

Media Statement

23 January 2023 / Media contact: Kathryn Arndt (03) 9349 7999



Cancel Local Councils? Not a Thing to Wish For

The VLGA was concerned to note the recent media associated with the release of the 10 January 2023 Herald Sun article “Survey delivers damning verdict on Victoria’s local councils”.

In this article, the Herald Sun references the results of a survey undertaken by RedBridgE that the publication itself had commissioned. The Herald Sun reported that the survey of 1189 Victorians conducted late last year found “about 45 per cent of respondents answered yes when asked if they thought councils should be scrapped, while 18.5 per cent were unsure”.

The VLGA highlights that as per the Victorian Electoral Commission’s (VEC) report *Local Councils Election 2020 – Report to Parliament* (p.20)¹ there were approximately 4.336m voters enrolled to vote at close of roll in the 2020 Victorian local government elections.

The VLGA asserts that a survey of merely .00027% of the eligible voting population is not, and cannot possibly be considered, evidence to support the Herald Sun’s summations.

However, the VLGA President, Cr Denise Massoud, welcomes the opportunity to open up the conversation about the role and responsibilities of our local councils. Despite the suggestion that voters are ambivalent when it comes to their local council, the 2020 elections realised the highest average turnout for Victorian local government elections at 81.47% – a 9% increase compared to 2016. Clearly people do have an interest.

In her University of Melbourne School of Government policy brief “Closest to the People – Local Government Democracy and Decision Making in Disaster”², the VLGA’s Chief Executive Officer, Kathryn Arndt, highlights how the COVID pandemic demonstrated the resilience, adaptability and capability of local government to deliver routine and emergency services to communities during this time of particular need. Councils did so whilst operating with limited budgets in a state government enforced rate capped environment whilst also attempting to provide welcome relief and recovery efforts for ratepayers and residents.

The scope and responsibilities of Victorian councils are legislated for under the *Local Government Act 2020* – local government is essentially a creature of the state. And, despite the trope that the business of local government should be limited to *roads, rates and rubbish* – the fact is the responsibilities are far reaching – with councils delivering over 100 essential services to communities.

Local government plays an integral role in connecting and caring for people and communities, which is why state and federal governments delegate the delivery of critical services to local government in the first place. It is the grass roots level of government and closest to the community and to put it simply, neither of these levels of government currently have the operational structures in place to deliver these services to Australian communities.

¹ [Local Councils Election 2020 - Report to Parliament](#)

² [Closest to the People - Local Government Democracy and Decision Making in Disaster](#)

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As a result, the work of a council is essential and the role of a councillor is not simple. Councillors receive 100s of pages to digest leading into council meetings where they are required to make significant decisions— including planning applications and the important services the council provides— such as maternal and child health, library, parks and playgrounds, sporting facilities, waste and recycling, immunisations, kindergartens and aged care services.

Although councillors may be seen as community leaders and volunteers by some, they are required to balance these roles with financial oversight, strategic policy, risk assessment and provide oversight of significant service delivery businesses. In addition, given the political dynamics at play, councillors are expected to lobby and advocate throughout the election cycle – and often need to balance employment outside of council duties as they do not receive a salary but rather an ‘allowance’ for their council service.

Each year, councils across Victoria are recognised for the initiatives they have taken on behalf of their communities. These initiatives range from collaborating with service providers to establish mental health supports for young and vulnerable residents, working with local community to create safe and imaginative play hubs for parents and children, providing meals on wheels, establishing best practice emergency management protocols in conjunction with local emergency services agencies to ensure the safety of high risk communities - just ask any resident in one of Victoria’s bush fire or flood ravaged devastated communities what role their local council played both during the emergency and in the recovery phase – not to mention the front line services councils provided during the COVID-19 environment.

Local government has many strengths. It is the most responsive level of democracy and because of its closeness to citizens it can deliver services. But there are challenges. The complexities of council statutory responsibilities continue to grow while at the same time it is the most erratically funded level of government with costs for service delivery often ‘shifting’ from the state and federal government onto local government as a result of policy changes – often implemented with little consultation with the local government sector or the communities which they service – for example, changes to federally funded home care services.

Local government is a complex business, but some councillors will be elected without the administrative or technical background to meaningfully engage in an informed way with many of the issues they will encounter.

Uncompromised local democracy depends on effective local governance. At its heart local democracy and the delivery of best outcomes for the community rely on the participation of candidates and voters who are armed with an accurate understanding of the role of council and the responsibilities of the elected councillor and the attributes necessary to fulfill that role effectively - accurate and transparent reporting from the media will also assist in informing this understanding – in addition to the respect, recognition and adequate distribution of funding from the state and federal governments. After all, if local councils ceased to exist, what is the alternative?

Please attribute to the VLGA:

As an organisation, the VLGA’s overriding value is to strengthen and support good governance in local government, and work to support, promote and facilitate trust and confidence in the sector, says VLGA President, Cr Denise Massoud.

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