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RE: Future of Local Government Review Stage 3

Dear Local Government Review Board

The Tasmanian Labor Party is pleased to provide a submission to the Future of Local Government Review Stage 3.

With the Premier's recent intervention in the review to rule out forced amalgamations due to internal political pressure on him, Labor is unclear on what the Board or Government hopes to achieve from the next stage of the review.

In the context of the Premier's last-minute meddling, Labor also notes that more than $3 million has been spent on the review so far, according to Budget Estimates.

Labor has a proud history of working with Local Government to deliver positive outcomes for communities and has been working hard to engage with councils and key stakeholders since the last stage of the review.

Local Government is the level of Government closest to the people and is an important provider of services and employment across Tasmania.

Forced amalgamations

Tasmanian Labor does not support forced local government amalgamations.

We have listened to feedback from around the state across Local Government and it is our view that redrawing lines on a map without the support of communities, councillors and the workforce will not solve the challenges facing the sector.

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Local voices and local decision-making

Local councils, their staff, mayors and elected members are passionate about their local communities and their futures.

My engagement as Shadow Minister for Local Government has only further entrenched that view.

That local depth of knowledge is unmatched at other levels of government and that is why Labor will continue to respect and value local councils, their place in Tasmania and their contribution to local communities and economies.

Local communities, particularly those in smaller or more dispersed areas, value their local councils as often they are the only elected members that are regularly in their community considering the demands in Hobart or Canberra of State and Federal parliament and large electorates.

Even in larger population centres there is concern that a loss of local voices in decision making at councils would have a negative impact on communities.

The same applies to a directly employed local workforce, which has an in-depth knowledge of the needs of their communities and go the extra mile because they themselves are part of that community.

Local services, workforce development and secure, direct employment

Labor would be very concerned if any review outcomes saw local councils lose ownership of core local services.

While Labor sees many opportunities for local councils to share skills and resources, we do not support resource-sharing recommendations that would see direct employment and core council services outsourced away from councils.

These secure, local jobs provide a massive benefit to local communities and the state as a whole.

There are skills and workforce shortages in Tasmania across all government services, such as health, education and child protection. These shortages are not an issue isolated to local government.

I know some councils have had skilled people withdraw from job applications because of the uncertainty created by this review.

While we acknowledge that the Board did not choose its own composition and neither did the current Minister, Tasmanian Labor reiterates our belief that the Board should have included at least one representative from Tasmania's Local Government workforce, of which there are more than 4000 workers including their union representatives with an in-depth knowledge of the sector to have chosen from.

Cost of living

We also note the widespread evidence from other jurisdictions that forced council mergers do not save ratepayers money and see no upside for communities in driving rates up during a cost of living crisis.

We also note comments by Minister Street who told Leon Compton on ABC radio on April 20: ***"The one thing you will not hear me promise, Leon, is that amalgamations will reduce rates for ratepayers because that simply is not the case. And it's not been the experience anywhere. We're not talking about reducing rates … for me this has never been about cost cutting for ratepayers."***

Any proposed mergers of councils, forced or otherwise, must be well articulated as to how money will be saved for ratepayers and not create an extra burden on household finances.

Other issues

There are many substantive issues in Tasmanian local government that need addressing and Labor will continue to work with everyone with a stake in local government to solve them.

In addition to those raised above Labor will continue to prioritise the following policy areas:

- **Occupational health and safety of elected members and council workers**
- **Assisting councils with housing approval pathways**
- **Assistance with climate change policy**
- **Economic development**

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Conclusion

The methodology used to come up with the review's next report must demonstrate how any changes recommended would support a sustainable, financially viable future of local government that provides local benefits to communities, workforce and the state's economy.

We expect any review recommendations to be well supported with evidence if they are expected to gain support from the sector, the community or the Tasmanian Labor Party.

Thank you for taking the time to read our submission.

Yours sincerely

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Shadow Minister for Local Government