

Place-shaping and the future role of local government in Tasmania: evidence and options

Board Reflections



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“While we might live in a global, interconnected world, Tasmanians continue to prize and identify with their local communities and environments. So long as this remains the case, there will be a need for strong and effective local government.

The Board wants to better understand where ‘local matters most’ when it comes to delivering infrastructure and services that best meet the community’s needs.

By understanding this, we hope we can better define the future role of local government and make sure we develop reforms that will maximise the value of councils’ unique expertise and abilities.

This Paper gives us some important insights and suggests a new way of thinking, that brings into clear focus local government’s fundamental role in enhancing community wellbeing.”

The Hon Sue Smith AM, Chair

As part of Stage 1 of the Future of Local Government Review (the Review), the Board 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.

Place-shaping and the future role of local government in Tasmania: evidence and options is the third in this series, and follows on from the second Paper on national and international trends in local government.

The Paper expands on one of the the key emerging trends identified in Research Paper 2 that councils are increasingly taking on a 'place-shaping' role in their communities. It unpacks exactly what this means and what it looks like in practice when we consider the role of local government in Tasmania now, and into the future.

The Paper considers both research and existing practices to identify and clearly define a number of potential future roles and functions for local government with a distinctive placed-based rationale.

The Board is particularly interested in UTAS' analysis of where local matters most, and how the extensive knowledge and expertise of councils in Tasmania provides them with a significant 'natural advantage' when it comes to their role in supporting tailored local initiatives that can improve community wellbeing.

THE ONGOING IMPORTANCE OF PLACE AND LOCALISM IN THE GLOBAL DIGITAL AGE

- The world around us is changing rapidly. Since the last structural review of local government almost 30 years ago, there have been countless technological and social shifts that have impacted the way people identify with place and understand what 'local' means.
- Even in an age of globalism and transnational online communities, it is clear that people continue to want and need connections to their immediate community and environment.
- The Board knows localism is particularly prized by Tasmanians given its unique array of regional community identities and its strong reserves of local 'social capital'.
- Therefore, the Paper reminds us that the questions of what local means to Tasmanians, why it remains important, and how that might impact what communities want and need from local government are more relevant than ever.

COUNCILS AS 'PLACE-SHAPERS': FOCUSING ON SERVICES WHERE LOCAL MATTERS MOST

- Research Paper 2 identified 'Community development, wellbeing, and place-shaping roles' as one of five key emerging local government trends, both in Australia and internationally. This trend has seen councils move toward a more active role in developing and preserving local identity as well as promoting community wellbeing.

- In Paper 3, UTAS unpacks this idea in the Tasmanian context and identifies five critical ongoing roles for local government.

1. *Place-based decision making and service delivery*
2. *Community development and fostering local identity and engagement*
3. *Representation, engagement, and advocacy*
4. *Facilitation, regional governance, and strategic planning*
5. *Meeting distinctive local needs*

- Tasmanian councils already play a clear and highly-valued ‘place-shaping’ role across a range of areas, particularly when it comes to community crisis response and rebuilding, tailored social and community services, and economic development advocacy, promotion and branding.
- This is reflected in changes to spending and service profiles, with many councils now dedicating an increased proportion of their budgets to cultural, sporting, and recreational initiatives.
- Moving to a more expansive ‘place-shaping’ role does not mean local government will cease to be involved in traditional infrastructure and service delivery. What it does mean is that, wherever possible, council expertise and resources are focused on and applied to

services where local delivery is crucial to deliver the outcomes communities need.

- The common thread in unpacking the emerging role of councils is making best use of their unique capacity as the tier of government ‘closest to the people’. In each of the five place-shaping roles outlined in the Paper, the emphasis is squarely on the benefits to community of local knowledge and connection in service delivery and representation.
- On the other hand, the Paper highlights this same rationale means some services currently delivered by individual councils might be better delivered at larger scales (regional or even State-wide) to take advantage of economies of scale and scope. However, any service consolidation should always be aimed at improving service quality, as well as cost efficiency.
- UTAS identifies several pathways to delivering scale and scope economies that include but go beyond amalgamations, such as shared or regionalised cooperative service models, partnerships, and the establishment of regional entities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE ROLE AND STRUCTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

- Clearly, if local government’s role as place-shapers continues to evolve and expand as is predicted, *some* change in both structure and capability will be necessary.
- While the nature of what this should look like is not yet determined, the Paper makes it clear decisions on these matters need not be uniform across Tasmania – for example, where there may be

compelling social and economic reasons to better align local government areas in more urbanised parts of the State, there can be equally compelling reasons to maintain smaller rural administrative structures.

- Given the evolving and expanding nature of council responsibilities and community expectations, there is a clear need for local government role clarity. This is something the Board will be consulting on and considering closely as we move into Stage 2 of the Review.
- *To read the full report, go to <https://www.futurelocal.tas.gov.au/publications/>.*





More information?
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**The future of
local
government
review**

