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Future of Local Government Review
via email: Submissions.LGBoard@dpac.tas.gov.au

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Dear Local Government Review Board,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission in response to the Options Paper Review Stage 2 – December 2022.

This stage of the review has in my opinion been rushed, with only two weeks between a LGAT-hosted workshop to discuss the issues raised in this paper for Kingborough and other southern Councillors and the close of submissions. Whilst I appreciate the response provided to me on behalf of the Board on 17 February, outlining the next steps in the process, I fear the short timeframe and lack of extension for accepting submissions will have resulted in the Review Committee not having genuinely heard the diversity of views on the proposed reforms which may adversely impact the capacity of the Board to progress the process in line with community expectations.

As the Options Paper notes on page 8, this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reassess Local Government in Tasmania and we have an opportunity to be bold and, “we should not rule out big ideas.”

With that in mind, at the outset of this submission, I want to emphasise my support for lowering the voting age. Noting the successful move to compulsory voting at Local Government elections at the most recent election, it is clear that Local Government in Tasmania can quickly and resolutely implement positive changes that strengthen our democratic process. Lowering the voting age is an important next step.

Local communities in Tasmania are indeed facing critical challenges, as correctly identified in the Options Paper, especially climate change, housing, and cost of living. I would add to that list rampant and spiralling economic inequality which compounds social disharmony.

I want to point out the decline in general-purpose financial assistance grants to Local Government, relative to total Commonwealth tax revenues and lament the reduction in commonwealth and state government assistance per capita over time. Rather than doing more with less, Local Government in Tasmania should have access to increasing financial support from the other tiers of government. This is the main issue constraining service delivery, and I was disappointed there was scant attention given to the impacts of the State Grants Commission’s distribution of Federal Assistance Grants in the Options Paper.

Any Tasmanian Local Government Charter should include a Statement of Expectations of the fundamental responsibilities of the state and commonwealth to adequately provision Local

Government and repudiate historical and ongoing attempts to cost shift to local communities' responsibilities for which the state and commonwealth governments should be responsible.

I do not agree with the Board's assessment that Tasmania's current council boundaries do not necessarily reflect how contemporary Tasmanians live, work, and connect. Whilst I agree that certain sectors, such as tourism, will genuinely benefit from a more consolidated regional approach, I harbour significant concerns that "fewer, larger councils" is simply a euphemism for service delivery cuts, longer wait times, driving more "customers" to call-centres where "your call is important to us," and automated voice recordings that say, "did you know you can find out all you need by visiting our website." Where once someone in a regional area would only have to travel to Kingston or to Huonville to talk to their local council staff, forced boundary changes may result in aggravating the tyranny of distance already experienced by so many Tasmanians. I reject the austerity mindset which sees human interaction as a costly burden to be avoided or minimised. I do not think a web portal, an algorithm and a chatbot constitute an improvement to service delivery to replace a front desk at a nearby civic centre staffed by members of our local community.

The Options Paper did not make the case for forced boundary consolidations. Whilst there may be a case to be made for mandated sharing and consolidation of services, this must correlate with an *increase* in capacity with a statutorily enforceable commitment to adequate resourcing for Local Government.

In 1907, Tasmania reduced its 149 municipalities by mergers and amalgamation to 53. Then in 1993, 46 Local Government Areas were reduced again to 29. If significant boundary adjustments are such a panacea, why hasn't the Board explained the extent to which service delivery improved in 1994 in the wake of those reductions? Why hasn't the Board documented how rates became cheaper and staff became happier and local residents received more bang for their buck?

Why didn't the Options Paper mention the financial situations of the mainland Councils that have endured Council amalgamations and mergers? For example, when Gundagai and Cootamundra Councils were forced to amalgamate, a Cootamundra-Gundagai Councillor alleged the changes resulted in rate increases of 53.5%, water and sewerage increases by 30% and other fees and charges increased by 15% as reported by *The Project* TV show in January 2022. The case for significant boundary consolidation will need to address case studies from the mainland and Tasmania's historical experience to explain why we think things will be different for us this time around.

Local Government is about caring for people, the environment, and the community. It is a force for good. We need to protect what we have, improve what we offer, and seriously scrutinise attempts to impose on Local Governments the same failed neoliberal austerity "expansionary fiscal contraction" strategies which have beleaguered so many other institutions over the past five decades. With respect to forced boundary adjustments, I am reminded of the adage, "if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail."