With planning, sky's the limit

WHAT is a social licence and how do you get one?

Many people are sceptical when they hear government or a proponent say they have the support of the community, or when opponents say they do not have a social licence to proceed with a project.

With whom did they speak? Anyone? A vocal minority? A select group who are experts on a given subject? How did they weigh up opposing views? Did the media pick up on an emotional perspective or weigh the issue in a balanced way? The term social licence is complex. It is not a stamp you put on a plan for a project — social licence received.

The idea of social licence came from the mining industry, but there's some

Citizens must get involved in policy not just react to projects, writes **Dion Lester**

debate over what it means, and what value, if any, the concept is to decision-making.

Discussions about social licence often use the catch-all phrase "community", however groups of people who live in the same geographical area or take part in the same activities do not always agree.

Look at your own family, sports club, or workmates, are

your opinions the same? The idea of social licence, and its measurement, is complicated. If a social licence is misjudged, the results are on the front page of the paper: delays, anguish, protests, frustration, resistance and costly appeals in the planning tribunal.

Times have changed since 1993 when Tasmania's overarching planning system was brought in. There is new interest in Tasmania as a place to live, work and visit, followed by investment and development, but there is less respect for government as a thought leader and authority.

We often see comments and input from interest groups and non-government sources of policies such as think tanks.

We can share ideas and

information at high speed. We tend to be more aware and concerned about changes that affect us, and it is easier to let people know we are unhappy. We have higher expectations of what is possible for our streets, towns and cities because we see inspiring examples elsewhere.

Traditionally, we left city planning to politicians and technical people. Despite statutory requirements for advertising and the additional efforts of many councils, these processes typically get little community engagement.

Once this process is done, it is the planning scheme that indicates when a council is required to notify the public about proposals, and requirements that must be met

for a project to be approved. And here lies the problem.

Discussion about what our cities and towns should look like only occurs when a development is presented to a council for assessment.

In many cases this can be too late, as a council is bound to approve a development that meets the requirements of the planning scheme, irrespective of what people feel about it.
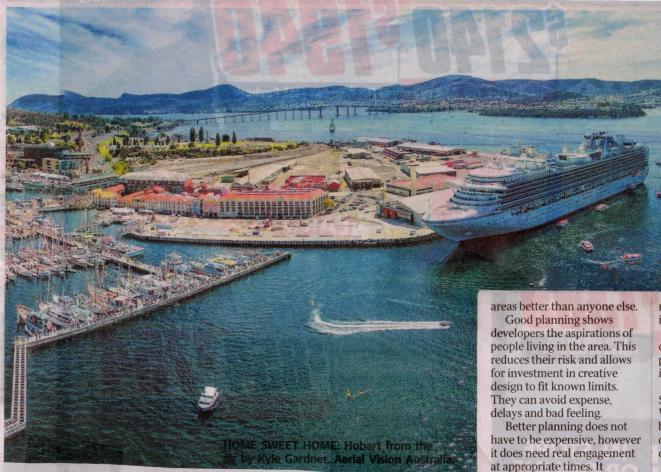
When Hobart Interim Planning Scheme was exhibited it attracted 102 representations, raising many issues across many zones, codes and provisions.

Compare this with the reported 400 people who met to call Hobart City Council to reject applications by the Fragrance Group to build two

hotels in the city, and before either application has been advertised. While it is yet to be proven whether these projects are in line with the scheme, the point is citizens must engage with the development of policies and schemes and not leave it until a project emerges that we do not like.

Recent concern about our planning system and the creation of the Tasmanian Planning Scheme demonstrate there are many who do not agree with how schemes are developed. All levels of government need to do better.

Early, authentic conversation between government and citizens is more likely to result in better decisions that include ideas from people who know their

HOME SWEET HOME: Hobart from the air by Kyle Gardner, Aerial Vision Australia.

INSET: Artist's impression of controversial hotel tower proposed by Fragrance Group for the state capital.

> Discussion about what our cities and towns should look like only occurs when a project is presented to a council for assessment.

areas better than anyone else.

Good planning shows developers the aspirations of people living in the area. This reduces their risk and allows for investment in creative design to fit known limits. They can avoid expense, delays and bad feeling.

Better planning does not have to be expensive, however it does need real engagement at appropriate times. It requires us to be proactive, resulting in a place that retains and develops the sorts of streets, suburbs and towns that

make our lives healthy, interesting and productive.

How do we shift from the constraints of our legacy planning system to a more inclusive form of planning?

Examples such as the Sustainable Murchison and West Coast Community Plans, being driven by councils, demonstrate the benefits of community engagement.

As the government tier closest to the community, councils are in a unique position to make sure needs are met. Localising the policy

setting fosters greater community engagement at the time that matters — when we are planning for our places.

Dion Lester is policy director of the Local Government Association of Tasmania.