

Sunday 19 Feb 2023

Dear Sir/Madam.

The Future of Local Government Review – Stage 2 Options Paper

Background

We have a strong interest in local government and in land use planning, have attended 2 workshops with the Board, last year at Hobart Town Hall, and last Monday 13 Feb 2023 in Kingborough. We also completed the on-line survey late last year.

The issues of financial sustainability are recognised. They are very real and affect many, if not all, councils around Australia as explained on the ABC AM radio program, 15 Feb 2023.

We agree we need to make councils resilient and well-resourced for the future but it is vitally important to realise that financial efficiencies do not equate to effectiveness.

Possibilities

To make councils more sustainable and resilient There are various choices and they might include:

- Increasing rates and delivering enhanced services
- Reducing services and capping rate increases
- Sharing specialist services between Councils e.g., planning expertise, IT, equipment sharing.
- Widen the rates base by Council mergers
- Demanding increased financial support from Federal and state govt to cover any shortfall. Some would say that as governments increasingly rely on Councils to deliver services this is a reasonable step.

Questions

Q1 What are/were the political and financial drivers behind this process.

Q2 We are interested in who sat on the stakeholder groups who decided on these 3 options.

Q3 The Options Paper at p29 states

“We do not know everything about how scale is impacting operations of Councils or the precise solution. Further work will have to be done as we move towards framing up final reform recommendations in Stage 3”

The obvious question then is why is the public only presented with these 3 options in Stage 2 if the impact of scaling up is not known?

The Three Reform Pathways

Having read all the various Advantages and Challenges listed for the three options we consider the challenges listed, or in plain -speak, the downside of these 3 pathways should be scrutinized very carefully. There are many councils on the mainland now which are dis-amalgamating because of the true cost, both financial and social, of amalgamations. We would not like to see this forced on Tasmania.

Option 5.1 Appendix Planning

Planning is critical for our communities and for building resilient, attractive, liveable communities where people have a voice over their own environment. Strategic planning and good design are fundamental for our future. Neither are being done well in our view by the state government’s Tasmanian Planning Scheme.

Our view is that planning should be kept in the local arena and DA assessments should be part of the remit of councils who sit as “the planning authority”.

Points to note re Planning:

1 The Appendix states that, concerning Development Applications and planning decisions, “conflict occurs/has occurred only in a small number of councils”. Hence in our view, this is not an authentic reason for removing Planning decisions from councils.

2 Tasmania has TPC and TasCAT which should be properly resourced to do the massive job expected of both bodies. Tasmania already has Major Projects to deal with large potentially divisive projects which cross LGA boundaries. Major Projects uses independent development assessment panels or DAPs for large potentially divisive projects which may have in earlier years been assessed under Projects of State Significance and Projects of Regional Significance.

3 Another very concerning issue around DAs being assessed by an independent panel or DAP is that in 2022, Minister Elise Archer made appointments to TasCAT of her own choosing. I understand she substantially ignored advice of the special body whose job it was to recommend TasCAT appointments. This was a highly political move and undermines democracy. The independence of these DAPs cannot be assured.

To conclude, in our view there is no valid reason why planning should be removed from councils. Trust in our local elected members is important and they have much greater local knowledge than any so-called independent panel or DAP.

Alternatives to our traditional councils

There are many models surely from overseas which could be usefully examined and introduced. Eg Greater London Council has many various boroughs or wards. There might also be an argument for stronger regional/area councils where there would be better resourcing from a wider rates base. However, this would need to be accompanied by reduction in powers and remit for the state government.

Local government must stay local. It is the tier of government closest to the people.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment.

Yours faithfully,

Anne Harrison

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