

# REALITY CHECK

Public Perceptions of South Australian  
Government Expenditure and Waste





**Reality Check:  
Public Views on South Australian  
Government Expenditure and Waste**

***Reality Check: Public Views on South Australian Government Expenditure and Waste***

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## Summary

This is the second of three SACOSS reports on South Australian state taxes and expenditure based on the Mint Research survey of 1,000 South Australians. While the survey mainly focused on tax issues, the data on expenditure and the perceptions of government waste was sufficiently important to warrant a report in its own right.

Government expenditure is the means by which governments provide infrastructure and public services to meet the collective (and sometimes individual) needs of people. In 2015-16, the South Australian State Government spent over \$18,000m in capital and operational expenditure, with:

- 31% being spent on health;
- 24 % on education;
- 10% of public order and safety;
- 9% on transport and telecommunications; and
- 7.5% on social security and welfare.

93% of this expenditure was on general operational expenditure, and as a proportion of total government operational expenditure, South Australia spends more than any other Australian state or territory on health, and above the national average in health, education, social services and housing and community amenities.

However, the state budget forward estimates show the level of government spending declining in real terms over the coming years. This raises concerns for SACOSS about the delivery of vital services in the future, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged South Australians who are most reliant on those services. The long term decline in taxation noted in various SACOSS reports over recent years represents a diminishing *ability* to fund public infrastructure and services, while the projected decrease in expenditure represents the *actuality* of diminished services and investment in public infrastructure.

This projected decrease in expenditure is at odds with the public's expectations of service provision evident throughout the SACOSS survey. 68% of survey respondents thought that the overall level of state government spending on infrastructure and services should be higher, with the strongest levels of support being for more spending on health, education and community services. There were few significant differences in responses based on household type or income, but regional respondents were a little more likely to support more expenditure on roads and public health care, and women were more likely than men to support more spending on health, education and community services. There was also a marked difference in responses by age, with support for more spending on roads and police/justice increasing with age (and support for more education spending declining among older respondents).

In terms of political parties, supporters of the Nick Xenophon Team had a significantly higher rate of support for more spending on police and justice (76%), while the Greens had the highest rate of support for education (90%) and community services (90%). Liberal voters were less likely than Labor voters to support more spending in most categories – the

exceptions being roads and industry support, but the differences between the major parties were only really significant in relation to wanting more spent on education (ALP 73%: Liberal 58%) and community services (ALP 73%: Liberal 60%).

The same sorts of priorities evident above were seen in response to the question asking respondents which area they would cut if one area of expenditure had to be reduced, but overall there was little support for cutting services as a way of addressing budget pressures.

These survey results present a challenge to government – both in terms of the contradiction of people wanting more services but also lower taxes, and because the last two state budgets have been headlined by cuts to business taxes – when support for business was the least popular of the broad expenditures in the survey. However, the results also present challenges for the Liberal Opposition in that, while a majority of Liberal voters still wanted higher government expenditure overall, they were less likely than most other voters to support higher expenditure and had the highest proportion who wanted less government expenditure. Accordingly, the policies that play best to the Liberal base may not resonate as well with the voters they may need to attract (either outright or via preferences) at the next election.

Importantly though, running through much of the survey data there was a perception that the government was wasting money. This perception is important because it allows people to hold what would otherwise be contradictory positions of wanting to pay less tax but get more services, and it allows Opposition and cross-bench politicians to avoid hard budget questions and choices by claiming they would reduce waste.

When asked directly, more than half of survey respondents thought the government was not effective at getting value for taxpayers' money. Predictably, Labor voters least likely to believe the government was wasting money. More importantly though, around two-thirds or more of respondents believed that government waste was sufficiently large that reducing it would likely make a difference at the macroeconomic level – enabling the reduction of state debt or the provision of a lot more services.

The problem with these views became obvious when respondents were asked for specific examples of government waste. Only 43% of respondents provided examples of waste or inefficiency, and of these, 72% of examples were particular infrastructure projects (headed by the new Royal Adelaide Hospital, the O-Bahn extension and the Adelaide Oval upgrade). However, it was not clear on what basis these projects were considered to be waste – and reducing such questions to whether an individual uses or wants that infrastructure may underestimate the collective benefit from public infrastructure.

Further, when the scale of expenditure on these projects is compared to the state budget as a whole, it is not clear that eliminating waste could have the budget impacts believed. While some of the key infrastructure projects were large enough to impact on state debt, there is far less impact on the ability to deliver services. For example, even if every dollar of the O-Bahn extension was considered wasted (that is, the whole project was completely unnecessary, and not taking into account any potential benefits or dollars coming back into the budget from that expenditure), the \$160m total expenditure would represent 3.9% of

state debt in 2014/15, but the yearly expenditure was less than one half of one percent of the total state budget expenditure. This is not to comment on the merits or otherwise of the O-Bahn project, but it does bring into question the belief that eliminating projects viewed as waste would allow a lot more services to be delivered.

The same is true (to a greater or lesser extent) of other examples of waste – including the popular target of politicians' wages and entitlements. While 14% of survey respondents said that politicians and public servants salaries were too high, the budget papers shows that entire state parliament – including MP wages, accounts for only 0.18%, or one fifth of one percent, of the state budget.

The problem with this view of government waste, both in terms of the exaggerated relative scale of the perceived waste and the failure to fully consider broader public benefits, is not only that it allows for avoidance of hard budget questions, nor even that it undermines public support for a particular policy or particular government. It also risks undermining the collective project – the belief in the benefits of government per se and the role of government in making a better society. The fact that a person may not use a particular piece of infrastructure, or would rather have spent the money on something else, does not make that expenditure a *waste* – it makes it a different, or someone else's, priority. That difference is, and should be, the subject of public and political debate, but that debate should be framed around relative costs, benefits and priorities – and for whom, not around waste and (by implication) the failure of government.

And if we have that debate about priorities, and we consider the public infrastructure and services we as a community need, we may see that the desire for more public services can't be met from current revenue sources. That would be useful in asking real questions about levels of tax and expenditure, and that is the conversation South Australia should be having in the lead up to the 2018 state election.

## Introduction

This report is the second of three SACOSS reports on South Australian state taxes and expenditure based on the Mint Research survey of 1000 South Australians conducted in December 2016. The survey was commissioned by SACOSS to advance what we see as the necessary discussion of state tax reform, and to highlight possible directions for change and potential opportunities for or barriers to reform.

The first report in the series, *Unfinished Business: Two Years on from the State Tax Review* (SACOSS, 2017) sets out the rationale for the survey and SACOSS' interest in taxation issues – in short, the need for a fair tax system that provides enough revenue to pay for vital public goods and services. That report dealt with the potential public support for specific tax reform measures proposed by SACOSS in its submission to the State Tax Review (SACOSS, 2015). The third report will deal with community attitudes to taxation generally, knowledge of state taxes and the political possibilities for reform (SACOSS, 2017 forthcoming).

While the starting point for the survey was taxation, to give proper context to the taxation questions there were also a series of survey questions around perceptions of state government expenditure. Views on taxation are inevitably tied to perceptions of what the money is spent on – and vice versa. However, the results of the survey in relation to government expenditure are important enough in their own right to warrant separate consideration as they reflect directly on government spending priorities. There was also in the expenditure questions and throughout the survey data an over-riding perception that government is wasting money – with the implication that taxes should not be raised or reformed if the government just wastes the money.

Accordingly, this report focuses on the survey data in relation to perceptions of government expenditure and waste.

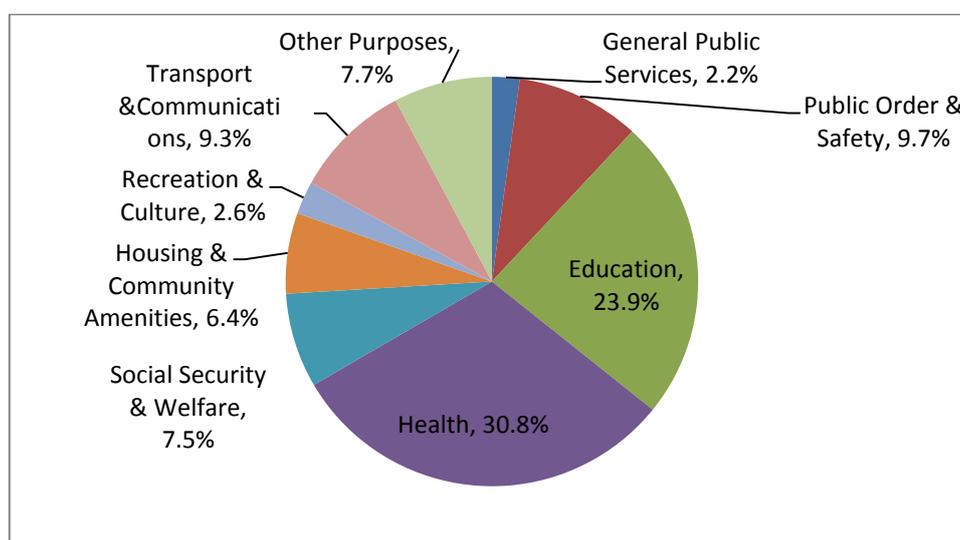
For convenience, the survey demographics which were detailed in the first report are repeated in Appendix 1 here, and the questions asked in relation to government expenditure are in Appendix 2 of this report.

## Expenditure

While taxation may have a range of purposes including macro-economic management, the redistribution of wealth, market correction or behaviour change, for many people its primary role is to provide the funds for government expenditure to makes the lives of individuals and the community better. Expenditure is largely for public services and infrastructure, or for the running of government itself (including payment of debt) and is done primarily through the various government departments and agencies (although sometimes also by grants to third parties).<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1 shows the areas where the \$18,272m general government expenditure was spent in 2015-16 (estimated results) (Govt of SA, 2016a). The figures include both capital and operational expenditure and show health and education as the largest two areas of expenditure – constituting over half of general state government spending between them.

**Figure 1: Government Expenditure by Function, 2015-16**

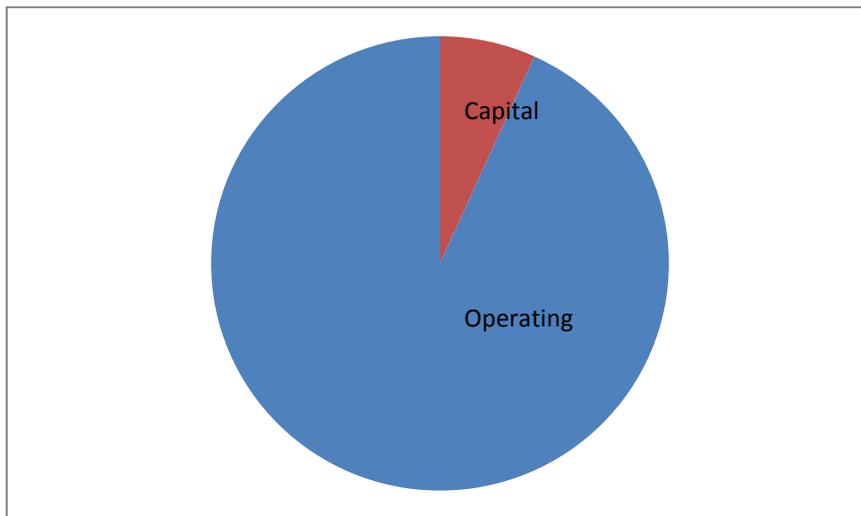


Source: SACOSS calculations from Govt of SA (2016a), Appendix A.

Figure 2 shows the breakdown between capital and operational expenditure, with the bulk of expenditure (\$17,036m or 93% of the total) being operational. Transport and communications had the most significant capital expenditure with \$592m in 2015-16, equating to 35% of the total expenditure in that area. The next highest was health with \$285m capital expenditure equating to 5% of total health spending. These capital and operational figures will become important when looking at the perception of waste in government spending.

<sup>1</sup> This does not include so-called “tax expenditures” which are estimated in the budget papers (Government of South Australia, 2016a) to cover differential tax treatments where tax concessions or exemptions have the same effect as if a tax was collected at a normal rate and then given back as an expenditure to the same taxpayer. While these are important in tax and revenue terms, they are not considered in this report.

**Figure 2: Government Capital and Operational Expenditure, 2015-16**

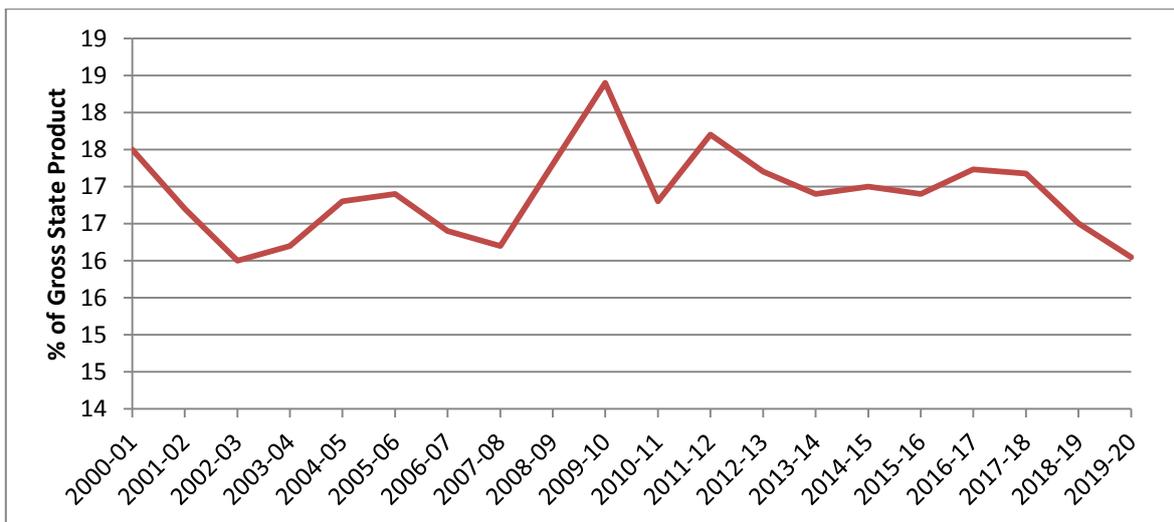


Source: SACOSS calculations from Govt of SA (2016a) , Appendix A.

Within general government operational expenditure, employee expenses accounted for \$7,749m, or \$8,991m with superannuation expenses included – that is, about half of all operating expenditure.

The above figures give a snapshot of government expenditure in 2015-16. However, as Figure 3 shows, the level of expenditure has varied over time. The spike in 2009-10 was the result of the Federal Government post-GFC stimulus package flowing through state government projects, while in recent years government expenditure has hovered around 17% of Gross State Product.

**Figure 3: Government Expenditure Over Time**



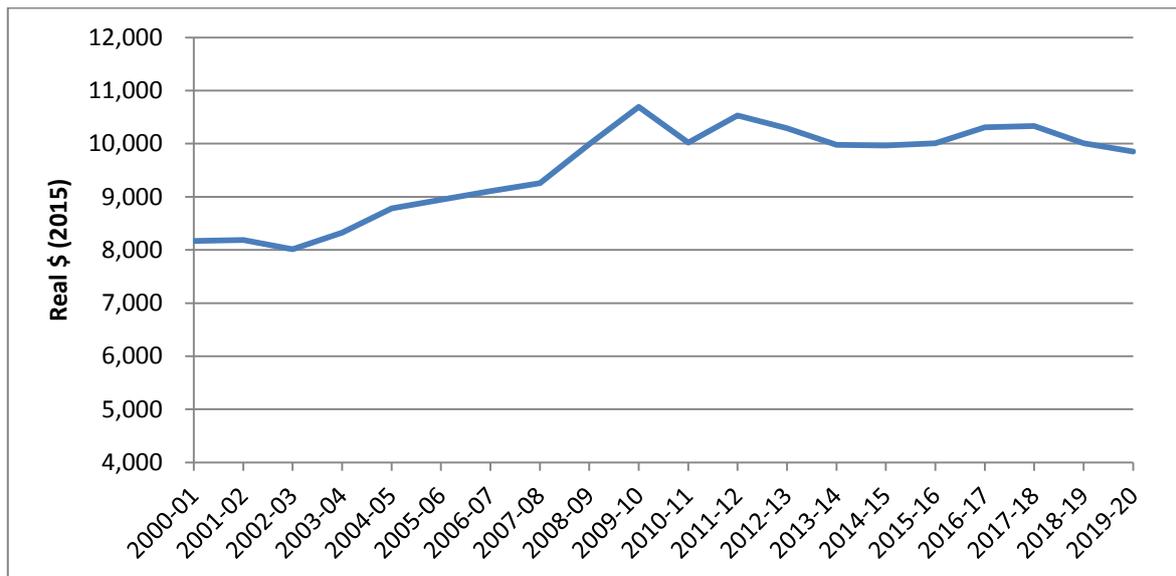
Source: SACOSS calculations from Govt of SA, (2016a), (2016b).

As can be seen at the right of the graph, over the forward estimates there is a significant decline in government expenditure as a share of the economy. In part this may be due to optimistic economic growth forecasts which would see GSP expand faster than expenditure.

The figures do not include the expenditure associated with the \$550m state energy plan announced since the budget.

A similar but less volatile view of government expenditure is evident in Figure 4 which traces changes in government expenditure per capita, adjusted for inflation: that is, how much on average is the government spending per head of population. While there was a steady increase in expenditure throughout the first decade of this century, the expenditure levelled off this decade at around \$10,000 per head.

**Figure 4: Real Government Expenditure Per Capita Over Time**



Source: SACOSS calculations from Govt of SA (2016a) (2016b), ABS (2016) (2017).

Two things are worth noting about these figures. Firstly, the expenditure is only underpinned by state taxes to a limited extent: in 2015-16, real state government expenditure per capita was \$10,006, but state taxes per capita were only \$2,587. This points to the narrowness of the state tax base, and underpins the frustrations aired from time to time by federal governments about the lack of accountability from state governments given that much of their expenditure is not paid for by state taxes.

The second thing to note again is the fall in expenditure in the final years of the forward estimates. The survey data to be discussed below shows a strong community desire for more spending on government services, but the figures above suggest that expenditure will decline in real terms and as a proportion of the economy. While the long term decline in taxation noted in various SACOSS reports over the last few years represents the decreasing *ability* to fund public infrastructure and services, this decrease in expenditure represents the actuality of decreasing services and investment in public infrastructure.

Given that such a decrease in infrastructure investment and/or public services may be in store for South Australia, it is useful to try to better understand people's perception and expectations of this expenditure. Although primarily focussed on taxation, the SACOSS survey does provide some insight into community attitudes to government expenditure.

## Survey Data

The survey directly tested views on the economic role of government spending, the appropriate level and priorities for expenditure, and also asked specific questions around perceptions of waste in government expenditure.

As with the first report in this series, each of the questions can be cross-referenced to demographic groups and voting intentions, and these will be discussed where there are significant differences in responses between groups.

## Economic Role of Government Spending

While there was a broad understanding among survey respondents that taxation was necessary to pay for public infrastructure and services (only 5% disagreeing), the first question explicitly on expenditure asked whether respondents thought economic growth in South Australia could be attributed mainly to government spending, private company investment, or a combination of above. Predictably, a majority of respondents (65%) thought it was a combination of both, but when this is added to the 12% who attributed growth mainly to government spending it is clear that, at least in principle, there is a widespread understanding that government expenditure has an important role in contributing to economic growth.

There were few relevant differences between the demographic groups in the survey, or between political parties. Liberal voters were more likely than Labor and Green voters to think that economic growth was mainly attributable to private company investment rather than government spending, but that was still only 18% of Liberal voter respondents – by comparison with 66% of Liberal voters attributing growth to a mix of government and private spending.

## Expenditure Priorities

The survey identified seven key areas of state government spending and asked if that area should receive more or less funding, or about the same as current expenditures. The areas of spending identified represented most of the major broad areas of government expenditure.<sup>2</sup> The results are in Table 1 below and clearly show strong majority support for spending more money in all areas, except for support for business which had just under majority support.

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<sup>2</sup> Respondents in regional areas were not asked about public transport because the lack of public transport in those areas might bias the responses. A statement that a person outside Adelaide did not want more spent on public transport may be because they do not value public transport, or they may value it but have no belief/hope that more money spent on it would actually deliver public transport in their area. This is arguably different from other areas of expenditure where it may be safer to assume that if there was more expenditure on roads, or education, etc that at least some of it would find its way to regional areas.

**Table 1: Attitudes to the Level of Government Spending in Particular Areas**

	Spend More % of respondents	The Same % of respondents	Spend Less % of respondents	Unsure % of respondents
Police and Justice	64	27	6	4
Roads	65	28	5	3
Public Transport	55	36	6	2
Education	70	22	5	4
Health	82	13	3	2
Community Services	72	22	4	3
Industry/Business Support	49	34	13	4

Clearly the strongest support was for more spending in education, community services and particularly the public health system. Not only did health have the highest level of support with 82% of respondents wanting more spending there, two-thirds of these wanted “a lot more” spending. Similarly (but not to the same extent), more than half of those wanting more spending on roads, education and community services for vulnerable and disadvantaged people wanted a lot more spending.

By contrast, more spending on industry support and business not only had the lowest level of support of all the expenditure areas, but two-thirds of the 49% of respondents who wanted more spending only wanted a little more expenditure in that area.

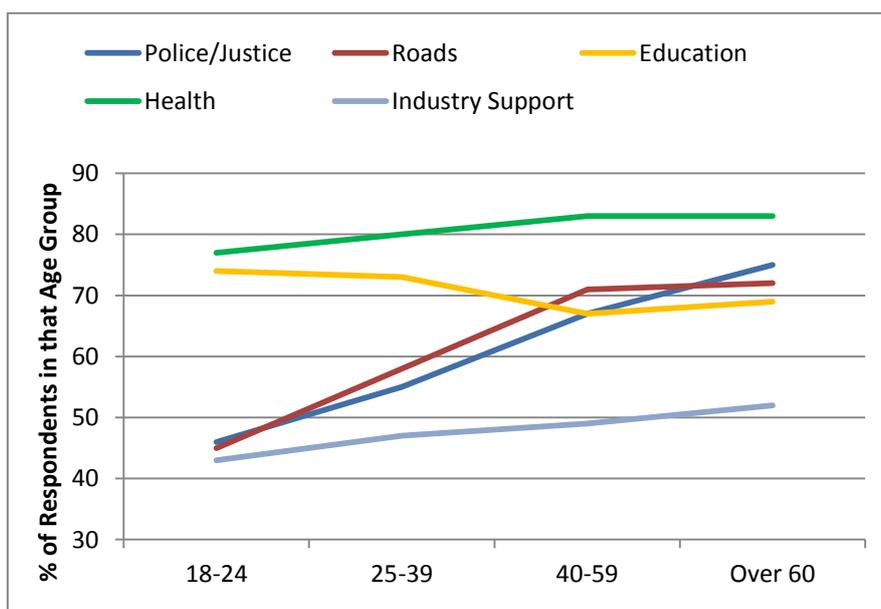
There were no significant differences in responses based on household type or income, but there were a number of differences across other demographics. Respondents in regional areas were a little more likely than those in Adelaide to support more expenditure on roads (73%) and public health care (86%).

Women were significantly more likely to support more spending on health, education and community services, and this was also reflected in support for more spending in those three areas among those whose occupation was home duties. For those listing home duties as their occupation, support for more public health spending was 97%, support for more education spending was 89% and for community services it was 85%.

Those who were unemployed had the lowest rate of support for spending more on police and justice (41% - although from a small sample size).

As Figure 5 below shows, there was also a difference in responses among age groups in relation in two key areas. Support for spending more on roads and on police and justice increased significantly with age, while support for increased spending on public health and industry support also increased with age (but to a lesser extent). Support for spending more on education declined among older populations, but this was still at a high level of support and the difference between age groups was not as significant as it was for roads and justice spending.

**Figure 5: Support for Spending More, by Age Group**



While not shown in the graph, support for more spending on community services was the same through all age groups, and for public transport there was slightly more support among the middle age groups than among those under 24 and over 60 – but the differences were not significant.

In terms of political parties, supporters of the Nick Xenophon Team had a significantly higher rate of support for more spending on police and justice (76%), while the Greens had the highest rate of support for education (90%) and community services (90%). Liberal voters were less likely than Labor voters to support more spending in most categories – the exceptions being roads and industry support, but the differences between the major parties were only really significant in relation to wanting more spent on education (ALP 73%: Liberal 58%) and community services (ALP 73%: Liberal 60%).

### **Cutting One Area of Spending**

The same sorts of priorities were evident in response to the question asking respondents which area they would cut if one area of expenditure had to be reduced.

As Table 2 shows, more than one in three respondents said they would cut support for industry and business, while there was very little support for cutting health, education or community services. 15% said that they would cut public transport, but given comments elsewhere in the survey identifying the O-Bahn and tram extensions as key areas of waste, this result may reflect objections to particular public transport programs rather than a preference for cutting public transport overall.

There were few demographic differences in the data on this question, or where there was they followed the pattern above in relation to expenditure on those areas.

**Table 2: Priorities If Expenditure Had To Be Reduced**

	% of respondents
Police and Justice	12
Roads	19
Public Transport	15
Education	8
Health	3
Community Services	7
Industry/Business Support	36

The consistency across the survey in relation to spending priorities is a challenge for both major political parties.

The last two state budgets have been headlined by tax cuts to business to stimulate the economy and the government has funded industry support for defence, car, steel and energy industries. Meanwhile, the Liberal Opposition has launched an attack on the government's energy policies by suggesting that the government should have subsidised the unprofitable Playford coal-fired power station at Port Augusta to keep it going. Both these headline approaches amount to spending money on business support which is the least popular of the broad government spending areas.

This is not to comment on whether those policies are good or bad, it is simply to point out that they may not be as popular as spending money elsewhere and both mean that there will be less money to spend elsewhere.

### **Overall Level of Spending**

Some of the respondents' comments on the questions above indicated that there was a level of nuance not captured by the questions in that respondents may wish to see more spending in some areas within a category and less in other areas within that category (eg. better roads, but not the O-Bahn extension; or less funding to private schools, and more to public schools).

However the overall picture of people wanting to spend more on key government services remained. This was also evident when the survey asked about the level of total government spending.

Respondents were asked to consider the importance of government infrastructure and services and to say whether they thought the overall level of South Australian government spending across all areas should be higher, about the same, or lower. The results are in Table 3 with 68% wanting to see higher levels of government spending overall – as noted above, an outcome not likely on current budget projections.

**Table 3: View of Overall Level of State Government Spending**

Should be:	% of respondents
A lot higher	26
A little higher	42
About the same	20
Lower	7
Unsure	5

These results are interesting when cross-matched with perceptions of the level of taxation. While 68% of respondents wanted more spending on services, 64% believed that the overall level of state taxes was too high. Half of those who wanted to see higher levels of government expenditure thought state taxes were too high, and a further 30% thought that tax levels were “about right” – so 80% of respondents would be hoping/presuming that the extra funding for infrastructure and services would come from somewhere other than state taxes. The contradictions in these figures were even more pronounced among those who thought state taxes were “way too high”, where two-thirds of respondents still wanted more spent on public infrastructure and services and only 15% held what might seem the more consistent position that if taxes were way too high, government spending should be lower. While some of this may relate to perceptions of government wasting money, which will be discussed below, this basic contradiction of wanting more services and lower taxes makes it difficult for any government to navigate budget priorities and tax policy. This will be discussed further in the final SACOSS report from this survey data (SACOSS, 2017 forthcoming).

Of more immediate interest is the breakdown by voter intention, as seen in Table 4 below. The results are consistent with the data above in relation to individual expenditure areas: Liberal voters were less likely than Labor voters to want higher spending overall – but still with a majority of Liberal voters (62%) wanting expenditure to be higher. Similarly, Liberal voters were much more likely than Labor voters to want *less* expenditure overall, but at only 11% support among Liberal voters, the “smaller government” expenditure option is not popular.

**Table 4: View of Overall Level of Spending, by Voting Intention**

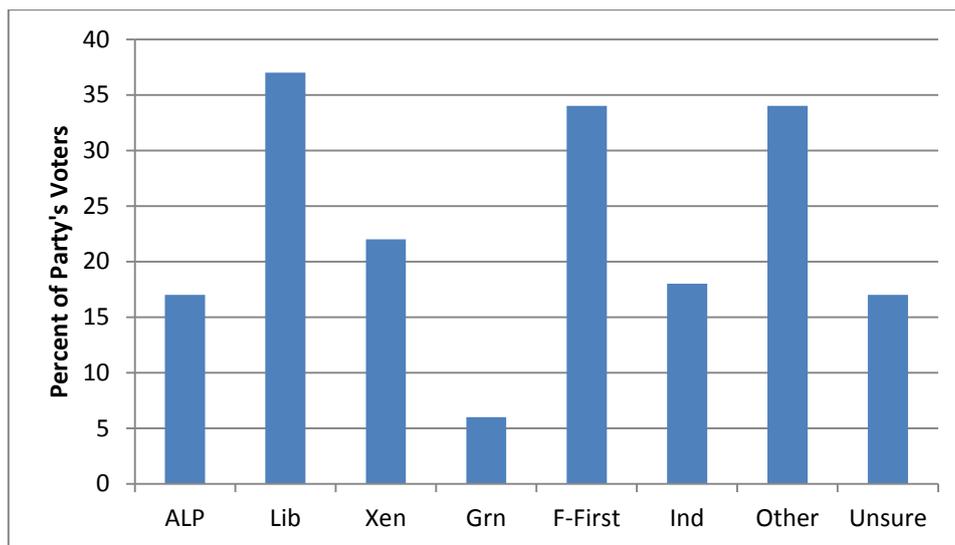
Spending should be:	ALP %	Liberal %	Xen %	Greens %	F-First %	Undecided %	Ind/Other %
Higher	74	62	70	76	69	67	62
About the same	19	23	19	11	26	23	26
Lower	3	11	7	3	6	2	6
Unsure	4	5	4	10	0	9	0

This data also suggests that there is a particular issue for the Liberal Party in that while their supporters may be less enthusiastic about increasing government expenditure overall, the

voters they may need to attract (either outright or via preferences) at the next election are much more likely to support more spending. While the survey numbers for the minor parties are low and should be treated with caution, it is notable that all other parties except the independents are more likely to want higher levels of government expenditure. Further, support for lower spending was very low among the undecided voters. Accordingly the policies that play best to the Liberal base may not resonate as well with the voters they may hope to win over. Again though, this issue should not be exaggerated because the majority of Liberal voters also wanted more spending on public infrastructure and services.

Consistent with the “across the board” support for higher levels of spending on public services, when asked about broad strategies for managing pressures on the South Australian state budget, only 23% of respondents agreed that the government should cut spending on public services while 48% opposed the idea. But again, there were political differences here. This is evident in Figure 6 which confirms the issue noted above that policies around smaller government or cutting services to meet budget needs resonates better among the conservative (Liberal and Family First<sup>3</sup>) base than with the voters who they may need to win office.

**Figure 6: Support for Cutting Spending to Manage Budget Pressures, by Voting Intention**



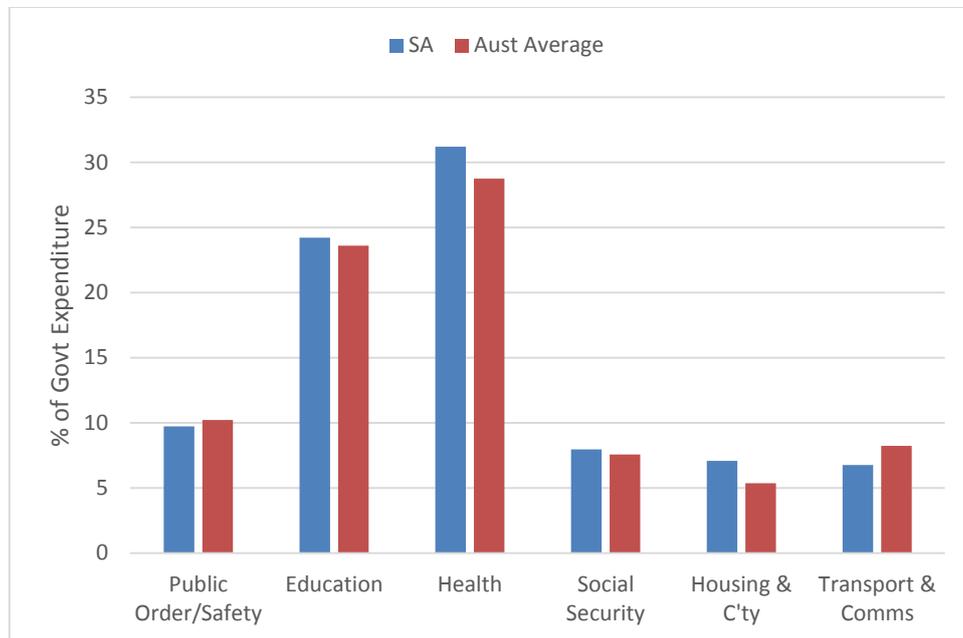
Overall there is a great consistency in attitudes across all the questions on expenditure (even if these may not be consistent with their responses in relation to tax). There is strong support across the community for more spending on public services, and in particular on health, education and community services. There was less (though still significant) support for spending on industry and business support.

Yet it is worth remembering here that as evident in Figure 1, health already accounts for 30% of the state budget. Further, as a proportion of total government operational expenditure, South Australia spends more than any other Australian state or territory on health, and as

<sup>3</sup> The survey pre-dated Family First’s merger with the Australian Conservatives, and Family First is used in this document because that was name used in survey questions.

Figure 7 shows, spends above the national average in health, education, social services, and housing and community amenities (water, sewerage, environment protection).<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 7: Expenditure – SA vs Average All State/Territories**



Source: SACOSS calculations from State Budget Papers, Uniform Presentation Framework data.

At one level this pattern of government expenditure accords with the priorities expressed in the survey, and so the South Australian Government could claim to be reflecting public priorities. But the interpretation is not so simple.

It is not clear from the survey what level of knowledge respondents had of current government expenditure. For instance, if respondents knew that health currently accounted for 30% of state government spending (more than any other state) would they still support more or a lot more spending on health? If they were unaware of current expenditure patterns respondents may simply have been expressing a recognition of the importance of particular expenditures – and may have been satisfied if they knew that current expenditure already reflected this priority.

On the other hand, the question was asked in relation to current expenditure (would you want more/less expenditure?) and so it may be that respondents simply perceive a current lack of services and want more spending on services even if it is already a priority expenditure area.

There is one final caveat in interpreting the survey data on government expenditure due to the broadness of the categories. For instance, it is not clear whether survey respondents

<sup>4</sup> Note that SACOSS survey category of community services would refer to services referred to in Figure 7 as Social Security and also expenditure on public housing and community development included in the Housing and Community Amenities category in the Uniform Presentation Framework used to generate this data.

who wanted more spent on police and justice wanted more police, more resources to make court processes cheaper or faster, or wanted more spent on correctional services – and if the latter, if that was for prisons or rehabilitation programs. There are clearly priority decisions within the broad areas of expenditure, and the survey tested only attitudes to broad expenditure priorities – not whether those expenditures were good, bad, necessary or not. However, some of these issues were teased out when considering the issue of waste in government expenditure.

## Waste

The perception of government wasting money is crucial to public understanding of taxes and expenditure. The perception runs through much of the survey data and allows people to hold what would otherwise be contradictory positions of wanting to pay less tax but get more services. The idea that the government wastes money means people can oppose paying more tax, both because the government will only waste the tax collected and because we could have more services without higher taxes if the government stopped wasting money. In effect, the perception of waste allows people to avoid the hard budget questions.

Waste is not the only idea that has this convenient function in allowing people to maintain the lower-taxes-more-services contradiction. The ideas that the tax system is unfair and “others” should pay more tax, or that economic growth will generate more taxes and an ability to pay for more services both have similar functions. These two issues will be dealt with the final report in this series (SACOSS, 2017 forthcoming), but in all cases (including in relation to waste), the point is not that there is no justification for the belief, it is just to note the particular function in the public debate on government tax and expenditure.

This issue of waste allowing people to avoid dealing with hard budget decisions is not just limited to the general public. SACOSS’ previous experience of surveying candidates and political parties about the level of revenue required to fund services is that most politicians would prefer to commit to reducing waste and being more efficient than raising revenue (SACOSS, 2014). This neatly allows political parties (particularly non-government parties of all stripes) to avoid having to put forward unpopular tax increases or to outline particular cuts to projects or services in order to pay for the projects that they are promoting.

All of the above perceptions/functions were evident in the survey – both where there were particular questions about waste, and also in places where there was space for general comment. However, while there is certainly waste and inefficiency within government, the waste and expenditure issues are much more complicated and must be addressed if we are to have meaningful debates about taxation and budget priorities in South Australia (and indeed, nationally).

## Waste Questions in Survey

There were three questions about waste in the survey – the first two quantitative, and the third an open-ended question asking for examples of government waste.

The first question on waste was carefully phrased and deliberately did not use the word “waste” which, by definition is normatively bad and might bias the responses. In fact, the question put the issue in a positive frame by asking how effective the state government is in making tax dollars work hard to provide value for money in public services. Yet as Table 5 shows, even with this framing, only 1 in 3 thought the government was effective, while more than half thought it was not effective – ie. that it wastes money.

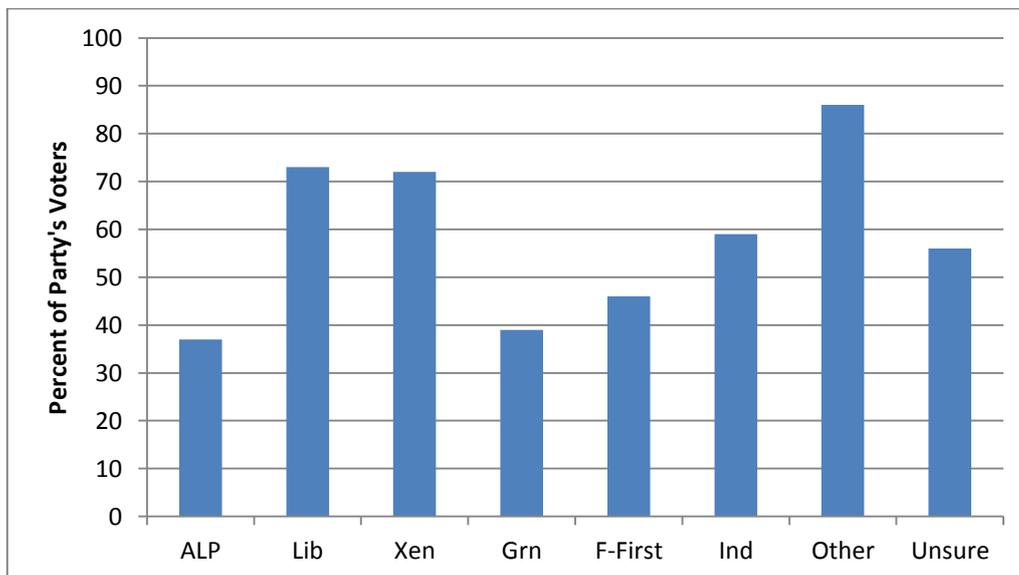
**Table 5: Perceptions of Government Management Efficiency**

	% of respondents
Very effective	4
Somewhat effective	28
Not very effective	36
Not effective at all	22
Don't know	10

There was little or no significant difference in responses to this question across most demographic groups, except in relation to age where those over 55 years old were more likely than the younger age groups to think the government was not effective in ensuring value for the tax dollar.

There were also marked differences in responses when analysed by voting intention. As Figure 8 shows, whether from values or party loyalty Labor voters were far less likely to think that the government was wasting money, while Liberal and Xenophon voters were far more likely to think the government was not effective at getting value for money.

**Figure 8: Belief that the Government Was *Not* Effective at Getting Value for Money, by Voting Intention**



The other interesting result from the voting intention analysis is the extraordinarily high percentage of those voting for “other” (non-parliamentary parties) who believed that the government was not effective at getting value for money (and in fact believed it was not effective *at all*). The actual survey numbers here were very low and should be treated with caution, although the results are consistent with many other attitudes in the survey and may suggest that there is at least some element of a “populist heartland” for whom the government is clearly wasting money – but again at a total “Other” vote of only 3% in the survey.

The second question on waste in the survey asked whether reducing state government waste and inefficiency would save enough money to reduce government debt, pay for a lot more public services, or mean that state taxes would not need to be increased. At one level the question is simply stating the obvious – that if expenditure was reduced via waste reduction, then (all other things being equal), there would be more money to spend on other things. This may explain the high positive response rates, but the key here is that to answer positively (particularly to think it is “very likely”) there must be a belief that “enough money” could be saved, that is, that the scale of waste is sufficient to enable any one of the outcomes suggested.

The results in Table 6 show that there was a fairly widespread belief that the level of state government waste was sufficient to enable such macroeconomic outcomes. Around two-thirds or more respondents supported the various propositions, and nearly one in three thought it was “very likely” reducing waste would have such impacts. By contrast, only 4-5% of survey respondents thought that the macroeconomic outcomes were “very unlikely”.

**Table 6: Perceptions of Waste and Macroeconomic Outcomes**

Reducing waste would save enough to:	Very likely %	Somewhat likely %	Likely TOTAL %
Reduce state government debt	29	40	69
Pay for a lot more public services	32	41	73
Not need to increase state taxes	28	36	64

Again, there were few significant differences between demographic groups – other than young people being more likely to be unsure. Even across the political parties the differences were not as marked as they were in relation to the perception of waste. Greens and undecided voters were least likely to believe that reducing waste would save enough money to have those macroeconomic impacts, but even those figures were above 60% (while the other parties were over 70%). And curiously, even though only 37% of ALP voters thought the government was wasting money, 72% thought that reducing waste could lead to increased services.

### **Waste Examples from Survey**

While from all of the above it is clear that there is a widespread view that the state government wastes money and that this is on a scale to impact on macroeconomic budget outcomes, the truth may be somewhat different – or at least more nuanced.

The survey followed the questions above on waste by asking respondents if they could think of any recent examples of state government wasteful spending or inefficiency, and if so, to specify what they were. Despite the high numbers believing that the state government wastes money or was inefficient, Table 7 shows the ten most identified examples of state government waste or inefficiency.

**Table 7: Top 10 Examples of State Government Waste or Inefficiency**

	% of respondents identifying waste examples
New Royal Adelaide Hospital	53
O-Bahn	30
Adelaide Oval & Footbridge	15
Desal Plant	11
Gillman	8
Nuclear Debate	8
South Road	6
Tramline	6
Southern Expressway	5
Transforming Health	5

While the new Royal Adelaide Hospital topped the list as the most mentioned example of government waste, the actual responses within these figures were varied. They included those who thought the idea of a new hospital was a waste (ie. against the project as a whole), those who may have agreed to a new hospital but thought it was too expensive or took too long, and those who identified not the hospital per se but the cost over-runs and delays (ie. the specific project management), and also a couple of responses which identified particular things about the design or project that were wasteful. Similarly, most of the responses relating to the Southern Expressway related to the waste identified in building a one-way expressway, and then later making it two-way, rather than the idea of the expressway itself.

This contrasted to the responses in relation to the O-Bahn, Desal Plant and the Adelaide Oval/Footbridge which were overwhelmingly opposed to the project per se. Many responses that raised the O-Bahn noted the small reduction in travel times, while the desal plant was seen as unnecessary with several respondents noting it was not being used.

It should also be noted that this survey was taken before the government announced its \$550m energy plan (Govt of SA, 2017) which included the building of a new gas power station and money for battery storage. While it might be that the recent blackouts and perceptions of the need for new energy generation may counteract the tendency evident in the list above, it is likely that as a major infrastructure this too would come to be seen (at least at a point in time) as an example of government waste.

There could of course be debates around each of the examples of waste or inefficiency, and there is little doubt that there are genuine and uncontroversial examples of government waste and inefficiency. But there are a range of issues with the perceptions of waste evident in the survey and the list of examples above, including around the scale of the waste identified and the understanding of what constitutes waste and inefficiency.

## The Problems with the Perception of Waste

### Scale of Waste

The fact that 72% of the examples of waste and inefficiency (and at least 7 out of the top 10 examples) were large infrastructure projects should raise questions about whether reducing the waste in these projects (even by not doing them) could really deliver the macroeconomic outcomes of debt reduction, more public services or alleviating the need for any increase in state taxes. As evident in Figure 2, capital works are a small part (around 7%) of state budget expenditure (in 2015-16) so clearly the bulk of government money is being spent elsewhere.

The contrary perception of the scale of waste in government infrastructure projects is undoubtedly fed by the large sums of money involved – and promoted by politicians who point to the large sums being spent as a measure of their commitment to the project/area. It is therefore self-evidently true that if such large sums did not need to be spent or could be better spent elsewhere than there is significant government waste and inefficiency. However, at a macro-scale the numbers don't really support this – or at least not to the scale suggested by the survey responses. Table 8 considers two of the biggest proposed examples of government waste (we have not considered the RAH because of the nuances in the responses noted above which would point to different levels of expenditure waste/inefficiency). Because of the complexity of financial arrangements and the fact that expenditure is spread over several years, there may be some dispute over the exact costing of the projects for the years considered, but they do provide relative orders-of-magnitude of the expenditure involved.

**Table 8: Budget Impact of Examples of State Government Waste**

	O-Bahn Extension	Adelaide Oval/Footbridge
Total Cost (\$m)	160	435*
Sample Year	2014/15	2013/14
Expenditure in Year (\$m)	53.3	131.9
% of State Budget in sample year	0.3	0.73
Total Cost % of State Debt in sample year	3.9	6.2

Source: SACOSS calculations based on Govt of SA (2014, 2015, 2016a)

\* State Government expenditure. There was also a Commonwealth contribution, and the total project cost was listed as \$535. (Infrastructure SA, 2017).

Again, this is not about the merits or otherwise of these projects, it is simply an attempt to put a scale on the supposed waste – and it should also be recognised that the above figures are absolutely one-sided in that there is no accounting for any benefits from the projects – either in their construction stage or over their lifetime (including revenue directly returned to government through payroll and other taxes).

However, even with these one-sided figures there appears to be a disconnect with the survey responses noted in Table 6 above. There is some support for the 69% of survey respondents who thought that reducing waste would save enough to reduce state debt in that, if each of these projects was viewed in total as a waste, then the amounts of money

involved would have made some significant contribution to reducing state debt. By contrast, the yearly expenditure involved in each of these major infrastructure projects would account for less than 1% of budget expenditure for the year. Even if all the money spent was viewed as a waste there would not be much support for the 73% of people who thought that removing waste would pay for “a lot more” services. Obviously though there are other examples which people may add to the list – but again, the cost figures are one-sided and as will be argued below, the understanding of what constitutes waste is contentious.

There were also some significant mismatches of perception and data when it came to other areas of government expenditure. Again, since 93% of the state budget is operational rather than capital infrastructure expenditure, one would assume that there could be more savings to be made there. However, despite the fact that (as noted above) about half of this operational expenditure is on wages, salaries and superannuation, only 7% of survey respondents pointed to too many public servants as an example of waste or inefficiency.

There are also clear costs to attempting to cut waste and inefficiency in operational budgets. Cuts and “savings targets” in operational budgets are often said to be aimed at back-of-house operations rather than public service provision, but these back-of-house functions are often necessary to the service provision and the result of cuts is longer wait times and a degradation of services – the very thing that was least popular among respondents.

This is not to say that the public service is a model of efficiency. 10% of respondents identified inefficient public service work flows as an example of waste, and SACOSS has its own frustrations with public service procedures in the culture of risk aversion, complexity of procedures and where it seems near impossible to have a meeting with less than three or four public servants – none of whom have the power to make decisions. However, the alternative may be money wasted on higher risk decisions or a lack of accountability (given that bureaucratic and political accountability is what drives some of the complexity). Again, in the bigger sense these are questions about where to draw lines rather than clear and obvious lines of “waste”, but unless these lines of accountability and culture are drawn differently, then operational procedures are unlikely to change and any cut in operational budgets will result directly in service cuts.

Finally, while 14% of survey respondents said that politicians’ and public servants’ salaries were too high – and politicians’ wages and entitlements are often the source of public and media outrage (although more at the Federal than State level), the entire state parliament – including MP wages, accounts for only 0.18%, or one fifth of one percent, of the state budget (SACOSS calculation from Govt of SA, 2016a). Again, while there may be different views as to the proper remuneration of politicians removing “waste” from this area is unlikely to make a considerable difference to macro-economic budget outcomes.

What all this suggests is that, notwithstanding the inevitable and very real examples of waste and inefficiency in government, there is large disconnect between the popular understandings around government waste and its actual importance in the state budget. This disconnect may serve ideological or political purposes (as noted above, to allow people and political candidates to avoid having to commit to hard budget decisions), but it is just

that – a discourse constructed/perpetuated for ideological or political purposes. It is not a sound basis for public policy, nor an excuse for politicians to avoid having to answer hard questions around raising revenue to fund services.

### **Waste or Priorities**

Beyond questions of the scale of waste and inefficiency, there are also questions about what constitutes waste. Looking at the list of examples of government waste and inefficiency it is essentially a list of almost every high-profile project the government has undertaken in the last 10-15 years! There are always genuine debates to be had about spending and infrastructure priorities, and about the costs and management of such projects. But the governance problem with simply compiling a list of projects seen as examples of government waste is that one person's unnecessary waste of money is another person's benefit or long overdue investment. The nature of living in a complex society is that there are multiple needs and priorities, and that not all expenditure will benefit everyone.

Are we, for instance, never to upgrade Adelaide Oval (or other sports facilities) because there are homeless people needing services? What about the tens of thousands of people who regularly go to Adelaide Oval and who can now more conveniently get there by public transport? But equally, what about the sports lovers who don't live in Adelaide? It is certainly legitimate to say that homeless people (or local sportsgrounds) should be the priority rather than Adelaide Oval, but it does not follow therefore that expenditure on the Oval is a waste.

The questions here are about balancing priorities, but it can't be simply that if someone or a number of people do not use something it is waste. If that logic was applied, those who do not have children could quite legitimately see new expenditure on education as government waste that they should not have to pay tax for – and services for homeless people or marginal groups would never get funding.

It should also be noted that the political cycle creates a mismatch for much public spending. Spending on early interventions to tackle social problems may avoid much greater costs to the government and community later, while infrastructure spending is easiest to attack in the planning and construction stage, while the benefits are only reaped after completion. Early proposals to build the Sydney Harbour Bridge stalled, and the first bill for bridge construction was defeated in the NSW Legislative Council because of war priorities in 1916 (NSW State Archives, 2017), while the Sydney Opera House was famously mired in controversy – yet few now would complain about these iconic infrastructures. We can only wonder if it will be the same with something like the new Royal Adelaide Hospital.

For any government expenditure, it is always easy for ten interest groups to say their need is greater – making the original project more unpopular and increasing the perception of government waste – but ultimately in the course of the debate spending that amount of money ten times over. And if we do not invest in public infrastructure, then we have decaying infrastructure and community facilities – which themselves are inefficient leading to complaints, for instance, about poor water pipe maintenance (an example raised in the survey).

It is a role of government in a democracy to prioritise these popular needs and desires, and in part the differences in priorities are decided at elections by the populace choosing the party or candidate which best articulates their priorities (including desires for lower taxes). These expenditure debates are properly about priorities, but when viewed through a paradigm of waste – so that “any project I disagree with” is seen as waste rather than a different priority – it poisons the political debate. It fails to understand the collective benefit we all derive from good public infrastructure and services, and in doing so it undermines our sense of community and fails to understand the role and the difficulties of government. As Donald Trump has acknowledged, government is not as easy as you expect! (Prignano, 2017).

## Conclusion

At the heart of this report is a fundamental contradiction of public policy. The SACOSS survey of a representative sample of 1,000 South Australians clearly showed a public desire for more spending on vital services, particularly in health, education and community services. But it also showed that people wanted lower taxes and rejected cutting services to manage budget pressures. This is not new or surprising, but as the analysis of the perceptions of waste showed, this contradiction can't (or at least shouldn't) be sidestepped by reference to reducing government waste and inefficiency.

While there is no doubt that there is government waste and inefficiency, the scale and macroeconomic importance of it is exaggerated in the public discourse (and in the survey results). At this level there is an education challenge for the government to be clear about where state taxes currently go. More importantly though, framing of debates about different government priorities as being about waste fails to understand the collective benefit we all get from government infrastructure and services, and risks undermining not just the particular policy or the particular government, but also of the benefits and role government itself. We get a populist rejection of government per se, which in turn delegitimises the collection of the tax revenue needed to fund government services and the possibility of investment in infrastructure and services. The result is fewer and worse quality services which in turn impacts on the wellbeing of the state as a whole, and particularly on vulnerable and disadvantaged people who most need those public services.

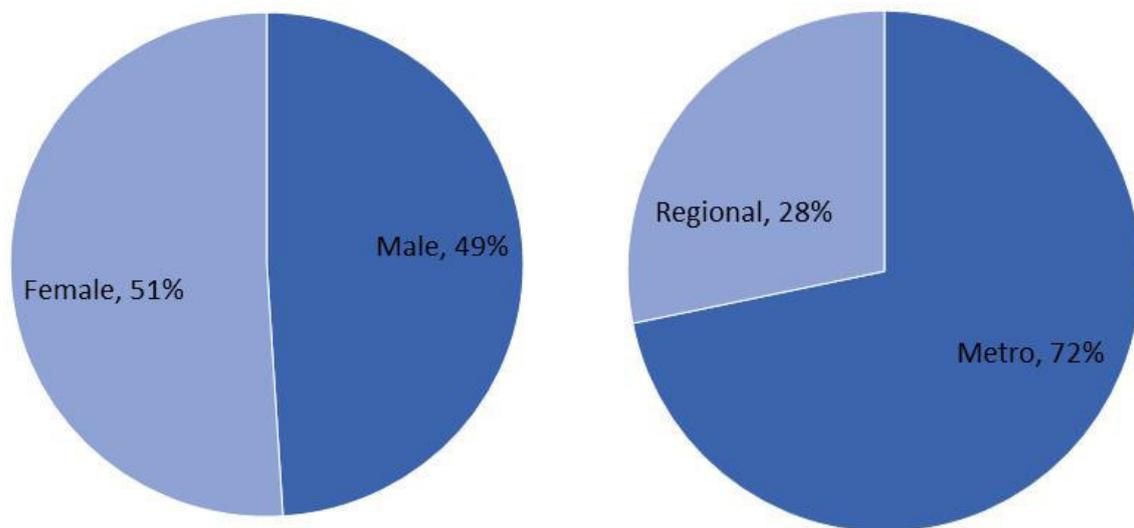
It is the job of opposition parties, academics, media commentators and community interest groups (like SACOSS) to critique and hold government to account – including by highlighting waste and inefficiency, but the conclusion of this report is really a plea to reframe the political debate. Public expectations of government services and the desire for increased expenditure on those services can't be met with current levels of taxation or simply by cutting waste. We either need to cut the provision of public goods and services – and the community benefits they provide, or we need to look at our tax system. That is the crucial public debate we need to have in the lead-up to the 2018 South Australian state election, and it is beholden on all political parties and commentators to confront those issues – and not to hide behind the simplistic rhetoric of cutting government waste.

## Appendix 1: Survey Demographics

A total of 1,062 South Australian residents over the age of 18 were surveyed, with the results then filtered to maximise representativeness resulting in a working sample of 1,000 respondents: 678 people on line, with the remaining 322 interviewed by phone.

The requirement of the survey sample was that it be broadly representative of the South Australian adult population across a range of demographic variables. The end result was a sample set that was sufficiently representative that no differential weighting was required in analysing the results. Accordingly, the numbers and percentages for each question are the actual numbers/percentages.

**Figure 9: Respondents' Gender and Location**



7% of respondents said that a language other than English was spoken in their home.

**Table 9: Respondents' Housing Arrangements**

Housing Tenure	%	Household Structure	%
Live in a house I own / am paying off	64.2	Family household	83
Renting accommodation	23.4	One person, living alone	13
Living rent free (eg. with parents / friends)	7.3	A non-family household (eg. share house)	5
Other / unknown	5.1		

**Table 10: Age of Respondents**

	%
18-24 years	12
25-39 years	25
40-59 years	35
60+ years	28

**Table 11: Respondents' Occupation**

	%
Work full time	31
Work part time / casual	23
Home duties	9
Unemployed, looking for work	6
Retired	19
Full time student or apprentice	4
Part time student	1
Not working because of injury / disability	5
Other	2

## Appendix 2: Survey Questions about Government Expenditure

Note: This is a subset of the entire survey which also asked about attitudes to taxation and to specific tax reform proposals (which are dealt with in separate SACOSS reports), and about basic demographics and voting intentions.

**TEXT IN BOLD, CAPS AND BLUE IS PROGRAMMING INSTRUCTIONS**

**NOTE:**

- **“SR” REFERS TO SINGLE RESPONSE (ONLY ONE RESPONSE IN A LIST IS ENABLED);**
- **“MR” REFERS TO MULTIPLE RESPONSE (MORE THAN ONE RESPONSE IN A LIST IS ENABLED)**

### SECTION 1: ATTITUDES TOWARDS GOVERNMENT SPENDING & TRADE-OFFS

#### Q1. ATTRIBUTION OF ECONOMIC GROWTH

Q1. In your opinion, which of the following do you agree with the most? Economic growth in South Australia can be attributed... **SR**

1. ... **mainly to government spending**
2. ... **mainly to private company investment**
3. ...to a **combination of government spending and private investment**
4. Unsure / don't know

I'd like you to turn your mind to some key areas for **state government spending** such as:

- i. The South Australian Police and the justice system (e.g. courts, correctional services)
- ii. South Australian roads
- iii. **SKIP FOR REGIONAL:** South Australian public transport
- iv. The South Australian education system, i.e. kindergarten, primary and secondary schools
- v. The South Australian public health care system
- vi. South Australian community services for vulnerable and disadvantaged people, e.g. support for homeless people, support for vulnerable children and families.
- vii. Support for industry and business in South Australia

*Please keep your answers here very brief, as you'll have the opportunity to discuss things in more detail at the end.*

## Q2. SERVICE FUNDING LEVELS

Q2. In your opinion, should [area] receive more / the same / less state government funding?

### **RANDOMISE i-vii**

- i. The South Australian Police and justice system
- ii. South Australian roads
- iii. **SKIP FOR REGIONAL:** South Australian public transport
- iv. The South Australian education system
- v. The South Australian public health care system
- vi. South Australian community services
- vii. Industry and business in South Australia

### OPTIONS

A lot more / A little more / The same / A little less / A lot less / Unsure

## Q3. SPENDING CUT PRIORITIES

Q3. If **one** area had to receive a reduction / cut in state government spending, in your opinion which one should this be? **SR RANDOMISE**

1. State Police and the justice system
2. State roads
3. **SKIP FOR REGIONAL** State public transport
4. The state education system, i.e. kindergartens, primary and secondary schools
5. The state public health care system
6. State community services for vulnerable and disadvantaged people
7. Support for industry and business in SA

## Q4. STATE SPENDING

Q4. When considering the importance of state government funded public infrastructure and services (like those just mentioned), do you think the **total** amount of spending across all in South Australia needs to be...**SR**

1. A lot higher
2. A little higher
3. About the same
4. Lower
5. Unsure

### SECTION 3: TRADE OFFS AND PRIORITIES

#### Q6. TAX LEVELS UNPROMPTED

Q6. Disregarding GST and income tax (as these are Federal taxes), in your opinion, are state taxes...

1. Way too high
2. A little too high
3. About right
4. A little too low
5. Way too low
6. Other / something else, please specify
7. Unsure / Don't know

#### Q7. TAX LEVELS OVERALL

Q7. Acknowledging that state taxes pay for the government services and infrastructure we talked about at the start, **overall** do you think that **state taxes** which are used fund these services are...**SR**

1. Way too high
2. A little too high
3. About right
4. A little too low
5. Way too low
6. Other / something else, please specify
7. Unsure / Don't know

## SECTION 5: ADDRESSING STATE BUDGET PRESSURES

### Q29. STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS BUDGET PRESSURES

Q29. Given future budget pressures facing the South Australian State government, do you agree or disagree with each of the following strategies? **SR RANDOMISE**

To address budget pressures...

- A. The state government should cut its spending on public services
- B. The state government should go further into debt
- C. The state government should review the distribution of taxes across businesses, organisations and individuals
- D. The state government should increase taxes for **businesses and organisations** only
- E. The state government should increase taxes for **everybody**

- 1. Strongly agree
- 2. Agree
- 3. Neither agree nor disagree
- 4. Disagree
- 5. Strongly disagree
- 6. Unsure / Don't know
- 7. Don't care

### Q30. HEALTH FUNDING

Q30. The South Australian public health care system is facing increasing external pressures and costs (e.g. increasing issues relating to mental health, obesity, our aging population). How do you think increasing pressures such as these should be managed over the longer term? I'll read through each, and if you can say yes or no as we go... (Select as many as you see fit) **MR RANDOMISE**

- 1. Cut government funding from other areas and reallocate to public health care
- 2. Cut some health services to reduce costs
- 3. Invest more in sickness prevention strategies
- 4. Increase fees and charges to individuals in the public health system
- 5. Look to tax reform, to find the necessary funding
- 6. Something else (please specify)
- 7. Unsure

## SECTION 7: WASTE / INEFFICIENCY

### Q32. GOVERNMENT MANAGEMENT

Q32. How effective do you believe the state government is in relation to... **SR RANDOMISE**

- |  |
|--|
| a. Ensuring the tax system is fair and equitable                                     |
| b. Making state tax dollars work hard to provide value for money in public services  |
| c. Informing the general public about state government spending and projects         |
| d. Undertaking appropriate budget planning to protect the state from increasing debt |

1. Very effective
2. Somewhat effective
3. Not very effective
4. Not at all effective
5. Don't know

### Q33. PERCEPTIONS OF WASTE REDUCTION & TAX

Q33. For the following statements, please tell me how likely or unlikely you think each outcome would be... **SR PER ROW RANDOMISE**

- a. Reducing state government waste and inefficiency would save enough money to reduce state government debt
- b. Reducing state government waste and inefficiency would save enough money to pay for a lot more state public services
- c. If state government waste and inefficiency was reduced, this would mean that state taxes would not need to increase

1. Very likely
2. Somewhat likely
3. Not very likely
4. Not at all likely
5. Unsure / Don't know

### Q34. UNPROMPTED EXAMPLES OF WASTE

Q34. Can you think of any recent examples of state government wasteful spending or inefficiency in South Australia? **SR**

1. Yes – please specify
2. No
3. Unsure

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