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Innovation in Australian local government:

A preliminary snapshot of community engagement practice

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Innovation in Australian local government: A preliminary snapshot of community engagement practice

Prima facie many people would not consider Australian local governments as obvious examples of innovation bureaucracies. Yet some local governments are beginning to demonstrate this characteristic in their participatory democracy, or community engagement, practices. Compelled by a desire to make better decisions, coupled with legislative requirements to facilitate community involvement that are increasingly complex and at times incongruous, many Australian local governments are dedicating considerable time and resources to community engagement. This paper introduces the initial findings of a survey into Australian local government community engagement practices. The data includes: the number of processes local governments are undertaking; the methods being used; the reasons for community engagement; who is responsible; who is undertaking community engagement on behalf of local governments and the challenges that local governments face in delivering innovative and even basic community engagement. The results identify further areas of analysis and research so that a more complete picture of innovation in community engagement practices can be obtained.

Keywords: Community engagement; local government; public administration; public participation

Introduction

While Australian local communities have the opportunity to vote in local elections and therefore receive democratic representation, communities increasingly also have the opportunity to be involved in local decision-making through participatory democratic processes, widely known as community engagement in the Australian context. From the standpoint of local government, community engagement can be defined as a process whereby ‘the aspirations, concerns, needs and values of citizens and communities are incorporated at all levels and in all sectors in policy development, planning, decision-making, service delivery and assessment by which governments... involve... communities and other stakeholders in these processes’ (Brisbane Declaration on Community Engagement 2005). Without exception, the Local Government Acts of the various jurisdictions (state and territory) list engagement as a normative principle and stipulate that councils must engage their communities (*Local Government Act 2009 (Qld)*; *Local Government Act 1989 (Vic)*; *Local Government Act 1999 (SA)*; *Local Government Act 2008 (NT)*; *Local Government Act 1993 (NSW)*; *Local Government Act 1993 (Tas)*; *Local Government Act 1995 (WA)*). As a

consequence, many – but, as we shall see, by no means all – Australian local governments have community engagement policies, plans, staff positions and resources dedicated to this function. However, the exact extent of how community engagement has permeated local government is unknown, at least partly due to a lack of empirical research. The preliminary research presented in this paper seeks to address this gap through presenting findings of a recently conducted census into local government community engagement practices.

Like all government systems, Australian local government has been subject to the influence of a number of trends in public administration. The most predominate has been the reforms introduced since the late 1970s, which several scholars have labelled New Public Management (NPM) and can be surmised as an approach to public sector management that emphasises the private sector values of efficiency and productivity (Marshall 2008; 2003; Tan et al. 2017; for an account of NPM see Diefenbach 2009:893). According to Head (2011:103) these early ‘technocratic’ NPM reforms saw an increase in the outsourcing of, and competitive tendering for service provision (Mulgan 2006; Martin 1998) and limited budgets for community engagement processes. By the mid-1990s the approach towards community engagement had tempered and instead it had become a part of the new wave of reform initiatives (Aulich 1999). Responsiveness to service users and network partnerships became priorities, for which community engagement was seen as a suitable vehicle. A more cynical perspective on this situation is that the inclusion of more community engagement requirements by state governments was an attempt to placate or deflect communities from other wide-ranging reforms to local government, particularly compulsory amalgamation programs and the subsequent reduction in local representatives, driven by economic concerns (Marshall et al 1999:36). Regardless of motivation, community engagement was granted a degree of usefulness under NPM frameworks.

In an article on innovation in Australian local government from nearly 30 years ago, Wettenhall (1988: 356) makes an astute observation about the juxtaposition of efficiency and democracy in the public sector:

...in public organisations, the drive for efficiency in the commercial sense must always be tempered by the need to service the values of democratic participation and social equity. Governments sometimes forget this important fact of their existence, but they do so at their peril: for them the real test of efficiency is how well they reconcile these conflicting values. (Wettenhall 1988:365)

Arguably, the inability of many local governments to reconcile these conflicting values created ideal conditions for the relevance of the Public Value approach. The Public Value framework presented by Moore (1995:30) differentiated the public sector from the private sector because of its remit to deliver collective services and its ability to exercise coercive powers. The 'strategic triangle' of the framework asks public managers to define: public value; their authorising environment and their operating environment. It is in the authorising environment where the views of the community become instrumental because for legitimacy to be granted to governments, citizens need the decisions to be fair and efficient (Moore 1995:48). Community engagement processes provide the opportunity for governments to demonstrate this fairness and efficiency, not just in democratic process but also in decisions (see Nabatchi 2012). Understood as such, while community engagement can be viewed as a placatory mechanism under NPM, under public value, it becomes a core requirement.

As a result of these developments in public administration, community engagement is now a widely-accepted function of Australian local government. And while some see this as a 'paradigm shift' in the way democracy is practiced (Stoker 2006; Aulich 2009), others remain sceptical (Head 2007). Regardless, the proliferation of practice (discussed below) would suggest that councils are seeing the benefits beyond merely meeting legislative requirements. However, the problem is that there is no empirical data to understand exactly what local governments are doing. Much of the existing literature about community engagement practices in Australian local governments focuses on: the role of participation in governance (Gollagher and Hartz-Karp 2013; Aulich 2009; Reddel and Woolcock 2004); the various types and levels of participation (Head 2007; Bishop and Davis 2002); the legislative and contextual development (Grant et al 2011; Grant 2017); its benefits and

impacts (Head 2007; Reddel and Woolcock 2004); its role in public policy (Head 2011; Bishop and Davis 2002; Adams and Hess 2001); and examinations of specific, usually deliberative, methods (Hartz-Karp 2012; Carson and Hartz-Karp 2005; Hendriks et. al 2013).

While all of this research contributes to a depth of understanding about community engagement in Australian local government by giving insight into particular methods, cases and councils, it does not give breadth, or an understanding of how most local governments are practically interpreting this rapidly evolving function of community engagement. Without a 'sectoral' view it is difficult to know which aspects of community engagement are being adopted and adapted by which types of councils and why.

This paper starts to address that gap by presenting the preliminary findings of a census of local government community engagement practice. Similar studies include Lowndes et. al's (2001) survey of 310 from 332 authorities in the United Kingdom and Wang's (2001) survey of 249 of 541 cities with populations larger than 50,000 in the United States. Not only does the Australian context and setting vary, developments in community engagement practice have also moved at a rapid pace. Consequently, this study seeks to present a snapshot of Australian community engagement practice which can then be used as a platform for further exploration.

The paper is divided into three main parts. I proceed from an explanation of the objectives and methodology, including response rates and weaknesses of the data. Second I present the findings, loosely in order of the the questions in the census, namely: how much engagement councils are conducting; what methods are being used; what the drivers are for engaging; who is planning and delivering the engagement; and, what are the challenges in planning and delivering engagement in Australian local governments. Links to related literature are made through the paper. Finally, the paper concludes by suggesting future analysis and research needed to complete a fuller picture of current practice.

Objectives and Methodology

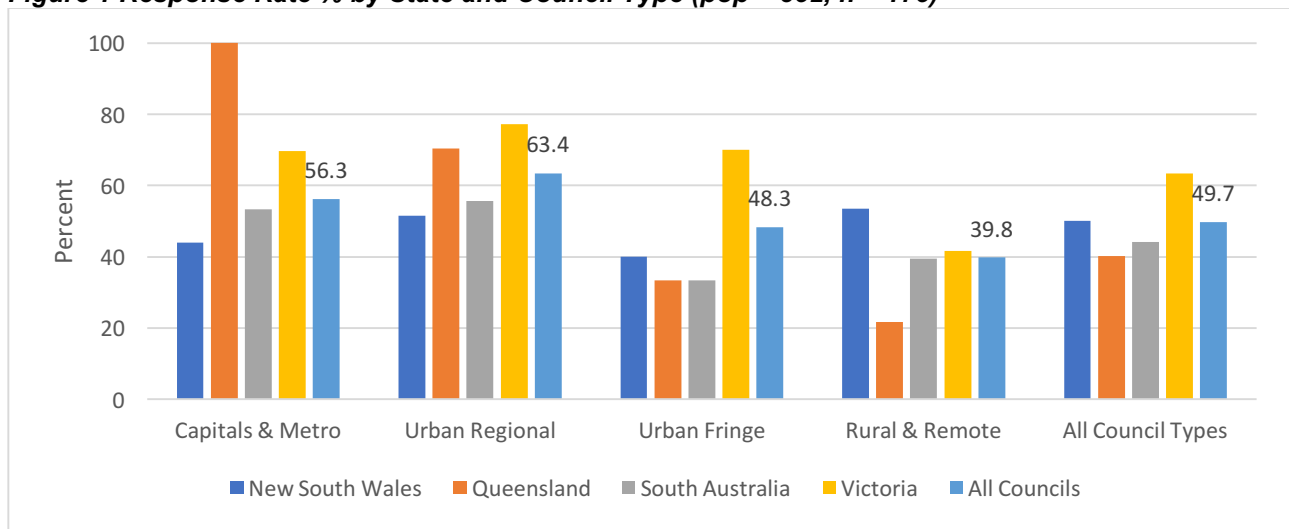
This paper presents the preliminary findings of a larger explanatory mixed-methods study into the professionalisation of community engagement in local government. The research questions for this initial stage were: What are the community engagement practices of Australian local governments? How is community engagement positioned inside Australian local governments? What is driving and inhibiting practice?

Later stages of the research will explore who facilitates community engagement on behalf of local governments and the drivers, trends and trajectories of community engagement practice and its emerging professional industry. The results presented are preliminary and descriptive, with further analysis yet to be undertaken to be able to make inferences about local government practice on a larger scale.

After obtaining approval from the UTS Human Ethics Research Committee, the 'Local Government Community Engagement Census' was emailed to all 352 local governments in New South Wales (NSW) (128), Queensland (77), South Australia (68) and Victoria (79) in April 2017. Two reminder emails were also sent and social media channels were used to promote participation in the census. The census contained fourteen questions including: council name (for classification purposes only); the number of community engagement processes conducted in the last 12 months; the position of the community engagement function in the organisational chart; where responsibility for planning and delivering community engagement was located in the organisation; the number of dedicated community engagement staff; the proportion of community engagement processes designed and delivered by staff in the organisation; reasons for using external consultants, if applicable; methods used in the past, present and being considered for the future; factors driving community engagement practice; and, difficulties experienced in delivering engagement from an organisational perspective.

Substantial responses were received from 49.5% (175 of 352) of the local governments. Figure 1 shows a summary of the response rates by state and by council type. Council type has been grouped using the Australian Local Government Classification (ALGC) system, the responses for individual ALGC types are presented in the Appendix. Figure 1 illustrates that the response rate from each state was above 40%, with the highest rate from Victorian councils (63.3%). Responses per council type across all states was also strong: capital and metropolitan councils (57.8%), urban regional councils (61.3%), urban fringe (48.3%), and, rural and remote councils (40.4%).

Figure 1 Response Rate % by State and Council Type (pop = 352, n = 175)



NB: Queensland has only one local government with a capital city/urban development classification which accounts for the 100% for that group.

As with all surveys, this one suffers from some weaknesses, namely: non-response; multiple responses; reporting bias; and point-in-time data. Given the survey was administered online, the response rate of 49.7% is relatively high. There are, however, some council types where response rates were much lower, for example, only 21.7% for rural and remote Queensland local governments. Research by Morris (2012) partially fills this gap through discussion of engagement practices and challenges in rural remote indigenous local councils. In addition, there were seven councils where more than one response was received. In these instances, one response was selected as the representative response and the criteria used was to pick the response from the more senior

staff member (where identifiable), and failing that, the response that was first received. It is worth noting that in these cases, there were some discrepancies between responses suggesting a reporting bias which may be present in other responses.¹ This highlights the confusion of how community engagement is positioned and understood in organisations – an interesting finding in and of itself. A final weakness of the data is that it provides a snapshot of practice at a certain point of time. Without longitudinal data it is difficult to assess trends. As these are preliminary findings of a larger study, many of these weaknesses can be addressed in later aspects thereof.

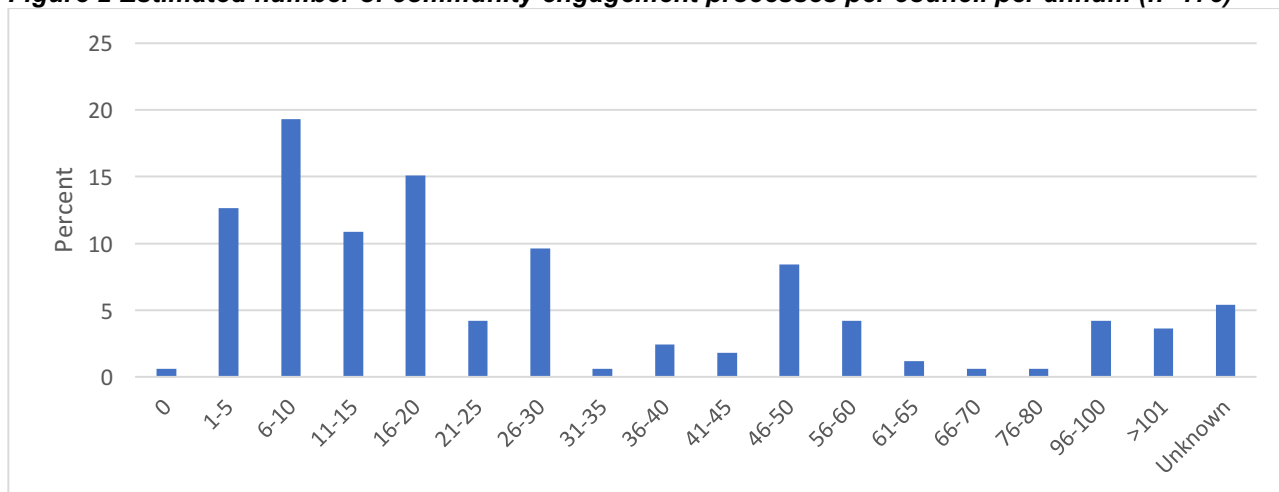
Findings

How often councils are engaging?

In the Local Government Community Engagement Census, councils were asked to identify approximately how many community engagement processes they delivered in the last 12 months. Responses ranged from none to (presumably) inaccurate outliers of 500 and 800 processes, as shown in Figure 2. The outliers as well as some of the comments received in lieu of quantifiable amounts accentuate an important difficulty in researching community engagement practice; as one respondent stated, ‘It depends on what level you are talking about? We conduct hundreds of engagements with documents on exhibition...[and]...about 30 community meetings’. This ambiguity for what counts as community engagement is one that has been previously identified (Head 2007) and continues to create confusion. It is likely that responses include everything from public meetings to letter notifications, and may even include phone calls or community events. On the whole, however, the responses appear realistic if community engagement processes are interpreted as the as delivery of a number of methods or activities for one particular decision-making purpose, with the majority of councils undertaking a couple each month to one process every few months.

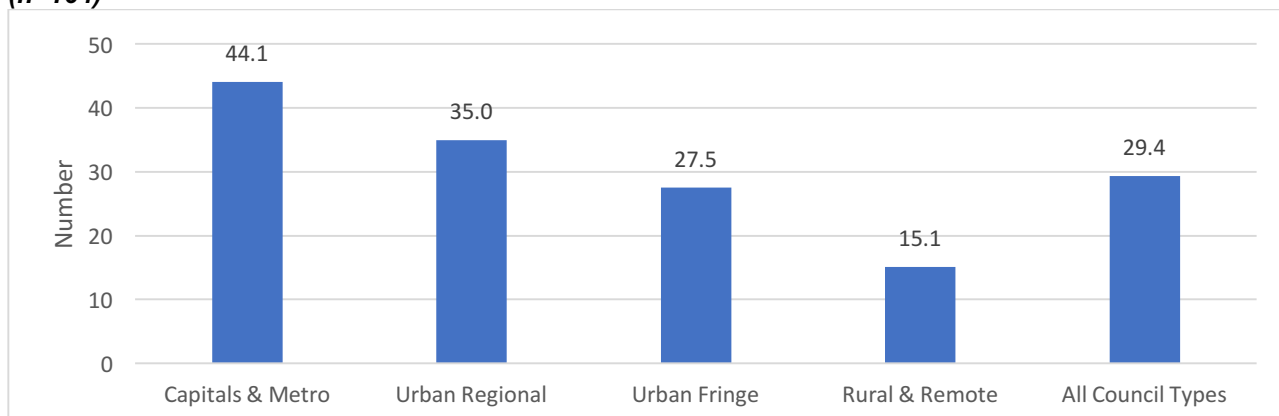
¹ For example, for one metropolitan council Respondent A stated there were 12 processes in the last year, that all processes were designed and planned by council staff and stated the ineffectiveness of the community engagement staff as a key barrier. Respondent B stated there were 48 processes in the last year, that two-thirds were designed and planned by council staff and stated that there were not enough staff resources to stretch across the organisation.

Figure 2 Estimated number of community engagement processes per council per annum (n=175)



Examining Figure 2, the average number of processes, excluding outliers, for all council types sits as 29.4 processes per annum. Figure 3 provides the averages by council type. Given that the ALGC system uses population size and density to determine council type, it is not surprising that more processes are reported in capital cities and metropolitan councils (average 44.1 processes), urban regional councils (average 35 processes) and urban fringe councils (average 27.5 processes) as opposed to rural and remote councils (average 15.1 processes) as smaller populations often mean smaller budgets and less staff (Morris 2012). Further analysis and later research will explore if there is a difference in the types of methods used by the different councils – for example, do some types of councils lean more towards traditional or emerging methods?

Figure 3 Mean estimated number of community engagement processes per council type per annum (n=164)



How councils are engaging?

Local governments across Australia's jurisdictions are obliged to conform to a variety of requirements for community engagement as dictated in relevant legislation and regulations, including – but not limited to – the relevant local government acts and associated legislation. The requirements vary between states (Grant and Drew 2017) and range from stipulations to follow the council's public consultation policy, such as in South Australia, through to following public notification and submission processes, present in all of the current local government acts, except for Queensland. Legislative requirements to engage can be interpreted as the *minimum* requirements for councils.

As a means to determine how councils were engaging, they were asked which community engagement methods they have used in the past (12 months or more ago), the present (current 12 months), and are intending to use in the future (next year or beyond). Councils were surveyed on the use of 12 different methods, which are listed and grouped as follows:

- Traditional methods – Those that are commonly associated with local government community engagement and participation. Includes: public meetings, public submissions, advisory/community reference groups
- Contemporary methods – Those that are more participatory than traditional methods and have become commonly associated with local government in more recent years. Includes: community summit/workshop (< 30 participants), community summit/workshop (>30 participants), drop in/open house/staffed display, focus groups
- Online methods – Those that are conducted on web based platforms. Includes: online discussion forums and online surveys
- Deliberative methods – those that conform to principles of deliberative democracy. Includes: citizen's jury/deliberative panel/forum

- Emerging methods – Those that are not yet commonly associated with local government but have had significant use in very recent years. Includes: open space/unconference, and participatory budgeting.

The grouping of the methods is purely for the ease of presentation and analysis and they may be considered arbitrary; for example participatory budgeting is practiced predominately as a deliberative process in Australia (see Christensen and Grant 2016) but is separated in this list. The selection of methods chosen were designed to provide a sample of common methods and is by no means comprehensive or indicative of the suite of methods used by all or even some councils (cf. Rowe and Frewer 2005).

The data collected shows that traditional engagement methods along with online surveys and drop in sessions, dominate the community engagement activities of local councils. Public meetings, public submissions, online surveys, drop in/open house sessions and advisory/community reference groups are the five most reported methods used in the previous 12 months, current 12 month period and into the future. As Figures 4 - 7 illustrate, 65% or more of councils report using these five methods in the past as well as in the current 12 month period. Public meetings (77.7% past, 69.1% present, 45.7% future), or ‘town hall’ meetings as they are also known, are typically run in a format where officials and experts present and then the audience of community and stakeholders can ask questions or make comments, sometimes with a time limit. This method has a long history of use in the United States (Bingham 2010) as well as Australia, even though it is not currently stipulated as a method in any of the local government legislation although aspects are often incorporated into larger public submission processes. Despite its ongoing popularity, the method is now subject to increasing criticism for: being unable to foster deliberation and for the public being generally unable to influence decisions (Adams 2004; Wang 2001; Bishop and Davis 2002: 21; McComas et al 2010); not being able to accurately assess support or opposition to proposals as attendance is dominated by

Figure 4 Traditional Method Use (n = 175)

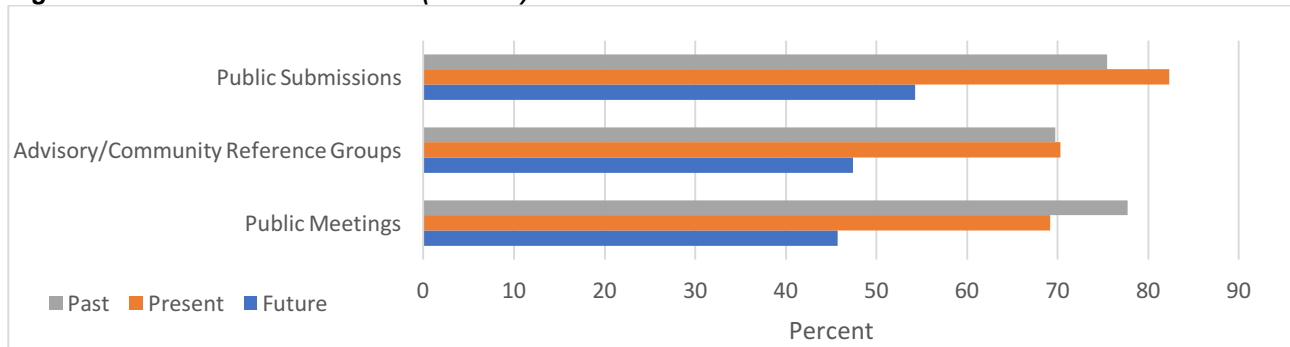


Figure 5 Contemporary Method Use (n = 175)

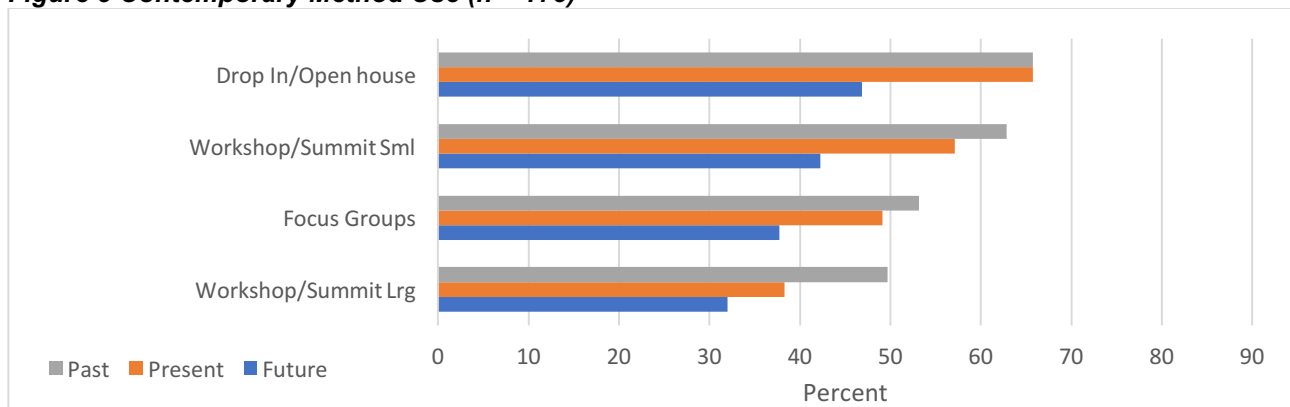


Figure 6 Online Method Use (n = 175)

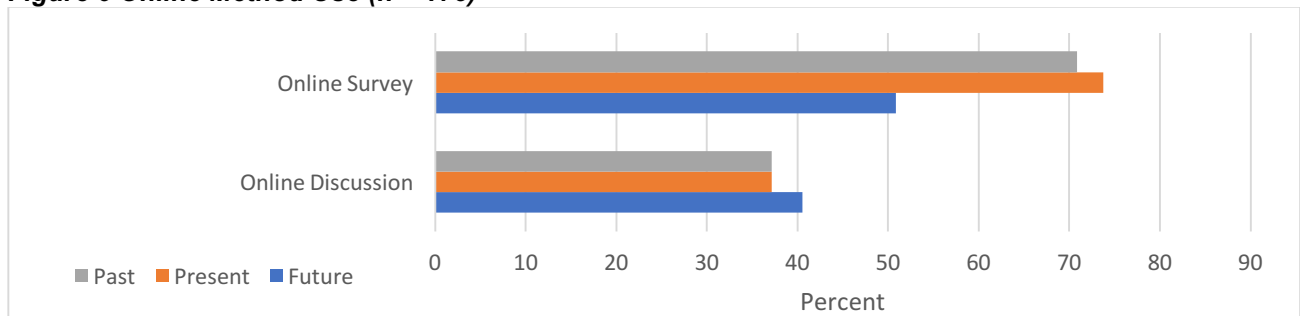
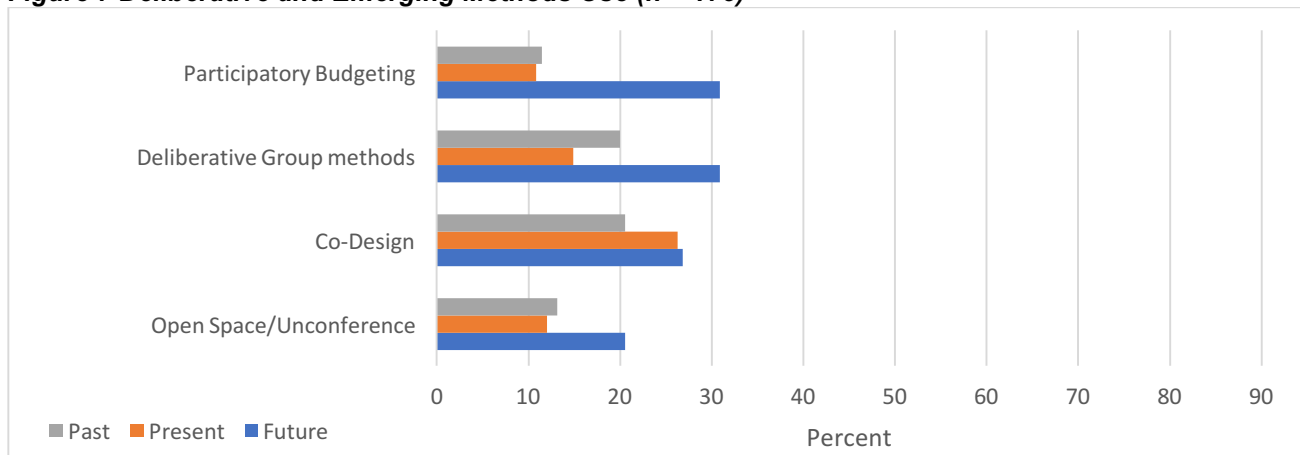


Figure 7 Deliberative and Emerging Methods Use (n = 175)



‘usual suspects’, ‘angry mobs’ and ‘grandstanders’ (National Civic League 2013; Leighninger 2014); and, because negative experiences can reduce political efficacy, social capital and public trust (Lukensmeyer 2013:156; Knight Foundation 2010; Leighninger 2014:3-4).

Also listed in the top five most-used methods are drop-in sessions/open houses (65.7% past, 65.7% present, 46.9% future) which are often used as a less adversarial alternative to public meetings, as participants are invited to attend displays wherein staff are present and where individual questions and concerns can be responded to in a one-on-one or small group setting. The method was regularly cited as part of the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) (2007) Spectrum of Public Participation as an “Inform” level method, meaning that the method offered the opportunity for participants to understand the proposal but not to have any influence over its direction or outcome, a weakness it shares with its predecessor. The IAP2 Spectrum is a commonly cited practical tool in Australian local governments that refers to increasing degrees of influence that are available to community and stakeholders in an engagement method.

Not surprisingly due to their excessive use in legislation, public submissions (75.4% past, 82.3% present, 54.3% future) remain popular. The process involves councils inviting written, and now sometimes electronic, submissions to object to or support particular proposals. There are sometimes options for community members to put forward their position at a council meeting as well as receive a written response from the council in response to their comments.

Second only to public submissions in current use are online surveys (70.9% past, 73.7% present, 50.9% future). One of the main appeals of this method is the collection of quantifiable data that requires minimal analysis for decision-making and that can be administered at a low cost (Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia 2012) especially when compared to face-to-face methods over geographically dispersed areas. Like other traditional methods, it is one that is likely to oversample active community members and lead to participation bias (Fung 2003) as well as fail to engage a

more representative segment of the community (Leighninger 2011:25) making it difficult for councils to make the best decision for the whole of the community.

Advisory/community reference groups (69.7% past, 70.3% present, 47.4% future) also remain a well-established method amongst councils. Once again, this is partly because of legislative requirements (Hendriks et. al 2013). Advisory and reference groups take a number of forms and are given various levels of decision-making authority depending on their governing legislation and local government context (Bolitho 2013: 12-14). In her study of citizen committees, Bolitho (2013) identifies the value, as well as common frustrations with the methods which include: their integration with other council functions; their ability to influence decision-making; representativeness and operational effectiveness.

This preference for traditional engagement methods mirrors similar findings overseas (Nabatchi and Amsler 2012:76; Wang 2001; Wang and van Wart 2007). Although interestingly, councils are less committed to using these methods in the future. The sharpest decline is in the intention to use public meetings, with a 44.2% drop from past use to future use. Also interesting is the decline in the intention to use public submission processes (28.0% drop from past to future use) as this would indicate that councils are using the method even when not stipulated in the legislation, or that there may be an expectation that future legislation will require less or no use of this method.

Despite the domination of traditional methods, drop-in sessions and online surveys, contemporary methods and online discussion forums are also experiencing significant reported use with current use ranging between 37.1% and 57.1% and with intended future use ranging from 32% to 42.3%. What is particularly noteworthy, and also relevant to the main premise of this paper, is the reported use of deliberative and emerging methods. Deliberative methods were described to survey participants as 'Citizen's Juries, Deliberative Panels and Forums'. Past reported use was 20% of all councils, current use 14.9% and future use is more than twice that at 30.9% suggesting that one third of councils intend to use deliberative methods in the future if they have not already.

Furthermore, emerging methods have a similar reported use, with nearly one third (30.9%) of councils intending to use participatory budgeting in the future, despite only 10.9% using it in the current year and 11.9% reporting its use in the past. This is especially noteworthy given that participatory budgeting processes have only been used in Australian local governments in the past 5 years (Christensen and Grant 2016).

Codesign processes are experiencing a similar trend, with one-fifth (20.6%) of councils reporting use in the past and just over a quarter reporting use in the present (26.3%) and intention for future use (26.9%). Codesign was included in the census in response to the revival of coproduction, codelivery, cocommissioning and other joint state-public approaches to service and program design and delivery (see Nabatchi et al 2017; Alford and Yates 2016; Bovaird 2007; Voorberg et al 2015; Bovaird and Loeffler 2013). Arguably, the term ‘codesign’ as well its related umbrella terms, are poorly defined and loosely applied (Nabatchi et al. 2017) making it difficult to know if councils are understanding this method as a way of working or a deliberative practice. This is a gap that can be explored in the later research.

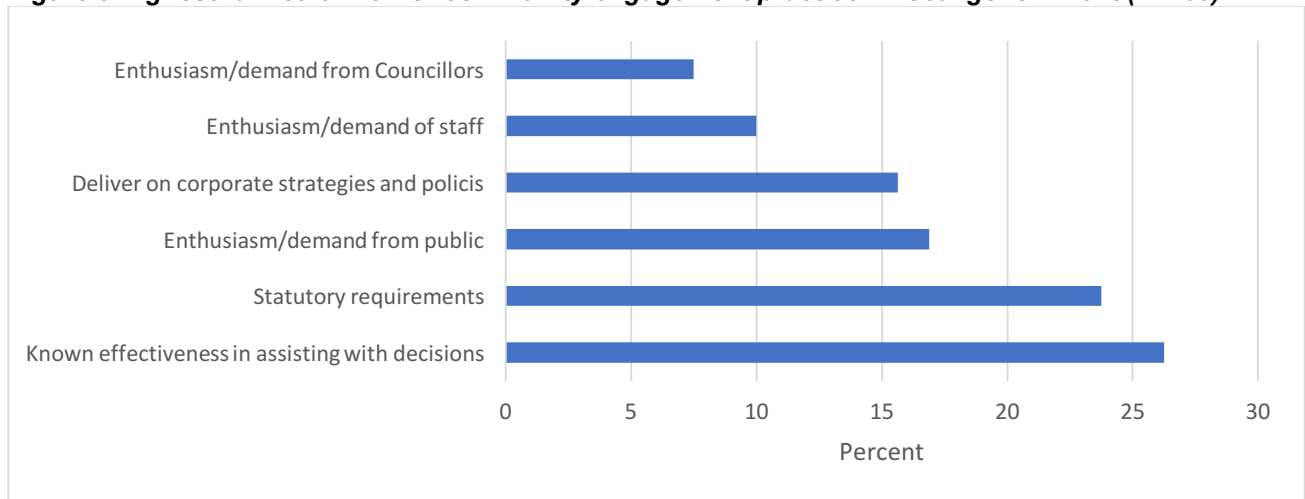
What’s driving community engagement by councils?

Census respondents were asked what they believed was driving community engagement practice in their local governments, and were provided with a number of options to rank. As shown in Figure 8, the highest ranking response was ‘Known effectiveness in assisting with decisions’ (26.3%), followed by ‘Statutory requirements’ (23.8%) and ‘Enthusiasm and demand from the public’ (16.9%). When asked if there any additional reasons drivers, 27.5% (n=44) of respondents gave answers. These included: recent amalgamations/IPART²; building relationships and capacity with

² In 2014 the NSW government commenced reforms of local government based on ‘fit for the future’ criteria. The Independent Pricing and Regularly Tribunal (IPART) led the review of the criteria and were subsequent assessors for proposals for mergers and improvements (IPART 2015). Community engagement was a requirement of proposals. The process of mergers is still ongoing.

community; risk and reputation management; enthusiasm/demand from executive staff; and, the need to hear from a cross-section or particular groups within the community.

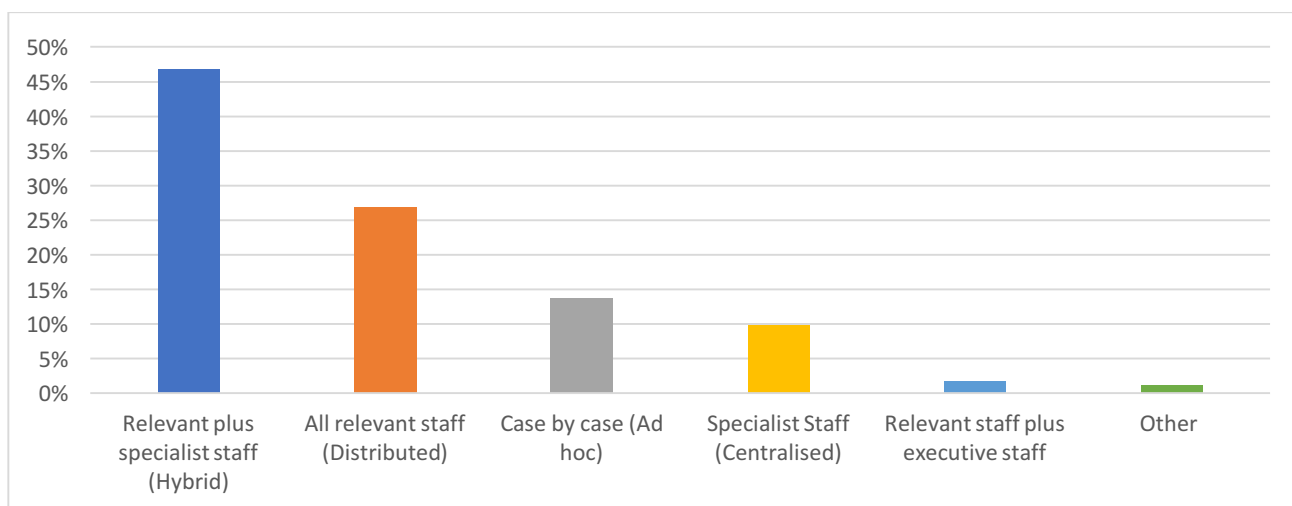
Figure 8 Highest ranked driver for community engagement practice in local government (n=160)



Who is designing and delivering local government community engagement processes?

Given that all councils surveyed are delivering community engagement processes, a logical question is: who is planning, delivering, reporting and evaluating these processes? Assuming that responsibility for community engagement would vary between councils, survey respondents were asked who was responsible for the planning and delivery of community engagement in their organisation. As Figure 9 shows below, nearly half (46.9%) of councils have an arrangement where relevant staff, presumably from different work areas such as land use planning, community services, and environmental services, work with specialist staff to plan and deliver community engagement processes. The second most common option was planning and delivery by relevant staff (26.9%). Other arrangements include a centralised specialist staff arrangement (9.7%) and relevant staff working with an executive staff member (1.17%). In a couple of the remote and rural councils, the executive member was the CEO.

Figure 9 Internal responsibility for planning and delivery of community engagement (n=175)

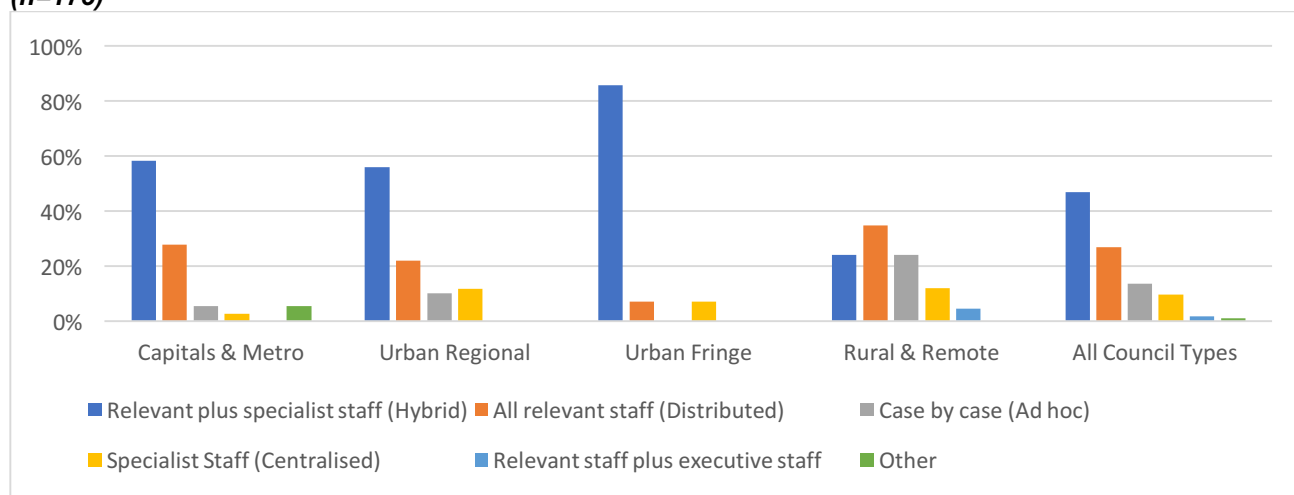


These findings are interesting for two reasons. First, in the instances where relevant staff are wholly or partly responsible: it assumes that regardless of disciplinary background and area of expertise, local government staff are expected to have a degree of understanding and involvement in the planning and delivery of community engagement. This in turn suggests that the knowledge and skills for planning and delivering community engagement are either assumed to be intrinsically known, previously acquired, acquired on the job, a combination of these or alternatively that there are no specialist knowledge and skills required. Second, it is notable that in most councils, staffing arrangements do not extend to include specialist community engagement staff. The reason for this will warrant further exploration in later stages of the research. Resourcing constraints are likely to provide a reason for this situation although a quick glance at any local government annual report or council plan would suggest it is a matter of prioritisation: as community engagement is usually listed as one of the first strategic goals for a council but staffing priorities are often given to positions that generate revenue, such as parking inspectors.

In order to explore where these differences are likely to occur, Figure 10 shows this same data by council type. Not surprisingly, given size and staffing constraints, all council types, except rural and remote, are likely to use a hybrid arrangement (capitals and metropolitan 58.3%, urban

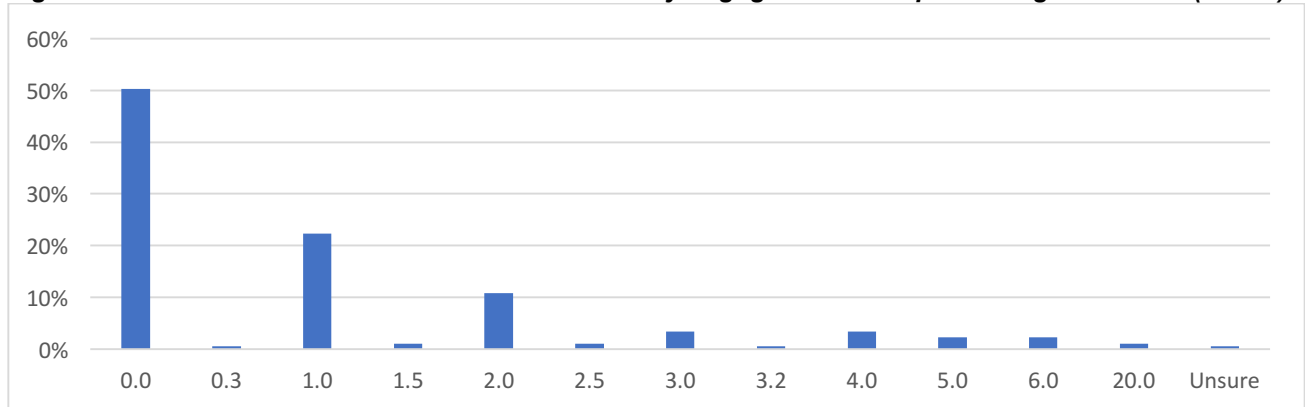
regional 55.9%, urban fringe 85.7%). While there are relatively high proportions of specialist staff in urban regional (11.9%), urban fringe (12.1%), and rural and remote (9.7%) it is likely that these staff are not dedicated community engagement staff and may be part positions. This can be inferred from the results to the next question.

Figure 10 Internal responsibility for planning and delivery of community engagement by council type (n=175)



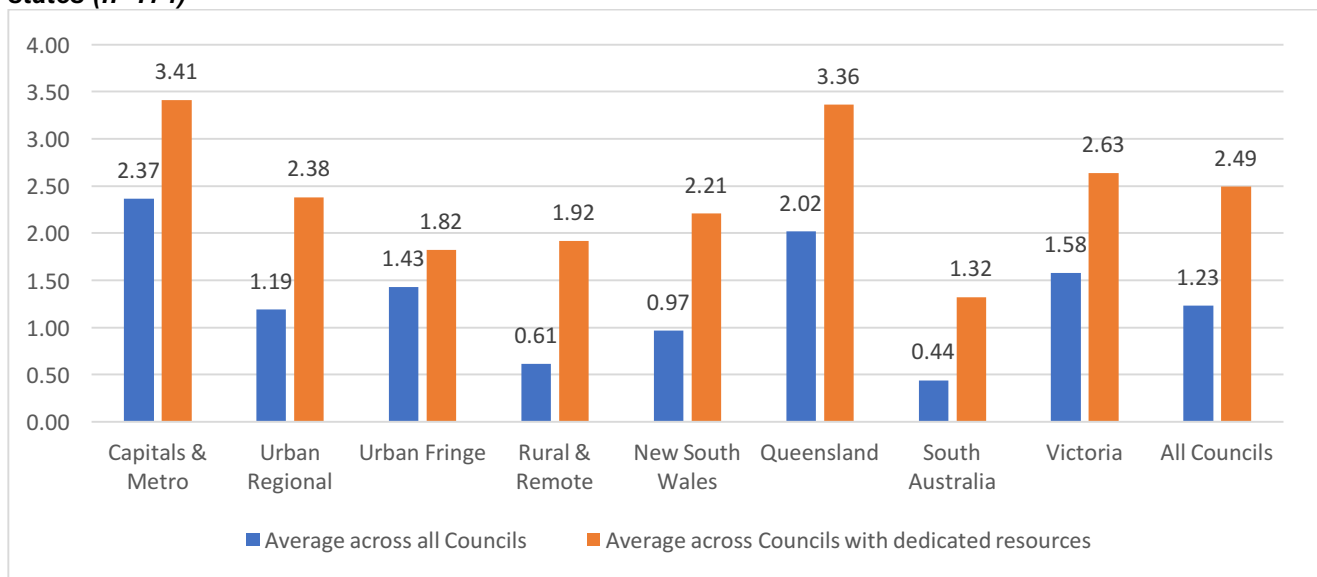
Survey respondents were asked how many staff in their councils had roles which were dedicated to community engagement only. It was stipulated that they not be combined with other functions such as communications. The results are in presented in Figure 11. Once again, half of councils do not have a dedicated community engagement staff member and the average across all councils is 1.23 staff per organisation, or 2.49 staff in organisations that do have dedicated community engagement staff.

Figure 11 Estimated number of dedicated community engagement staff per local government (n=166)



A closer look at the average scores reveals some noteworthy findings, as illustrated in Figure 12. Not surprisingly, capital and metropolitan councils have a higher average of dedicated community engagement staff (3.41 for each of these councils with dedicated staff). This high number can be attributable to two of the capital city councils reporting 20 dedicated staff each.

Figure 12 Average numbers of dedicated community engagement staff across council types and states (n=174)



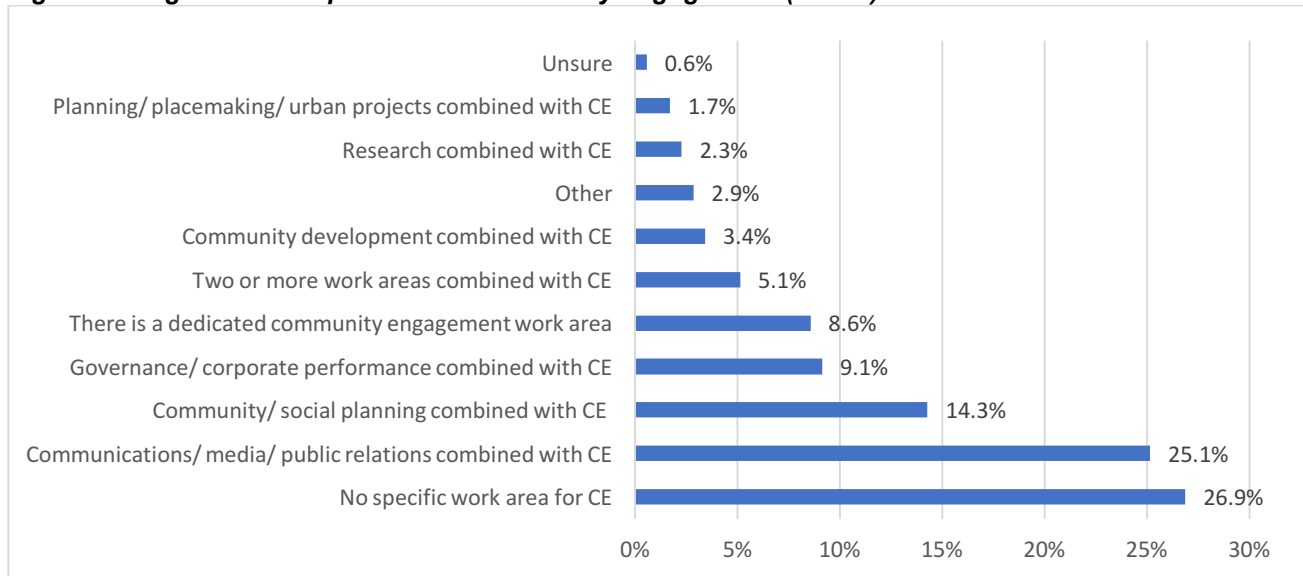
In the instances where there are no dedicated staff but there are specialist staff to assist with community engagement, it can be assumed that the community engagement function is being combined with another work area. Community engagement’s position in the organisation is particularly important when considering how the practice is theoretically understood. That is, is it an

extension of governance and corporate strategy? Is it part of community development? Is it seen as a form of research? Or a form of communications? Or public relations by a different name?

To assist in determining if this is the case and what the related areas might be, the question ‘Where is community engagement positioned in your organisational chart?’ was asked of census respondents. Congruent with the earlier findings of councils where there were no dedicated staff and responsibility for planning and delivery lay with relevant staff, 26.9% of councils indicated that there was no specific work area for community engagement. This finding is illustrated in Figure 13 along with the position of community engagement in other councils. Of significance is the result of 25.1% of councils combining the community engagement work function with communications, media and/or public relations. While in many councils, these fields are perceived as the most complimentary and compatible, the differences between them might be having a negative impact upon community engagement, more so than communications, as it is likely to be the less-dominant field. For example, if the focus of a community engagement process is on communications or information sharing it might neglect the decision-making aspect, rendering the engagement tokenistic.

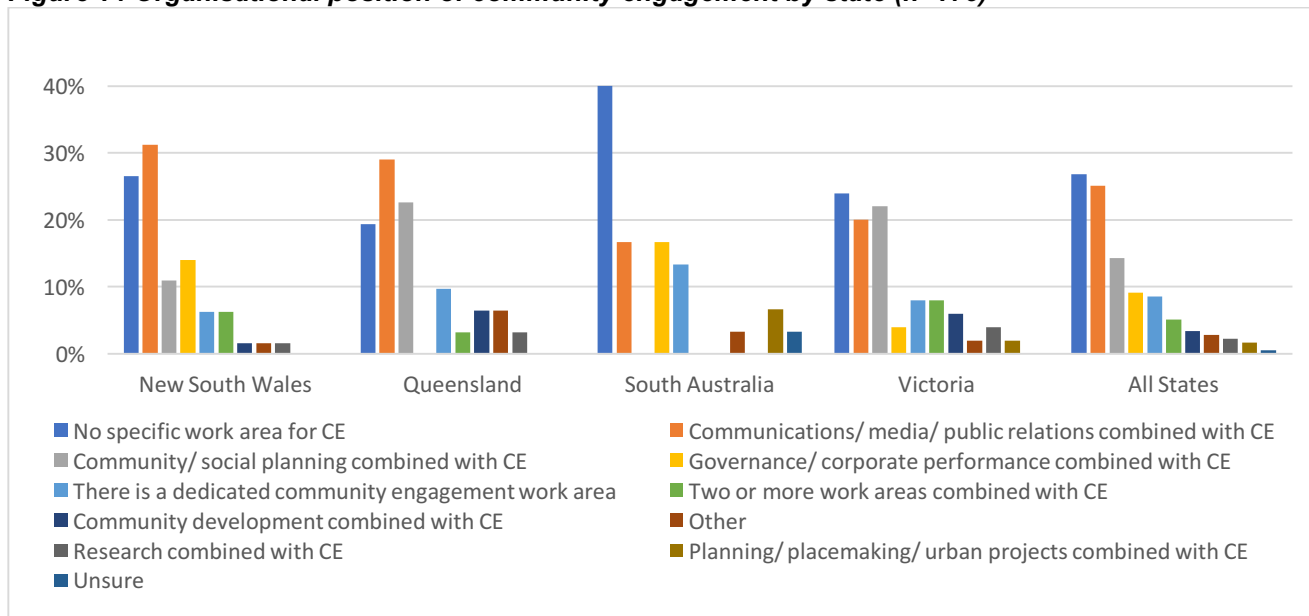
Only 9.1% of councils reported combining community engagement with their governance functions. This is interesting as community engagement is widely understood to be the involvement of the community in the decisions that affect them and formal decision making processes, such as public submission processes, are often managed by the governance work areas as they usually have oversight for legislative compliance. Other work areas that community engagement is combined with include: community/social planning (14.3%), community development (3.4%), research (2.3%) and planning/placemaking/urban projects (1.7%). In 5.1% of councils there are multiple functions included alongside community engagement.

Figure 13 Organisational position of community engagement (n=175)



In an attempt to determine if there were regional trends in the organisational positioning of community engagement, the data has been analysed by state, as illustrated in Figure 14. As the figure shows: South Australian councils are less likely to have a specific work area for community engagement (40%) while at the same time having a higher percentage of dedicated community engagement work areas than any other state (13.3%); New South Wales (31.3%) and Queensland (29%) are more likely to have the community engagement function combined with communications, media and/or public relations; community engagement is more likely to be combined with community/social planning in Queensland (22.6%) and Victoria (22.0%). The reasons for these regional differences may be due to the practicalities of implementing the different legislation, each of which certainly has its own defining features, functions and priorities (Marshall et. al 1999:35; Aulich 1999). Regardless it certainly warrants further investigation as would determining which models are increasing in dominance.

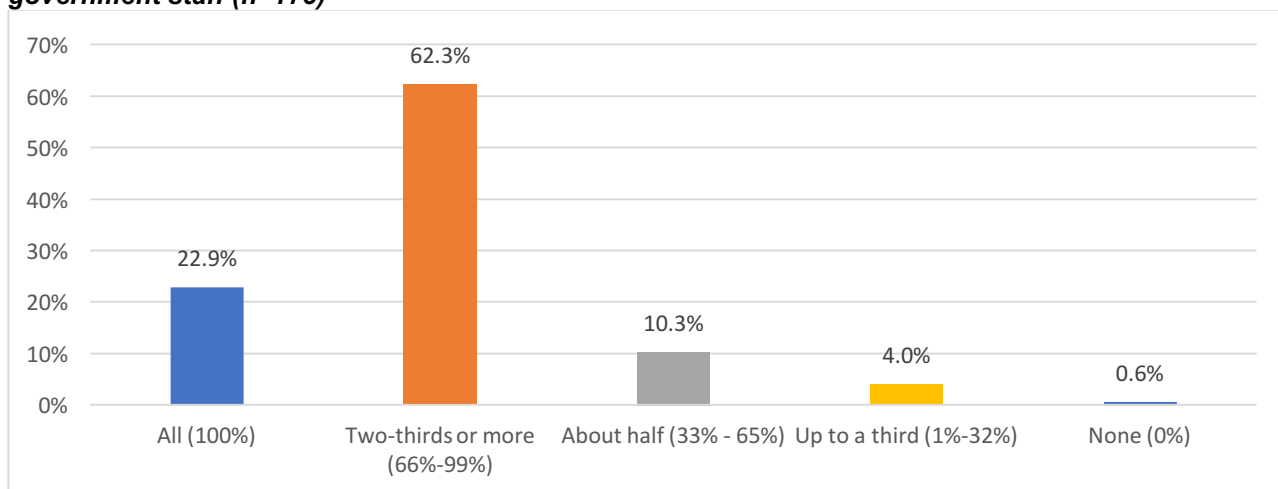
Figure 14 Organisational position of community engagement by state (n=175)



The growing industry of community engagement consultants (see Bherer et al 2017a; Lee 2015; Hendriks and Carson 2008) suggest that local government is a significant client group.

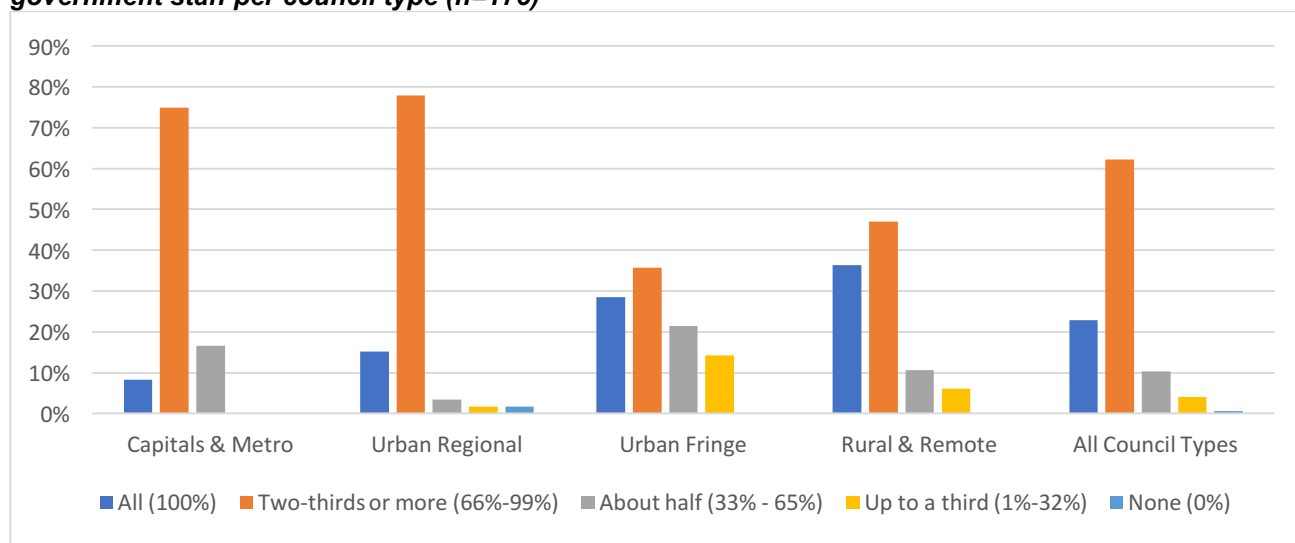
Consequently, census respondents were asked to estimate how much community engagement they plan and deliver as an organisation, as opposed to that which is planned and delivered by external consultants. The results are presented in Figure 15 and show that roughly one-fifth (22.9%) of councils do all of their own planning and delivery. Nearly two-third (62.3%) plan and deliver two-thirds or more themselves and 10.3% do about half and 4.0% do up to a third.

Figure 15 Estimated proportion of community engagement processes designed and delivered by local government staff (n=175)



Expecting there to be differences between council types due to resourcing constraints, the responses have been analysed by council type, as show in Figure 16. As expected, rural and remote councils reported being most likely to plan and deliver all community engagement processes without external assistance (36.4%), followed by urban fringe councils (28.6%). Interestingly, approximately one-third (35.7%) of urban fringe councils do less than half themselves.

Figure 16 Estimated proportion of community engagement processes designed and deliver by local government staff per council type (n=175)



According to census respondents, the reasons for using external consultants vary. When asked to rank the main reasons for using external consultants, 30.5% cited the need for specialist knowledge due the complexity of the project, 26.6% cited the desire for an independent third party to ensure integrity of process, 20.3% cited the need for specialist skills, 13.3% cited that staff do not have the time, and 9.4% cited that existing staff lack the necessary knowledge and skills (See Figure 17).

When asked if there were additional reasons for using external consultants, responses include: community engagement services are combined as part of a larger package with technical services; funding and legislation requirements; and, the projects are too large.

These responses warrant further analysis and exploration. For example, are external consultants viewed as independent third parties by participants and do the loyalties of the consultant lie with the participants or the organisation paying them? Lee (2014) argues that external consultants battle with this later question, whereas Hendriks and Carson (2008) indicate there is no evidence to

suggest they do. Further, are consultants used for the planning and delivery of more specialised methods? In their comments on practice in the United States, Nabatchi and Amsler (2014:70) state that traditional engagement methods are usually undertaken by the organisation but external consultants are usually brought in for the more innovative methods. Could the case be the same in Australia? Also, are the consultancies specialist community engagement firms or part of larger firms that offer community engagement in addition to their more significant technical offerings, such as the case in France (Mazeaud and Nonjon 2017) and Quebec (Bherer et al 2017b)?

Figure 17 Highest ranked reason for using external consultants to deliver community engagement processes (n=128)

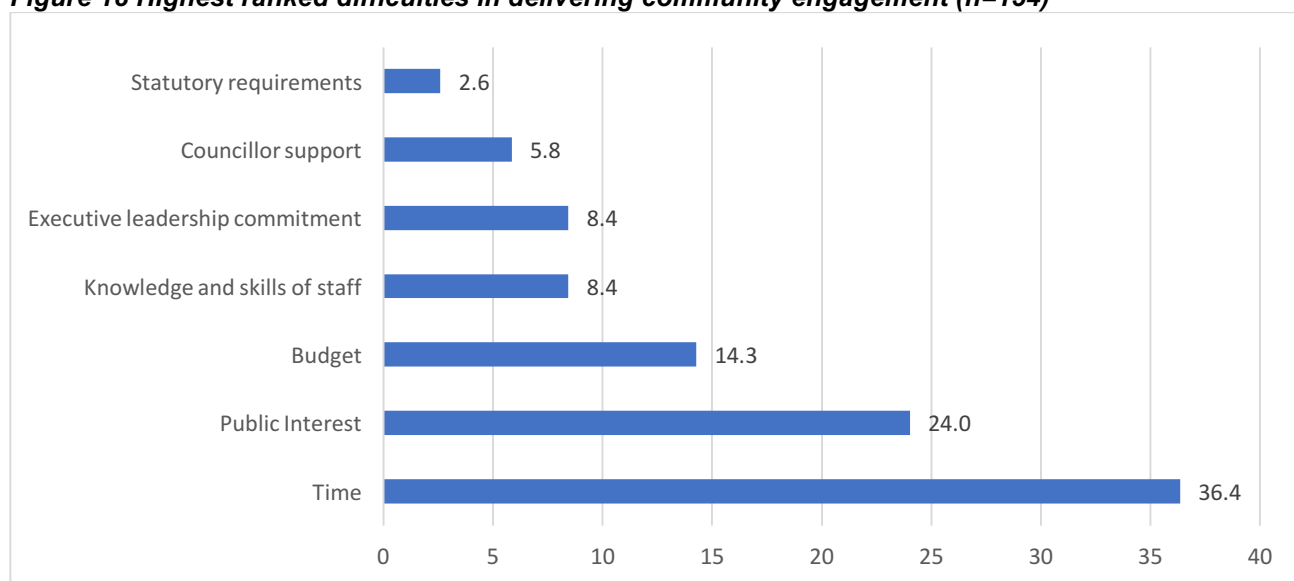


What are the challenges in delivering community engagement for councils?

The final question of the census asked respondents what they believed were the main difficulties in delivering community engagement processes in their local government. Over a third (36.5%) responded with the time required, which suggests issues with being under resourced and/or poor planning. Nearly a quarter (24%) cited public interest, although in hindsight this response should have stipulated “poor public interest” versus “high public interest”. Lack of budget is cited by 14.3% also suggesting a resourcing issue. Following these are: knowledge and skills of staff (8.4%), executive leadership commitment (8.4%), councillor support (5.8%) and statutory requirements (2.6%). When asked if there were any additional difficulties, over a third (37.7%) of total

respondents gave additional answers. In order of frequency, these included: geographical disbursement of community; poor telecommunications infrastructure; lack of dedicated staff; over consultation/consultation fatigue; difficult community members; apathy; engaging hard to reach groups; poor planning and staff commitment/enthusiasm amongst others. These responses speak to some of the general challenges of local government as well as those specific to how community engagement is understood and practiced.

Figure 18 Highest ranked difficulties in delivering community engagement (n=154)



Summary and Future Research

This paper has presented preliminary findings of a census in the Australian local government community engagement practice. These initial findings show that community engagement practice has been subject first and foremost to legislative requirements, as demonstrated through the domination of traditional methods. These methods are: usually legislated (public submission); inexpensive to deliver (online surveys); and often conservative in approach although they are not without their problems which may explain the decline in intended future use and the intention to use more innovative and emerging methods. The highest reported driver for community engagement practice is its known effectiveness for assisting in decisions and the highest reported challenge in planning and delivering community engagement in the time required. The profile and resourcing of

community engagement inside local councils varies, and there is a significant coupling of the community engagement function with the communications, media and public relations functions of councils. All of this information suggests that community engagement is progressing in different directions. This is dependent not only on the legislative environment but also on the expertise, organisational culture and public administration trend of each council and whether that aligns with NPM or public value frameworks.

Even though these findings assist in creating an understanding of what is happening across Australian local governments, the data raises nearly as many questions as it answers. As this is the initial step of a larger mixed-methods study, these questions can be explored in future empirical research that is part of the study as well as the future inferential statistical analysis. These questions include: Do different council types prefer different types of methods, and if so, why? Are councils utilising public submission processes beyond those stipulated in legislation? Why is there declining interest in traditional methods? What is the appeal of emerging methods? Why do some councils see the employment of specialist community engagement staff as a priority and what affect does that have on practice? What are the effects of the various organisational positions of community engagement? What is the role of external consultants in community engagement? Which methods are external consultants more likely to be engaged to run? Are external consultants part of specialised or general technical firms?

These questions will be explored in a practitioner survey as well as series of semi-structured case-study interviews so that a more complete picture of community engagement practice in Australian local governments can be completed, allowing for a greater understanding of not only how local governments are practicing engagement but how and why they are innovating.

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APPENDIX

Figure 19: Census Response Rates by ALGC Groups

Group	ALGC ⁴	NSW ³			QLD			SA			VIC			Total		
		pop	resp	%	pop	resp	%	pop	resp	%	pop	resp	%	pop	resp	%
Capitals and Metro		25	11	44.0	1	1	100.0	15	8	53.3	23	17	73.9	64	37	57.8
	UCC	1	1	100.0	1	1	100.0	1	1	100.0	1	1	100.0	4	4	100.0
	UDS	2		0.0				2	1	50.0				4	1	25.0
	UDM	4	2	50.0				7	3	42.9				11	5	45.5
	UDL	6	3	50.0				4	3	75.0		7	77.8	19	13	68.4
	UDV	12	5	41.7				1		0.0	13	9	69.2	26	14	53.8
Urban Regional		35	18	51.4	27	19	70.4	9	5	55.6	22	15	68.2	93	57	61.3
	URS	10	2	20.0	5	2	40.0	8	5	62.5	6	2	33.3	29	11	37.9
	URM	17	10	58.8	9	6	66.7	1		0.0	12	9	75.0	39	25	64.1
	URL	5	3	60.0	3	2	66.7				3	3	100.0	11	8	72.7
	URV	3	3	100.0	10	9	90.0	0			1	1	100.0	14	13	92.9
Urban Fringe		10	4	40.0	3	1	33.3	6	2	33.3	10	7	70.0	29	14	48.3
	UFS				1		0.0	3	1	33.3	2	1	50.0	6	2	33.3
	UFM	3	2	66.7	2	1	50.0	1		0.0	1	1	100.0	7	4	57.1
	UFL	1		0.0				1		0.0	1	1	100.0	3	1	33.3
	UFV	6	2	33.3				1	1	100.0	6	4	66.7	13	7	53.8
Regional & Remote		58	31	53.4	46	10	21.7	38	15	39.5	24	11	45.8	166	67	40.4
	RAS	1		0.0	0			10	3	30.0				11	3	27.3
	RAM	13	7	53.8	3	2	66.7	12	5	41.7	1		0.0	29	14	48.3
	RAL	22	11	50.0				9	5	55.6	8	5	62.5	39	21	53.8
	RAV	20	13	65.0	8	1	12.5	7	2	28.6	15	6	40.0	50	22	44.0
	RTX				5		0.0							5		0.0
	RTS				10	2	20.0							10	2	20.0
	RTM	1		0.0	15	4	26.7							16	4	25.0
	RTL	1		0.0	5	1	20.0							6	1	16.7
Total		128	64	50.0	77	31	40.3	68	30	44.1	79	50	63.3	352	175	49.7

³ Since the publishing of the *Local Government National Report 2014-15* (Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development 2017), the New South Wales has undertaken the ‘Stronger Councils’ merger program and consequently the number of councils has decreased from 155 to 132. The table has been amended to incorporate these changes using the ALGC classification system provided by the Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development (2017:218).

⁴ Only local governments under the jurisdiction of their state’s Local Government Acts have been included. This criterion excludes seven local governments in South Australia and three in New South Wales.