

## Why Local Government Matters

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### 1 Introduction

Since the early 1990s the vocabulary used for discussing local government, both among academics and government practitioners, has developed considerably. The usual discourse surrounding local government identifies its primary role in terms of service delivery and/or as the seat of local democracy as it is located closest to the people.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, terms such as ‘governance’, ‘new public management’, ‘community partnerships’ and ‘multi-level and multi-actor governance’ are among those discussed in publications on local politics and government.<sup>2</sup> The question is whether these ‘new’ ways of conceptualising local government accurately reflect community expectations of local government.

Additionally, there is a paucity of theorising of Australian local government.<sup>3</sup> This chapter argues that moving beyond an efficient local vehicle for providing a range of services,<sup>4</sup> governance leads to a new emphasis on place-based community leadership and civic engagement. The chapter then demonstrates how recent empirical work soliciting citizens’ attitudes in identifying the optimal role of local government aligns with this ‘new’ thinking.

This chapter is based on research entitled *Why Local Government Matters*.<sup>5</sup> It is an ongoing national research project funded by the Federal Government and conducted by the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government at the University of Technology Sydney, aimed at understanding community attitudes to local government and what its role could be. The research reveals a surprising range of views on the role of local government within

- 1 Martin Mowbray, ‘Intellectuals and the Local State: The Australian Local Government Literature’ (1997) 15(4) *Urban Policy and Research* 247.
- 2 Bas Denters and Lawrence E Rose, ‘Local Governance in the Third Millennium: A Brave New World’ in Bas Denters and Lawrence E Rose (eds), *Comparing Local Governance: Trends and Developments* (Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke, 2005) 1, 1.
- 3 Chris Aulich, ‘From Citizen Participation to Participatory Governance: Governance in Australian Local Government’ (2009) 2 *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance* 44.
- 4 Andrew Sancton, *Canadian Local Government: An Urban Perspective* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011).
- 5 Roberta Ryan et al, *Why Local Government Matters: Full Report 2015*, Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (June 2015).

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