

29 August 2022

LGBoard@dpac.tas.gov.au

RE: Future of Local Government Review: Interim Report

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Interim Report which includes the draft role statement, capability aspirations and outcomes, future visions for review themes and priority reform areas.

The Local Government Professionals Tasmania Board provide the following feedback.

Role Statements

While at the broadest level the role statements would appear to work, the Board is concerned that the lack of clarity and clear definitions limits their usefulness and makes it difficult to assess what directions and decisions can be drawn from them. As they stand, they may not be sufficient to guide meaningful change and because of their ambiguity, endorsement requires a leap of good faith from council officers as the next steps remain unclear. For example – there are currently requirements around health and wellbeing in the *Local Government Act 1993*, but what that looks like and how that is delivered across the sector has never been clear. While flexibility to respond to local needs is supported, having clarity about what is clearly in or out of scope is required. Similarly, in relation to “providing infrastructure and services” it is not made clear what is meant by infrastructure – is it built or social or both? Is it roads and bridges or more? There should be definitions of key words and concepts to support the assessment of the role statements.

The Board also has particular concerns about Role Statement 2 - about how regional delivery of infrastructure is determined and structured. For example, who makes decisions about design, location, and engagement and does the provision of infrastructure at a regional level include maintenance and depreciation? What evidence is there that regional infrastructure delivery will be more efficient, cheaper, better designed and so on? Has there been relative assessments that consider point in time impacts (for example of COVID) on infrastructure delivery – with councils in other jurisdictions and with State Government delivery? Has there been any assessment of the downstream impacts of regionalization on local employment and other economic outcomes in rural and regional communities? The Board want to be reassured that the models being suggested going forward will really deliver better outcomes for their communities and that there is also consideration of how we can build regions without centralization.

The Board notes that community expectations of councils, especially as a provider of last resort, are unlikely to change significantly but if too many functions are regionalized it leaves little local capacity to respond nimbly to emerging issues. Further opportunity for cross disciplinary collaboration is drastically reduced. For example, infrastructure delivery disconnected from community services

place-making may mean health and wellbeing benefits from infrastructure delivery are reduced. The benefits of local design and community input should not be underestimated.

Charter

The Board of Local Government Professionals Tasmania does not support the inclusion of a Charter in the *Local Government Act* as this would move the legislation further away from principles and powers of general competency to prescription.

Capability and Outcome Statements

The Local Government Professionals Tasmania Board feels the capability and outcome statements were well written and appropriately balanced benchmarking and aspiration. They would benefit from further definition of key terms – for example ‘environmental wellbeing’, ‘infrastructure’, ‘social cost’ etc. In moving forward, careful consideration is needed of the broad framework of influences on these, many of which fall outside Local Government. For example, educational pathways and course offerings, legislation and statutory functions (eg *Public Health Act*), workloads and more.

Future Vision

Consistent with feedback on the role and capability statements, the Board feels that ambiguity needs to be reduced through supporting definitions. As with the Role Statements, the suggestions around infrastructure provision raised concern. For example: “*Operate within a broader infrastructure planning, funding, and delivery framework that provides the right incentives for them to make economically efficient and equitable infrastructure investment decisions that maximise the overall net benefits to Tasmania*”, suggests a loss of autonomy over the local area that could not be supported. Again, before utilising these statements to progress to recommended ways forward, the Board would like to see that there has been further interrogation of data and consideration of the key drivers. For example, what impact has a Premier’s direction to use the balance sheet during COVID had on Councils? What consideration has there been of any point in time factors such as COVID stimulus packages? Has the data been robustly challenged and benchmarked against other local governments on the mainland and the State Government?

The Board supports the role councils can play in community wellbeing but notes that serious structural funding deficits in this space would need to be addressed. Similarly, councils’ roles in supporting the current and emerging statutory requirements of State Government need to be considered within the context of funding and resource constraints. There has been a history of new statutory roles being passed to Local Government without the appropriate consideration of resourcing implications.

Finally, the Board noted the interrelationships between theme areas. For example, the activation of places has both wellbeing and economic benefits and is critically supported by infrastructure provision. Appropriate planning is required to support good environmental outcomes and well as community wellbeing outcomes. While breaking thoughts into themes can make conversations and communications easier, it is important not to lose the understanding of how different functions, services and infrastructure support joint outcomes.

Because of the need to dive deeper into data, to consider new data sources and identify key drivers, the Local Government Professionals Tasmania Board would be supportive of further time being taken to progress Stage 2 of the Review.

Yours sincerely



Paul Jackson
President