

# **TASMANIA'S CONNECTEDNESS: A SOURCE OF STRENGTH OR A TOOL OF SILENCE?**

PREPARED FOR BRAND TASMANIA AND  
THE DEPARTMENT OF PREMIER AND CABINET (DPAC)  
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## Background

The Commissioner of Inquiry (CoI) into the Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings made several important observations about the way Tasmania's culture and history have influenced how concerns about child sexual abuse in Government institutions have been handled. In particular, the CoI noted that Tasmania's sense of connectedness, shaped by a small population, high cultural homogeneity, historical factors, geographic isolation, low social and economic mobility, and low inward migration has contributed to an environment which "deterred victim-survivors, their families and others from reporting child sexual abuse in institutional contexts and have also contributed to poor responses to reports of abuse."

The CoI noted the social connections in Tasmania "are frequently close and deep, established over generations" and this reflects Brand Tasmania's own research that Tasmanians "are connected to each other, and to this place." However, where Brand Tasmania has identified connectedness as leading to "a uniquely Tasmanian spirit of cooperation" the Commission found that our connectedness can be a source of harm, and that the sense of connection that runs deep in Tasmanian communities may have deterred people from speaking up about abuse.

### The project

The Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPAC) leads the State Service in supporting government to achieve the best possible outcomes for the Tasmanian community. They achieve this by working in partnership with the communities they serve and across the public service. Following the release of the CoI and its insights into Tasmania's culture, DPAC sought to better understand the positive and negative experiences of connectedness in the Tasmanian community. The goal was to use these insights to inform future policy to effectively address societal issues in the state. Specifically focusing on child sexual abuse in response to the CoI chapter 5.2 Culture and Recommendation 19.12<sup>1</sup>. To achieve this, DPAC worked in partnership with Brand Tasmania and engaged the team at Folket Consultancy to conduct the research.

### The approach we used

Since launching in 2018, the Brand Tasmania team has conducted hundreds of hours of in-depth interviews with individual Tasmanians across the state and produced reports, stories and documents about what makes Tasmania and Tasmanians unique. Brand Tasmania has also delivered workshops, surveys, roadshows, co-design processes, and wider engagement activities. DPAC was interested in gathering these rich insights on Tasmanian community and culture from Brand Tasmania. In collaboration with DPAC and Brand Tasmania, Folket Consultancy workshopped a set of questions that were used to analyse the material. These were:

1. What is the Tasmanian cultural uniqueness about connection and relationships (primary focus), power dynamics, and mental models?
2. When has this Tasmanian connectedness caused people and communities to stay silent, led to inaction and/or avoidance in the face of adversity? And, what influences these dynamics (e.g. fear, proximity of connection, impact on others)?

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<sup>1</sup> For further information and specificities of Recommendation 19.1, see Commission of Inquiry into Tasmanian Government's Response to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings (2021), available from <https://www.commissionofinquiry.tas.gov.au/report>

### 3. What levers within Tasmanian connectedness are there to address adversity?

We also sought out any references in the data relating to child sexual abuse, abuse and/or overcoming adversity in responding to these questions.

The materials we analysed included the following:

1. We facilitated a workshop with Brand Tasmania team members (n=5) to collect primary data of their knowledge and insights into how the Tasmanian culture has developed over the past five years.
2. We also used secondary data from Brand Tasmania which included over 120 documents ranging from reports, stories, and other website materials.

To manage the large volume of data and aid the analysis, Folket Consultancy used NVivo, a qualitative analysis software.

As part of the analysis, we also applied a system change lens and incorporated the Water of Systems Change conditions of the semi-explicit 'relationships and connections' and 'power dynamics', and the implicit 'mental models' to explore the aspects of Tasmanian culture that hold issues in-place.<sup>2</sup>

#### Limitations

Any research project will have limitations and this one is no exception. In this research, the material used focuses more broadly on Tasmanian people, communities, and culture rather than solely on "child sexual abuse in institutional settings," as highlighted in the CoI. However, we aimed to address this limitation by actively seeking out any direct mentions or reflections on topics related to child sexual abuse, abuse, and overcoming adversity within the data collected. Just under ten instances were identified and due to the low number, they are not an indication of the prevalence of abuse and adversity in Tasmanian society.

Additionally, our reliance on secondary sources is primarily due to privacy restrictions surrounding primary data use. To mitigate this, we conducted a workshop with the Brand Tasmania team, enabling us to gather primary insights and knowledge about Tasmania's people and culture.

## Findings

### 1. What is the Tasmanian cultural uniqueness in relation to connection and relationships (primary focus), power dynamics, and mental models?

We see clearly how culture impacts the everyday lives of Tasmanians. Culture shapes our beliefs, values, behaviors, how we see ourselves, make decisions, and interact with other Tasmanians. Brand Tasmania described Tasmanian culture as having elements of 'differentness, smallness, closeness and connectedness, wildness, quietness, hauntedness'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> These conditions are the semi-explicit conditions of connections and relationships, and power dynamics, as well as implicit conditions of mental models with the Water of Systems Change approach. For additional information, see Kania J., Kramer, M., and Senge, P. (2018) The Water of Systems Change, available from [https://www.fsg.org/resource/water\\_of\\_systems\\_change/](https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change/)

<sup>3</sup> Brand Tasmania (2021) Be Tasmanian podcast, episode three: The problem only we can solve, available from <https://tasmanian.com.au/tasmanian-projects/tasmanian-podcasts/>

But we also see how our Tasmanian cultural uniqueness shares similarities with other places. The Col report compares Tasmania to Jersey and Ireland. Norwich in the UK was identified by Brand Tasmania as another place where close connections are a key unique feature of the community. There are strong themes of Tasmanian connectedness throughout all of Brand Tasmania's work. We did a simple word frequency count of Brand Tasmania's work and the top three words included 'Tasmanian', 'people', and 'community', with 'family', 'connection' and 'culture' not far behind. Through our analysis, we sought to understand the various associations linked with the term "connected".<sup>4</sup> In Brand Tasmania's material, the word 'connected' is understood as a strength and intertwined with community and people. For example, Brand Tasmania's "Tasmanian Stories"<sup>5</sup> share insights of strong links to family, community, and place.

*She grew up in West Moonah, and has family connections all over Tasmania, from Franklin to Devonport. She describes her family as "super local," where "we knew everyone, and everyone knew us." (Tasmanian Story)*

*"People talk to you at the cash register. Walk down the street, people look you in the eye and smile . . . it allows that connection." (Tasmanian Story)*

But we also noted examples where a connected Tasmania and Tasmanians was a negative or situations where people struggled to get work due to not knowing the 'right' people. There were also stories of feeling excluded if you did not have the local connections and family ties.

*"That's probably another sort of clique-y Tasmanian thing. You might get your foot into the door because someone knows that you know them. It's not always about your qualifications." (The evolution of the Tasmanian brand report)*

Yet, we are seeing a shift in Tasmania's "connectedness". In the Brand Tasmania work, Tasmania is changing with more people moving to the state. Similarly, the Col notes Tasmania has become a more open and cosmopolitan state in the last 15 years referring to the same reasons.

In our analysis, we also uncovered various insights into the complex power dynamics at play in Tasmania. Across different levels, including individual, community, and political spheres, individuals can engage with and occasionally influence, sources of power. These include people, businesses, and politicians. It was suggested that Tasmania's small size and population made this possible.

*"It feels like a more egalitarian society. In Sydney, there's a lot more division in the communities, between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. Here in Devonport, it feels like one community, and kids from all walks of life and families interact together." (Tasmanian Story)*

*"I have more opportunity to join events, discuss something in city council or state government, to see a high-level person. For example, the Lord Mayor and I always see each other because I volunteer in the Salamanca market." (Youth Story Report)*

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<sup>4</sup> We used a word tree analysis. 'Word trees use a visual branching structure to show how a pre-selected word(s) is connected to other words. Unlike word clouds, word trees visually display the connection of words in the dataset, providing some context to their use' Henderson, S. and Evergreen, S. (n.d.) Word tree, Better Evaluation, available from <https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/methods/word-tree>

<sup>5</sup> See, <https://tasmanian.com.au/stories/>

*“If you work somewhere where you're quite close to the decision maker ... it's only one step to get permission to do things.” (The evolution of the Tasmanian brand report)*

Brand Tasmania's research also revealed instances of unequal power relations stemming from factors such as income inequality, disparities between rural and metropolitan areas, and transportation accessibility. Additionally, young people reported feeling excluded on both the community and political levels.<sup>6</sup>

When it comes to our ‘mental models’, they refer to our internal representations and understandings of ourselves, the world and life in general. It includes our internal beliefs, assumptions, values, and perceptions. They influence everything we do and are essential to supporting change, yet they can be the hardest to shift.<sup>7</sup>

In a recent study conducted in 2023, Brand Tasmania commissioned research from Bastion Insights<sup>8</sup> to capture how Tasmanians perceive themselves through word associations. The most used words included ‘we will give things a go, we cooperate, we are friendly and down to earth, we are hard-working and adventurous, we are independent/free-spirited, and we are quiet achievers’.

Hand in hand with the Tasmanian stories was the idea of ‘struggle and hardship’ and ‘not good enough’.

*In our interviews with Tasmanians, we weren't asking for stories of struggle and hardship ... We simply asked what made our place different from anywhere else, and they told stories of struggle and hardship. (Be Tasmanian podcast, episode two)*

*Tasmanians always found a way to talk about how it's harder here. We struggle. We hit all kinds of obstacles- from people telling us our culture doesn't exist, to people telling us our dream isn't worth pursuing. They mocked and underestimated us. They told us we weren't good enough. And for too long, as Tasmanians, we believed it. (Be Tasmanian podcast, episode three)*

Today, we are seeing a shift in how Tasmanians understand themselves with stories of pride and Tasmanians wishing to retain and embrace our uniqueness.

*Where previous generations were uneasy about their Tasmanian identity, we're proud to be Tasmanian, and to embrace all the things that make this place so special ... (Youth Story Report)*

## **2. When has this Tasmanian connectedness caused people and communities to stay silent, leading to inaction and/or avoidance in the face of adversity? And, what influences these dynamics?**

When analysing the material and consulting with the Brand Tasmania team, we uncovered close to ten instances of child sexual abuse, abuse, and/or overcoming adversity. In these accounts, victim survivors chose not to report the abuse to the authorities. We were told they made this decision because they believed the perpetrator held more power, often stemming from being from a well-known family or a family member. Additionally, they feared upsetting the community or burdening others. Instead, victim

<sup>6</sup> Youth Network of Tasmania (2023) Tasmanian Youth Story 2022-23 Consultation Report (February) prepared for Brand Tasmania

<sup>7</sup> Refer to FSG website at <https://www.fsg.org/>

<sup>8</sup> Bastion Insights (2023) Place Brand Research and Measurement: 2023 Research Report (July) prepared for Brand Tasmania

survivors tended to prioritise helping others over seeking justice for themselves. We also observed the lingering effects of intergenerational trauma.

*“He [dad] was physically abused and made to believe it was wrong to be Aboriginal. I remember being told, ‘Be careful who you tell you’re Aboriginal, in case welfare comes to take you. But be proud of who you are.’ So, Dad had a very hard upbringing, which meant that, although he loved his children, he struggled to show affection” ... (Tasmanian Story)*

Throughout the material, we found that Tasmanians deeply value connection. While this can bring benefits, it can also sometimes restrict, silence, or exclude us.

*Tight knit communities are great – if you fit in. If you are known and liked by the community, they will help you. If you come from a family with a bad reputation, if you are of a marginalised identity, if you have a scandal – it can be hard to get help in hard times. (Youth Story Report)*

In Brand Tasmania's research, we heard instances where Tasmania's close connectedness led people to refrain from speaking up to avoid causing offense or adding to others' burdens. Some mentioned the need to be careful when talking about others as there was a good chance they were connected somehow.

*... the limited degree of separation led to self-policing, particularly regarding what one said and whom one talked about. (The evolution of the Tasmanian brand report)*

We also saw how connectedness could be stifling. For example, in one story, a husband and wife established an organisation to support those most in need. Yet, they encountered instances of snide remarks from the community and even faced a damning newspaper article. In many Tasmanian stories, the journey of starting a business or pursuing higher education was often met by skepticism from family and community. Musicians, writers and filmmakers were told you could not pursue an artistic career in this “isolated place”.

*Industry experts encouraged everyone from Richard Flanagan to Luca Brasi to move to Sydney or Melbourne if not one of the big cities of Europe or America ... This lack of confidence extended to Tasmanians themselves. Festival curators felt obliged to import talent to sell tickets and generate excitement. (Tasmanian Story)*

This doubt and discouragement were influenced by a mix of close connections and beliefs (mental models) about not being good enough.

For some people going to university was a first in the family. We saw how these individuals were discouraged by some family and community members as they might not ‘fit in’ or think they are better than others. Concerns were also raised that they would leave their family, community, or the state behind.

*Tasmanians heard it in their own communities and families ... people told each other their dreams were unworthy, or silly, even impossible. (Be Tasmanian podcast, episode one)*

*“People often said to me, ‘there’s no jobs in marine science.’ This was discouraging but also entirely untrue.” (Tasmanian Story)*

*“In the beginning, people were sceptical,” ... “They said it [community garden] wouldn’t work, that people would vandalise it.” (Tasmanian Story)*

In our analysis we could see how Tasmanian connectedness sometimes led people and communities to remain silent or inactive when facing challenges. This occurred when individuals felt pressured to conform or feared upsetting close-knit communities. Factors like fear of repercussions, concerns about disrupting community cohesion, or worries they might burden others influenced inaction or staying silent.

Additionally, the desire to maintain harmonious relationships within a tightly connected community had at times discouraged individuals from speaking out or taking action in the face of adversity. These dynamics were influenced by the strong bonds and interconnectedness of Tasmanian society. This was seen to create invisible barriers to address issues openly.

But this same connectedness has also been used to influence and shift attitudes towards marginalised groups. This was particularly evident in stories about LGBTQI+ communities and Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

*... young people with diverse identities, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality, often no longer feel that they need to leave the state to escape discrimination. (Youth Story Report)*

*These changes in laws and policies [to decriminalise homosexuality] have been matched by changes in hearts and minds [of Tasmanians]. (Tasmanian Story)*

We also saw a shift in attitude towards Tasmanian Aboriginal people in some of the stories captured by Brand Tasmania. For example, in the Youth Story Report (2023) young people spoke of increased respect, desire to know more, and recognise Tasmanian Aboriginal people, past and present. Today, more young people also identify as Tasmanian Aboriginal people, with 14 (14%) out of the 98 young people in the report identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

*Young people increasingly respect Aboriginal heritage as an important part of Tasmania’s sense of place. (Youth Story Report)*

*“My generation was probably the first to learn about palawa history... This is our opportunity to learn from a non-settler perspective.” (Youth Story Report)*

### **3. What levers within Tasmanian connectedness are there to address adversity?**

Systems change is about shifting the structural conditions that hold an issue or issues in place. We found several levers that can be used to address adversity in our analysis of the Brand Tasmania materials. Many of these levers draw on the power of connectedness. For example, knowing who to ask for help and finding a person who believes in us, getting inspired by others from Tasmania, and working together with others.

#### **We need someone who believes in us**

The importance of support and the power of support was often told in the stories about hardship, challenges, and abuse. Often, all it took was support from just one person who believed in you when you needed it most. This support could come from within the family, such as a grandmother, or from



outsiders like caseworkers, service providers, organisations, educators, or even your piano teacher. Despite having family connections, some Tasmanians facing difficulties did not feel understood or believed that their family had the capacity to help them. Therefore, the presence of that “one supportive person” from outside often made all the difference.

*“When I was nine, I had this social worker. It blew my mind. This woman, who had no reason to care for me, showed me love ... I became a social worker because of her. She changed the entire direction of my life.” (Tasmanian Story)*

*“She [staff member at the shelter] was amazing. She said, ‘I’m not letting you leave this place until you have a house.’ I wouldn’t have gotten through that without her.” (Tasmanian Story)*

*“She [youth worker] is so passionate about working with young people, inspiring, and encouraging others to make change in the community. She inspires me to get involved in the community.” (Youth Story Report)*

Many of the stories of people overcoming adversity revealed a common desire to assist others, to be the person who provided help or prevented similar hardships from happening to others.

*“You just need that couple of people who see that thing in you, that potential, to build you up over time. I would like to do that with a younger female who is struggling and trying to find her path.” (Tasmanian Story)*

*“If I can give one person what my social worker gave me, how she made me feel, it’s worth it.” (Tasmanian Story)*

*“The things kids can be going through, it just blows your mind ... I’ve found they really want to be heard. To give them the chance to talk about who they are and to be treated like an adult really does change kids sometimes.” (Tasmanian Story)*

*“Being a safe person that they [young people] can come and talk to is the highlight of what I do.” (Tasmanian Story)*

*“Maybe talking about pregnancy loss will help reduce the stigma somewhat,” she says ... Her experiences as a nurse and parent have reaffirmed her belief in the importance of close relationships. (Tasmanian Story)*

### **We are inspired by other Tasmanians leading change**

We also noticed that another key factor contributing to change was Tasmanians being inspired by, and wanting to be like other Tasmanians who were making a difference.

*Participants were particularly inspired by people who have proven that you can do it here, on your own terms: for example, Hannah Gadsby, the founders of Savage Interactive, the Jack Jumpers, and the creators of Derby Trails. All of these people, participants said, have shown that Tasmanians can create genuinely new opportunities in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, and smooth the path for others in the process. (Youth Story Report)*

Others recognised the hard work already done by others and those paving the way for their future success in leading change.

*“I was lucky to be able to build on the work of other disability advocates, who had already played a significant role in influencing more choice and control before I entered the scene.”  
(Tasmanian Story)*

Grace Tame, a victim survivor of sexual abuse, emerged as a leading figure driving change in this area. She embodied the Tasmanian narrative of struggle, hardship, and strength.

*“Grace Tame is a real inspiration for me. I feel really proud of her... No one would have questioned her teacher without her taking a stance. She stuck it out for so long, so resilient, so many people would have given up... Maybe she felt a responsibility not just for her but for everyone. (Youth Story Report)*

We also saw the power of storytelling to bring about change. Sharing your lived experience with the broader community was seen as a lever for change to overcoming adversity and shifting mental models.

*... Most of all it was only possible because we told our personal stories about what it meant to be treated like second-class citizens (for being gay). We had faith that if we reached out to our fellow Tasmanians, they would heed us. Based on that faith we travelled across the island and spoke about our lives to whoever would listen. (Tasmanian Story)*

### **We find strength in the community to drive change**

We also saw the power of finding your ‘niche’ community or communities to support you through adversity. These niche groups could be based on industry, hobbies, lifestyle, community, diversity, or backgrounds – all aimed at providing support and advocating for change.

*“My advice would be to find your people and your village. Let them in. They want to help you through difficult times as well as be there to celebrate the good times.” (Tasmanian Story)*

*“I love that, in Tasmania, there’s a sense of sisterhood in the sort of music I’m involved in. Women are visible and at the top of their game in the expressive arts. There are so many strong women teachers out there in the community, nurturing, caring, guiding, and teaching.” (Tasmanian Story)*

For those overcoming challenges and adversity in business, leveraging Tasmanian connectedness meant accessing knowledge, opportunities, collaborations, and support.

*On the whole, all the Tasmanian distilleries lean on each other ... the only way they were going to be successful was to help others be successful. (Tasmanian Story)*

Tasmania's connections with the rest of Australia and the world have also played and continue to play a role in driving change within the community. When discussing their pride for Tasmania, some pointed out the value of the external perspectives on the state that have come from increased domestic and international exposure in recent years. Some said that positive feedback from outside the state has confirmed what they already knew – that Tasmania is a great place to be.

## Concluding summary

In Tasmania, we have a deep sense of connectedness and shared experiences. This connectedness shapes us. Often, it fosters collaboration and belonging. But at times, our close-knit communities and Tasmanian connectedness have contributed to silence and inaction in the face of adversity. Fear of repercussions, social pressure, and our 'closeness' can influence Tasmanians and communities to remain silent or avoid confrontations that may disrupt our community cohesion. These dynamics are further heightened by entrenched power dynamics and the fear of burdening others with your struggles.

Yet in our analysis, we can see how within our Tasmanian connectedness are levers for addressing adversity. Supportive networks, inspirational figures, and the power of storytelling emerge as tools for navigating challenges and effecting change. Even just having "that one person" believe in you, and believe *in* you, was often enough. Sometimes, we find these people outside of our direct family. Our stories of overcoming adversity also highlight a desire to pay it forward and help others facing similar challenges. Witnessing or leading change, inspired by individuals like Grace Tame or successful local figures serves as a catalyst for us to lead community action and change. Additionally, finding niche communities or groups aligned with your interests or background can provide crucial support during difficult times.

While Tasmania's connectedness has at times led to challenges in addressing adversity, our analysis reveals a wealth of resources within our connectedness to tackle these issues.



## ABOUT FOLKET CONSULTANCY

Hej! "Folket" is Swedish and means "The People", think 'folks' in English. We're a boutique consultancy based in lutruwita/Tasmania. Founded by Linda Karlsson, Folket Consultancy is a collective of experienced consultants. Our team of folks all love to work on collaborative projects that create impact in our communities.

Between us, we offer expertise in evaluation, research, facilitation of workshops and community consultation, co-design and program development, community and stakeholder engagement, as well as strategic communication.

We tailor our team and services to your needs.

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