

THE CONVERSATION



How council mergers and reforms imperil local government democracy

April 6, 2016 1.53pm AEST

Unless councillors are helped to focus on their representative roles, local democracy's effectiveness could be in danger. AAP/Darren Pateman

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Australia's local government sector has been undergoing reform in recent decades. The result has been fewer and larger local governments and a reshaped role for elected members or councillors. But do councillors understand what this means for them?

From the 1990s, the number of councils in Australia has decreased from 826 to 565. Reforms have focused on local councils' administrative, financial and technical capacities.

These reforms tend to strengthen local government's service-delivery role. But, so far, they have done little to support local representation and democracy. There are significant concerns that these reforms may have a negative impact on local democracy.

What the changes mean

Local government legislation has changed in many Australian states. The legislation now sets out the roles of the CEO or general manager and the role of councillors. The CEO generally has management responsibility for the organisation while councillors are responsible for strategy and policymaking.

However, what councillors may not necessarily understand is that their role is strategic leadership – not the day-to-day management of the organisation.

As part of the authors' research, we conducted a national survey of councillors on their views of their roles and responsibilities. The preliminary results make it clear they felt they should have more influence over administrative policy and procedures. The difficulty is that

legislation says this is the responsibility of the CEO or general manager.

This matters. If councils are larger organisations and councillors represent more residents, it is important that they focus on understanding their communities' needs and aspirations. For local democracy to be effective, councillors should focus on developing strategic plans to meet residents' needs, rather than trying to manage day-to-day operations.

State governments argue that the main objective of local government reform is to make councils more efficient. They want to ensure local government's financial sustainability and its ongoing ability to provide services to the community. This usually leads to fewer and larger local governments.

A new role?

Australia's 5,060 councillors represent a wide diversity of communities and govern very different kinds of organisations.

The 565 councils in Australia range greatly in size. The largest, Brisbane City Council in Queensland, has an annual operating budget of A\$2.9 billion and serves a community of just over a million people. It covers an area of 133,809 hectares.

The smallest, Sandstone Shire Council in Western Australia, comprises a population of 116 and covers a land area of 3,266,650 ha. This is comparable to the size of Belgium. It had an annual operating budget in 2014 of \$3.4 million.

Local government reforms include a stronger emphasis on councillors' strategic, long-term decision-making role. In New South Wales, councils also have to establish community-engagement strategies.

These changes were intended to shift a previously widespread perception of local councils as simply managers of local services and local infrastructure to one where their role, as democratically representative bodies, gained in significance.

This defining of roles between strategic decision-making and involvement in day-to-day administration is problematic. Some councillors have expressed frustration and confusion when, following changes in the legislation, they are no longer able nor permitted to deal directly with staff.

The preliminary results of our study show that what councillors think is their role may not be the same as the intent of local government reform. Larger local governments also means councillors must represent more people.

Unless councillors are helped to focus on their representative roles, engaging with and understanding their communities rather than being too focused on day-to-day council operations, local democracy's effectiveness could be imperilled.



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