LONGFORD & NORTHERN MIDLANDS FORUM



19 October 2026

Town Hall, Longford

A MESSAGE FROM:

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The Northern Midlands is home to some of the best soil, water and farmers in the country. Longford and its neighbouring towns carry a proud agricultural and heritage history, and the businesses here have built that history over generations.

When we met on 19 October, we heard from people who love this region and want it to grow. But we also heard about the pressures holding it back. Business confidence is low. Costs keep rising. Housing, health services and workers are hard to find. And too often, government makes it harder, not easier, to get on with the job.

We convened this forum to listen, to understand the local experience and to take what we heard into Labor's policy development. We thank everyone who attended and spoke so openly.

What we heard was clear. The Northern Midlands does not need to be reinvented. It needs its existing industries backed to grow, value-add and reach new markets, and it needs a government that clears the path rather than blocking it.

Hon Josh Willie MP

Jen Butler MP

Brian Mitchell MP

ABOUT THIS REPORT



About

This report summarises the strongest themes, concerns and opportunities raised at the Tasmanian Labor Longford and Northern Midlands Forum. It is not a transcript and does not attribute individual comments.

Participation in the forum, or inclusion in this report, should not be taken as endorsement of every view recorded, endorsement of Tasmanian Labor or another political party, or support for any future policy position.

The report reflects the themes heard across the room and the priorities Tasmanian Labor will take forward in its policy development and accountability work.

Discussion

Participants worked in table groups on two discussion questions. The first was what challenges and roadblocks do Longford and the Northern Midlands face right now? The second was where the biggest opportunities lie for the region? Each table then reported back to the full room.

WHO WAS IN THE ROOM

The forum brought together representatives from agriculture, food production and processing, tourism and hospitality, small business, health, local government and the broader Northern Midlands community.



Listing does not imply organisational endorsement of this report, Tasmanian Labor or any political position.

- **Northern Midlands Business Association**
- **Tas Rex**
- **Western Junction Sawmill**
- **Valleyfeild Vineyard | Bell & Gong**
- **Austral Bricks Longford**
- **Woolmers Estate**
- **United Workers Union, Tasmanian Office**
- **TasFarmers**
- **Longford Probus Club**
- **RAW Rural Alive and Well**
- **UMS, Burlington Berries**
- **X-Hemp**
- **Selborne Biological Services**
- **Tas Quality Meats**
- **Northern Midlands Medical Services**
- **Fire Chief Longford & Bishopbourne**
- **Community members**

SUMMARY OF THEMES

- The cost of doing business is too high

Payroll tax, freight and workers compensation premiums are squeezing businesses, and confidence is low.

- It is too hard to employ and grow

Red tape makes hiring difficult, grant programs are out of reach for small and medium businesses, and the system feels stacked against them.

- The workforce does not line up

Seasonal and long-term jobs programs are not working together, and there is nowhere for workers to live.

- Health services are stretched

GPs, specialists and mental health support are hard to access, and rural classifications do not reflect local reality.

- Housing is a barrier

People cannot find a home, and there are not enough social and age-appropriate options.

- A town under pressure

Heavy traffic, planning tensions and vacant heritage buildings are changing the character of Longford.

- Government is not pulling in one direction

GBEs duplicate effort, and state and local planning overlap rather than align.

- Value-adding is the big opportunity

Great produce is leaving the region unprocessed. Processing, provenance and agritourism can keep the value here.



A TOWN UNDER PRESSURE

THE COST OF DOING BUSINESS



WHAT WE HEARD

The cost of doing business

Businesses described costs rising faster than they can manage. Payroll tax and freight were raised repeatedly, along with the cost of shipping produce off the island. The Freight Equalisation Scheme was described as so difficult to administer and access that many businesses simply do not bother.

Workers compensation premiums have risen sharply, and participants said the increases do not seem to reflect the level of risk their businesses actually carry. Some pointed to Queensland as a scheme worth looking at. Long waits to see a medical specialist, often months, are delaying return to work for injured employees and creating a drag on productivity. Business confidence across the region is low.

Red tape and access to support

Participants said it has become too hard to employ people. The red tape involved pushes businesses towards contractors, which is easier but more costly. Grant programs were described as farcical. Application processes are too hard and conditions too rigorous for small and medium businesses. Ironically, larger businesses with more resources find them easier to access.

Grants are easiest to get for the businesses that need them least.

Health and wellbeing

Participants said Tasmania is not as healthy as it used to be. Access to GPs is a serious concern. The classification system for rural GPs treats Longford as close to Launceston, only around 15 minutes away, which affects pay structures and makes it harder to attract and keep doctors. Participants said the medical boundary system needs to work for all of Tasmania. Isolation is taking a toll on mental health, and people described a lack of support and clinical access when they need it.

Workforce and seasonal work

The region depends on a seasonal workforce, but seasonal and long-term jobs programs are not lining up. Participants want these programs consolidated so they work together.

Accommodation for seasonal workers is a real challenge. Participants said it needs to be more widely dispersed across communities rather than concentrated in one place, which would help maintain social licence. They also noted that when a large share of wages leaves the region, the local economy does not see the full benefit of that work.

TasTAFE was identified as an important pathway for young people into the local workforce.



WHAT WE HEARD .2

Housing

Access to housing was raised at every table. Participants called for more social housing and more age-appropriate housing so older residents can stay in their communities. Prefabricated building was identified as an opportunity already underway that could be scaled up.

A town under pressure

Longford is busier than it used to be, and participants described a lower sense of community and more conflict. Heavy vehicle traffic through Longford and other towns is a growing concern, and residents feel their concerns are slow to be addressed.

The town's heritage value is at risk. Activity is shifting towards commercial uses, heritage buildings are sitting vacant, and participants saw a lost opportunity for small businesses to use those spaces and work together.

Forestry and timber

Participants raised concerns about the EPBC Act and its impact on the timber industry, but also saw a real opportunity to value-add. Laminated timber produced at Western Junction was highlighted as a product with many uses.

Planning and coordination

Participants described ongoing tension in planning, and confusing crossover between state and local government on planning and strategic planning schemes.

GBE activity is not coordinated across the state, and participants pointed to excessive duplication. They argued that government businesses should be using their combined market power to bring prices and costs down for industry, rather than leaving businesses to absorb rising costs.

THE FUTURE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

The forum made clear that the Northern Midlands does not need to be reinvented. It needs government to back the industries already here and make it easier for them to grow.

Costs

Government should take pressure off businesses, not add to it. That means a workers compensation system where premiums reflect real risk, and a freight scheme that businesses can actually use.

Access

Grant programs and support should be designed for the small and medium businesses that make up most of the region, not just the largest.

Services

Rural health classifications should reflect local reality, so communities like Longford can attract and keep GPs. Housing, health and public transport are essential to keeping people in the region.

Coordination

GBEs should work together and use their shared market power to bring costs down. State and local government should be aligned on planning, not overlapping.

Getting out of the way

Barriers to entry for new businesses should be reduced, so good ideas can get off the ground.

Backing local

Government procurement should back Tasmanian businesses, including minimum standards for Tasmanian product in new builds and developments.



STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES

The second half of the forum turned to opportunities. Participants were clear that the biggest gains will come from growing and diversifying the industries the region already has, rather than chasing new ones.



Value-adding in agriculture

The Northern Midlands has excellent soil, water and farmers, but much of its produce leaves the region unprocessed or only partly processed. Participants saw processing as a major missed opportunity. Secondary processing could also turn waste products into new products.

Provenance and new markets

Tasmanian provenance carries real value in international markets. Berries were one example of produce that could command a premium with stronger branding and value-adding. Participants want new export markets opened up.

Agritourism and heritage tourism

Paddock to plate experiences could diversify agricultural products and draw more visitors. Participants saw agritourism and heritage tourism coming together, with Longford’s motor racing heritage a distinctive drawcard.

Renewable energy with a Tasmanian label

Renewable energy was identified as a big opportunity, provided development is sustainable. Participants saw value in renewable and sustainable energy carrying a recognisable Tasmanian label.

Timber and advanced manufacturing

Value-adding in the timber industry, including laminated timber at Western Junction, was raised as a growth opportunity.

Digital connectivity

Tasmania has good internet infrastructure. Participants saw an opportunity to use the NBN to attract new businesses to the state.

Supporting new businesses

Participants want barriers to entry reduced for new ventures, such as tyre recycling. Some raised international ideas worth exploring, including Ireland’s basic income for artists and musicians, and whether a similar model could support start-up business owners.

Better planning for growing towns

Participants pointed to places like Colorado, where more thought goes into green spaces and waterways when planning housing and development. Regional public transport was also identified as a high need.

WHAT SUCCESS SHOULD LOOK LIKE

- **Costs businesses can manage**

Workers compensation premiums that reflect real risk, and a freight scheme that works.

- **Support that reaches small business**

Grant programs and support designed for small and medium enterprises.

- **A workforce that lines up**

Seasonal and long-term jobs programs working together, with accommodation spread across communities.

- **Health services close to home**

GPs, specialists and mental health support people can access, and a rural classification system that works for all of Tasmania.





- **Homes for everyone**

More social housing, age-appropriate housing and faster building.

- **Value added here**

Produce processed in the region, sold on Tasmanian provenance, and new export markets opened.

- **Coordinated Government**

GBEs using their shared market power, and state and local planning aligned.

- **A town that keeps its character**

Heritage buildings back in use, traffic managed and a strong sense of community.

Tasmanian Labor will use these findings to inform its policy development, parliamentary work and continued engagement with Longford and the Northern Midlands.

CONCLUSION

What we heard in Longford builds on what we heard at the Tasmanian Labor Northern Economic Forum in Launceston on 6 July 2026 and the Bell Bay and George Town Forum on 28 September 2026. Three forums, with different participants and different industries, have reached the same conclusion. Northern Tasmania does not lack opportunity. It has been held back by a lack of coordination, confidence and delivery.

Every forum found government businesses pulling in different directions, and planning systems holding back investment. Every forum raised housing, health and services as essential to keeping people in the region. And every forum called for a government that backs local industry rather than standing in its way.

The Northern Midlands is not short on produce, skills or ambition. What it needs is lower costs, less red tape, better services and a government that helps its businesses capture more of the value they create.

This report is part of Tasmanian Labor's ongoing work across the North. We will keep listening, hold the Government to account on what we heard and build these lessons into our policy for the region. The full report from the Northern Economic Forum is available at:
https://taslabor.org.au/our-plan/vision-for-the-north/

THE NORTHERN MIDLANDS FEEDS TASMANIA

It needs lower costs, less red tape and a government that backs local business.

Tasmanian Labor