

Options paper LG Board Feb 19 2023

Representation

One of the missing elements of the options paper and the Board's study is any suggestions as to how the communities would be represented.

Good governance, accountability and community representation and communication are critically important to local government.

How could well-qualified local candidates be elected? This might involve pre-election and post-election training so that councillors (as the board of management of the LGA) would have capacity to make valid decisions on all aspects of running the LGA. Because of the electoral system and the right of everyone to nominate for election, members of a council, unlike those for the board of management for a business, are not selected to provide the range of skills in financial management, business management etc that a board would be expected to have. Proper remuneration might encourage better qualified candidates to stand for election in rural areas.

Could local communities be represented in wards, with precincts at a local level where all community members could have their say and outcomes would be sent to the council via the ward representative(s)? This could result in much greater community involvement in local government than at present, when people tend to think that voting every four years is all that is required.

In an existing rural LGA of say 15,000 voters, few residents actually know who they are voting for and what they stand for. Each councillor has to cover issues for the whole municipality which involves a lot of driving and makes it hard to understand what's going on in the more distant parts. A localised system would also enable residents to become more familiar with their LGA, even if it was larger than the current one, and more relevant information could be provided through precinct groups. Better communication, not simply good news stories, must be provided by the council.

Resource sharing and larger LGAs

Resource sharing and fewer, larger LGAs clearly makes sense to the Board – resource sharing could be over greater areas than new larger LGAs that might be formed.

Would there still be a single CEO or general manager appointed by a council comprised of members potentially unqualified in the appointment process? It would appear that at least one outside qualified person should be required to participate in the recruitment process.

Would s.62(2) of the Local Government Act (*The general manager may do anything necessary or convenient to perform his or her functions under this or any other Act*) be changed so that general manager does not have ultimate power over the council?

Might councils have a co-operative management structure whereby several managers could hold the general manager position in turn or in sequence?

Would these changes minimise the “silo” structure that can evolve within a council management?

An advantage of larger organisations could be the potential for development of staff in a particular area eg planning, so that staff are able to specialise in a particular area – housing, transport, active living. The State-wide planning scheme seems to be very prescriptive and planning is not flexible enough to consider local conditions and planning staff are often not familiar with the local area in which they are working.

Problem: Planning flexibility is clearly open to manipulation, but with less undisclosed “local” input this might be minimised!

Infrastructure

Budgets are dominated by roads and bridges – and there is a great deal more to moving residents within a LGA than simply providing roads. As with planning, separate work teams could concentrate on gravel roads, sealed roads or footpaths leading to both improved services and greater efficiency, and increasing the skilled workforce. Greater attention could be directed to improvements in availability of alternative forms of local transport.

Local mobility solutions

Most LGAs have State subsidised public transport routes, but many residents live too far from them to access them easily without a car.

The cost of private cars is huge. Those people who do not have a car - cannot drive, too old, too young, unlicensed or unable to afford to run a car – are at a severe disadvantage, especially in rural areas. This causes social isolation and poor health outcomes, which cost health services and care providers time and money in having to drive long distances to attend to their clients. Local community transport must be factored into the “transport” budget of any new structure of local government because it is critical to the wellbeing of the community.

Community Transport Services Tasmania (CTST) provides services for those most in need of transport and there are local flexible transport systems, such as Area Connect, that should be supported by local governments and more should be established on a local, regional basis to connect communities.

New digital technologies are enabling more flexible local transport systems to emerge and looking to the future, as the Future of Local Government Review is doing, such technologies must be incorporated into any plans for reorganisation of local government so that councils are not restricted to their traditional roles. Finance for innovation in “transport” systems – including walking and cycling tracks - should not have to be financed entirely from rates. If larger LGAs that were developed to share costs with the State government for roads within the area, including roads now designated as State roads, the budgets could also provide for extended active transport facilities.

Development of strategies

At present each council develops its own strategies – eg NRM strategy, Climate action strategy, Health and Wellbeing strategy, Waste Minimisation and Resource Recovery strategy etc etc. This involves a lot of staff time and may demand higher levels of expertise than available in a small council, so greater efficiency might be achieved through development of strategy templates so that each area could tailor the “model strategy” to suit its own requirements. Reference to a model strategy would also enable residents to be involved in the strategy development process because they would be aware of the common themes before being asked to comment.

Conclusion

The range of issues to consider is too great to make a comprehensive submission. However, I have included some suggestions that may be of use. At this time, when transport systems are at a crossroads with more people moving to rural areas and working, at least in part, from home (or on a bus), development of more flexible and user-friendly local transport services is a critically important issue. This review of local government provides the opportunity to deliver changes for the better.

Thank you for the work already completed and for the opportunity to make this submission. I look forward to the next stage of the process.

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