

Submission: Local Government Review, Stage 2 Interim Report – Cr Anne-Marie Loader, MVC

Introduction

Local Government is the third tier of government in Tasmania and the closest to the communities that they serve. It's common place in Tasmania to bump into a Councillor and to have a chat about anything and everything. It's difficult for some in the community to work out where the responsibilities of council ends and State and Federal Governments picks up. For this reason, councils deal with a wide range of issues and enquiries as well as advocating for the community to State and Federal Governments.

The best thing about Local Government is that when a community member has an issue, the Councillor mostly already knows about it, where it is and the details. We live in and are part of the communities that we represent.

Local Government isn't called Local without reason. It's vital to have that close link to communities especially when there are things going on that State and Federal Government representatives are just too removed from to assist.

Tasmania has 29 councils. I often hear that that is too many for a state both smaller in geographic area and population than mainland states. It is this small size that has helped to shape our state in many ways. We have a rich history of community, that while this is being lost in large mainland cities and towns, is still alive and well here (just). We do things differently; attempting to compare our size with the mainland and recommending a similar level of representation isn't practical and most importantly isn't culturally viable. We are already seeing a shift away from knowing our neighbours, being involved in community groups and most alarmingly, a decrease in those choosing to volunteer.

Local Government is often referred to as the body that looks after *rates, roads and rubbish*. It's so much more than that and the community where the Local Government Area (LGA) is located shapes exactly who their local council is and what they do to a point. After the necessary areas that are perfectly described by *rates, roads and rubbish*, there is the community building and well-being aspects of council work. Councils listen to their communities and, when there is need, go over and beyond to care for the communities they serve. For example, some councils in Tasmania provide health services simply because no one else will. This also applies to child care. Both much needed services for communities to keep ticking over, keep industry and the economy ticking over and usually these services are ones that the upper levels of government have failed to provide.

Tasmania needs Local Government to be local; Local Government supports our unique way of life. Tasmania is not a large urbanised state with big cities and our council boundaries and make up need to reflect this so that our enviable way of life is nurtured and maintained.

Councils are local and as locals they respond to local needs.

All the way through this review process the Review Board have said that they are engaging with the community with 'bold packages'. And yet many in our communities have not heard about these reforms. I do not call asking ordinary Tasmanians to read several 46 page information packs engaging with the community. The key messages of the Review have not been done in a way that has captured the attention of the vast majority of Tasmanians and as such they have not had their say simply because they don't know about it. And for those who have had a look, the sheer size of the information packs and supporting documents have put many off. The Board has left the hard task of alerting the community about the review process to the Councils themselves. Reports on Tasmania's low literacy and low take up of the digital world are not difficult to find. Expecting a broad

consultation that requires good literacy and digital skills means that around half the adult population is excluded.

Are there any benefits to communities with amalgamation and/or boundary adjustments?

The scenarios in the Information Packs for both 'Tamar Valley' and 'Central and Midlands' Catchments are all problematic for me as a resident, ratepayer and Councillor of the Meander Valley municipality area due to the following:

- No where in the Information packs is the problem stated that the scenarios are designed to fix. There are only supposed 'solutions' without the problem/s being stated.
- The scenarios are either too large and will disintegrate local representation and local response to need or too small to allow for a viable council.
- Elections: A candidate will struggle without a large team of supporters. This will lend itself to candidates aligned with political parties being more easily elected than independent candidates and thus cementing local government as another tier of party politics. We need diversity and engagement in councils by all, not just people with means and links to large organisations.
- There is no economic evidence in the information packs to suggest that residents and rates payers will receive better services.
- There will obviously be loss of jobs for some council workers as services are consolidated, thus reducing services to the communities. The flow on to local businesses with this could be extremely damaging as some people are forced to move to find work.

Forced amalgamations don't work; voluntary amalgamations and shared resources could.

- Most of this submission was written prior to the announcement that forced amalgamations are no longer being considered... it's hard to know what's happening with this. They have been off the table, on the table and now off the table again.
- Forced amalgamations have had disastrous effects on local communities in both Victoria and NSW in recent times. Both rates and employee costs increased as a result of amalgamations and some councils are now looking to un-amalgamate. Bigger doesn't equal being cost-effective or providing the best community services. I've heard anecdotally that local infrastructure such as little halls and parks have been made vulnerable by making councils larger. A decrease in representation + urbanised representation = losses to small and regional communities.
- No dollar value can be placed on identity, sense of place and that all important feeling of home. Meander Valley has that. We don't want to lose it.
- In a time where people are less engaged with their neighbours, forcibly rolling everyone together in new municipalities and expecting it to work will cause long ranging problems. It would be way better for us to work through the pros and cons of forming new municipalities together, than being split and pushed.

A big unanswered question about all of the scenarios is who will pay for their formation? Will it be ratepayers? Or will it be from taxes? Either way it is a lose-lose situation for Tasmanians.

Meander Valley Municipality is viable and well-performing. Why not focus on LGAs that are not viable and/or not performing well? Rather than go in with 'bold packages' to everyone, quietly go to assist these LGAs and work out the best way forward through negotiation and support. The 'big stick' of forced amalgamation will always result in push back, whereas negotiation and dialogue could well

lead some councils to amicably and cooperatively work with their neighbours for the best outcomes for their residents and ratepayers.

There appears to be a shift towards the urban areas of the state to the detriment of the regional and rural areas in all the offered scenarios.

A huge part of Local Government apart from local response to need and representation, is the local knowledge that both staff and representatives bring to their roles. Take Scenario 2 from the Central and Northern Midlands Community Catchment Information Pack. How is this ever going to be 'local'? Deloraine and Brighton are hardly local to each other. Was this one put in to make the other scenarios more palatable? How would one council hope to service an area like this with a huge amount of roads, infrastructure and area to maintain but under 53,000 people? It would be the reduction of local representation, gone would be the days of easily making contact with a Councillor. It would become like the State Government where it can take weeks and weeks for an MP to respond to an email. Likewise with the Tamar catchment, there is no 'empowering' of local communities, only the degradation of identity and representation.

All up as a Councillor I've found the need to engage in the review process something that has taken me away from the real role of being a Local Government representative. This 'bold package' has meant that I've had to do the following:

- Let the community know about The Review because the methods that the Review Board have used haven't captured the attention of the community.
- Attend a considerable number of meetings to engage in the process (the shortest travel time was 30 minutes, the longest just over two hours). This meant taking time off work and time off from what I'm meant to be doing as a Councillor.
- Spend a considerable amount of time studying the documents so that I can clearly explain them to residents and ratepayers.
- Listening to community so that I can represent them. The overwhelming majority of people who I've spoken with do not want any amalgamations or boundary adjustments. In fact, most people are horrified at the thought of moving from Meander Valley Council and particularly have voiced this against becoming part of a greater Launceston catchment.

Some things have been surprising:

- Blackstone Heights community through the group 'Blackstone Heights Community News' are adamant that they do not want to be moved from Meander Valley Council into any area with the Launceston City Council, this was also very much the case through a recent public meeting hosted by Meander Valley and a survey of residents and ratepayers. They state that Launceston City Council isn't the right fit for them and that they are very content being within the Meander Valley Council LGA.
- Some Prospect Vale residents have said that they identify with Launceston more than Meander Valley however the desire to keep rates low and services high means that most I've spoken with do not wish to become part of a greater Launceston, or Tamar as it's called, Catchment.

Shared Services:

Councils already share many services. It would be better to explore this rather than forced amalgamations and boundary adjustments. Shared services will retain the current level of

representation and maintain local identity while providing economies of scale in some areas (examples include IT services, procurement and possibly waste management).

Job Retention and costs of change:

Since becoming a councillor I have been impressed by the hard working and dedicated staff at Meander Valley. The staff as a whole tend to be as economical and prudent as possible with very little waste. I've observed this in pretty much all areas of council work and responsibility. The Review process has placed stress on the staff with concerns about their long-term employment prospects. There have been additional difficulties filling vacant positions as a result. Having met with councillors from the other councils that are part of the Central and Tamar catchments, these concerns are mirrored in their council staff teams also. It is questionable that this Review has been timed appropriately given that all industries are under pressure as our nation recovers from the pandemic.

Who Pays?

Who will pay for any amalgamations and boundary adjustments? What is the timeline for all of this? These details are glaringly missing from the Information packs. If there are to be staff changes and redundancies, how will this be managed?

And a little note about councils as planning authorities:

The Premier has announced that there will be changes to councils acting as planning authorities. He said that this 'takes the politics out of planning'. I don't think so. This will cement politics in planning and most alarmingly, remove democracy and the community's voice in planning areas that affect them. This is seriously worrying.

Throughout this document I have not provided references. This is because the information packs are large on statements but scant on referencing; I have followed this lead.

In conclusion:

Tasmania is unique. One size does not fit all. A move to urbanised services and representations will lead to the demise of community and the Tasmanian uniqueness. What is the problem or problems that the Review is fixing? What is the justification for boundary adjustments and amalgamations? What's wrong with the current structure? The Information packs provide a number of scenarios but no where has the issue that they address been clearly stated. It would be better for all to work with local councils rather than imposing ideas on them. As a Councillor and as a resident I want to see my local council representing my community well, using my rates in an economical manner that provides services for all, but most importantly supports the area that I have chosen to call home and constantly works to improve the benefits of living here.