

Representative local democracy: a comparative analysis of experience across Australia

Project Summary

1. Introduction

The Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) in partnership with the Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA) is undertaking a comparative study of representative governance arrangements for local governments across Australia. This work flows from on-going local government reform processes and the need to understand the advantages, constraints and theoretical underpinnings of different approaches to representative democracy across Australian Local Government.

Research Objective: While there are bodies of research on many (although not all) of the aspects of representative governance there is a gap in terms of thinking and analysis which bring together these different threads within the Australian local government context. This project compares and analyses these diverse approaches to provide a useful synthesis and promote debate on alternative ways to foster strategic leadership and better governance.

2. Themes

The project is organised around a set of themes. The list below sets these themes out together with some of the related questions to be explored.

Representative Structure

It is unclear at the moment how representative structures are determined and what are the theoretical underpinnings. A series of questions will be examined to try to unpack this theme including:

- What criteria are used to determine and review electoral structures i.e:
 - How is the number of councillors determined?
 - What criteria are used to determine boundaries and structures? Are the criteria adequate?
 - If a local government area is to be sub-divided into wards, how are decisions made between multi-member and individual wards?
 - Are there implications arising from the different voting systems ie preferential, proportional representation etc
- How often should reviews occur, how should they be structured and what should they cover?
- Does electoral structure impact on political leadership and decision-making and if so, how?

Voting

Voting is the primary tool used in representative democracy enabling citizens to choose their elected members at local government level. Under this theme we will explore questions such as:

- What does the voting landscape look like across Australia in terms of compulsory or optional voting and the balance between postal and attendance voting? Is there documentation of lessons learned and the advantages or disadvantages of different approaches?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of different election cycles, e.g. all councillors being up for election every 4 years, half every 2 or alternatively 3 year terms?

Mayor and Deputy Mayor

Internationally and in Australia, there is increasing interest in the role of the mayor. The national picture is very mixed in terms of legislation and practice. Some mayors are directly elected while others are appointed by their fellow councillors.

- Are the roles and powers of mayors, deputy mayors and councillors clearly set out in local government legislation? If so what are the similarities/differences and what are the underlying reasons for articulating these responsibilities (e.g. providing mayors with executive powers)?
- What are the implications for roles and powers of:
 - The direct or indirect election of mayors
 - The direct or indirect election of deputy mayors
 - The election of mayor/deputy as a ticket
 - The appointment of a deputy by the mayor as is done in Auckland
 - The appointment of councillors to committees (members and/or chairs) by the mayor?

Role and responsibilities of councillors

Across Australia the scope of councillors' roles and responsibilities varies. Some are expected to dedicate their time and expertise on a full time basis while others are expected to fulfill their positions on a voluntary basis. These two approaches appear to reflect different underpinnings in terms of the importance placed on the role of councillors within the broader political framework.

- What are the implications for the community and for political governance of these two models?
- What are the roles and accountabilities for councilors, and where and how are they articulated?
- Are the roles and accountabilities appropriate for 21st century local government?
- How should councillors' responsibilities be reflected in their remuneration?
- What powers does state government have in terms of ensuring that local elected members meet their responsibilities and act within the limits set by codes of conduct? What capacity does a state Minister have for dismissing councillors?
- Should the mayor have an 'oversight' role of councillors as is the case in Tasmania?

Relationship between council administration and elected members

This theme will explore the relationship between council staff and councillors.

- What is the nature of the relationship between the mayor and CEO, e.g. does the mayor have the authority to direct the CEO?
- What are the mechanisms for delegation to senior management and what are the implications?
- What is the nature of the relationship between councillors? Are roles differentiated?
- What is the role of strategic and corporate planning in shaping and promoting a constructive relationship between council administration and elected members?

Timeframe

The research commenced in May 2012. A draft working paper will be produced by November 2012. Following further consultation a final paper will be prepared for release by April 2013.

3. Project team

Su Fei Tan, Research Officer, UTS Centre for Local Government

Email: sufei.tan@uts.edu.au

Tel: 02 9514 1061

Ron Exiner, Director Governance, VLGA

Email: ron@vlga.org.au

Tel: 03 9349 7999

Stefanie Pillora, Program Manager, Research, ACELG

Email: stefanie.pillora@acelg.org.au

Tel: 02 9514 4897