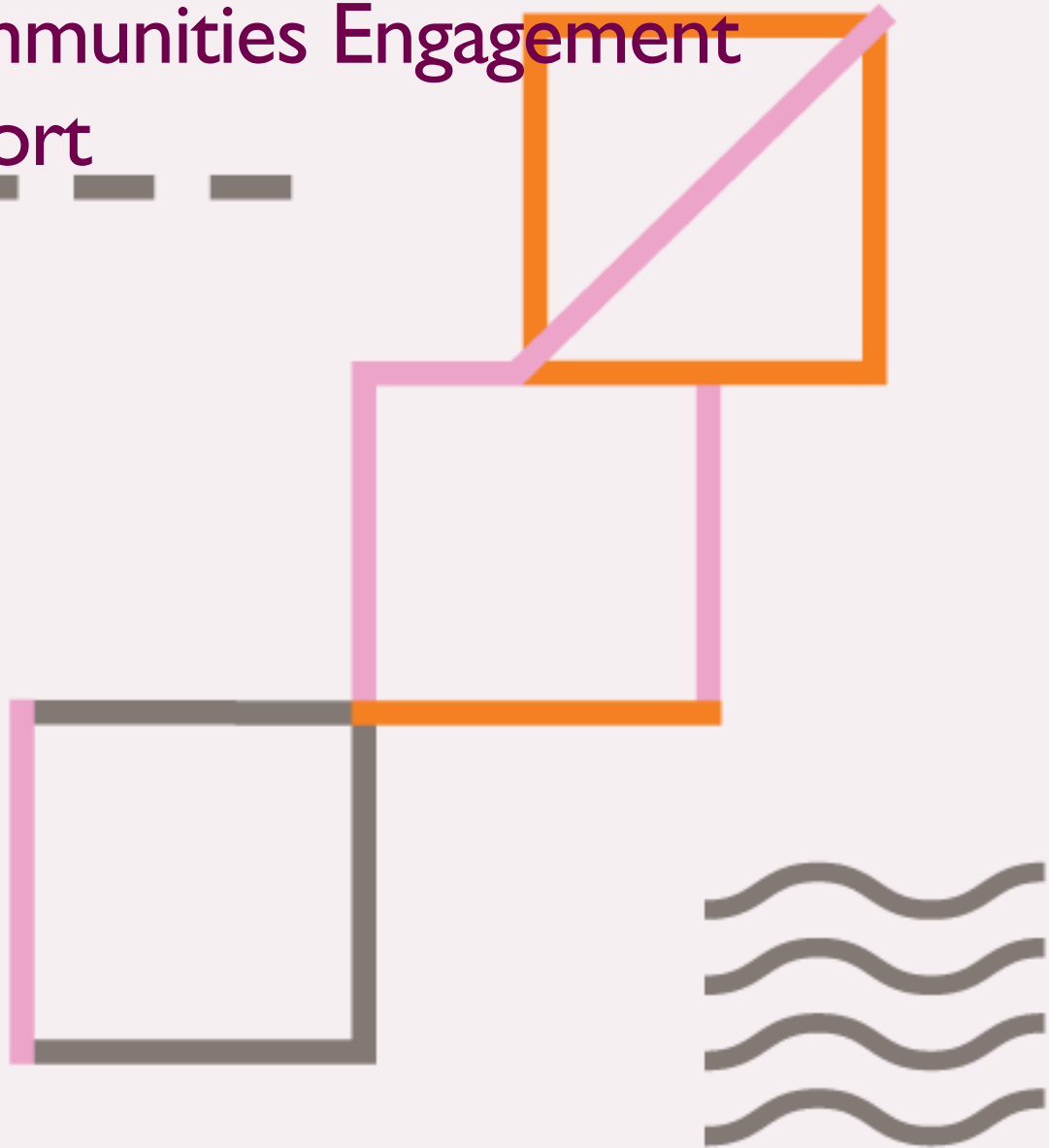
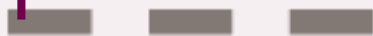


# Future of Local Government Review: Targeted Aboriginal Communities Engagement Report



March 2023

# Targeted Aboriginal Communities Engagement

The Tasmanian Government has commissioned the Local Government Board to undertake a broad review into the future of local government in Tasmania. The review is looking at the fundamentals of the local government system: the role it should play in supporting communities, the services it should be delivering, and the most effective ways of doing so.

The Board is aware of the Tasmanian Government’s work to establish Truth-Telling and Treaty processes in response to the Pathway to Truth-Telling and Treaty Report. It is also familiar with the Closing the Gap Tasmanian Implementation Plan 2021-2023, which includes a Local Government Aboriginal Audit. That Audit aims to capture the existing work of local government to ensure alignment with the four Priority Reforms and existing and new Key Targets in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

This will be a solid source of information for the Future of Local Government Review. However the Board wanted to ensure that it heard from Aboriginal communities directly as part of the Future of Local Government Review.

In Stage 1 of the Review the Board undertook engagement and research to understand the community’s views on local government. Whilst the Stage 1 engagement process reached a significant number of people, Aboriginal people were not apparent in those who provided feedback, and Aboriginal peak groups did not take up the Board’s invitation to participate in the review. As a result of this, the Board committed to

engaging further with Aboriginal people and communities in Stage 2.

The Board wanted to hear directly from Aboriginal people how well our system of local government currently serves Aboriginal communities, and how it could be improved for the future.

### COMMUNITY WORKSHOPS

The Board held several meetings across lutruwita (Tasmania) to meet with members of different Aboriginal communities and discuss their views on local government. There was one meeting held in nipaluna (Hobart), two meetings held in Launceston, and one meeting held in the North-West in Ulverstone.

WORKSHOP LOCATION	FACILITATOR	PARTICIPANTS
nipaluna/Hobart	Ruth Langford	19
Launceston	Fiona Hughes	20
Launceston	Fiona Hughes	2
Ulverstone	Fiona Hughes	32

All meeting were facilitated by well-connected members of the Aboriginal communities in these areas. The structure of the meetings was informal, with Board members listening to the concerns and issues most important to each audience.

### ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY CONTROLLED ORGANISATIONS

A number of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations were contacted by phone to

invite any views they have on Tasmania's system of local government.

The organisation that responded to this phone contact was the Cape Barren Island Aboriginal Association Inc.

The themes coming out of both sets of conversations have been incorporated into the discussions below.

## KEY THEMES

### GENERAL DISATISFACTION WITH GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

Participants spoke with passion about their frustrations with government structures, whether at the federal, state or local level. The Board heard a number of points on this theme, including:

- experience of bias
- concerns regarding Aboriginal sovereignty and the imposition of colonial structures
- misunderstanding or disregard by government institutions
- a desire to see traditional Aboriginal principles adopted in governance.

There was a sense of general disappointment with the current level of recognition, understanding and assistance that was being provided to Aboriginal people.

A common sentiment was workshop participants feeling stuck in cycle of poverty and feeling abandoned by all levels of government. Some participants felt that local government was biased against low income suburbs with high Aboriginal populations, unfairly targeting them with requests to comply with standards and rules they feel no ownership of.

Underlying this disillusionment with government institutions was the issue of sovereignty and the imposition of colonial structures, such as compulsory voting in council elections. One participant highlighted the concerns of some Aboriginal people about whether acknowledging local government means that they are compromising their sovereignty, that was never ceded. They expressed reservations on participating in an institution that may go against their foundational values.

A common point raised was that Aboriginal people have a strong voice, but their perspectives were not being listened to and considered in decision-making. There were frequent comments from participants about how they felt unwelcome, anonymous, or overlooked in council work. They felt that council structures do not meet their needs, and councils did not make any attempt to understand them.

Some participants urged the Board to consider traditional methods of governance and questioned why the existing local government system was assumed to be correct. This is based on a principle of reporting to their community, rather than an external authority outside the community. One party raised the idea of seasonal governance, in which family or community members deferred to the most experienced or knowledgeable person regarding different periods or issues.

### REPRESENTATION

The lack of Aboriginal representation in local government and beyond was a recurring theme. The Board heard strong views expressed on:

- more Aboriginal people occupying positions within government

- numerous barriers to participation and representation, and
- reforms that could remove or reduce these barriers.

There was a strong desire in the workshops for Aboriginal Liaison Officers to be employed within local government, both to educate others within government and to allow improved consultation and communication with the Aboriginal community.

Participants wanted to see Aboriginal people represented in a range of local government positions, such as council staff, as councillors and as Board members. This would allow for greater diversity in the views and priorities considered within councils, and lead to more effective services, such as grant processes, that would accommodate them.

The representatives of the Aboriginal communities involved in the workshops raised several barriers to their unrestricted participation in local government, such as:

- feeling unwelcome,
- standards of behaviour that may include racist or inappropriate conduct,
- a lack of non-Aboriginal support to run for council,
- high financial costs to campaign,
- a lack of full understanding of the role and responsibilities of councillors,
- feeling uneducated,
- wanting to avoid being seen as the sole representative of all Aboriginal people in the area, and
- an absence of experienced role models and mentors.

Participants made numerous suggestions that would contribute to lessening these barriers, particularly through symbolic and practical acts. These include councils taking action to welcome Aboriginal people, such

as prioritising acknowledgements of Country, signs that provide Aboriginal histories, dual place names, flying the Aboriginal flag, displaying cultural artefacts in council properties, as well as investing in infrastructure that facilitates Aboriginal cultural activities, like fire pits.

The proposal that councils should have identified Aboriginal positions for councillors, either elected or appointed by the Aboriginal community, was also raised. While there was some support for the idea, there was also concern that it would be very challenging for an individual to represent an entire community, and it may be seen as tokenistic.

Another suggestion was council mentorship programs, which would allow younger Aboriginal people to be guided through council-promoted structures, such as employed positions or on council committees. A number of participants recommended Cultural Awareness Training being mandatory for all staff, on a periodic basis, such as once every 6-12 months. There was also a suggestion that any reform related to Aboriginal communities needed to be enduring across elected terms. Participants felt that these suggestions needed to be legislated and not subject to changes in council leadership and their policies.

Lastly, participants suggested that there was value in councils looking to other jurisdictions for examples of where local government better incorporates Aboriginal culture and populations.

### **MISUNDERSTANDING OF SERVICES, LACK OF SERVICE DELIVERY**

The Board heard from participants that they held mixed attitudes to the common functions of local government. The major issues raised in this area were:

- that infrastructure and the environment were the services that needed improvement
- the systems of grants and permits are inaccessible to Aboriginal people
- major concerns are related to social, health and wellbeing services traditionally delivered at other levels of government, and
- more support by local government to enable cultural burials and funerals.

As highlighted above, traditional council functions and services were not the primary concern of participants in the community workshops. However, in the traditional role discussion, it included mentions of infrastructure, regarding public toilets and their necessary proximity to disabled parking, as well as the infrastructure at community centres that Aboriginal people use. There was a desire for stronger upkeep of public spaces by councils, in keeping with the importance of the environment.

The importance of land, sea, sky, and language for participants was significant for Aboriginal community members that attended the workshops. They noted that there was an opportunity for local government to improve in the stewardship of the environment, as it was currently perceived as poor. Waste management and recycling, animal control, and the killing of native animals through land development were presented as examples of underperformance in this area.

Participants also noted that they felt restricted from interacting with their traditional lands through the introduction of permits, fees, and fines. For example, Aboriginal people have had to pay to camp on cultural land, or needed permits for foraging, hunting or harvesting bush tucker.

Participants noted that government is seen to disregard traditional knowledge that could be useful within parks through wildlife/heritage rangers.

Some participants raised the possibility of a change in council rates for Aboriginal people, to accommodate their socio-economic circumstances and to account for the services they actually used. This was particularly the case for remote locations where only limited council services were available. Workshop attendees also noted that councils should be providing more funding for Aboriginal culture, grants or low-cost spaces to utilise for the arts and storytelling.

Beyond the traditional role of local government, the primary conversation of participants focused on a range of services typically delivered at alternative levels of government. For some, they were not aware of what services councils did offer, but had multiple suggestions on the services and functions that they needed more support in.

Councils were proposed as contact points for a range of government services, given their proximity to the local community. These included:

- welfare payments through Centrelink,
- community-style housing and maintenance, and homelessness support,
- food stamps and concerns regarding malnutrition,
- transitional rehabilitation services from jail or other detention facilities,
- legal assistance,
- support for single parents,
- domestic/family violence support
- healthcare, particularly for mental health,

- youth support, employment, or youth councils,
- advocacy to change date of Australia Day, and
- advocacy to review the Constitution.

One issue raised consistently across the workshops was reform for funerals and cultural burials. The legal requirements of the *Burial and Cremation Act 2019* were seen as overwhelming and inaccessible for Aboriginal people pursuing traditional forms of burial. Clear and simple communication with the community about what is currently possible, and any future reforms, was a priority.

### COMMUNICATION

A final theme that arose across all workshops was poor communication between councils and Aboriginal people. Participants said that councils usually put the onus on Aboriginal people to instigate conversations. Other major concerns within this theme were:

- the flawed underlying principles of consultation towards Aboriginal people
- the negative perception and bias towards their communities
- the barriers to communication mechanisms, and
- reform through practical improvements and approaches, such as written information or face-to-face consultation.

Participants felt that Aboriginal people should be respected as the traditional owners of the land, and their views sought on this basis, rather than as a token group of stakeholders.

Workshop participants raised the perception that Aboriginal people were considered too difficult to deal with. People gave examples of council staff or representatives liaising with preferred members or organisations within

the community, rather than recognising the breadth of views that exist.

They felt that the perception of 'difficult' behaviour was due to white people feeling uncomfortable with Aboriginal truth-telling and righteous anger. This discomfort gets in the way of communication on challenging but important issues. To resolve this, councils need to implement principles and practices that allow people to identify and address the feelings that can arise when considering a colonial past.

The communication mechanisms of local government have made some Aboriginal people feel unsafe or out of place, discouraging them to participate. The Board heard that local government could improve relations with Aboriginal people by proactively coming to them, meeting them on Country, providing an informal atmosphere with food and drink, not enforcing a strict time limit or structure to meetings, and bonding together to build ongoing relationships. A suggested channel to execute this was through community Elders.

In addition to interpersonal communication, one key area for reform was written communications from councils, which are not necessarily accessible for a wider audience. For example, one participant suggested that the process of applying for permits was something Aboriginal people are not familiar with or understand well. As a result of this, it is challenging for them to get approval and provides further barriers. Local government should make these written processes simpler and easier to understand.

As a broader point, many participants suggested that limited educational opportunities for Aboriginal people had created barriers in accessing council

information, or in understanding their rights as ratepayers. In the case of business owners, the challenges of navigating the municipal system of paperwork and approval were significant.

Suggested improvements to local government were to simplify all language and formats for systems, databases, websites, and any free newspapers that are intended to inform communities. Participants noted that all material should consider the wider audience that will consume it, not just Tasmanians with higher education levels.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Local Government Board sincerely thanks all participants who joined the community workshops. The Board acknowledges that people gave up their time to provide an input into the Future of Local Government Review, which hopes to introduce reform that improves services and participation for Aboriginal people and all other Tasmanians.





**More information?**  
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