



TASMAN COUNCIL

1713 Main Road, Nubeena TAS 7184

Tel 03 6250 9200 Fax 03 6250 9220

Email tasman@tasman.tas.gov.au

Web www.tasman.tas.gov.au

ABN 63590070717

Our ref: LG Review

10 February 2023

The Hon. Sue Smith AM
Chair,
Local Government Board

Dear Sue,

RE: The Future of Local Government Review - Tasman Council Submission

On 25 January Council carried a notice of motion to support a submission on the issues contained in the attached document. Tasman Council is pleased for the opportunity to forward this submission in response to some of the points raised in the Review, Stage 2, Options Paper. Please find the submission attached.

Council notes that the Future of Local Government Review is important, with varied and strongly-held views. Councillors and Council Staff have also been encouraged to attend the consultation sessions available to them.

Council is aware that while the Options Paper states (in) "...early February the Board will be visiting communities all around the State to hold town hall style meetings", no meetings were organised in the Tasman Municipality. While there was a meeting organised for Sorell, attendance for those without private transport meant that this was not a viable option. In contrast, a Tasman forum at our local Neighbourhood House, in stage one of the review, achieved capacity. We were advised that this was the best attended forum across the state.

It should also be noted that one of the online sessions was scheduled for a major public holiday in the south of the State. Additionally, within our community there are many people who do not have access to the internet and were therefore excluded from participating. This is due to an inability to afford access or living in a service 'black spot' area. It is disappointing to see that some more regional communities have again not been given the opportunity to 'have their say' in the future of their community.

Tasman Council and our community look forward to being able to have more direct interaction with the Board as this process continues.

Yours sincerely,

Cr Rod Macdonald
Mayor

The Future of Local Government Review:

Tasman Council submission

An Introduction to Tasman Municipality

Tasman Council is a vibrant and steadily growing municipality. New migration patterns have seen the influx of professionals moving into our community, including those working remotely from home, in interstate and even overseas roles. Our long term residents along with new arrivals are working together to contribute to the vibrancy and creativity of our community, with an ever growing list of festivals, markets, community events and cultural groups. Evidence of this is reflected in the emergence of new festivals such as Light Wave and the continuing growth of The Feast, Koonya Garlic Festival and the Tasman Arts & Craft Exhibition.

Current published projections from the Department of Treasury and Finance appear questionable. Contrary to our experience, they predict a decline of 0.75% in population between 2017 and 2042.

In terms of economic activity, there has been an annual average of 42 development applications approved for dwellings over the past 7 years. In the last four years there have been record levels of investment, with over \$30 million in building approvals, including almost \$10 million in housing approvals in the 2021-22 financial year. This is continuing as the interest in our region is also growing and it is recognised as a highly desirable place to live.

Submission Overview

This submission provides an overview of the views of the Tasman Council in relation to some of the specific points raised in The Future Of Local Government Review, Options Paper – Review Stage 2 (the paper). In this instance Council has not responded to all of the questions raised in the paper, but rather addressed issues that are of particular relevance to our municipality and/or on which Council holds a particular view.

As one of the few councils involved in the most recent amalgamation attempts, Tasman Council has recent and relevant experience in how this process can affect the community and the implications of the uncertainty which arises as a result of a poorly-defined and executed process.

Our community is still feeling the effects of the previous attempt at amalgamation. Our community's exclusion from the review process, due to the lack of local consultations available in this stage, has only served to reignite the strongly-held views within our community. We also note that the early community forum conducted in the initial stage of the review was the best attended session in the state.

Some sections of the media and proponents of amalgamation commonly state that there is a growing body of evidence to support amalgamations, but the opposite would appear to be the case. In particular, the growing number of de-amalgamating NSW councils, the latest being the Cootamundra-Gundagai Regional Council.

Commentary on the Options Paper

The paper raises a number of very valid questions and points about Local Government, including the role and structure of Local Government, how councils can represent their community effectively, the nature of community, the importance of place and of course the options for the future of Local Government in Tasmania. We consider that a proper review process will examine the individual functions and focus on the solutions which can be applied at a local level to achieve improved service delivery. Local Government should be local.

Staffing:

Much of the paper is focused on questioning the ability of smaller councils to effectively perform their statutory and regulatory function. It is asserted that these smaller councils are not able to access the qualified staff or resources required to perform these functions. This also leads to the assumption that larger organisations are able to access staff and resources.

The assumption that professional staff shortages are as a result of the size of an organisation cannot go unchallenged. Currently, even larger organisations such as the State Government are having difficulty in filling positions and as a result are not able to maintain effective staffing levels. Examples include Parks and Wildlife, Tas Fire Service, Tas Ambulance, nursing and teaching. Private sector employment in hospitality, early learning services and aged care are also struggling to find suitable staff.

While it is acknowledged that smaller councils can have difficulty in attracting staff with specific qualifications, it is equally true that some professionals choose to work in smaller organisations because they are more closely connected to their community and offer more diverse roles compared to those in larger organisations.

Centralisation of Statutory Functions of Local Government

Opportunities:

Many statutory and regulatory functions which have been delegated to Local Government by the State may be better managed by centralisation. These include: dog registrations, food business inspections, vaccination clinic support, water sampling and fire abatement processes and more recently support in the eradication of feral deer. Domestic cat management is also being discussed as a potential Local Government responsibility.

Many of these activities are undertaken at cost to the council involved, with limited support from the State. If the Review Board is seriously looking at true reform, rather than using 'reform' to describe amalgamation, then consideration should be given to how these services can be better provided through centralised IT and management mechanisms. This would free up staff who can then be re-deployed to undertake other functions within the Council.

Existing Examples of statutory state-wide administration

Frameworks already exist through the State administration of gun licensing, fishing licenses, driver licenses, parks passes and a number of other functions. It appears that while this has been considered at a high level, there has been little if any broader discussion around extending this capacity.

As an example, the extension of the services provided through Service Tasmania to administer functions such as dog licensing should be considered. Alternatively, the creation of a new State Government department or extension of the role of the existing Office of Local Government or other departments within the State structure could undertake these regulatory functions.

Where local knowledge is required, Council Officers could still be called upon to assist (for example, dealing with dog management complaints).

Benefits of state-wide administration

Removal of duplication:

This would provide benefits in a number of areas. For example, a state-wide dog registration system would allow easier information-sharing via common IT platforms, being state-wide rather than municipality based.

Increase response capacity in other areas:

Council staff currently involved in these types of activities could be re-deployed to support other functions of council.

Economic Impact of Amalgamations

While briefly mentioned in the paper, little consideration has been given to the impact of the decrease in council staff, particularly in smaller communities. Councils are often major employers. If this is to change, consideration must be given to not only the effects on the individuals (as noted in the report, 'meaningful employment is often difficult to find in regional communities') but also, importantly, to the region as a whole. The removal of this source of employment from the community will have not only financial effects on the people involved, but also may lead to decreasing population as people move to find employment elsewhere, decreased economic activity and increased health and mental health burdens as those people seek assistance to address the consequences of unemployment due to changes in their workplace. While this may sound dramatic, in a smaller or regional community, industry closures have long-term negative consequences for the community. The experiences of amalgamations within NSW councils supports this view and it has been the subject of extensive academic review and analysis. (Prof. Brian Dollery, University of New England)

Shared Services

The paper poses the possibility of compulsory service-sharing arrangements and/or consolidation of some services. Tasman Council welcomes the opportunity to explore this possibility. As a council that has previously been involved in shared services, the results of these can sometimes be very beneficial.

However, it should be noted that some current service sharing arrangements are more a ‘fee for service’ than a true service-sharing arrangement.

Considerations in the delivery of shared services:

If this is an avenue that the Review Board considers viable to explore further, consideration should be given to a number of factors such as the differing needs of councils in service delivery; for example the complexity of some services required in Hobart is not necessarily the same as those services provided in regional Tasmania.

Perhaps a model that looked at like groupings of councils, rather than geographical or regional groupings could be considered in the delivery of shared services. For example, the Tasman Council due to its isolated location, size and the type of community we have, has more in common with King and Flinders Islands, the west coast and part of the far north east or north west than it does with Hobart, Glenorchy, Brighton or even Sorell.

If compulsory service-sharing arrangements or other economies of scale are to be further investigated (and Tasman Council would welcome this approach) then consideration should be given to encouraging a discussion about alignment of type rather than location in order to ensure that smaller councils do not run the risk (as posed in the paper) of having their needs overshadowed by larger organisations. This approach also allows for continued strong local community representation in regional or more isolated areas, thus very much enshrining the importance of community and place in Local Government.

Place Making

A local ‘sense of place’:

While regulatory compliance and financial sustainability are important factors in the role of Local Government, the paper makes the point that amongst the other roles performed by councils is that of place making. No one chooses to live in a place based on its regulatory compliance, but many choose to move to or remain in a place because it has that ‘something’ that makes it special. To be clear, place making is not about built infrastructure. While built infrastructure can form part of place making, it is also about the way a community, group of people, or even an individual relates to a place. It is in some ways very difficult to define, and even harder to quantify, which makes defining its importance problematic. For the purposes of this document, place making and community are closely associated.

The importance of personal contact:

The paper talks about the importance of Local Government in a community and acknowledges that sense of community (or place) is particularly important to regional and older Tasmanians. It also notes that in a modern world community has come to have a different meaning, with social media and other digital technologies deployed to provide a sense of belonging. However, if the COVID pandemic has taught us anything it is that personal connection and the ability to reach out to those that are nearby cannot be replaced by a digital community.

The importance of local decision making:

The paper seems to underestimate the importance that access to decision makers, and those that work inside the system has for many in a place based community. While noting that there is a need for better engagement, the paper also proposes removing the best mechanism for engagement from places. That is, people who talk to the community.

Local Government is exactly that. People in the community can talk to their local decision makers. The Tasman community values personal access to their Councillors and staff. It would appear that the authors of the paper failed to recognise or address the role that Local Government actually plays in community engagement.

Local Government & Community Integration:

In regional communities, Local Government is far more than a regulatory arm of government. It is deeply involved in and supports many activities from local school fetes to ANZAC Day Services, from large scale community events to small markets, from the co-facilitation of formalised resilience building activities with third party organisations to one-on-one discussions with people about how to prepare for a coming bushfire season. This is the role of Local Government in place-based community building. Again, an understanding of the importance of this role of Local government is not reflected in the paper which appears to have been written at a higher level and without this consideration in mind.

Savings from amalgamation overstated:

Looking back at past amalgamations, as noted in the paper, some communities and people were hurt, and some still carry this hurt with them. This clearly illustrates the underestimation of the importance of place and Local Government's role in this. Previously we have touched on the economic benefits of economies of scale. Part of the reasoning behind amalgamations might have been economic benefit. However, even now, over twenty years after the most recent amalgamations, we still see communities with multiple Council Depots and Council Chambers (Central Highlands, Southern Midlands, West Coast, Glamorgan-Spring Bay all come to mind), so while there may have been a reduction in some costs, the costs associated with building maintenance, infrastructure, insurance and running costs are still very evident in these locations, as is the strong desire for a 'local approach' within communities.

Community well-being a primary function of local government:

It is important to remember that while economies of scale may provide some financial savings and efficiencies, this is often not the case. Certainly, they do not provide a sense of place and the accompanying sense of community wellbeing which is one of the primary functions of Local Government. To remove this is to diminish community connectedness.

Local Government Review – Options

The paper presents three options from which we are asked to choose: one being amalgamation into larger councils. The Tasman Council having been through this process less than four years ago, and

having heard very strongly from the community that it did not want this, does not endorse the option of amalgamation.

Tasman seeks to work with the Review Committee to look at how true reform could bring about improvements in the function of Local Government, while still preserving the geographical boundaries that in the case of the Tasman help to define it and its community as a place.

Tasman Council has kept an open mind as it has watched the Review unfold around it. However, there have been limited opportunities for genuine engagement in the process. There is a sense that the community is unable to 'have its say' unencumbered and without the feeling of a predetermined outcome.

An alternative approach:

- As the paper suggests - examine and define the role of Local Government, first removing the current restraints imposed and leaving nothing off the table. This could result in a situation where (as previously mentioned) the State takes on responsibility for some of the State-imposed regulatory and compliance tasks currently passed to Local Government. It may result in a funding model that provides Local Government with State funds to perform these activities on its behalf rather than the current impost imposed on the rate payer through cost shifting.
- Once the role and function of Local Government has been determined, an assessment of those remaining regulatory activities that can be delivered through compulsory shared-service provision could be undertaken. Simple changes such as consistent processes and templates for activities such as community engagement, annual plans, reporting and other statutory requirements, providing consistency and cost savings across the sector could be contemplated.
- Engaging with all communities, in person, taking time to listen to their concerns and aspirations and considering how amalgamations, if still proposed, would affect those people and places on a place-by-place basis.

Conclusion

The paper raises some valid points around cost savings and economies of scale, but people and communities cannot be measured solely in fiscal and economic terms. The place base of communities must be taken into consideration. This cannot be done from a distance. It must be experienced to be fully understood.

In 2019, Tasman voters clearly expressed their views, with a 70-30 vote against amalgamation. While Tasman Council opposes amalgamation for our community, that does not mean that it is wrong for every community. There may be other municipalities that would welcome this, and they should have the opportunity to explore that option.