

Future of Local Government Review-Stage 2

Feedback from Stage 1

Dorset Council

General Comments

Council was extremely surprised and very disappointed at the very low number of replies and submissions to the Stage 1 attempt at consultation.

This is no reflection on the efforts of the committee to achieve broad ranging feedback (for which they made an excellent effort), but in a way reflects the views of Tasmanian residents more broadly.

Although the State Government considers the Local Government sector to be a problem based on a very small number of incidences, the lack of responses strongly suggests that the community does not necessarily agree with this summation. Is the rest of the community, happy with the current set up, not overly concerned or simply don't care?

It is important to ensure that any proposed changes to the way the sector operates is based on not only what was said but more importantly on what was **not** said.

Replies from less than one third of one percent of the population of Tasmania is anything but a call for change. We risk the real possibility of the tail wagging the dog, not uncommon with public consultation.

In local terms if two residents from the municipality of Dorset came to council with a proposal to change the way council operates would we, as a council be likely to make such a change? I think not.

It is also important to note that the feedback received was so divergent that at times it was difficult to establish which way the evidence leant and if established, the majority was so small that it could not be relied upon.

Specific feedback

Section 2

By necessity various councils have taken on roles that traditionally are not the domain of Local Government. This situation has been compounded by the actions of State and Federal programs being introduced into Local Government areas with an expectation that Councils would manage the programs.

When Federal and State funds were eventually withdrawn there was an inbuilt expectation from community that the programs would continue. This created a financial issue for many councils and when faced with the reality of having to cut the programs created unnecessary dissatisfaction from community.

To this end a much clearer definition of the role of Local Government must be established and the very ambiguous statement in the Local Government Act making councils responsible for the “Health, safety and welfare of community” should be either removed or clearly defined and appropriately limited.

The area of climate change, which got a mention in a number of submissions will be difficult to achieve when the reality is that councils have limited powers in this area. Most councils can effect change in the areas of waste disposal, stormwater management, road and fleet management and management of parks and gardens but beyond that the task gets very difficult. Even Fleet management is difficult when the price of a light truck (diesel) for town management is \$80,000 versus \$270,000 for an electric version with a replacement battery costing \$90,000 and a battery life expectancy of only eight years.

Water and sewerage is managed by Taswater and most of the coastline is owned and managed by Crown Land Services, Parks or Mast and therefore out of council’s control, so I fail to see where else councils can have a further profound effect on climate change.

As for a charter, just seems like more bureaucratic nonsense designed to complicate what should be a reasonably simple role and make councillors more vulnerable to Code of Conduct complaints/prosecutions.

Unnecessary regulation of councillors is one of the reasons it is difficult to get decent people to stand for council as well as the pittance paid to councillors in smaller councils.

Additionally Dorset questions the number of councillors at all councils. Firstly it should always be an uneven number and nine should be the maximum. In Dorset’s case seven would seem a more reasonable number. Dorset has applied for this reduction in the past but our request has been denied.

Section 3

Regardless of the number of councils and their boundaries, sustainability and capability will still be determined primarily by the personnel involved, both councillors and staff.

It is possible that some boundary adjustments and amalgamations may improve both capability and sustainability for some areas but these are likely to be minor rather than major. Large scale amalgamations as proposed by some of the large city councils are unlikely to achieve the desired results as any benefits gained by economies of scale will almost certainly be lost by the added bureaucracy that exists in large councils. While previous amalgamations have sometimes resulted in improved capability and sustainability there has not been a single example of amalgamation that has resulted in large scale savings for rate payers.

Taswater is the perfect example where amalgamation of roles and operations has resulted in increased costs and timeframes for infrastructure projects. If you want look at the epitome of cost and time blowouts have a look at the operation of state and federal government departments, where the former federal minister for infrastructure and Deputy

Prime Minister Michael McCormack, commented that if you give a project to a government department you can double the cost and then add some.

Dorset has on occasions shared services with adjoining councils but more on an ad hoc basis rather than by permanent arrangement. This has at times worked well and resulted in benefits for both councils but probably does work well because our joint boundaries are in isolated rural settings, not affected by joint infrastructure and facility usage such as Launceston, Meander Valley and West Tamar. One exception is the branding for the Blue Derby mountain bike trails which covers Dorset and part of Break O Day and this arrangement has proved to be sound and jointly beneficial but would in no way would it be improved by amalgamation.

Section 4

Dorset agrees that consolidation of services around city areas has the potential to improve management but whether that translates to better delivery and costs savings has yet to be proved.

Certainly the inclusion of rural areas east of Launceston into Dorset would improve our operations and realise benefits for those residents who claim they have not seen anyone from the Launceston City Council since their amalgamation in 1993.

There are a number of examples around Tasmania where separation of rural areas from large urban areas seems to make sense, therefore allowing those rural areas to be attached to neighbouring councils thus improving capability.

Having these boundaries based on resident type (urban v rural) means that residents are likely to have similar priorities and aims. Geographical boundaries (mountain ranges etc.) also would need to receive consideration to avoid unnecessary and costly travel by both staff and councillors. However it is more difficult to identify which services could be centralised to improve quality and save costs in the long term.

When a large scale contract is let (eg. waste) cost savings are often made in the first term of the contract, but when you create such a monopoly we have found that costs rise significantly in the second term of the contract.

Another example is admin and IT shared roles which would reduce costs overall for the group of northern councils, however it would increase costs significantly for smaller councils. A recent example was Tech One's submission for Enterprise Software which was a big solution for a small council adding complexity and additional staff for management.

One area that Dorset would not entertain would be the centralization of planning services mainly because we consider that to be one of Dorset's strengths and hugely beneficial to our ongoing development and growth. The fact that developers praise the efficiency of our planning department and rate it vastly superior to our neighbours is proof that bigger is not necessarily better.

There may be opportunity for an expanded role for the major projects committee to take on planning for projects that span multiple municipalities or have state or regional significance.

As far as I am aware there have been only two projects announced as being eligible under this system which seems very low.

The many differences in planning schemes and attitudes has the potential to cause significant grief for councils if building, plumbing and health services are combined. Dorset has already experienced serious angst from our community when we have been using the expertise of neighbouring councils whose planning and building requirements differ from our own. This has required some retraining of those shared staff some of who will not change resulting in cancellation of the shared arrangement.

Dorset believes the financial position of all councils is already available through the Auditor General's report to Parliament, their annual reports and their Long Term Financial Plans. The problem is that different councils calculate and report differently so accuracy and comparisons are difficult to interpret.

Dorset would agree that increasing subsidies to unsustainable councils is not the answer, but neither is lumping an unsustainable council in with a sustainable council resulting in a much larger council that is not necessarily sustainable.

Long term planning in this area is difficult to accurately predict because a single large project or enterprise, lost or gained will have a profound effect on the future of any council.

The current Grants Commission road funding model is flawed.

Too much emphasis is placed on the road type (sealed v unsealed) and not on the use and accompanying rating opportunities from surrounding properties.

For example a section of urban sealed road can potentially yield a significant amount of rate income and carry mainly light car traffic giving it a life treble that of a busy rural road carrying heavy freight traffic and possibly yielding very low and in some cases no rate income. Those councils with a majority of freight roads are therefore heavily disadvantaged even with the adjustment factors accounted for.

In short Dorset does not believe a case for major change has been established. We appreciate it is early stages and there is ample opportunity for some genuinely beneficial suggestions with sufficient detail to come forward.

Dorset will continue to be involved because the last thing we would like to see happen is to have our municipality and residents thrown to the wolves to prop up another council or to meet the agenda of the State Government.