Minister for Sport and Recreation John Ah Kit today announced substantial changes to the Local Government Act, with a major focus on increasing accountability for those councils which fail to meet minimum levels of service delivery.

“There is little doubt that constituents of some local councils—especially smaller ones—are often badly served by bodies that simply fail to do their job.

“It’s not just a matter of focusing on financial and other regulatory requirements, these amendments will allow a declaration of core service delivery functions: if they fall below acceptable standards as outlined in their business plans, then the government will act,” said Mr Ah Kit.

“For example, while a particular council might be doing OK financially they may be failing to do the things that are expected of local government, such as rubbish removal.

“I’ve made it a hallmark of our approach to local government that we are prepared to move decisively where councils are letting down their constituents, and the amendments to the Local Government Act expand the ways in which councils can be made accountable.”

The amendments are part of a wide sweep of changes to the Local Government Act, which have been five years in the making. Many of the amendments were developed under the previous government, and have involved extensive discussions with the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory as well as individual councils. The changes include:

- a requirement for local councils to develop annual business plans which will enable councils to focus clearly on their priorities, and stick to them, and thus allowing constituents to judge the effectiveness of their representatives;

- clear definitions of the role of elected members of council, with a similar approach to the role of clerks/CEOs;

- protection for CEOs against peremptory and unjust dismissal and greater protection against attempts to pressure them into improper behaviour;

- the capacity of the minister to appoint a Manager to councils that are experiencing difficulties to allow them to return to normal quickly without necessarily going to a full commission of inquiry—though the latter would still be required in cases of fraud;

- the capacity for individual members of councils to attend meetings via teleconferencing or video link, thus allowing councils that cover larger areas to meet without the burden of extra travel, especially where travel is restricted by seasonal conditions;

- the removal of the anomaly whereby council employees will now be able to stand for Territory or Federal parliament without potentially losing their jobs should they be unsuccessful candidates (the use of revocable resignations is available to public servants and local
councillors, but not employees of municipal councils); and

- flexibility in what councils can call themselves—considered important as councils evolve, emerge and grow.