



Why **Local Government**  
**Matters**  
In South Australia

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## Why Local Government Matters in South Australia

In 2016 the *Why Local Government Matters in South Australia* research sought to investigate the value of local government to South Australians. The project was undertaken by the Centre for Local Government at the University of Technology Sydney with funding from the Research and Development Scheme of the Local Government Association of South Australia and the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government. The project follows the 2014/15 nation-wide survey, *Why Local Government Matters*, which examined Australian attitudes to local government. This project took an in-depth look at South Australia. The project methodology involved:

- an online panel survey of 1002 South Australians (from metropolitan Adelaide and country areas)
- four focus groups (from inner city, outer suburbs and rural centres), and
- data from the national online survey (from the 2015 *Why Local Government Matters* research project).

This research project is significant because it provides a detailed snapshot of how South Australians perceive local government and its role in society. The knowledge gained has the potential to assist policy makers across all levels of government to deliver policy outcomes that effectively respond to the needs of communities.

This report provides a summary of the findings. The research findings demonstrate that local government matters because of its role in shaping places and is a valued service provider working to deliver services that meet the community's needs. The findings discussed below suggest that South Australians value a broad role for council in their local community.

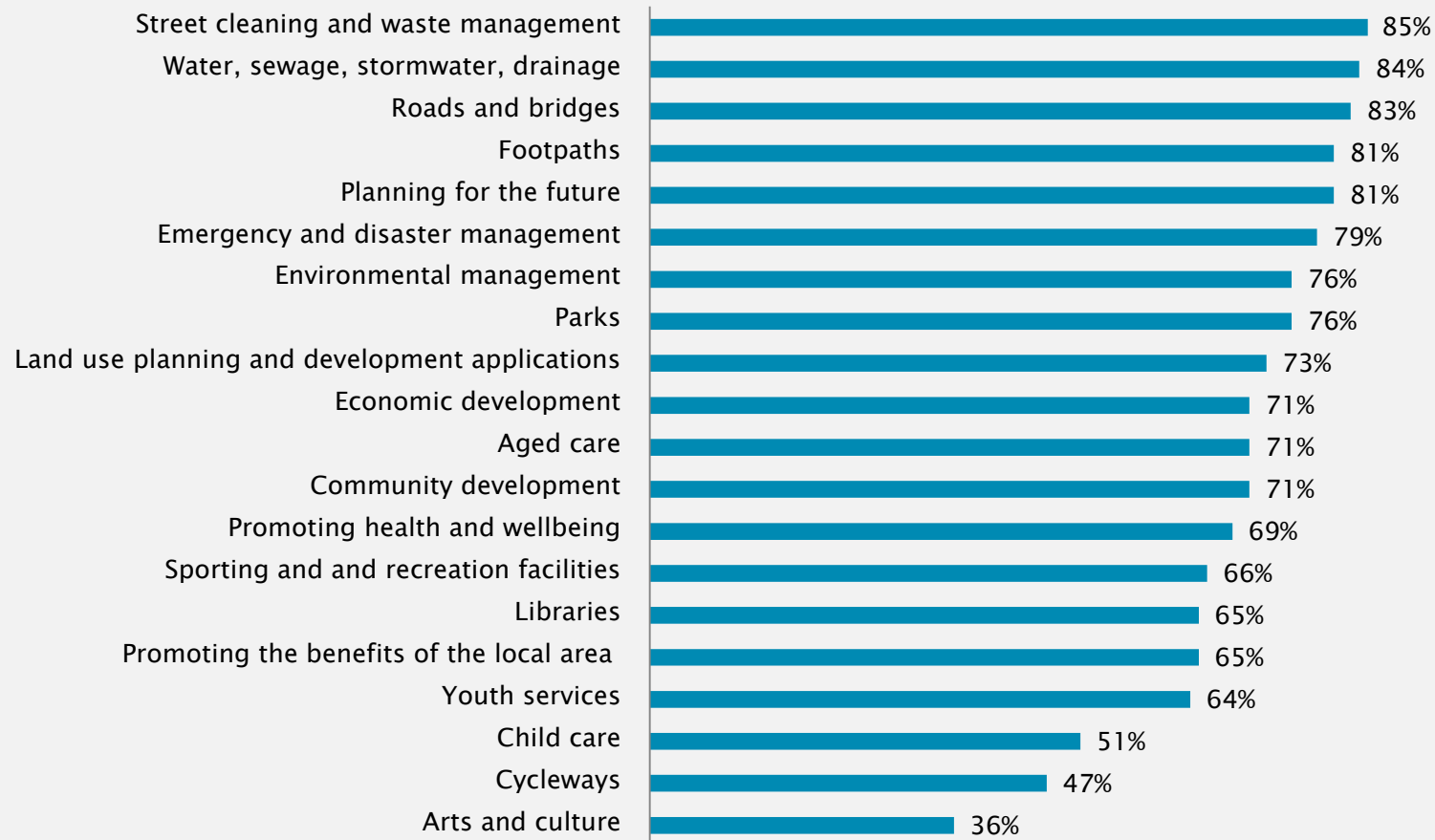
## 1.1 The role of local government

### 1.1.1 Advocacy

Traditionally, the role of local government has been understood to encompass service delivery and the provision of opportunities for local democratic engagement by communities at the local level. However, research findings indicate that South Australian respondents also value the more contemporary place-shaping role of local government, with a high proportion of survey respondents reporting “promoting the benefits of the local area” as a very or extremely important (65%) role for local government, considerably higher than the national response (57%).

Additionally, there is strong recognition for broader roles performed by councils such as planning for the future; economic development; promoting health and wellbeing and area promotion alongside more visible services such as waste management; stormwater drainage; roads and footpaths.

The following factors were considered extremely or very important:



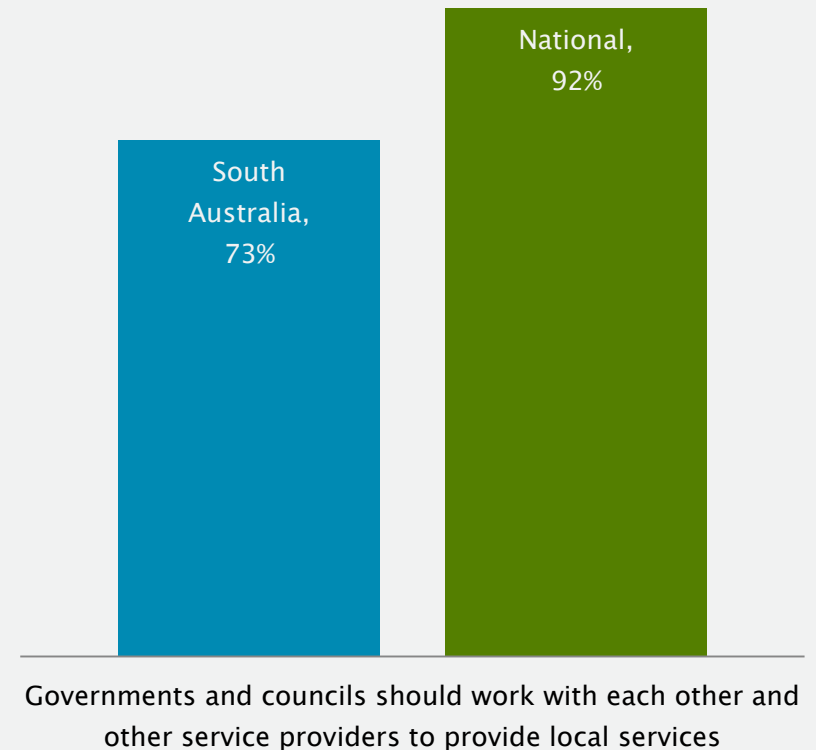
South Australians' concerns about roads and bridges, footpaths, economic development and promoting the benefits of the area are considerably higher than in the nation-wide survey.

### 1.1.2 Collaborative approaches to service delivery

Collaboration in government service delivery may be seen as a means of improving the efficiency of service delivery. There is support by South Australians for collaboration in government service delivery, although not to the degree of respondents nationally. Almost 60 percent of respondents strongly or moderately agree that governments should use a mixture of public, private and not-for profit organisations to deliver public services in their area – this is noticeably lower than the responses in the national survey (83%).

Many focus group participants were able to recognise that there are already some shared service agreements between councils for waste management and library provision. They see councils as having a unique capacity to harness the resources and knowledge of other levels of government, non-government organisations, volunteers and local community groups in the delivery of services in the local community.

The survey found that over 70 percent of South Australian respondents strongly or moderately agree that governments and councils should work with each other and other service providers to provide local services, which is again sizeably lower than the responses in the national survey (92%).



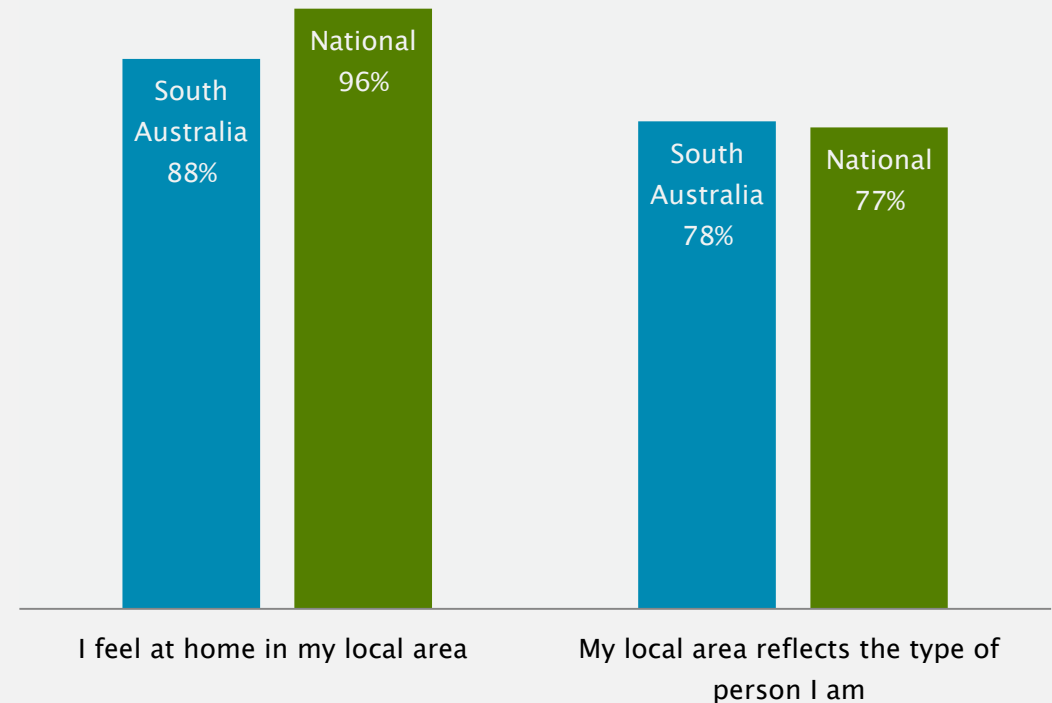
### 1.1.3 Place-shaping

Local government plays an important role in meeting the needs that drive most people's attachment to, and satisfaction with, their local area. Similar to the nation-wide survey, South Australians were asked to identify their level of agreement to statements describing the ways their local area may contribute to personal identity and emotional connection to place. Most South Australians feel emotionally connected to the place where they live. The majority (88%) agree that they 'feel at home' in the local area in which they live. Over three quarters (78%) strongly or moderately agree that the local area in which they live reflects the type of person they are.

People have more emotional connection to place if they are:

- older
- home owners, rather than renters
- living in country areas outside of Adelaide
- active in their community
- more knowledgeable about local government
- employed and retired, rather than unemployed, or students
- supporters of the major parties (Liberal, Labor), rather than minor parties and independents

Conversely, the focus group research found that people who feel they have little choice or are ambivalence about where they live also tend to be less satisfied with the local area and feel less connected to the rest of the community.

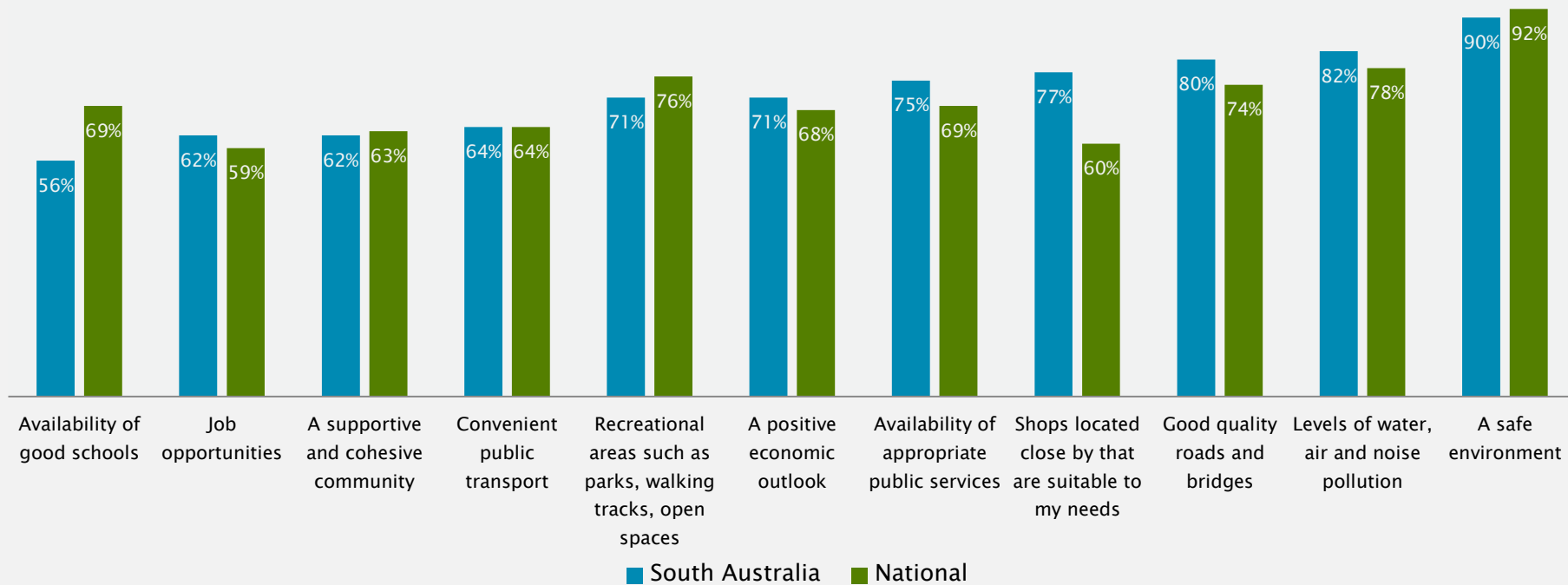




### 1.1.4 Importance of and satisfaction with local service delivery

In addition to emotional connection, place-shaping is driven by instrumental aspects which contribute to individual's satisfaction with their local area. These instrumental aspects, such as a safe environment and the levels of water, air and noise pollution are important triggers for individuals choosing to remain in an LGA or relocate to a different area. Local government plays a large role in these features, typically providing or influencing them through planning, policy and advocacy. Accordingly, respondents were asked to rate the importance of, and their satisfaction with, 11 such aspects delivered or shaped by councils.

The results show that the following aspects of the local area are most important for South Australians: a safe environment (90%), levels of air, water and noise pollution (82%) and good quality roads and bridges (80%).



The research also found that in South Australia, importance attributed to the instrumental aspects of ‘good quality of roads and bridges’ (80% SA vs. 74% nationally) and ‘shops being located close by that are suitable to needs’ (77% SA vs. 60% nationally) are higher than in the nation-wide survey, while the availability of good schools (56% SA vs. 69% nationally) is lower in importance.

The research uncovered that the level of importance of these instrumental aspects varies according to where respondents live, their gender, and their level of participation in their local area. Some of these differences include:

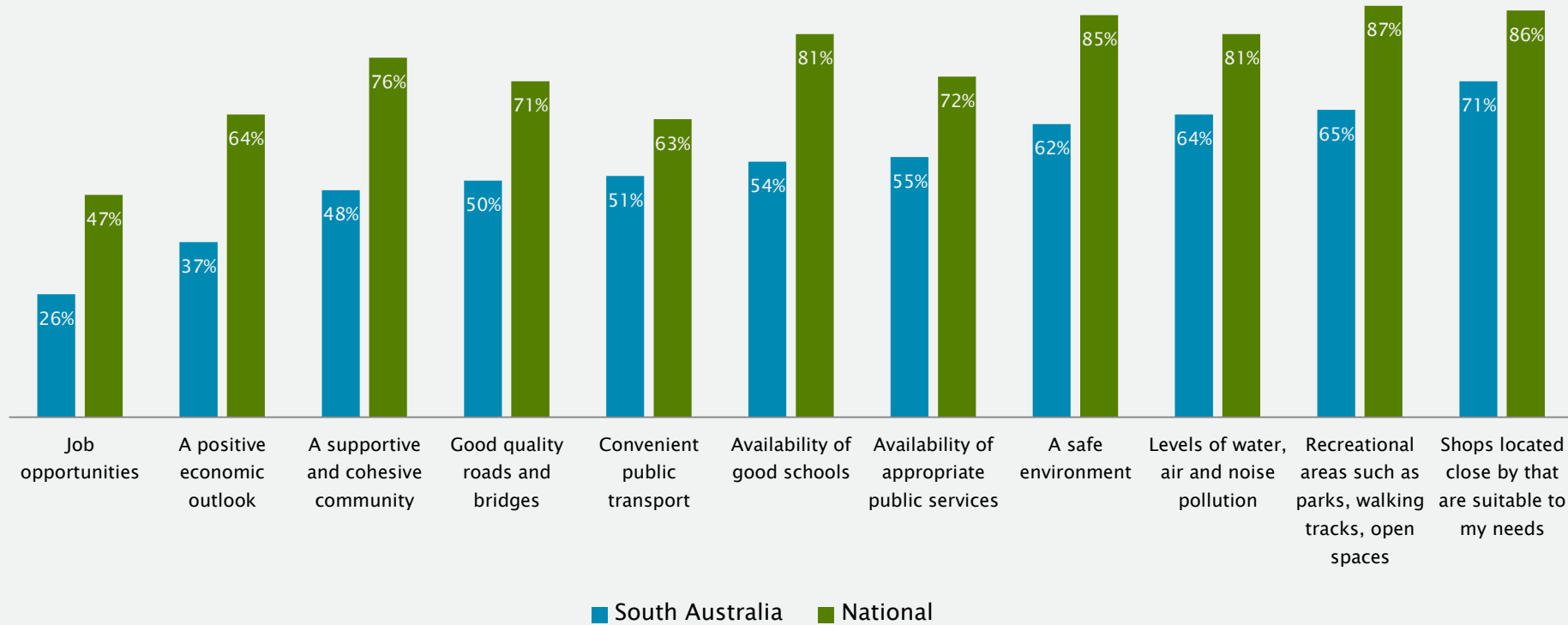
- Public transport is more important for people living in Adelaide compared to those living in country South Australia. However, people who live in the country report that schools, a supportive and cohesive community, job opportunities, a positive economic outlook, good quality roads and bridges, and a safe environment are more important to them. It is important to note that a 2013 ABS Survey on Australian social trends found that South Australia has the highest per capita passenger vehicles and the lowest public transport use for travel to work when compared nation-wide<sup>i</sup>
- Gender also makes a difference. Women are more likely to place higher importance on safe environment, the levels of water, air and noise pollution, a positive economic outlook, and availability of good schools and recreation areas in the local area in which they live.
- Residents’ level of participation in the local area also matters. For those more active in their local communities, the availability of appropriate public services is important. These types of residents are also more able to identify with the need for a cohesive community.

To provide context and meaning to the importance awarded to instrumental aspects, respondents were then asked to also rank their satisfaction with each of these 11 different features. Respondents are most satisfied with shops located close by (71%), recreational areas (65%), levels of water, air and noise pollution (64%) and a safe environment (62%). These findings show that South Australians tend to be highly satisfied with many of the same aspects of the local area which they consider important.

However, in comparison to the national survey South Australians are generally less satisfied across all areas of service delivery. The largest differences in satisfaction between South Australians and Australians more broadly is in the availability of good schools (54%

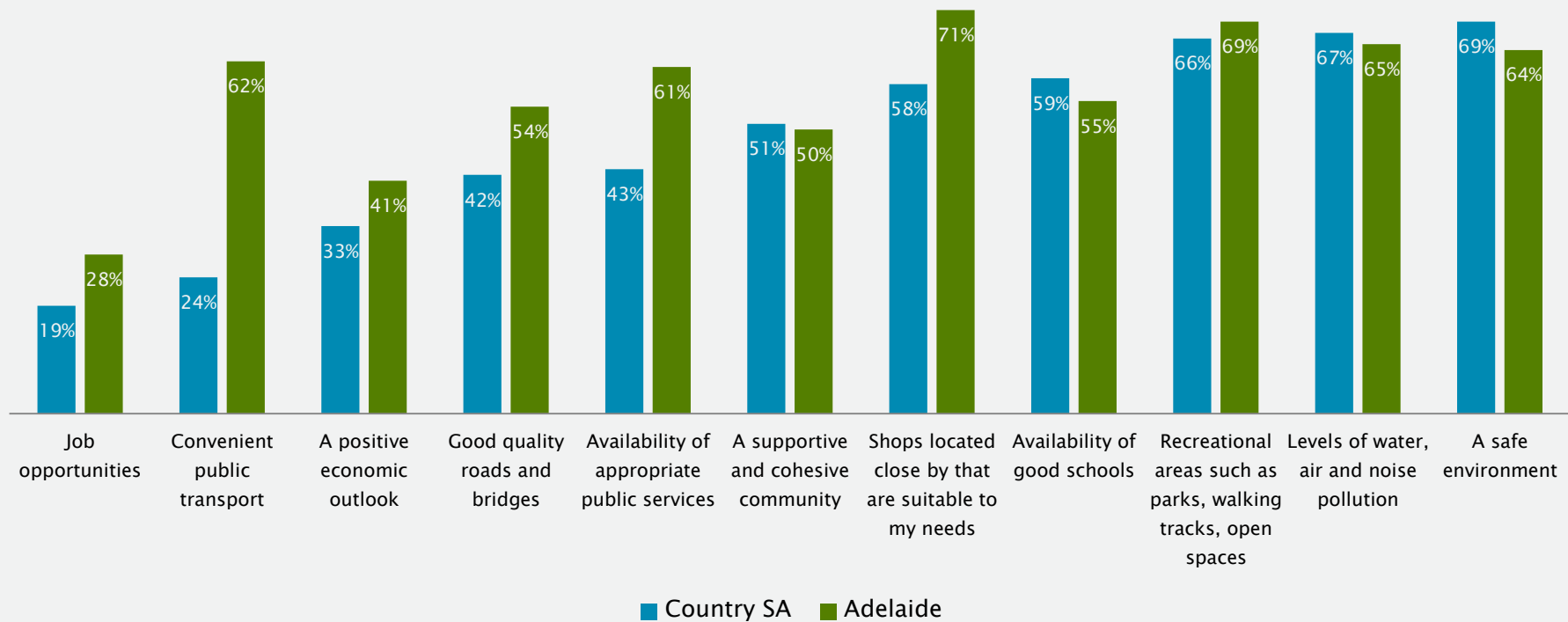
and 81% respectively), supportive and cohesive community (48% and 76% respectively), a positive economic outlook (37% and 64% respectively) and job opportunities (26% and 47% respectively).

The chart below details the levels of strong and moderate satisfaction for areas of service delivery, in comparison with national figures.



The research found that satisfaction with different areas of service delivery varies by location, employment status, housing tenure, and age.

For South Australians, ratings of satisfaction differed if they *lived in country South Australia or in Adelaide*. Country residents are less satisfied than those in Adelaide with their job opportunities, economic outlook, availability of shops close by that are suitable to their needs, public transport, and the quality of roads and bridges. For those living in the country, facilities—such as roads, footpaths, the availability of waste collection and recycling, traffic and public transport—are the most prevalent source of dissatisfaction about where they live.



## 1.2 Preferences for the way services can be delivered

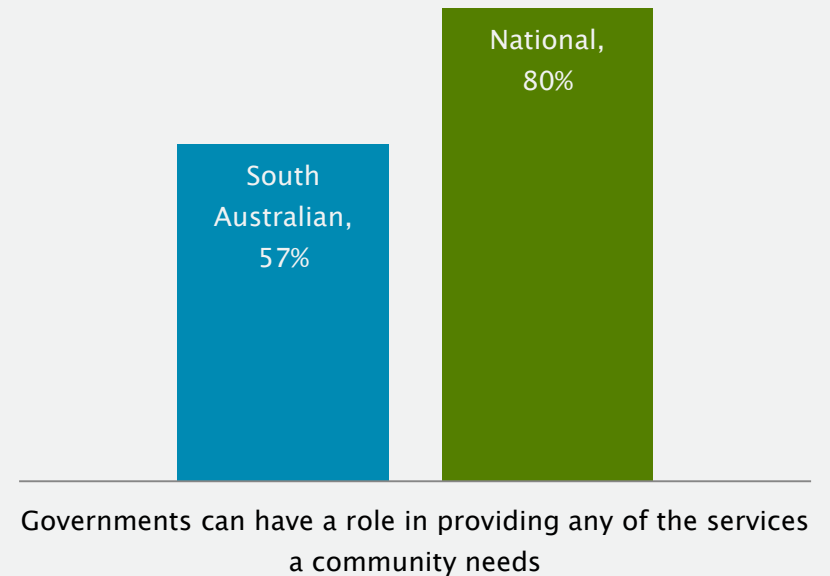
The research sought to better understand the perspective of South Australians on the role of government in service delivery and interest in participatory decision-making. Understanding how South Australians think about these topics allows local government to be more responsive to community views. Respondents were asked questions about the way services can be delivered, the role of government and participatory decision making.

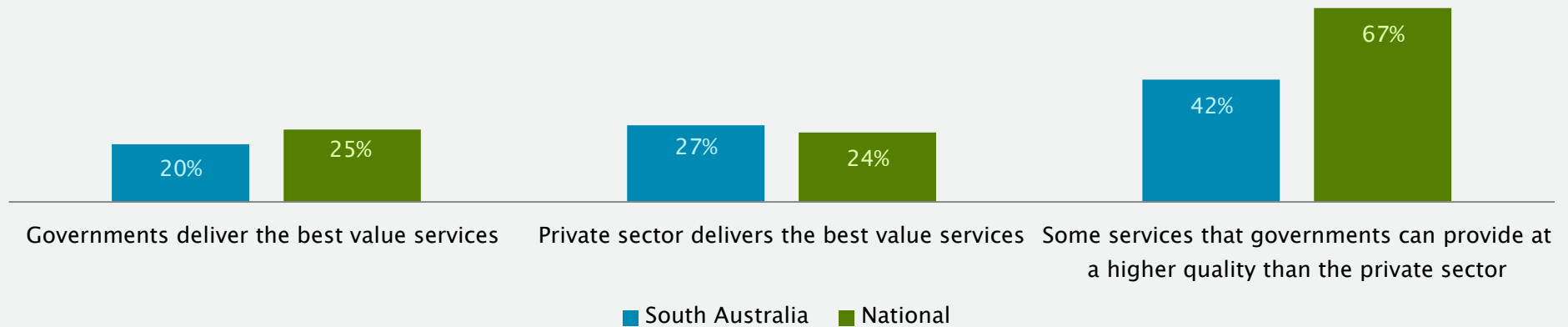
Councils are seen as the ‘closest level of government’ to the people as local government plays a key role in providing services and infrastructure on which communities rely on every day.

### 1.2.1 Public versus private provision of services

Over half of the respondents (57%) strongly or moderately agree that governments can have a role in providing any of the services a community needs. This is lower than the national response (80%).

One fifth of South Australian respondents (20%) strongly or moderately agree that governments deliver the best quality services and a slightly higher proportion (27%) reported that the private sector delivers the best value services. Just over two fifths (42%) report that there are some services that governments can provide at a higher quality than the private sector, which is considerably lower than national respondents (67%).





Amongst South Australian respondents, there is not strong support for the idea that governments deliver best value (20% SA vs. 25% nationally ) or better quality services (42% SA vs. 67% nationally). Additionally, compared to the national response (24%), South Australians were more likely to agree that the private sector delivers the best value services (27%).

Supporters of the Greens, minor parties and independents are more likely to agree that the private sector delivers the best value services (27%). Those with higher levels of education are less likely to support private sector service delivery, as are the self-employed. Country residents are more likely to support government provision.

The focus group research found that overall, there is support for the public sector to play a role in service delivery, particularly in areas where fairness is important (such as education and health) or where there is no profit incentive to provide the service (such as community development and social services).

The focus group research found that South Australian participants support the need for increased efficiency in government service provision; the involvement of the not-for-profit sector; and sub-contracting of council services—but are mostly not in favour of

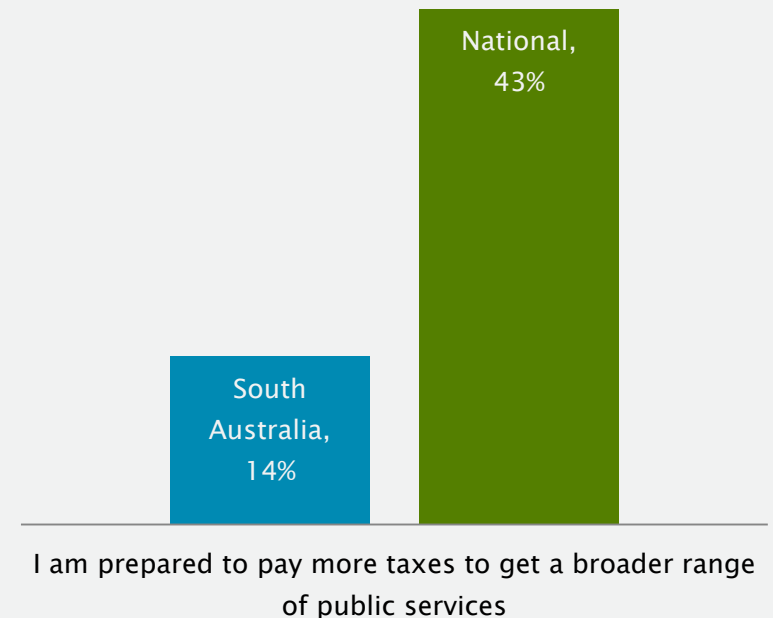
privatisation. There is a fear that a bigger emphasis on privatisation of services would increase costs and inequality, with people citing the privatisation of electricity, water and healthcare as examples of negative outcomes.

Focus groups participants voiced concerns that quality could decrease with privatisation because of a lack of accountability and the service provider not having a direct responsibility to the local community. People noted that elected councillors give them a sense of community involvement in decision making and a feeling that if needed, they could talk to someone at council who will represent their interests. While focus groups participants are concerned about council provision of local services—particularly about how money is spent, slow response times, perception of wasted money and other resources, and frustration that decisions did not match their own preferences— in general people want to see council service delivery improve through increased efficiency and collaboration with other organisations and the community.

### 1.2.2 Paying for services

Whilst over 40 percent of respondents in the national survey report that they would be prepared to pay more taxes to get a broader range of public services, only 14 percent of South Australian respondents strongly or moderately agree. Similar proportions (15%) are prepared to pay more taxes to get better quality public services.

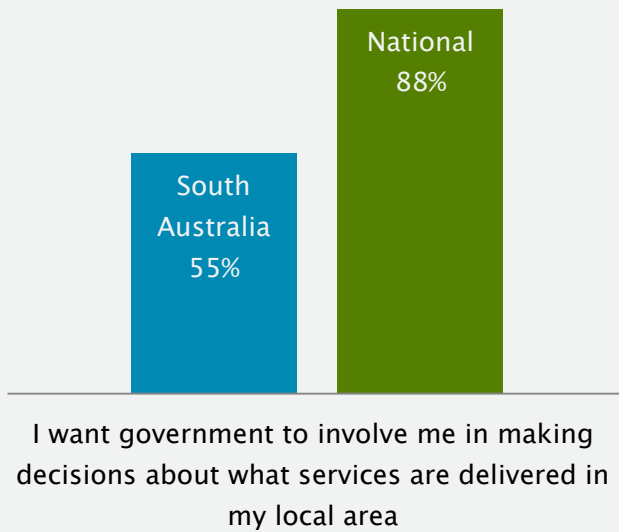
Focus groups participants report that they do not know where their current rates are spent and are not prepared to pay more unless they felt more confident that there is no waste, and that increases would be spent on things that matter to them. They also ask for greater transparency about council finances. It is important to note that South Australia has the lowest per capita revenue from the sales of goods and taxes, and the highest council rates per capita when compared nationally<sup>ii</sup>.



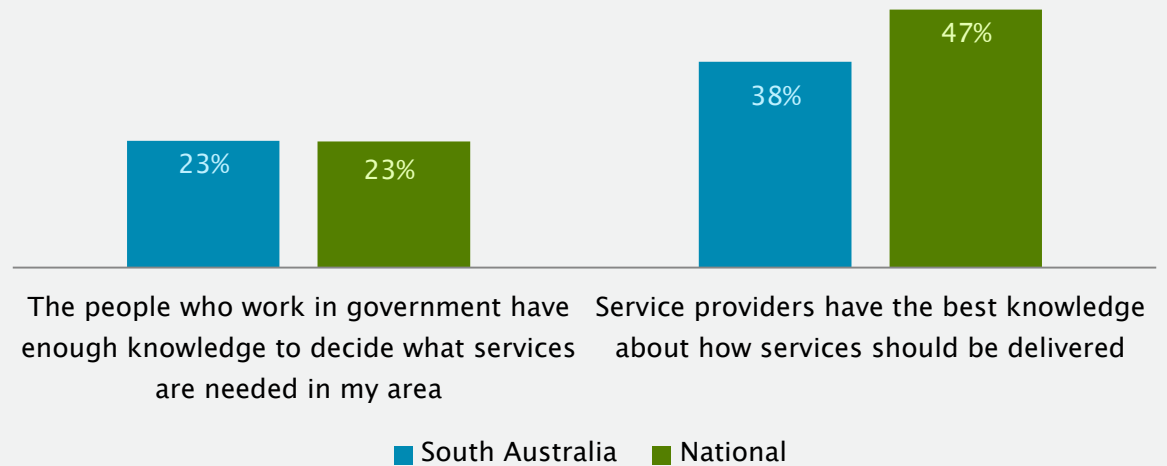


### 1.2.3 Participation in decision making about services

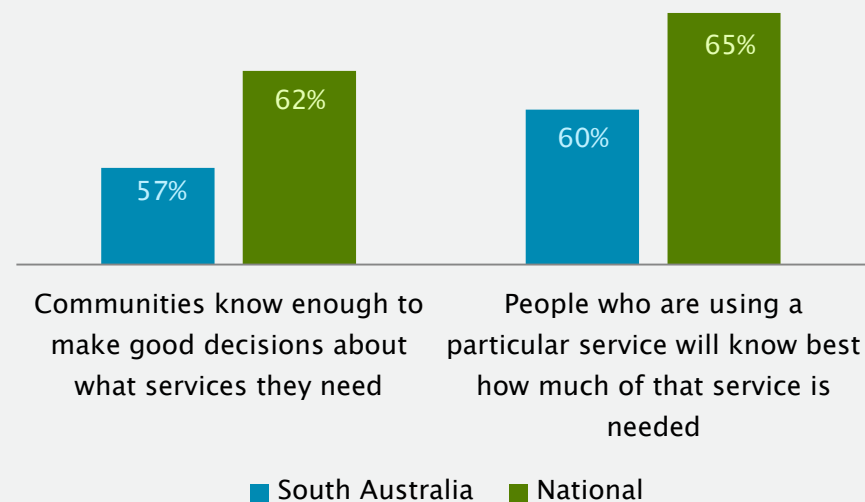
Over half of the South Australian survey respondents (55%) report that they want government to involve them in decision making about what services are delivered in their local area. This figure is sizably lower than the national response (88%). This is particularly the case for country people and those who are more active in their communities.



Less than a quarter of respondents (23%) strongly or moderately agree that the people who work in government have enough knowledge to decide what services are needed in their area. Just over one third of respondents (38%) strongly or moderately agree that service providers have the best knowledge of how services should be delivered, which is also lower than the national response (47%).



South Australian respondents are less likely (57%) to report that communities know enough to make good decisions about what services they need compared to other respondents in the national survey (62%). Almost two thirds (60%) strongly or moderately agree that people who are using a service will know best how much of that service is needed.



People value the role of councillors and know they can contact them if they have a problem, although people report receiving very little information from their council or opportunities to have a say on local issues. When focus group participants were asked the degree to which they read material currently provided by council or attend the meetings they do hear about, they acknowledge that they need to take more personal responsibility to get involved. Many focus group participants are sceptical about their ability to change anything, and indicated that they would only get involved if an issue impacted or interested them personally.

## 1.3 Perception of local government and its role in delivering a range of services and activities

### 1.3.1 Knowledge of what local government does

In focus groups, when asked to list the things that councils do in their local area, there is a 'core' group of responsibilities agreed to by everyone, including infrastructure, waste management, and planning roles of local government. A large number of other council activities (including community, social and economic development and other place-making roles) are nominated by a proportion of people. The latter may be because their knowledge of council roles reflect the specific services of local government in their own area; their interaction with council because of their individual circumstances; or the degree to which the 'core' activities of local government are being delivered to their satisfaction, thus allowing them to conceptualise the role of council more broadly.

There are generally differences between country and metropolitan participants. In general, people had a good sense of the distinction between state government responsibilities and those of councils.

### 1.3.2 Different roles for local government

Perspectives about the importance of different roles for local government depend on where people live, their values and their personal attributes. Beyond the provision of general services, people tend to favour a role for council in areas that are of the most direct relevance to their own quality of life.

- *Older people* are more likely to emphasise water, sewage, stormwater and drainage; land use planning and development applications; roads and bridges; and footpaths. They are also more likely to see a role for local government in the provision of aged care.
- *Women* are more likely to favour a role for local government in footpaths; child care; aged care; libraries; art and culture; emergency and disaster management.
- *Homeowners* are more likely to favour a role for council in providing parks and street cleaning and waste management – whilst *renters* are more likely to nominate child care as an important role.

- *Unemployed* people and *homemakers* are more likely to see an important role for local government in promoting health and wellbeing; emergency and disaster management; promoting the benefits of the local area, and promoting sporting and recreational facilities.

Compared to national respondents, people in South Australia are more likely to nominate an important role for local government in economic and community development areas, as well as in the provision of infrastructure such as roads and footpaths.

- *Country residents* see an important role for council in infrastructure, community and economic development. They are more likely to think it is important for council to be active in aspects of: water, sewage, stormwater and drainage; roads and bridges; environmental management; economic development; youth services; child care; community development; planning for the future; promoting the benefits of the local area; and promoting health and wellbeing.

### 1.3.3 Amalgamation

When asked about amalgamation in focus groups, generally focus group participants take into consideration the costs and benefits of amalgamating local government areas. While people see some advantages in consolidating councils because of the potential to save money by ‘buying in bulk’, pooling resources and sharing knowledge, this is outweighed by a concern that the different needs and preferences of local communities may lead to inappropriate or unequal distribution of services across the larger geographic area.

The focus group discussions also revealed that a number of people are also concerned that councils would need to contract to larger firms with the capacity to service the larger geographic region or larger populations, and that this may adversely affect local businesses currently providing services.

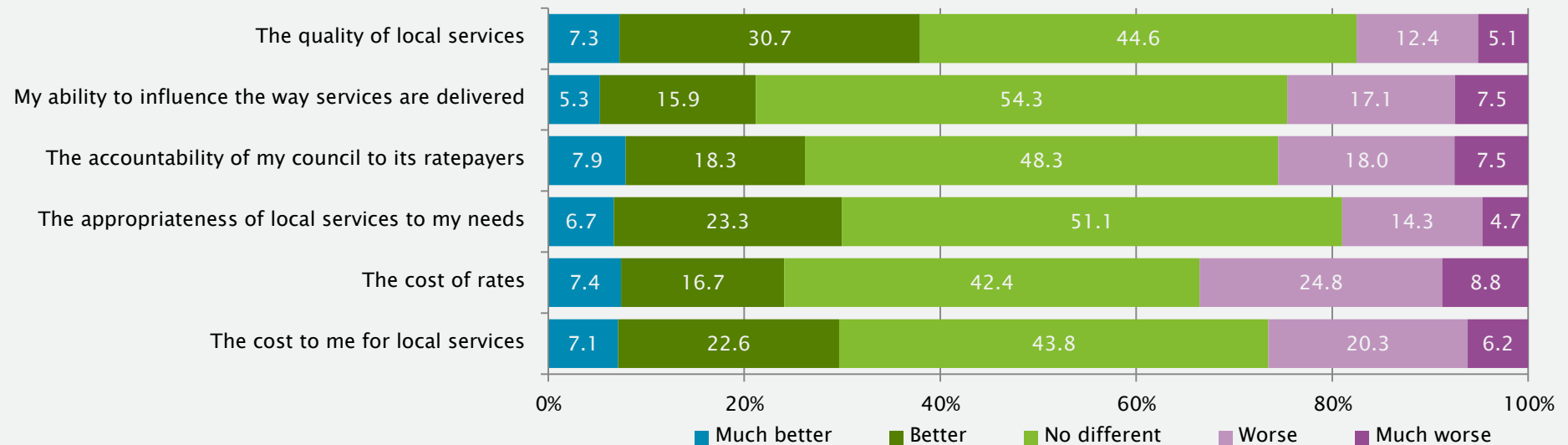
The most frequent objection to amalgamation is the loss of local representation. People are concerned that they would ‘miss out’, have less representation and have less value individually if the numbers within a local government area (or the geographic area itself) become too large. People are open to the idea of amalgamation if it lends to the possibility of having ‘satellite people’ or skeletal staff in different locations to replace the loss of elected representatives.

Along with the loss of local representation, focus group participants report that consolidating councils will decrease accountability and reduce service levels. They also raised concerns that a lack of local knowledge would impact on the effectiveness of decision-making.

### 1.3.4 Shared service delivery

Although some of the concerns about amalgamation coincide with shared service delivery agreements between councils generally respondents preferred the continued existence of their own councils to protect their interests and to offer them the better access to elected representatives.

When asked if shared service delivery arrangements would make things better or worse, approximately half of the respondents are generally unsure of the impacts, or thought nothing would change. Slightly more people think costs would increase rather than decrease, and slightly fewer people are concerned that the quality or appropriateness of services would get worse rather than better.



## 1.4 Conclusion

In summation, the research demonstrates that local government matters in South Australia because of its role as an advocate for the community. The research found that South Australians value local government's role in promoting the benefits of the local community (65%) and in planning for the future (81%). South Australians also value the role of local government in planning for the future, economic development, promoting health and wellbeing and area promotion.

Local governments matter because of their role as 'place-shapers', and their importance in meeting the needs that largely drive people's attachment to, and satisfaction with, the area in which they live. Councils may foster this by delivering appropriate services to meet community members' specific needs and focusing on place making.

The research found that levels of importance and satisfaction regarding key aspects of the local area differ depending on whether individuals live in country South Australia or in Adelaide. Country councils have unique challenges with maintaining economies and delivering services to scale. There are clear opportunities for councils to work towards better understanding and delivering the services that are valued by communities.

In many instances national responses differed considerably from South Australians. This was most evident for the questions about government's role in service provision. For instance, while over half of the South Australian survey respondents (57%) strongly or moderately agree that governments have a role in providing services that the community needs, this was noticeably lower than the national response (80%). Whilst South Australians support collaboration in government service delivery, with almost 60% strongly or moderately agreeing that government should use a mixture of public, private and not-for profit organisations to deliver public services in their area, the national response was higher (83%). Only 14% of South Australian survey respondents were prepared to pay more taxes for a broader range of public services, compared with 43% nationally.

Overall, in South Australia, there is a strong support of local government and its role, which continues to move beyond the provision of infrastructure and services to a role that focusses on community connection and the wellbeing of their local populations more broadly. Most clearly South Australians value councils' strategic approach to community development across social and economic domains, as well as local government's role in advocating for and promoting the local area.

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<sup>i</sup> ABS, 2014, *Australian Social Trends, July 2013*, available at: [www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features40July+2013](http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features40July+2013)

<sup>ii</sup> Australian Government, 2015, *Local government national report 2013–2014*, Canberra, available at:  
[http://regional.gov.au/local/publications/reports/2013\\_2014/INFRA2466\\_LGnr\\_2013-14.pdf](http://regional.gov.au/local/publications/reports/2013_2014/INFRA2466_LGnr_2013-14.pdf)