



# Public Connection with Local Government

## Desires and Frustrations of Articulating Local Issues

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### Abstract

This paper provides an empirical account of public participation within an Australian local government context. It seeks to determine the ways civic discourse is articulated and how (if at all) this facilitates civic connection with local government. Through in-depth interviews and focus groups with local citizens from the Victorian municipality of the City of Casey, this paper explores citizens' understandings, experiences and expectations in relation to participation with local government. Citizens conveyed a strong desire for engagement, as well as frustration that the local government is disinterested in civic input and fails to keep the community adequately informed. Participants suggested that this situation is creating both a sense of disconnection from government and civic reluctance to further engage in local political matters. These civic insights reveal a precarious state of local politics, and highlight the complexities and tensions in the relationship between local governments, citizens and democratic participation.

**Keywords:** citizens; local government; public participation/engagement; (dis)connection with government

### Introduction

This year saw the third attempt of a referendum to address whether local governments should be formally recognised in the Australian constitution. Such a move would enable local governments to access funding directly from the Commonwealth and may potentially alter accountability processes. While it was intended that the referendum coincide with the 2013 federal election, former Prime Minister Rudd's chosen election date prevented this opportunity. Regardless, the issue has reinvigorated debate from various associations as well as local, state and federal members over the authority granted to Australian local governments. The move to alter the political powers of councils by incorporating them into the constitution should be approached with careful consideration of both current local government performance and the best interests of citizens. In this context, this paper seeks to highlight understandings of local government held by citizens, particularly in relation to public participation and the effectiveness of civic communication with local government.

There is a growing link between localism and civic engagement that recognises the value of local government settings for processes of public connection (Michels & De Graaf, 2010). As the majority of citizen interaction with government occurs locally, the communicative practices employed by councils offer key spaces for democratic participation (Shackleton, 2010; Couldry & Langer, 2005). In order to facilitate engagement, these spaces should involve government receptivity and responsiveness, with civic input afforded consideration in decision-making (Macnamara, 2013). This approach enables political participation to lead to action, which helps citizens develop a sense of connection with government (Coleman & Blumler, 2009).

This paper builds on an earlier study of local council communication (Freeman, 2013) to present empirical findings from focus groups and interviews conducted with residents of the City of Casey (Casey) municipality in Victoria. It explores a desire for enhanced civic participation but suggests there is also strong dissatisfaction with current local government operations. A common view amongst participants was that Casey is unreceptive and unresponsive towards civic views and is out of touch with the community. This situation contributes to community frustration towards ineffective government communication practices, with concern that public participation methods do not inform government actions and decisions. Highlighting the importance that citizens place on community issues, this examination of civic views aids understanding into local public life (Craig, 2004), and results in a proposed model for effective local government communication. While this paper does not intend to suggest that Casey provides a reflection of all Australian local governments and their constituents, the understandings, experiences and expectations of local citizens highlight a variety of complexities and tensions surrounding democratic participation at the local government level.

## **Public Participation and Local Government**

The traditionally passive role of citizens in representative forms of democracy is under question, with community involvement and active citizenship gaining prominence in political discourse (Marinetto, 2003; Scott, Redmond & Russell, 2012). Citizenship itself is an evolving and contested concept that broadly encompasses rights and responsibilities surrounding political, civil, economic, cultural and social life (see Miller, 2007; Dewey, 1946; Craig, 2004), and which shape individuals' ability to participate in society. While these aspects of citizenship are deeply interwoven (Miller, 2007), this paper focuses on its political dimensions in relation to civic participation with government.

Public participation with government typically involves individuals occupying roles as consumers or citizens. Livingstone and Lunt (2007) distinguish between these terms, and suggest that 'consumer' is indicative of participation that involves individual private benefits, whereas 'citizen' relates to broader community benefits and public interest. These roles are, however, interrelated and both are important aspects of public participation with government. As consumers, individuals access government information and services, enabling them to formulate informed choices on political issues as well as utilise the services necessary to ensure quality of life. As citizens, individuals have the right to vote and have their interests represented by government. Private consumer interests and broader public and community concerns can be understood as two sides of the same coin (Livingstone & Lunt, 2007). Both are fundamental aspects of citizenship that contribute to connection with government, and neither role is more important. Interestingly, the term 'citizen' is regularly, although not consistently, used in Australian communications legislation to encompass both public and consumer interests (Australian Communications & Media Authority, 2010). Following this lead, this paper uses the term 'citizen' in its broader sense, as participants identified themselves as both consumers of local government information and services, and as citizens with the right to vote and voice opinions on community matters.

A body of Australian and international research informs this study. Pratchett (1999) argues that it is the responsibility of local governments to enhance democratic consciousness and facilitate improved methods of public participation (see also O'Toole, 2009). Couldry and Langer's (2005) study of public connection demonstrates that citizens perceive democratic participation to exist primarily at the local level. In Australia, the majority (up to 80%) of citizen contact with government occurs through local government (Shackleton, 2010). These and other studies of democratic participation highlight a growing link between localism and civic engagement. In particular, local level participation helps to overcome some of the scale and manageability issues associated with larger-scale democratic involvement (Jimenez, Mossberger & Wu, 2012), and can help maximise local developments to suit specific civic needs (Bradford, 2008). Common understandings and experiences of local communities frequently drive participation efforts (Graham & Aurigi, 1997). The increased sense of immediacy and familiarity with local issues encourages active involvement because citizens can see the direct implications and relevance of political participation

for their everyday lives (Margolis & Moreno-Riaño, 2009). Malina (1999) highlights the importance of local settings for political participation and notes:

Whilst there is an awareness that the ordinary person is unlikely to maintain interest in all political discussions, it is expected that people will be concerned about processes that affect their own lives. Citizens, therefore, should be enabled to exert some power and control over events at the local level. (p. 31)

The proximity of issues is therefore important for political participation. As Malina (1999) recognised, local participation – where citizens play an active part in the political decision-making affecting their everyday lives – requires citizens to hold a degree of power to exert influence. The engagement mechanisms enabled by local governments therefore retain a vital position in processes of public connection, as the provision of participatory opportunities is needed to facilitate active citizen engagement with government (Coudry, Livingstone & Markham, 2007).

Public involvement with democratic processes must, however, have an impact if citizens are to feel a genuine sense of connection with government (Coleman & Blumler, 2009). There are often significant political barriers to engagement (see, for example, Chadwick, 2011; Freeman, 2013). In order for public participation to be meaningful and matter, Macnamara (2013) argues that the architecture to facilitate involvement needs to be designed into communication processes so that attention and consideration is afforded to public voices. In place of simplistic and tokenistic communicative practices, institutions ought to provide participatory opportunities that offer receptivity and responsiveness so that public involvement may lead to action and change (Macnamara, 2013; see also Jensen, 2009; Freeman & Quirke, 2013).

In their empirical study of public engagement, Coudry, Livingstone and Markham (2007) highlight a lack of local spaces where citizens' voices can be articulated into action. Coudry et al. (2007) suggest governments should undertake practical steps to take fuller account of the role of citizens in political processes, including how citizens' experiences and views are considered in decision-making. There is a need, therefore, for local governments to create and support spaces for civic participation. However, Wiklund (2005) highlights that municipalities have shown little interest in finding out the types of participative mechanisms citizens want, for what purpose, and how these facilitate civic involvement in democratic decision-making, and calls for greater investigation into citizens' needs and preferences.

Empirical research on citizens' views of public participation with local government has been undertaken in other countries (see, for example, Lowndes, Pratchett & Stoker, 2001; Scott, Russell & Redmond, 2007; Michels & De Graaf, 2010). These and other studies highlight that citizens often perceive local spaces for participation as tokenistic attempts to placate the community (Scott et al., 2007), with few opportunities and little capacity to influence decision-making (Jensen, 2009; Leach & Pratchett, 2005). In relation to public connection with local government, Coleman and Blumler (2009) conducted a survey of 2,273 citizens in the United Kingdom to assess how well citizens thought they were represented, and found that 77% felt a significant disconnection from local councillors. An emerging theme in this field of research is that of a widespread disconnection between citizens and local governments, caused largely by a lack of receptive and responsive engagement opportunities. In the Australian context, there are no formal requirements for local governments to enhance engagement with citizens or facilitate democratic renewal as there are in other countries such as the United Kingdom (see Lowndes et al., 2001). Aulich (2009) highlights that, despite an increasing focus on civic engagement in Australian local government policies, there are few instances where civic participatory practices have been established and "accepted as a fundamental right of communities to enable them to assume a formal place in governance" (p. 57).

This paper builds upon an earlier project that investigated Casey councillors' perceptions of public participation (Freeman, 2013). It found that councillors had limited and divergent understandings of the role of citizens in democratic processes, that possibilities of increased civic involvement created a perception of risk in relation to political futures, and that political machinations significantly impacted upon both the engagement mechanisms offered to citizens and decision-making. Moreover, councillors

viewed citizens as largely uninformed and too emotional to make rational decisions, with civic participation unlikely to influence local decision-making (Freeman, 2013). By exploring the views and everyday experiences of local citizens of the City of Casey, this research adds another dimension to understandings of public participation at the local government level, and highlights underlying complexities and tensions that surround democratic involvement in local government decision-making.

## **Methodology**

This research draws on a case study of the City of Casey to explore citizens' perspectives of local political participation. Casey spans over 400 square kilometres in Melbourne's south-east. Proclaimed in 1994, it is an amalgamation of two previous local governments that approximately covered Casey's northern (urban) and southern (rural) regions. With a population of over 250,000, Casey is Australia's seventh largest local government (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2012). The area is a designated growth corridor for metropolitan Melbourne and has experienced rapid expansion, with a 42.7% population increase between 2001 and 2011 (ABS, 2013). Drew (2013) indicates that the formation of larger municipalities through Australian local government reforms has created increasing emphasis on improving the efficiency of government operations, rather than ensuring their effectiveness. This has produced a stronger governmental focus on viewing the public as consumers rather than citizens (Drew, 2013), which means local governments like Casey often privilege one-way communication and service delivery practices over the development of two-way civic participation mechanisms.

It was a deliberate purpose of the research to elucidate the understandings and experiences of engaged citizens. Entman and Herbst (2001) argue that active citizens are vital to any democracy and, if research intends to explore the role and impact of civic participation on political decision-making, then examination of such 'activated publics' is necessary (see also Grunig, 1989). As such, individuals (over the age of 18) who had previously contacted the local government were recruited through local newspaper advertisements. People wanting to participate contacted the researcher directly, indicating they are active citizens in terms of using local news sources, having an interest in local government, and through previous experience contacting Casey. Snowball sampling was also used to build on the initial sample, with participants suggesting other community members who had contact with Casey and might be interested. This was a necessary extension for recruitment as participants noted that local newspaper availability has reduced and distribution dramatically fluctuates throughout the municipal area. To reduce any feelings of pressure, participants (rather than the researcher) initially contacted additional people. Participants were given a small honorarium for involvement; however, this was not advertised in any recruitment material.

Semi-structured focus groups and interviews (ranging between 90 minutes and two hours) were held in 2013 with 20 Casey residents to uncover their experiences and expectations, as well as the issues they deem important (Gamson, 1992; McCallum, 2010, 2006). There were also four participants from neighbouring municipalities who previously dealt with Casey on matters where Casey retains responsibility. The involvement of these citizens highlighted that overlapping communities face common concerns. In one instance, municipal divisions occur down the main road of a rural township, which meant that close neighbours in one focus group faced the same issues but had separate processes governing them.

For a small sample, there was a broad range of participants. These included: residents from both urban and rural areas; individuals aged in their mid 20s to early 70s; people who had recently (within the past couple of years) moved to the area during Casey's growth; and many who had lived in the municipality for decades (one participant has resided in the area for more than 50 years). There was also diversity in the levels of political involvement undertaken by participants, which ranged from political activists to people who had minimal contact with the government in relation to minor service issues. Overall, the majority of participants had lived in the area for at least a decade and had ongoing concerns surrounding community issues, particularly in relation to municipal development. This sample meant that participants possessed considerable knowledge about the municipality, its communities, and the local government. Their experiences highlight a variety of issues faced within the municipality's distinct geographical regions, as

well as changes that have occurred since Casey's amalgamation. Thematic analysis of the interview and focus group data was used to identify recurring areas of importance for citizens.

The focus group and interview data was not intended to reflect local public opinion as a whole, but to offer a basis for greater understanding into citizens' perspectives on and relationships with local government (see Lowndes et al., 2001). The narratives arising through local community peer conversations aid understanding into public life and participation with local government, allowing citizens' understandings and experiences to reveal a complexity of issues that impact on local public engagement. Unexpected outcomes of the sessions included how appreciative participants were for having someone listen to their concerns, and the number of participants who wanted to be informed of the research outcome. These highlight two key themes that resonated through each session: the importance of local governments both listening to and informing the community (see Macnamara, 2013; Couldry & Dreher, 2007).

### **The Local Matters: Public Perceptions of Local Government**

This section outlines key findings arising from the empirical data surrounding citizens' experiences, understandings and expectations when contacting the local government. Interestingly, participants identified themselves as both citizens and consumers. In their civic roles, all interviewees demonstrated strong concern about how the local government should "benefit the community", and desire to voice opinions on public interest matters such as community safety and support for marginalised groups. From the consumer perspective, adequate provision of infrastructure and services as well as value for money in relation to the government's use of rates revenue were recurring issues raised by participants in each session. Overall, participants indicated that they used a broad range of participatory mechanisms to contact Casey, including direct in-person and telephone contact with the government and councillors, written submissions, and internet communication (website, email, discussion boards). This section focuses on the outcomes achieved from these communication processes.

#### *Neglected Communities*

We're not important, this little area. We do feel our area is neglected. (Interviewee)

Local issues matter to citizens. Participants asserted that Casey has "lost touch with the people" and what is important to the local community. Many interviewees reflected upon this situation and suggested that, since Casey's amalgamation, the council's management of the municipality has become "much worse", with poor civic representation: "when it was the Shire of Cranbourne, we had so many councillors that there were lots that you could actually contact that represented you". Prior to the amalgamation, it was local people who represented local areas. Since that time, many now felt they lived in "neglected" communities. In large part, this was due to a sense that the City of Casey does not adequately understand local (especially rural) areas and issues, particularly as its staff "don't actually live anywhere near the City of Casey" and "obviously never come here". There was strong concern that Casey "has to realise the decisions it makes impact on people's lives". To address this predicament, participants called for a new sense of connection between the government and its citizens, and indicated that the "council must respond to the broader community need".

The bulk of citizens' comments predominantly concerned ongoing and unresolved issues, with trepidation that "there's so much to do that nothing's done". In general, participants' comments were positive regarding minor service issues promptly dealt with by council officers (such as replacing damaged rubbish bins) and Casey's financial support of community groups and organisations. However, negative comments far outweighed the positives on matters that had a higher degree of difficulty or involved individuals directly dealing with councillors. Citizens perceived a distinct lack of interest in issues raised by individuals, with many matters put "in the too hard basket". Most concerns related to insufficient services,

infrastructure, and poor planning to cope with Casey's rapid growth. In particular, participants were concerned that the government needs greater foresight in its initiatives and developments, highlighting that on many occasions the necessary infrastructure is not in place before larger populations move into the area: "we've got to accept progress to a point, but make sure you put the infrastructure in". In this regard, there were calls for greater coordination with authorities overlapping Casey, including the Victorian state government and Melbourne Water, in order to more effectively improve and service the local area.

Several participants indicted that Casey is more like a corporation now rather than a council, and that an administration would be more effective than the current local government. It was suggested that there is poor communication between Casey's departments, and staffing improvements are needed as frequent turnover makes it difficult for citizens to develop an ongoing rapport with the government. Participants noted that poor job satisfaction – among councillors, officers, and senior administrators – influenced levels of conscientiousness and compassion when dealing with the public. In particular, it was "the ones up the top [who] don't care". This comment, amongst others, suggests that there is a significant disconnection between citizens and those people in government who hold greater power.

Participants indicated that there was "one rule for them and one for us", with numerous suggestions that councillors only represent their own interests, rather than the community's, using the system to their own benefit. Examples included that councillors obtained their role in order to keep its contacts, and that local money is used to fund international trips for issues that are state government responsibility. Another example involved residents from a rural township who applied for minor works funding from Casey to improve a local recreation reserve and tourist site, for which they completed all the work. In this instance, the local representative took the credit in his re-election campaign material, promoting these developments as improvements he had secured and completed for the community.

#### *Local Government and Its Relationship with Citizens*

They treat you like you're an idiot. They're right, I'm wrong. I'm a fool. That's the tone of everything you get from our council. (Interviewee)

Participants frequently spoke about the elitist mentality of the government and councillors, highlighting a significant lack of respect for citizens who directly contact Casey. There were numerous comments in this area, and examples include: "They've all got this, sort of, holier than thou attitude"; "They think they're above you"; "They have got a superior attitude"; and "She just wasn't even respectful and I wasn't even doing it [contacting Casey] for me". A significant disconnection has occurred between the citizens and government, which was noted both in relation to individual issues and broader community matters where involvement was undertaken on behalf of local groups and associations. Furthermore, citizens felt the government "take you for a fool", was "just brushing me off", that it was "rude", and "it's just absolute rubbish the way they treat you". There was little to suggest that citizens perceived the government was making any genuine attempt to connect with local citizens.

All participants agreed that the local government was not keeping citizens adequately informed on issues or the reasons for decisions. Even on small matters, such as maintenance issues, citizens were not informed in advance about the government's actions: "nobody knew anything about it"; "it would have been nice if we had of known. We heard about it after it had occurred"; "they don't keep us informed on anything". It was also felt that citizens were not offered feedback on the way issues were progressing or how (if at all) their input had been considered. Comments in this area indicated that the government was deliberately not fully informing or misleading citizens on local issues by only putting forward positives and not covering any of the negatives: "you're not even being given the correct information for you to make your decision on". Citizens suggested that the government "try to keep it [current issues] really quiet" and "try to tell you as little as possible".

There were many comments relating to inadequate information on council use of rates revenue. All participants felt they are not told enough specifics in the budget breakdown, instead provided with general summarised data that appears meaningless. Cost and value for money were significant concerns of local citizens, with participants recognising themselves both as consumers of government services and contributors towards local government funding through their rates. Participants suggested there is a need for better decision-making in relation to government use of funds. They indicated that the government's lack of familiarity with the local area is contributing both to civic suggestions and complaints not being understood, and excessive use of costly consultants who develop plans that are never adopted or are inappropriate for the area. Several participants mentioned the government's poor choices surrounding use of money, noting that much was "wasted". For example, one participant highlighted that, with a \$15,000 grant to plant trees on a local reserve, it cost \$755 per planted tree (for tubing stock, not established trees). But these trees were planted at the wrong time of year, and many subsequently died. Worth noting is that citizens were not opposed to paying rates; they just wanted to be kept better informed to ensure they were getting value for money.

Several participants highlighted inconsistency in decision-making. They questioned why decisions were made when they appeared to contradict the majority view, and said there was no information given to justify decisions: "Even if it's a majority of people going along saying we don't want it, they will say, 'Oh bad luck'". One citizen spoke of a petition she organised with 97 signatories. The council told her it would not be taken into consideration as many of the signatories did not live in close enough proximity to the proposed development, despite being Casey residents. This citizen highlighted that these local residents were still funding the development through their rates. Even after involvement at a council meeting, the citizen received no response in relation to the issue or the reason for the council's decision.

Involvement with Casey through formal processes was perceived to be limited by the government. For example, planning permit applications were deemed to take an overly long time before Casey reached a decision and informed applicants of the outcome. Minor works applications could only be lodged online; participants noted that this was difficult both due to poor internet connectivity and as they were unable to gain any assistance from Casey. Participation at council meetings is also understood as restricted, as Casey's public question time policy is to keep questions (and answers) as brief as possible with no discussion permitted (see City of Casey, 2013). Questions can be ruled out of order if their introductions comprise more than ten words, and individuals cannot submit more than two questions at a meeting (City of Casey, 2013). Such strict limitations on public questions restrict any likely influence of this form of civic participation.

### *The Impact of Local Public Participation*

Bang your head against a brick wall. They don't care about what you say. (Interviewee)

Participants were asked how they thought the local government received their views and what type of response they attained. Typical comments included: "they don't listen to you", "you can say something, but it's not going to go anywhere"; and "you don't get a response". A concerning fact was that many quotes in this area appeared verbatim in multiple session transcripts. For example, the phrase "they don't care" appeared in every transcript and often from multiple sources in each. Many citizens highlighted that they never received return contact, and when it was received it was often in the form of pre-printed letters that failed to address the issue raised. Interestingly, citizens indicated that they would prefer no response than such a letter. Similarly, one participant noted that when using an online discussion board (that is outsourced by the local government), "it's all one-way" and the only government responses you *might* receive are generic "we've received your reply" comments. These observations highlight the efficiency versus effectiveness debate outlined earlier, and suggest that if the government is to make an effort to provide spaces for civic participation and return contact, then it must be meaningful to be effective.

Citizens felt that the council “don’t really want us to have a say or an opinion”, and that Casey holds very negative perceptions of people willing to speak up. Citizens indicated they were resented by the government and perceived as “whingers”. Fears of judgment and backlash were mentioned in multiple sessions. For example, one participant highlighted the hostility faced from councillors who begrudge citizens: “if a couple of councillors don’t like someone, just a normal local person that’s trying to get something ... I know they have definitely gone against that person [be]cause they’ve got a personal vendetta”. This situation is inhibiting civic desire to be involved even though citizens may feel strongly about particular issues. It was pointed out that this situation is “emotionally draining on the person” trying to have their say. Moreover, it was suggested that the government aims to wear down citizens: “You just get tired. So they know they’ll railroad you in the end”.

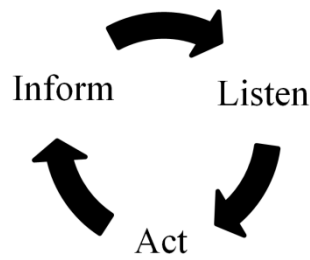
In addition to the government being unreceptive and unresponsive towards civic input and not keeping the community informed, participants highlighted that civic views have little to no impact on government actions or decisions, confirming the views of councillors in the previous study (Freeman, 2013). Following instances where citizens had directly contacted the government, participants emphasised that “they’ve already made their mind up, how they’re going to go”, “it’s not going to change”, “you’re not going to get anywhere”, and “you’re never going to have an impact”. Moreover, citizens identified that even official channels for public involvement, such as public question time at council meetings, were tokenistic: “It’s just a token – they have to allow you in and then they just vote how they were going to anyway”. Participants also highlighted a lack of accountability of the local government’s operations: “They will just do what they want”; “Nobody pulls them up on it”.

This is a disappointing situation for the local citizens who indicated the amount of effort and reflection that is involved when contacting the government. For example, written submissions are often drafted and re-drafted over a period of several days. This demonstrates that the local government matters to citizens, particularly due to the immediate impact on the quality of their everyday lives: “We’re impacted by it more than they [the government] are”. Again, citizens highlighted that Casey’s failure to fully consider the impacts of developments on residents is largely due to the fact that staff live outside the area. These comments offer evidence that emotional attachment to local community issues encourages participation (Pantti & van Zoonen, 2006). Contrary to local councillors’ views (Freeman, 2013), this does not mean that civic involvement is irrational or illogical. Indeed, it is unrealistic to expect that local governments themselves possess all the necessary municipal knowledge to make well-informed decisions, and civic input could provide a useful source of further information (Michels & De Graaf, 2010). Overall, citizens indicated that, despite wanting to engage, they currently have no role in local government, and representatives did little to represent the community’s interests. In order to improve, the local government has to “listen to the local people”.

### **Citizens’ Recommendations for Developing Local Civic Engagement**

I should have the right to have my say, I should have the right to be heard, and I should have the right not to be dismissed; treated with some consideration and respect. (Interviewee)

The experiences highlighted here indicate that the local government’s communication with citizens needs to improve, as do methods of public participation; these were suggestions directly stated by many participants. To achieve this, this paper proposes three areas to work within: informing, listening, and acting. According to the local citizens, the government needs to listen to civic concerns both in relation to minor service issues and larger problems, and be proactive in seeking civic views on issues; act upon issues in a timely manner and consider citizens’ views in local decision-making; and provide detailed information to citizens on current issues, the decisions made, the reasoning for the decisions, and the way civic input is used in the process. Based on the empirical findings of this research, Figure 1 has been developed to illustrate a potential model of effective communication. It highlights that this is not a linear process but needs to reflect and support ongoing political conversations, rather than episodes of civic involvement (see Coleman & Blumler, 2009).



**Figure 1** – Effective local government communication with citizens

While there are numerous complexities and challenges for governments to develop such a process of public engagement, participants recommended several obvious starting points that would be relatively straightforward to implement and could considerably improve public connection with local government. The strategies for better engagement that were directly put forth by the local citizens included:

- Maintain focus on local issues and what matters to the community.
- Send out more information – both prior to and after matters are dealt with – particularly on use of financial resources. This could be done through, for example, detailed newsletters on current issues;
- Make a regular monthly time where councillors or officers will be available in local community centres or public halls in townships, particularly in the southern areas that are distanced from the official council offices.
- Offer more community meetings, and run opinion polls, surveys or questionnaires on key issues (particularly in relation to planning and development), and be responsive to civic feedback.
- Hold civic panels or focus groups, such as the ones undertaken for this research, to gain a better understanding of citizens’ perspectives on local issues and why they are important.

The implementation of these types of practices is of course contingent upon the local government to develop its communicative architecture so that it facilitates greater contexts for civic participation (see Macnamara, 2013; Couldry et al., 2007; Freeman & Quirke, 2013). Such small steps have been undertaken and proven to be of benefit in other local government areas. Participants’ comments regarding neighbouring municipalities of Greater Dandenong, Cardinia and Frankston highlighted awareness of greater efforts made by these councils to engage with their communities. For example: Dandenong has innovated through a mobile service application that can be used to report municipal issues; Cardinia conducts surveys and polls on proposed developments; and Frankston produces an extensive local newspaper sent out six times per year that covers topics including budget use, relations with other authorities, governance issues, and neighbourhood news. While the benefits and outcomes of these types of engagement practices vary, they broadly illustrate a greater commitment from the local governments towards keeping the public informed and enabling civic input.

There is currently an unmet civic desire for political engagement within the City of Casey. If local governments like Casey refrain from offering receptive and responsive communicative practices, there is potential for a democratic slip in relation to public participation. The citizens interviewed were not apathetic to local politics, but the negative perceptions of citizens held by the government and its councillors are inhibiting civic desire to be involved with the government on local issues. It was concerning that participants in multiple sessions mentioned that Casey’s failure to adequately communicate with citizens and utilise civic input is leading to political disengagement amongst the local community, which they were “disheartened” about: “[It is] not so much [that the community is] apathetic but they think, oh, what can I do?”; “the perceptions of a lot of the residents is there’s no point because they’re not going to listen to you in any case. People are genuinely cheesed off”. While these citizens are

actively concerned about local issues, often they deliberately do not engage with the government as they cannot see the point when their voices are not heard or considered in decision-making. Although these frustrations are leading to disengagement, this should not be equated with political apathy. Instead, they illustrate a need for the local government to provide improved contexts for civic involvement, or otherwise run the risk of exacerbating civic disconnection and dissatisfaction with local government.

## Conclusion

Effective representation requires an ongoing connection between citizens and governments. Citizens will disengage from politics if they feel they are not recognised, heard or valued through this connection (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Macnamara, 2013). The evidence presented here indicates a need for more receptive and responsive communicative practices by the government, as well as civic desire to be kept adequately informed and have public feedback considered in decision-making. Public interaction with government must have an impact if citizens are to develop a genuine sense of connection with government (Coleman & Blumler, 2009). This necessitates political institutions keeping in touch with those they govern by providing contexts for public participation that take into account citizens' experiences and views (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Macnamara, 2013; Hale, Musso & Weare, 1999).

The citizen-centric approach of this research highlights the value of examining civic perspectives in order to fully understand and appreciate the complexities and tensions associated with democratic participation. The evidence presented here highlights an unmet civic desire for political engagement, and adds to understandings regarding why people feel detached from and poorly represented by local government. At present, citizens are remaining interested in local issues, but the inadequacies of the political system are creating a genuine sense of disconnection from government. This situation produces significant uncertainty surrounding how long citizens will persist trying to engage on local issues, when there are concerning levels of cynicism and disappointment with the current form of local government representation of the community's best interests.

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