



# SOUTH HOBART PROGRESS ASSOCIATION

*Incorporating Cascades Progress Association)*

*Founded 1922*

**ABN 65 850 310 318**

**President:** Michael Cole

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Local Government Board  
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## **re: The Future of Local Government Review Comment on the Phase Two Interim Report.**

*The South Hobart Progress Association Inc.(SHPA Inc.)* takes this opportunity to thank you for inviting comment on the future of Local Government: in particular, the Phase Two Interim (Summary) Report prepared by the *Local Government Board* as part of the Government's Review of Local Government.

The Board has asked that feedback on Stage Two be focussed on how Local Government should be restructured to meet the needs of the community in the future, and the Board's proposals for reforming decision-making around development applications. We have assumed in our submission that the latter is no longer necessary given the Minister's referral to the Minister for Planning to be considered as part of the Government's review of planning.

We would like to begin with some observations. While the approach adopted by the Board is commendable in some senses, it is clearly prefaced on a significant reduction in the number of councils in Tasmania through amalgamations. The use of phrases and words such as 'structural reform', 'reshaping boundaries' and 'consolidation' are, at best, euphemisms or weasel words for amalgamations and at worst deceptive and misleading. It is unfortunate that what started out as a review of the *Local Government Act, 1993* has somehow transmogrified into a council amalgamation process.

Whilst the *South Hobart Progress Association* does not oppose council amalgamations, per se, it does believe that a lot of groundwork needs to be done **before** proceeding. Such an approach would include preparatory research and information that clearly establishes that a council is no longer viable. Secondly, there is a need for an on-going consultation process with the local community, and, thirdly, a viable solution to the issue. With this in mind, the Association believes that amalgamations or 'structural reform' should only be considered when one of the following requirements is not being met:-

1. that the council has to be financially viable in the medium to long term;
2. that it substantially achieves its roles, responsibilities and functions;

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3. there is no graft, corruption or fraud;
4. that it is supported by the local community; and,
5. that the council is accountable and transparent.

The Association believes it would be preferable to have to 'tested' councils in Tasmania using similar criteria before embarking on a review of local government. As the Board would know, councils are required by law to submit annual reports, financial statements to the Auditor General, ten year infrastructure and ten year community plans and a number of other reports and requirements. This information would be helpful if councils were reviewed before being subject to structural reform.

In many cases where amalgamations have proceeded, both here in Tasmania and Interstate, there are no benchmarks to assess progress. A set of targets or outcomes should be created and measured in order to answer the question – 'was the amalgamation a success?' Assuming the Board proceeds with Stage 3 of the Review then community catchments should be asked to develop benchmarks to measure progress prior to structural reform.

The issue of whether or not amalgamations are beneficial overall, is still contested at the national level. Nonetheless over a third of councils have disappeared in the last two decades throughout Australia. Research in this area, particularly from Victoria, NSW, and South Australia is often inconclusive on the matter. More often than not it is simply assumed to be the case that benefits will accrue. While economic efficiencies and potential better service delivery are usually identified through 'structural reform', they are often quite small in reality. This should be hardly surprising as most councils have implemented some form of shared arrangements, usually with adjoining councils. More progressive councils have provided both staff and have marketed products that are in demand by other councils leading to greater efficiencies. In the case of *Tasman* and *Sorell Councils* further reviews by the *Local Government Board* simply highlighted the degree of co-operation between the councils and what limited savings that could be made.

One of the downsides of creating larger councils is the loss of local representation and democracy. In larger councils, councillors need to know the requirements and views of a much greater number of residents. Access to local government is also problematic and weakens local input and democracy. Another downside is the loss of local knowledge, whether assessing major development applications or appreciating the need for a new swing in the local playground.

Recreating some sort of ward system is equally undemocratic. If a person can be elected a councillor on fewer votes than another candidate in the same electorate simply because they live in a particular area, then it violates the fundamental tenet of democracy – that is, one vote one value. One way of partly overcoming this problem is to have fewer members in any new established and larger council. However, by definition, that means less access and less representation.

While the *Board* has done an admirable job in identifying 'community catchments' throughout the State, it will be difficult to make meaningful gains in 'structural reform'. For example, it is widely believed that in order to cope with future demands both *Tasman Council* and *Glamorgan Spring Bay Council* ought to be amalgamated with a larger council, such as *Sorell*. The major problem is that all three councils have little in common. *Sorell* is a dynamic, young and growing municipality reliant on primary industry and services. *Tasman* relies on tourists predominantly and contains an ageing and dwindling population. *Glamorgan Spring Bay* effectively represents the East Coast, farmers, tourists and beaches. It may be worth

considering using the catchment groups to look at sensible boundary amendments, rather than wholesale changes made under the catch cry of 'structural reform.

Finally, although the role of councils in development applications has been referred to the Minister for Planning, we should be very wary of the suggested approach. To have panels decide rather than councils is to invite more politicisation of the DA process. The Government will inevitably appoint sympathetic individuals to the panels which have been set up for a problem that doesn't exist. *The Hobart City Council*, in response to a claim of being anti-development, publicly stated that 98.5% of all DAs are passed by the Council. There is little reason to not believe that similar figures occur in all other councils. Tasmania has a perfectly reasonable development approval process. **If it aint broke don't fix it.**

The Association would like to, again, thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. Hoysted', written in a cursive style.

**Phillip Hoysted.**

Vice-President. SHPA (Inc.)

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23<sup>rd</sup> May, 2023