

The Role and Future of Citizens' Committees for Australian Local Government

August 2012-August 2013

Background

Local governments play a crucial role in engaging and working with communities. One of the most commonly used mechanisms for citizen engagement employed by councils around Australia is the place-based committee of management or 'citizens' committee'. These committees typically include appointed or selected volunteers or stakeholder groups that advise councils on local issues, and/or manage local facilities. In contrast to many community engagement exercises, citizens' committees are typically ongoing, and thus offer the potential to act as sites of sustained community governance. Although prolific, very little is known about the work that citizens' committees do, their contribution to place making, and how they might make a more meaningful contribution to local community governance.

The project builds on a pilot project undertaken in 2011 by Dr Carolyn Hendriks, Dr Annie Bolitho and Chad Foulkes on delegated citizens' committees (so-called 'section 86 committees') in partnership with Surf Coast Shire Council. One of the key findings of this pilot study was that citizens' committees tend to operate as sites of public management (with devolved responsibility), rather than as venues for effective ongoing public engagement.

This research partnership will examine how citizens' committees are currently being used, and consider how they might be strengthened in view of citizen engagement principles, including inclusion, representation and deliberation.

Why focus on citizens' committees?

In the pilot project we conducted a Victoria-wide workshop and learned that many councils are wrestling with a number of interrelated issues with their citizens' committees.

Many are asking, for example, what is the future of their citizens' committees given that existing members (volunteers) are aging? What role should these committees play in relation to other engagement activities that their councils are now undertaking? What are the real costs for councils in running citizen committees and how could they be resourced more effectively? What skills do their members need? How do councils and committees enact relevant change? This research partnership offers an opportunity to extend this research to compare councils' experience, examining citizens' committees in other councils across Australia.

The research is designed to make an important contribution to global discussions on public participation, and community governance in local government. It will also build on emerging Australian research on the role and changing nature of community governance and citizen engagement in the local government sector. In particular, the partnership will shed light on how local governments can develop more sustained and connected forms of community engagement by working with, and where necessary adapting, existing practices.

Some Australian councils have used innovative ways of working with their communities, for example through social enterprises, community planning groups, citizens' juries, leadership forums, and community conversations. While such participatory innovations offer useful means to engage those who might otherwise be hard to reach, they may remain disconnected from existing participatory and governance arrangements. Research also finds that most councils in Australia continue to rely

on conventional forms of public consultation such as surveys and citizens' committees. This suggests that some of the greatest opportunities for improving community engagement across the local government sector in Australia lie in adapting existing participatory procedures, such as citizens' committees.

Project Objectives and Scope

This research aims to improve the functioning of citizens' committees such as Committees of Management (CoM) as sites of public engagement in local government. The researcher, Dr Annie Bolitho and her associate Dr Carolyn Hendriks will evaluate how citizens' committees are currently working, and look to the future, exploring their potential and the pathways that might exist to strengthen or make changes to their role in local government.

Working with three local councils, the research will:

- 'take stock' of how their CoMs currently function
- examine council learning's and assess their CoMs in terms of their inclusivity, representativeness, deliberative capacity, place making, their longevity and capacity to support the council's broader community engagement agenda
- look to the future and the policy developments or amendments that would be required to transform existing structures.

The insights generated from the three local government studies will inform the project's broader research question: *What is the role and future of citizens' committees as vehicles for community engagement in Australian local government?*

To assist participating councils envisage future improvements to their committees, the researchers will conduct a reflective forum with councillors and relevant council personnel (such as managers, and community development officers). The forums will highlight the community engagement lens being applied in the project, and bring together diverse council employees from relevant departments such as recreation, community development and citizen engagement. Participants will be asked to consider possible improvements from capacity building, training, and minor procedural modifications, through to changes, such as employing alternative methods of member selection, and committee redesign.

Partners

The following organisations are co-funding the research project: The Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG), newDemocracy Foundation, Wyndham City Council (Urban), Nillumbik Shire Council (Peri-urban) and Surf Coast Shire Council (Regional). The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) and the Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA) will provide in-kind support.

TimeframeStage	Proposed Timeframe
1. Establishment of partnership, background preparation for empirical work	July – August 2012
2. Empirical research (interviews, focus groups and reflective forums) and literature review	September 2012 – February 2013
3. National Workshop	March or April 2013
4. Project Report and Draft Academic Paper	April-August 2013