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CATEGORY

Australasia Research

Institute for Public Policy and Governance: University of Technology Sydney

Community Engagement in Australian Local Government: The Practice and its Pressures

Community engagement has become an imperative of Australian local governments. Driven by legislative requirements and increasing demands from communities, there has been a proliferation of practitioners, policies, frameworks and reports that aim to enhance public involvement in decision- making. The facilitation of this involvement is lauded as a demonstration of democracy in action; however, the practice in its current form is in relative infancy. As such, issues surrounding the practice and professionalisation are emerging which require examination and careful consideration. These issues include the increasing commercialisation of community engagement, social closure created through professionalisation, and the impacts of current practices on the quality and effectiveness of local democracy.

This research critically explores the practice and professionalisation of community engagement in Australian local governments. The exploration is guided by an explanatory mixed- methods research approach that combines quantitative and qualitative instruments to ensure a robust and thorough exploration. The main instruments for collecting data are a census of local government community engagement practice, a survey of community engagement practitioners and a series of semi-structured interviews with senior practitioners.

The relevant literature, findings and analysis are presented in a series of seven publications. The first outlines the legislative environment in which local governments have been increasingly required to undertake community engagement. The second presents empirical data which show how Australian local governments understand and practise community engagement, and the third uses participatory budgeting to explore how Australian local governments 'adopt and adapt' community engagement processes. The fourth problematises the commercialisation or growing 'industry' that has emerged around community engagement. The fifth problematises the professionalisation that is occurring in community engagement, while the sixth presents empirical data on the practitioner cohort in Australia and identifies how they differ by work context. The seventh and final paper explores the tensions that practitioners face and how they manage them.

The research makes a contributions to the body of knowledge by presenting empirical evidence about the historical development and contemporary legislative requirements for local governments to undertake engagement. It also discusses how Australian local governments are practising engagement and provides basic demographics and experience of the practitioner cohort and describes the type of work they do and the tensions they experience in practice.

It is of relevance to policy makers, public managers, professional associations and practitioners through its call for more evidence-based approaches to policy-making in engagement, its data which can be used for benchmarking, its considerations for organisations planning to conduct participatory budgeting, its data on the barriers practitioners need to overcome when working in public institutions and the data on the challenges faced by practitioners.