The process has been criticised by community groups as becoming very opaque. The Resident informant 1 argued:

> The goalposts kept changing and only selected parts of *Fit for the Future* were taken.

Resident informant 4 argued:

> There's been no real representation from the community. I consider that it's been based on misinformation; in fact, misinformation bordering on lies. If this was a corporate situation you wouldn't be able to get away with what the government have been trying to do and are doing.

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Despite public hearings, the State Government was not bound to respond to the findings. The President of Local Government NSW argued:

> "It's important to note that even though the review process offers an opportunity for community input, the Minister is in no way bound by its findings or recommendations, or that of the Boundaries Commission. If it has ticked all the procedural boxes as set out in the Act, the Government can essentially proceed to force amalgamations at will (Sansom, 2015)".

Participation, in the form of local hearing, appears little more that part of a formalised and technocratic post-political policy effort to facilitate council amalgamations. When challenged on participation, these hearings and submissions can be mobilised by the State Government to support their policy position. However, it is apparent from the above evidence that State Government restricted public participation. The participation process was a post-political attempt to silence opposition or limit alternative perspectives and voices. The limitation of post-political participation creates alternative sites community opposition or antagonistic politics. This was the case council amalgamation in the case study.

5.7 Community opposition

The underlying logic of the post-political condition suggests that where political antagonism is suppressed or denied it is likely to reappear as different forms of protest (Inch, 2012). Neoliberal and post-political forms of governance are often challenged. In the case of *FFTF*, the council amalgamation process did not proceed as smoothly as hoped for by the State Government. Alternative sites of conflict arose.

Opposition to council amalgamation extended beyond residents. Local councils emerged as central to the development of alternative antagonistic politics. This comes as no surprise, given that they are the targets of the *FFTF* policy and many will be required to merge. As part of their strategy to resists amalgamation, they sought to actively engage their citizens in an effort to disrupt the claims and objectives of the State Government. In short, the objective was to illustrate that residents did not support *FFTF*.

The *FFTF* process caused residents to actively resist implementation. The Resident informant 4 argued:

> I have not been invited by the government. I have become an activist, a community activist for preserving the status quo.

Residents had been very active in opposition, including a number of large public protests. Newspapers reported that:

> "Thousands of protesters gather at Sydney's Town Hall to rally against a host of Mike Baird's most controversial policies. March against Mike, targets Baird".

> "At least 600 people have packed into Sydney's Martin Place to rally against the New South Wales Government's plan to merge councils (Stokes, 2016)".

Concurrently, opposition political parties were active in supporting public opposition. The Greens organised a public meeting of about 200 people at Balmain Town Hall on November 7 to discuss the amalgamation and a big rally held against the amalgamations outside State Parliament (Mcilroy, 2015).

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Various unions also opposed amalgamation. For example, the United Services Union claimed that its 25,000 members opposed the amalgamation plan because they were opposed to job cuts and outsourcing (Hinman, 2016).

Protesters interrupted the Premier's presentation to the Local Government Association conference, where he was outlining the benefits of amalgamation:

> "A small group of protesters from the Save Our Councils coalition waved placards and chanted "back off [Premier Mike] Baird" as the Premier and his Local Government Minister, Paul Toole, arrived at Rosehill Racecourse to give speech. There were some groans and angry interjections from a few vocal protesters when he told the conference that amalgamations would be beneficial to councils (Gerathy, 2015b)".

Community groups claimed that their opposition was very strong and they were demanding greater participation. A Save our Councils Coalition representative argued:

> "Our fight against these forced amalgamations is supported by the combined force of community groups. Any voluntary merger should be based on a referendum of each group of residents (Mcilroy, 2015)".

Residents opposed to amalgamation expressed their concerns through submissions to expert panels, attended rallies, met the candidates' forums, arranged awareness campaign and wrote letters to oppose amalgamation. Opposition community groups used locals who had social media, or entertainment skills and have put together high-quality material on YouTube and Facebook. They have kept in touch by tweeting. Opponents used emails to keep in contact with each other and leaflets were distributed in council area targeted for amalgamation. These alternative forms of participation are an expression antagonistic politics. They are a reaction to the limited forms of participation implemented by the *FFTF* process.

The volume of community concern and opposition of the study area is verified by the Boundaries Commission Delegate Report (Council Boundary Review, 2016) which acknowledged that:

> The delegate for Ryde, Hunters Hill and Lane Cove received 457 submissions from concerned residents and 70 people spoke in the hearing sessions (p. 5).

In opposing the amalgamation process, councils ran local media campaigns, arranged local meetings and information session, while many also funded and managed large surveys of residents seeking to gather information on the level of support for council amalgamation. The resources available to local governments (most of which come from that State Government) were, therefore, essential in mobilising an alternative antagonistic politics that opposed an amalgamation. The Council informant 3 stated:

> The community awareness that we did is the City of Ryde's cost. We spent $126,000.

Thus, both the State Government and Local Councils spent public money in efforts to secure their own interest and gather public opinion either in support or opposition of the proposed amalgamation. The Council informant 6 argued:

> We have done several surveys. It's been over a four-year period and most those, of course, we've had overwhelming opposition to the amalgamation.

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To oppose the post-political framework of State Government, the councils identified for amalgamation came together to undertake such initiatives. The Council informant 3 argued:

> We surveyed our residents… We did extensive as an individual council and then we did it jointly.

As an alternative instrument of opposition, the councils of the study area called for a public poll, which is an option mentioned in the Local Government Act, to be undertaken prior to implementation. The Council informant 2 argued:

> State government spent millions of dollars in advertising money. I believe, a fraction of that money could have been spent simply by running plebiscites, polls, asking people what they think, and then deciding. Those councils that want to merge, fine. Merge them. Do it. That's what the community wants. That community wants to be governed in that way. Those communities that don't want to be governed in that way, well they should be able to say that. If you want to merge us, ask the people.

The KPMG report (that was not made public) was an important post-political strategy of the State Government. The government's claims were challenged and the failure to release the report only increased scepticism and opened up alternative avenues of opposition. Other forms of opposition also arose. North Sydney, Botany Bay, Ku-ring-gai, Mosman, Strathfield and Hunters Hill councils all voted to take legal action against imposed amalgamation. Including a couple of regional challenges, nine mergers have been delayed by legal action (Robertson, 2016). An example:

> "Ku-ring-gai Council, slated to merge with Hornsby to form a council of 270,000 residents, voted to commence proceedings in the Supreme Court. It is seeking release of a report by KPMG which the government used to quantify the benefits of mergers and which has been denied under Freedom of Information laws (Davies, 2016)".

The above quotation is particularly pertinent as a hint as to the post-political efforts of the State Government in pursuing council amalgamation. The expert reports used to justify the amalgamation process were not public knowledge; they could not be critiqued. However, the post-political mechanism of reports exposed the Government to an alternative site of opposition - the courts. The foundation of these challenges was that the government used the wrong section of the Local Government Act when it adopted a fast-tracked process to force amalgamations.

Communities also cited geography as a strategy for opposing amalgamation. Resident informant 1 cited the example of river and land to oppose the amalgamation of these three councils. He argued:

> One of the argument that in the Act, to amalgamate you require there to be continuous land and it must be an area of contiguous land. Now the argument there that the Lane Cove River divides two councils, thus it is not contiguous. So, we are separated from Lane Cove by the Lane Cove River which is a major river.

Residents also protested that dismissal of mayors and councillors. In some location, residents forced the council meetings run by the newly appointed administrators to be shut down. For example,

> "The first meeting of the newly created Inner West Council descended into chaos, with riot police called to the scene as protesters shouted "out", spat at and jostled council workers (Kembrey, 2016a)".

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> "About 200 protesters, angry at the New South Wales Government's decision to merge Ashfield, Leichhardt and Marrickville councils… drowned out Inner West Council administrator Richard Pearson during the meeting. Protesters repeatedly chanted "stop WestConnex" while Mr Pearson was trying to speak and "out" as he left the meeting (ABC News, 2016)".

In response, the Minister for Local Government argued:

> "The crowd's behaviour was 'disgusting'. The administrator and the staff were there to make decisions about services for the local community… They were greeted by a mob mentality of people who were there clearly out to disrupt the meeting. There is nothing democratic about a mob mentality (ABC News, 2016)".

According to Ruming et al. (2012) community opposition represents a valid and important form of urban democracy, especially where spaces for participation in formal planning processes have been restricted and the movement away from localised decision-making is identified as locally undemocratic (Ruming, 2014). By eliminating elected representatives at the local level and closing off opportunities for participation, the State Government triggered these alternative antagonistic politics as residents, elected officials and other stakeholders reacted to the post-political efforts of the State Government.

5.8 Conclusion

Neoliberal urbanism is described as a growth-oriented concept of urban development by means of liberalisation, of public services and reduced participatory options (Wehrhahn, 2015). In post-politics, people perform through institutionalised procedures to resolve differences (Crick, 2004). However, despite the effort of the State Government the neoliberal and post-political efforts to reform local government generated community and council opposition that sought to disrupt and challenge the council amalgamation process.

By challenging State Government logic towards amalgamation, many council's claims that they are financially viable, that they have a strong connection with their community that they are "fit for purpose". These claims were mobilised to challenge the council amalgamation process as implemented by the State Government. Councils and communities expressed their opposition through multiple avenues, including writing submissions, attending inquiries, writing to the media, holding protests and calling for a review, poll or plebiscite. People claimed council reform was something that the government wanted to push through, using their legislative muscle for its own interests. Participation was done in a particular way to support the objectives of the State Government and facilitate implement the *FFTF* program. For this reason, there is a strong level of cynicism. Communities argue that their protests have been successful as the original timeline established by the State Government for amalgamating councils was the beginning of 2017. However, as the end of 2016 approaches, a number of councils targeted for amalgamation have not yet merged, including Ryde, Lane Cove and Hunters Hill.

Although opposition to council amalgamation was wide spread it should be noted that it was not universal. Within the council targeted for amalgamation, it is likely that many residents supported amalgamation, or had no opinion at all. For example, the Council informant 3argued:

> There are a lot of people out there… a lot of community members would say they're supporting a merger.

Likewise, a number of council targeted for amalgamation supported the process and have transitioned to new

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councils with minimal opposition from elected councillors, council staff or communities. Some councils agreed to merge voluntarily, for example,

> "Gosford and Wyong councils have agreed to voluntarily merge into a single Central Coast 'super council' (Gordon, 2015)".

The former Gosford Mayor argued:

> "Although time was against us, I'm very pleased with how both councils have worked hard to protect the interests of their communities and the Central Coast (Gordon, 2015)".

Nevertheless, the overreaching position from the community, elected councillors and council staff was one of opposition. It has been illustrated that there are complex dynamics around NSW council amalgamation. Lastly, the point of critical insight is that an alternative, more effective consultation process could have been used. However, it was not done, because it might challenge the policy objectives of the State Government. The process implemented by the State Government can be identified as an effort to mobilise a post-political strategy. However, this strategy failed as opposition and alternative points of antagonistic politics emerged elsewhere. The following chapter will outline a summary of the findings and the answers to the research questions more specifically.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This research aimed to reveal the State Government's objectives and strategies to implement FFTF program, as well as to identify the reasons, reactions and strategies mobilised by opponents of the amalgamation process. In the previous chapters - the theoretical framework, research methodology, research context and critical analysis was outlined. This chapter aims to summarise the findings of the research by providing answers to the questions set out at the start of this thesis. Project constraints, future research opportunities, and concluding remarks are also provided.

6.2 Summary of findings

This section contains a summary of the research questions set out in Chapter One. The theoretical framework of neoliberalism and post-politics was used to explore the purposes and techniques of State Government towards council amalgamation. Content analysis was used to analyse the State Government's attitudes. On the other hand, community opposition is a significant subject of this research. Community opposition was analysed in the framework of NIMBYism, and communities and councils' opposing reason and strategies were explored by the interviews and content analysis. The case study provided the option for outlining the councils and communities' attitudes robustly. Contemporaneous research on *FFTF* policy and governance is absent and this research fills some important gaps.

6.2.1 *What are the objectives of the NSW State Government's FFTF program as outlined in policy documents and media?*

The first research question explored the objectives of the *FFTF* program. It was found that there was unsurprising, a significant divergence in the understanding of the objectives of, local government reform between the State Government and its opponents. The State Government emphasised potentially significant financial benefits, such as cost savings and effectiveness. The State Government claimed that larger merged councils would facilitate more public services and bigger infrastructure projects. It also sought to minimise red tape and deliver a more efficient assessment of development applications and related development. Opponents claimed the ultimate benefits would go to the State Government and developers, not the community. Another important objective revealed by this research is the electoral political benefits of the State's ruling political party. Opponents claimed that the *FFTF* program would diminish local democracy and befit the State Government. To analyse the *FFTF* objectives of the State Government, a neoliberal framework was used. The strong emphasis on financial benefits lined the objectives of the State Government with the neoliberal form of capitalism. The State Government sought to minimize red tape and smooth development applications that will benefit developers. So, the objectives of the State Government are an expression of neoliberal governance. This research has added significant value in the existing academic and public policy scholarship by analysing *FFTF's* neoliberal objectives.

6.2.2 *What are the strategies mobilised by the State Government to implement FFTF reform?*

The second question focused on identifying the strategies mobilised by the State Government to implement the *FFTF* program. It was found that State Government relied on the use of expert panels instead of resident polls or wider consultation. The State Government *FFTF* policy process in this research was analysed in the framework

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of post-political governance. The post-political strategy includes certain forms of community consultation but constructed in a particular way to limit true politics. This is also done through a form of technocratic planning and governance mechanisms. Opportunities for councils and communities to participate in the process were limited. The State Government applied a techno-managerial post-political approach to participation. It was found that the State Government developed new and alternative ways in an effort to ensure their position to implement *FFTF* was not challenged. It appears as though that State Government attempted to implement a 'tick-the-box' reform process to implement council amalgamation but the process was challenged. The opponents criticised the whole process of implementation. The existing literature focused on criticising the process of *FFTF* but failed to outline the strategy of the State Government. This research revealed the techno-managerial and alternative strategies of a policy framework, which added a new dimension of the post-political policy framework and governance.

6.2.3   *How have communities, councils and their representatives reacted to FFTF program?*

Due to the post-political framework, diverse conflict and antagonism was seen in the urban governance and policy progression. This research examined the reaction of the communities and councils. Throughout the *FFTF* process, many councils and communities opposed council amalgamation. Councils argued that they are financially sustainable and providing good services to residents. Similarly, councils argued that council amalgamation would diminish the services they are able to provide, due to job cuts and wastage of money associated with the amalgamation process. Likewise, many communities were also very negative about the *FFTF* program. They considered this program as a destruction of local democracy and local representation. Residents were worried about their accessibility to the councils. They are very worried about the services of councils; also worried that their rates would rise. Another important reason communities and councils opposed amalgamation was because they thought it is for the political and economic interest of the State Government. In response to amalgamation opponents, the State Government was quite silent and continued their amalgamation process. The State Government applied post-political strategy to avoid resistance and antagonism. However, the process did not proceed as smoothly as hoped. Alternative sites and forms of conflict or protest arose as a form of post-political returns.

6.2.4   *What are the strategies mobilised by communities, councils and their representatives for opposition amalgamation?*

The fourth question centred on the strategies mobilised by councils and communities to oppose amalgamation. To oppose neoliberal and post-political forms of governance, throughout the process of amalgamation councils and communities were active and procured various actions to oppose amalgamation. The case study found that the *FFTF* participation option was prescribed and a way to reach the desired amalgamation. Opponents initiated submissions, rallies and consensus building. Councils and communities worked together to oppose amalgamation. In the study area, the councils undertook joint initiatives like surveys to show their capacity and public support. The community opposition could be termed as NIMBYism as a way of stopping any change and a way of showing opposition. Alternatively, opposition could also be considered as a means of community participation as the post-political framework limited the options of participation. However, despite the efforts of many communities and council, these efforts have been futile as amalgamation has (or is in the process of) occurring. This is due to local government's constitutional weakness and State Government legislative power. Lastly, some councils lodged court cases to challenge the *FFTF* initiative. Existing research on amalgamation has a missing link of the

community opposition strategic framework. This case study explored the strategy of council amalgamation in alignment with NIMBYism and alternative form of participation.

6.3 Constraints

There were some significant constraints on this research. First, the process of local government reform was large and ongoing; it was difficult to include all aspects of this endeavour within the scope of this project. If I were given more time, I would have expanded the parameters of the project. Second, the project was undertaken within the context of tight time limitations. A big project associated with public policy, governance, techno-managerial framework and community opposition is difficult to complete within eight to10 months'. Third, because this project has the potential to make a valuable contribution to a theoretical and empirical perspective on local government amalgamation, there is additional pressure to produce quality output, therefore it took longer than anticipated to finalise the research methodology. Besides, it took time to finalise the research context and subjects as it is a highly political issue. Four, another constraint was the political nature of the project and the lack of interest from State Government to participate in the research. I think if the State Government had been involved I could have gathered more critical information. Five, conducting this research as an international student raised as a number of challenges. Initially, I was unaware of the form of governance, local government structure and about politics of NSW. This means considerable time in the early stage of the project was dedicated to understanding the NSW government system. Six, the size of *FFTF* and council amalgamation was a challenge. Council amalgamation is such an enormously complex issue that it was really difficult to incorporate the important issues within the scope of the research. Finally, the word limitation on thesis acted as a constrain to the amount and detail of analysis included. Initial plans included two empirical chapters, however, this was not possible due to the aforementioned limitations. Nonetheless, this project has revealed a number of important insights into the council amalgamation process and the strategies mobilised by residents to oppose them. The case study has filled significant gaps in existing literature and added a new analytical framework. Importantly, the project reveals a number of opportunities for future research.

6.4 Opportunities for future research

The analysis of council amalgamations has been the subject of much research, however, there is a significant scope of further research on council amalgamation. Local governance is very important for strengthening council performance and service delivery. Identifying better governance indicators of councils for better governance can be an important topic for future research. The research focused in NSW and the empirical study of three councils in Sydney. However, local government reform and council amalgamation is taking place across Australia. There is scope to expand this research to look at the reform of local government in other states. This analysis would provide a comparative study that would reveal similarities and differences in the objectives, strategies and reactions of council amalgamations in different contexts. There is also an opportunity to conduct a large study in NSW, by incorporating other case study locations and seeking to include participants absent from this project (such as State Government officials and politicians). An expanded research project would offer the opportunity to explore the council reform process in locations where councils and residents actually supported amalgamation and merged voluntarily. Such examples include Gosford and Wyong Councils; and Newcastle and Port Stephens Councils. The performance and challenges of voluntary and forced amalgamating councils may differ. The

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comparative study of the results or implications of voluntary and forced amalgamation can solve some questions about amalgamation and minimize the tensions of forced amalgamation.

6.5 Conclusion

Structural reform through compulsory council amalgamation has been the primary instrument of local government reform in most Australian states (Aulich et al., 2014; Brian et al., 2008; Drew & Dollery, 2014; Drew et al., 2013; Sinnewe et al., 2015)., The most recent round of local government reform in NSW continued this tradition, with council amalgamation emerging as a key objective of the State Government's *FFTF* initiative launched in 2011. However, mobilising a theoretical framework that draws on neoliberalism, post-politics, and community opposition reveals a series of significant insights for human geography and urban planning scholarship, as well as public policy development and community activism. Throughout this thesis, it is argued that post-political and neoliberal governance and policy objectives operates as the guiding principles framing council amalgamation in NSW. However, despite the objectives of the State Government, efforts to curtain opposition and expedite a new policy framework which aligned with their visions was challenged at multiple points in the process. Community opposition acts as a form of civic right where community participation is limited or restricted (Ruming et al., 2012). This community opposition can be considered as the representative community reactions of any undemocratic planning activity of local area. Thus, the post-political efforts of the State Government were never enacted as envisaged. Rather, the policy approach mobilised by the State Government opened up a series of tensions and alternative sites of politics which allowed opponents to challenge the legitimacy of the council amalgamation process.

This case study showed valuable insights in opposing neoliberal and post-political forms of public policy. Throughout the process of council amalgamation, the case study areas were very active against the neoliberal initiative and argued that this reform was not for their interests. They argued that the *FFTF* is biased. They practiced all available community consultation to inform the State Government their views but due to post-political mechanisms their efforts were useless. For this reason, various forms of opposition arose in the study area to oppose amalgamation. As a final instrument, the councils filed cases in court. However, their court cases against amalgamation process were unsuccessful. The councils are waiting for further actions, and the State Government is waiting to be finalised the disputes. Although opposition to council amalgamation has been rife in many communities facing forced amalgamation, it should be noted that this was not universal across all council areas, with some council experiencing minimal opposition, while others actively supported amalgamation.

It was State Government plan from the outset to implement proposed amalgamation by mid-2016, however, the State Government has not yet been able to implement its mergers for all council areas. The formation of 20 new councils was declared in September 2016 and nine merger proposals are still pending execution because of community and council opposition. Ultimately, the public policy and governance process has not been as smooth as hope for by the State Government. It seems that State Government's neoliberal and post-political frameworks have been strongly challenged and opposed in the research study area. Across NSW, and in the Ryde, Lane Cover and Hunter's Hill area in particular, community opponents have had a series of small wins, either delaying the proposed mergers or changing the configuration of the amalgamation. Thus, local government reform in NSW is not a case of successful post-political policy and governance. The concerns of the public were not curtailed and restricted via formal participation mechanisms. Rather, alternative sites of antagonism and politics emerged.

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Appendix 1: Ethics Approval

Ethics Application Ref: (5201600502) - Final Approval

Dear Associate Professor Ruming,

Re: ('Fit for the Future, (Not) Fit for the Community: A Critical Analysis of NSW Council Amalgamation and Community Opposition')

Thank you for your recent correspondence. Your response has addressed most of the issues raised by the Faculty of Arts Human Research Ethics Committee. Please ensure the following is updated prior to sending to participants.

Correct the typo in the following sentence in the interview email (remove 'been').
'The Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee has been approved this project.'

Approval of the above application has been granted, effective (27/07/2016). This email constitutes ethical approval only.

If you intend to conduct research out of Australia you may require extra insurance and/or local ethics approval. Please contact Maggie Feng, Tax and Insurance Officer from OFS Business Services, on x1683 to advise further.

This research meets the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). The National Statement is available at the following web site:

 http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/publications/attachments/e72.pdf.

The following personnel are authorised to conduct this research:

Associate Professor Kristian Ruming
Mr Khandakar Al Farid Uddin

NB. STUDENTS: IT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO KEEP A COPY OF THIS APPROVAL EMAIL TO SUBMIT WITH YOUR THESIS.

Please note the following standard requirements of approval:

1.   The approval of this project is conditional upon your continuing compliance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).

2.   Approval will be for a period of five (5) years subject to the provision of annual reports.

Progress Report 1 Due: 27th July 2017
Progress Report 2 Due: 27th July 2018
Progress Report 3 Due: 27th July 2019
Progress Report 4 Due: 27th July 2020
Final Report Due: 27th July 2021

NB: If you complete the work earlier than you had planned you must submit a Final Report as soon as the work is completed. If the project has been

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discontinued or not commenced for any reason, you are also required to submit a Final Report for the project.

Progress reports and Final Reports are available at the following website: http://www.research.mq.edu.au/current_research_staff/human_research_ethics/r esources

3.   If the project has run for more than five (5) years you cannot renew approval for the project. You will need to complete and submit a Final Report and submit a new application for the project. (The five year limit on renewal of approvals allows the Committee to fully re-review research in an environment where legislation, guidelines and requirements are continually changing, for example, new child protection and privacy laws).

4.   All amendments to the project must be reviewed and approved by the Committee before implementation. Please complete and submit a Request for Amendment Form available at the following website:

http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how_to_obtain_ethics_approval/ human_research_ethics/forms

5.   Please notify the Committee immediately in the event of any adverse effects on participants or of any unforeseen events that affect the continued ethical acceptability of the project.

6.   At all times you are responsible for the ethical conduct of your research in accordance with the guidelines established by the University. This information is available at the following websites:

http://www.mq.edu.au/policy/

http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how_to_obtain_ethics_approval/ human_research_ethics/policy

If you will be applying for or have applied for internal or external funding for the above project it is your responsibility to provide the Macquarie University's Research Grants Management Assistant with a copy of this email as soon as possible. Internal and External funding agencies will not be informed that you have approval for your project and funds will not be released until the Research Grants Management Assistant has received a copy of this email.

If you need to provide a hard copy letter of approval to an external organisation as evidence that you have approval, please do not hesitate to contact the Faculty of Arts Research Office at ArtsRO@mq.edu.au

Please retain a copy of this email as this is your official notification of ethics approval.

Yours sincerely

Dr Mianna Lotz
Chair, Faculty of Arts Human Research Ethics Committee
Level 7, W6A Building
Macquarie University
Balaclava Rd
NSW 2109 Australia
Mianna.Lotz@mq.edu.au

Appendix 2: Interview Invitation

Dear XXX,

You are invited to participate in a research project examining the NSW State Government's Fit for the Future initiative and associate local opposition.

The NSW State Government released Fit for the Future (FFTF) in September 2014. The program seeks to reform of local government and create bigger and financially stronger councils. Under the initiative, the number of councils in Greater Sydney will be reduced from 43 to 25. The council amalgamation process has become a controversial issue, with arguments both in favour and against proposed amalgamations. This study will analyse the insights of the proposed amalgamation and opposition by conducting a series of interviews with the representatives from the NSW State Government, local councillors and council staff, local politicians, members of community groups and residents. In particular, this research will focus on the proposed merger of Ryde, Lane Cove and Hunters Hill city councils.

The study is being conducted by Khandakar Al Farid Uddin, to meet the requirements of Masters of Research under the supervision of A/Prof Kristian Ruming of the Department of Geography and Planning, Macquarie University and the research has approved by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Participation in this project will involve an interview of approximately 60 minutes in length. The interview will explore the strategies and actions of key players in either supporting or resisting the amalgamation process. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw from your participation at any time without having to give a reason and without adverse consequence. Interviews will be conducted at a location of your choice at a date and time convenient to you.

As someone involved in the proposed amalgamation of Ryde, Lane Cove and Hunters Hill councils, your participation is invaluable to this project. Please reply this email if you wish to participate in this project.

If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact me.

Best wishes and regards,

Khandakar Al Farid Uddin

Higher Degree Research Candidate
Department of Geography and Planning
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Appendix 3: Interview Questions

Set A: State Government, Local Government and Councils

Interview Questions: Semi structured interview will be conducted by following the below framework

a. **Objectives of the NSW Fit for the Future (FFTF) program**

   1. What are the objectives of FFTF?

   2. What are the benefits of this reform process for local residents?

   3. In your opinion/experience, why have some councils and residents opposed FFTF?

b. **Strategies mobilized by the state government to implement FFTF program**

   1. How have local residents been involved in the council amalgamation process?

   2. In your opinion, was this an effective way of drawing residents into the process? If not, what could have been done differently? If so, why is there a level of community opposition?

   3. What are the options for the residents to participate in the implementation process?

c. **Communities, councils and their representative's reaction**

   1. What reasons have opponents used to oppose amalgamation?

   2. What has the state government done to address community and council opposition?

   3. How do you evaluate community opposition?

d. **Strategies mobilized by communities, councils and their representatives for opposition amalgamation**

   1. What has the community/local government doe to oppose council amalgamation?

   2. Have these strategies been successful in any way? Have changes been made?

Fit for the Future, (Not) Fit for the Community

Set B: Residents and Community Groups

Indicative Interview Questions: Semi structured interview will be conducted by following the below framework

   a. **Objectives of the NSW Fit for the Future (FFTF) program**

      1. What elements of FFTF are you opposed to? Why?

      2. The FFTF reforms suggest a number of benefits for NSW and local communities. Do you believe this will occur? Why/why not?

      3. How will the reform process impact upon you and the local community?

   b. **Strategies mobilized by the state government to implement FFTF program**

      1. Do you have any concerns about how FFTF has been implemented?

      2. How have you/the community been involved in the FFTF reforms?

   c. **Communities, councils and their representative's reaction**

      1. How has the FFTF process been received by the local community?

      2. Why are you opposing FFTF and council amalgamations?

      3. How did you group/the local community come together to oppose the amalgamation process?

   d. **Strategies mobilized by communities, councils and their representatives for opposition amalgamation**

      1. What have you done to oppose the council amalgamation process?

      2. Have you been successful in influencing the process? If so, how? If not, why?

      3. To date, Ryde, Lane Cove and hunters Hill have not been merged. What are you plans/strategic for the future?

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Appendix 4: Information and consent form

Information and consent form

MACQUARIE
University

DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY AND PLANNING
Faculty of Arts

Macquarie University
NSW 2109 Australia

Fit for the Future, (Not) Fit for the Community? A Critical Analysis of NSW Council Amalgamation and Community Opposition

You are invited to participate in a research project examining the NSW State Government's *Fit for the Future* initiative and associate local opposition.

The NSW State Government released *Fit for the Future* (FFTF) in September 2014. The program seeks to reform of local government and create bigger and financially stronger councils. Under the initiative, the number of councils in Greater Sydney will be reduced from 43 to 25. Outside of Sydney, the number of councils will be reduced from 109 to 87. The council amalgamation process has become a controversial issue, with arguments both in favor and against proposed amalgamations. Despite attempts by the State Government to engage the broader community in decisions around council mergers, there is a lack of support from some in the community. In response, some communities, councilors and council staff have actively opposed the amalgamation process. As part of this study I am conducting a series of interviews with the representatives from the NSW State Government, local councillors and council staff, local politicians, members of community groups and residents.

This project focuses on the proposed merger of Ryde, Lane Cove and Hunters Hill city councils. This case study site offers a valuable insight into the amalgamation process for two reasons. First, the proposed amalgamation brings together three very different councils in terms area, population size and socio-economic characteristics. Secondly, the proposed merger has been the subject of considerable public opposition.

The study is being conducted by Khandakar Al Farid Uddin, (Mob: 0410 399 661; khandakar-al.farid-uddin@hdr.mq.edu.au), to meet the requirements of Masters of Research under the supervision of A/Prof Kristian Ruming (kristian.ruming@mq.edu.au) of the Department of Geography and Planning.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw from your participation at any time without having to give a reason and without adverse consequence. Participation in this project will involve an interview of approximately 30 minutes in length. The interview will explore the strategies and actions of key players in either supporting or resisting the amalgamation process. Interviews will be conducted at a location of your choice, at a date and time convenient to you. If you agree, the interview will be tape recorded to aid in the analysis.

No individual will be identified in any publication of the results. Any reporting will use pseudonyms to hide the identity of participants. Only members of the research team and professional transcribers will have access to the original data generated through this research. A summary of the results can be made available to you on request.

Thank you for considering participating in this research project.

Regards,

Khandakar Al Farid Uddin

MACQUARIE University

I, _____, have read and understand the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research, knowing that I can withdraw from further participation in the research at any time without consequence. I have been given a copy of this form to keep.

Participant's Name:

Participant's Signature: Date:

Investigator's Name:

Investigator's Signature: Date:

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by the Macquarie University Ethics Review Committee (Human Research). If you have any complaints or reservations about any ethical aspect of your participation in this research, you may contact the Ethics Review Committee through the Director, Research Ethics (telephone 9850 7854; email ethics@mq.edu.au). Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated, and you will be informed of the outcome.