

# Why Local Government Matters



## Summary Report 2015

## Acknowledgements

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# MESSAGE FROM THE MINISTER



As a councillor for 14 years before entering the Federal Parliament, I know first-hand the great honour it is to serve the community at the level of government closest to them. I also understand the pressures and complexity of the issues councils seek to resolve.

Local government plays a critical role in maintaining and developing the social and economic fabric of regions, bringing communities together and producing local solutions to local problems.

There is now a once in a generation opportunity for us to rethink the way we as governments do business and serve our communities. The Government is providing the forum to discuss change through our White Papers on the Reform of the Federation and Taxation.

Our Federation has served our nation well for over 100 years and has shown some flexibility to deal with issues of concern over the years. But the balance of constitutional responsibility and revenue raising capability has becoming increasingly grotesque.

Reforming the Federation is vital if we are to deliver our publicly funded services to the Australian people more effectively, more efficiently and more fairly.

The Australian Government is investing a record \$50 billion across Australia to deliver vital infrastructure communities need to secure a prosperous future. Our infrastructure commitments are not limited to big ticket items, but also deliver for every local government in Australia.

To support Local Government deliver productive infrastructure that will drive local growth, this Government is delivering billions of dollars through various funding programmes including:

- \$9.45 billion in Financial Assistance Grants;
- The \$2.1 billion Roads to Recovery Programme;
- The \$1 billion National Stronger Regions Fund;
- The \$300 million Bridges Renewal Programme;
- An additional \$200 million each for the Black Spot and Heavy Vehicle and Safety & Productivity Programmes;
- \$100 million for beef roads; and
- \$45 million under the Stronger Communities Fund.

For these reasons I am delighted to introduce Why Local Government Matters.

Why Local Government Matters raises a range of issues and provides data relevant to the future of local government to think about in the context of the White Papers and more broadly.

The research produced by the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government will support local government in its continued and significant contribution to enhance the strength, diversity and prosperity of Australia.

I congratulate the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government for its initiative and efforts in undertaking this valuable research.

**The Hon Warren Truss MP**  
Deputy Prime Minister and  
Minister for Infrastructure and Regional Development

## MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR



There is an acceptance by individuals and communities that local government is always 'there' for a range of local needs, yet it is less clear how citizens identify with this crucial level of government.

This national study addresses a significant gap in the sector and research about how Australians value local government. This is an important question for today's polity. The findings will help more clearly define how, where and to what extent local government can further respond to local needs and influence broader political and public debate in Australia. Project findings will also assist scholarly research into local government.

The project builds upon research undertaken by the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) to provide practical support for the local government sector across a number of themes, and utilises the considerable experience in social survey research of UTS and its investigators located in the Centre for Local Government.

Findings from *Why Local Government Matters* will be communicated in all jurisdictions and key literature. Project results will be benchmarked with comparable work of councils, local government organisations and researchers, and will inform further Centre work on themes such as sustainable governance, service delivery, leadership and community values.

I trust that the release of this research will substantially contribute to the greater understanding of the attitudes towards local government and the role of this tier of government in the federation and leadership of Australia.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'R Ryan', followed by a horizontal line extending to the right.

**Associate Professor Roberta Ryan**  
Director, Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government and  
Centre for Local Government, University of Technology, Sydney.

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# Why local government matters

## Research objectives

*Why Local Government Matters* is a major piece of social research on community attitudes to local government undertaken by the UTS Centre for Local Government on behalf of the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG). The research aims to better understand how and why the activities of local governments, and their roles in society, are valued by communities.

The research investigates:

- local government's role as a 'place shaper' and its importance in meeting the needs of citizens that drive their attachment to, and satisfaction with, the areas in which they live
- the preferences of communities for how their services are delivered at the local level and the ability of local governments to offer flexible and community specific service delivery
- theories of governance, particularly community beliefs about big versus small government and its role in the market, the appropriate role for the private sector in local service provision, the preferred extent of public participation in government decision making, and preferences for the realisation of public value
- community knowledge of local government, ranked importance of services which can be delivered by local government in different jurisdictions, and attitudes about amalgamation
- the attributes of individuals which are theorised to interact with or influence their attitudes and beliefs about each of the areas above, including demographic factors, levels of community participation, personal values and political leanings.

A telephone survey of 2006 Australians was conducted in November 2014 as stage one of a longitudinal social research project which will also incorporate a qualitative phase in 2015.

## Summary report

This Summary Report presents a snapshot of the main findings of the 2014 survey, with the Full Report available for download on the ACELG website: [www.acelg.org.au/WLGM](http://www.acelg.org.au/WLGM)

The individual sections of this report provide a summary of the attitudes of Australians to each of the areas of research listed above, namely:

- What does place mean to people?
- The role of government
- How do people want their services delivered?
- How do people want to be involved in government?
- What do people think about local government?
- How do people's personal characteristics and values impact on their responses?

# What does place mean to people?

## Key points

- Australians feel a strong emotional connection to the local areas in which they live, providing them improved emotional wellbeing and a stronger sense of their personal identity.
- In their local areas, the most important things for Australians are a safe environment, the availability of health care, levels of water, air and noise pollution, and being able to afford appropriate housing.
- In general people are satisfied with the environment around them, however Australians are less satisfied with the local economy and infrastructure than with the availability of local services.

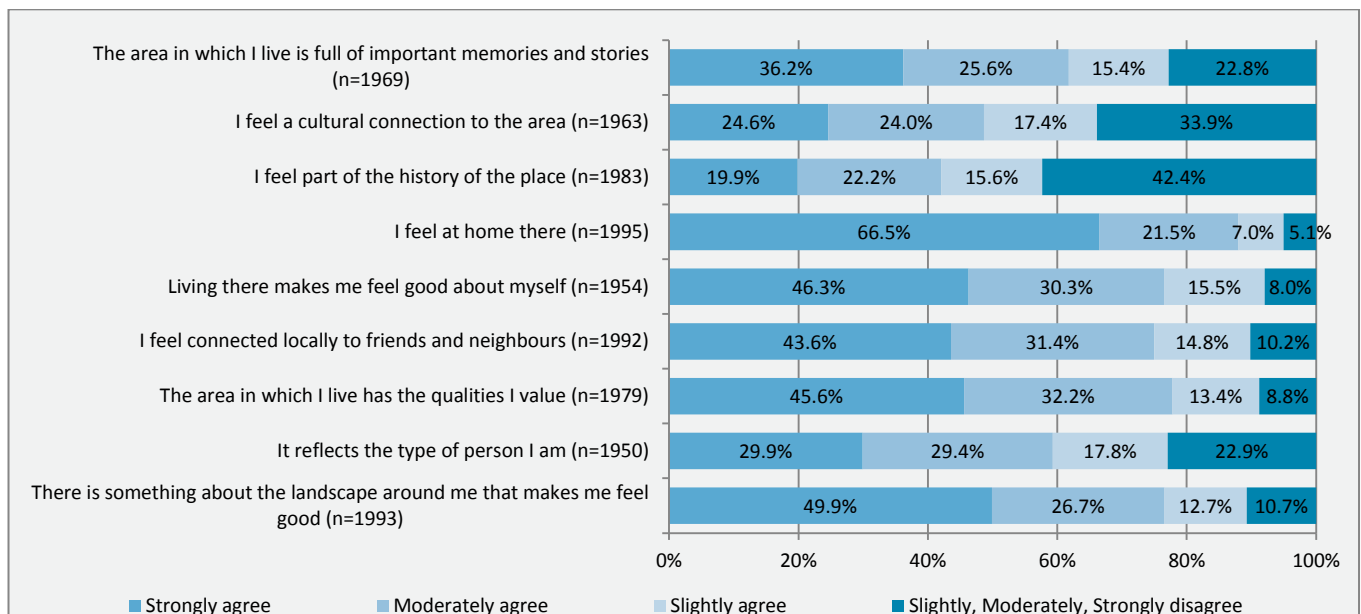
Local governments matter because of their role as ‘place-shapers’ and their importance in meeting the needs that most drive people’s attachment to, and satisfaction with, the area in which they live. To better understand what matters to Australians about the place—or local area—in which they live, respondents were first asked their level of agreement with nine statements describing ways their local area may contribute to personal identity, emotional attachment and connection to the community.

Overwhelmingly, Australians feel at home in the place where they live, with 67 per cent strongly agreeing, 22 per cent moderately agreeing, seven per cent slightly agreeing, and only five per cent disagreeing. There are very high levels of strong and moderate agreement for measures of emotional connection to their local area in dimensions such as ‘having qualities I value’ (78 per cent), ‘the landscape makes me feel good’ (77 per cent), ‘living here makes me feel good about myself’ (77 per cent), and ‘I feel connected locally to friends and neighbours’ (75 per cent).

A large number of Australians (59 per cent) strongly or moderately agree that the area in which they live ‘reflects the kind of person I am’. Overall, most Australians feel their sense of identity and emotional wellbeing are supported by the attributes of the local area in which they live.

Levels of agreement were lower for aspects of emotional connection to place relating more to cultural and historical associations. Respondents strongly or moderately agree that the area in which they live is full of important memories and stories (62 per cent), they feel a cultural connection to the area (49 per cent), and they feel a part of the history of the place (42 per cent).

FIGURE 1: THINKING ABOUT THE LOCAL AREA IN WHICH YOU LIVE, DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?



SOURCE: ACELG 2014 WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTERS SURVEY

Second, respondents were asked to rate the importance of, and their satisfaction with, 15 different areas of service delivery, infrastructure and community services that are typically provided by local government, or over which local government exerts an influence through planning, policy, and advocacy. These are all aspects of the ‘instrumental’ features of place that drive our satisfaction with the area in which we live, and have been shown to be the most important triggers for people moving or aspiring to move to another area.

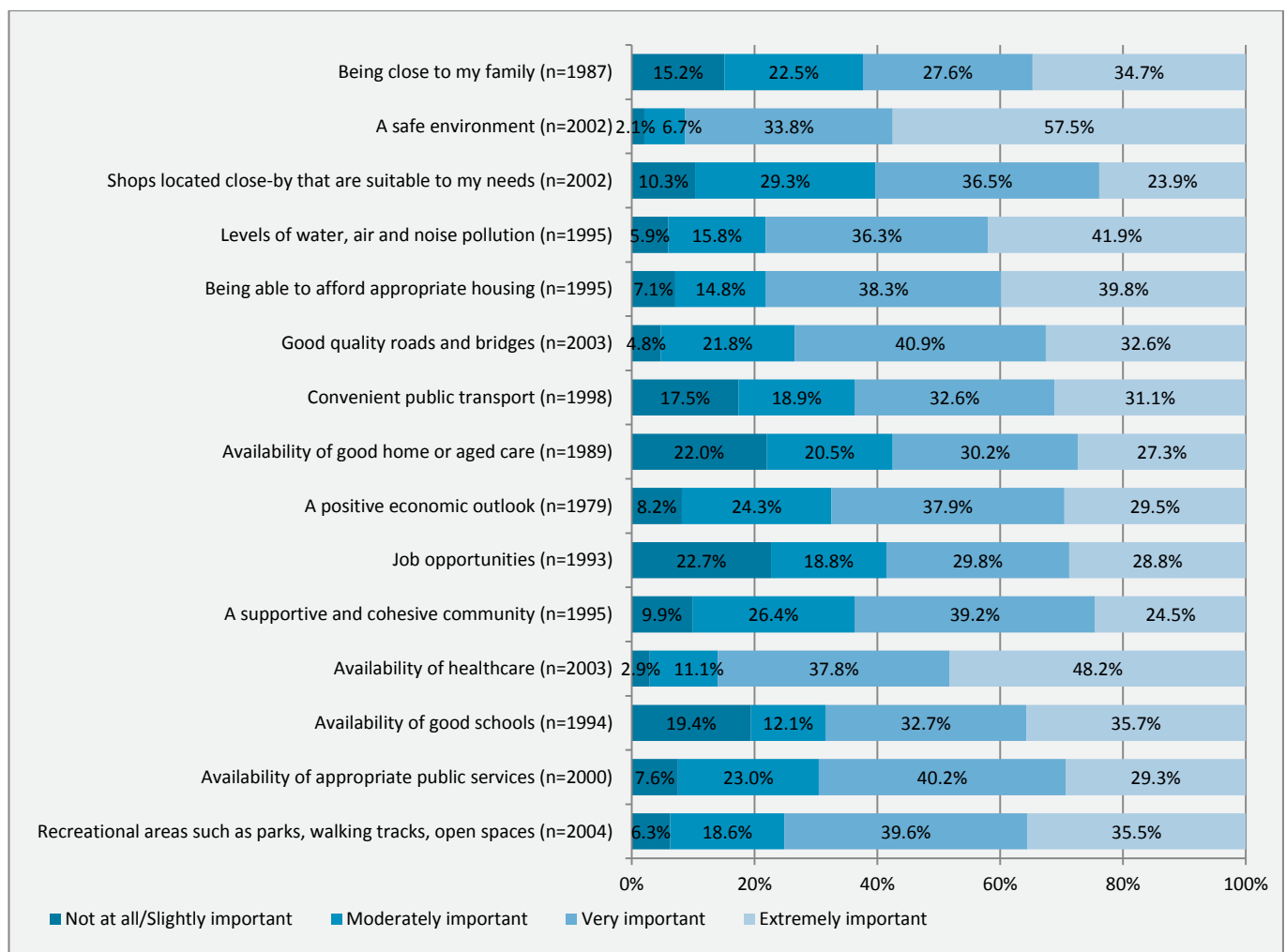
The most important thing for respondents is a safe environment, rated as extremely or very important (on a five-point scale) by 91 per cent of Australians. This was closely followed by availability of health care at 86 per cent. Other areas rated as extremely or very important include levels of water, air and noise pollution

(78 per cent); being able to afford appropriate housing (78 per cent); recreational areas such as parks, walking tracks and open spaces (75 per cent); and good quality roads and bridges (74 per cent).

A supportive and cohesive community is rated as extremely or very important by 64 per cent of Australians.

Issues related to the local economy are also central, with a positive economic outlook rated extremely or very important by 67 per cent and job opportunities by 59 per cent. Services which rate as extremely or very important include availability of good schools (68 per cent) and good home care or aged care (58 per cent). The more general availability of public services is rated as extremely or very important by 70 per cent of respondents.

FIGURE 2: THINKING ABOUT THE LOCAL AREA IN WHICH YOU LIVE, HOW IMPORTANT ARE EACH OF THE FOLLOWING TO YOU?



SOURCE: ACELG 2014 *WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTERS SURVEY*



In order to provide context and meaning to the satisfaction ratings given by respondents, only the answers given by people who valued each factor as extremely important are given in Figure 3 below.

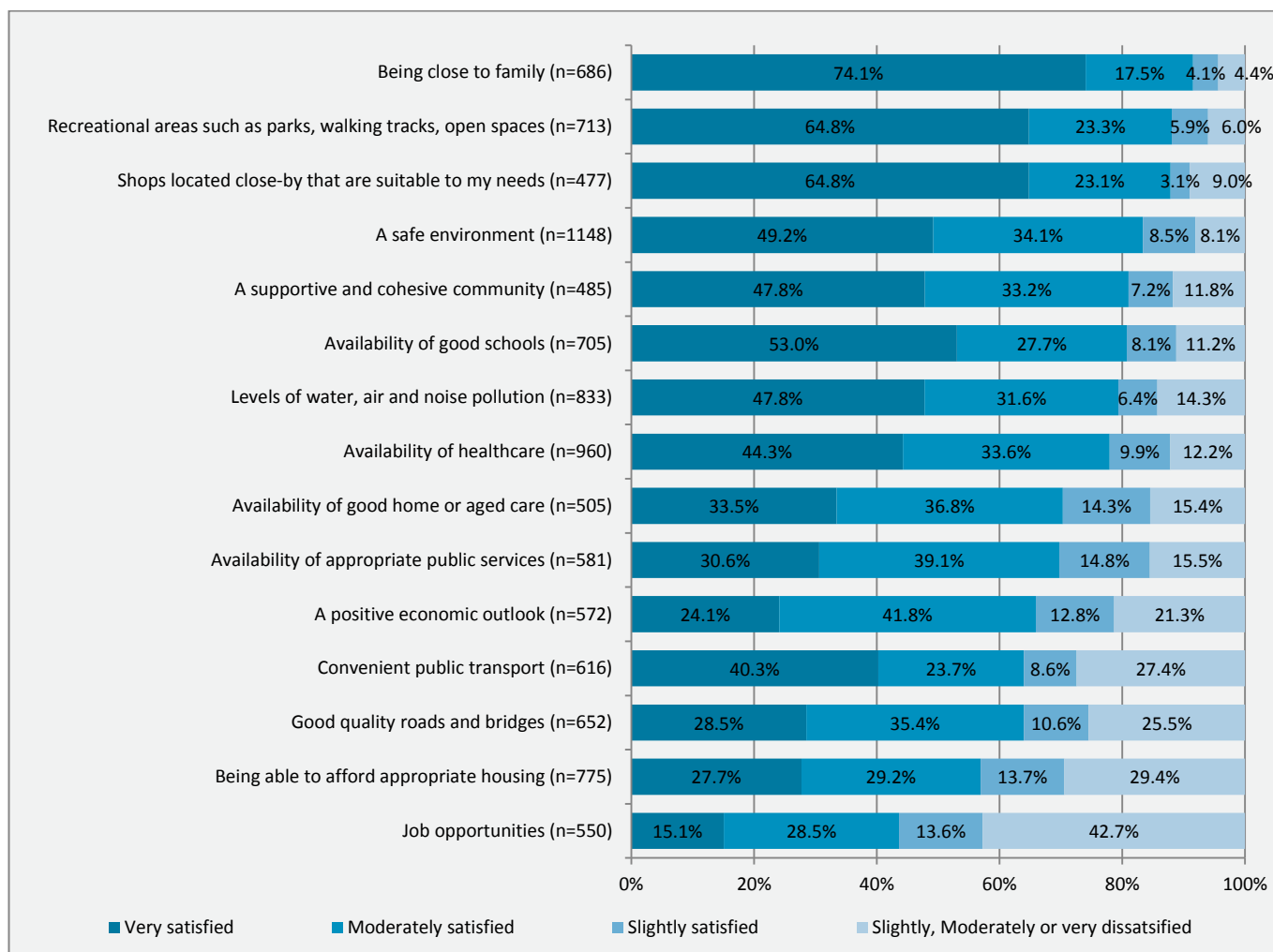
Respondents are very satisfied with recreation areas such as parks, walking tracks and open spaces (65 per cent) but less so with levels of water, air and noise pollution (48 per cent). They are also satisfied with being close to family (74 per cent) and shops being close-by that are suited to their needs (65 per cent).

Levels of satisfaction fall once people are asked about services such as the availability of good

schools (53 per cent); healthcare (44 per cent); good home or aged care (34 per cent); and appropriate public services (31 per cent). Levels of satisfaction for a safe environment (49 per cent) and a supportive and cohesive community (48 per cent) are very similar.

In general, the areas in which people are least satisfied relate to infrastructure such as convenient public transport (27 per cent) and good quality roads and bridges (26 per cent); housing affordability (29 per cent); and features of the local economy such as a positive economic outlook (21 per cent) and job opportunities (43 per cent).

FIGURE 3: THINKING ABOUT THE LOCAL AREA IN WHICH YOU ARE CURRENTLY LIVING, ARE YOU SATISFIED OR DISSATISFIED WITH THE PROVISION OF EACH OF THE FOLLOWING? [RESPONSES GIVEN ONLY FOR PEOPLE WHO ANSWERED 'EXTREMELY IMPORTANT' TO THE QUESTION: THINKING ABOUT THE LOCAL AREA IN WHICH YOU LIVE, HOW IMPORTANT ARE EACH OF THE FOLLOWING TO YOU?]



SOURCE: ACELG 2014 *WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTERS SURVEY*

# Role of government

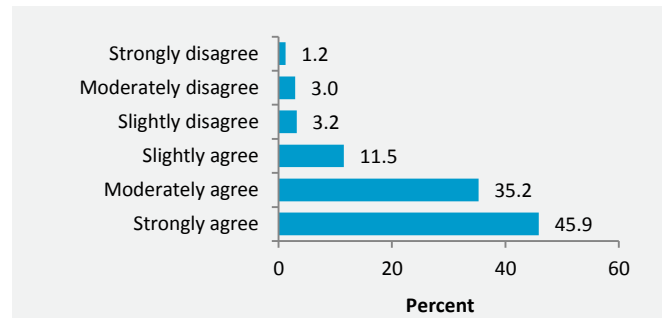
## Key points

- There is strong support for the role of government in service delivery, particularly in health and education.
- Australians do not agree that the private sector or the market necessarily deliver the best or most efficient services
- There is enormous support for government to provide services that deliver a healthier and fairer society, and that decisions about services should not be made just on value for money.

All governments make choices about the part they play with respect to service delivery based on their understanding of the role of government from an economic and ideological perspective. In order to tease out how Australians think about some of the key arguments in this area, respondents were asked a series of questions about service delivery, the role of government and how they wish to participate with governments in decision-making. Although questions were not framed to be about any particular level of government, how Australians feel about these issues is of direct relevance to local governments as they are well placed to be responsive to the views of their communities.

Australians overwhelmingly want their governments to play a role in providing many of the services the community needs, with 93 per cent of respondents agreeing with this proposition.

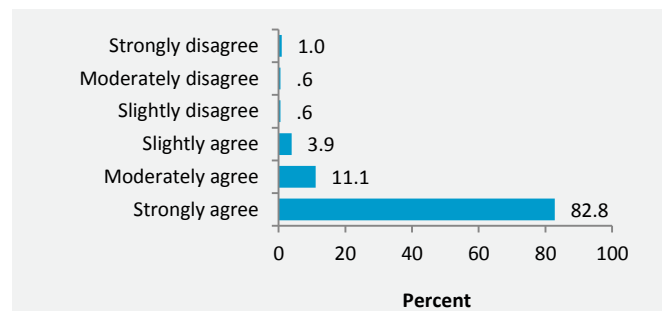
FIGURE 4: THERE IS A ROLE FOR GOVERNMENT IN PROVIDING ANY OF THE SERVICES THE COMMUNITY NEEDS (N=1961)



SOURCE: ACELG 2014 *WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTERS SURVEY*

An even higher proportion support the proposition that health care and education should be delivered by government, with 83 per cent strongly agreeing and most all (98 per cent) agreeing to some extent.

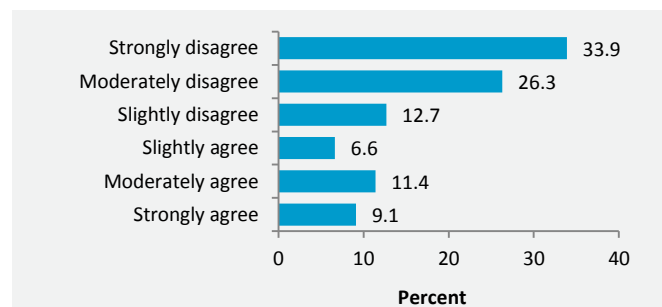
FIGURE 5: THERE ARE SOME THINGS LIKE HEALTH CARE AND EDUCATION THAT GOVERNMENTS SHOULD DELIVER (N=1988)



SOURCE: ACELG 2014 *WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTERS SURVEY*

It is argued by some that government's role in delivery of services should be limited, for example, to areas of 'market failure', where the private sector is not able to supply goods or services to meet levels of demand. Nearly three-quarters (73 per cent) of Australians disagree with the proposition that government should only provide services where the private sector doesn't.

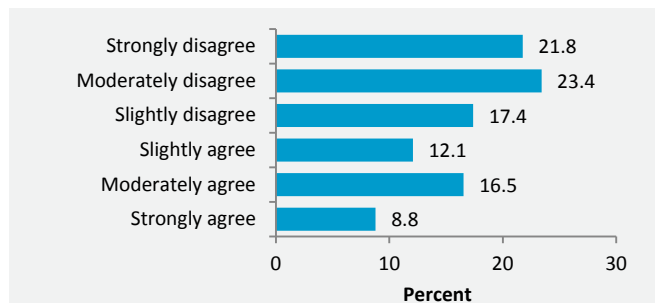
FIGURE 6: GOVERNMENT SHOULD ONLY PROVIDE SERVICES WHERE THE PRIVATE SECTOR DOESN'T (N=1940)



SOURCE: ACELG 2014 *WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTERS SURVEY*

Further, it is not uniformly agreed by Australians that the private sector delivers the best value services. Although there is some agreement, a large majority (63 per cent) disagree with this statement.

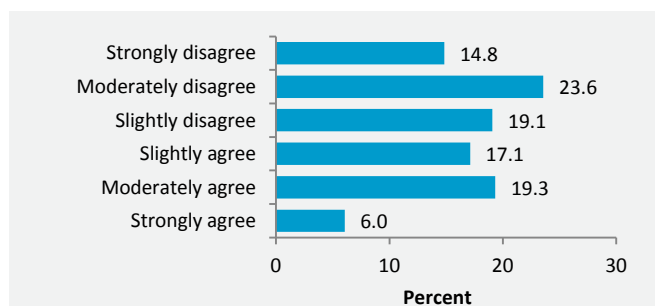
FIGURE 7: THE PRIVATE SECTOR DELIVERS THE BEST VALUE SERVICES (N=1852)



SOURCE: ACELG 2014 *WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTERS SURVEY*

However, there is less agreement with the notion that government generally delivers the best value services. Over half (58 per cent) of Australians disagree with this statement.

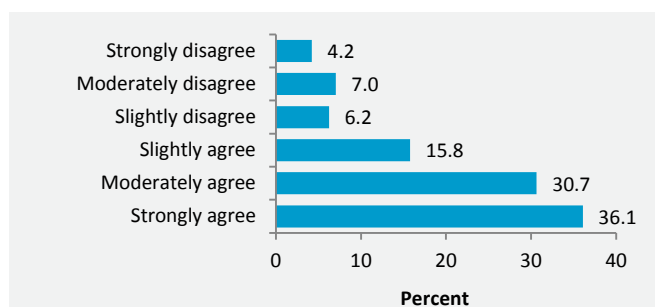
FIGURE 8: GOVERNMENT DELIVERS THE BEST QUALITY SERVICES (N=1869)



SOURCE: ACELG 2014 *WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTERS SURVEY*

On the other hand, with the question framed slightly differently, respondents clearly agree (83 per cent) that there are some services that governments can provide at a higher quality than the private sector.

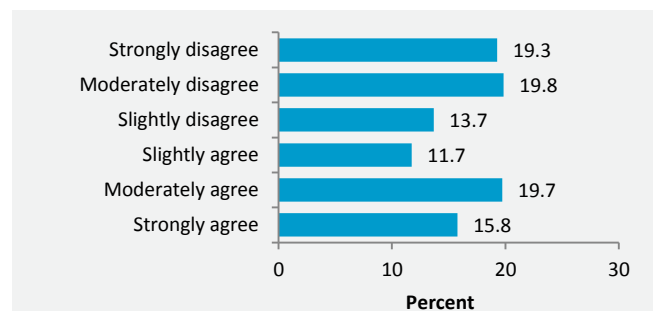
FIGURE 9: THERE ARE SOME SERVICES THAT GOVERNMENTS CAN PROVIDE AT A HIGHER QUALITY THAN THE PRIVATE SECTOR (N=1874)



SOURCE: ACELG 2014 *WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTERS SURVEY*

One of the ways of understanding the role of government is as a creator of 'public value', or positive social and economic outcomes valued by the community. Just over half of Australians (53 per cent) do not want decisions about service delivery to be made primarily on value for money.

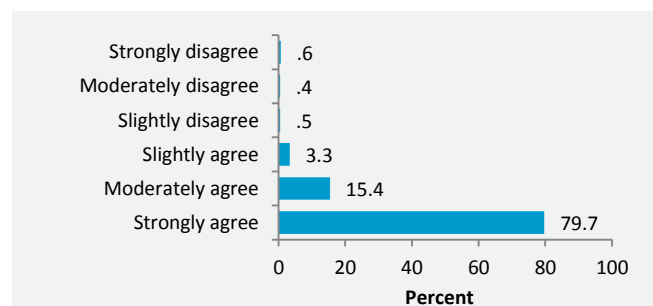
FIGURE 10: DECISIONS ABOUT HOW SERVICES ARE DELIVERED IN MY AREA SHOULD BE MADE PRIMARILY ON VALUE FOR MONEY (N=1934)



SOURCE: ACELG 2014 *WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTERS SURVEY*

Nearly all Australians agree that governments should deliver services that contribute to a healthier and fairer society, with 80 per cent strongly agreeing and only two per cent disagreeing.

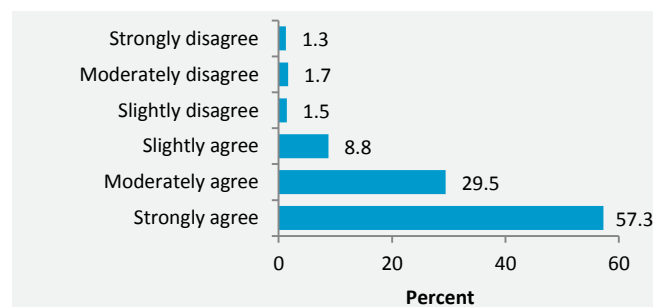
FIGURE 11: I WANT GOVERNMENTS TO DELIVER SERVICES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO A HEALTHIER AND FAIRER SOCIETY (N=1989)



SOURCE: ACELG 2014 *WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTERS SURVEY*

There is also strong support for the idea that government should be advocating for the needs of the local community (96 per cent agreement).

FIGURE 12: GOVERNMENT SHOULD BE ADVOCATING FOR THE NEEDS OF MY LOCAL COMMUNITY (N=1950)



SOURCE: ACELG 2014 *WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTERS SURVEY*

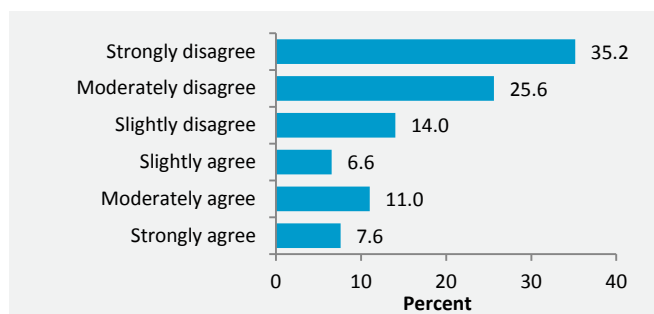
# How do people want their services delivered?

## Key points

- A majority of respondents agree that taxes should pay for more than basic services and most say they are prepared to pay more taxes to receive a broader range of services.
- There is strong agreement for governments to work with each other and with service providers to provide local services.
- Public services don't need to be delivered by government; instead there is support for delivery of public services by a mixture of public, private and not-for-profit organisations.

Australians want more than just basic services from government. Over half (61 per cent) strongly or moderately disagree that governments should focus on providing only basic services compared with 19 per cent that strongly or moderately agree.

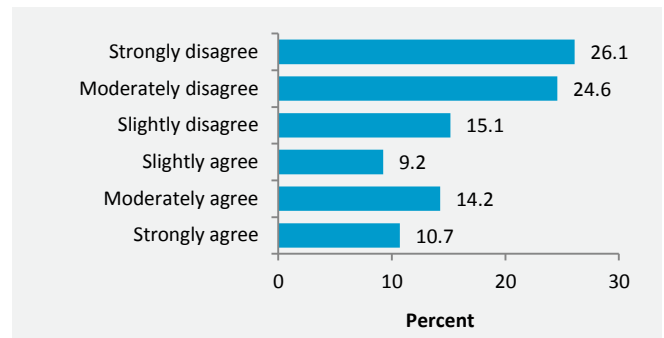
FIGURE 13: GOVERNMENT SHOULD FOCUS ON PROVIDING ONLY BASIC SERVICES (N=1960)



SOURCE: ACELG 2014 *WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTERS SURVEY*

The level of support for the idea that taxes should only pay for basic services is relatively low, with just 25 per cent of Australians either moderately or strongly in agreement. In contrast, 51 per cent of respondents strongly or moderately disagree.

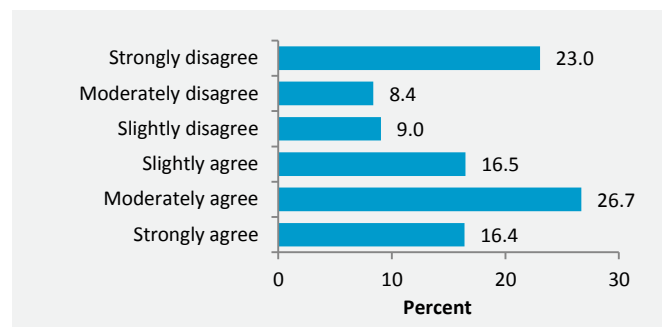
FIGURE 14: MY TAXES SHOULD ONLY PAY FOR BASIC SERVICES (N=1907)



SOURCE: ACELG 2014 *WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTERS SURVEY*

The question of whether respondents are prepared to pay more taxes for a broader range of services divides Australian opinion. While 23 per cent strongly disagree, 60 per cent agree either slightly (17 per cent), moderately (27 per cent) or strongly (16 per cent).

FIGURE 15: I AM PREPARED TO PAY MORE TAXES TO GET A BROADER RANGE OF PUBLIC SERVICES (N=1908)



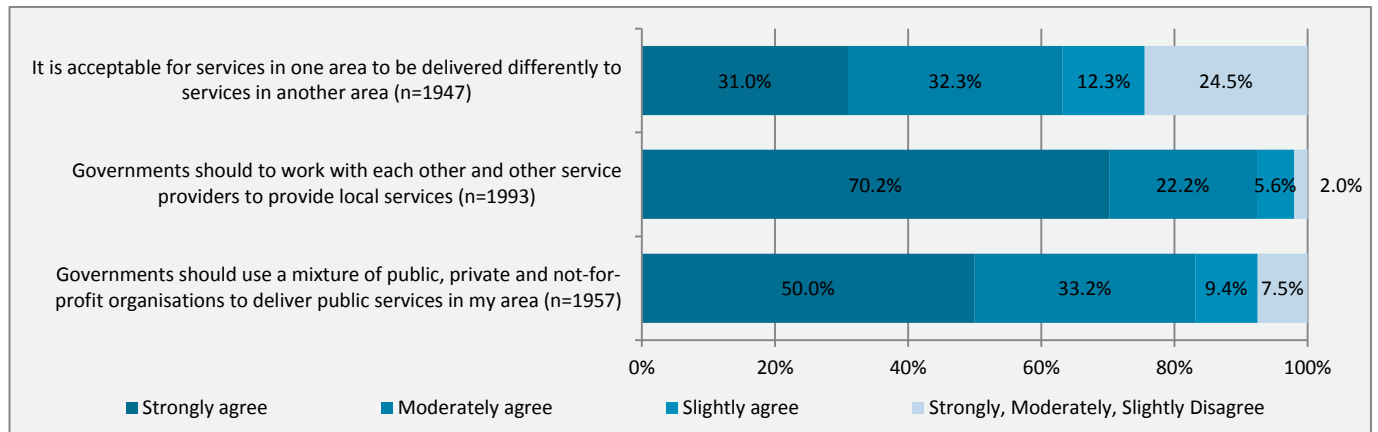
SOURCE: ACELG 2014 *WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTERS SURVEY*

A quarter of Australians (25 per cent) do not agree that it is acceptable for services in one area to be delivered differently to services in another. That the remaining three-quarters agree suggests a level of support for differentiated service delivery at a local level to better meet the needs and preferences of the local community.

Most people (93 per cent) agree that local public services should be delivered using a mixture of public, private and not-for-profit organisations. In addition to agreeing to the proposition that governments should work with a range of

business or organisational types when choosing how to deliver services, Australians strongly agree (70 per cent) that governments should work with each other and with other service providers to provide local services.

FIGURE 16: THINKING ABOUT THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN THE PROVISION OF SERVICES TO THE COMMUNITY, DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?



SOURCE: ACELG 2014 *WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTERS SURVEY*

# How do people want to be involved in government?

## Key points

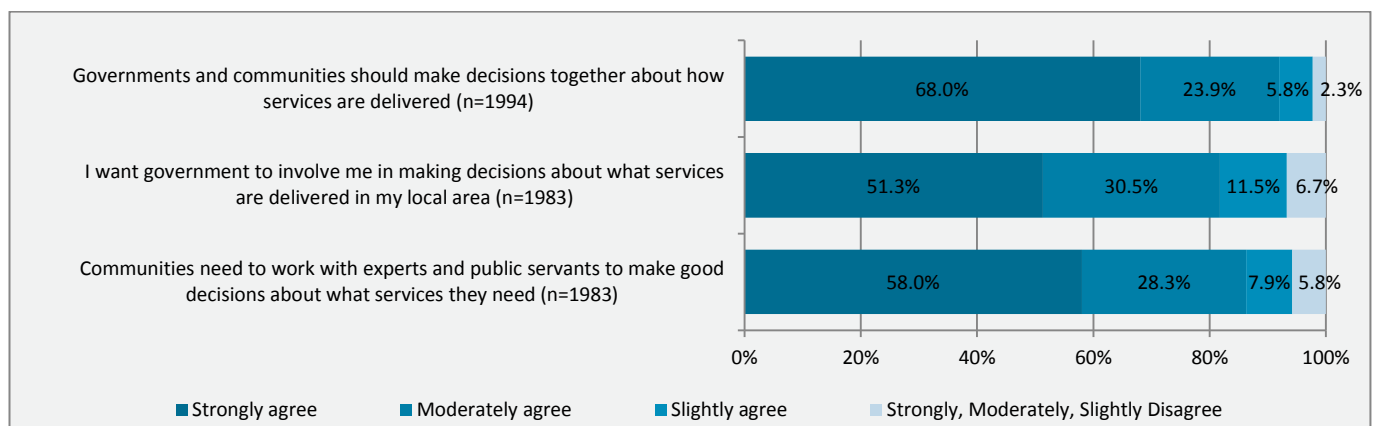
- Australian communities want to be involved with government in making decisions about how and what services should be delivered in their local area.
- Good decisions are best made by involving communities, experts and government together in the process.
- Communities and people using services are considered to have the best knowledge of what services are needed and how they should be delivered, followed by service providers and finally people who work in government.

Overwhelmingly, people think that communities need to work with experts and public servants in order for good decisions to be made about what

services are needed. Overall agreement is very high, with 58 per cent of respondents strongly agreeing and a further 28 per cent moderately agreeing that communities, experts and governments should be working together.

There is strong support for very participatory styles of democratic engagement by government with its people. Australians want to be involved by government in making decisions about what services are delivered in their local area. Nearly all (93 per cent) want to be personally involved, with over half (51 per cent) reporting they strongly agree that government should involve them in decision-making. Additionally, a majority of respondents (68 per cent) strongly agree that governments and communities should make decisions together about how services are delivered, while a further 24 per cent moderately agree.

FIGURE 17: THINKING ABOUT THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN THE PROVISION OF SERVICES TO THE COMMUNITY, DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?



SOURCE: ACELG 2014 *WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTERS SURVEY*

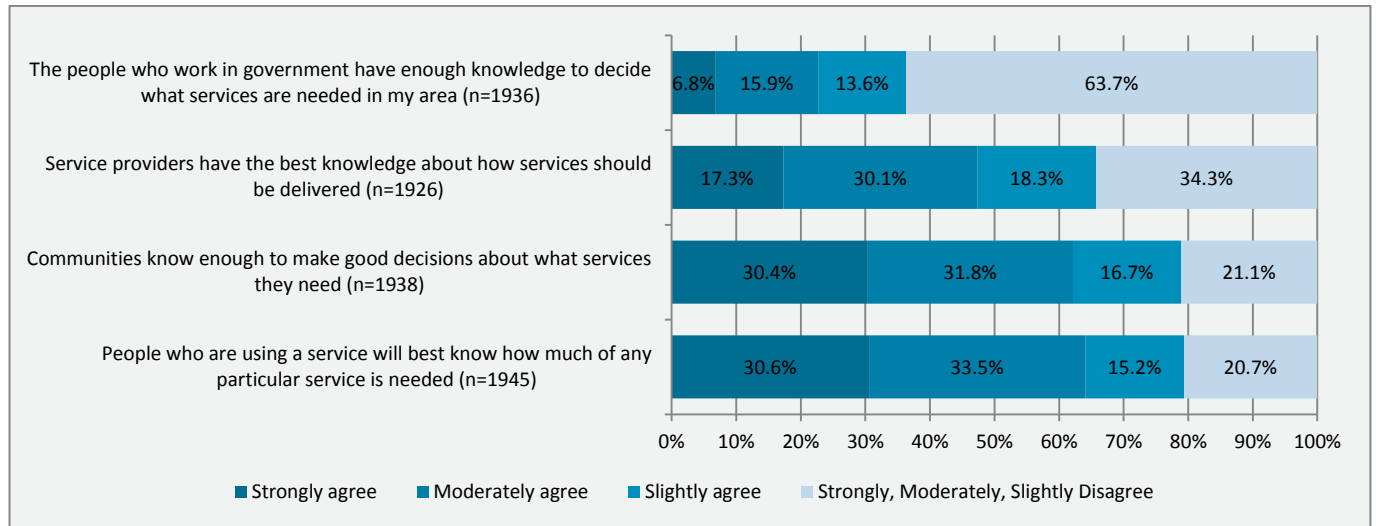
The strong preference expressed by Australians for decisions about service delivery being made by networks of community, experts and government could in part be explained by how they assess each of these groups' capacity to make the right decision. The data suggest a clear hierarchy of who is considered to have the best knowledge. People place the community and users of services ahead of service providers, with both groups being trusted more to know what and how is needed than people who work in government.

Nearly two-thirds of respondents (64 per cent) strongly or moderately agree that the people who are using a service are the ones who will know best how much of any particular service is needed. Similarly, 62 per cent strongly or moderately agree that communities know enough to make good decisions about what services they need.

A smaller proportion (47 per cent) strongly or moderately agree that service providers have the best knowledge about how services should be delivered and an even smaller number (23 per

cent) strongly or moderately agree that the people who work in government have enough knowledge to decide what services are needed in their area.

FIGURE 18: THINKING ABOUT THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN THE PROVISION OF SERVICES TO THE COMMUNITY, DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?



SOURCE: ACELG 2014 *WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTERS SURVEY*

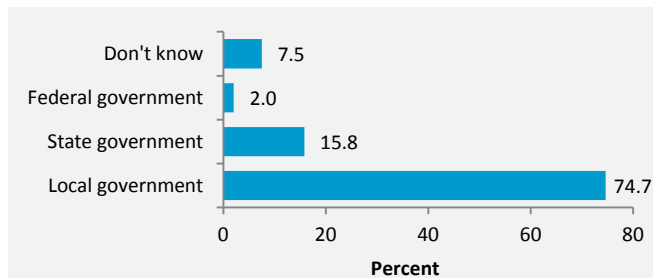
# What do people think about local government?

## Key points

- Australians think that local government is the best level of government to make decisions about the local area.
- Australians believe it is important that local government delivers a diverse range of activities, with planning for the future being amongst the most important.

Australians believe that local government is the tier of government best able to make decisions about the local area, with 75 per cent choosing local government, compared with 16 per cent for state government and two per cent for federal government. This seems to reflect a perception that the government 'closest to the people' will know best what is needed in the local area.

FIGURE 19: THINKING ABOUT WHERE YOU LIVE, WHICH LEVEL OF GOVERNMENT IS BEST ABLE TO MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT YOUR LOCAL AREA? (N=2006)



SOURCE: ACELG 2014 *WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTERS SURVEY*

Figure 20 shows a range of responsibilities that could be taken by local government and the relative importance to respondents that local government in fact does each of these things. Water, sewage, stormwater, drainage (82 per cent); and street cleaning and waste management (81 per cent) have the highest levels of extremely and very important ratings from respondents. This may be attributable to the long-term role taken by local government in these areas around Australia. The third-highest ranked potential

activity for local government was planning for the future, rated by 80 per cent of Australians as extremely or very important.

Other areas of typical core business for local governments across Australia—such as parks, footpaths, roads and bridges and land use planning/development applications—are also rated as highly important activities for local governments to do.

The public supports the importance of a role for local government in health, environmental management and disaster management.

Although local governments have varying levels of involvement in these areas across and between jurisdictions, the results indicate that the public feels local governments should have some responsibility for these tasks.

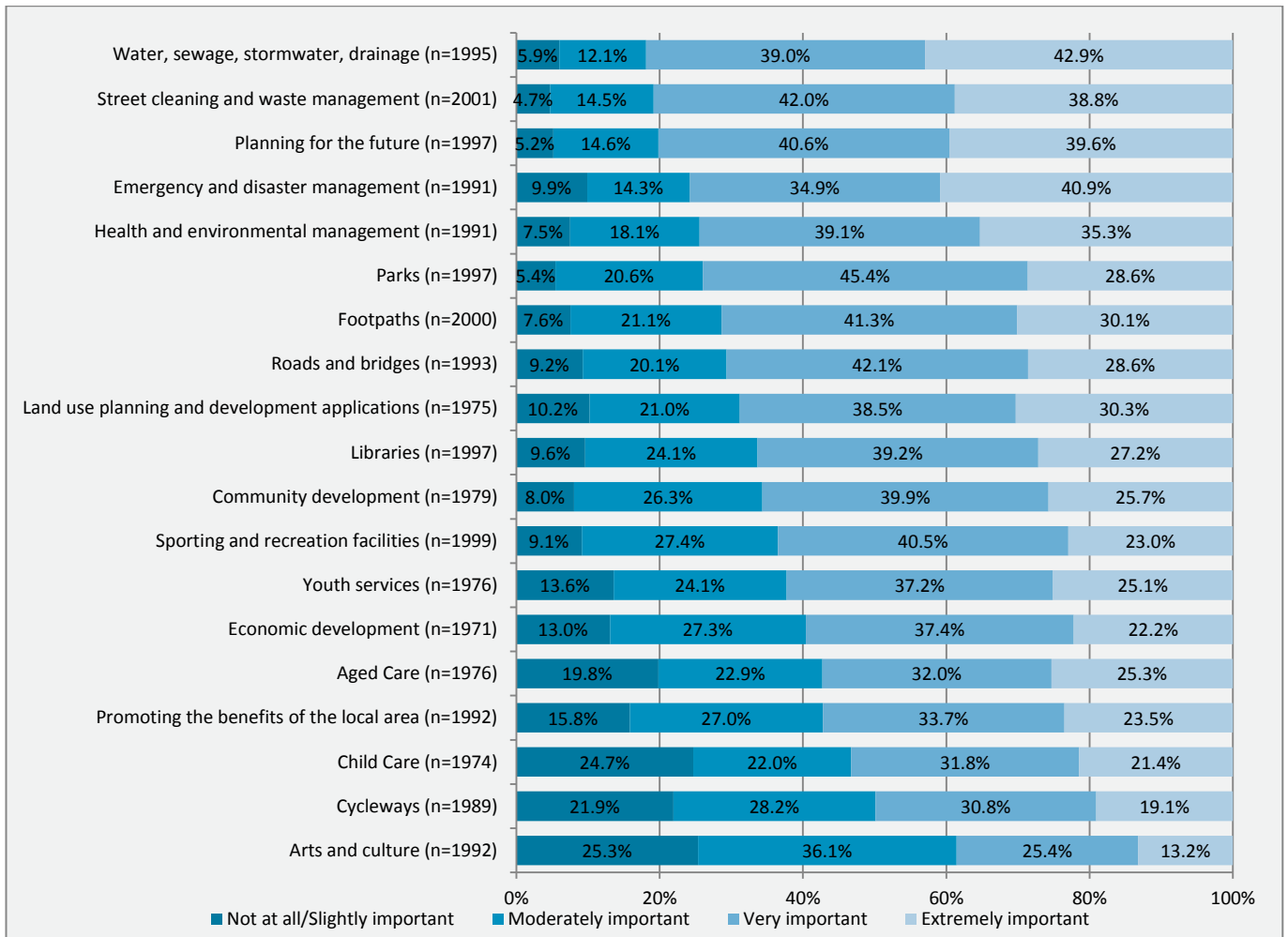
Community services such as child care, aged care and youth services are viewed as less important for local governments to deliver. The role of local governments is not as clearly defined in these sectors and differs between states which may have an impact on peoples' expectations for the role of local government.

Local governments are often involved in arts and culture. Respondents do not rank these activities as important parts of local government operations relative to other tasks, although the absolute level of the 'not at all/slightly important' rating is only 25 per cent. This may be because the public is not aware of the work that local governments do in this area, or because they do not view this work as being as important as other tasks that local governments perform.

Almost half of Australians are able to correctly (42 per cent) or almost correctly (6 per cent) name the mayor or president of their local council or shire. Considerably more (85 per cent) were able to name their local government.



FIGURE 20: HOW IMPORTANT IT IS TO YOU THAT LOCAL GOVERNMENT DOES EACH OF THESE THINGS?



SOURCE: ACELG 2014 WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENT MATTERS SURVEY

## How do people's personal characteristics and values impact on their responses?

The results presented in this summary report reflect the views of Australians nationally. However, there are statistically significant differences in community views depending on:

- levels of community participation
- respondents' age, gender, income, education, employment status, non-English speaking background
- values and political affiliation
- housing tenure, dwelling type and household type
- length of residency in the local area
- the type of local government area in which people live (e.g. remote, regional, large and small metropolitan councils/shires).

These differences are explored in more detail in the full report, available on the ACELG website:

[www.acelg.org.au/wlgm](http://www.acelg.org.au/wlgm)

Ryan, R., Hastings, C., Woods., R., Lawrie, A., Grant, B. 2015 *Why Local Government Matters: Full Report 2015* Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government, University of Technology Sydney Australia



## Research methodology summary

A survey instrument for fielding by computer aided telephone interviews (CATI) was written by ACELG, tested in sections through three online panel surveys and analysis of results, and then fielded to 2006 people aged 18 years and over from all states and territories of Australia (with the exception of the Australian Capital Territory) in October/November 2014 by market research company UMR.

A gender quota was established in proportion to the Australian population. Age quotas were set to match the Australian population within six groups (18–29; 30–39; 40–49; 50–59; 60–69; and 70 and over). Additionally, quotas for the type of local government in which each respondent resides were set in order to allow for meaningful comparisons to be made, particularly between those living in regional and remote; regional urban; and the capital city/urban development areas. It is important to note that these quotas were based on local government type, not the proportion of the population resident in each local government category.

The survey results have been post-weighted by age and gender. Figures for the Australian population based on the 2011 Census were used.

The average interview length was 26.4 minutes (median length 24.2 minutes).

A fuller discussion of methodology can be found in the full report.

Percentages in this report may not total 100% due to rounding.

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