The LogoNet Dialogue 2017-19

PLACE BASED GOVERNANCE AND LOCAL DEMOCRACY:

Will Australian Local Government Deliver?

LogoNet
AUSTRALIA

Fresh thinking about the future of local government and governance

Report Authorship

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The Logonet Dialogue 2017-2019

LogoNet Australia is an informal national network of individuals dedicated to fresh thinking about the future of Local Government and community governance, and to promoting innovation in the way local councils go about their business.

The inaugural LogoNet meeting was held in Sydney in November 2016. It was agreed that strengthening local democracy should be a high priority for the network. Accordingly, over the past two years, LogoNet has conducted a national Dialogue to explore the case for, and ways to promote, effective place-based governance and local democracy as vital elements of Australia's federal system. The Dialogue commenced in mid-2017 with a number of short information and discussion papers being posted on the LogoNet website, along with links to relevant material elsewhere.

At the outset, four broad questions were posed to stimulate discussion:

- What are the essential elements of place based (community) governance, and what role should local government play?

- Are local councils functioning effectively as democratic institutions? If not, why?

- What are the key areas in which local government needs to improve its performance as a champion and enabler of place-based governance and local democracy?

- What do you see as good examples of sound practice and innovation in this field?

The Dialogue process had three main components:

- An open-access, online forum that sought and published a wide range of contributions and commentaries from anyone interested in the Dialogue theme.

- Informal roundtable discussions in Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth.

- 'From the Frontline' – in late 2018 a series of more specific questions about aspects of local democracy and governance were circulated to LogoNet members and others on its mailing list, with responses collated into three summary reports posted on the website.

In addition, Dialogue themes were addressed at the 2017 and 2018 Future of Local Government Summits sponsored by the Municipal Association of Victoria. The 2017 Summit Declaration provides a valuable summary of the issues discussed (see Attachment A).

Context

The central issue for the LogoNet Dialogue has been whether, how and to what extent Australian local government can and should do more to strengthen our democracy – in particular by advancing 'place-based', collaborative governance. The genesis of this question is now widely acknowledged across the 'western' world:

- Dramatic declines in the level of trust in governments and politicians. In Australia this is most evident in the case of the federal government, but although local government has generally performed much better, surveys indicate its level of trust is no more than 35-40%.

- A growing sense that 'big government' cannot (or will not) deal effectively with complex, 'wicked' problems such as climate change, environmental degradation, rapid growth of metropolitan areas, declining regional economies and increasing social inequality.

- Heightened concerns about threats to people's established local surroundings and quality of life, that change is too fast and the global forces at work are out of control.

- A search for answers that is feeding narrow self-interest, radical populism and a 'post truth' world rather than rational debate and effective collective action.

It has become all too easy to adopt a pessimistic view of the prospects for democracy, community life and local places. But there are also positive signs and trends:

- Climate change and associated environmental issues are highlighting the need and opportunities for renewed local and regional initiatives on a number of fronts including community education, environmental repair and promoting renewable energy.

- Communities are turning to collaborative processes such as Collective Impact to tackle social and economic disadvantage.

- Increasingly, people are challenging 'top down' or 'one-size-fits-all' policies that run counter to their view of the world, and some local councils are learning that they too need to 'let go' and enable communities to chart their own course.

Reflecting these trends the 2017 Future of Local Government Declaration highlighted concerns over the apparent inability of governments, business and public institutions to address the economic, social and environmental challenges facing communities and regions. It called for 'a fresh approach and responsive leadership':

It's time to explore a new model of governance, one based on a re-energised civil society that draws on the strength and resourcefulness of people working together in diverse local and regional communities – a localist response.

Australian local government does have a solid track record as an innovator in place-based governance. In the early 1990s the Australian Local Government Association undertook pioneering work on Integrated Local Area Planning, and with federal government support projects to demonstrate this model were carried out by councils across the country. This initiative preceded by several years Britain's internationally recognised Lyons Report that promoted 'place-shaping'.

More recently, community planning has been widely adopted in Victoria; systems of community-focused Integrated Planning and Reporting have been legislated in New South Wales and Western Australia; and the Waratah-Wynyard council in Tasmania has established Australia's first formally recognised 'community board'.

However, despite these and other valuable initiatives, implementation of place-based and community governance by Australian councils remains on the whole patchy and tentative. These concepts seem to offer a powerful guiding vision for stronger local government, but the available evidence suggests that relatively few in the sector are ready to embrace and explore that potential to its fullest extent. The LogoNet Dialogue sought to understand whether this is indeed the case and if so, why and what needs to be done.

A Note on Terminology

Explorers of local governance and democracy must navigate a tangle of terminology. The main terms used are *community governance*, *localism* and *place-based governance*. Other labels include *collaborative governance*, *community-led governance*, *community co-leadership* and *co-governance*. While it is possible to argue some differences in meaning between these terms[i], it is not necessary for the purpose of this report. Instead, the approach taken is to apply the notions of *governance* and *place* in the simplest way.

Governance refers to the arrangements we put in place as a society to determine what needs should be met and how[ii]. So *local governance* refers to the arrangements we use in a specific place. In this context *place* means a shared physical and social environment and often a history, as well as a common sense of connection or relationship to the locality[iii]

What we call *places* are usually considerably smaller than large towns and cities. They are typically neighbourhoods, suburbs or villages and sometimes whole local government areas (LGAs). Therefore, a single locality such as a LGA or small town can, for different purposes, be made up of a number of *places*.

The arrangements we use to govern ourselves may or may not involve *the government* (state or federal), or a *local government* (council). So the term govern is used broadly in order to include whatever agreed decision-making mechanisms are in operation.

It follows that *place-based governance* can cover a broad spectrum of processes that may be led by governments and/or by local communities in order to address the needs and concerns of the place and people. Where citizens and community organisations take the lead *place-based governance* generally means the same as *community governance* or *community-led governance*.

Is there a problem?

Fundamentally, place-based governance is an expression of a set of democratic values. And given that local councils are much more focused on specific places and communities than state and federal governments, they are, in theory at least, well positioned to foster a collaborative approach to governing communities and cultivating democratic practice. But do they?

The Dialogue revealed widespread concerns that many Australian councils lack the will or capacity to adopt new forms of democratic decision-making. We need to understand these challenges in order to help councils assess their current position and move forward.

Waiting for Permission?

Dialogue participants generally endorsed recent research findings[iv] of widespread disengagement from politics and government, and specifically of low levels of trust in, and respect for, local government. They observed an evident failure of the sector to fulfill its leadership potential, spending too much time waiting for state and federal governments to provide answers to problems, permission for councils to act, and additional resources to enable them to do their job.

It can be argued (see here for example) that local government's limited powers and influence are reason enough to discourage councils from leading local democratic reform and place-based governance. One contributor even suggested that with the growth of larger community-based and commercial service providers, local government's time to lead collective community building may have passed.

The other [policy prescription] was for local governments to provide more personalised and locally responsive human services as a way of strengthening bonds with local communities. I wonder, however, if this opportunity has now passed with the advent of larger not-for-profit and commercial providers of health and human services.

(Contributor comments, Dialogue Roundtable, Melbourne).

However, most participants felt that local government still had the potential to do something about the ills of disengagement and failing democracy: *an opportunity to restore trust in government, starting from the ground up.* (Contributor comments, Dialogue Roundtable, Brisbane). The idea that *place* and *identity* are of fundamental importance to individuals and communities and provide a unique basis for local government and local governance, was highlighted early in the Dialogue and resonated again and again throughout the two years.

And Dialogue participants noted that progress has been made. A significant number of local councils have indeed achieved a degree of success delivering better outcomes through partnering with their communities, bringing about an improvement in mutual trust (see examples here and here).

So is local government as powerless and subservient to state and federal governments as many in the sector seem to believe, and is that a real barrier to pressing ahead with place-based governance? Other voices argue

that the potency of local councils lies in their capacity to convene, integrate and collaborate at the local level; to partner with their community; to …*own the future* (Dr Jonathan Carr-West, [Dialogue Roundtable, Sydney](#)). This need not be dependent on receiving permission or support from above.

Entrenched Power of Elected Members and Bureaucrats?

A second set of observations and arguments related to the role of councilors and mayors. If local councils are to embrace a more community-led way of operating and share power with others, then elected members need to have a genuinely collaborative approach and skillset. This could have a significant impact on their currently defined role, which would be less about making decisions on behalf of the community and more about making ways for the community to decide.

A number of Dialogue participants reflected on the wish of many elected members to protect their current decision-making autonomy. This can conflict with the democratic intent of community-led governance that assumes, at least to some extent, a power-sharing arrangement.

Support for councils holding on to decision-making power extends to bureaucrats as well. One senior officer was clear that while decisions should be public, evidence-based and made in accordance with strategic plans and community engagement strategies: …*the Council itself is elected to make the decisions and in that regard they should not 'share' decision-making with their communities.* (Contributor, [*From the Frontline* Series, Question 2](#)).

Tensions around the idea of power-sharing reflect in part the governmental paradigm which defines traditional practices and beliefs for elected members and bureaucrats.

We usually consult our communities, survey our communities, inform our communities and sometimes even listen to our communities…we [then] retreat to the political and professional halls of power to make the decision we think is best for them. Our political programming in representative democracy and our professional programming in public management suggests this is the right way. (Contributor, [*From the Frontline* Series, Question 1](#)).

Unsurprisingly, some commentators argue that unless roles and practices are challenged and power structures turned upside down, the localist (community governance) agenda will be unable to progress[v].

Excessive Parochialism?

Some participants diagnosed the problem as one of excessive parochialism: a failure by local government to effectively advance regional and national agendas. They painted a picture of local councils being overly focused on what they could directly control – the council organisation itself and the services it delivers to the LGA – at the expense of pursuing their communities' interests regionally and nationally through alliances and partnerships.

This was also characterised as a focus on the *in here* rather than the *out there*; a failure to engage in the *big picture* issues of economy, society and government: regional economic development, metropolitan and city governance, climate change, and the impacts and potential of digital technology and artificial intelligence.

To advance place-based governance, local councils need to be a strong voice for their communities in the federation, and collectively thrust the notion of *place* onto the national agenda. Effective community governance will strengthen the legitimacy and relevance of local councils as representatives of their community.

> *Unless councils collaborate more routinely and effectively at a (sub) regional level they risk becoming just another stakeholder voice, rather than a key player in government and a strong representative of their communities.*
>
> (Contributor Comments, Dialogue Roundtable, Melbourne).

On the other hand, one contributor sounded a warning that a focus on place-based and community governance could lead councils and communities even further from seeking to influence *big picture* issues. Clearly a balance is required here, with local leadership a critical ingredient in getting the balance right.

Efficiency Dominates?

When state and federal governments look critically at local government, they focus chiefly on the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery, as if local councils were little more than administrative agencies (a brief review of these issues can be found here). The dominance of this agenda can prevent councils seeing themselves as democratic institutions with a unique capacity and legitimacy to champion local democracy and foster community governance.

> *Councils need to think about their democratic functions separately to their service delivery functions...More attention must be given to democratic*

> *renewal through increased opportunities for civic engagement, devolution within councils to neighbourhoods and other initiatives to increase local government's democratic mandate.*
>
> (Mike Reid, Local Government New Zealand, Dialogue Roundtable, Melbourne).

In fact, research suggests that matters of efficiency and effectiveness are not necessarily at the forefront of the community's mind when judging local government's value. Evidently creating a better and fairer society is paramount in the community's view, and decisions are about more than money and efficiency[vi]. Communities value being involved in making decisions about their place and future. This can be seen in the case studies presented below, especially the story of Noosa Shire Council in Queensland: people will pay to keep local democracy!

Lack of Transparency?

Some participants argued that too many elected members regard community engagement as a token exercise, favouring their own agendas over what the community sees as its needs and priorities. There is often a gap between what a council states it will do and what it actually does.

> *There is also a perception that Councils only 'go through the motions' re community engagement and that the outcomes are usually pre-determined... priorities [are] more about improving the status and reputation of the elected members than about seriously addressing community needs.*
>
> (Contributor comments, From the Frontline Series, Question 1).

This disconnect between the ideal purpose of community engagement (and communication with the community more broadly) and the disingenuous way in which it is sometimes carried out, prompted contributors to identify it as a significant barrier to encouraging authentic place-based community governance. Several noted that a lack of open, transparent and honest communication with the community was a direct cause of the erosion of trust that has occurred and that continues.

In the community governance model, legitimacy is derived from the collective determination of interests and priorities. If councils are unwilling to involve the community as a true partner in the work of shaping *the place*, there can be no mutual trust in the validity of decision-making. Trust must be seen not only as something the community needs of council, but also that the council needs of the community.

> *Too often, Councils are afraid of letting go of the decision and what that really says is that you don't trust your community to make a great decision.*
>
> (Contributor comments, *From the Frontline Series, Question 2*).

What's the way forward?

Having outlined key issues and potential problems, we now turn to the way forward. While the Dialogue identified some broad areas of concern, participants differed on how radical the response should be. Some were clear that the way forward was about changing the current paradigm and moving away from government-centric power structures. This group was interested in seeking new ways to devolve decision-making to the community, with local government adopting a stewardship role and supporting the community to chart its own course.

At the local level, councils must offer sound and effective democratic governance to communities and demonstrate a willingness to adopt new forms of inclusive democracy and accountability.

(Summary Notes, Dialogue Roundtable, Melbourne).

Others seemed to favour more and better consultation to discover the community's preferences, so that this 'intelligence' could be made available to the council when making the relevant decision. This approach came with the warning that councils would need to be genuinely responsive to the 'intelligence' or risk the allegation of tokenism. In essence, however, the existing framework of representative democracy would be retained.

In principle, communities should be involved in decision-making as much as possible, while ensuring that all sections of the community are involved... However, devolved decision-making also needs to occur within the broad

paradigm of the representative democratic process in which councils are elected based on their policies.

(Contributor comments, *From the Frontline Series, Question 2*).

A New Agenda of Devolved Decision-Making

Dialogue participants offered a variety of observations about the need for local councils to implement new agendas around devolved decision-making.

Our current government structures and the mechanisms of governance have not adapted to and are not responding to the current context. ... there is no reason to concentrate authority and decision making within [a] selected few.

(Contributor comments, *From the Frontline Series, Question 3*).

A new localist agenda would...ask questions about how local government can best add value to both local places and communities and the broader system of government. It would require a different mix of institutional skills and priorities, and perhaps new structures/ mechanisms at the locality and regional levels to promote community democracy and partnerships in planning and service delivery.

(Summary Notes, Dialogue Roundtable, Melbourne).

...there is a growing need for local government to review its role and facilitate the building of stronger, more sustainable and resilient communities. This outcome is most likely to occur when Councils devolve power to communities to make decisions on all aspects of local community life. Councils can then support the actions needed to implement these decisions.

(Contributor comments, *From the Frontline Series, Question 2*).

Devolving decision-making, which means ensuring that *citizens are provided with real opportunities to influence and make decisions* (Contributor comments, *From the Frontline Series, Question 3*) was seen by many as a critical enabler of place-based governance. The dynamic here is the need to go beyond intelligence gathering and embrace partnership or co-governance.

Identified Enablers for Devolved Decision-Making

- A commitment to devolution formally and broadly rather than on an ad hoc or individual project/program basis.

- Providing capacity-building for councillors, staff and community members rather than assume participants have the necessary skillset and values.

- Equity of process to ensure participation can be accessed by all.

- Freedom for each council to work with its community to determine how best to organise and shape processes that will work effectively in their area.

- Ensuring open access to information so that the community can be empowered to contribute.

- The need to quarantine some functions from devolution, such as regulatory matters.

Commentary on the practice of devolved decision-making did acknowledge that it was early days and there was still much to learn about what worked and how far a devolutionary agenda could be pushed. Some were unequivocal. When asked: *To what extent should councils share decision-making with their communities?* one elected member responded simply: *As much as possible.* (Contributor comments, *From the Frontline Series, Question 2*).

Harnessing the Collective

Another suggested treatment for the ills of disengagement and failing democracy as well as building resilient local communities was Collective Impact.

The Collective Impact approach involves convening on a shared purpose, bringing people together across sectors to share ideas and align agendas to get a collective impact... This process involves engaging with the community to frame the issue they want to address. It also involves building different models of governance to engage citizens as co-producers of the solution rather than relying on discrete ad hoc programs.

(Liz Skelton, Director Collaboration for Impact, *Dialogue Roundtable, Sydney*).

An example of this model, using the complex problem of homelessness, was presented to one of the Sydney roundtables by the Inner West Council. The council had taken the lead in convening a group of government and local community sector organisations, leveraging this partnership to deliver programs on the ground. Homeless members of the community were involved in helping to define the problem and shape solutions. The council's task was largely about convening the collective rather than direct service provision.

Implementing Collective Impact

The Dialogue identified a number of key issues around the Collective Impact approach and the implications for local government and local democracy. These insights highlighted:

- The over-riding imperative to focus on sharing a common agenda and goal as a way of fostering the sharing of power and achieving the outcome.

- Involving the community from the outset in defining the issues and necessary responses.

- Crafting a common culture for the collective, drawing on a shared desire for better outcomes for the place.

- The pivotal function of local councils in fostering collaborations either by leading, actively participating as a member of the collective, or providing 'backbone' support to enable the collective without driving the agenda.

- Councils having to work differently when participating in these collectives as they do not own the agenda – they must be flexible in their approach and give others space to lead.

While there are some defining features of the Collective Impact model, it is in essence a collaborative governance arrangement, usually applied in a particular place to respond to specific local issues. It has the community at its centre, and the collective operates as a decision-making and implementation body in its own right, rather than providing advice or intelligence to some other decision-making authority. There are a number of Collective Impact projects on foot around Australia, with many of these benefiting from involvement (or leadership) by local councils (see here for example).

Influencing Development

The physical aspect of *place* is often critical to a community's sense of identity and therefore requires particular attention as a key element of place-based governance. Lack of influence over local development and the change it brings is a key driver of concerns about threats to people's established surroundings and quality of life. In this context the Dialogue explored the current approach to community-based Neighbourhood Planning in England through a series of discussions led by Emeritus Professor Mike Gibson of London's South Bank University.

The introduction of Neighbourhood Planning in England was part of the 'Big Society' and Localism agendas pursued by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government elected in 2010. Those agendas sought among other things to implement 'double devolution', shifting power downwards beyond local government to the community level. This contrasts with moves by some Australian states to move in the opposite direction, re-centralising control within their own agencies at the expense of local democracy.

Is the current system of statutory planning the real "silo"? The [recent changes] can be seen as an erosion of democracy... State Government representatives out-number council ones on Joint Regional Planning Panels and the needs of the state override those of the community.
(Contributor comments, Dialogue Roundtable, Sydney).

Under the English system, a local community can establish a neighbourhood forum, or work through an existing parish council, to prepare a plan that meets the objectives of the local government area's established strategy but vary the way it is implemented in terms of detailed land use and development controls. Following a process of technical assessment and a local referendum, neighbourhood plans become part of the statutory framework – even contrary to the preferred approach of the local authority.

The system has brought both benefits and challenges:

- Hundreds of thousands of citizens have participated directly in shaping their neighbourhoods.

- In rural areas adoption of neighbourhood plans has strengthened the influence of locally elected parish and town councils.

- The power of politicians and planning officials is being challenged as they must adapt to a collaborative planning model.

- But in larger urban areas neighbourhood planning can struggle to deal with much more complex issues and processes, and lack of sufficient resources for the task.

Overall, the English experience suggests that neighbourhood planning is an important component of place-based governance and can indeed strengthen grass-roots democracy. It engages people in a statutory process that gives them a real say in how their place evolves.

No Australian state offers a statutory framework for English-style neighbourhood planning, except to the extent that broader strategic plans and statutory land use (zoning) plans guide the development of specific localities. However, a number of councils have adopted a place-based approach to local planning with extensive community input, for example 'neighbourhood planning' in the City of Brisbane and 'precinct planning' in Tweed Shire, while the Victorian government has encouraged councils to collaborate with citizens and key stakeholders to prepare 'community plans' for different parts of their local government areas.

Case Studies

Dialogue participants identified the following case studies as examples of genuine attempts to advance place-based governance and empower communities. Significantly, the three Australian examples all sit well within the bounds of representative democracy under the aegis of an area-wide local government: the Dialogue did not reveal any Australian cases of more far-reaching devolution of decision-making. By contrast, the New Zealand case study of statutory community boards in Thames-Coromandel offers a more radical approach.

Melbourne City Council and Participatory Budgeting[vii]
An empowering engagement process goes beyond 'intelligence gathering'

Melbourne City the capital city of Victoria, has a resident population of about 170,000. It includes Victoria's main business district and cultural and sporting facilities. In 2014 the City Council decided to develop its first ten-year financial plan with input from a 'People's Panel'.

In preparation for the Panel, there was a broad public consultation exercise on the financial plan. About 600 participants were invited to submit budget suggestions or attend a workshop. The Panel was then constituted with independent advice to ensure balanced representation across the community. There were 45 members, each paid $500 to participate to ensure broad socio-economic representation.

The Panel process unfolded over several months, in stages separated by a few weeks to allow time for panelists to absorb all the information. The first aimed to fully inform panelists about the financial position of the council, so as to place them, as far as possible, on an equal footing with council staff. Then the Panel's was to identify collective priorities and make budget recommendations to the council. Recommendations required at least 80% support. Eleven met this threshold and were presented to the council. One included increasing rates to maintain the current standard of service delivery and to prepare the City for climate change.

At the outset the Council committed to publication of recommendations along with its response and reasons for accepting or rejecting the Panel's proposals. Ultimately, it accepted 10 of the 11. An independent assessment concluded that the process was highly effective, conducted well, and good value for money. While the Panel was advisory, it nonetheless went beyond simply collecting people's views and preferences and ventured into the realm of decision-making, albeit on the outskirts. Four key factors took the process beyond mere consultation.

First, the Panel made its recommendations with a full understanding of the council's financial position: it had to be rigorous and not just produce a 'shopping list'. Second, the requirement for a high level of consensus meant the Panel needed to seriously examine issues and be sure of the community benefit it aimed to achieve. Third, the publication of recommendations plus council's reasons for accepting or rejecting them, gave the process gravitas and made it more influential. Fourth, the use of independent advisers to establish the panel and conduct an evaluation of the undertaking and its outcomes added credibility to the process as well as an important learning loop. The evaluation confirmed the view of many panelists who believed they had participated in a valuable exercise and influenced some of the council's principal financial strategies.

Noosa Shire Council and the Community Jury[viii]

A determined community turns decision-maker, with a council willing to take the risk

Noosa Shire is on the Queensland coast about 120 km north of Brisbane. It serves a population of about 55,000 and is a busy tourist destination. The area has a history of community activism, initially to fend off unwanted development during the 1980 and 1990s.

In 2008 Noose Shire was amalgamated with two others, despite strong community opposition. But Noosa continued its campaign and six years later, it was restored as a stand-alone council. Despite being required to bear the considerable costs through their rates, 81% of voters in a referendum supported de-amalgamation. They argued for the opportunity for local people to have a local say on local issues, whilst those opposing de-amalgamation emphasised financial concerns – loss of economies of scale, potential increase in rates and related economic impacts. (Brett de Chastel – Chief Executive Officer, Noosa Council)

Reflecting the community's evident desire for close engagement, the new council formed Queensland's first local government-based Community Juries, with councillors agreeing to implement the outcomes of the jury process. Initially, two juries were established: one examined reducing waste to landfill, the other management of all aspects of the Noosa River.

While the history of the Noosa community predisposed it to deep engagement and an expectation of participating in decision-making, the willingness on the part of the council to embrace the jury process was crucial. The juries, selected by an independent adviser (newDemocracy Foundation), made a number of considered recommendations, all of which were accepted and implemented by the council. Both projects are progressing.

The experience of Noosa Shire Council and its community jury underscore the relevance of a number of key factors highlighted during the LogoNet Dialogue. First, the jury system and the commitment by the council to implement the outcomes provided a genuine opportunity for devolved decision-making: the council agreed to share power. And the risk taken by the council in agreeing to implement the outcomes before knowing what they were, expressed a necessary level of trust in jury members to make sound recommendations, whilst highlighting the need for jury members to take their responsibilities very seriously.

The Noosa story again demonstrates the tendency of communities to value local democracy above narrow economic considerations. This is consistent with research findings across the Australian local government sector (see reference vi).

Waratah-Wynyard Council and the Waratah Community Board[ix]
A disenfranchised community gives rise to Australia's first Community Board

Waratah-Wynyard is located in north-west Tasmania and has a population of around 14,000. The Waratah district was amalgamated with Wynyard in 1992. Since that time the local community had harboured a sense of 'missing out', whilst the council believed it was being treated very well: it had a suite of plans and strategies relevant to the Waratah area, plus a significant list of asset investments it intended to pursue. And the community had contributed a number of ideas to improve the amenity of the Waratah area and promote tourism. Yet it appeared that discontent prevailed.

The turning point was a recommendation to the council from an independent adviser to take a different direction; giving the community more scope to guide future priorities, investment and community outcomes – an agenda of greater self-determination. In 2017 the Council resolved to create a Waratah Community Board and a Waratah Community Plan. Also, the council agreed to create a local tourism group and help it develop a Promotions Plan.

In establishing the new Board there was extensive community engagement to engender a strong sense of local ownership in the final outcomes. Importantly, the Board's Charter linked the Board's work and the Waratah Community Plan to the Shire's overall Community Plan and strategies. This was seen as an important to maintain an overall sense of cohesion.

The Board includes 4 community members selected by the council using a structured EOI process, plus a councillor. It holds public forums and reports regularly to council meetings. Members are appointed for 3 years and receive a small meeting fee. The council has made a firm commitment to support the Board and provide funding.

Early indications point to the development of a more positive relationship and improved trust between the Waratah community and the council; the value of having a single point of community engagement for any council plan or project; progress in unlocking the potential of the area's tourism; and less dependency on the council for money and solutions.

There are some concerns that the Waratah Board is only advisory, and that its members are appointed by the council. In a sense it is little different from other advisory committees and falls short of devolved decision-making. However, a key point of difference is its Charter and broad remit to provide community advice and input concerning all aspects of the place of Waratah, and that this is done formally via the Community Plan. In these respects, it is the first of its kind in Australia.

After just over twelve months of operation of the Board, the council is soon to give a public progress report. How it proposes to build on the foundation laid, and whether it will move to devolve some functions and decision-making more formally is yet to be seen. Further small steps towards community-led governance may be a safe way of maintaining momentum.

New Zealand Community Boards and Thames-Coromandel Council[x]

Fostering devolution using Community Boards with formal delegations

Community Boards in New Zealand were first introduced in 1989 following sweeping council amalgamations, to provide an opportunity for local communities to retain a measure of self-determination within the larger local government areas. They are optional but statutory bodies and can be delegated a wide range of neighbourhood-level functions by their 'parent' council, as well as advocate for their local communities on council planning, budgeting and service delivery.

Community Boards have between 4 and 12 members, at least half of whom are elected locally. Councillors from the 'parent' council are eligible to be appointed but they are limited to a minority. The number of Community Boards has declined since the 1990s, but there are still well over 100 across New Zealand and they are an accepted part of the system of local governance. However, in recent years concerns have been raised about their effectiveness and the tendency of some councils to reduce their delegated functions. A 2018 survey found that only 16% had decision-making powers over local services.

Against this background of generally weak devolution the Thames-Coromandel District Council decided in 2010 to strengthen the role of its Community Boards. This followed the election of a new mayor and council on the back of community concerns about a disconnect and lack of partnership between the council and its communities; a trend to more centralised planning and service delivery; and slow decision-making on local as opposed to district-wide matters.

The incoming council took on the challenge of becoming more community-led, with a reform program headlined Local manages local services. Council's five Community Boards and their chairs became central to the formulation of council strategies, creating a single vision and shared sense of direction; budget delegations and decision-making about local services was returned to Boards; and Community Board Plans were developed to guide overall priorities. Staff were recruited or expected to promote this new way of working and drive a culture of partnership and empowerment around their own responsibilities.

The reform process proved demanding in terms of organisational culture; recruiting and/or retraining staff to work in the new environment of partnerships and empowerment; responding to vocal community critics and maintaining the support of elected members. In the end, however, the council was able to claim with justification that it created ...*an environment where community partnerships become the norm not the exception* ([see reference x](#)) and a leading practice model whereby ...*the primary role of Boards in future will be in community place-making, guided by the community's own priorities through a Community Plan and with the agreement by councils that Boards take the lead in community governance.*[xi]

So will local government deliver?

The Dialogue sought to explore the barriers to and enablers of place-based community governance. This section returns to the four questions that grounded the Dialogue at the outset, and offers answers based on what participants had to say.

What are the essential elements of place-based (community) governance, and what role should local government play?

The Dialogue's answer to this question is that there are three key elements of place-based community governance. These are sharing power, transparency and trust.

Sharing Power

Fundamental to the notion of place-based community governance is the willingness of elected representatives and bureaucrats to share decision-making power: to provide genuine opportunities for citizens to influence and make decisions. It is about legitimising collaboration and collectivity as central organizing principles of local governance. Inevitably, the extent to which this power-sharing occurs and the breadth of issues to which it applies can and will vary from time to time and place, depending where on the 'devolution ladder' a particular council and particular issue are located.

Of the four case studies, the issue-specific panels established by Melbourne City Council and Noosa Shire Council could be seen to occupy lower rungs of the ladder; the appointed and largely advisory Waratah Community Board to be somewhat higher (reflecting its wider scope of influence and longer term potential); and Thames-Coromandel's statutory Community Boards with extensive delegated functions further towards the top. Similar steps up the ladder could be taken by any council seeking to deliver place-based community governance.

Transparency

One of the common observations of Dialogue participants was the lack of openness by councils about the problems and challenges they face, and their tendency to assume that their organisational views and interests rate more highly than community input and preferences.

Collaborative decision-making demands a willingness to share information and build community understanding around complex issues. This was highlighted by the example of the Melbourne City Council People's Panel. To ensure meaningful and effective community input to the ten-year financial plan, time and resources were required to build the panel's knowledge and understanding of the financial challenges the council faced.

Trust

Declining trust in governments has been a key factor generating interest in more community-led approaches. Trust is ...*the glue that facilitates collective action for mutual benefit*. (see reference iv). It is a vital ingredient in the capacity of government to build better communities and many Dialogue participants expressed concern local government's perceived reputation as lacking relevance and capability.

Conversely, for community-led approaches to work, governments and their institutions need to have trust in communities and citizens to make good decisions when they are given the opportunity for meaningful and informed participation in decision-making. Some Dialogue participants were unsure about this and feared that community-led approaches could result in hijacked decisions that favour particular interest groups. However, this

concern runs counter to contemporary research that suggests carefully constructed and authentic democratic processes do yield sound decisions that reflect the broad community interest and build trust. This finding was evidenced by the four case studies and is also supported by the results of Collective Impact collaborations occurring around Australia (see here for example).

A Leadership Role for Local Government

Dialogue participants generally saw local government as being ideally positioned to play a leading role in advancing place-based community governance. Whilst councils must operate within legislative limits, around Australia there is little to stop them promoting and supporting collective action, as well as devolving substantial powers and functions to local communities. And they can work with communities to establish new local organisations with the potential to take collective action to a higher level, as in the case of the Waratah Community Board and tourism group.

However, all this begs the question of the extent to which these opportunities are being followed through. It also raises the question of whether it is time to introduce a statutory community right to instigate a local entity with powers and resources devolved from its 'parent' council. Why must communities wait for councils to muster the will and courage?

Are local councils functioning effectively as democratic institutions? If not, why?

Reforms across the local government sector in Australia in recent years have increased community engagement to ensure that local strategic plans better reflect community aspirations and needs. Arguably, this engagement has, at times, gone beyond 'intelligence gathering' and entered the domain of participative democratic practice. But many Dialogue participants questioned whether community input and priorities were then faithfully reflected in council programs and specific decisions.

Do councils wear the cloak of community democracy only when convenient?

There was a widespread view that councils are often reluctant to see beyond their own concerns about the dominance of state governments and the limits placed on their autonomy, role and capacity (whether real or perceived); or that they spend too little time considering their democratic mandate, focusing instead on the detail of service delivery. It would seem that many councils – or at least many of those councillors and managers who currently wield power – remain wedded to a more or less rigid application of representative democracy, with little interest in considering more participative practices and community-led arrangements.

This situation is problematic for local government as a sector given on the one hand the largely successful experiences of those councils that have experimented with more participatory democracy; and on the other, the widely expressed concern about excessive state dominance and interference. Many citizens want more opportunities to participate in decision-making, and building increased community trust and support would seem to be a pre-requisite for strengthening local government's status and independence.

What are the key areas in which local government needs to improve its performance as a champion and enabler of place-based governance and local democracy?

There was a strong view that councils could make more use of their power to integrate, collaborate and convene as a way of expressing their democratic mandate and harnessing the advantages of *place* and *identity*. While this power is clearly evident in numerous examples of current practice, it seems insufficiently understood by many councils who believe they have to wait for some sort of higher-level imprimatur, or believe they lack the resources required.

If councils are to be champions and enablers of place-based community governance they need to grasp and apply this unique power more often and foster collaborative processes grounded in the strengths of their communities. While some forms of democratic engagement require considerable resourcing by councils, at least initially (as did Melbourne's People's Panel), many can rely largely on the passion and drive of community members and groups: councils often need do little more than press 'go'.

Contributions to the Dialogue also suggest that local government needs to make more use of alliances with other stakeholders to project the interests of communities and places to federal and state governments and influence their agendas and decisions. For example, councils and communities could be working together more closely to advocate for legislative change that would strengthen neighbourhood planning frameworks and enhance their collective power to shape local places.

While state-based and Australian local government associations are key advocates, there is clearly a view that much more could and should be done by councils, working through strategic partnerships and regional organisations.

What do you see as good examples of sound practice and innovation in this field?

Over the course of the Dialogue, contributors cited a substantial number of examples of councils undertaking engagement activities, including the case studies presented earlier and several Collective Impact projects. Undoubtedly there are many others, but as discussed previously, few appear to challenge the boundaries of 'conventional' representative democracy. (Examples of international experience can be found on the [LogoNet website](#)).

Conclusion

People relate to the places to which they are connected, usually a neighbourhood, a suburb or town. Place is instrumental in defining the sense of identity individuals hold as well as their sense of wellbeing. There is a growing recognition that people want more influence over the places they occupy; an opportunity to shape their surroundings and be part of the decisions that affect them. In a way, this is a return to a more localist, place-based approach that preceded the rise of centralised government.

However, this localism is not only about the institution of local government; it is about local communities. The focus on local government arises because of the unique opportunity the sector has to foster a more community-led approach; to devolve power to neighbourhoods and groups and involve communities in decisions.

And while the LogoNet Dialogue has revealed some challenges and barriers, it has also shown that none of these are insurmountable where there is a determination to partner with communities and genuinely strengthen participative democratic practice. Local councils have the power to convene, integrate and collaborate; to empower the collective to build communities. Yet many councils remain wedded to the strict model of representative democracy and ...*pre-occupied with the burdens of state centralism.*[xii]

A growing number of councils are responding – in different ways – to the rewarding challenge of fostering community-led governance, but many still lack the courage or willingness to do so. A catalyst is needed to allow communities and citizens to reclaim power over the local and end the waiting.

At the time of writing this Report there are reviews of local government and its prevailing legislation happening in several Australian jurisdictions (see here for a brief summary of these). To stimulate an agenda of devolution and localism, the time has surely come to confer a legislative right for communities and neighbourhoods to initiate the establishment of local entities with some real decision-making authority. The New Zealand model of Community Boards has been considered from time to time, but so far always with a negative response. A fresh look with an open mind is overdue.

Attachment A

Future of Local Government Conference, May 2017 DECLARATION[xiii]

The need for change

This declaration rests on a belief that the state of the nation and the health of our society depend on community-driven action in the neighbourhood, not just decisions made in parliaments or boardrooms.

Across the world people are concerned about the apparent inability of governments, business and public institutions to address the economic, social and environmental challenges of the 21st Century. Our present ways of thinking and governing are neither coping with the pace of change nor meeting citizens' expectations. There is an urgent need for a fresh approach and responsive leadership.

In some ways Australia remains the 'lucky country' but here too we are struggling with economic upheaval, rising inequality, loss of social cohesion, increased rates of mental illness and serious environmental threats, notably climate change. Many Australians are losing faith in our basic democratic institutions and withdrawing from active participation in civic and cultural life. Our reputation as an inclusive, tolerant and compassionate society is under threat.

It's time to explore a new model of governance, one based on a re-energised civil society that draws on the strength and resourcefulness of people working together in diverse local and regional communities – a **localist** response.

The role of local government

Australia's system of government must continue to evolve to meet the challenges of the 21st Century, and it must evolve more quickly. This requires action by all levels of government. Federal and State governments need to rethink their roles, but they cannot and should not try to solve all the problems facing our country on their own. Many of the solutions can only be found within communities, and central governments must respect and leave space for local action and innovation.

Local government has made a good start in addressing these issues but must work hard to build on its achievements. Councils have a unique mandate to support, represent and give voice to 'communities of place'. They can provide an ideal platform for governments at all levels to strengthen their engagement with communities – and there is also a real opportunity to bring about a renaissance in local government itself. But the world is changing fast: democratic legitimacy and trust must be earned.

Key principles

To play a valued and effective role in a new system of community-based governance, councils need the legislative flexibility and scope to take further steps along the road to localism. They should:

- Have the courage to embrace the future and take informed risks to bring about necessary change

- Learn how to be community led, making space for communities to take action themselves, and responding positively to local initiatives

- Deepen their understanding of communities, listening to all their people and engaging with them in new and different ways that reflect community diversity ('Dadirri' deep listening, understanding and communication)

- Empower citizens through participatory and deliberative democracy, including community boards, precinct committees, cooperatives, citizens juries and others

- Embrace new ways of working to ensure that local needs are met through joined-up planning and services

- Forge more local and regional partnerships that address issues and drive change at community, state and federal levels

- Promote local networks, co-production of goods and services, and moves to 'reclaim the Commons'.

In this way we can create a 'New Story' – a narrative of change built on the strengths and uniqueness of each community and place. Local government can provide the foundations for change. It can lead the process of transformation through good governance and sound administration, reinvigorating faith in democracy and citizenship. It can facilitate new forms of community-centred, bottom-up governance that inspire the confidence and active participation of citizens. It can unleash community resources and help ensure our future wellbeing.

First Steps

To make a difference and help 'reinvent the future' local government must be 'bold and brave for change'. We urge councils individually and collectively to:

- Endorse the principles underlying this Declaration

- Consider how their own roles and approach to community leadership may need to change, and what additional skills and capacity may be required

- Establish collaborative regional and national networks to share experience with other councils and communities

- Invite citizens to become partners in framing a 'New Story' for the local area, town, city or region

- 'Map' the energy of the groups and networks that make up our communities (Asset-Based Community Development)

- Work with local communities to develop action plans that address their differing needs and opportunities, and agree ways to measure progress

- Commit to collaboration with other councils, State and Federal governments, business and civil society as an essential way of working

- Adopt a decentralised model for their own activities, including place-based planning and service delivery, and devolving decision-making to communities.

Attachment B

From the Frontline:
Local Government, Devolution and Local Power[xiv]

In August 2018 LogoNet commenced its *From the Frontline* initiative, seeking the responses of people working at the 'frontline' in local government to a series of questions exploring the relationships between councils and their communities.

From the Frontline sought to address the LogoNet Dialogue's aim of stimulating fresh thinking on effective place-based governance and local democracy, and also drew on the 2017 Future of Local Government Declaration. However, it recognised that while many people in the local government sector would like to participate in these discussions, they often simply don't have the time to attend forums or write articles. *From the Frontline* allowed them to contribute short responses to key questions on how councils could develop their relationships with local communities. These responses were then collated into a set of summary papers to reflect current views in the sector, inform decision-makers and help set directions for ongoing LogoNet initiatives.

The first three *From the Frontline* questions were distributed to LogoNet contacts in the period from August to November 2018. The questions were also included in the *LogoNet News*, placed on the LogoNet website, and publicised in social media. The intervals between the questions allowed responses from the first question to help shape the second, which in turn influenced the third.

Question 1: How can local governments improve trust and openness in their relationships with the community?

Responses highlighted the key markers of good relationships, including factors such as transparency, open communication, engagement and real community empowerment, as well as the bad. The latter included tokenistic consultation, the gap between some councillors and their constituents and the poor perception of local government in some communities.

A wide range of proposals for action were put forward. These included improving communication and information flows, strengthening transparency and accountability, building strong two-way partnerships between councils and communities – including devolution of power, and improving the delivery of services.

The summary paper concluded simply that "many of the solutions to the question of how to improve trust and openness in the relationship between Local Government and the community lie in councils demonstrating all the basic elements of good governance".

Question 2: To what extent should councils share decision-making with their communities? What methods should they use? Can you describe any examples of this being done successfully?

Question 2 was designed to address some of the themes that emerged in the responses to the first question, seeking feedback on how far shared decision-making should be taken and the methods that should be used. Responses showed widespread support for councils taking

a proactive approach, though some limitations were also nominated. These included recognising the most appropriate decisions to share, the importance of adapting processes to suit specific communities, councils and issues, and also taking steps to ensure the involvement of minority, disadvantaged and disengaged groups.

Several ways of implementing shared decision-making were suggested including, for example, an evolutionary approach to the development of shared decision-making protocols, a critical component of which is information provision. The appointment of committees, boards and panels, the use of surveys, the creation of forums, focus groups, community juries and "traditional" face-to-face meetings were all seen as appropriate to varying degrees.

All this suggested growing support for devolving some decision-making to the community. The summary paper concluded: "we may be moving towards a democratic partnership in which we want elected officials to bring a commitment to sharing power in the interests of what we now see as a more legitimate and socially beneficial decision-making arrangement."

Question 3: Is it time for local government to lead democratic change and commit to devolving and authentically sharing decision-making power with the community? If so, can Australian councils adopt the sorts of formal, whole-of-council approaches being used elsewhere and if not, why not?

Question 3 explored further the opportunities for councils to devolve power to the community identified in the responses to Question 2. Responses to Question 3 generally agreed that it is time for local government to lead the process of sharing power and devolving decision-making, though they also nominated some issues which will need to be addressed if councils are to take a leadership role.

Some identified the practical benefits of devolved decision-making, but the majority proposed more philosophical reasons, for example, the pressing need to address the community's increasing distrust of political leaders and governance systems. Another factor is the rate of technological, social and economic change, which is making traditional concentrations of authority and models decision-making irrelevant and inappropriate, but at the same time providing new opportunities for the community to participate directly in decision-making.

There was also recognition that the capacity of both councils and communities to participate in devolved decision-making processes needs to be improved. Small councils, isolated and disadvantaged communities need to be supported and the underlying inequalities addressed if the devolution process is to be completely authentic.

While there was limited discussion of the concept of councils adopting devolved decision-making on a formal, organisation-wide basis, there was general support for councils drawing on processes which have already been adopted successfully elsewhere. While several practical measures were proposed a number of potential obstacles were also identified, including the erosion of council autonomy by state governments which has reduced the scope for decision-making at the local level. However, as the summary paper concluded:

Despite these challenges …the enthusiasm for the principle that councils should authentically share power with their local communities has been evident throughout the responses to all three questions. It's time, it seems, for genuine devolved decision-making.

Attachment C

Dialogue Directory

Major written contributions listed by title:

- Adelaide Dialogue Roundtable, 8 March 2018
- Australia's First Community Board?
- Brisbane Dialogue Roundtable, 8 February 2018
- Empowering Citizens through Open Government – an approach to thinking global and acting local
- From the Frontline – Local Government, Devolution and Local Power
- From the Frontline Question 1: How can local governments improve trust and openness in their relationships with the community?
- From the Frontline Question 2: Sharing decision-making with the community
- From the Frontline Question 3: Committing to Devolved and Authentic Decision-Making
- Good News and Bad News? Some thoughts on the NSW audit of council reporting on service delivery
- Insights from the Productivity Commission on the governance and performance of Local Government in Australia
- Like the Phoenix, it is time for Local Government to renew and regenerate itself
- Local Councils, Legitimacy and Place-Based Governance: Part 1 – On the One Hand
- Local Councils, Legitimacy and Place-Based Governance: Part 2 – On the Other
- Localism – A Many Facetted Thing!
- LogoNet Sydney Roundtable with Dr Jonathan Carr-West
- Melbourne Roundtable on National Agendas for Local Government
- Neighbourhood Planning: Can We Empower Communities: Prof. Mike Gibson presentation
- NSW Dialogue Roundtable, 21 February 2018
- Open Government Partnership National Action Plan Consultations
- Reflections on Localism
- Re-imagining Community Councils in Canada
- Some Fresh Thinking from Britain and New Zealand
- Submission to the draft Open Local Government Action Plan 2018-2020
- Submission to the Western Australian Local Government Act Review (Phase 1)
- Sydney Dialogue Roundtable, 21 February 2018

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