

The History of Local Government in Tasmania – Board Reflections

The future of local government review



March 2022

“As a Board, we are focused on the future. But to map the best path forward, we must first heed the lessons of the past” The Hon Sue Smith AM, Chair

As part of Stage 1 of the Future of Local Government Review (the Review), the Board has commissioned the University of Tasmania (UTAS) to prepare a series of research papers to provide important context to our work and support the public discussion about possible future directions for the local government sector.

The History of Local Government in Tasmania is the first in this series. It presents a detailed exploration into the State’s evolving local government sector, from its early colonial inception through to the current state of affairs.

The Board sees this paper as essential for two reasons: the first is to ensure both the Board and the broader community have a robust understanding of how local government came to be in Tasmania and the ways in which the sector has evolved since. The second is to learn from the past. While this Review is concerned with the future of local government, it would be remiss of the Board to overlook past attempts at reform and not draw on the key lessons from those processes.

Reflecting on the UTAS paper, the Board has identified several overarching themes that it will take on board as we embark on the current Review.

WORKING WITH THE COMMUNITY

- The colonial emergence of Tasmania’s local government sector in 1803 was rooted in the need for local decision-making within the State’s sparsely located and diverse populations.
- While the introduction of the *Local Government Act* (1906) worked to consolidate the role of councils, the desire for community identity and local representation has endured.
- The 20th Century saw many failed attempts at sector reform, with the rationale behind the need for change almost always being financial.
- One of the key factors driving this failure was the lack of community and sector consultation, something that the successful reform effort of 1993 remedied.
- Reform attempts that followed met similar fates to the pre-1993 efforts; without active engagement with the sector and the people they serve, meaningful outcomes were difficult to achieve and tensions grew.
- Reflecting on past outcomes, it is clearer than ever how important it is to hear from community members, the sector and stakeholders to understand their frustrations, their ideas, and their aspirations for the future.
- The Board is committed to delivering a comprehensive, community and stakeholder engagement program. For further details on how you can get involved visit www.futurelocal.tas.gov.au

EMBRACING CHANGE (BUT NOT FOR CHANGE'S SAKE)

- As communities evolve, there are inevitably new challenges and opportunities that present themselves.
- This means that systems and approaches that once worked well will not necessarily work forever, and the local government sector needs to be open to adaptation and evolution to deliver better outcomes to the community, even where this is challenging.
- Resistance to change can be driven by a perceived lack of need for, or clear rationale behind, key decisions.
- Where meaningful change has occurred, a genuine need or opportunity has been identified; the benefits of reform clearly established, and broad community and political consensus on the specific way forward has been achieved. To ultimately succeed, reform proposals also need to be designed in collaboration with those who best understand the challenges we are trying to address and the opportunities we need to grasp.

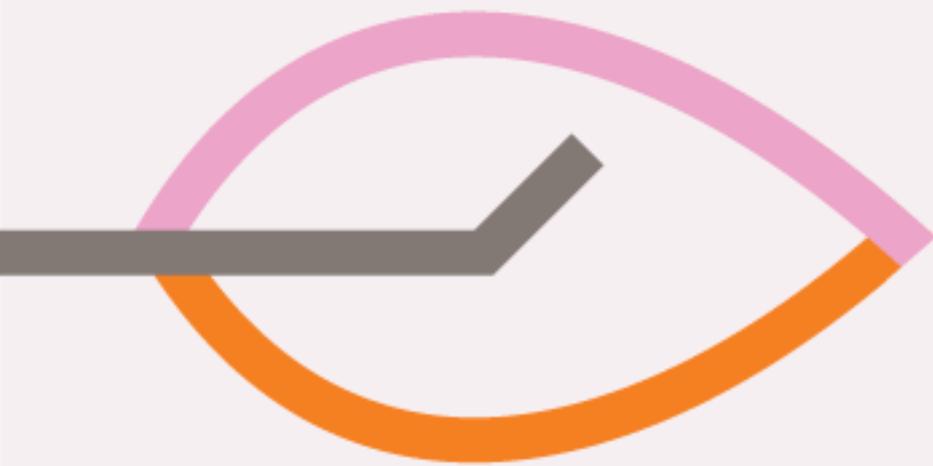
PAST LESSONS INFORMING FUTURE VISIONS

- Beyond the historical challenges outlined in the paper, it is clear that social, demographic and technological shifts over time all impact the role of local government and potential future areas of reform.
- We are seeing a range of emerging global trends that will, nonetheless, have very real, local implications for Tasmanian communities. For instance –
 - *the way people live, work and access services continues to evolve because of demographic and technological changes;*

- *the functions of local government continue to expand into a broader range of social and community services;*
- *there will likely be adjustments to, and the blurring of, some boundaries between our three levels of government as collaborative service models evolve, and this is likely to be a good thing for citizens overall;*
- *climate change will present significant planning, environmental, and infrastructure management challenges for all levels of government, and local government will be in the 'front line' in addressing many of these.*

- While this may mean the role of local government needs to change, it is clear that the sector's importance will be enduring and, in certain cases, will perhaps be greater than ever.
- The Board looks forward to upcoming sector and community engagement, knowing it will significantly inform the rigorous research being undertaken by our research partners.

To read the full research report, go to www.futurelocal.tas.gov.au/publications/



More information?
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government
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