

# Systems of local government

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All six Australian states and the Northern Territory have systems of elected local government that derive their existence, boundaries, functions and powers from their constitutions and state legislation. (The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) is effectively a city-state, with no separate local governments – see [Chapter 24](#).) The federal constitution makes no mention of this pervasive local third tier of administration. Yet the 537 local governments across the country play significant national democratic roles in two important respects. First, municipal councils reflect people’s aspirations for decentralised governance, so that the more than 5,000 locally elected members can represent the voice of communities, guiding decision-making, setting longer-term strategies for their areas and contributing to national agendas. Second, councils provide a mechanism for the responsive delivery of essential local and regional infrastructure and services.

Their roles and responsibilities vary to some extent from state to state. However, in general their core functions comprise the provision of local infrastructure and municipal services, spatial planning and development control, place and environmental management, recreation facilities, and (sometimes) potable water supply and sewerage services, plus various other aspects of community wellbeing. Compared to other developed countries this range of functions is quite limited.

## What does democracy require of Australian local government?

- ◆ Democratic local government should be enabled and entrenched constitutionally and in relevant legislation.
- ◆ Local voting systems should accurately reflect levels of community support for candidates and should be accessible to new citizens wishing to run for election.
- ◆ Local government areas and institutions should effectively express local and community identities and reflect communities of place.
- ◆ Principles of subsidiarity should apply and, within the constraints set out by state legislation, local government should be an independent centre of decision-making with enough financial resources to be able to make meaningful choices on behalf of citizens.

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- ◆ Councillors should understand their constituents and be involved in community engagement on a regular basis.
- ◆ Councillors should be subject to effective scrutiny and should be publicly answerable to local citizens and the media.

## Recent developments

The chapter begins by reviewing two recent key developments – changes in local democracy, and the impact on municipalities of the COVID-19 pandemic. Next, the SWOT analysis summarises the overall strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats affecting local government. The later parts of the chapter look in more depth at three more detailed issues for local democratic quality.

### Electoral democracy

Across Australia local government elections are conducted under a universal residential franchise. In most areas (except for the whole of Queensland) there are also supplementary voting rights for non-resident property owners, an internationally unusual provision in a liberal democracy. In most cases elections are conducted or overseen by independent electoral commissions, and where councillors are elected by means of wards, rather than across the local government area as a whole (so-called ‘at large’ elections), there are usually rules for the delineation of ward boundaries aimed at ensuring ‘one vote, one value’. Compulsory voting (covered in [Chapter 5](#)) applies to local government elections in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, urban municipalities in the Northern Territory and, only since June 2022, Tasmania. Typically, compulsory voting has produced voter turnouts of 70–80 per cent or more. In South Australia and Western Australia voting in local government elections remains voluntary, with turnouts around 30–35 per cent. In Tasmania, however, even with voluntary voting, the turnout had climbed from similar levels to almost 60 per cent. This appeared to reflect a number of factors, including the introduction of universal mail-in local voting for all citizens in 1996 ([Zvulun, 2010](#)), greater media interest in local government (likely due in part to the popular election of all mayors and deputy mayors), a strong sense of regional and local identity, and effective pre-election awareness campaigns.

Local government councillors make up a significant proportion of elected members across all levels of government. [Figure 26.1](#) shows the number of elected members by level of government and jurisdiction. In 2015, there were approximately 5,060 local councillors in Australia (this number has since decreased as a result of municipal amalgamations in New South Wales, and persistent pressures from state governments to reduce councillor numbers generally). Except for the City of Brisbane, local governments across Australia are limited by statute to no more than 15 councillors – and very few have even that many. This reflects the neoliberal ‘board of directors’ model of the role councillors should play (see below). As a result, councillor to population ratios are high by international standards and in large cities can reach 1:20,000 or more. Moreover, in all jurisdictions except Queensland councillors are nominally part-time and generally lack dedicated staff support.

**Figure 26.1: Australian elected representatives at all levels of government**

Area	Population (in 2021, millions)	Federal (2023)			All state/ territory (2024)	Local (2015)
		House	Senate	Total		
New South Wales	8.07	46	12	68	135	1,494
Victoria	6.53	38	12	50	128	631
Queensland	5.16	30	12	42	93	530
Western Australia	2.66	16	12	28	95	1,252
South Australia	1.78	10	12	22	69	716
Tasmania	0.56	5	12	17	40	280
Northern Territory	0.23	2	2	4	25	157
Australian Capital Territory	0.45	3	2	5	25	
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	150	76	<b>236</b>	<b>585</b>	<b>5,060</b>

Source: This figure updates a table from Su Fei Tan (2020) 'Local democracy at work: An analysis of local government representatives and democracy in NSW', from which the last column ('Local 2015') is taken. The House seat allocations are from the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC, 2023). The numbers for state legislators are from Wikipedia (2024a).

Note: Queensland and the two territories have no upper houses (and so fewer representatives). Green shading shows that ACT Assembly is both the territory and the local government.

There are approximately 10 times as many councillors as elected state politicians, and 20 times as many as federal legislators per state. These councillors represent a great diversity of places and communities and govern very different kinds of organisations, ranging from metropolitan municipalities with populations of several hundred thousand that offer a wide array of services and have substantial resources, to rural and remote local governments with very small populations living in geographically large areas. Councillors are also expected to play diverse and sometimes conflicting roles, including representing the interests of their individual ward electorates and the municipal community as a whole, strategic and corporate planning and policy-making, ensuring good governance, and scrutinising the performance of both each other and their organisation, in particular the chief executive.

## The impact of COVID-19

Australian local governments were severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and their limited resources were stretched by efforts to support local economies and communities. Some state governments (but controversially not the federal government, which allocated billions to the private and community sectors) provided substantial financial assistance to help maintain employment within the sector. The pandemic obliged local governments to make far-reaching and costly changes to modes of service delivery and to close facilities where people gather, including customer service centres, libraries, child-care services, leisure facilities and community centres. Council meetings had to move online and wherever possible staff worked from home, requiring action to strengthen their IT infrastructure and improve communications skills. Large numbers of staff were re-assigned to other roles or required to take unpaid leave; some were retrenched.

In addition, many councils introduced programs to support local businesses and community wellbeing, including action to minimise the adverse impact of isolation and loneliness.

The outcomes of the pandemic also changed the demographic profile of local government areas. The Australian Bureau of Statistics ([ABS, 2021](#)) reported that in July, August and September of 2020 Australia's capital cities experienced their highest net loss of population due to internal migration since records began. As more people moved to working-from-home arrangements, some gained greater freedom of choice in where they could live. The high cost of living in the major metropolitan areas has long provided an incentive to consider moving to attractive coastal or rural locations, notably for retirees and people looking for lower-cost housing.

In addition, the pandemic also saw state governments flex their constitutional muscles in terms of their sweeping powers and autonomy in matters of public health. This in turn led to a more assertive stance generally in the states' relations with the Commonwealth, and in the exercise of their authority over local government and civil society.

## Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis

Current strengths	Current weaknesses
Effective guarantees of democratic local government are included in the state constitutions of Queensland, Victoria and to a lesser extent South Australia.	There has been no constitutional protection for democratic local government at all in New South Wales. Even where local government's existence and democratic status are assured, state constitutions do not limit states' power to intervene in local affairs. There has been no recognition of local government in the Australian federal constitution.
Compulsory voting in local elections means that turnout has been high at local government elections in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and urban areas in the Northern Territory.	Voluntary voting in Western Australia and South Australia has resulted in low voter turnouts.
Independent electoral commissions conduct or oversee most local government elections and may also set ward boundaries.	States can shape or manipulate various aspects of local elections through local government Acts, for example, by maintaining/strengthening property based voting, determining the type of voting and numbers of councillors overall and per ward, and ruling out popularly elected mayors.
Councillors exhibit a strong sense of commitment to their communities and in most cases carry out their roles on a part-time, voluntary basis.	Councillors have not been very socially diverse, with older professional men markedly over-represented. Citizens from lower income socioeconomic groups, young people, women, Indigenous communities, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and so on, continue to be under-represented on councils.

Local governments have generally been responsive and creative in meeting their community's needs, reflecting the knowledge and understanding councillors have of their communities.	The sheer diversity of local governments has made it difficult to identify common strategic and policy objectives – particularly when it comes to engaging with state and federal governments. Also there may be tensions between councillors and their federal and state level counterparts.
In all states local government Acts provide for elected councillors to determine strategic plans and policies in consultation with their communities, to set budgets and to monitor organisational performance in the provision of infrastructure and services.	Democratic decision-making can be challenged by institutional structures that empower the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) as head of the organisation, often with only limited oversight by councillors of their day-to-day management. The legislated role of mayors has typically been quite limited. State ministers for local government have significant 'reserve powers' to intervene in councils' affairs.
Over the past 40 years Australian local government has generally enjoyed a sound working relationship with Commonwealth governments and, until recently, a regular 'seat at the table' in key federal forums.	The recent abolition of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and the establishment in its place of the 'National Cabinet' (from which local government was initially excluded and has only limited involvement) has weakened local government's capacity and engagement in intergovernment relations.
<b>Future opportunities</b>	<b>Future threats</b>
Under their powers of general competence, local governments have scope to fill policy and program vacuums. For example, many have demonstrated a keen interest and willingness to address challenges posed by climate change.	The adverse impacts of COVID-19 continued to threaten the financial sustainability of councils in 2022, as they lost income streams while providing costly support to their communities throughout the pandemic, with potential longer effects.
There are opportunities to further leverage municipalities' position as the level of government closest to the people, by developing stronger community engagement to reinforce local democracy and decision-making.	Community trust in and support for the institutions of local government remain relatively low and may be further weakened by perceptions of poor performance in meeting local needs, inappropriate behaviour by councillors, and under-representation of women, young people and minority groups.
Continuing reform and innovation processes under way across the Australian jurisdictions provide new opportunities to strengthen local democracy and representation, and to enhance local government's status, for example, by introducing compulsory voting in South and Western Australia, both states that already have postal voting for local elections.	The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the re-assertion of states' primacy and control within their jurisdictions, perhaps weakening local government as a democratic force.
The election in May 2022 of a Labor federal government offered opportunities to restore and strengthen federal-local relations and local government's involvement in inter-government relations more broadly.	Failure to make the most of those opportunities and/or the return of a Liberal-National (conservative) government after only one or two terms could see a long-term decline in local government's status and role.

The rest of this chapter looks in more detail at the structural influences on local government when engaging with other tiers of policy-making; how councillors and mayors represent their communities; and the evolving agenda of possible reforms.

# Local government and other tiers of government

Sub-state governments are not mentioned in the 1901 Australian federal constitution. In 1974 and 1988 referenda were held to remedy that omission, in 1988 with an explicit requirement for states to entrench systems of democratic local government. However, both fell well short of the required majority support. Nevertheless, to date lack of federal constitutional recognition has not prevented direct and indirect funding of municipalities by the Commonwealth (federal) government, nor inclusion of local government representatives in a range of intergovernment forums – with the proviso that both depend on the goodwill of the Commonwealth and states.

Local government does enjoy varying degrees of recognition and protection under state constitutions, although in most cases those constitutional provisions can be altered simply by an Act of state parliament without a referendum. The form of such recognition varies widely. Typically, constitutions require the establishment of elected local governments across all or part of the state and empower the state parliament to pass laws as it sees fit for the boundaries, institutions, election and operations of those entities. Some provide additional protections for local democracy. Queensland requires a referendum to be held before a bill may be passed that would abolish the system of local government as a whole, and in South Australia such a bill requires an absolute majority of both houses of parliament. Also in Queensland, dissolution of an individual local government area must be ratified by the Legislative Assembly (LA). Victoria's constitution defines local government as a 'distinct and essential tier' of government and dismissal of an elected council requires an Act of Parliament (importantly, a constitutional provision that may only be changed by referendum).

However, none of the state constitutions guarantees democratic local government wherever that may be the people's expressed wish, and the New South Wales' constitution envisages that municipal councils may be either elected or 'duly appointed'. Nowhere does local government enjoy specific constitutionally entrenched powers or revenues, while both local government Acts and other legislation (notably that governing land-use/development planning) often include provisions that limit the rights of communities to exercise meaningful control over their local affairs.

The effectiveness of democratic local government may be constrained by state-imposed limits on revenue-raising and the spectre of ministerial oversight and intervention (see [Chapter 15](#)). New South Wales has had a system of 'rate-pegging' (setting an annual limit on increases in local property taxes) for more than four decades; Victoria introduced a similar system of 'rate-capping' in 2015; and in 2021 South Australia introduced statutory oversight of councils' financial strategies.

The wide-ranging powers of state local government ministers to oversee and intervene in the affairs of municipalities can have both positive and negative effects on local democracy. Sometimes councils may become dysfunctional when councillors are irrevocably divided on key issues. In such cases intervention in the form of an advisor appointed by the minister, or a performance improvement order, or in extreme cases a short period of suspension with the appointment of a temporary administrator, may prove helpful. However, when such interventions become commonplace and procedural constraints on ministers are minimal or non-existent, democratic values are at risk.

## Weaker federal engagement

Federal and state constitutions and laws have very little to say about intergovernmental relations. What emerged, however, in the late 20th century was a framework of ministerial councils and other intergovernment forums and mechanisms, mostly established administratively rather than by legislation. Local government became part of that framework during the 1980s, and from 1992–2020 the president of the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) was a member of the peak Council of Australian Governments (COAG) alongside the prime minister (PM) and first ministers of the states and territories. Local government was also represented on numerous ministerial councils and intergovernment committees. However, in recent years its involvement diminished, particularly under conservative Coalition federal governments, with less federal-local cooperation on policy issues and the Commonwealth's focus firmly on grants for favoured projects as opposed to increased general-purpose funding.

In April 2020 COAG was summarily disbanded by then PM Morrison as part of his response to the COVID-19 pandemic ([Hitch, 2020](#)). Morrison claimed that COAG had been cumbersome and ineffectual; he wanted a streamlined operation with a narrower agenda – a 'National Cabinet' consisting only of first ministers, that would meet frequently (monthly or even fortnightly), mostly online and 'behind closed doors' with fewer advisors in attendance. ALGA was excluded, albeit with a seat on a new 'National Federation Reform Council', which would meet annually.

The return of a federal Labor government in May 2022 brought some significant improvements to local government's position. Prime Minister Albanese (a former federal minister for local government) announced that the ALGA would attend one of four National Cabinet meetings each year, with local government issues firmly on the agenda. Also, his government would re-establish the Australian Council of Local Government (an Albanese initiative in 2008, abolished by the Coalition in 2013) to facilitate closer Commonwealth-local relations. Much has depended, however, on local government's collective performance in formulating and developing coherent, evidence-based policy positions, as opposed to simply advocating its perceived need for increased federal support.

## Reassertion of state primacy and control

The impact of COVID-19, weaker engagement with the Commonwealth and the abolition of COAG were accompanied by a re-assertion of state primacy and control over local government. As noted earlier, Victoria has joined New South Wales in capping annual rates increases ([Essential Services Commission, Victoria, 2021](#)) and South Australia introduced a somewhat similar arrangement ([Drew, 2018](#); [Riddle and Johns, 2020](#)). Several states have implemented land-use planning 'reforms' that transfer decision-making authority from municipalities to state ministers and/or their appointees. Some have subjected councillors to more demanding codes of conduct and complaints procedures; while elected councils that exhibit failures (real or perceived) to deliver good governance may be exposed to additional avenues for state intervention, suspension or dismissal.

Having given democratic local government a significant degree of autonomy plus increased scope through powers of general competence, and watched the emergence of large, well-resourced metropolitan and regional municipalities (ironically, often created by state-imposed amalgamations), some state governments now appear concerned that their erstwhile 'underling' looms as a competitor for status and resources. Within a few decades Australia will

have a string of local governments with populations around 400,000 or more, big budgets, extensive professional and technical resources, significant international links around issues such as climate change, and undoubted capacity to partner directly with the Commonwealth on major initiatives. Without controls, municipal rates and charges might impede increases in state revenues, while stronger local democracy might disrupt the states' ability to determine infrastructure and development priorities and to promote preferred business investment ([de Vries, 2021](#)).

## Councillors and mayors representing communities

Research in New South Wales showed that councillors felt a strong sense of commitment to their communities ([Tan, 2020](#)). In interviews, councillors identified several different but often overlapping reasons for standing for election. The primary factor was the desire to make a difference and improve the place where they live. Many spoke of pride in their hometown or the influence of family as the main source of their motivation. Some came to the attention of their local mayor through their involvement in the community and were subsequently asked to stand for election.

Despite this deep level of commitment it must also be noted that, in terms of representative democracy, in most cases the collective profile of councillors has not reflected that of the communities they represent. There has not been a national census of councillors, and data from state agencies has not always been available. The studies that have been carried out indicate that councillors are predominantly older, male professionals. In the NSW study councillors interviewed tended to possess similar characteristics in terms of age, socioeconomic class, profession and levels of education. This can be partly attributed to the structural features of local government and the resultant demands on councillors who are expected to be part-time and to work on a largely voluntary basis (except in Queensland).

Women continue to be under-represented ([Wong and Zierke, 2022](#)). In Victoria, the 2020 local government elections saw 272 female councillors (44 per cent) elected, the highest percentage nationally, but still below the state's 50 per cent target. In Tasmania, following the 2018 local government elections women made up 38 per cent of mayors, 45 per cent of deputy mayors, and 40 per cent of councillors. In 2019, 41 per cent of councillors elected in Western Australia's local government elections were women. Prior to the December 2021 local elections, women represented less than a third of all councillors and mayors serving on councils in NSW, although that number subsequently rose to nearly 40 per cent. In South Australia, a record percentage of women stood for and were elected to local government in the 2018 elections, but the percentage of female councillors remained little more than a third.

Decision-making processes are another key issue for local democracy. Legislative frameworks for decision-making by local governments typically align well with ideals of deliberative democracy. These include the need to consider a diversity of interests, the imperative for elected representatives to find compromises and the requirement to make well-informed decisions through a process of deliberation. However, while formal decision-making happens at council meetings, chief executives evidently exercise a great deal of power in shaping

decision-making because they provide the material required by part-time councillors to reach decisions. Moreover, the agenda and accompanying business papers for council meetings are often very lengthy, and the sheer volume of information councillors are expected to read makes it more difficult for them to reach decisions in the best interests of their community.

Tensions between representative and participatory democracy pose particular challenges at the local level. Local government is ideally placed for facilitating citizen involvement in decision-making (Christensen, 2019). Typically, councillors and staff have a deep understanding of their communities and strong ties with their constituents, and over recent years there has been a proliferation of community engagement practice in Australian local governments, for several reasons. First, there has been a quest for better and more democratic outcomes resulting from participatory processes, and to respond to increasing demands for engagement from citizens. Second, governments have sought increased legitimacy through these practices, in an environment of community activism and increasing distrust of government. Third, the advent of technology has made it easier and more cost-effective for governments to engage with their constituents and stakeholders.

Thus local governments' knowledge, understanding and close ties with their communities lend themselves to the implementation of participatory, democratic decision-making. However, how this aligns with the statutory role of councillors and the system of representative democracy varies from council to council. In some cases councillors are very supportive of the need for further community engagement and see these processes as a way for them to interact more deeply and meaningfully with their constituents. In other cases, they see wider participation as unnecessary and a challenge to their status as an elected representative of community interests.

## **Electing mayors (or not)**

A related issue for debate concerns the status and election of mayors. Across Australia, mayors combine ceremonial, political and to some extent quasi-executive roles. All local government Acts now describe the mayor as the political leader of the council and the local community, with especially important representative responsibilities. In recent years, amendments to several Acts have given mayors some additional authority, but except for Queensland all fall well short of creating 'executive' mayors: management remains firmly in the hands of the chief executive. As a general rule, mayors cannot exercise power in their own right and many find it difficult to exercise strong, consistent leadership. Commonly, they are elected indirectly by their fellow councillors rather than by the people and must be re-elected every one or two years. In Queensland, Tasmania and the urban areas of the Northern Territory, all mayors are popularly elected, as are a majority in South Australia and around 20 per cent in each of New South Wales and Western Australia. The latter three states have allowed individual municipalities to determine how the mayor was elected, but popular election did not come with any enhanced role or authority. In Victoria, popular election of mayors has been specifically precluded, except for the City of Melbourne, where it has been mandatory – as for all capital city Lord Mayors.

## Continuing processes of reform

In all states local government has been subject to seemingly continuous processes of reform. These have compounded since the 1980s in response to changing ideas and expectations about how government is meant to operate, notably as a result of the widespread adoption of ‘new public management’ models. The primary aim of most reforms in local government has been to increase efficiency and effectiveness in service provision. At the same time, local government’s remit has expanded from a narrow focus on property-related services (‘roads, rates and rubbish’) to encompass varied roles in planning, environmental management, economic development and community wellbeing. However, this model of a diverse range of activities and service delivery being determined by a citizen-elected body and administered by a single administrative organisation has not been paralleled by still-siloed state or federal agencies. Perhaps as a result, the complexities and capabilities within local government are poorly understood and undervalued by central governments, and this hampers effective intergovernment relations.

State and territory governments all amended their local government Acts between 1989 and 1995. Since then Queensland introduced a new Act in 2009, the Northern Territory in 2019 and Victoria in 2020. Other states have made (or began making) substantial amendments to their Acts. A key outcome of legislative change has been the granting of ‘powers of general competence’ to local governments, giving them more discretion over the roles they play and operational matters. For example, the *Victorian Local Government Act 2020* defines the role of a council as being to provide good governance in its municipal district for the benefit and wellbeing of the municipal community ([Wikipedia, 2024b](#)). It then provides that a council may perform any duties or functions or exercise any powers conferred on it by any Act, as well as any other functions that the council determines are necessary to enable it to perform its role, including some to be undertaken outside its municipal district.

The impact of these reforms on the role of councillors and on local democracy has been significant. In the case of NSW, historically the *Local Government Act 1919* identified the mayor as the ‘chief executive officer’, and the ‘town or shire clerk’ was in effect the chief administrative officer. In addition, the chief engineer and the health and building inspector also had their powers described in the legislation. The *Local Government Act 1993* (influenced by ‘new public management’ policy objectives) altered this arrangement, abolishing the town clerk position and establishing a General Manager/CEO who became the elected council’s sole employee, with powers to appoint all other staff and to manage the organisation and implement the council’s plans and policies more or less as she or he sees fit (subject to achieving the desired outcomes). For example, while councillors have input into and formally adopt the required 10-year community strategic plan, it then falls to the chief executive (and their staff) to fine-tune and implement the programs and activities necessary to achieve the plan’s goals and objectives. The role of being a councillor has thus changed from being in touch with the day-to-day functioning of the organisation to exercising ‘arms-length’ responsibilities for setting strategic and policy directions, adopting the budget and monitoring progress.

This shift in theory and practice has proved problematic. In a discussion of local government reform in the Northern Territory, Sanders (2013) documented the frustration and confusion experienced by councillors who, following a change in the legislation, were no longer able, nor were they permitted, to deal directly with staff. Instead, councillors were being told to direct their questions and concerns through council meetings to the central shire administration

and that appropriate directives would then be passed on. This denied councillors the direct relationship that they were used to. They felt that the new legislation was not meeting their needs and should be changed so that councillors and staff ‘can work together’ to attend to problems on a day-to-day basis. Further research is needed to establish the extent to which such concerns persist, but anecdotal evidence suggests they may still be widespread.

Moreover, the separation between policy and administration may sit uncomfortably with the realities of local representation. The 2013 report of the NSW Independent Local Government Review Panel (2013) noted that the role of a councillor is divided into two parts: as a member of the collective ‘governing body’ and as an ‘elected person’. The former was seen in terms of deliberative planning, resource allocation, policy development and performance monitoring, removed from everyday administration and akin to a board of directors. The latter involves community representation, leadership and communication: it is more clearly political and includes those functions that most councillors would regard as fundamental to meeting their constituents’ expectations and being re-elected. The Panel’s investigations suggested that amendments to the local government Act were necessary to explain these contrasting roles – and how they interrelate – more clearly. Legislative changes were also recommended to clarify the relationships between councillors, mayors and the chief executive. Amendments along these lines were subsequently implemented in 2016, but no research exists to confirm whether or not councillors fully understand the challenges and implications of reconciling their various responsibilities, as well as their relationships with the chief executive and senior management.

## Amalgamations

Another set of actions that directly impacts local democracy has been the structural reform of areas to amalgamate local governments or make boundary changes. Australian state and territory governments have long criticised small (in population and/or area) municipalities and claimed that larger organisations would be more efficient and effective, hence able to deliver better quality and a wider range of services. Several rounds of sweeping amalgamations occurred in the 1990s and early 2000s, except in Western Australia (see Figure 26.2). More recently, in 2016 the NSW government reduced the number of local government areas again from 152 to 128. In 2024 the Australian Local Government Association had 537 member councils, but a few may not have joined it (ALGA, 2024). Whether amalgamations have indeed resulted in efficiencies and cost-savings has remained hotly contested (Drew, Kortt and Dollery, 2013). An alternative view has been that in selected cases they can enhance local government’s ‘strategic capacity’ to play a stronger role on behalf of local communities in the wider system of government, and in that sense strengthen democracy (Aulich, Sansom and McKinlay, 2013).

Mergers of councils are often bitterly opposed by local residents and politicians affected. For example, responding to the announcement of amalgamations in NSW in 2015, the mayor of Woollahra in Sydney’s affluent eastern suburbs said her council would fight a forced merger with neighbouring Randwick and Waverley. ABC News (2015) quoted her as saying: ‘I don’t think people in Woollahra are going to roll over ... If we are forced [to amalgamate], that just reinforces the view that democracy is dead in New South Wales.’ Woollahra subsequently took their case to the High Court (Visentin, 2017). Resistance to forced mergers was typically based on a desire to retain the local character of an area, plus fears that larger areas would mean less local representation and advocacy, a weaker locality-specific voice with regard to land use planning decisions, and poorer or less appropriate services.

**Figure 26.2: The number of local councils in Australia, 1982–2012**

State/Territory	1982	1990	1995	2008	2012
New South Wales	175	176	177	152	152 *
Victoria	211	210	184	79	79
Western Australia	138	138	144	142	139
South Australia	127	n/a	119	68	68
Queensland	134	134	125	73	73
Tasmania	49	46	29	29	29
Northern Territory	6	22	63	16	16
<i>Total</i>	<i>840</i>	<i>726</i>	<i>841</i>	<i>559</i>	<i>556</i>

Source: Dollery, Kortt and Grant (2013) *Funding the Future: Financial Sustainability and Infrastructure Finance in Australian Local Government*, Sydney: The Federation Press, p.218.

Note: \* In 2016, amalgamations in NSW saw the number of councils reduced from 152 to 128.

The impact on local representation lies in the number of residents each councillor represents: amalgamated councils invariably have fewer elected members than the combined total of their predecessors. The consequences for local democracy are unclear, and there has been limited research on the subject (Aulich, Sansom and McKinlay, 2013). This can be attributed to several factors. First, the impact on local representation may not be that obvious or readily appreciated, and public concern may dissipate once a reduction in councillor numbers has been accepted as the new norm. Second, in some mergers specific measures were put in place to ensure that the perceived quality of local democracy was not unduly affected (for example, by implementing ward structures or establishing transition committees in affected communities). Third, the new, larger councils may have become more conscious of the importance of transparency and accountability and made improvements in these areas to offset their having fewer councillors.

## Conclusion

Local government offers citizens valuable opportunities to engage in democratic politics on issues that closely concern them and to directly experience making a difference, providing a seedbed for advancing democratic processes, engagement and understanding. Improving current performance might start with councils and states making concerted efforts to encourage a more diverse range of candidates to stand for office, thus achieving a mix of elected representatives that better reflects their community in terms of age, gender, socioeconomic status, and so on. Building the capacity of councillors to fulfil an expansive vision of their roles, responsibilities and how they fit within the local government system could also be a key element. Since local government is required to operate within the frameworks and constraints established by state and, to a lesser extent, federal governments, enhancing the value that those governments place on local democracy also remains vital. Strengthening the local base of Australia's democratic life will require commitment and collaboration across all three levels.

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