



Friends of North Bruny

SUBMISSION TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOARD REVIEW INTO THE FUTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN TASMANIA

Friends of North Bruny Inc. (FONB) is an incorporated association which seeks to protect and preserve the unique environment and lifestyle of North Bruny for current and future generations. Our constitution expressly anticipates that this will involve us in making representations to government, local government and other bodies and organisations on issues which relate to North Bruny or to Bruny Island generally.

It is in this vein that we make this submission to the review being conducted by the Local Government Board into the future of local government in Tasmania. We appreciate the opportunity to do so.

FONB is one of the 3 main community groups on Bruny Island, the others being the Bruny Island Community Association (BICA) and the Bruny Island Environment Network (BIEN). We work with those other organisations on issues of common interest, but maintain our independence. We have a paid-up membership of over 100 people, which represents a considerable proportion of both the population and the ratepayer base on North Bruny.¹

We have in part been motivated to make this submission by news that Kingborough Council have made a submission to the Board in which they support amalgamation with the Huon Valley Council but also recommend the creation of a Board of Management for Bruny Island, similar to the governance arrangements for Lord Howe Island.² We have not seen the Council's submission to the Board, and are relying on a media release on the Council's website³, a related article in the

¹ The number of permanent residents on Bruny Island is now over 1000 people, of which no more than a fifth would live on North Bruny. We do not know the number of ratepayers on the island, but estimate that it would be in the vicinity of 3000. Again, no more than a fifth of these would be on the northern part of the island.

² See *Lord Howe Island Act 1953 (NSW)*.

³ <https://www.kingborough.tas.gov.au/2023/07/kingborough-supports-local-government-reform/>

Mercury newspaper, and an ABC interview with the Mayor, Paula Wriedt.⁴

We do not agree with the proposal that local government services for Bruny Island should be provided by a Board of Management separate from the local government arrangements made for mainland Tasmania, and explain why below.

Special circumstances of Bruny Island

Bruny Island does need special consideration in the Board's review, because its circumstances are unusual.

The factors we consider particularly important are these –

- The island is both nationally and globally significant, for its biodiversity, its physical beauty, its cultural history, and its history in the exploration and settlement of Australia. It needs to be looked after with exceptional care. Significantly, it is one of 20 'priority places' intended for special protection under the Commonwealth's *Threatened Species Action Plan 2022-2032*.⁵
- The resident population of the island is small, as previously mentioned, and so is its population of ratepayers, but it receives a lot of visitors, and this places considerable strain on the island's infrastructure and services. Some of the visitors are from Tasmania, but many are tourists from interstate and overseas. Many visitors only come for the day.
- We receive approximately 150,000 tourists a year (and up to 5000 a day)⁶, with particularly heavy visitation in summer and on public holidays. We expect the annual number to keep rising, since it has already surpassed pre-Covid levels. This pressure in part arises from tourism promotion by the State, but the island has also become notorious as a destination through social media.
- The pressure on the island from visitors and tourists puts a significant strain on local government services, such as public toilets,

⁴ <https://www.abc.net.au/hobart/programs/drive/should-bruny-island-be-removed-from-kingborough-council/102650636>

⁵ <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/environment/biodiversity/threatened/strategy/priority-places>

⁶ In comparison, the number of visitors allowed on Lord Howe Island at any one time is capped at 400. It receives a total of 16,000 to 17,000 visitors in a normal year.

waste management services, and Council roads.⁷ It is unfair that this burden currently falls on Kingborough Council and its ratepayers. The State is encouraging this level of visitation, and should subsidise the resultant costs on the community. It should also consider a visitor levy to help cover these costs, as we believe Kingborough Council has recommended to the Board.

- The pressure on the island also in part arises because of ease of access. Unlike Lord Howe Island, Flinders Island or King Island, where most visitors fly in, Bruny Island is accessible by a 10-minute ferry ride on a service which runs 3 times an hour, from a ferry terminus which is only 30 minutes from a capital city. We are not protected by distance or cost.
- This proximity also means that we have strong economic, cultural and social connections to mainland Tasmania. We are strongly connected to the Channel communities of Kettering, Snug, Coningham, Howden, Tinderbox and Margate, and of course strongly connected to Kingston. Most islanders would do their shopping in Kingston, and this would often be where they engage with government services. Hobart and Kingston are also accessible by Metro buses from the ferry terminus at Kettering. (There are no comparable economic, cultural or social links with the Huon Valley, and travel between the island and the Huon Valley is slow and time-consuming.)
- Another feature of this proximity is that most visitors or tourists who come to the island will have incurred much of the cost off the island, and will not spend much here. It is on the mainland that they will hire cars or campervans, purchase tours, buy groceries and fuel, etc..
- The increase in visitors and tourists is also having significant planning consequences, as is the growth in the number of people who wish to retire to the island. New homes, shacks and accommodation places are being built, and existing homes are being turned over to visitor accommodation. This trend requires careful management at the local government level.

⁷ Water supplies are also an issue, since there is only one aquifer for public water supplies, at Adventure Bay. However, although highly important, this is not a local government issue.

Community Catchment

As the community organisation for North Bruny, we engage with Kingborough Council on a fairly continuous basis. We are very aware of the difficulties that the Council faces in providing local government services to the island, and see that this burden would be eased by pursuing economies of scale. However, we would not like to see Bruny Island serviced by a Council based in the Huon Valley, for this would risk us being ‘out of sight, out of mind’, and rupture the economic, cultural and social connections that we have mentioned. The natural centre for providing local government services to the island is Kingston.

Thus, we support Strategic Scenario 2 in the Southern Shore Community Catchment Information Pack.

Kingborough Council’s Board of Management proposal

We believe that this proposal is superficially attractive but misconceived, for these reasons –

- The island would thereby lose access to the skills and resources available to a large Council – the type of body that would result from a Council amalgamation in the Southern Shore Community Catchment. Rather than being the beneficiary of “economies of scale and scope, maximising the efficient use of resources to provide an improved range and quality of services, and value for ratepayers on a sustainable basis” (to quote the Board’s Terms of Reference), the island would be going it alone, trying to make up for the loss of economies of scale and the loss of ready access to skills and resources through extra expense. A ready example would be planning expertise. With an increased need for careful planning in the face of growing development applications, the Board would have to hire its own planners or contract for planning services. Either way, the result would not be as beneficial to the community as a large Council planning office, where experience and resources can be freely shared.
- The rate base on the island is not large enough to support its own local government body. According to a statement made in 2018 by the then Mayor of Kingborough Council, the Council was then spending \$1.25 on the island for every \$1 it received from Bruny ratepayers.⁸ Supplementing the rates with a \$5 levy for every visitor

⁸ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-12-20/bruny-island-off-tasmania-feels-growing-pains-of-tourism-boom/10582124>

would still not raise enough money for the island's needs, especially if the economies of scale available through a large Council were not being obtained, so additional funds would have to be sought from the State government to make the proposal work.⁹ The risk there would be that the Board might gradually be starved of the funds needed to properly protect and service the island. A large Council might be thought to have greater sway in arguing for any supplementary State, and perhaps Federal, funds that might be needed.

- Having the island's local government affairs managed by an outside Council helps defuse some of the tensions which can arise in a small community. The community on the island is very engaged and resilient, but there are tensions that which could easily disrupt a Board of Management unless well led, and unless the number of islanders on the Board was balanced by competent off-island membership.
- The smaller the governmental body, especially in a small community, the greater the risk of impropriety, such as nepotism or the inappropriate use of resources.

We do support a visitor levy, since we believe that the visitors to the island should in part pay for the infrastructure burdens that they create.

We also believe that there would be value in the Council which eventually assumes responsibility for Bruny Island appointing a special advisory committee to advise it on Bruny Island affairs, to ensure that the special needs of the island are taken into account in a larger administrative structure. This would presumably be appointed under s 24 of the *Local Government Act 1993*. Kingborough Council previously had a Bruny Island Advisory Committee (BIAC), which was disbanded for various reasons in 2019. We believe that this was a valuable committee, though not always harmonious, and that it would be good for such a committee to arise again. Ideally, the members of the committee would be drawn from all over the island, and would be reasonably representative of its multi-faceted community.

Simon Allston
Chair

⁹ It is salient to note that in the financial year 2020/1, 57% of the funding of the Lord Howe Island Board came from external government sources in the nature of direct funding or grants – see https://media.opengov.nsw.gov.au/pairtree_root/62/bd/35/f5/46/c5/47/75/9a/f4/d3/7c/55/91/1f/80/obj/ED21_8566_Report_Annual_Lord_Howe_Island_Board_FY_2021.pdf, at p 48.