

Function of council key to better services

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Spend enough time around local government and you will start to wonder not if reform is needed but how much and how soon.

This is not an argument for or against the State Government's bid to slash the number of Perth councils — how many councils there are matters less than how they function. But those who oppose reform on the basis the status quo works just fine are missing the big picture.

Take council meetings as an example of the best and worst of the sector: a forum where anyone who is interested can witness how local government works and how, well, sometimes, it does not.

They are also a place where ratepayers, however big or small their gripe or tenuous their grasp on the facts, have the right to speak and be heard by their elected representatives. In theory this is a good thing.

For some councils, however, it breeds a squeaky-wheel mentality where ratepayers who make enough noise can sway the council regardless of whether it represents good policy. In the worst cases, planning policy and informed advice from the administration goes out the window in favour of appeasing a vocal minority.

This kind of decision-making causes considerable frustration for developers and planners. It also frays relations between councils and administrations — a serious concern when you

consider such relationship breakdowns have been at the heart of several council implosions, most recently the City of Canning.

The introduction of Development Assessment Panels has helped but the broader concern is a lack of understanding about the role of council and the failure of operational structures to keep pace with expanding responsibilities.

At a recent meeting in the metropolitan area a veteran councillor made a point of stressing aloud the need for “people to do their homework” before committee meetings. That the comment was made in public speaks to the level of frustration that can be experienced — and this was at arguably one of the most professionally-run councils in the State.

At less efficient councils it is not uncommon to see elected members who appear either not to have read or not to have understood items in the agenda on which they are preparing to vote.

These problems are not new, nor are the solutions routinely proposed to address them. Mandatory training is one, higher pay another. Both ideas came up in the so-called Robson Report, the same report that recommended the Government reduce Perth's 30 councils to 12.

Since the report was released the reform debate has been all but limited to questions of which councils will survive and which will not but a reduction in council numbers was not the report's only



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recommendation. It recommended, among other things, that elected members receive training to encourage strategic leadership and “board-like behaviour”. It also suggested there was merit to paying councillors more if bigger pay packets came with “increased responsibility, accountability and training”.

And in a few sentences it highlighted one of the problems plaguing local government.

“The Review has revealed many individual visions for the future of metropolitan Perth but the panel is surprised by the lack of an overarching vision . . . there are 30

local governments in the Perth metropolitan region each with their own vision for the future of their local communities. There is nothing wrong with this, but it is the lack of an overarching vision for the Perth metropolitan region that concerns the panel,” it said.

That lack of a vision has been evident in too much of current reform debate, with some councils unable to look beyond their own backyards.

The Government's vision for Perth's metropolitan councils is far from perfect and its plan to redraw boundaries is no panacea. Time will also tell whether councils who believe the Local

Government Act has been breached will be proved right.

But too much of the rhetoric around reform has been focused on a desire to maintain the status quo. This kind of thinking ignores the need for change, not least because the scope of local government has changed considerably over the years while its operational structures, by and large, have not. That is a problem.

Councils have every right to be concerned about the reform and to look out for their ratepayers' interests. But those who advocate standing still do themselves few favours.

The debate must be widened beyond individual councils trying to protect their boundaries to consider how the councils of the future should look, act and function. If not, those who believe local government reform is unnecessary may not survive to see it happen.

