

High DA wait times blamed on poor planning

Community activist Kevin Brooks has blamed high development application assessment times on a poor voluntary redundancy program introduced by Central Coast Council Administrator Rik Hart in 2021.

Speaking at the public forum prior to the February 27 meeting, Brooks said the Q2 Business Review presented to Council at that meeting revealed that development application (DA) assessment times were 58 per cent above target.

The report, which encompasses the second



Community activist Kevin Brooks

quarter of the current financial year, found that with a target of an 80-day assessment, DAs were taking an average of 126 days to be assessed.

"The average assessment time has doubled since Mr Hart

was appointed Administrator and David Farmer CEO," Brooks said.

He said the poorly designed program, in which high priority areas were cut just as much as lower priority ones, led to the loss of experienced planners and kick-started the decline.

"Over the past year, we've been told repeatedly that Council is finally processing more applications than it receives," he said.

"If so, why is the average DA assessment time worse than 12 months ago?

"Go back even further, of course, and the average assessment time has doubled

since the second half of 2020-21 when the current Administrator and CEO were appointed.

"It is time to acknowledge that the current crisis with DA assessment times was kick-started by the Administrator and his senior management team through a poorly designed voluntary redundancy program and insufficient prioritisation."

Brooks also expressed concern that Council was already behind in 24 per cent of its targets across all business areas, including other priority areas such as water and sewer where performance was significantly below target.

He said Council needed to improve its processes for prioritisation across the organisation in both objective setting and resource allocation.

He also accused Council of "over optimistic" reporting.

"For example, 814 outstanding DAs is clearly well behind the target of less than 750 – yet the report claims this is somehow 'on track'," he said.

"It seems odd that we have 127 targets yet only one of them relates specifically to roads.

"And it is concerning that results do appear to be worse in the priority areas.

"Most people would agree water quality is a priority.

"Yet, Council is eight per cent behind target on water quality complaints, 77 per cent behind target on unplanned interruptions, 26 per cent behind target on mains breaks, and 54 per cent behind target on wastewater overflows.

"All this despite a water rate hike in excess of 30 per cent.

"The quarterly business report is an opportunity for leaders to accept responsibility, diagnose the causes of poor performance and present action plans for improvement."

An Analysis of Central Coast Council Under Administration

More than two years of Council under Administration have brought higher rates and worse services.

There is little evidence of reforms to improve the efficiency, culture, or productivity of the organisation.

Instead, Administrator Rik Hart and CEO David Farmer have taken the easy option to slug ratepayers.

Rate Increases

In July 2021, domestic rates increased 42 per cent in Gosford.

This included a 15% special variation initially limited to three years but extended to ten years in 2022.

On top of that, water rates will be 35 per cent higher (plus inflation) by 2025 due to phased increases approved this year.

The 15 per cent special variation was supposed to be temporary to allow the repayment of debt from the financial crisis – but as some of us pointed out at the time the numbers never added up.

Now, pricing regulator IPART, which approved the rate hike after relentless Council lobbying, has confirmed only 41 per cent of the special

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variation is to pay off debt.

IPART approved the increase on grounds of "financial need," but apparently cannot say what 59 per cent of it is "needed" for.

We can only conclude that IPART thinks Administrator Rik Hart is no more able to balance the books than were the previous Councillors if limited to the same rates income that was available to them.

It is time Mr Hart finally explained what the bulk of this rate hike is really for if only 41 per cent of it is to repay debt?

Council Services Still Deteriorating

Despite all this extra money, there has been no improvement in Council services.

Wherever you look, for example IPART's water utility customer satisfaction survey,

or NSW Ombudsman complaints data, performance indicators are plunging along the bottom.

Council's own Annual Report shows that 40 per cent of 2021/22 Operational Plan targets were missed, although the accompanying media release claimed, "Council Achieves a Lot in Challenging Year."

Spin from the Communications Department is perhaps one of the few areas where productivity has improved.

Excuses and Low Productivity

Even when poor service is acknowledged, we hear too many excuses.

Several months ago, when conceding that Development Application (DA) median turnaround times had doubled since the first year of the merger in 2016/17, Mr Hart blamed staff shortages.

Typically throwing ratepayers' money at the problem, he announced he had already hired five new permanent and six contract staff and was in the process of recruiting eight new roles on top of that.

There was no discussion of other possible solutions based

on better management or productivity.

Unless there were twice as many employees working on DAs in 2016/17, when performance was twice as good, productivity must have fallen.

Mr Hart did not say if that was the case or not, but we do know productivity across Council as a whole has fallen because the latest Annual Report shows over 2,000 employees compared with about 1,900 at merger in 2016.

Given that services have declined since then (over fifty service cuts were announced at a single Council meeting in March 2021), productivity - output per employee - must now be lower.

Insufficient Prioritisation

And even if there were too few employees working on DAs, who is responsible for that?

It was Mr Hart himself who oversaw the organisational restructure in 2020/21.

Whilst some downsizing was inevitable, applying the 9 per cent reductions evenly across departments was neither strategic nor prioritised.

Because Mr Hart bungled his

restructure, he now has to re-hire in priority areas.

Ratepayers are entitled to ask if any of the new employees he has hired, regardless of the titles of their "roles," are actually performing work previously carried out by those made redundant?

If so, ratepayers' money will have been wasted on expensive redundancy payments – something that shouldn't happen if restructures are guided by strategic and community priorities.

When I became a Council Leader in the UK two decades ago, we inherited a not dissimilar financial crisis.

We adopted a different approach focusing on internal reforms to improve governance and efficiency, whilst externally we undertook an innovative community consultation to prioritise functions and services and allocate resources accordingly.

We did not increase rates more than inflation.

What is to be Done?

Mr Hart has now been here more than two years and CEO David Farmer only slightly less.

They are now accountable for the quality and value for

money of Council services.

Rate hikes may have papered over the financial cracks but have done nothing to address the underlying causes of those cracks which lay in poor management, culture and productivity.

Indeed, without reforms to address these underlying problems, the extra money will merely entrench new levels of inefficiency and waste.

Self-interested bureaucracies rarely reform themselves.

Public accountability is needed.

Despite opportunistic claims to the contrary, local democracy did not cause the 2020 financial crisis.

The Central Coast is not incapable of operating a system of representative democracy that works perfectly well across the rest of the Western World.

Elections should be brought forward.

Council's high paid senior bureaucracy needs to be accountable to our community for performance, and for the expenditure of our money.

There should be no taxation without representation.

Letter, 16 January 2023
Kevin Brooks