

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment.

Councils play a vital role in the social, economic and environmental well-being of their communities and we support the Board's suggestion that there should be more emphasis on supporting wellbeing, resilience, connectedness, identity and culture at a local level.

It is crucial that the role of local government as a voice for the community and advocating to other levels of government is not lost or diluted in the reform process. And if some services are to be delivered at a regional level, councils must retain the ability to effectively influence those services.

## SECTION 2: THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY TASMANIA

*What services do you think benefit most from 'local' design and delivery? Why? When it comes to those services, how local is 'local enough' to deliver for the community?*

Much of what councils do now is suitable for and focussed on local design and delivery. This list is long, and it may be more efficient to consider the reverse. It is the traditional services to property, or elements of them, which do not necessarily need to be managed at a local level. This definition encompasses waste management, road infrastructure construction, including the construction of bridges and stormwater drainage, and aspects of planning.

In terms of the regionalisation of planning, this Council has already suggested the concept of a regional pool of specialists to be called on at need. That said, we strongly suggest that local strategic land use planning such as the ability to develop a Settlement Strategy, be retained at a local level, as well as the approval of residential DAs, as these are key drivers of local character. However, major and contentious development proposals requiring more specialist knowledge and greater capacity could best be dealt with at regional level.

Other service areas where this council and other rural and regional councils struggle to attract and retain skilled specialist staff include environmental health and building compliance. Nevertheless, absent elements of the responsibilities outlined above, we believe we can do more to 'grow our own' through expanding schemes such as our cadetship program that seeks to enable young people to remain in their home locality by providing a fulfilling local career path.

If the structure of a council is built on the principle of 'form follows function', a tailored 'place-based' approach in Circular Head might look like:

- **Responsibility for specific services which are best provided at a local level**
  - Recreational facilities (including playgrounds, sports grounds, and halls)
  - Local streetscapes (including parks, gardens and pedestrian areas)
  - Cycle paths and footpaths
  - Animal management
  - Street cleaning (including public toilets)
  - Plumbing compliance
  - Local strategic land use planning and development assessment

Environmental health  
Major asset planning and maintenance  
Corporate functions: including IT, communications, rates collection

- **Building community capacity, connections, trust and participation**  
Build/co-ordinate/facilitate community health and wellbeing (including support for vulnerable people, welfare and volunteers)  
Support/co-ordinate/facilitate community events, arts and festivals  
Support regional tourism  
Support emergency and disaster management and recovery
- **Representation and advocacy**  
Be the community voice to other levels of government  
Deliver innovation and transparency in community engagement

*What do you think about the idea of a 'charter' for local government? If we develop a charter, should it be included in the LG Act?*

This would need to be very clearly drafted if it was to make a difference and avoid or minimise the potential for unintended consequences such as limiting freedom to act in certain circumstances.

While a Charter appears to provide an opportunity to define roles and clarify good governance, we consider that it would need to be included in the Local Government Act to provide a sound legislative grounding and is likely to require 'teeth' if it is to be an additional lever for good conduct.

In that context we would note that legislating in pursuit of good conduct is rarely effective and it may be more productive to focus on remuneration and attracting/training quality candidates.

#### SECTION 4: OPPORTUNITIES, ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

##### ***Infrastructure Provision and Management***

Major asset management (construction and renewal of roads, bridges, and stormwater drainage) is a continual juggling act for small councils. Despite strategic asset management plans being in place, it is not unusual to have to defer planned maintenance to fund a more immediately urgent priority.

Grant funding is relied on by small councils to support infrastructure provision and renewal. Larger projects are often contracted out, leaving small councils vulnerable to rising prices and contractor shortages. We struggle to compete with the private sector in attracting contractors and have also noticed an increasing trend of losing staff to major construction

and mining projects, due to pay offers that we cannot possibly match, resulting in more juggling, delays and shortfalls.

While we cannot ignore the case for infrastructure construction being delivered at a regional level, we believe there is a case for retaining asset planning and maintenance in-house. Effective service standards for asset maintenance need to reflect local circumstances which can vary considerably between geographical and urban/rural areas.

Therefore, it would seem logical for the Board to explore how road, bridge and stormwater construction and renewal could be undertaken in a way that best leverages economies of scale, including increased purchasing power.

Regional delivery does not necessarily argue for a State agency to take the lead. The Board should explore the feasibility of these services being delivered by a regional consortium made up of several councils. In the North-West the Cradle Coast Authority is well-placed to embrace a strengthened role in these areas. We suggest making use of existing structures rather than creating new regional bodies because we believe it is important not to add another layer of governance to an already crowded landscape.

That said, it is important to test that existing regional bodies are fit for purpose if they are to take on new roles. The Board should satisfy itself that the needs of both urban and rural councils can be equitably met and funded.

It is worth pointing out that Circular Head and Waratah-Wynyard Councils already have a joint five year forecast for pavement renewal and carry out joint bridge renewals. Clearly, these types of arrangement could form the basis for regional contracts.

Smaller infrastructure assets that small councils can and should continue to fully manage include local halls, parks, gardens and recreational facilities.

### ***Finance and Administration***

Circular Head Council has generated an underlying deficit in the last few years due to financing the construction of a major new recreational asset (pool and sports/gym complex). Nevertheless, we are on track towards a balanced budget. Note also that Council's rate base has slightly declined since the 2016 census.

To offset these factors, major new renewable developments are on the horizon. In addition, new housing development is coming on stream with a projected 300-400 lots over the next 10 years. There is also vacant land in the CBD owned by Council which could be developed and there is developer interest in the tourism field. Together, these factors indicate good potential for Council's income to increase and a return to a positive budget status.

We believe that consolidated business services are a means for councils to increase their sustainability and facilitate modernisation. We have a long-established and intentional resource-sharing arrangement with Waratah-Wynyard Council, including common strategies in some key policy areas, and we are now actively working towards a more integrated back

office. We are open to exploring whether other councils would wish to be part of this arrangement.

At this stage we remain cautious about advocating for a consolidated business services arrangement that encompasses significantly more councils due to the complexity of systems integration and the inevitable politics that ensues. Our approach is to start small and demonstrate success.

### ***Planning and other Regulatory Functions***

Rural and regional councils often struggle to attract and retain specialised staff, particularly in planning services. This means we rely on consultants more than we wish to or can sustainably afford.

If aspects of planning services were to be considered for delivery at a regional level, councils must have a seat at the table if they are to properly advocate for and look after the interests of their community.

However, we note that the building permit process is largely administrative and therefore location agnostic. We suggest that centralising this service has the potential to create greater consistency across the State and reduce confusion in the construction industry.

We believe councils should retain the other core regulatory roles including environmental health, animal management, and a local enforcement and compliance capability. These are services that benefit from local knowledge and presence.

In Circular Head these functions are not well-resourced, and if the outcome of the Board's work meant that Council was no longer directly providing some other services, we would look to redirect funds to strengthen these teams, thereby supporting the envisaged shift in Council's role towards an increased focus on local health and wellbeing and community safety.

As outlined above, we already operate a cadetship program, seeking to employ local school leavers and train them up to bolster capability. Currently we are establishing cadetships in environmental health and finance. This program could potentially be extended to other regulatory roles.

### ***Economic development and local promotion***

Council advocates for funding and encourages investment in the local economy, recognising the importance of a thriving economy to a community's health and wellbeing. We support the Board's suggestion that councils' mandate for economic development should be better defined.

Council is committed to regional workforce planning. Its [Workforce Development Plan](#) has been developed in partnership with local stakeholders including major local businesses. It identifies that the Circular Head region, like many others in Tasmania, is facing a wide, complex and inter-related range of demographic, social and economic development challenges.

Absent some of the broader infrastructure responsibilities outlined above Council would welcome the ability to redirect resources to focus on attracting investment, which would contribute to addressing key community development and growth priorities for Circular Head.

We would welcome increased strategic collaboration at the regional level to support local and broader economic objectives. This should also help to ensure that Council receives timely information about regional opportunities and initiatives.

We encourage the Board to further explore its thinking about the potential to develop less competitive models of grant funding and are open to exploring collaborative regional projects and initiatives.

### ***Environment***

We note the increasing necessity for a high standard of environmental stewardship and consider that councils, as the tier of government closest to the community, can take a key leadership role in encouraging and role modelling behaviour change. We want to help our communities to be ready for the future and to be resilient so that they can handle whatever the future may bring in environmental terms.

Once again, the ability to access specialist skills is a limiting factor and we would argue, like planning skills, that a pool of regional expertise would be invaluable as we consider strategic environmental planning, investment and robust infrastructure provision for the future.

We would value the ability to access regional procurement expertise focussed on delivering environmentally friendly contracts.

Noting that waste management is currently subject to State Government reform, we acknowledge there is a case for increased regional management of waste to generate the economies of scale that support investment in the 'circular economy' and improved environmental outcomes.

That said, while not directly relevant to the Board's work, Circular Head Council operates a landfill site which has a projected further 90 years of life on current trends. This is a major income stream, and should all waste services be regionalised, its loss would have a severe impact on this Council's finances. Added to that would be the new cost of trucking waste nearly 100km to Dulverton with associated fuel costs, road impacts and pollution increases from the additional heavy truck movements.

### ***Governance, accountability and representation***

We agree that equitable and high-quality representation is key to a sustainable, strong and well-respected local government sector that is trusted by communities. Noting that the Board is considering the possibility of remuneration for councillors, we consider this to be a positive step that would open the door to wider participation. However, we note the Board has not outlined its thinking on who is to fund any such remuneration.

We are concerned that a drive to professionalise representation should not lead to lack of representation at a local level. Local matters. Decision-makers must know their community well if the community is to receive a fair go.

Noting the Board's intention to consider innovative models of community engagement and participation we would suggest that it may like to consider the types of deliberative democracy approaches that have been piloted by some Northern NSW and Queensland councils. As well as Citizen Jury types of engagement, Ipswich City Council's Community Panel approach is well worth consideration.

There is a considerable amount of data in the public domain to support councils in their community engagement efforts and making better use of this data would offset the loud voices and help to ensure that the outcomes of community engagement are equitable.

We note the Board's intention to explore a reporting framework for local government and would strongly advocate that any such framework must be carefully constructed. Increased transparency in performance is a positive step, but indicators and measures must be constructed to accommodate the considerable differences between urban and rural/regional councils.

Indicators must be very carefully chosen to:

- Be meaningful (outcomes not input/output)
- Not generate perverse consequences
- Compare like with like or make it clear that each council is unique

### ***Community wellbeing***

It could be argued that community wellbeing is at the heart of everything a council does. Yet currently, community service provision as a specific workstream is one among many diverse services that councils provide. Circular Head Council therefore welcomes the Board's thinking regarding a fundamental refocussing of councils' core objectives to place wellbeing explicitly front and centre.

'Wellbeing' is a broad and ill-defined playing field. In considering a more defined role for councils the Board should consider how the various levels of government, not for profit entities and community groups can best work together. Local government may not always be best placed as a service provider, but it is very well placed to advocate, facilitate and co-ordinate.

We believe there is a great deal of added value that can be delivered for communities when councils are empowered to take the lead in bringing entities to the table to align collective efforts at a local level. To be most effective, the role should go further than merely bringing service providers together. It is evident through the many successful partnerships this Council has developed with community that it is local connection and respectful relationships which can deliver the most significant outcomes.

Though well-intentioned, Federal and State programs and funding streams often operate independently, resulting in program overlaps. In addition, programs funded at a higher level of government are not always a good fit in a very local context. This results in service gaps. Service provision is often based on a universal model and approach for ease of delivery. Local approaches recognise all the factors not just the target cohort but also the ecology of communities.

To mitigate these risks consideration should be given to delegating a level of power and authority so that gaps and overlaps can be addressed at community level. This in turn calls for some flexibility in funding and Councils are well placed to act as 'banker' for separate funding streams, so that, with proper reporting and accountability, State and Federal funding can be used effectively at a local level. This follows the well-established principle of subsidiarity – that services should be delivered at the level and scale that achieves the greatest overall value for the community.

The Cradle Coast Councils demonstrated this through attracting Healthy Communities funding to deliver locally developed solutions for health and wellbeing programs. This enabled us to develop a joined-up approach to wellbeing. Circular Head Council recently adopted its Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2022 which formalises its approach to developing a Health & Wellbeing Collective. This is a partnership approach focussed on wellness screening, peer education and social prescribing to enhance community connection, food and physical activity literacy.