



Victoria Local Government, Australia

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The story

In 2020, Local Government Victoria decided to review their existing Act (the state's mandate which its government updates periodically). One minister, Natalie Hutchins, who was the Minister for Local Government, Industrial Relations, and Aboriginal Affairs at the time,¹ had championed deliberative processes as early as 2016. The Greater Geelong City Council began implementing citizen participation in 2016 when the Victorian Parliament voted to dismiss the City Council after an independent investigation.² Because of the political shake-up, the Parliament committed to consulting the community in the restructuring of its local government. A citizens' jury was called by Natalie Hutchins, Minister for Local Government. The Greater Geelong Citizens' Jury went very well and served as an example of how participatory democracy could buoy and uplift conventional democratic structures in the region. As such, during their review process in 2020, Local Government Victoria decided to incorporate citizen deliberation into its Act, requiring community engagement to be implemented at all levels of Victoria government.

The model

Institutional linkage

The Victoria Local Government Act (2020) explicitly states that this is a "principles-based approach."³ The intention is for individual councils and communities to decide how best to engage their communities without prescription from the highest level of Victoria government. For this reason, the build-up, implementation and success of efforts varied across communities, and required a different approach than more typical institutionalization efforts.

Deliberative process

Besides mandating principles-based participatory events in all local governments, the Act stipulates that deliberation must be used to complete the four primary strategic planning documents: the council priorities document, the ten-year financial plan, the ten-year assets plan, and the twenty-three year community vision. This is meant to ensure that citizen engagement is used for meaningful policy.



1. <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/members/natalie-hutchins/>.
2. https://newdemocracy.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/docs_activeprojects_geelong2016_Geelong-Citizens-Jury-Debrief-Report.pdf.
3. <https://www.localgovernment.vic.gov.au/council-governance/local-government-act-2020/principles-of-the-local-government-act-2020>.



Since the adoption of the Victoria Local Government Act, two councils have decided to instill deliberation in their processes; one is entering its second year, and another is entering its third. These have served as examples of how institutionalization can be enacted; the administration now understands how panels work and what they have to do to ensure that deliberation is successful. In these cases, they have found that a standing panel is a very efficient way to test a lot of policies. At the time of writing, Mosaic Lab is conducting their second round of municipal-level deliberative processes in accordance with the Act.

Insights from this case

Prescriptive vs. principles-based

Many people criticized the Act for the way it framed deliberation; principles-based action is harder to implement and ensure than prescribing that councils interact with their communities in certain ways. However, Victoria Local Government represents many different communities and councils; it would be challenging to prescribe how individual councils should interact with their communities. Mosaic Lab took the stance that councils should apply these principles based on how they want to connect with their communities. Principles-based approaches to deliberation gives community leaders the opportunities to engage their constituents in the ways that are sincere and purposeful.

Importance of educating elected officials

Our interview partner highlighted the importance of every elected official in Victoria understanding what deliberation

is, how to do it well, and what “good deliberation” can produce. Educating each official, however, has proven to be challenging. In this model of institutionalization, support should be given to practitioners and advocates to equip councilors and their staff with knowledge and know-how. Additionally, this education should include what resources and how many resources are required to do deliberation well.

Communication between elected officials

Following the above point, this case shows that formal education is not the only means of introducing elected officials to best practices and the principles of good deliberation. Mosaic Lab noted that when officials worked with each other and between councils, information was disseminated effectively. This may not replace formal education about deliberation, but it can serve as an entrypoint.

Training public servants

The Act deliberately lets councils decide on models of deliberation for themselves. For Mosaic Lab's part, this meant that much of their work was educating councils on scaling deliberation. They devised a “menu” based on the budget that a given council has for its deliberations (e.g. for this budget, you can expect this level of impact). This created a cost-benefit breakdown that government officials could digest. From this came the idea of a roadmap, wherein Mosaic Lab presented councils with an end result and mapped backwards what they would have to do to achieve that.



References

- Department of Government Services. 2024. A principles-based Act. Removing unnecessary regulatory and legislative prescription in [this link](#)
- Kylie Cirak and Jennifer Lilburn, Kismet Forward. 2017. Geelong Citizens' Jury Debrief in [this link](#)
- Lyn Carson. 2022. What can be learned from the implementation of the Victorian Local Government Act 2020? in [this link](#)
- Parliament of Victoria. n.d. The Hon. Natalie Hutchin in [this link](#)
- Victoria Local Government. 2023. Authorised Version No. 019 Local Government Act 2020 in [this link](#)