



Future of Local Government Conference, May 2017

DECLARATION

The need for change

This declaration rests on a belief that the state of the nation and the health of our society depend on community-driven action in the neighbourhood, not just decisions made in parliaments or boardrooms.

Across the world people are concerned about the apparent inability of governments, business and public institutions to address the economic, social and environmental challenges of the 21st Century. Our present ways of thinking and governing are neither coping with the pace of change nor meeting citizens' expectations. There is an urgent need for a fresh approach and responsive leadership.

In some ways Australia remains the 'lucky country' but here too we are struggling with economic upheaval, rising inequality, loss of social cohesion, increased rates of mental illness and serious environmental threats, notably climate change. Many Australians are losing faith in our basic democratic institutions and withdrawing from active participation in civic and cultural life. Our reputation as an inclusive, tolerant and compassionate society is under threat.

It's time to explore a new model of governance, one based on a re-energised civil society that draws on the strength and resourcefulness of people working together in diverse local and regional communities – a **localist** response.

The role of local government

Australia's system of government must continue to evolve to meet the challenges of the 21st Century, and it must evolve more quickly. This requires action by all levels of government. Federal and State governments need to rethink their roles, but they cannot and should not try to solve all the problems facing our country on their own. Many of the solutions can only be found within communities, and central governments must respect and leave space for local action and innovation.

Local government has made a good start in addressing these issues, but must work hard to build on its achievements. Councils have a unique mandate to support, represent and give voice to 'communities of place'. They can provide an ideal platform for governments at all levels to strengthen their engagement with communities – and there is also a real opportunity to bring about a renaissance in local government itself. But the world is changing fast: democratic legitimacy and trust must be earned.

Key principles

To play a valued and effective role in a new system of community-based governance, councils need the legislative flexibility and scope to take further steps along the road to localism. They should:

- Have the courage to embrace the future and take informed risks to bring about necessary change
- Learn how to be community led, making space for communities to take action themselves, and responding positively to local initiatives
- Deepen their understanding of communities, listening to all their people and engaging with them in new and different ways that reflect community diversity ('Dadirri' deep listening, understanding and communication)
- Empower citizens through participatory and deliberative democracy, including community boards, precinct committees, cooperatives, citizens juries and others
- Embrace new ways of working to ensure that local needs are met through joined-up planning and services
- Forge more local and regional partnerships that address issues and drive change at community, state and federal levels
- Promote local networks, co-production of goods and services, and moves to 'reclaim the Commons'.

In this way we can create a 'New Story' – a narrative of change built on the strengths and uniqueness of each community and place. Local government can provide the foundations for change. It can lead the process of transformation through good governance and sound administration, reinvigorating faith in democracy and citizenship. It can facilitate new forms of community-centred, bottom-up governance that inspire the confidence and active participation of citizens. It can unleash community resources and help ensure our future wellbeing.

First Steps

To make a difference and help 'reinvent the future' local government must be 'bold and brave for change'. We urge councils individually and collectively to:

- Endorse the principles underlying this Declaration
- Consider how their own roles and approach to community leadership may need to change, and what additional skills and capacity may be required
- Establish collaborative regional and national networks to share experience with other councils and communities
- Invite citizens to become partners in framing a 'New Story' for the local area, town, city or region
- 'Map' the energy of the groups and networks that make up our communities (Asset-Based Community Development)
- Work with local communities to develop action plans that address their differing needs and opportunities, and agree ways to measure progress
- Commit to collaboration with other councils, State and Federal governments, business and civil society as an essential way of working
- Adopt a decentralised model for their own activities, including place-based planning and service delivery, and devolving decision-making to communities.