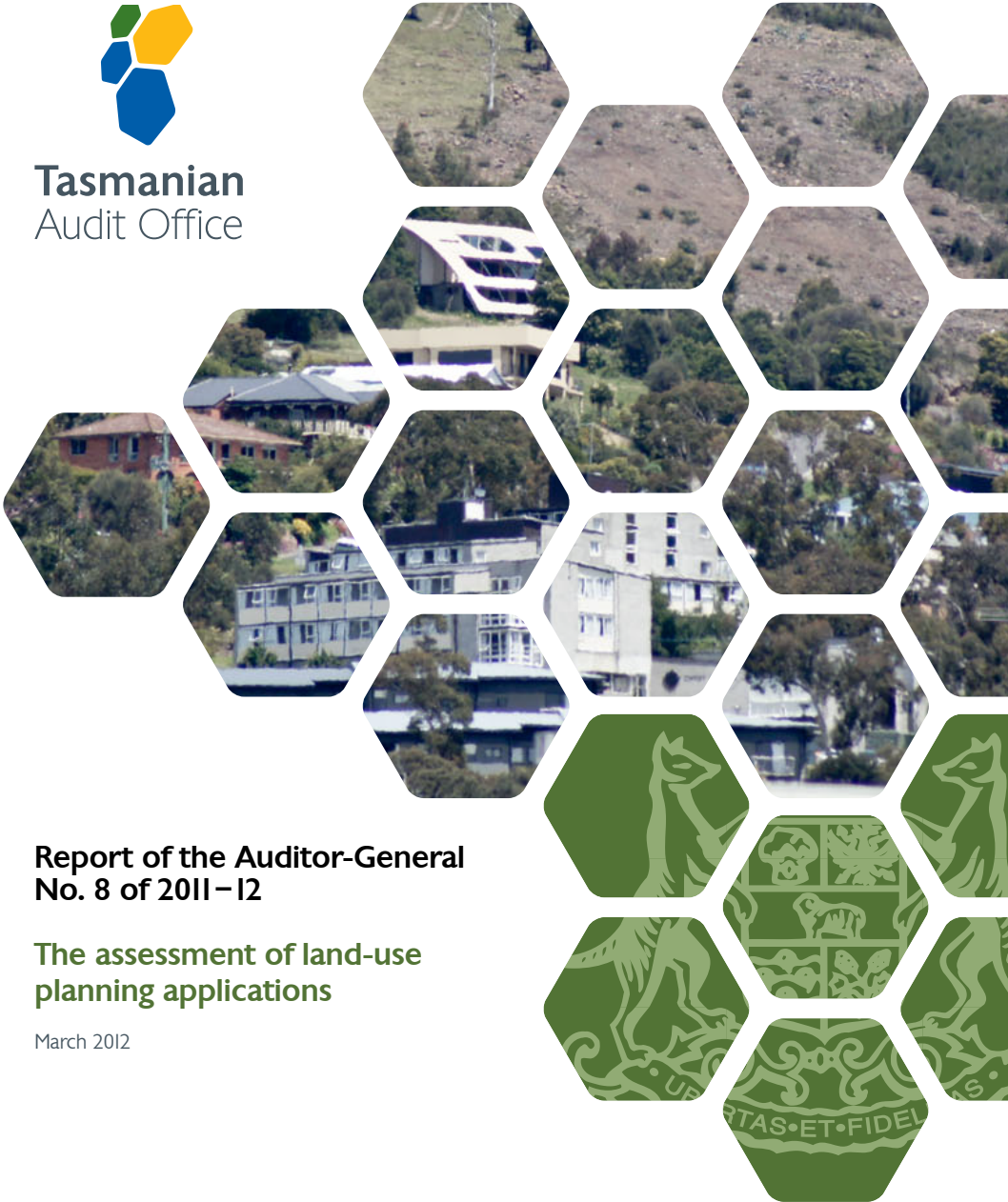




**Tasmanian**  
Audit Office



**Report of the Auditor-General  
No. 8 of 2011–12**

**The assessment of land-use  
planning applications**

March 2012

## INTRODUCTION

In 1994, the then Government established the Resource Management and Planning System supported by a number of key pieces of legislation. Essentially, the aim was to balance management of resource potential to meet the needs of future generations on the one side, while addressing adverse effects of activity on the environment.

We undertook a performance audit to examine aspects of the land-use planning application system in Tasmania. In so doing, our aim was to provide a benchmark that could assist the reform process that has been underway since 2008.

All local government councils are planning authorities. Legislation enables councils to develop planning schemes that the Tasmanian Planning Commission (TPC) approves. Those planning schemes cover matters such as zoning and permitted uses. In essence, schemes provide rules that applicants should follow and that councils would use in assessing development applications (known as DAs). In some instances, a planning scheme needs to be amended before a council can consider a development application and when that occurs, councils seek approval from TPC.

Generally, a planning permit needs to be issued by a council before an applicant can proceed with any development. Councils assess DAs against the planning scheme. Legislation sets out timeframes to process DAs and provides for appeal processes.

Figure 1 provides a general outline of the state's planning system with emphasis on DAs that are assessed by councils. We have omitted appeals processes as these were outside the scope of the audit. It should be noted the legislation and planning schemes specify when community involvement can occur.

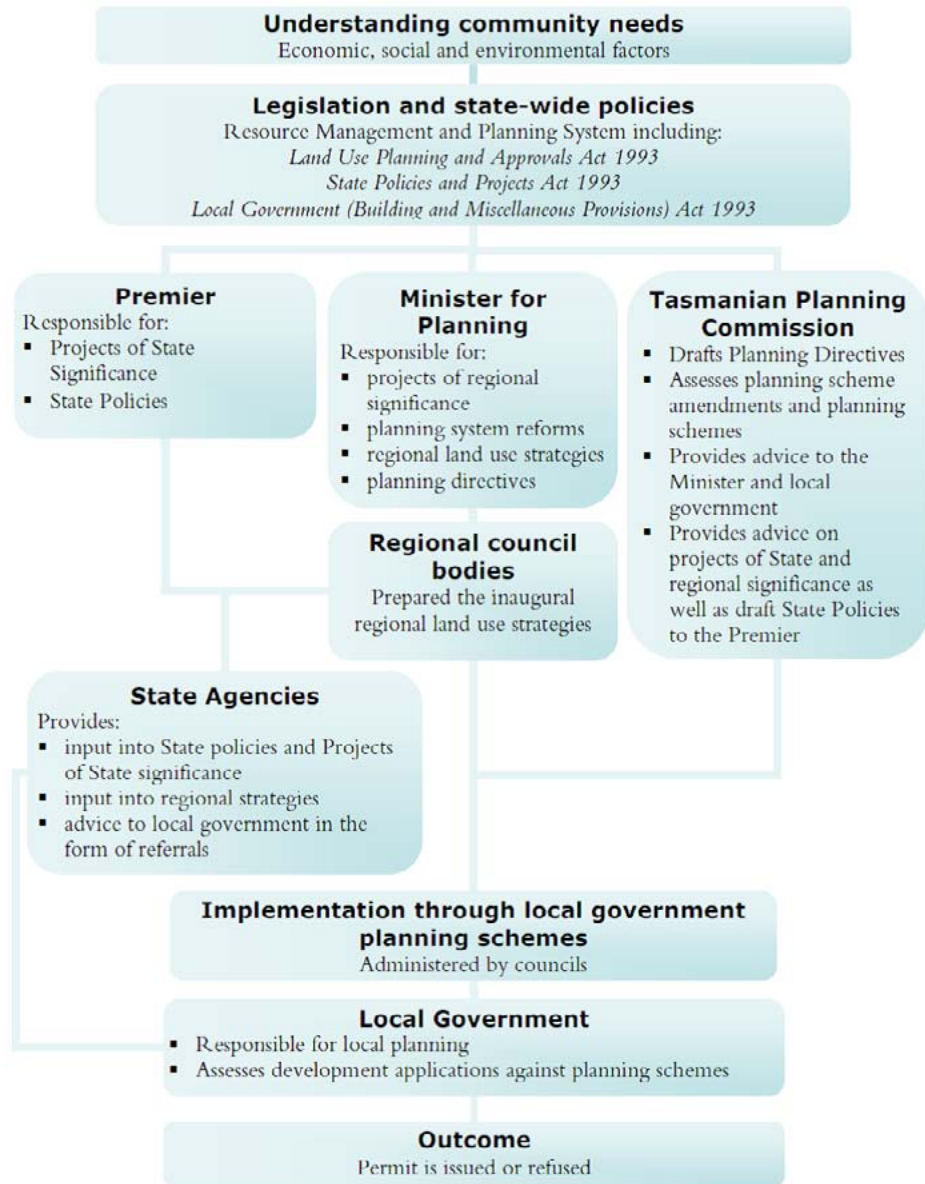
The objective of the audit was to assess the performance of Tasmania's land-use planning application system at the whole-of-state and local levels. We conducted sample testing at the following entities:

- Central Coast Council (CCC)
- Break O'Day Council (BODC)
- Derwent Valley Council (DVC)
- Launceston City Council (LCC)
- Meander Valley Council (MVC)
- Sorell Council (SC)
- Tasmanian Planning Commission (TPC).

The time scope of the audit dealt with:

- DAs received in 2010–11
- planning scheme amendments proposed by councils that were approved in 2010–11
- timeliness and output indicators between 2005 and 2011
- strategic planning documents from 2002–2011.

Figure 1: Overview of the planning system and its link to Development Applications



# DETAILED AUDIT CONCLUSIONS

The following audit conclusions are based on sample testing that we conducted at the councils in scope and at TPC.

## Did planning officers have adequate training and experience?

All planning officers had adequate training and experience. Due to staff turnover, some planning authorities had more experienced planning officers than others. However, we found that planning authorities were proactive in expanding employees' knowledge through training.

## Did planning officers have appropriate access to expertise?

All planning authorities had appropriate access to expertise, whether in-house or from external stakeholders.

## Were DA assessment resources and systems adequate?

We considered two aspects of this audit criterion, as noted in the following sub-sections.

### *Staffing*

Staffing resources were adequate but there may be opportunities to share resources in times of high activity.

### *Assessment systems*

There was scope for improvement at the councils in matters such as:

- reducing duplication of effort
- formalising internal assessment processes
- moving towards electronic records management
- using an electronic DA assessment system with in-built system controls
- setting time limits for completion of referred work.

## Had legislation and strategic plans been complied with?

We examined two aspects in terms of legislative and strategic compliance, namely:

- timeline requirements (as per *Land Use Planning and Approvals Act 1993*)
- entities' own strategic plans.

Our conclusions are provided in the following sub-sections.

### *Legislative compliance*

At councils, 15 per cent of DAs tested had exceeded the 42-day statutory limit. Also, there were inconsistencies with the way that councils had counted the elapsed days.

At TPC we found one example where a planning scheme amendment had exceeded the 90-day limit by two days.

## Strategic plans

While we noted some minor exceptions (at BODC, LCC and TPC), most entities had set and complied with a strategic plan framework.

### Were planning schemes clear and current?

With respect to planning schemes, there was considerable variation between the number of zones and the number of use classifications. The year of establishment also varied widely and although all schemes had been recently amended, this was not to say that these amendments had provided comprehensive updating. For the planning schemes that we audited, there was no standard form of presentation or layout. Those differences between planning schemes created inefficiencies, particularly for individuals or businesses (such as supermarket chains, telecommunications providers and construction companies) with state-wide operations.

### Was sufficient information provided to the public?

We found that all entities in scope needed to provide more information to the public and made recommendations to that effect across the board.

### Is performance adequately reported on?

At a majority of councils, performance reporting about timeliness of processing DAs and the number of DAs handled was not routinely provided.

## LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The following Table reproduces the recommendations contained in the body of the Report.

REC	SECTION	WE RECOMMEND THAT ...
1	1.4.2	... TPC: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• develops a list of key planning principles to share knowledge with new delegates and assist in assessing planning scheme amendments</li><li>• implements an information system in which Section 43A applications and planning scheme amendments can be assessed and completed electronically</li><li>• develops a feedback mechanism to inform future decisions made by delegates about planning scheme amendments.</li></ul>
2	1.7	... TPC provides the public with information on the aim and intent of planning system reforms.
3	2.5.1	... all planning authorities improve the accuracy of performance measures by measuring the assessment time when the application fee has been received.
4	2.8.2	... TPC develops guidelines for qualitative measurements to be applied to planning authorities. We further recommend that these qualitative measurements are used as an analysis tool to drive continual improvement.

... BODC:

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|---|-----|--|
| 5 | 3.4 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>implements an electronic information system in which planning applications can be assessed and reporting automatically</li><li>enters into agreements with external entities to ensure the timely return of referred applications.</li></ul> |
|---|-----|--|

6	3.5.1	... BODC completes application assessments within the statutory time.
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|---|-------|---|
| 7 | 3.5.2 | ... BODC sets specific and measurable goals that are achievable within the timeframe set by its strategic plan. |
|---|-------|---|

8	3.6	<p>... BODC provides the following information on its website:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a list of recent discretionary application submissions</li><li>a list of recent permit approvals</li><li>information about the planning scheme review.</li></ul>
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| 9 | 3.7 | <p>... BODC reports the following information as part of its annual reporting cycle:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>number of applications lodged</li><li>timeliness of assessment</li><li>performance against its annual plan.</li></ul> |
|---|-----|--|

10	4.5.1	... CCC places greater emphasis on completing DA assessments within the statutory time.
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| 11 | 4.6 | ... CCC provides information about the planning scheme review on its website. |
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12	5.4	... DVC considers implementing an automated information system in which DAs can be assessed.
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| 13 | 5.5.1 | ... DVC completes DA assessments within the statutory time. |
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14	5.5.2	... DVC sets specific and measurable goals that are achievable within the timeframe set by the strategic plan.
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| 15 | 5.6 | <p>... DVC provides the following information on its website:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>zoning boundaries</li><li>a list of recent discretionary DA submissions</li><li>a list of recent permit approvals</li><li>checklists</li><li>information about the planning scheme review.</li></ul> |
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16	5.7	<p>... DVC reports the following information as part of its annual reporting cycle:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>number of DAs lodged</li><li>timeliness of assessment</li><li>performance against its annual plan.</li></ul>
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... LCC:

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| 17 | 6.4 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>builds controls into the DA assessment system</li><li>develops a method of generating detailed management reports</li><li>enters into an agreement with external entities to ensure the timely return of referred DAs.</li></ul> |
|----|-----|--|

18	6.5.1	... LCC places greater emphasis on completing DA assessments within the statutory time.
19	6.6	<p>... LCC provides the following information on its website:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• an introductory guide to the planning process</li> <li>• a list of all recent discretionary DAs</li> <li>• a list of all recent permit approvals</li> <li>• information about the planning scheme review.</li> </ul>
20	6.7	... as part of its annual reporting cycle, LCC reports the number of DAs lodged and the timeliness of their assessment.
21	7.4	... MVC places a higher reliance on the electronic information system in which DAs are assessed and transition away from paper-based planning files.
22	7.6	... MVC provides information regarding the zones detailed in its planning scheme on its website.
23	8.4	<p>... SC:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• builds controls into the DA assessment system</li> <li>• develops a method of generating detailed management reports.</li> </ul>
24	8.5.1	... SC places greater emphasis on completing DA assessments within the statutory time.
25	8.5.2	<p>... that SC sets specific and measurable goals that are achievable within the timeframe set by its strategic plan.</p> <p>We further recommend that all annual plans should be finalised prior to or at the start of the relevant period.</p>
26	8.6	<p>... SC provides the following information on its website:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• zoning boundaries</li> <li>• a list of all recent discretionary DAs</li> <li>• a list of all recent permit approvals</li> <li>• information about the planning scheme review.</li> </ul>
27	8.7	<p>... SC reports the following information as part of its annual reporting cycle:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• number of DAs lodged</li> <li>• timeliness of assessment.</li> </ul>



H M Blake  
Auditor-General  
27 March 2012

**For the full report go to:** <http://www.audit.tas.gov.au/publications>

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Photo supplied by Ron Alenka

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