

Re-building Local Democracy: food for thought

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Local democracy, NSW-style

- By both international and inter-state standards, NSW has an ‘unusual’ approach:
 - **A state constitution that contemplates *appointed* councils**
 - **Unfettered state intervention (unless it contravenes laws or basic principles eg due process)**
 - **Ministerial power over *elected* councillors**
 - **A single tier of widely different councils, but with one-size-fits-all legislation**
 - **A maximum of 15 councillors regardless of population, plus repeated pressure to have fewer**
 - **No elected community-level governance, even when areas are very diverse and populations very large**
 - **Few popularly elected mayors, and communities cannot initiate/require popular election**
 - **No ‘executive authority’ at all for mayors (even in controlling behaviour in council meetings)**
 - **A strong managerialist culture (councillors seen as a ‘board of directors’, considerable authority and autonomy for the CEO)**
- Some or all of this might be the right way to go – but then again, maybe not?

The *local* democratic deficit

Place	Population 2021	# Councils	Population Range	Average Population	Total # Councillors	Range per Council	Average per Council	Av'ge Popn. Per Cllr	Notes
NSW	8,200,000	128	1,360-397,000	64,000	1,255	7-15	10	6,530	No lower tier
Wales	3,107,500	22	59,000-360,000	141,000	1,233	30-75	56	2,520	Plus 735 CTCs^
Dorset, England	380,000	1			82	No legal limit		4,600	Plus 160 PTCs*
Central Coast	346,500	1			15	15 is legal limit		23,100	No lower tier

^ CTC = elected Community and Town Councils; * PTC = elected Parish and Town Councils

Other models of elected local governance

- Victoria's Electoral Representation Advisory Panels
 - **Formed 2022, reviewed 39 councils, 15 months of broad consultation**
 - **Changes made: 30 councils changed to single member wards; 4 to multi-member wards; 5 to no wards**
- Gold Coast City: 14 single-member wards (average population about 46,000); full-time councillors paid \$167K; plus popularly elected mayor paid \$280K
- All mayors in Queensland, Tasmania, New Zealand – and most in South Australia – are popularly elected
- In South Africa, wards have a single councillor **plus** an elected Ward Committee to represent community interests
- Auckland has elected Local Boards with legislated functions; other places in New Zealand have optional, partly-elected Community Boards with delegated functions
 - **NZ communities can initiate the establishment of a board for their area**

Britain's parish, town and community councils

- Thousands across England and Wales – all are elected, and they exist *as of right* with legislated functions
- Populations range from a few hundred to 50,000 or more
- Larger councils (populations 5,000+) typically have **10-20 councillors** – unpaid
- They all raise a **supplementary rate** ('precept') which is uncapped
- Their 'principal council' may delegate additional functions
- They can also prepare **statutory** Neighbourhood Plans to supplement or vary local planning strategies and controls, and receive a share of **infrastructure contributions**

Cooperative Councils Network (UK) principles

- **Councils seen as ‘social partnerships’:** citizens, communities, enterprises and councils working together
- **Democratic engagement:** active engagement of the full range of residents in decision-making and priority-setting
- **Co-production:** enabling citizens to be equal partners in designing and commissioning services and determining the use of public resources
- **Maximising social value:** ensuring better social/economic outcomes
- **Innovation:** working with local communities to drive positive change

All this means re-thinking the role of councillors as ‘community connectors, brokers and leaders’

125 years of local democracy: placing councillors at the heart of vibrant local government

Local Government Information Unit by Dr. Seán O Riordáin

<https://lgiu.org/blog-article/125-years-of-local-democracy-placing-the-councillors-at-the-heart-of-vibrant-local-government/>

<http://ailg.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/AILG-Maynooth-University-Councillor-Research-Report-Final-compressed.pdf>



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Some key questions to ponder

- Will a return to the pre-2020 form of Central Coast Council provide *meaningful and effective* local democracy?
- If not, what were the *underlying* weaknesses (as opposed to the headline-grabbing 'noise' that afflicts most councils)?
- What *package of democratic mechanisms* would best fit the Central Coast in the future?
- If passed, would the September referendum proposal be a step in the right direction or an obstacle to needed change?