

## **LGAT Opinion Editorial – We need to focus on planning, not red tape**

We are all aware that housing affordability throughout Tasmania has declined significantly in recent times. In 2020, the State Government introduced a number of red tape reduction reforms to our planning system to, amongst other things, support the release of more land for housing. While Local Government supports a process of continuous improvement in our planning and development system, the constant narrative of “reducing red tape” undermines the important role our regulatory approvals system provides to the Tasmanian economy and risks damaging community confidence in a system that enables good planning.

‘Red tape’ is not (nor should it be) the defining characteristic of our planning system and not all regulation is red tape.

In its interim report, the Premier’s Economic and Social Advisory Council recommended that “Local Government should prioritise the resourcing of development applications and planning approvals to ensure that legislative timeframes are met, if not bettered.”

But let’s look at the facts. In Tasmania, the statutory timeframe for assessment of applications and actual time taken by councils is close to, if not the best, in the country. The statutory days allowed for assessment of applications requiring advertising in Tasmania, known as discretionary applications, is 42 days; or less than six weeks. Data from the past three years tells us that Tasmanian councils are not only meeting the statutory timeframe but, in most cases, substantially bettering it. Compare this with states such as Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia where equivalent applications are assessed within two months or Western Australia where it is 3 months.

So, if Tasmanian assessment timeframes are close to the best in the country and our councils are achieving them, then logically it is not development application timeframes creating the housing availability and affordability issues in Tasmania.

The identification of land suitable for housing development is the first step in the development process. Housing supply must be well located and well serviced in areas where infrastructure can provide for and attract new residents, with supporting jobs, social and community infrastructure and public transport. In Tasmania however, there has been limited action in planning for and locating new housing supply. Planning resources at Local and State Government levels are limited and our land use planning efforts have been constrained by a focus on the Tasmanian Planning Scheme and red tape reduction, at the expense of sound strategic planning.

For many years councils have been calling on the State Government to establish the Tasmanian Planning Policies as important strategic foundations for our planning system. These policies alongside a long overdue update of our Regional Land Use Strategies, will provide missing clarity on what governments and the community desire for our local areas and importantly, will help to drive any reforms needed in our regulatory system. Until we know what direction we wish to head in, it is very difficult to craft meaningful changes in the regulatory environment or indeed for councils to make the required day to day decisions on development applications.

Of these two critical reforms, it is the Regional Strategies; where the rubber hits the road for housing availability and affordability. It is these strategies that determine when and where land should be released for our growing population.

We understand the Government will be commencing consultation on the Tasmanian Planning Policies soon and this is welcomed. It is imperative however, that work also begins on updating the Regional Strategies. This work needs to connect state and local land use and transport planning. It should include consideration of where population and housing growth should be allowed versus constrained and where it makes sense to invest in infrastructure, both hard and social. Solutions must be based on a comprehensive understanding of future housing demand and supply by location and designate areas for urban renewal and infill. As you can imagine this all takes time to do well and that is why councils are asking the Government to commence this work now.

Now is the time to move from tweaking the edges of our regulatory system, to beginning the important task of planning for our future housing needs.

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