

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE FRAMEWORK FOR PROJECTS

MOTION ONE

The LGAQ calls on the State Government to work with local governments to develop an enforceable framework, similar to the concept of a Road Infrastructure Agreement, to be used by councils and proponents across all industries, allowing for hard and soft social infrastructure needs to be addressed in affected communities.

DESIRED OUTCOME

Development of the Social Infrastructure Agreement concept including, but not limited to, consideration of:

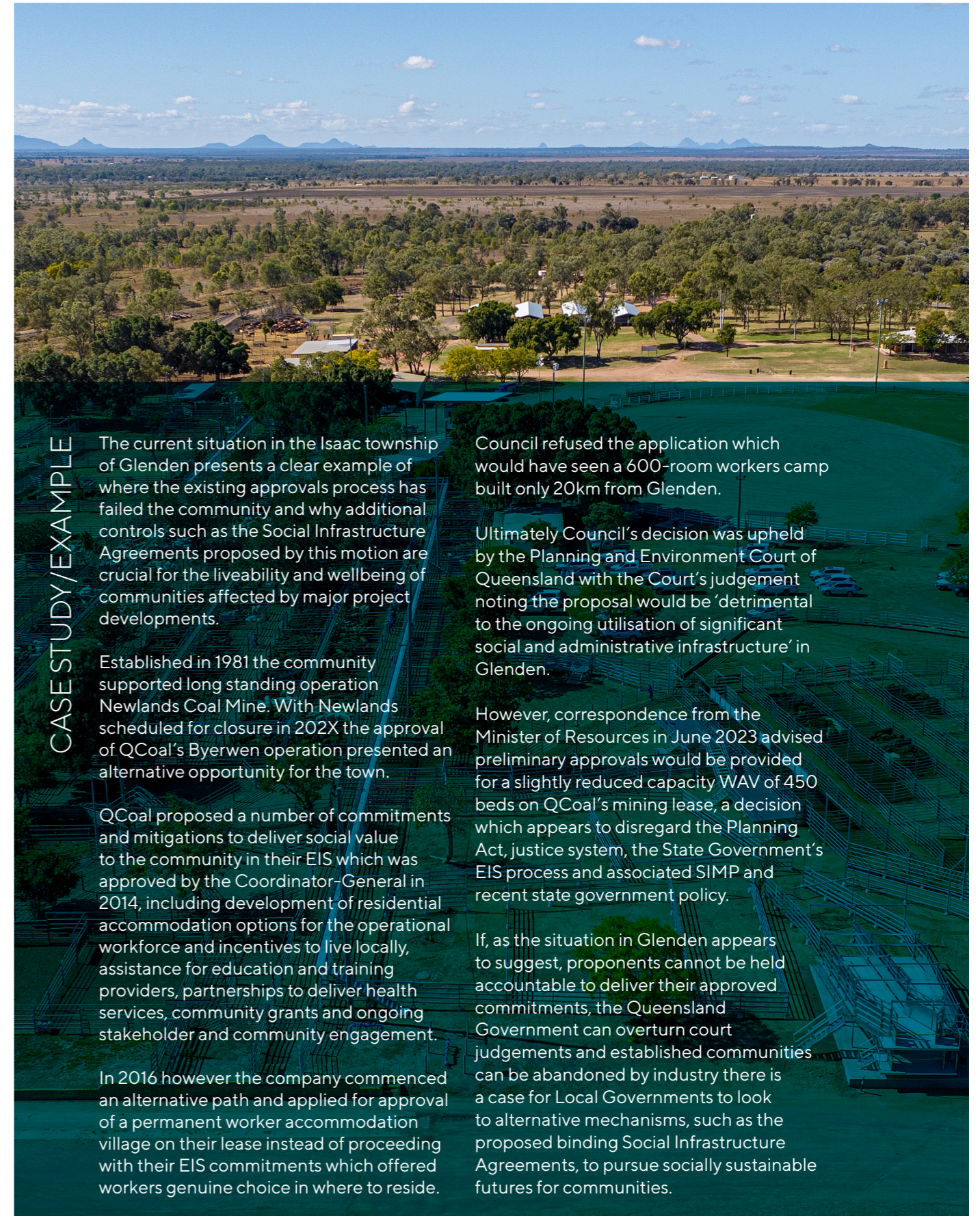
- Alignment with the format and process of established Infrastructure Access Agreements between local governments and major project proponents intended to recoup costs arising from project generated increased demand on local water, sewerage and road networks.
- Identified thresholds to trigger any agreement.
- Methodologies to assist local governments to account for and quantify the social value of social infrastructure and develop multi-perspective need scenarios.
- Appropriate regulatory and legislative controls to ensure agreements are legally binding and tethered to the land parcel to be developed, in preference to the project proponent, to ensure continuation of the agreement regardless of current ownership.
- Development of a resource kit which can also be used by project proponents to assist them to achieve social license to operate (SLO), that is the ongoing acceptance and approval of the project by the community, through social infrastructure investment.
- Definitions of social infrastructure which include both hard (built) and soft (service) elements and consider the social value of places traditionally excluded from more narrow definitions such as natural third spaces.
- Capacity to respond to communities' aspirations for the future

BACKGROUND

Social infrastructure includes the physical buildings and services which support community life and represents a fundamental component of overall social sustainability, supporting positive outcomes across peoples' environmental, economic, political, and cultural conditions. It is the foundation communities need to secure a positive and desirable future as our as they embrace a changing world.

Current regulation requires major project proponents develop an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to gain project approval, however social impacts are not given the same weight as environmental or economic concerns. This has led to shortcomings in meaningful and sustainable investment in social infrastructure, including ad hoc planning based on immediate felt needs identified in hasty community engagement processes which aim to mitigate impacts from a with the view of not making a bad situation any worse. This disregards the long-term aspirations of host communities.

Project proponents readily enter into Infrastructure Access Agreements directly with Councils to manage more readily quantifiable demand for water, sewerage and road network use. Impacts to social infrastructure are left to be managed through proponent commitments in Social Impact Management Plans (SIMPs) developed through the EIS. While the process requires proponent to engage with local governments in the development of SIMPs the commitments within these plans represent an unenforceable agreement between the proponent and the State. This has led the Queensland Government experiencing difficulties holding proponents to account for failing to deliver on agreed commitments. Compounding the situation are projects where the approval pathway does not require even the minimal consideration and management of social impacts stipulated under the EIS process. The cumulative effect of these projects, including renewables and smaller scale extractive projects, present an unacceptable risk to Councils and ratepayers who are left to fund additional demand from developments. The outward manifestation of the current process includes unmanaged social impacts, essential services strained beyond capacity, social exclusion, weak social license to operate (SLO) for proponents and disconnect between levels of government. Ultimately the current process represents a woefully inadequate mechanism to ensure meaningful and appropriate investment in social infrastructure and address the declining liveability and wellbeing of affected communities.



CASE STUDY/EXAMPLE

The current situation in the Isaac township of Glenden presents a clear example of where the existing approvals process has failed the community and why additional controls such as the Social Infrastructure Agreements proposed by this motion are crucial for the liveability and wellbeing of communities affected by major project developments.

Established in 1981 the community supported long standing operation Newlands Coal Mine. With Newlands scheduled for closure in 202X the approval of QCoal's Byerwen operation presented an alternative opportunity for the town.

QCoal proposed a number of commitments and mitigations to deliver social value to the community in their EIS which was approved by the Coordinator-General in 2014, including development of residential accommodation options for the operational workforce and incentives to live locally, assistance for education and training providers, partnerships to deliver health services, community grants and ongoing stakeholder and community engagement.

In 2016 however the company commenced an alternative path and applied for approval of a permanent worker accommodation village on their lease instead of proceeding with their EIS commitments which offered workers genuine choice in where to reside.

Council refused the application which would have seen a 600-room workers camp built only 20km from Glenden.

Ultimately Council's decision was upheld by the Planning and Environment Court of Queensland with the Court's judgement noting the proposal would be 'detrimental to the ongoing utilisation of significant social and administrative infrastructure' in Glenden.

However, correspondence from the Minister of Resources in June 2023 advised preliminary approvals would be provided for a slightly reduced capacity WAV of 450 beds on QCoal's mining lease, a decision which appears to disregard the Planning Act, justice system, the State Government's EIS process and associated SIMP and recent state government policy.

If, as the situation in Glenden appears to suggest, proponents cannot be held accountable to deliver their approved commitments, the Queensland Government can overturn court judgements and established communities can be abandoned by industry there is a case for Local Governments to look to alternative mechanisms, such as the proposed binding Social Infrastructure Agreements, to pursue socially sustainable futures for communities.