

Communities love local councils but not private service delivery

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The study found most residents have positive attitudes toward local government. AAP Image/Dean Lewins

Local government may not be recognised in the Australian Constitution but we fail to recognise its importance in our federation at our peril.

According to Australia's first comprehensive **study** of community attitudes to local government, the majority of Australians value local government more highly than they do either the federal government or the states and territories.

During the second half of 2014, we surveyed a statistically representative sample of more than 2000 people to find out why local government matters. This major piece of social research, which has never been done before, demonstrates how and why communities value local councils.

Positive attitudes

Local governments employ nearly 200,000 people (about the same number of people who work in the federal public service) in diverse roles across the country. In 60 regional local

government areas in Australia, councils are the single biggest employer.

And don't be in any doubt that people know about their local governments; our study found 85% of people correctly named their council or shire and 50% could name their mayor or shire president.

Media coverage of local councils often focuses on perceived grievances residents have with their local representatives, and our supposed dislike of paying rates. But we found that around 75% of Australians surveyed think local government is best able to make decisions about their local area. This compares to 26% for state government and an embarrassing 2% for the federal government.

The view of local government as being confined to roads, rates and rubbish is long gone, in both practice and in terms of what communities expect. Australians want local government to be responsible for a diversity of activities in their local community, with planning for the future being among the most important.

The emotional connection between people and the place where they live is one of the strongest messages policy makers can take from the study.

Agreement to statements we tested include: the landscape makes me feel good (77%); living here makes me feel good about myself (76%); and I feel connected locally to friends and neighbours (75%). Open space and the natural environment, and community "connectedness" are spheres of local government responsibility and are the key factors in making people choose and love where they live.

Residents don't just want the rubbish collected and a local pool – they want a sense of community. They expect councils to deliver events and services that help build one.

Local governments matter because of their primary role as the "place-shaper" and their importance in meeting the needs that most drive people's attachment to and satisfaction with the area in which they live.

Public versus private service delivery

The concept of service delivery by the public service is important to Australians. We overwhelmingly (93%) want governments to play a role, rather than the private sector, in providing services to the community.

To underscore this, Australians want more than just basic services from government. Over half (61%) disagree that governments should focus on providing only basic services compared with 18% that agree.

Contrary to a dominant message in public debate that private service providers are more efficient than government ones, we found that 45% of respondents disagree that the private sector delivers the best-value services. Only 26% agree that the private sector delivers the best value.

There is enormous support for government to deliver services for a healthier and fairer society, and for the proposition that decisions about services should not be made just on value for money.

And how should we pay for these services?

The majority of people agree that taxes and rates should pay for more than just basic services. Of those surveyed, 50% say they are prepared to pay more taxes to receive a broader range of services and about a quarter of respondents (23%) strongly disagree.

Valuing local knowledge

Australians overwhelmingly (93%) want to be involved with government in making decisions about what services are delivered in their local area. We think good decisions are best made by involving communities, experts and government together in the process.

Our survey found that people using services are considered to have the best knowledge of what services are needed and how they should be delivered, followed by service providers and then people who work in government.

Local government is not just an arm of state government that delivers services on the state's behalf. People care deeply about local representation – they value having a say over who governs them at the local level. Having the capacity to decide on the people who make the decisions that affect them locally is strongly valued.

The full report of Why Local Government Matters will be launched in June 2015. See the ACELG website for the Profile of the Local Government Workforce report and a presentation of Why Local Government Matters findings.



local government

Privatisation

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Councils

Private versus public

Public services