



Tasmanian Council of Social Service

Submission to

Role of Local Government Discussion Papers

About TasCOSS

TasCOSS is the peak body for the Tasmanian community services sector. Its membership comprises individuals and organisations active in the provision of community services to low income, vulnerable and disadvantaged Tasmanians. TasCOSS represents the interests of its members and their clients to government, regulators, the media and the public. Through our advocacy and policy development, we draw attention to the causes of poverty and disadvantage and promote the adoption of effective solutions to address these issues.

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Introduction

TasCOSS is the peak body for the Tasmanian community services sector. Its membership comprises individuals and organisations active in the provision of community services to low income, vulnerable and disadvantaged Tasmanians. Through our advocacy and policy development, we draw attention to the causes of poverty and disadvantage and promote the adoption of effective solutions, at all levels of government, to address these issues. We also work across the sector to build the capacity of community service organisations to deliver efficient, effective and relevant services to all Tasmanians.

TasCOSS believes that local governments have a key role to play in combating social exclusion. Social exclusion is a process of being shut out from social, economic, political and cultural systems. It is often linked to poverty, and can be geographically clustered, but is not limited to disadvantaged areas or economically disadvantaged individuals.

From a social inclusion perspective, a high-performing council should understand who its residents, organisations and businesses are and the nature of their diverse needs, and be working to deliver:

- ***High-quality services to people as well as property*** at
- ***A cost affordable to all*** with
- ***Broad and deep public participation*** and
- ***A commitment to enhancing social inclusion, community cohesion, and community resilience.***

TasCOSS has been asked to respond to two of the eight identified roles of local government; however, we have thoughts on three more. In each case, we have attempted where possible to address the questions posed by the discussion guide:

Why is this role essential and what are the ramifications if councils perform poorly? In an ideal world how would a high performing council deliver on this role and what would be the benefits for communities? What are the challenges councils face in delivering this role and how could these be overcome? What support/resources would councils need to effectively deliver this role?

Role 1: Councils respond to and develop a sense of place through branding, promoting and enhancing local identity and promoting social cohesion

Councils play an important role in fostering and promoting senses of place, both at the level of the local government area and at the level of individual communities. At the most basic level, any council should work to ensure that these activities move beyond promoting visions of privilege and that the local identity that is being developed and promoted breaks down:

- *Barriers between individuals.* All councils must value personal diversity—whether of age, gender, physical or intellectual ability, sexuality, race, or cultural background—and to convey this value to all residents.
- *Barriers between communities.* All councils should engage in active efforts to combat stigma aimed at disadvantaged areas, and to promote and celebrate the strengths of all neighbourhoods within their local government area.

Beyond this basic level, however, a high performing council will put community cohesion and resilience at the heart of their vision and corporate values. Cohesion is more than the absence of conflict: it is a condition where all can participate in a community, undeterred by cost or differences in aspirations or interests. Similarly, resilience is more than the ability to bounce back from damaging events: it is about people possessing the skills and having the access to the resources—personal, social and economic—that allow them to negotiate challenges and to take up opportunities.¹ In a high-performing council, the fostering of community cohesion and resilience will drive all cross-council activities, from planning and infrastructure to services and community development, events and activities, and corporate branding.

For a high performing council to focus on building and deepening community cohesion and resilience, however, it is crucial that staff and elected officials have an understanding of what these concepts mean for the residents of their local government area, and of the vision that local people, organisations and businesses have for their area: what their shared aspirations are, and what will bring them together. As a consequence, a high performing council will fully engage its community in the development of its vision statement, and the branding and promotion that flow from it. Through such engagement, residents, organisations and businesses are more likely to buy into the council's vision statement, to understand what it means for them, and to act on it in their day to day activities.

In conjunction with community engagement, a high performing council will ensure that all council staff and volunteers understand what the council's vision statement, and the concepts of community cohesion and resilience that it is intended to promote, mean for them and their activities, from developing and commissioning services and activities, to information provision. Such a council will develop, in conjunction with their communities, performance indicators related to the development of community cohesion and resilience, and will include them in the monitoring and evaluation of all programs and projects.

For an example, see the London Borough of Newham's Community Resilience Strategy and accompanying documents, available at <http://www.newham.gov.uk/yourcouncil/buildingstrongcommunity.htm>.

¹ Borough of Newham 2011, p. 5.

References:

Borough of Newham (2011), *A strong community: building resilience in Newham. Stakeholder consultation 2011.*

Role 2: Councils engage with their communities, providing them with information about community and council business and where appropriate, actively consult with and provide opportunities for constituents to participate in council decision making.

A high-performing council knows who live and works in their communities and ensures that all residents, organisations and businesses have a full and equal say in decision-making by prioritising best-practice early engagement, consultation, assessment, monitoring, evaluation and review processes designed to:

- Transparently communicate policy and planning processes, including negotiations with other groups (developers, for instance) over major projects.
- Capture and engage with the ideas and views of all residents, included socially excluded individuals and groups.
- Equitably consider the needs and desires of all residents.
- Ensure that outcomes are clearly explained and open to appeal.
- Ensure that outcomes are monitored, evaluated and reviewed for effectiveness for all residents.

Socially excluded residents are less likely to participate in public policy processes, however, and political disengagement and social exclusion appear drive each other.²

- Low-income and disadvantaged residents can feel as though “the system” is biased against them, or lack the literacy or numeracy skills necessary to engage.
- Older people can feel as though “progress” is running away from them, and be intimidated by new technologies.
- Young people who cannot yet vote can feel that their views are of no interest.

Research from other states suggest that typical local government engagement efforts are not effective and that new strategies for reaching the “hardest to engage” groups are required.³

Good consultation for social inclusion:

- Happens early, so that respondents are not put into a reactive, negative mode and fundamental issues are still open for discussion.
- Ensures that all are invited to participate and that the timing and location of consultations are convenient to people with caring responsibilities or mobility problems, or who lack access to transport.
- Permits people to contribute ideas, digest the consequences of different plans of action, and weigh up different alternatives.
- Uses mechanisms and tools—for instance, 3D visualisation tools—specifically designed to obtain the views of less educated and socially excluded residents.⁴
- Makes available advocates to help represent communities on highly technical issues.
- Takes both qualitative and quantitative data seriously, to give community concerns and expert assessments equal weight.

² Electoral Commission (UK) 2005, p. 20.

³ ACELG et al 2011, p. 3.

⁴ Kelly 2011, p. 14.

- Informs respondents of actions that have emerged from their engagement so that they can see that their input is valued.
- Contains post-project evaluative components as well as annual opportunities for public input to ensure that policy and project objectives are being met, monitor performance, and review—and where necessary adapt—decision-making processes.⁵

The key determinants of effective consultation for social inclusion are skilful and knowledgeable staff who have good lines of communication and the support of their organisations and of elected representatives.⁶ An explicit commitment to building staff capacity for engagement, and to evaluation of engagement, is an integral part of many progressive councils' engagement policies.⁷

References:

Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government, Institute for Sustainable Futures and University of Technology, Sydney (2011) *Local Government and Community Engagement in Australia*. ACELG Working Paper No. 5, November.

Brackertz, Nicola and Denise Meredyth (2008) *Social Inclusion of the Hard to Reach: Community Consultation and the Hard to Reach: Local Government, Social Profiling and Civic Infrastructure: Final Report*. Swinburne Institute for Social Research.

Burton, Alison and Ricki Dargarvel (1990) "Integrated and social impact assessment in a social planning context." In Jill Land and Cath Edmondson (eds.), *Social Issues in Town Planning: Proceedings of a Conference*, University of New South Wales, Sydney, May, pp. 133-145.

Department of Public Works, Government of Queensland (2010), "Post-occupancy evaluation." http://www.works.qld.gov.au/downloads/bpu/samf_poe.pdf.

Electoral Commission (UK) (2005) "Social exclusion and political engagement. Research report." http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/63835/Social-exclusion-and-political-engagement.pdf

⁵ See, for example, Department of Public Works, Government of Queensland 2010.

⁶ Brackertz and Meredyth

⁷ ACELG et al 2011, p. 21.

Role 4: Councils are strategic land-use planners who work with communities to create an environment that guides the use of land to balance economic, environmental and social values.

Many of the factors contributing to social exclusion can be addressed by good planning in relation to land use, transport and services infrastructure, and urban design. A high performing council ensures that all local planning schemes and processes:

- *Remove barriers to and, where possible, promote affordable housing.* All other Australian states have at least some mechanisms in their land use planning regulatory frameworks to encourage the development of affordable housing. It's important that Tasmanian planning processes facilitate the provision of a range of affordable housing types for all ages, as well as of social housing stock for special needs groups, in convenient, sustainable locations.
- *Promote good health and wellbeing for all.* There are many ways in which planning processes can work to:
 - Create opportunities for healthy activities for all people, regardless of age, gender, physical abilities or levels of socio-economic advantage;
 - Ensure that all individuals and communities receive equal protection from health hazards including toxins, non-toxic pollutants, accident hazards and other environmental health hazards;
 - Boost food security through appropriate spatial planning and urban design, and through the protection of existing and potential agricultural land;
 - Create peaceful places where people of all ages, physical abilities, genders and levels of socio-economic advantage can relax; and
 - Create inclusive public spaces where people and communities can connect.
- *Create the infrastructure for, and arrange development around, affordable and accessible transport.* Planning processes can help facilitate the creation of infrastructure required to encourage the growth of public and community transport options, as well as healthy options such as walking and cycling. The location of future housing and business development should be linked to transport availability.
- *Bring basic services closer to people.* It's important to remove barriers to the establishment of basic services in proximity to residential areas and ensure that basic services are provided for in the establishment of new residential areas.
- *Help socially excluded Tasmanians access employment.* Spatial planning processes can play an active role in efforts to promote sustainable employment for socially excluded Tasmanians.
- *Help socially excluded Tasmanians manage the financial and logistical impacts of climate change.* In all community safety and risk reduction/management strategies, spatial planning processes should factor in the particular impacts of climate change on socially excluded Tasmanians—for instance, in relation to affordable housing in vulnerable areas.
- *Encourage the activities of community service organisations.* Spatial planning processes can ensure that planning schemes don't obstruct community service organisations in

their activities or location, and can facilitate the provision of space for community service organisation premises and services.⁸

Spatial planning is a particularly difficult area for securing public engagement, especially among socially excluded residents. This may be an appropriate area for the Tasmanian Planning Commission to take an active public education role.

⁸ For more detail, see TasCOSS' publication *Social Inclusion Principles for Spatial Planning in Tasmania*, which presents practical, detailed recommendations for action in relation to these goals for all levels of the Tasmanian spatial planning system, at www.tascoss.org.au

Role 6: Councils are responsible financial managers who deliver cost effective, equitable and efficient services and assets which reflect local needs and expectations and are guided by council’s long-term planning objectives.

Local government rates can cause financial hardship for those who are asset-rich and income-poor, since residential property values are not always correlated with lifetime income.⁹ This situation is particularly likely where property values have risen sharply in areas where residents are on fixed or low incomes.

A high-performing council will ensure that its services are affordable for all by:

Ensuring that council valuation and ratings systems ensure the most progressive possible rates.

Overall, the current system of basing rates on annual assessed value (AAV) is less progressive than it could be. Several authors argue that capital improved value is likely to be a better indicator of capacity to pay than unimproved site value, although unimproved site value better reflects the relative value of local government services.¹⁰

Offering concessions and payment options tailored to low-income and disadvantaged residents. In addition to existing mandated concession rates, one suggestion has been to allow deferment of payment of rates—for example until a change of ownership for a principle place of residence—for ratepayers with capacity-to-pay constraints, whether long-term (retirees on fixed incomes, for instance) or short-term (such as individuals experiencing temporary financial hardship). Such an arrangement has the potential to shield low-income and disadvantaged residents from financial shocks while not disadvantaging councils or other ratepayers.¹¹

The issue of equitable assignment of rates is likely to become more critical over time, as grants as a share of local government revenue have declined at the same time that local governments’ roles have expanded.¹² In the event that local governments take a more active revenue-raising stance, a high-performing council will:

- 1) Undertake more active revenue raising only after preparing long-term financial and asset management plans and developing and articulating preferred affordable service levels.
- 2) Adhere to good taxation theory in regards to equity in ability to pay and benefits received.¹³

Councils may need to be enabled or encouraged in these areas by changes to the Local Government Act, which should:

- 1) Contain a requirement for councils to prepare long-term financial and asset management plans and to develop and articulate preferred affordable service levels. While many Tasmanian councils have already undertaken such planning, a legislated requirement may be necessary to pull in stragglers.
- 2) Make explicit that council rates contain a tax component, as well as utility charges, to ensure commitment to good taxation theory.

⁹ Comrie 2013, p. 31

¹⁰ Comrie 2013, p. 32

¹¹ Comrie 2013, p. 33

¹² Comrie 2013, p. 23

¹³ Comrie 2013, p. 33

Beyond these points, a high-performing council will engage in transparent commissioning of services based on social value and community benefit, not just value for money, and will encourage access to and sharing of community assets (buildings, equipment and knowledge). Over the long run, local governments may benefit from exploring models of community governance, where local government shifts from delivering specific services to initiating collective processes which involve a wide range of players—from the public, private and non-profit sectors—in collaboration to meet community needs.¹⁴

References:

Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG), Institute for Sustainable Futures and University of Technology, Sydney (2011) *Local Government and Community Engagement in Australia*. ACELG Working Paper No. 5, November.

Comrie, J (2013) *In Our Hands: Strengthening Local Government Revenue for the 21st Century*. Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government, University of Technology, Sydney.

¹⁴ ACELG 2011, p. 8.

Role 8 : Councils engage with each other and other spheres of government to represent and advocate the needs of their communities, and where appropriate, cooperate and work in partnership to generate the greatest benefit for communities.

It is crucial that all parties involved in combating social exclusion work together, both within and between levels of government. As noted by the Tasmanian Government’s guide to whole-of-government action, collaborative thinking and action can:

- Lead to better understanding and creative approaches to complex issues that straddle issue areas, such as access to basic services.
- Capture issues that fall between the silos of different levels of government, departments and services, such as food security.
- Help to ensure that different levels of government and departments are working towards a common set of policy goals.¹⁵

A high-performing council works towards collaborative thinking and action:

- *Within the council*, to break down organisational barriers between, for example, planning and community development staff.
- *Between councils*, to maximise opportunities for sharing expertise and resources.
- *Between the council and State government*, to advocate for all residents—including socially excluded members of the community—and to ensure policy harmonisation.

In the last regard, the State government can assist by helping create institutional arrangements that enable integration between planners and State government departments as well as shared decision-making between state and local governments.

But councils can also achieve better social inclusion outcomes—and save themselves work in the process—by working in partnership with community service organisations not only in service delivery, but in policy planning process. As already noted, socially excluded individuals and groups are among the least likely to engage with public consultation processes, making it hard for local governments to hear their points of view. Community service organisations have the potential to serve a unique function as a bridge between Tasmania’s spatial planning system and some of the state’s most marginalised individuals, families and communities. With their detailed knowledge, community service organisations have the potential to help local governments:

- Understand specific local issues contributing to disadvantage and social exclusion
- Avoid potential problems in existing and proposed planning approaches and schemes
- Develop innovative approaches towards overcoming existing and potential barriers to social inclusion and community well-being.

Local governments can indeed seek out federal funding for projects involving collaboration with the state government and community sector on social-inclusion-related issues.

A high performing council creates databases of local community service organisations interested in contributing to policy and project planning processes (for instance through an e-mail survey of all

¹⁵ Department of Premier and Cabinet 2010.

local community service organisations), and consults the community service sector early in the policy planning process, as well as in the early planning stages of major developments, to ensure that there is adequate time to respond to their feedback and concerns. Strategic advisory groups—which can meet on an ad hoc basis—may be the best way to get planners, community development officers, and community service organisations together.

References:

Department of Premier and Cabinet (2010) *Collaboration: A Tasmanian Government Approach*.

http://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/divisions/policy/collaboration_a_tasmanian_government_approach