



**Neighbourhood Houses
Tasmania**

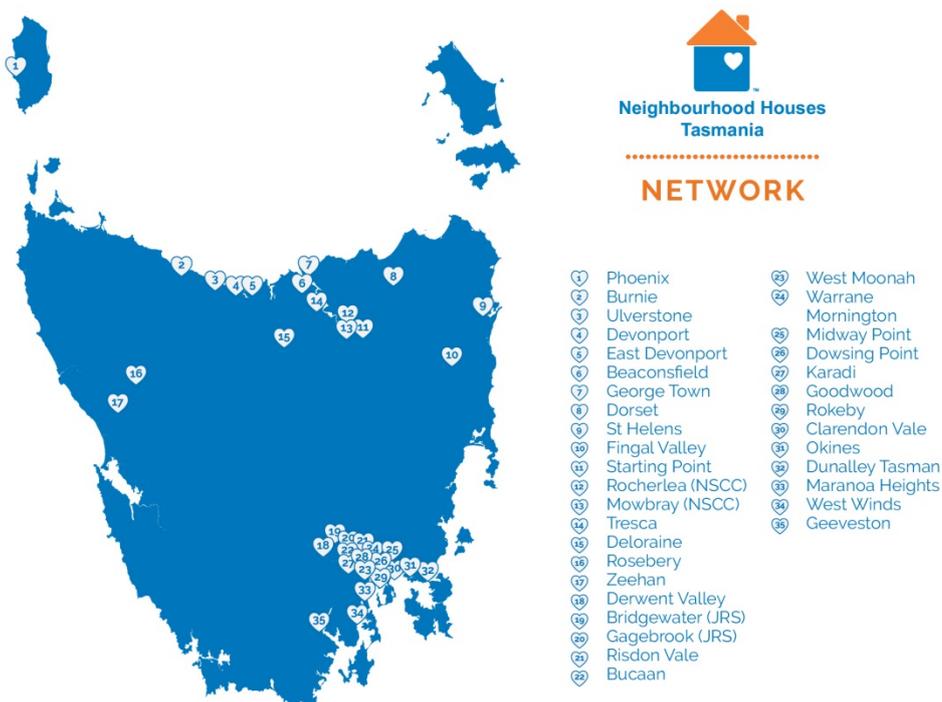
Submission to

**REVIEW OF TASMANIA'S LOCAL
GOVERNMENT LEGISLATION
FRAMEWORK**

March 2019

NHT and the Network of Neighbourhood Houses we represent

There are 35 Neighbourhood Houses across Tasmania, 34 of which are funded by State Government Disability & Community Services under the Neighbourhood House Program, and supported through Neighbourhood Houses Tasmania as their peak body. All Houses primarily engage in community development work in disadvantaged or socially isolated communities. Neighbourhood Houses are all separately incorporated community organisations governed by a volunteer local management committee. The Houses work with people of all ages and always from the core fundamental of community development as our process – and have done so for over 30 years in many communities, and in every local government area except Hobart.



Neighbourhood Houses are places where people come together and find support, belonging and purpose as they work together to support their local community and make a real difference in people's lives. They are run by the community, for the community and offer a wide range of programs and activities for local people. Houses are the warm and generous heart of their communities. As a network, the Neighbourhood Houses form the largest community development infrastructure in Tasmania, with the most regionally diverse footprint of any non-government community service organisation in the state. The network has been working together across Tasmania for over 30 years, with many Houses serving their local community for over 40 years (as of 2019).

What is community development?

Community development involves ways of working that empower individuals and groups of people to make changes in their community on issues that affect them.

At its most simple – and powerful – community development is the art of bringing people together, united by a common concern or opportunity, and choosing to work together to deliver change.

The process of working together connects people, groups and organisations with a greater sense of purpose and meaning. It also has greater potential for collective impact. The process is founded on ways and means to create connections and belonging. Everything builds from there.

Houses maintain a focus on community development by:

- Responding to community needs
- Representing community views
- Delivering programs using community practices
- Facilitating delivery of services locally
- Building community capacity

This means that the way Houses do their work is as important as the projects chosen. House programs and activities always strive to ensure community members feel welcomed, included, represented and have a say in what happens.

Highlights from our summary, [Making a Difference](#), of the outcomes from the network in 2016-17 show:

- 779,592 contacts were made by community members with all Houses
- This is 23,624 on average in each House for the year
- Which is equivalent to 492 contacts per week in each House
- Volunteers contributed 266,904 hours across the State over the year
- It means there are 168 hours of volunteering per week in each House
- Each House worked with an average of 39 partner organisations during 2016-17

Further information about our network can be found at: <http://nht.org.au/home/neighbourhood-houses-in-tasmania/>

Neighbourhood Houses have a local grassroots focus and engagement and some are working effectively together with local Government for the benefit of their communities. Our network has a unique grassroots perspective on local Government and so can honestly identify what currently works well and what does not.

Indeed a focus at our annual conference in 2018 was on Neighbourhood Houses and local Government, asking the question - what makes these partnerships work?

We would welcome the opportunity to further input into this review.

Consultation process for this Submission.

NHT has drawn on the discussions around local Government involving 31 Houses and over 150 local participants at our conference in 2018.

We have offered the opportunity for our Members to input into this Submission, and 11 have provided written feedback which is quoted in this submission.

The NHT Board, consisting of 10 Neighbourhood House representatives, have had a recent discussion around working with local Government.

All of these perspectives have shaped our responses here.

The review of legislation is focussing on the elected council and processes to ensure good governance, and we have had the opportunity to input into the TasCOSS submission which covers the important principles of governance around the elected officials. We fully support their submission and its associated recommendations.

NHT and its Members hope that this legislation review acknowledges that Councils consist of both the elected council AND the council staff. These two elements form the Council. We are assuming that this review considers both elements of “local governance” particularly in light of some of the recent difficulties in some Councils where the interplay between councillor and council staff has undermined the operation of local government.

NHT are choosing to reflect our and our Members observations under three key headings drawn from the themes DPAC have asked in the review.

- 🏠 How can Councils best engage and represent communities?
- 🏠 What areas/services should Council be responsible for delivering in the future?
- 🏠 How can Councils be better at partnering in meeting the needs of communities?

We have *italicised direct quotes* from our Members taken from the survey we conducted with them.

How can Councils best engage and represent communities?

Our Members feedback reflected that Local Government worked well when it engaged outside “the archaic method of interaction with the public at Formal Council Meetings”. Our Members were very clear that engagement solely through open Council meetings limited many people to have input, and limited Councillors and the council staff from truly appreciating community perspectives.

They were very clear that the existing formal processes of engagement limited broader community voices, particularly those with poorer literacy or less confidence on having input into decisions.

A clear observation by Houses is that Councils, be it their staff or councillors, need to build relationships and trust in community. Importantly the observation was that they need to be part of existing events and groups, and not to just create your own.

“They need to come to the people, not ask the people to come to them. They need to engage with community members at existing events/groups/gatherings. They need to use a variety of means to engage with people - for example face to face, social media, telephone, email etc”

“Just come and mingle at events and activities” “Be available to the local community”

“get out and about in the community. Be aware of what groups/organisations exist and do out in the community. Meet with community groups. Email those groups when input is needed.”

“I think if they build the relationship with the community, the community would be more willing to voice their concerns. A lot of consultation occurs with no immediate results occurring, sometimes doing something small so the community feel heard to start with and be very honest in what the council can achieve”

“Local Government needs to be 'seen' - they need to be present within the community in order to engage with them. Attend more events, meetings, groups. Being present will result in increased communication and engagement.”

“the elected councillors could spend more time with community and listening to the issues”

Houses are very open to offering the Houses as engagement points but also suggesting that Council staff and councillors use multiple engagement mediums, and that they utilise existing gathering places for community members.

“Engage through their local Neighbourhood House”

“Attend community Houses, local clubs, organisations and groups, Centrelink and community forums (at different hours of the day).”

“Being seen at local events, having open office days, community breakfast, talk to people in the street - have an open meeting at a community place”

A number of Houses reflected that Councils can often talk of consulting with community but in reality are just seeking endorsement for what they had already decided. This is not consultation. Suggestions included:

Open, transparent communication with no agenda or pre-prescribed solution hidden in the background. Community needs to know their opinion is valued and not just part of a process to get projects across the line. Example: Council asked for community feedback about placement of a new facility. In reality community were given 2 choices both of which had been drawn up already by the Planning Department. Community was very frustrated as there were other more practical options that made sense. There was no opportunity to suggest other more appropriate options.

What areas/services should Council be responsible for delivering in the future?

The focus of Councils services varies across the state however our Members believe Councils should have a focus on community development, and by that we mean working with and engaging their community to develop solutions to local issues.

Houses and NHT believe Councils have a responsibility to maintain a focus on addressing disadvantage, and community health and welfare. A Council should engage with and listen to the local community on its needs. Council should then use its voice to advocate for better services for their community.

“work alongside community, addressing community needs as identified by community”

“consultation with the community would be a good start and then take the information and work with it. I think they should be advocating for better services for all including health and social needs”

“Youth programs, community health and welfare, getting involved with the “Weeks” ie Youth Week, Families Week, Volunteers week, Seniors Week” etc. There are heaps of them that they could support and show a presence within the community.”

“respect our work - see that it is as important as sewerage and rubbish removal”

Councils were seen as playing an important role in building community pride and cohesion through festivals and events.

“Large scale events (1000+ attendees) - fairs, galas, New Years Eve, Christmas Parade, festivals, etc”

In terms of how Council delivers services, Neighbourhood Houses were clear that when Council worked in partnership with existing community groups and understood what they did, they could support and enhance what was happening. Basically that Council should seek to promote and build on the work of existing community groups, not attempt to run everything themselves. In fact, NHT and Houses have seen instances where some Councils have done harm by duplicating and even competing with existing community groups.

“Ensure the people who work for councils from GM down are fully aware of the community organisations that exist and who key people in those groups are.”

“Community development should be coordinated by councils in collaboration with the community groups. The delivery of services would be better provided for by the groups that exist within the community.”

“Councils are good at providing admin and facilitating meetings and enabling service providers to do their work. I suggest Councils use the skills of their community to deliver services/programs rather than deliver themselves.”

“Councils could work with Houses in facilitating community development rather than deliver programs for the sake of delivering programs.”

How can councils be better at partnering in meeting the needs of communities?

When asked what the keys were to good partnerships and experience with Councils, they were the opposite of when asked what the issues were when partnerships didn't work.

Not surprisingly they identified that good open, honest community consultation, as well as trust and openness in dealing with community were the keys to effective partnerships. It is also worth noting that the Council staff are where these connections are often made OR where these relationships can be difficult.

“Keeping the doors open for collaboration and conversation”

“Transparency, conversation, connection”

“Honesty and openness, opportunity to speak and show what is going on - communication”

“respect and understanding”

Our members also identified that Council staff and Councillors being more present at Neighbourhood Houses and other community groups would be welcome. Even options of co-locating Council staff would help build relationships and enable better collaboration.

“Maybe spending time at the House - work here once a week/fortnight/month. See first hand what is going on. talk to the clients who walk through the door.”

“co-location can work well”

Neighbourhood Houses Tasmania looks forward to supporting partnerships between Houses and local government, and for us all to continue to develop and promote the community development approach to supporting our local communities. Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations and initiatives.