



# The Role and Future of Citizen Committees in Australian Local Government



newDEMOCRACY



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## Preface

One of the most important objectives of the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) is to support informed debate on key policy issues. We recognise that many councils and local government organisations are not always able to undertake sufficient background research to underpin and develop sound, evidence-based policy. ACELG's *Research Paper Series* seeks to address this deficit. Strengthening local democracy and exploring new ways of governing are ongoing challenges for the sector and so represent important elements of the ACELG research program.

This report, *The Role and Future of Citizen Committees in Australian Local Government*, will make an important contribution to the research series. It draws on the ACELG working paper on community governance and complements research currently place on representative democracy. It also draws on the knowledge of the research partners: Nillumbik Shire Council, Surf Coast Shire Council, Wyndham City Council and the newDemocracy Foundation.

As the report indicates, in the domain of community governance citizen committees can be one of the few mechanisms for sustained community input into local decision making, in contrast to many community engagement exercises.

We know this report will be of interest to many in local government around the country who are reviewing their committee structures and are interested in taking a more strategic approach to the support provided to committees and to improving their effectiveness.

Feedback is welcome on this paper. For more information or to provide feedback, please contact Stefanie Pillora, ACELG Program Manager, Research: [stefanie.pillora@acelg.org.au](mailto:stefanie.pillora@acelg.org.au).



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## Executive summary

Citizen committees are a widely utilised yet little explored form of public participation in Australian local government. Typically, citizen committees comprise volunteer citizens who meet regularly, face to face, and sometimes over extended periods of time, to provide councils with policy advice and place management related services.

This research aims to:

- offer an exploratory study of citizen committees in Australia local government
- examine the potential for citizen committees to support sustained community engagement that is representative of the broader community
- identify how citizen committees could be improved.

The project examines three Victorian councils with different demographic characteristics. One is regional, one is peri-urban and one is a growth area council. The analysis of evidence from the case study councils draws on relevant policy reports and research articles, qualitative interviews and focus groups with staff and citizen members, as well as a half-day workshop with the case study councils.

This report examines the role of committees, and the types of committees used. It situates these committees within the broader local government mandate of community governance. The experiences of the case study councils suggests that there are limits to generalising about the ways in which the citizen committee mechanism is used, since situational factors influence each local government's approach.

Key findings of the research are:

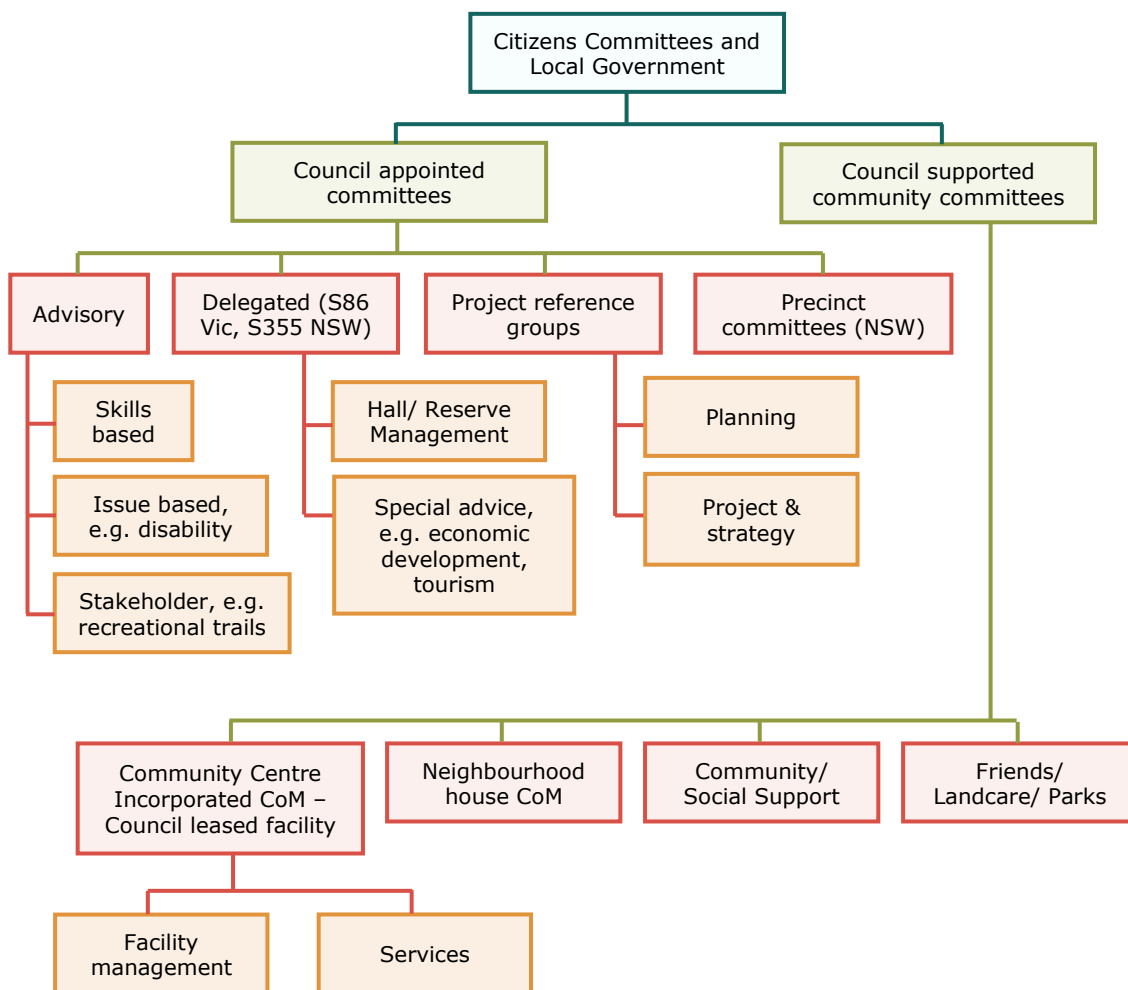
- Committees are a key element of councils' community engagement strategies.
- They predominantly service community and council needs, have limited influence and are not highly inclusive or representative.
- Those who are involved in the work of committees value them for multiple reasons, depending on their roles as members, officers or elected representatives.
- These parties have different interests in committees, and this may at times lead to misunderstandings and conflicts of interest.
- There are many factors influencing the effectiveness of citizen committees, and the report suggests ways of dealing with common issues.
- Committee sustainability and recruitment present challenges to the sector, given that many councils depend on them not only for consultation and decision making activities, but for public management of facilities.

The research concludes that citizen committees, both council-appointed, and incorporated non-for-profits, enable the sector to draw on a considerable resource from the community for advice, issue resolution and public management. Though other kinds of engagement have become more common, citizen committees

remain well established in local governance. They work best when there is a clear vision of their role within the council’s broader community governance approach, and when there is appropriate investment in capability building and group development. Good working relationships, clear points of contact and regular feedback are highly valued by members, as is the opportunity to work together with others to achieve an outcome for the public good.

Citizen committees have the potential to enhance the democratic capacity of councils and citizens, but this potential is not realised unless they are clearly integrated into and connected to broader activities in community governance.

**Figure 1: Citizens’ Committees types**







# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

The citizen committee is a widely used participatory mechanism that has received surprisingly little attention in discussions and literature on local community engagement. Yet these committees, composed of citizen volunteers, contribute significantly to councils' business, involving themselves in local governance issues and the management of community assets. Unlike most 'one-off' community engagement exercises, involving citizens voicing opinions on specific and immediate local issues, citizen committees are ongoing and in some cases may act as sites of sustained community governance.

The term 'citizen committees' as used in this report refers to a diverse range of committees, all of which meet regularly, as community volunteers or stakeholder representatives, serving a variety of remits. They come in many forms: advisory committees, selected and led by council, which provide input into issues and policy; delegated committees, appointed by council which undertake management of public facilities; not-for-profit incorporated committees of management working alongside councils to manage facilities and services through contract and management agreements; and grassroots committees such as 'friends' groups, which councils support because they believe they strengthen communities. Thus, officers and elected members in the majority of councils around Australia have ongoing contact with citizen committees.

## 1.2 Purpose of this report

This report discusses key findings of an empirical research project that explored the role and future of citizens' committees as vehicles for community engagement in Australian local government, building on an earlier pilot study. It draws on the experiences and perspective of staff, councillors and citizens from three diverse case study councils across Victoria: Nillumbik Shire, Surf Coast Shire and Wyndham City Council. In each local government the research explored how citizen committees currently function, and how they are connected to broader community engagement and governance agendas. The research also considers questions that arise from the case study councils' experience regarding the future of citizen committees.

The purpose of this report is both descriptive and analytical. It describes an area that has previously been undocumented and examines the experiences of the three councils to draw lessons for local governments across Australia. It is written for councillors, council officers, council managers, and citizen committee members, all of whom can have a positive effect on the workings of committees.

## 2 Project scope, approach and methods

### 2.1 Project scope

The project provides a 'snapshot' and investigation into citizen committees in three local government areas (LGAs) in Victoria. The project aims to contribute to the improved functioning of citizen committees as sites of public engagement in the context of community governance.

The project investigated the particular roles of citizen committees in each case study council. The research explored questions such as: What roles should citizen committees play in relation to other engagement activities that councils currently undertake? What are the implications of evidence that the public favours shorter, one-off engagements? What are the implications of evidence that the average age of volunteer members is increasing? How might committees be resourced more effectively? What are the real costs for councils in running them? Participants were asked to share their thinking about possible improvements such as capacity building and training. Their opinions were sought on possible modifications, from minor procedural modifications through to employing alternative methods of member selection, and committee redesign.

The project employed a qualitative methodology, including a literature review, interviews and focus groups and a half-day workshop with participants interested in citizen committees across Victoria. Project updates were made available through the Local Government Research Network.<sup>1</sup> (For more on methods and approach see the appendix).

The research conducted for this report did have some limitations. The research is restricted to case studies in Victoria, with limited reference to other jurisdictions. Owing to resource constraints it was not able to extend the research to other states. Invitations were made to organisations in a range of states to share reports and documentation of citizen committee experiences, but the response was limited. Legislative analysis, however, has been expanded to include other jurisdictions to enable comparative assessment of legislative frameworks.

### 2.2 Case study partners

The empirical research involved three case study local governments, which were selected for their diversity. Their experiences with committees should not be seen as representative of councils with similar demographics or characteristics.

**Nillimbik Shire** (population 62,000+) in Melbourne's east has an active tradition of participation, and is a highly engaged community. This engagement has been consistent through the Shire's history, with strong advocacy in favour of maintaining the peri-urban nature of the shire during the widespread mid-1990s local government amalgamation, later concern to protect the Shire's green wedge characteristics,<sup>2</sup> and an ongoing commitment by the council to its communities. A continuing agricultural tradition alongside suburbs, changes in demographics and land use, and experiences following the 2009 Black Saturday Bushfires<sup>3</sup> all inform policy and practice in regard to citizen committees.

1 See <<http://lgresearch.net.au/localgovcommittees>>.

2 A green wedge is defined by the Victorian Department of Planning and Community Development as 'non urban areas of metropolitan Melbourne that lie outside the Urban Growth Boundary' (DPCD 2011).

3 The 2009 Black Saturday Bushfires affected approximately 1.1 million acres of Victorian bushland and resulted in 173 deaths (Black Saturday Bushfires 2013).

Recent committees in this LGA, some initiated by council and some community-led groups include:

- an agricultural advisory committee which addressed a contentious sustainable agricultural rebate
- a new Family Centre project steering group which provided a user perspective on building design
- an arts acquisition advisory committee which advised on arts investment
- Community Bushfire Recovery Associations which supported affected communities and liaised with all levels of government throughout the recovery process.

**Surf Coast Shire** (population 26,000+) comprises rapidly growing coastal areas, and outlying rural villages and settlements. The Shire has a well-educated and very engaged community, with a high level of volunteer activity. In its operations Surf Coast employs delegated special or Section 86 committees quite extensively. They are run through its Community Development, Planning and Tourism departments. Special committees that are part of the council's activities include:

- the Stribling Reserve Committee, which manages a reserve on the foreshore of a popular coastal resort. It has negotiated in-kind and materials support from local businesses to significantly improve the quality of a 2012 upgrade to facilities.
- the Deans Marsh Committee which manages a reserve with sporting oval and associated bookings, and an annual festival.
- the Tourism Committee, which provides advice and input on Council's tourism strategy and ensures an agreed strategic direction and an equitable grants distribution.
- the Planning Committee comprising citizens with experience in related fields. The Planning Committee meets monthly to hear submissions and make decisions on planning applications that have been objected by Council.

**Wyndham City Council** (population 187,000+) in Melbourne's outer west is one of Australia's fastest growing LGAs, with residents from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Community centres were planned and built into new suburbs in the precinct structure plan and development phase. Social infrastructure is now a priority and council works with six not-for-profit incorporated committees of management that manage community centres and deliver services. Wyndham faces big challenges in meeting the needs of people in this fast growing area. A member of the National Growth Areas Alliance, Wyndham advocates for attention to social and other consequences of rapid growth. A recent restructure in the Social Development Department reflects the urgency of addressing community facility management, community governance and partnerships alongside community development, in the context of policy and planning to meet the expanding work program in this area.

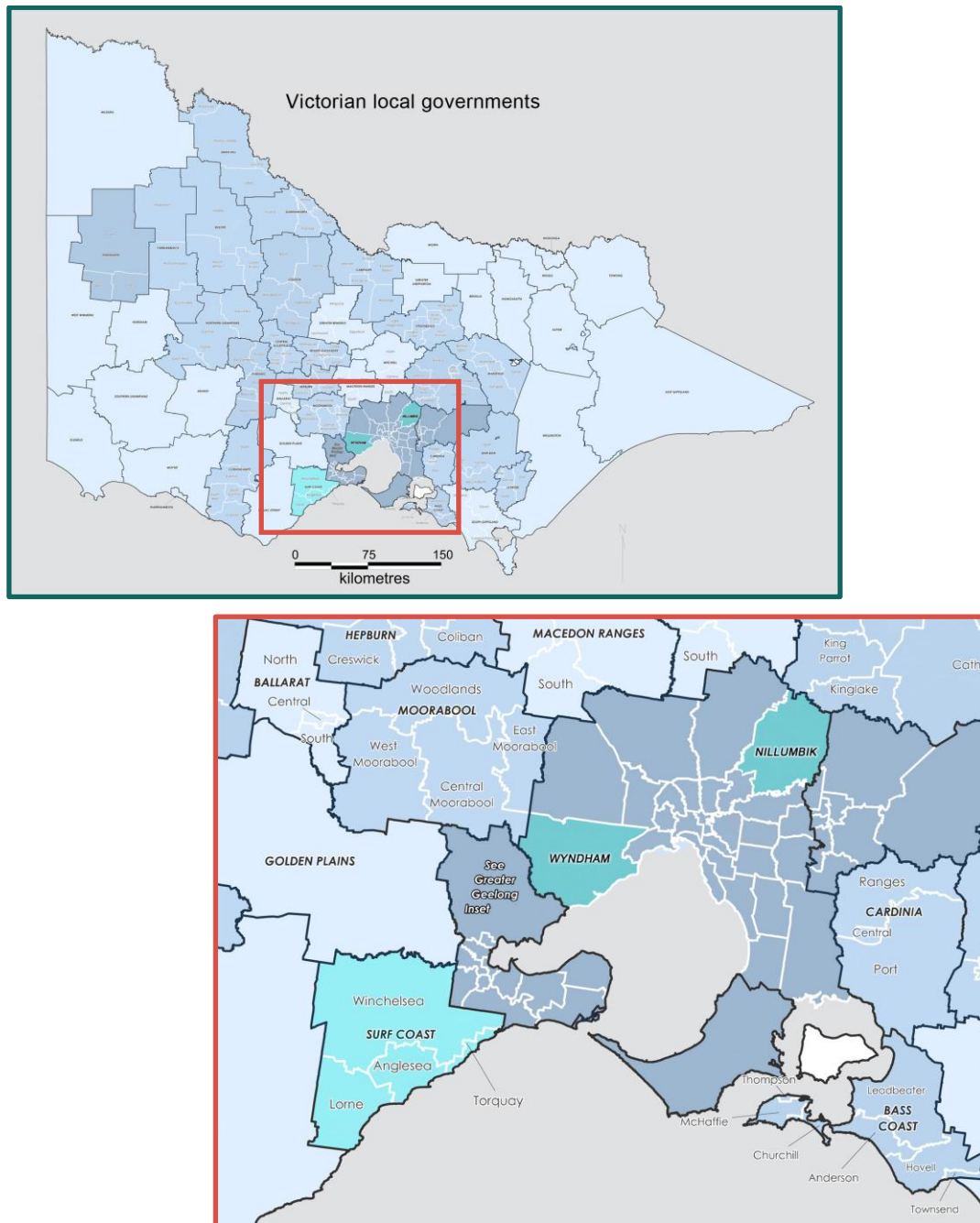
A sample of recent work of Wyndham not-for-profit Incorporated Committees of Management includes:

- Quantin Binnah Community Centre Inc. which provides leadership and direction working alongside council, leveraging off their strategies to service the community. Employs staff to provide early childhood services

and adult and further education courses in subjects such as cooking, computers, dancing and community gardening. The Centre also runs a café.

- Wyndham Community & Education Centre Inc. sets vision and governance direction, employs staff to provide services such as adult education, community development and settlement support, and has a strong reputation for its humanitarian network.
- Jamieson Way Community Centre Inc. provides governance and direction for a centre, which offers early childhood services and adult classes in response to community interest. It creates new opportunities in the community. For example, it created a community market.

**Figure 2: Map of case study LGAs**



## 3 Citizen committees in contemporary Local Government

Committees comprising councillors and citizens, officers and citizens, or citizens only are established in local government legislation in many states. In the NSW Local Government Act, Section 355 (1993) is an enabling provision under which various forums are established, often known as '355 committees'. Provisions in Section 8 of the NSW Act relate to the scope of committees. Section 8 states that precinct committees are to be used to involve the public in the development, improvement and coordination of local government. There are provisions for committees with citizen membership in Sections 49-53 (2012) of the NT Local Government Act; Section 42 (1999) of the SA Local Government Act; Section 24 (1993) of the Tasmanian Local Government Act; Sections 3.1 and 86 (1989) of the Victorian Local Government Act; and Section 5.9 (1995) of the WA Local Government Act. In the relevant Queensland legislation, the Queensland Local Government Act (2009) and the City of Brisbane Act (2010), there is no mention of committees with membership other than council staff and elected members.

The Victorian Local Government Act (1989), the relevant legal framework for this case study, explicitly spells out the role of advisory committees and 'special' (S86) delegated committees. The role of advisory committees is limited to advising council. S86 committees, like S355 committees in NSW, operate as delegated instruments of Council within the scope of specific delegations. In regional areas, these delegations are often for the management of halls and reserves. Special committees also play a role in tourism, economic development and in one case study council, planning. Membership comprises user groups or businesses and community representatives. The benefits realised from committees are 'community owned' halls and reserves, engagement of businesses in diverse towns in the tourism strategy and skilled voluntary professional input to a planning process. Council provides ongoing support to the committees and realises cost savings through spreading its public management workload.

### 3.1 Origins of citizen committees in Victoria

Citizen committees came to the fore in the late 1970s and 1980s, at a time when the role and purpose of local government was under massive review. During this period the role of citizens and communities in local government was being reassessed. So were the structure and size of municipalities and wards. Much larger municipalities would impact the level of citizen representation in local politics (Hendriks et al. forthcoming). In the 1990s, this loss of representation through amalgamations and restructures led to diminished community resources and facilities and was accompanied by widespread dissatisfaction. In some cases citizens gained a role through committees integrated with councils, and in others community groups with informal links to councils developed, in an attempt to replace what local municipalities had provided (O'Toole & Burdess 2004). Since then, a mix of committee types with a range of roles has evolved.

### 3.2 The contemporary community governance context

Today, community governance is a term used frequently in local government. The concept is crucial to understanding the potential councils find in developing relationships with their communities and citizens under increasing resource constraints. Community governance refers to the administration of local communities through collaborations between public, private, and non-profit sectors. Ideally it involves multiple forms of collaboration and engagement on a continuum from formal partnerships and contractual arrangements, to formal

participatory mechanisms such as public forums and citizen committees, to informal networks and activities. The community development activities of councils support this relationship building, with corporate services and governance strongly involved in ensuring good governance and compliance in formal partnerships, for example in management agreements and special committee delegations.

Expectations of local government have changed considerably in the last twenty years and citizens engage with their local leaders beyond the conventional avenues of representative democracy such as elections (Haus 2006). Further, communities concern themselves with council performance, and though many individuals may not have the time and interest to involve themselves in monitoring their council, they take an interest in what is learnt by engaged citizens who do get involved in local governance (Quinlivan 2012).

Contemporary diverse, diffuse and partnership-based modes of governing are termed 'local governance'. Representative democracy has not been displaced by network or participatory modes of governing. Rather, contemporary forms of governing are eclectic, and involve government, private and not-for-profit actors. In Australia, at the local government level this is termed 'community governance' (O'Toole 2004).

The report 'Evolution in Community Governance, Building on What Works' (McKinlay, Pillora, Tan & Von Tunzelmann 2011) provides detailed background on developments in community governance area in Australia. An empirical study by O'Toole and Burdess (2004) focuses on Victoria after the 1994 amalgamations, but is highly applicable to issues facing contemporary local government across Australia. Changes have taken place in the ways local governments govern. Local government is now as much a facilitator of networks and partnerships as a 'government structure'. Its processes are geared to an optimisation of human and financial resources within a networked structure. Here, the capacity of local citizens to affect their circumstances is central. The notion of communities servicing local needs that would previously have been met by government has been adopted as an ideal. Community governance now takes in a wide range of activities and involves both servicing community needs, and representing or advocating for community interests (2004, pp. 434-5). This is sometimes referred to as 'social infrastructure.'

### **3.3 Community development, engagement and citizen committees**

Local governments face numerous challenges. In the area of community development, they face the task of building and sustaining working relationships with communities, and with relevant non-government and government agencies, through community engagement, partnership building and ongoing negotiations across different areas of councils (O'Toole & Burdess 2004, pp. 434-5). The majority of participants in this research raised questions about how 'community' governing structures meet the challenge of engaging and representing communities in their local government area (LGA), since few are broadly representative.

Community engagement is now a well-recognised element of council business (Herriman 2011) and the sector uses many approaches to canvassing the views of its communities. The emphasis on 'consultation' that was prevalent in the 1980s and 90s has given way to the idea of engagement with intent to remain in dialogue (McKinlay et al. 2011). Professional bodies such as the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) provide training and a framework within which to assess various dimensions of public participation. Councils provide many one off opportunities for communities to engage, such as planning consultations,

town hall and open house meetings, public meetings, e-news and Have-Your-Say sites. As described by McKinlay et al. (2011) there is an increasing push to view community engagement as an aspect of the governance structure. Citizen committees, playing a role through formal appointment by councils, or working in formal and less formal partnerships, as not-for-profit incorporated community committees, are a primary mechanism of sustained, ongoing engagements with citizens.

The idea of community governance informed the responses of many participants in the study to questions about citizen committees. Some ways in which these committees fulfil community governance are by:

1. Engaging communities whose sense of identity is connected spatially to the region (Stoker 2004) in the governance of their LGA.
2. Dealing with local interests through the ongoing involvement of community members in decision-making. Citizen committees, through the duration of their tenure, offer opportunities for holding council administrators and elected representatives to account (Fung 2001). Schaller (1964, p. 177) speaks of the fact that they "can become a visible and responsible pressure group on a recalcitrant administration".
3. Being premised on the notion that local communities have knowledge and capacity, and that tapping into local expertise and experience helps local government deal with the complexities of certain policy issues. In some settings, such as NSW's Precinct Committees, citizen committees contribute to the development of agreed planning goals. They provide feedback on policies and strategies. They have partial or full responsibility for managing public assets (see Pratchett et al. 2009, pp. 28-47) and for raising funds from the community.
4. Acting as a conduit for communication between elected representatives, council staff and the public, although this potential was only informally and somewhat inadvertently realised in the case study council committees. In the US they have been formally connected to participatory events such as New England Town Meetings (Williamson & Fung 2004), and have convened consultative forums on issues of community concern in their own right. This mediating role can take pressure off elected representatives, and can enable exchanges in which there is greater informality and a different environment for information sharing Schaller (1964, p. 176).

### **3.4 Community building/strengthening**

An important normative concept within the community governance domain, 'community building', variously expressed as 'community strengthening', 'social inclusion' and 'building social and community capacity' (Dale 2008) was regularly highlighted by participants in the research. Community building or strengthening was seen by some participants, especially in the growth council case, to be necessary to get local community-led initiatives going within devolved policy arrangements. This would enable communities to engage and identify with their locality and local government. Recreation, economic entrepreneurial development, service delivery, lifelong learning, social justice and arts and culture were all mentioned by participants as elements of community building, capacity building or strengthening in the context of community governance.

Local government, as an 'enabler', as 'steering rather than rowing', has adopted capacity building policies and frameworks, involving outside parties such as incorporated not-for-profits, which now play an increasing role in this regard, partly driven by state agendas in regard to partnership building (Dale 2008).

**In June 2013** Wyndham City Council adopted a Community Engagement Framework. Actions associated with this move included the implementation of a revised community governance structure through the update of the existing Community Engagement Section of the Governance Framework and the development of a Community Strengthening Policy to be completed by December 2013.

### 3.5 What does 'community governance' mean?

McKinlay et al. (2011) identified the importance of "joint understanding between all parties as to what can and can't be achieved through a community governance approach". This study revealed that despite the prevalence of the term 'community governance' and its use in discussions, there is no widely accepted definition. Individual council managers, officers and councillors may understand the sustained and connected engagements involved in community governance quite differently. Chairpersons of incorporated committees working alongside local government sometimes commented on the difficulty of meeting council expectations framed in the language of community governance, capacity building and strengthening. It is likely that the majority of committee members are not aware that they are pursuing a community governance agenda, as executive committee members such as the Chair largely liaise with council and negotiate their expectations. Lack of understanding about the broader council community governance framework may impede the potential for collaboration and for strategic innovation. The common ground in participants' views of community governance is the focus on the local, and on frameworks for influencing local decision-making.

#### Council officer perspectives on community governance

Different officers interviewed for this research provided views that were in agreement and contradiction. They said that community governance:

- represents decision-making by the community, such as a sporting group, which is a community group.
- does not represent decision-making as such ... for example in strategic planning there are focus groups but they never make decisions, they can make recommendations to be considered by council.
- is about good decision-making and decision-making rests with the councillors who are elected to make good decisions that benefit the community.
- is about the arrangement that council has with community groups, if we have a lease or license with an independent incorporated group, we've delegated authority for them to make decisions in regard to the asset.
- has a council component, but it happens out there in the community, the crux is understanding the relationship between council and community.
- is about supporting communities and incorporated groups to implement good governance in their own settings.
- takes into account changes in the sector which took place in the era of the introduction of 'best value' when communities were invited to have much more input than traditionally, outside the election cycle. Nowadays councils get much more input from the community. The community feels they have a right to input on governance.



### 3.6 Overarching frameworks

While the 'Evolution of Community Governance' report (2011) stresses evolution, and that it may be unhelpful to tie down frameworks too decisively, Bingham (2010) argues that in the contemporary context of 'new governance' and collaboration between policy makers and citizens, it is important to identify a model that encompasses the range of emerging forms of engagement across the policy continuum, alongside the legal framework for policy making, implementation and enforcement. The community's input and its ability to influence governance are limited when there is no clear framework to make sense of and authorise its contribution. Here, Section 86 committees stand out as an unusual mechanism with legal authorisation, even though their purposes are usually related to the management of public infrastructure, rather than to influencing council policy (see Hendriks, Bolitho & Foulkes forthcoming).

## 4 Roles of committees and types in use

This section presents the research findings on the types of citizen committees used in the three case study councils. There are many types of citizen committees in the local government sector, serving different purposes, composed of different types of members. All are characterised by their long time frames of engagement and their continuous links with councils. A variety of structures and relationship dynamics were evident in all the case study councils, with different demographics, priorities and longstanding practices influencing structures and mechanisms in use. The citizen committees described by participants covered a range of formal and informal structures. Citizen committee members who attended the project forum rated informal grassroots processes as influential and worthwhile.

Broadly, citizens participate in committees with council support in two main areas. One is committees formally constituted by councils that operate under 'Terms of Reference' (ToRs) documents: advisory committees, special committees, place-based precinct committees, and reference groups with various focuses (see Section 3 above for relevant Australia-wide legislation). The other is external, incorporated community committees supported by councils to achieve objectives in the council area, such as managing facilities through lease management agreements, delivering services, and providing broad community/social support. In the former case, councils work with members appointed to committees within the council structure, and in the latter they work with independent, outside parties, with roles and responsibilities defined through appropriate governance agreements.

### 4.1 Council appointed committees

**Special committees:** In various Australian states, there are provisions that give committees formal power through a deed of delegation. The council defines the purpose and membership of the committee (Hendriks, Bolitho & Foulkes forthcoming). The deed of delegation spells out the committee's role, and enables it to exercise functions and powers of council, within certain constraints. Special committees can be responsible for budgets, and may act relatively independently of council, although often with council input and support. Participants are recruited from advertisements calling for expressions of interest and on appointment they declare any conflicts of interest. Special committees report to council through monthly minutes and annual reports. Owing to the high level of corporate governance requirements many councils have disbanded special committees in recent years, or changed their status to incorporated committees of management.

**Precinct committees** in NSW are voluntary committees of residents, run by residents living in defined geographic areas of an LGA. A core group meets regularly to discuss issues affecting their local area. They enable people to become involved in the areas where they live, and meetings involve the core group and anyone with an interest in a local issue. Precinct committees can ask for action from council. These requests can range from general ones to more complex requests requiring a motion agreed to by the committee. Precinct committees were more prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s, but today six NSW councils, largely in the Sydney metro area, support precinct committees as an effective way of involving the community in planning and decision-making (North Sydney Council 2012).

**Advisory committees** are typically understood as a traditional form of community engagement. They are established to provide advice to the council, but unlike special committees do not have delegated powers, and their decisions or recommendations do not have standing unless they are adopted in a council meeting. A council is not bound to take on an advisory committee's

recommendations. Participants are recruited using advertised calls for expressions of interest, and may be selected on the basis of their expertise, the user or interest group they represent, or because of their specific understanding of policy matters. An advisory committee's terms of reference will spell out what its role is in the context of council policy and strategy, and council has control over membership. Some advisory committees are appointed for the duration of an issue or project's life, but others may have longer terms, with appointments advertised every two to three years.

Both special and advisory committees allow councils to draw on the community's expertise and they provide a link to the wider community. In rural and regional areas, they also enable councils to spread their workload.

**Reference groups and working groups** appointed to advise on short-term projects, and are disbanded when their role has been fulfilled.

## 4.2 Council-supported community committees

Some incorporated not-for-profits have carriage of significant council priorities, such as management of community facilities, and the provision of day care and early childhood learning. In growth area councils with large community development and service requirements for rapidly growing populations, citizen committees of this type may be a mechanism used more extensively in future, given resource constraints. Members are recruited through advertising, through 'taps on the shoulder' and through relevant networks. In Victoria, committees fall under the Associations Incorporation Reform Act (2012), and often receive support with governance from councils.

There are a myriad of other citizen committees in every government area, such as Friends of foreshores, creeks and reserves, historical societies and Anzac Day committees. Again, in growth areas with high community development and capacity building needs, there is a premium on groups, which connect people with each other and with the areas where they live, and councils play a role in supporting skills development for the successful governance of such groups.

Different forms of citizen committees have similar inherent challenges, but vary in terms of their appeal to the community, their perceived status and their costs to councils.

The table below outlines committee types and roles.

**Table 1: Committee types and roles**

	<b>Examples</b>	<b>Role/decision-making power</b>	<b>Example of remit</b>	<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
<b>Delegated or 'special' committees (Section 86 Victoria, Sections 355 &amp; 377, NSW)</b>	Hall/community hub/reserve/skate park committee (tends to be prevalent in rural/regional settings).	Power to make decisions and raise funds delegated through Local Government Act.	Management of community asset e.g. community hall, reserve, sporting infrastructure.	Provide skills not otherwise available. Community ownership of assets. Devolved public management.	Lack of broad representativeness/inclusivity.
<b>Precinct committees (Section 8, NSW)</b>	Council-supported system of committees involving core membership and open meetings.	Able to influence councils to consider appropriate place-based interventions and planning.	Obtain and distribute information and form two-way linkage between community and council.	Citizens keep in touch with development applications, traffic, landscape and service planning.	Resource intensive with detailed responses on specific issues regularly required.
<b>Advisory committee Skills based</b>	Arts	Able to make recommendations, and hence influence Councils, no formal decision making power.	Advise council on Arts based on knowledge of arts and culture of the area.	Provide skills not otherwise available. Acquisitions may contribute to value of investments.	Local knowledge may be partial.
<b>Advisory committee Issue based</b>	Recreational trails Community inclusion	Able to make recommendations and hence influence councils, no formal decision-making power.	Provide diverse perspectives to council on a contested issue or site.  Provide perspectives on issue of community concern e.g. disability.	Provides an approach to stakeholder and advocacy management that acknowledges diverse viewpoints.	Interested parties may be unable to consider a public view.  Can become stale, only serving group networking purposes.

	Examples	Role/decision-making power	Example of remit	Strengths	Weaknesses
<b>Advisory committee</b> <i>Working partnership based</i>	Sister cities	Provide advice, no formal decision-making power.	Advise on programming, protocol and so on.	Councils garner culturally relevant advice from members.	
<b>Advisory group</b> <i>'Community voice'</i>	Youth committees	Provide youth perspectives, no formal decision-making power	Advise on activities and approaches to youth participation.	Councils gain understanding young people's needs. Encourages networks, leadership development.	If action is not implemented and activities not meaningful, committees founder.
<b>Reference group</b>	Community centre development reference groups	Community agencies and members make recommendations and hence influence councils. No formal decision-making power.	Participate with design team on infrastructure project, facility design and development –  A kind of extended design charette.	Short term, purposeful with a view to community ownership.	Community vision and skills may not be available for future engagement.
<b>Council-supported community committees</b>					
<b>Facility management committee – incorporated community association</b>  <b>i.e. is a citizens' committee, but not a council committee</b>	Community centres	Authority to manage asset and make decisions about it, outsourced through lease or management agreement.	Contractual arrangement for management, that includes regular council liaison e.g. for management of community centre.	Purposeful approach that puts management of assets clearly in the community's hands. Takes care of employing facility staff, IR, legal issues, finances.	Community committees may lack governance experience.  Resource constraints.  Potential isolation from council and its programs and

	Examples	Role/decision-making power	Example of remit	Strengths	Weaknesses
<b>though extensive council liaison and support may be involved</b>					expertise.
<b>Community social support</b>	Leadership advocacy/social justice e.g. humanitarian network, lifelong learning.	Independent	May advise councils informally on the basis of experience.	Connections into community.	
<b>Special circumstance committee</b>	Community recovery committee in LGA	Independent	Key role supporting community, providing consistent voice to council. Extensive Council liaison and support to enable vehicle for transformation.	Connections into community, Independence.	Strengths are difficult to replicate, as crises draw out a particular community capacity and government response, which is not available in normal circumstances.
<b>Landcare/ Friends Groups</b>	Friends of x Creek	Independent	Maintenance and development.	Community commitment to place and environment.	

### **4.3 Citizen committee roles, community engagement and collaboration**

Throughout Australia, the legislation requiring local government to consult with local communities and other stakeholders is increasing. Examples include requirements in the Victorian Planning and Environment Act (1987) and the requirements of the NSW Local Government Act (1993)'s Section 402 on Community Strategic Plans and Section 406 on Integrated Planning and Reporting. In response, local governments have integrated community and stakeholder engagement into management plans and have included them across different areas of council business. At the same time, partnerships with entities in the community have developed greater importance for councils. Thus, to a certain extent other forms of engagement with the community may be seen to have outstripped the influence of council-appointed advisory committees. However, it is apparent that a wide range of citizen committees is established in local government with ongoing support from council staff.

### **4.4 Citizen committee value**

Citizen committees provide tangible value to the sector. Advisory committees can prevent conflict and opposition on contested issues. Disability inclusion committees have been influential through their advice on the built environment, and have helped minimise accidents and litigation. Arts advisory committees have guided councils to make investments artwork that for some councils have resulted in rich collections. There are also significant cost savings that citizen committees offer. Research from a Victorian State Government agency which employs this mechanism as extensively as local government, calculates the extent of the labour component at approximately 841,700 hours per year, costed out as being worth between \$16m and \$32m per annum (Victoria University 2012). It is likely that the value to the local government sector is in a similar order. Yet, given their very low level of visibility, committees do not currently attract significant organisational or community interest.

## 5 Key themes from the research

Despite the variety of types and uses of citizen committees, common themes were identified by participants in the interviews, focus groups and the half-day workshop conducted as part of this research. These themes are:

1. The role of committees in community engagement
2. The multiple reasons committees are valued
3. The diverse agendas of the parties involved
4. Issues with effectiveness
5. Committee sustainability and recruitment.

These themes are discussed in detail below. Readers may find insights which are relevant to their own councils, or ideas that could be developed for the benefit of the sector as a whole.

### 5.1 The role of committees in community engagement

Participants identified the following characteristics of committees that affect their role in promoting community engagement:

***A disconnect between community engagement and community development:*** Council-appointed and supported citizen committees were recognised by all parties in the study as key elements of their councils' community engagement frameworks. However, the research participants tended to talk of them as rigid council institutions and did not appear to view them as being open to innovation and refinement. A disconnect between the aims of community engagement and the community development aims of citizen committees seems to contribute to this. Community engagement tends to focus on shorter-term involvement of communities in decision-making, while community development also focuses on fostering community capacity, leadership development and achieving project-based outcomes.

***Limited authority and decision-making capacity:*** The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) places council advisory committees in the 'Collaborate' category of its Public Participation Spectrum. The Spectrum lists five types of participation, ranging from 'Inform' (in which the public is merely provided with information) to 'Empower' (in which the public makes the final decision). The 'Empower' category is the only one in which citizens have more influence than they do in the 'Collaborate' category (IAP2 2007). However in this research there were few cases where committees went beyond being a mechanism to access local knowledge and resources. Most had limited authority and decision-making capacity. Nonetheless the ongoing partnerships between council staff and citizens involved in committees highlight issues regularly encountered in other operational collaborations.

***The need for representativeness and inclusion:*** Committees that make recommendations on behalf of particular communities need to be recruited on the basis of representativeness and inclusion. This is necessary to ensure that these committees bring a representative range of views to their deliberations and recommendations. The importance of diversity was recognised by council officers, who saw advisory committees as too frequently unrepresentative. Diversity tended to be construed by committee members as referring to diversity in skills and experience rather than in demographic characteristics.



**The role of 'expert citizens':** A tendency noted by council officers regarding council-appointed committees was for an 'inside circle', sometimes representing sectional interests, to develop whereby citizen members formed close connections with council officers and elected representatives. This strong citizen interest in committee membership can separate the knowledgeable citizen from the ordinary citizen and effectively exclude a broader public. Various committee members, through working with councils and council frameworks over a long period of time, can come to see themselves as 'expert citizens'. They can be extremely reluctant to lose their participation in a forum in which they have contributed to their council over a period of time. Such members are council or LGA assets, in that they realise they are part of a larger context of community governance and are familiar with the values and practices of local government. They have the skills to engage with officers and councillors, can live with the frustrations of bureaucratic process, can make sense of policy and strategy and contribute to it, and they understand the trade-offs of working in a political domain. Nonetheless, the 'expert citizen' dynamic represents a challenge when councils are seeking broader, more representative engagements. Ways in which councils might respond to this dilemma range from establishing clear frameworks to include one-off and more sustained engagements with citizens, undertaking innovation when opportunities arise to empower committees for specific purposes, recruiting for diversity, offering skills development and regularly reviewing committee performance.

The comments of interviewees regarding these characteristics, and possible council responses to the issues they raised, are summarised in the table below.

**Table 2: Citizen communities as an engagement approach; key issues and possible responses.**

Theme	What interviewees said	Possible response
<b>A disconnect between community engagement and community development</b>	Spoken of as 'council institutions' rather than an approach to community engagement with scope for innovation and refinement.	Explore innovation, and provide skills development, for members, e.g. in social media.
	Disconnect between community engagement (project-based) and community development (focus on maintaining and sustaining place-based relationships).	Frameworks to highlight connect between these areas.
<b>Limited authority and decision-making capacity</b>	Committees actually have limited authority, influence and decision-making capacity in most cases.	Consider opportunities for more empowered committees for specific purposes.  Explore opportunities to improve the democratic standing and influence of committees.
	Collaboration is operational i.e. a cooperative effort by which people or organisations work together to accomplish a common project or mission, rather than democratically conceived	Recognise that operational collaboration entails defining project or mission, ongoing effort on both sides and regular review.

Theme	What interviewees said	Possible response
<b>Representativeness and inclusion</b>	Council officers recognise the importance of diversity for authentically participative engagement.	Review committees and ToRs to assess diversity.
	In practice most committees are not representative of the broader community.	Highlight diversity and requirement for different demographic characteristics in ToR.
	Committee members construe 'diversity' as skills/experience diversity, rather than socio-demographic diversity	Review member selection procedures with a view to how to engage 'hard to reach communities'
<b>'Expert citizens'</b>	Citizen members develop close connections with council officers and councillors	Regularly review all committees' performance, including the representativeness dimension.
	'Expert citizens' are council assets with capacity to understand role in governance and deal with bureaucratic process.	Work with expert citizen members to realise the benefits of what they offer.
	Knowledgeable and experienced committee members are not broadly representative of community.	

## 5.2 The multiple reasons committees are valued

The research suggests that the local parties that are involved with their work generally value citizen committees.

**Citizen members:** generally saw the committee as a structure through which they could contribute to, and have a degree of ownership of, a place with which they had significant history. They saw committees as a way of holding councils to account, and as providing a thread of continuity when councillors and council officers changed frequently.

**Councillors:** often used committees to 'test the community pulse' and as a kind of one-stop shop for meeting experienced committee members.

**Council managers and officers:** committees provided them with an ongoing link to communities and places, and in some cases played a crucial public management role.

**The rate paying community:** Ratepayers might see citizen committees as an example of community input, a site where citizens do public work, monitor council performance and influence councils, for example on accessibility and broader issues of inclusion. At the same time ratepayers can vicariously monitor council performance through contact with these structures.

In summary, citizen committees hold multiple values for different people and trying to honour all these agendas is at times very difficult.

**Response:** Any training for citizens, councillors or officers should highlight multiple values of those involved. Participants observed that good chairing, respectful behaviour and adherence to high ethical standards, contribute to building trust between parties that hold different values.

### 5.3 The diverse agendas of the parties involved

The research revealed following issues related to the differing agendas of those involved in citizen committees:

- Councillors attending council-appointed committees are required to formally declare conflicts of interest. However, it emerged that councillors, officers and citizens may all experience conflicts of interest. According to one example provided by an interviewee, a member had joined one citizen committee to promote her pyramid business. Another reported that one council officer had not tabled a community proposal because he or she was opposed to it. Interviewees said that some councillors had joined committees eager to develop their resumes but with little interest in the committee's business. In situations where observer councillors attended meetings, some officers called for changes in the regulations related to governance responsibilities and councillor ethics. To support this view, one officer cited an example which involved premature support for grant funding.
- Councillors play a significant role in relation to citizen committees. Officers may wish to highlight procedural concerns but feel that they have to defer to councillors. Further differences in age may also come in, with young officers lacking the skills to intervene with older more experienced councillors.
- A strong theme in the findings is that there is potential for misunderstanding between the multiple parties involved, due, for example, to the conflict between the need for local governments to fulfil their corporate requirements and the community aspirations of members.
- Committees intersect with council business areas and practices and may involve officers from diverse business areas such as environment, community development, recreation and infrastructure. Thus, working relationships internally and externally involve detailed preparation and responses to requests, meetings and phone calls, and entail high transaction costs.
- The research suggests that for council officers, councillors and citizens alike, there are advantages and disadvantages associated with being an active part of the community and its governance. Participants in many committees have big workloads and attend meetings out of hours. They represent the council's community governance efforts and have vital knowledge of the area or region. They may be exposed to community members wishing to discuss local issues during everyday activities such as shopping at the supermarket.

**Response:** recognising that councils and communities hold different values is key to relationship building. Internal liaison can reduce the transaction costs which result from dealing with committees in a siloed manner. An emphasis on governance is as important for councillors and council employees as it is for committee members.

## 5.4 Issues with effectiveness

Participants in the study reported a wide range of issues which affected committee effectiveness: committee purpose and lifespan; relationships, connection and leadership; reporting; and group processes and deliberation. Many interviewees commented that too little attention was paid to maintaining, supporting and recognising committees that are working well. A disproportionate focus tends to be put on dealing with crises in weaker committees.

***Committee purpose and lifespan:*** Citizen committees that are most valued by members and councils have a clear sense of purpose, of the extent of their mandate, and of their roles and responsibilities. Some participants recognised that in their jurisdiction it was politically difficult to remove committees when they had fulfilled their purpose, since they had political or historical roots that needed to be honoured. Elected representatives sometimes had a vested interest in keeping committees going. In some cases committees continued to exist because officers were nervous of the repercussions of change, when members resisted closure. Committees in which this occurred might continue to exist for a long time, at the expense of council resources, without fulfilling any purpose. This can be a barrier to effectiveness, and may prevent committees from having a vibrant future.

***Relationships, connections and leadership:*** Citizen committees can play a role in influencing local government when there is effective leadership. Elected representatives do not necessarily take up this role. In the special and incorporated committees described in this study, citizens took on formal leadership, and some attempted to take up informal leadership when faced with an ineffective chairperson. Many committee members described council officers as having a most important role to play because they are more aware of the different dimensions of local issues and budget issues than councillors. There was broad appreciation of a term coined at the project forum, 'inverse capacity building'. This was defined as the need to equip council staff and elected members to better understand community culture and the context in which committees operate in order to help them work with citizens.

***Reporting:*** The failure of minutes to convey the substance of discussions by council citizen committees to the chamber was raised as a key concern for members and officers. This issue significantly limits committee influence. Interviewees reported that a citizen committee was likely to have a greater influence on council if it had a councillor as an active observer of its business, and that councillor had an interest in influencing understandings in the council chamber of the committee's strategic intentions.

***Group processes and deliberation:*** Some officers and committee members described the deliberative strength of committees. They described them as being characterised by open-mindedness, respect and dialogue contributing to the consideration of diverse viewpoints and minimal adversarial exchanges on controversial subjects. These committees were seen as valuable, for resolving differences in the visions and values of stakeholder around a key issue, and because they had the capacity to provide quality recommendations. Most participants stressed that the quality of chairing had a major impact on members' understanding of the public deliberation aspect of their role. Where chairing was inadequate, members said that proper process and procedures were not fulfilled, and this reduced their ability to provide advice or influence council action.

***Response:*** Clear and purpose-driven terms of reference stand out as a key element of effectiveness, along with worthwhile deliberation and appropriate guidelines for discussion. For community governance that is strategic, and well understood by committee members, council officers and elected representatives, terms of reference and instruments of delegations that spell out the purpose of

the committee, the role of the chairperson, and the date on which the task in question is expected to have been completed, were seen as vital. Maintaining an up-to-date list of all council citizen committees, across different council departments, was seen a tool to review purpose and end dates. Councils with effective committees recognised the importance of good working relationships with committees, clear points of contact and regular feedback on changes that affected committee business. Personal relationships matter – this includes relationships between committees and bureaucrats, and between committees and councillors.

The table below summarises each issue raised, and lists possible responses.

**Table 3: Committee effectiveness; key issues and possible responses.**

Theme	What interviewees said	Possible response
<b>Committee purpose and lifespan</b>	Clear purpose makes a difference to effectiveness and outcomes.	Terms of reference and delegations need to spell out purpose, chairperson role and lifespan.
	Committees sometimes continue after fulfilling their original purpose because of political sensitivity of their removal.	Monitor and review
<b>Relationships, connection and leadership</b>	Effective leadership improves function and influence of committees.	Training for councillors highlighting their role in enhancing committee influence.
	Council officers exercise leadership through understanding local issues and council strategy.	Highlight officers' role in 'strategy awareness/education' with committees.
	Councils as well as committees require capacity development to work better with communities	Consider potential of experienced committee members to 'induct' new staff members.
<b>Reporting</b>	Minutes fail to convey the substance of discussion to the chamber and limit committees' influence.	Actively interested councillors can play an important role in conveying spirit of deliberations to fellow councillors.
<b>Group process and deliberation</b>	Open-mindedness, respect and dialogue contribute to consideration of diverse viewpoints, leading to stronger recommendations.	Provide training in chairing skills, which are essential to robust deliberation.

### Example of clear committee purpose

Purpose: To provide a formal mechanism for Council to consult with key stakeholders, seek specialist advice and enable community input into the issues, initiatives, policies and strategies relating to agriculture within the Nillumbik Shire. (Nillumbik Shire 2011).

### The role of the Terms of Reference

- Specifies purpose and time frame of committee life.
- Specifies membership, for example representative groups, user groups according to the purpose of the committee.
- Can be a key approach to inclusive procedure – it's on the table, everyone knows what their purpose is, and can return to it in order to fulfil the group purpose and not waste time.

## 5.5 Committee sustainability and recruitment

Committee sustainability and succession was an issue raised by many participants on the council side, and by not-for-profit chairpersons. Council officers recognised the impost on volunteers and some questioned whether volunteer structures are the right ones for certain public management tasks because volunteers can become overburdened and may lose touch with their original interest in doing community-centred work.

In growth areas, physical infrastructure projects such as community centres have often been put in place in the early stages of new developments without evidence on which to ground projections about the social and community developments that will follow. Community or social development departments, responsible for 'social infrastructure development' face huge challenges. When there has been significant investment in facilities, councils would like them to be managed by great management committees but this can be difficult to achieve, with a lack of skilled people available to volunteer, and many locals being time poor or unaware of the importance of the services provided by a community centre until their children are of an age to use them.

Issues identified in the research that are related to committee sustainability and recruitment included: recruitment and succession, recognition and visibility, and corporate governance. These issues are discussed below.

**Recruitment and succession:** There was little evidence of effective strategies for recruitment, although some executive committee members reported targeting people in the community. Lack of regular attention to recruitment and pessimism about current recruitment approaches hampers succession. Given that some committees and committee forms are stale, and there were a number of instances of leadership burnout reported, developing effective recruitment practices is a high priority. The research revealed that few council volunteer brochures or web pages speak of the option of serving on citizen committees.

**Recognition and visibility:** Committee members are sustained by knowing their work makes a difference. Consistent recognition on a quarterly basis would perhaps carry more weight than annual events, or events every two years. There is room for great improvement in councils' public recognition of citizen committees' work. Desktop research shows that the majority of councils' appointed committees have almost no visibility in council documentation and websites. None of the case study councils were able to provide the researcher with

a photo of any of their special or appointed advisory committees. One advisory committee that had played a major role in advising on the development of community assets was not mentioned on the relevant project or program websites. Only one council specifically included the opportunity to serve on committees among volunteer opportunities listed on their website. This failure to publicise citizen committees hampers recruitment and community awareness of their role.

**Corporate governance:** Participants in the project’s forum noted that corporate governance requirements significantly impact citizen members of incorporated and special committees and they therefore affect sustainability and recruitment. There are costs involved in complying with these requirements. For example risk management is now part of committees’ event planning and there are much higher expectations about the management of volunteers. Not only does this create a large impost on volunteers, it may create a climate in which members are reluctant to innovate. Members sometimes feel anxious about the impact a poor board decision might have on them. In the case of one council, an information session on corporate governance attracted 200 people, suggesting that members of committees really wanted to know about their responsibilities. Where special committees are covered by council insurance, some community groups may find it hard to afford public liability and some may not be insured. Governance of special and incorporated committees requires ongoing council support, and in the case of incorporated not-for-profits, sensitive mentoring by executive members.

**Response:** Regular attention to recruitment is vital for succession. For a committee to be effective, it is not necessary for every member to possess all the relevant skills. If there are sufficient members with strong skills, inexperienced members can be coached or mentored to equip them for more complex roles. Communications strategy should be implemented which highlight the opportunity to serve on committees, and councils need to make use of their communication channels. Forward planning for committee recognition is needed, and so is adequate training and support to meet governance requirements. The following table summarises issues raised by participants and provides possible responses:

**Table 4: Committee sustainability; key issues and possible responses.**

Theme	What interviewees said	Possible response
<b>Recruitment and succession</b>	Effective strategies for recruitment are not in evidence and neither is a consistent approach to recruitment.	Plan for recruitment: what approach; who to target; when to do it and how often.
	Council brochures and websites do not mention opportunities to serve on committees.	Use council communications to highlight committees and opportunities to serve on them.
<b>Recognition and visibility</b>	There is very limited profile for committees’ work. Committees not mentioned on council websites	Undertake communications strategy to highlight committees’ work to council and the public.
	There is limited recognition of committees’ and volunteer members’ effort.	Develop a forward plan for regular committee recognition.
<b>Corporate governance</b>	Large impost on volunteers from corporate governance requirements, for S86 committees and incorporated committees of management.	Invest in adequate support and training.

## 6 Lessons learned for the future operation of Citizens' Committees

This section discusses general observations drawn from the interviews, focus groups and half-day workshop conducted for this study. Because the study only examined three councils, all Victorian, further research is needed before conclusions can be reached which can be said with assurance to be widely applicable to Australian councils. The councils in this study have the goal of connecting citizens, operational staff and councillors with each other. Their object is not just to inform, but also to improve their knowledge of each other, and the effectiveness of council. In order to do so they undertake one-off and sustained community engagements.

The case study councils see value in connecting with communities through forums with larger networks than those which citizen committees generally have access to, to reflect changes in the nature of communities. This new emphasis acknowledges the participative and representative weaknesses of committee structures. Many participants saw future citizen committees as being similar to what they have been in the past, serving community and council interests, perhaps with a more strategic alignment to council, or perhaps with a number of committees amalgamated to serve a larger geographical area or purpose. Some saw them having a greater role to play in the future.

There are significant opportunities for innovation and improvements in the citizen committee approach. This study suggests the following changes to consider. These suggestions are as much to do with council practice as they are with changes to committees per se.

### **Citizen committees should be clearly defined as part of a community engagement and governance framework**

Councils are better placed to use citizen committees effectively if the committees function as part of a community engagement framework with provision for mechanisms that facilitate short-term as well as longer-term engagements.

- Adopt criteria for the use of citizen committees, such as the importance of longer time frames and deliberation by diverse parties, so that fit-for-purpose mechanisms are set up.
- Examine council's capacity to support committees, for example service levels and governance support required, as well as liaison across council areas.
- Regularly review committees, including terms of reference, representativeness and effectiveness, including level of influence. For committees that do not meet council's criteria for success, consider different mechanisms by which council's goals can be fulfilled, such as a regular forum drawing on larger networks.
- Manage expectations of influence where terms of reference limit the committee's actual capacity to influence.



### **Citizen committees are representative of the broader community**

- Ensure that terms of reference and delegations highlight socio-demographic diversity
- Consider random selection recruitment approaches based on socio-demographic criteria, or combining randomly selected and nominated representatives.

### **Participants in citizen committees have the capacity to be effective**

- Provide training and resourcing for councillors, for example through councillor governance training or chairing skills; for officers to understand the importance of representativeness in community engagement including citizen committees; for citizens in deliberation and governance to meet increasing legal requirements.
- Give councillors with relevant portfolios roles with appropriate committees
- Use retired committee members to mentor new or aspiring committee members.

### **Citizen committees are visible and recognised by their council**

- Increase visibility of committees through use of media, photos, websites, volunteering brochures and news items.
- Promote committee work at open days and festivals
- Create opportunities for committees to present to councils, or groups of councillors
- Give adequate attention to successful committees as well as those that present issues.

### **Citizen committees understand liaison procedures**

- Establish and communicate liaison procedures between councils and committee executives and members.
- Highlight roles and communication responsibilities to avoid random contact

### **Alternative mechanisms to citizen committees**

- Where a council conducts a range of service and community activities and interventions in one place, consider streamlining interactions with community stakeholders by holding precinct- based mini-summits, or bring multiple stakeholders into a single forum to negotiate and prioritise desired services and Council input.
- Seek the community's views through online mechanisms where appropriate
- Undertake larger network forums for community participation on relevant community issues on a quarterly basis.

### **Review citizen committees for greater efficiency**

- It may be necessary to rationalise or consolidate committees and undertake a change management process.

## 6.1 Citizen committees and new council business models

When reflecting on current council business models for servicing communities, participants in this project had mixed feelings about council outsourcing services to NGOs, and about direct council management of facilities and services. On the one hand, when the management of larger facilities is outsourced there is a very clear delineation of council and provider roles and responsibilities, and there are no requirements for governance support or community capacity building. On the other hand, when management is outsourced the social and community values that have marked neighbourhood houses and other NGO and citizen committee-driven models are lost. Citizen committee members and council officers noted that direct management does not provide the same opportunity for community input to services and centres. Moreover, for those involved with incorporated committees of management to whom large centres and significant services have been outsourced, in some cases there is a question as to whether the business model under which they operate is effective or sustainable.

In the community space new business models are also emerging, for example community-based festival committees adopting social entrepreneurial models and emphasising community connectedness (see for example <http://www.warrandytefestival.org/>) and organisations like Rotary's festival enterprises are becoming more business-oriented and focused on consumer appeal. In some councils there are entrepreneurial developments around training and community connections, such as hospitality training alongside a community cafés (see for example <http://www.wyndhamcec.org.au/saffron.html>).

## 7 Conclusions

This study set out to examine the role and future of citizen committees in Australian local government. The research sought to bring to light the sheer diversity of citizen committees used in the sector. It also aimed to explore what potential there might be to introduce adaptations in order to make the mechanism the best possible form of sustained community engagement, while at the same time putting more emphasis on representation of a broader community. There was a strong focus on improving the functioning of public engagement, particularly in democratic terms.

The research highlights the valuable role that well managed and adequately resourced citizen committees play in the local government sector. Advisory committees, when operating under appropriate terms of reference towards a defined purpose provide valuable advice from the community perspective. Committees tasked with managing community assets such as community halls, reserves and facilities provide a link between communities and councils, and their voluntary labour over the long term has considerable value in dollar terms. They draw together diverse community or user groups and encourage broader community participation, for example through local festivals.

A significant finding of this research is that it is important to integrate citizen committees into community engagement frameworks to ensure that their democratic potential is realised. This integration will enable a stronger vision of the role that citizen committees, at their most effective, might play in future. Further, it will highlight those purposeful refinements and changes that are needed for committees to influence discussions and decisions in councils.

As a mechanism that is formally recognised within a community governance framework citizen committees have the potential to represent and advocate from a community perspective. Unfortunately this potential is seldom realised. Councils appear reluctant to explore the possibilities of adapting citizen committees to fulfil this kind of remit, for example on emerging issues where a representative citizen view, deliberated upon over a period of time, would be of value. Innovations could include a different approach to the formulation of terms of reference to provide a committee with more influence and scope to undertake its task. For example, this might enable a committee to convene its own community consultation event, collect data on community views on behalf of council, or assist in the design of one-off participatory events.

Opportunities to pursue open conversations on public issues are not widely available in society, one participant suggested, and neither is the opportunity to 'band together' to achieve something. This is an under-appreciated aspect of what citizen committees provide. The value of democratic mechanisms which enable citizens to meet with people they would not normally spend time with, and which provide citizens with opportunities for deliberative discussion in the course of undertaking collective and collaborative work month by month, should not be underestimated. The structures that enable these experiences are often provided or supported by local governments.

The citizen committee mechanism has served local government very well, both through providing advice and undertaking public management. At a time when broad ratepayer opinion can readily be sought through online mechanisms, citizen committees are inevitably viewed as resource intensive, time consuming and limited in scope. However there remain benefits in having ongoing face-to-face links with communities in some situations, and in assuring the success of volunteer-driven place management. This research is limited to the insights and

perspectives of three Victorian local governments, and more research on the topic is needed.

Participants in the research suggested that research on the following themes would be valuable:

- How and why people do participate in citizen committees in local government?
- In growth council areas, what is the role of committees and what are their experiences in developing social infrastructure?
- How do citizens experience committees within the council articulated context of community governance?

The research also suggests that there is considerable scope for action research to examine the value of innovative interventions, including:

- citizens providing input into the drafting of the terms of reference of committees
- committees commissioning research, consultants or taskforces to undertake specific work to inform their deliberations, or conducting public meetings on issues-based concerns in their own right.
- the potential of co-working space in council buildings, accessible to councils and committee members that is not exclusively council-defined (requiring pass to enter) or community-defined (requiring council appointments and travel), that would more naturally bring together executive members and council officers for community and committee development.

# APPENDIX

## Project scope

The ACELG partnership project, 'The Role and Future of Citizen Committees in Australian Local Government' offered an opportunity to extend previous research on special (Section 86) committees by examining the experiences of citizens' committees in other councils, and by reflecting more broadly on their future role in Australian local government. A particular focus of the partnership project was how local governments can develop more sustained and connected forms of community engagement by working with, and where necessary adapting, existing practices.

The project aimed to improve the functioning of citizen committees as sites of public engagement, in the context of community governance. It builds on emerging Australian research on the role and changing nature of community governance and citizen engagement in the local government sector (e.g. Artist et al. 2010; Cuthill & Warburton 2005; O'Toole & Burdess 2005, McKinlay et al. 2012, Pillora & McKinlay 2011b). The research drew on related concepts such as: community engagement; localism, an influential discourse in the UK, following the introduction of the Localism Act (2011) and its Part 5 *Community Empowerment*; and place making, an approach at the intersection of planning, community interests and needs, and management of place.

## Project approach

The project was based on a qualitative research methodology with four elements:

### 1. Literature Review:

This looked at relevant publicly available documents about committees in Australian jurisdictions, as well as academic publications on citizen committees, public participation, community engagement, local governance, community governance and place making.

### 2. Empirical research on three local government case studies:

Between August 2012 and December 2012, working in partnership with three local governments, the researcher explored the role and future of citizens' committees at each council through interviews and focus groups:

Interviews (1 hour in length)	
Role	Number of interviews
Council officers and managers	6
Councillors	3
Committee members	3

Focus group 1: Council officers (1.5 hours in length)	
Role	Number of participants
Community Development, Environment, Infrastructure, Corporate Services	7
Focus group 2: Council officers (2 hours in length)	
Community Development, recreation, community engagement	5
Focus group 3: Committee members (1.5 hours in length)	
Disability, place-based, user group, community asset advisory groups	6
Focus group 4: Committee members (1.5 hours in length)	
Place based community	3

Interviewees were asked to explore questions about the kinds of citizen committees they used, about how they used them, about the status and role (if any) the committees played in the council's community engagement strategies, and about how citizen committees connected with existing democratic and participatory structures (such as council, community planning, and other community engagement structures). Building on earlier ACELG research, the research also invited participant perspectives on community governance. Focus groups explored the same themes.

In the inception phase of the research, councils were asked whether they could provide costings on their citizen committees. However, none of the councils could do this owing to the diffuse nature of the costs associated with staffing, grants, training and so on.

This research originally aimed to run workshops within councils to bring together relevant internal stakeholders such as the executive, councillors, and managers, and to assist them to envisage the future of their committees of management as citizen committees. However it was not possible to arrange this within the constraints of the project.

**3. A half-day workshop** on 'The Function and Future of Citizens' Committees', that involved research participants and shared insights from the three cases. The workshop was originally intended to bring together local government practitioners from across Australia, but the challenge of generating interest and conversation across states was beyond the scope of the project.

**4. Research Dissemination:** through the course of the project the research has been disseminated via the web at <http://lgresearch.net.au/localgovcommittees>. The research findings will also be published in research papers that will connect emerging themes with debates on community localism, and the nature of local government collaborations with committees.

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## About ACELG

ACELG is a unique consortium of universities and professional bodies that have a strong commitment to the advancement of local government. The consortium is led by the University of Technology Sydney's Centre for Local Government, and includes the University of Canberra, the Australia and New Zealand School of Government, Local Government Managers Australia and the Institute of Public Works Engineering Australia. In addition, the Centre works with program partners to provide support in specialist areas and extend the Centre's national reach. These include Charles Darwin University and Edith Cowan University.



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