

Opinion Editorial

Councils are supporting their communities while shouldering a share of the COVID-19 burden.

Councils are used to stepping up in emergencies. They are frequently the first port of call for community guidance and support, while continuing to delivering essential services and leading recovery. The current COVID-19 pandemic, however, has all of us in uncharted territory. In the face of calls from some for Local Government to do more in responding to COVID 19, it is important understand what councils already doing.

Like many Tasmanian businesses, councils and the Local Government Association of Tasmania (LGAT) have had to quickly adjust operations to keep workers and community members safe while still maintaining assets and services. This is while facing the closure of, or downturn in, key business units. Councils continue to deliver statutory and community services including delivering infrastructure projects, providing immunisations, maintaining exercise areas, cleaning public spaces and approving private development. Following public health directions, councils have had to temporarily close many key community facilities like playgrounds, recreation centres, museums and visitors' centres.

Councils provide essential information for communities through their newsletters, social media pages, websites and local news channels. Councils reinforce messages from the Premier like "Stay Home Save Lives", while helping communities understand how such messages impact them in their local area. This includes information such where they can exercise, which services are available locally and information on support payments and grants. Council offices may be closed for public access, but rest assured councils' dedicated employees are still working away.

For Local Government, it is business as usual despite the unusual times. Wherever possible staff who can't undertake their usual duties are being redeployed to other community support areas. It was extremely disappointing, however, that the Prime Minister rejected the genuine request from councils across the country to permit access the Federal JobKeeper program for staff no longer able to work due to council facilities being forced to close, who have already, or may have to be soon, stood down.

Tasmanian councils recognise that COVID-19 is leading to job losses and economic downturn that will put a lot of families, households and businesses under significant financial pressure. In response, councils have implemented, or are in the process of implementing, a range of supportive measures including the ability to consider hardship cases in relation to rates, to assist individuals and businesses in financial difficulty.

In response to COVID-19, hardship policies across the sector have been reviewed and updated. Common financial relief mechanisms being implemented by Tasmanian councils include deferral of rates payments, waiving penalties for late payments, turning off interest for outstanding rates, suspending debt recovery actions, waiving fees and charges, providing rent relief on council owned buildings, paying their incoming bills more quickly and offering community grants.

Many councils are bringing forward significant capital projects to stimulate the local economy through employment and procurement and the State Government's Stimulus Loan package is a welcome enabler in that regard. Furthermore, at the LGAT March General Meeting,

councils agreed in principle to a 0% increase in rates for 2020-21 and councils are now considering that formally as part of their budget processes.

Councils have also implemented a range of other initiatives to support their communities such as assistance for community groups, establishing community hotlines and dedicated COVID-19 pages on their websites. Many councils are waiving parking fees, providing online resources for children and families, implementing or supporting buy local campaigns, sharing and promoting local information, facilitating local counselling services and networking to support local businesses.

At the same time, Local Government is looking towards community recovery. As with other disasters or emergencies, the essential role of councils in recovery is well documented and appreciated, and Councils will be doing even more during this phase.

All of this is not without challenge – revenue will be squeezed and like State and Federal Governments, councils will be carrying the financial burden through debt and deficit budgets for some time to come. Councils have not received any direct additional funding via the Federal or State Governments. However Local Government has recognised the need to support local communities through and on the other side of these challenging times.

I am grateful to everyone in our sector, whether elected or staff, for the incredible work everyone is doing to keep the essential services moving in our councils! I urge you to consider the work councillors and staff are doing, how they as individuals also contribute to local communities, and local economies. To echo the words of the Premier I ask you to 'be kind' and thank your council's staff along with all other workers on the front line.

Mayor Christina Holmdahl

President Local Government Association of Tasmania