

## **Submission Re: Future of Local Government in Tasmania**

**Submitted: LN & JJ Hadaway** [REDACTED]

**We have lived in the Huon Valley Council area since buying land and building a home in 2004. We have recently sold and built a second home 2022/2023.**

**We moved from the Shire of Yarra Ranges to the LGA of the Huon Valley and were immediately conscious of the differences in the way local government functioned in Tasmania.**

**Our experience in Victoria led us to believe there would be community consultation and involvement with the local Council about all matters raised by constituents. We expected Council would be prepared to accept innovation, adapt to ratepayers expressed needs and adjust to changes in housing and societal impacts on the rural landscape which we came here to enjoy.**

**While living in Victoria we were part of the amalgamation forced on councils by the then Premier Jeff Kennett.**

**The amalgamation in the Shire of Yarra Ranges was smooth, well promoted and understood with plenty of time available for local communities to engage with each other and resolve differences locally without state intervention.**

**We sat on town committees, engaged with the community, reported back and were listened to. There were many differences of opinion but they were talked through in the community until an equitable outcome was agreed.**

**The reality of our contact with local government in Tasmania has been anything but encouraging and the recent build experience has been unnecessarily costly, bound in red tape, time consuming and disengaging.**

**The Huon Valley Council is at best inept and at worse discouraging to a point where friends have given up on plans to live here and moved to Hobart and/or back to the big island.**

**We see issues with staff who are not locals, do not stay long enough to learn anything of the local ethos and who, if they have been here long term, are not trained to adapt to the changing environment and population of the valley so respond as hide-bound public servants, unwilling to accept anything new unless it is proposed by another, well known "old" family. The level of nepotism observed in the Huon Valley is mind blowing.**

**It is our view that local government, across Tasmania must become more:**

- Representative and accountable to the community that supports it.**
- Innovative and willing to trial new ideas**
- Cost effective for long term development**
- Knowledgeable about its current identity**
- Able to define and supply "place based" services**
- Willing to act for its community rather than for state based political gain**

**Currently the Huon Valley Council has a GM who was appointed under a conflict of interest, is not local, who appears to have little interest in engaging with locals, either individually or with community organisations and who has not set up any local communication strategy that accommodates feed-back directly from and to Councillors or staff.**

Public question time is a bare 20 minutes at the General meeting of Council each month but has been so stymied by Council controls that even this short period does not allow for a fair question and answer for a ratepayer brave enough to appear.

The local community does not attend Council meetings.

The on line, Council engagement via “have your say” only works for the few ratepayers who look it up, have the IT skills to use the system and the literacy skills to engage with it.

Given that the Huon Valley has the extraordinarily high rate of adult illiteracy of over 60% it’s not surprising there is poor understanding of, and poor engagement with, Council matters. The result is that Council does not receive real community concerns and so acts out of context with them.

The far flung areas of the Huon Valley are poorly served by Councillors, who do not visit and by staff who prefer desk-top audits to leaving their offices.

The Council is “Huonville centric”. There are no regular community meetings with any Councillor or staff member in Dover nor in any of the other 4 major centres.

There are no regular community updates about planned activities and no interface with Dover unless one looks on-line.

Obtaining information, e.g. about Council’s responsibility to the Dover/Geeveston communities regarding extensions to the Dover Medical Centre and the staffing of these centres has been so difficult that we almost lost a senior GP from Dover and are now losing a senior GP from Geeveston.

The recent matter of Council having a huge number of properties (over 400) to be incorrectly rezoned, many as Landscape Conservation, is indicative of the fact that Council planners did not gather up to date relevant information and were unaware of the real time use, environmental impacts, geographical relationships, current (vegetation) overlays and potential financial impacts of the proposed rezonings. The number of hearings by the Tasmanian Planning Authority and the time taken to resolve many of the issues raised has been costly financially and very stressful to those land owners who were likely to have property devalued and/or zoned to a new, unusable level.

The Huon Valley Council has a poor history of staff training and staff maintenance. This is obvious in the planning Department, where a ratepayer is likely to not speak to the same planner twice and is required to make an appointment with a planner to have a simple question answered that should be able to be dealt with by a quick phone call.

The internal committee system run by Council staff is not transparent, reaches few in the community, does not support community decision making and should be changed to regular visits to each town with a well publicised agenda that has been agreed with the community put out well in advance.

The Huon Valley Council has set rates 2023/24 which have not been agreed to by ratepayers who do not understand why the massive 12% increase has been levied. Council financial management is questionable and dissemination of where and why rates are spent less than transparent. Council forward planning for its financial reserves should be openly discussed with ratepayers and proposed future rate increases put on hold until Council can verify the need for them.

The Southern Shore Scenario 2, which promotes the amalgamation of the Kingborough and Huon Valley LGA’s could not provide outcomes worse than those already evident in the Huon Valley.

There is every reason to suppose that the amalgamation of Kingborough and the Huon Valley would be beneficial to the Huon without creating overwhelming difficulties for Kingborough.

We believe amalgamation, focused on “place based services” developed with “community advisory panels” would enhance community representation and accountability because an amalgamated Council would have the resources and the will to expend the resources to benefit the combined communities.

A new start would create an impetus that would support trialling new ideas in an innovative fashion so the outcomes were applicable to the whole of the new Council area including the rural, remote and disadvantaged fringes of the Huon that are overlooked now.

Resource sharing and economies of scale would need careful consideration and interpretation but the two areas of Kingborough and the Huon Valley are not so disparate that current resource sharing could not be extended. The University of Tasmania which presents current research into potential amalgamations supports a focus on increased resource sharing and provides context that shows how close the Kingborough and Huon Valley LGA’s really are. <https://www.utas.edu.au/community-and-partners/tpe/flgr>

The Huon Valley Council has financial reserves greater than Kingborough so a fair and equitable arrangement would need to be agreed to ensure the Huon Valley community its long term development is secure.

The current identity of both Kingborough and the Huon Valley LGA’s has been well documented in all the background that supports amalgamations. It is clear the similarities except for the most urban areas of Kingborough, and the most regional areas of the Huon Valley outweigh the differences.

However, the rate of change across both LGA’s will increase and a larger Council may be in a better position to broadly manage the change across a total area rather than have two separate councils attempt to deal with the same issues in small areas in different ways.

It will be critical that the changing identity and changing needs of community are addressed in a timely and innovative way whether Kingborough and the Huon Valley amalgamate or not.

Health, education, transport, housing, recreation, land use, commercial development, require fair and equitable long term planning based on local community input and agreement.

Place based services are the historical backbone of local government. They have been impinged to the point where, in some instances these services no longer exist even though they are still required. There would need to be a review of all place based services to determine how these may be strengthened and better applied to what the community requires.

The provision of Primary Health Care to Dover and Geeveston, although “non-core” business is an example of a place based service that is vital to the far south community and that must be continued.

Local Councils should not be a derivative of state government. It would help to have the specific roles of both tiers of government clarified during the amalgamation process. Councils and their areas and their communities have always benefited from close community consultation about community rather than state matters. Amalgamation should ensure community is always first, fully engaged and can maintain and develop to support its health and well being.

Jen and Lance Hadaway

Dover



