

International study highlights opportunities for stronger local government

The Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) today released a major report on the options available for local government to increase its capacity and provide improved services. The report – *Consolidation in Local Government: A Fresh Look* – covers both Australia and New Zealand.

In the past local government reform has focused strongly on council amalgamations and cost savings. The ACELG research sought a more balanced approach, taking into account the importance of good governance and effective local democracy and representation. It also looks at the aftermath of previous efforts at reform through a series of in-depth case studies and interviews with senior figures in local government.

The report is the result of a year's work by senior researchers from Australia and New Zealand. It was a collaborative venture between ACELG – a federally funded consortium of universities and professional institutes, the Local Government Association of South Australia (LGASA), and Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ). Each wanted to take a fresh look at the various options for consolidation in local government – amalgamations, boundary changes, shared services and regional collaboration – free from any current pressures to go down a particular path to reform.

Releasing the report today, the Director of ACELG, Professor Graham Sansom, said that the report highlights the need for local government to embrace further change if it is to be sustainable and cement its place as the democratic representative of local and regional communities.

“Consolidation options must be addressed so that councils can meet growing community needs and expectations. State and federal governments are also asking local government to do more. Councils should work with their communities and regional partners to determine which option will deliver the best outcome. In some cases this may lead to amalgamations or boundary changes, in others to more regional collaboration and shared services,” he said.

“But everyone needs to be clear that the objective is more effective local government, not cutting rates and charges. There is often scope for efficiency gains, but these are needed to fund new or improved services and infrastructure.”

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LGASA Acting President, James Maitland said the report will make an important contribution to the debate, as it is one of the few ever undertaken without politics and local emotion involved. "The report certainly debunks a number of myths about council amalgamations and sets them alongside shared services in the context of enhancing the strategic capacity of councils."

The report and detailed case studies are available to download from ACELG's website:
www.agelg.org.au

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