



Towards improved local government in southern Tasmania - Participation and Place



Australian Government



This project is funded by the Australian Government and the Southern Tasmanian Councils Authority

Issues

Two issues invariably surface as strong concerns for the community when any discussion of Local Government reform occur:

1. We will lose our local representation and not be heard.
2. We will lose our identity as a community - our sense of place.

Local Government prides itself on being “the sphere of government closest to the people” and to lose this would be a tragedy for both Local Government and its communities.

Whatever reform occurs to Local Government in Southern Tasmania needs to ensure that the ability of communities to determine what happens in their area is maintained or strengthened and the sense of place and local identity of a community is not lost.

Sense of identity

Tasmanian communities have a strong sense of place. This can be seen in some of the outcomes of the amalgamation of councils in 1993. The east coast municipal area became “Glamorgan/Spring Bay”, retaining the names of the two municipal areas that were combined into the new council. Central Highlands and Southern Midlands councils both retain offices in the towns that were the centres of the pre- amalgamation municipalities.

We are proud of our history and the identity that where we live confers on us.

Place management

Local Governments around the world have recognised the importance of sense of place and responded by developing what is now called “place management”. There is recognition that vibrant, safe and attractive towns, suburbs and city centres:

- foster a sense of community by developing unique, individual character, image and style;
- evolve and grow with their community and reflect their character, heritage, and future aspirations;
- nurture small business and local employment;
- provide housing choice and opportunities for people to age in place; and
- facilitate and encourage walking, cycling and public transport usage.

Experience in Australia with Place Management has identified some key lessons:

- Place management needs to be guided by a plan – a robust plan based on sound, sincere engagement of stakeholders;
- To be effective, the place manager role needs direct access to senior levels within Council;
- Resources must be made available;
- People must be brought into the discussion about their place – there is a wealth of knowledge in the community;
- Deliver promises and communicate progress; and
- Recognise that place management is an ongoing process with no end.

Community Engagement

A strong relationship with communities, as part of place management or any other form of council activity is critical if Local Government is to continue to be the sphere of government closest to the people.

It is interesting to note that the OECD characterizes “good governance” as:

“...participatory, consensus orientated, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law. It assures that corruption is minimized, the views of minorities are taken into account and that the voices of the most vulnerable in society are heard in decision-making.”

With increasing complexity there has been a worldwide trend in developed countries to begin to recognize the limitations of purely representational democratic structures in being able to provide good governance. Government at all levels, but particularly local governments, have identified the need to seek ways in which to supplement this traditional approach with more participatory forms of engagement with the community.

The “Just Communities” research done in the last few years in Australia concluded that local government needs to find the right mix of:

- community engagement
- governance
- decision making processes
- management frameworks

to be able to strengthen local democracy and progress community well-being.

There are several levels on which the community engages with their council:

- as an electors of local representatives through the normal voting process
- as a users of services, whether it be rubbish collection, youth activities, as a road users or one of the many other services the local council provides.
- as a participators in providing input for councils to make decisions.

Local Government in Australia has been developing and using a wide range of mechanisms to achieve greater participation, including:

- Citizens or residents panels

- A panel is selected to fit with the demographic profile of the community to be used as a source of enhanced community input.
- Advisory forums or committees
 - Some advisory committees advise on particular events, such as Australia Day, others on issues, such as Youth issues, or Physical Access issues, road safety, heritage, Aboriginal issues.
- Community based council meetings
 - The council moves out of the 'chambers' and meets in community meeting facilities in various suburbs, sometimes rotating geographically around their municipality.
- Training in community engagement techniques
- Surveys
 - Surveys are undertaken to reach a broad cross section of people, to seek their opinion on issues, their stated activity preferences and to outline choices between limited options.
- Precinct/Township or Residents' Associations
 - These structures are intended to promote and facilitate a forum for local area consultation. They are typically independent from council and each other and made up of members of the community from a defined geographic area.
- Community outcome indicators and/or state of the community reports
 - A set of indicators to measure the sustainability, wellbeing and outcomes of a local government area
- Community management committees
 - To These manage a variety of facilities for councils, for example, community halls, tennis courts etc
- Community forums before council meeting
 - Residents can address councillors and the people in the public gallery on a particular issue
- Volunteer activities
 - Residents volunteering for council in such areas as bushcare, graffiti management and removal, dog pound volunteers, adopt-a- park, adopt-a-road, assisting visitors to regional art galleries
- Community consultation policies that outline when and where and how a council will consult with its community

Southern Tasmanian experience

In Southern Tasmania councils have recognised the need for strengthening participation and have been developing more effective ways in which to involve the community in decision making.

Glenorchy City Council has been working with its precinct system for some years now. The Precinct system was established to facilitate and encourage the involvement of local communities in decisions and projects that affect their neighbourhoods.

The city was divided into a number (initially 12 now 9) of areas, each served by a Precinct Committee that meets monthly. The residents of each Precinct area are encouraged to attend meetings to discuss local issues and to develop and undertake projects that directly benefit their neighbourhood.

Glenorchy City Council has continued to develop ways in which it can enhance participation with its community and is in the process of developing a community panel to provide input to council.

Huon Valley Council, at a similar time to Glenorchy developing its precinct model, developed a Township Committee structure. The purpose of the Township Committees is to enable engagement by the Council with local community through the provision of advice to the Council on the areas identified in respect to the township.

The role and function of the Committees is to provide advice to the Council on things such as:

- Township presentation and amenity.
- Implementation of township plans.
- Pedestrian and traffic management.
- Individual and community safety (ie vandalism, graffiti, antisocial behaviour).
- Parks and garden development and presentation.
- Other matters as referred to the Committee by the Council.

Huon Valley has reviewed and continued to build on the success of the township approach, clarifying roles and responsibilities.

One of the notable differences between the Houn Valley township model and the Glenorchy precinct model is the involvement of elected members as Chairs of Township Committees in the Huon and the exclusion of elected members in any formal role in the Glenorchy model.

Conclusion

There are opportunities, if Local Government reform in Southern Tasmania is to occur, to develop structures and processes that enhance sense of place and participation by the community in local government decision making.

The size of a council organisation or of a municipal area is not a barrier to greater levels of community engagement or creation of a stronger sense of place for an area.

The reality is that the enablers of better outcomes in these areas are:

- the willingness of Local Government to work with the community in new and more effective ways;
- the availability of people within councils with the right skills and experience to make these things happen; and
- the financial resources to be able to invest in the outcomes that communities want.