

VLGA

Victorian
Local Governance
Association

The Victorian Councillor Census

Insights into the 2020-2024
councillor journey.



Foreword

The Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA) is pleased to publish the first edition of the 'Victorian Councillor Census'. The information outlined in this report is a major step towards a better understanding of the overall experience of a councillor across their term, and how the sector can respond and become better placed to support and empower them to be successful in their role.

This report will influence and lead conversations. The Census addresses an information gap when it comes to understanding how our democratically elected community representatives are supported to fulfill their duties, along with balancing their personal motivations and challenges. The VLGA will use this data to better support councillors in their role and improve good governance in the local government sector. It is also our hope that it will be used by government to inform funding, policy and related sector discussions in order to enhance the outcomes councillors deliver.

Thank you to all councillors who participated in the 2024 Victorian Councillor Census. With over 300 participants, the VLGA was provided with an extensive evidence base of councillor voices that chose to contribute to this report. The Census will be the first in a regular series from the VLGA, capturing and tracking councillor demographics, attitudes and key challenges for local council governance over time. It will be a critical tool that will directly inform VLGA sector advocacy, informing policy, Government advocacy and related sector discussions.

The VLGA continues to support councillors in their journey to be successful in providing strong and diverse community representation for their municipality, and the Victorian Councillor Census will continue to provide oversight and direction to our mission in supporting VLGA members in good governance.

The VLGA commissioned **Qdos Research** to support the delivery of the Census and data management, achieving independence and maintaining the complete anonymity of responses from the VLGA. Each councillor was contacted with a unique link to submit one entry only to the Census to protect response accuracy.

The Census is part of VLGA's continuing support to councillors in their journey to be successful community representatives in their municipalities.

Profile of Participants

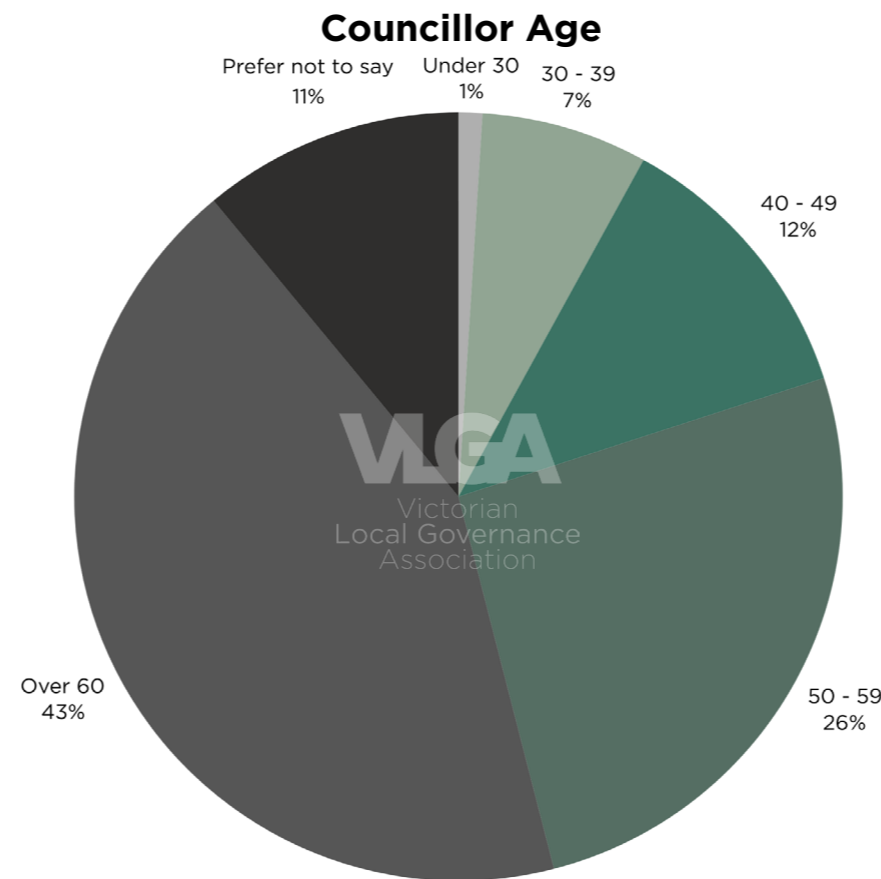
The inaugural VLGA Census was launched on 28 June 2024.

The VLGA distributed the Census electronically to all current, serving Victorian councillors (n=606).

The Census included a mixture of quantitative and qualitative questions.

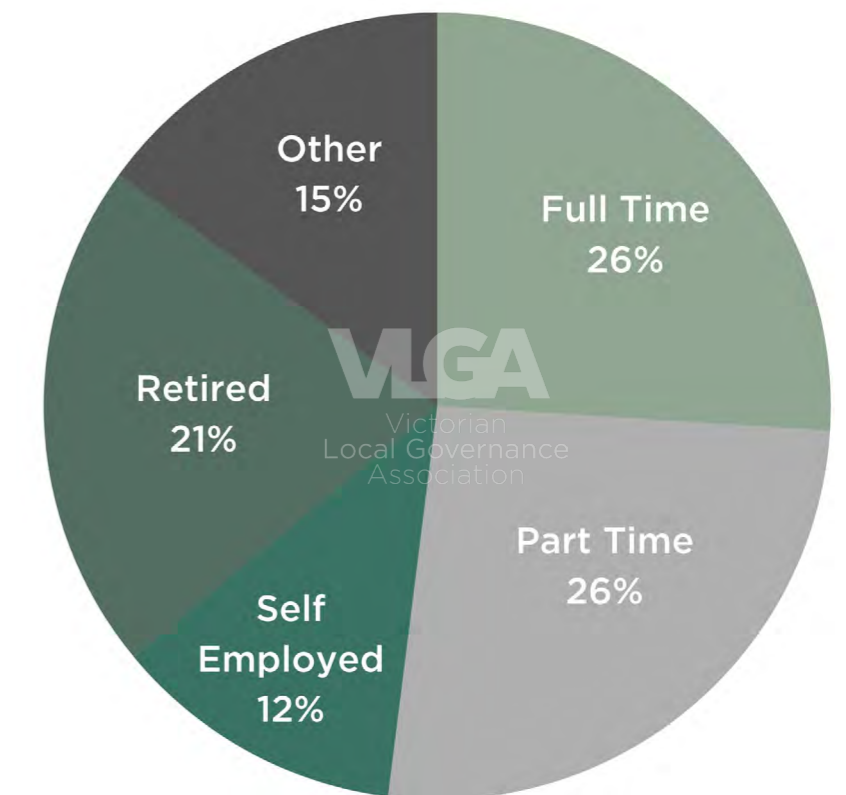
Profile of Participating Councillors

- 301 participants
- An average age of around 57.5 years.
- 48% were women, 49% men and 3% non-binary/self described/rather not say.
- 3% were of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent.
- The average number of years served as a Councillor was just under eight, although half were in their first term.
- The average time spent on Council activities each week was around 30 hours.
- 34% were from a metropolitan council, 9% interface, 21% regional, 16% a large shire and 20% a small shire.
- 51% have been Mayor and 49% Deputy Mayor.
- The majority of respondents were employed in some capacity
- 59% had a university qualification, 26% TAFE/certificate/diploma, 11% secondary school completion and 3% some secondary school or less education.
- 46% had children living at home.



It's important that our council representatives are diverse in race, gender, age and ability.

Councillor Employment Status



We need better, more educated people with the desire to assist the community...

I am actively trying to recruit more women for the next election and more forward-thinking people.

Our Findings

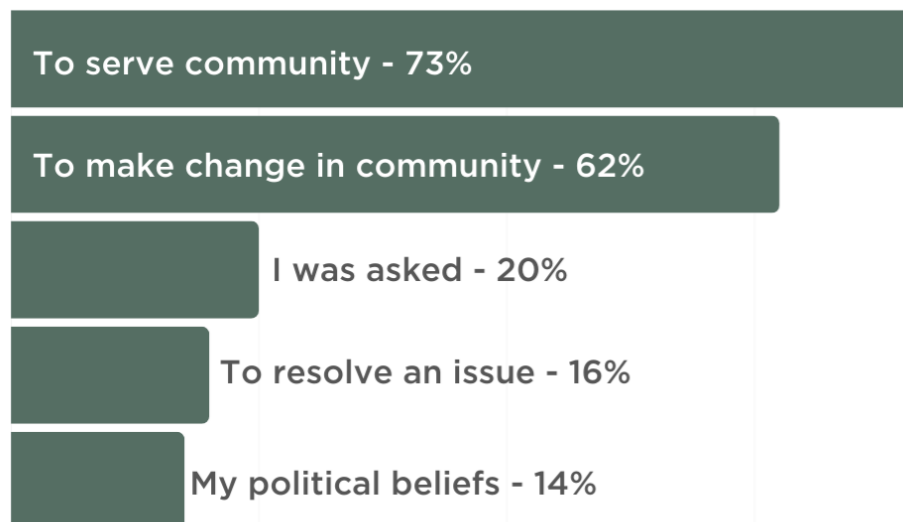
Motivation to Stand

Councillors are motivated to run for council by a strong sense of community service and a desire to make a change.

Whilst they feel they have the abilities to undertake most functions of the role at the time they were elected, they have grown significantly in the role. This is especially the case for some of the role's more challenging aspects such as service planning, setting the policy direction of council and managing the council budget. The role has also noticeably improved their abilities in the aspects which motivated them to initially run for council - representing and supporting their local community.

Commitment is evident in the high level of priority they place on most of the key responsibilities of the role. However, in the prioritisation juggle, service planning tends to have lesser priority.

What motivated you to stand for council?



What it helps to know up front

Much of what councillors wish they had known at the start of their service relates to the challenges of the role, particularly its limitations, strategic nature and the relationship and dynamics with council staff. In addition, dealing with poor attitudes and behaviours of other councillors is a theme throughout the Census. Some feel ill-equipped to manage this and wish they had known how challenging it was going to be.

When first elected:

- Men (46%) were more confident than women (37%) in their ability to deal with issues or complaints but this had evened out across the duration of the term (now, men: 87%; women 88%).
- Men (39%) were also more confident than women (23%) that they could manage the council budget, but ratings were now even (men: 81%; women: 80%)
- Those not intending to run again generally had less perceived improvement in confidence than those who intended to run again for each aspect.

Some mentioned wanting a greater awareness of the role compared with that of council staff, with others expressing this as frustration in the power dynamics between staff and councillors.

Some councillors would have liked a better sense of the time commitment required, which for most was substantially greater than they expected.

“A better knowledge of what services council is required to deliver under the act as against what services council might elect to provide.”

The councillor role is rewarding and a privilege, bringing huge learning opportunities.

Effective Training

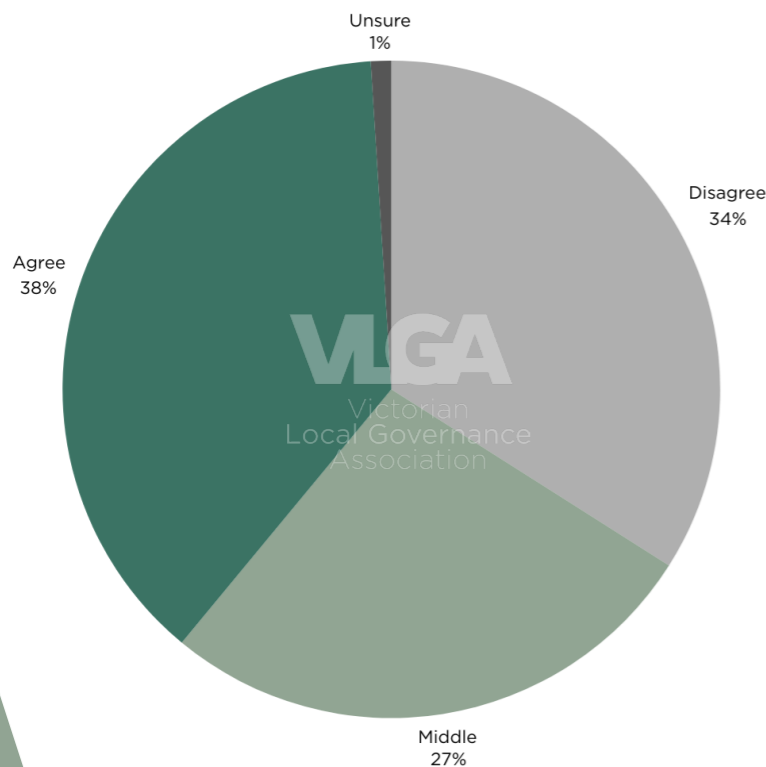
For all the varied training and courses available to councillors, those which stand out as most effective are targeted to specific competencies (good governance, financial management and budgeting, leadership training, cultural awareness). Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD) councillor-targeted courses have a high reputation, as does VLGA leadership and self-development professional development. Overall, the quality of induction needs improving. Women in particular find it sub-optimal.

Influence of the Role

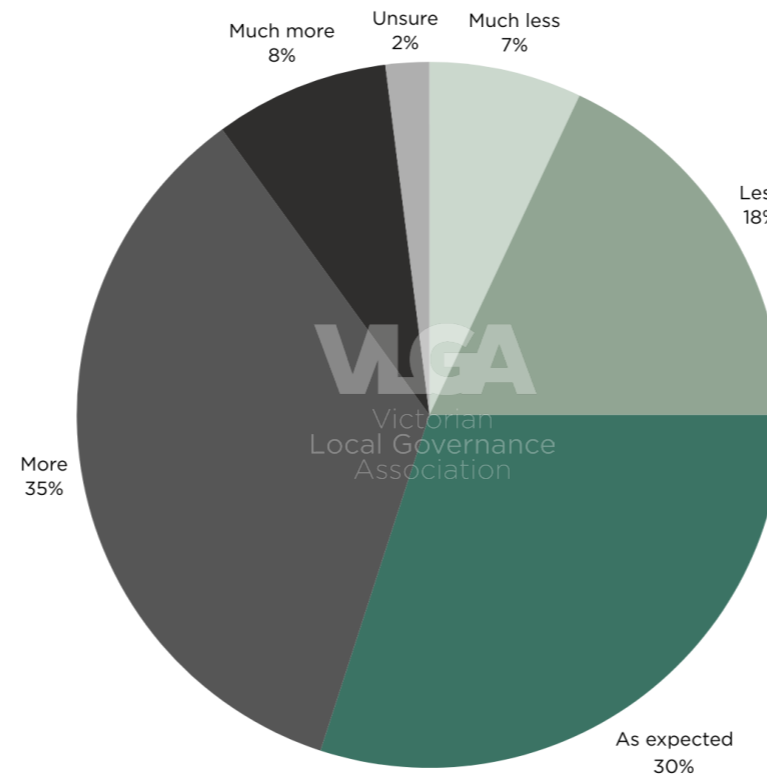
Despite its challenges, almost twice as many councillors feel they have more influence than they expected to at the start of their term. However, a large proportion of those surveyed feel councillors have limited ability to effect positive change, despite their influence. Views are mixed on the power of the council itself. Councillors feel they have more power than they expected in some areas like facilities, allocation of funding and waste management but less than they expected in areas like setting rates, social services and town planning. Those not intending to run again (26%) were noticeably less likely to rate themselves as having more influence in the community as a councillor than they expected.

I wish I knew and understood meeting procedures, governance rules and Councillor Code of Conduct way better than I do now.

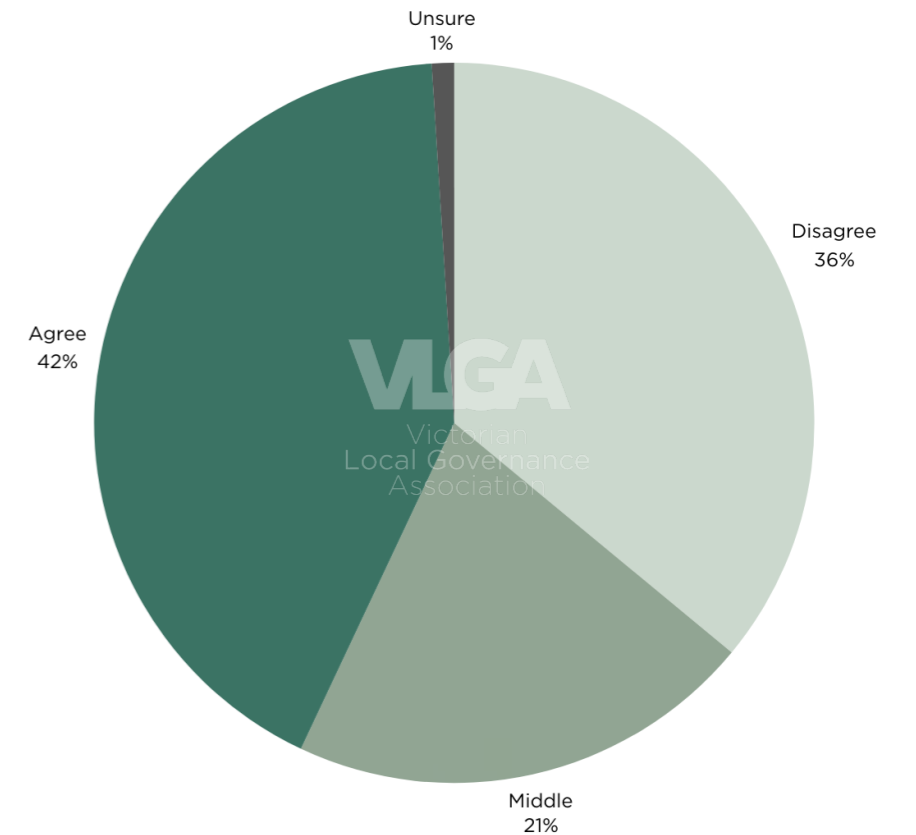
I was happy with the induction training I received when first elected.



Do you feel you have more or less influence in your community as a councillor than you expected?



Councillors have a limited ability to effect positive change



Made me more determined to work to improve professionalism of the councillor role.

Hostility, Bullying & Harassment

The biggest challenge faced by a very large majority of councillors is the degree of hostility, bullying and harassment they have experienced in the role, largely from other councillors and members of the public. Women were particularly impacted by experiences of bullying and harassment.

Bullying and harassment has markedly impacted the lives of many councillors with one in five describing their mental state as having suffered substantially from the experience. Some councillors indicated that their decision not to run again was impacted by their experiences.

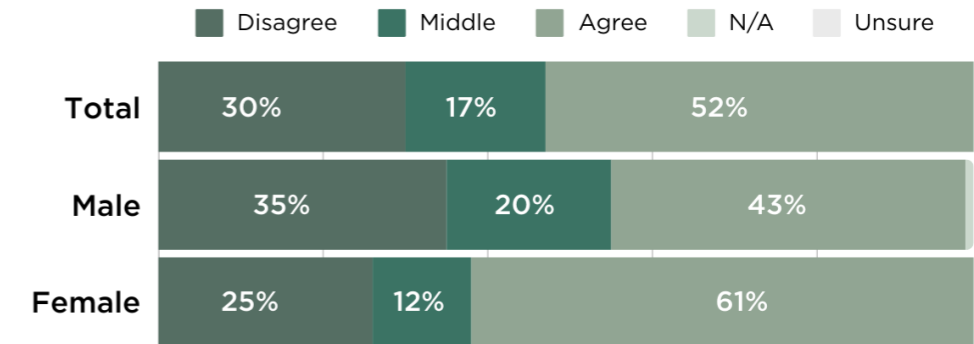
Abuse and/or intimidation from members of the public is also seen as on the increase and more than anticipated.

Dispute resolution mechanisms to deal with councillor conflict, bullying and harassment are largely seen as inadequate, with councillors feeling they are caught in a “no man’s land” due to the nature of their role (not technically employees, and nowhere near the same level of checks and rules as elected members at state and federal levels). Women are significantly more likely to say current arrangements are ineffective.

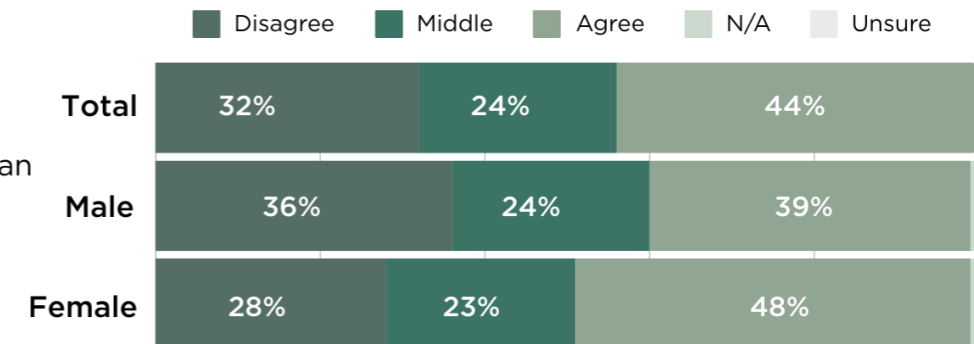
There was a difference between men and women in the level of hostility they experienced as councillors. Women expressed they experienced higher levels of hostility than they had anticipated from both members of the public and fellow councillors. Additionally, more women councillors than men were satisfied with the dispute resolution processes to deal with conflict between councillors.

It’s made me averse to posting on social media. I no longer do so, as it invites negative feedback and hostility from anti-council groups and individuals.

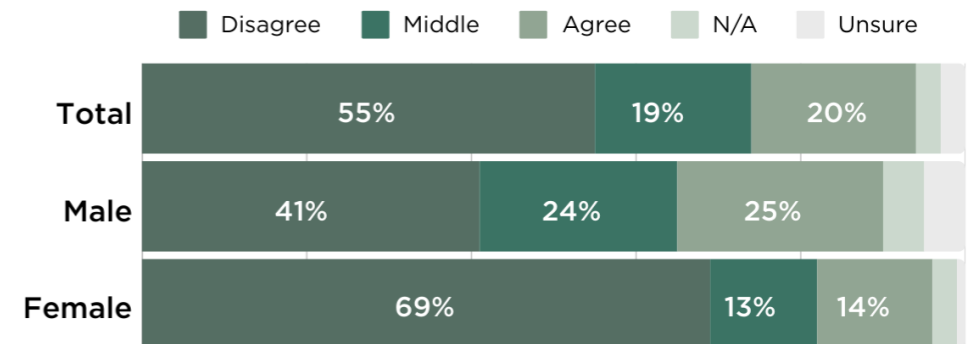
I received a higher level of hostility than I expected from some other Councillors



I received a higher level of hostility than I expected from some members of the public

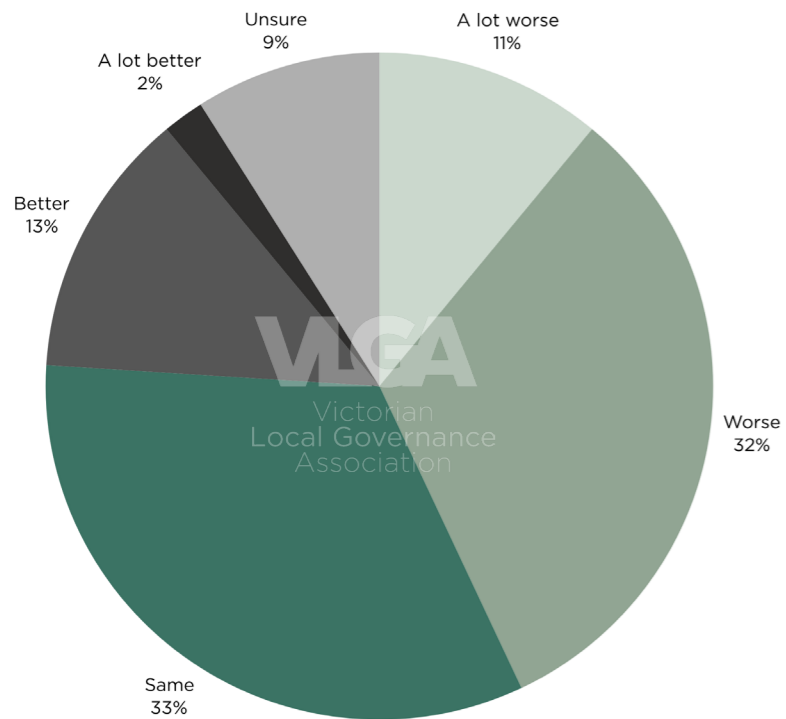


There are good dispute resolution mechanisms in place to deal with conflict between Councillors

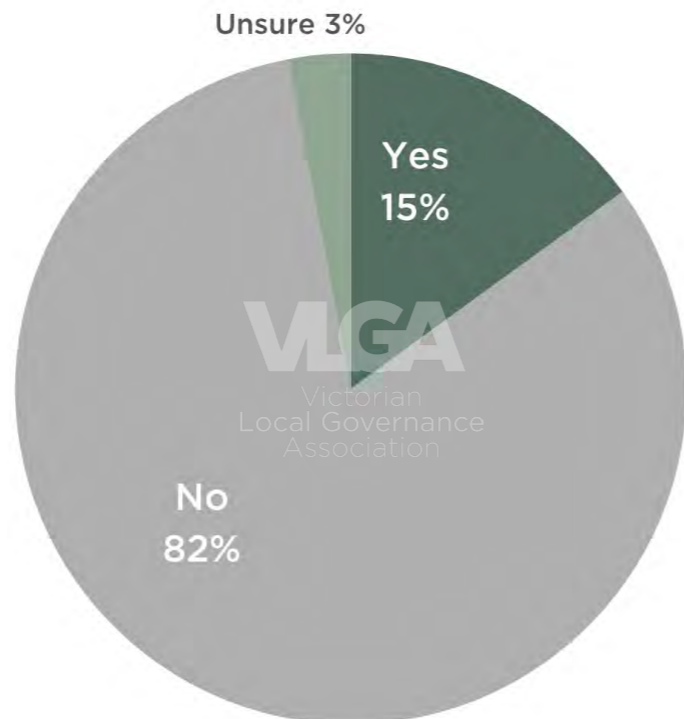


*Verbal threats of abuse take a toll.
Verbal and physical attacks also negatively impact my ability to thrive in the role.*

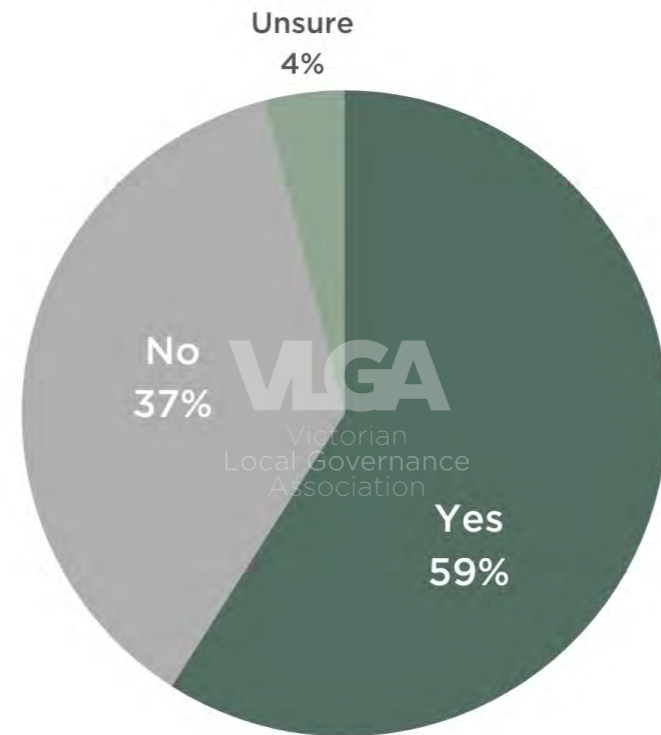
Since the start of your current term has abuse and/or intimidation of Councillors from members of the public become...?



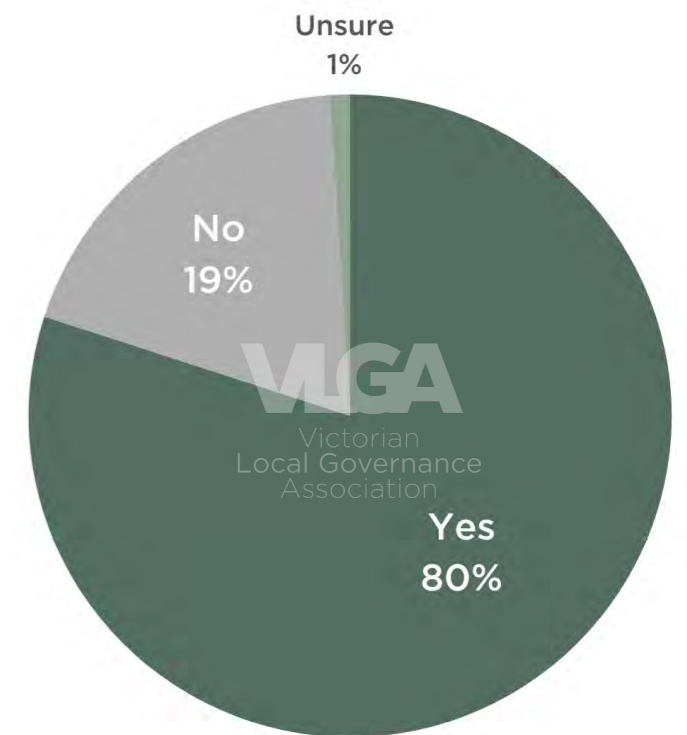
In your role as councillor, have you experienced sexual harassment?



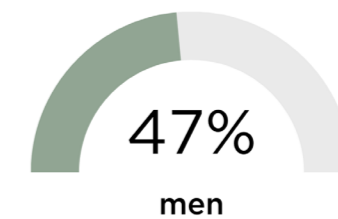
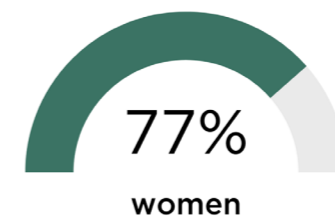
In your role as councillor, have you experienced bullying and non-sexual harassment?



In your role as councillor, have you experienced threatening or intimidating behaviour?



There has been terrible behaviour by other councillors, which has had an impact on councillors, staff and the organisation, however there is little that can be done to deal with it.



think arrangements in place to deal with inappropriate behaviours by other councillors are ineffective

Demands of the Role

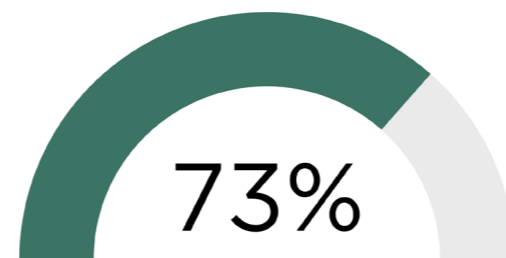
Councillors reported an average of 30 hours a week is required to perform their role with the time commitment greater than what most councillors expected it to be.

Not surprisingly, the remuneration is also seen as very inadequate for the role's requirements. This incongruence between the considerable time commitment and limited remuneration is the main reason why some would not recommend the role to others. Another key reason is the hostility experienced.

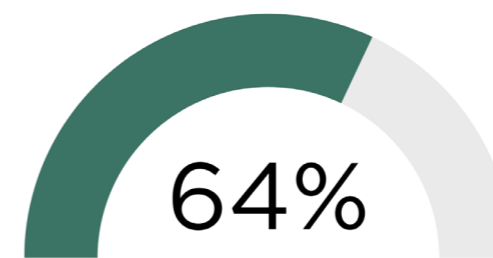
Belief in Service

Childcare costs are seen as an expense councillors should be entitled to claim as part of their duties. Women in particular feel strongly about this. Councillors are more equivocal about making the release of individual councillors' childcare claims a breach of confidentiality (just over half of women agreed, compared with about a quarter of men).

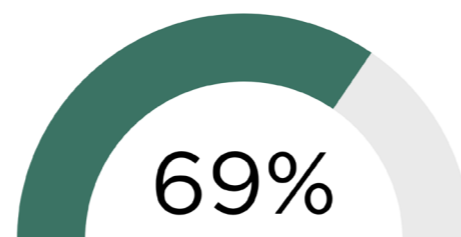
Despite their own intentions, the role's demands and higher than expected levels of hostility and conflict, two-thirds of councillors would recommend the role to others. Reinforcing their strong sense of community service, becoming a councillor is seen as rewarding, a privilege to serve and a significant opportunity to learn. Many councillors also say councils need committed community members to run to ensure good governance, so it is important they do their part in encouraging community-minded people to run.



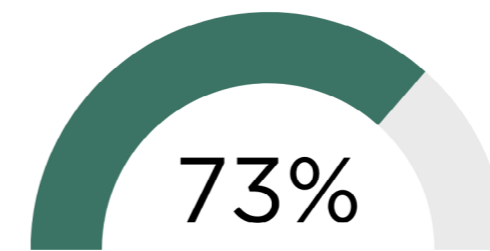
believe the time demands are not appropriate for the remuneration



find the time commitment required is higher or much higher than expected



agree that councillors should be entitled to claim childcare costs as part of performing council duties



would recommend the role of councillor to others

Support in the Role

For the most part, councillors feel well supported by family and friends (71%). Most also feel reasonably well supported by council's CEO, council staff and their local community (between 45-50%).

But only 1 in 5 councillors feel supported by their fellow councillors (19%)

Overall, other councillors are of some support.

Men were more likely than women to feel fully supported. This was particularly the case for the CEO (men 64%, women 46%).

I have found it very stressful and a lot of work which is not fully remunerated.

This role provides a unique opportunity to impact one's own community in a positive and constructive way.

Our Plan to Respond

Conclusion

The first-ever VLGA Victorian Councillor Census has elicited valuable data and a unique insight into the issues and challenges faced by councillors in their roles. It has also highlighted the impact these challenges have on good governance in elected representation. Armed with this information we are better placed to inform, influence and lead conversations across the government sector. The VLGA will use the commentary of councillors to better support their role and expand the efficiencies and effectiveness of the local government sector.

The VLGA has a proven track record of collectively supporting councils and councillors to perform at the highest level, so they are best placed to deliver consistent and enduring outcomes for their communities. Through the Census, the organisation has actively sought information from elected representatives around the supports they need to be successful in their role.

The Census has provided useful supportive data to the anecdotal accounts of VLGA members. In particular, the cost to councils and communities when proper investments are not made in prevention or professional development programs, aimed at ensuring councillors are prepared with the knowledge and skills they need to lead effectively and with good governance at their foundation.

The VLGA is committed to collecting this data annually. This will provide an accurate pulse check on the challenges elected representatives are facing and help identify what additional support or professional development is needed to ensure councils are operating proficiently and effectively. It will also allow the VLGA and the Victorian Government to identify trends in the data provided and ensure that support programs are targeted appropriately, and issues are addressed and responded to proactively.

As a member-run and independent organisation, the VLGA is the only peak body for local government in Victoria which is dedicated to supporting councils and councillors with a singular focus on good governance.

We remain committed to working together with our sector partners to improve culture and the environment in which councillors operate.



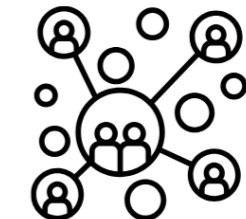
Develop an EAP Register for councils to provide wellbeing support for councillors.



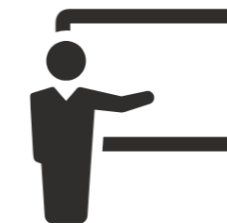
Formalise the VLGA's advice network to provide councillors with expert advice.



Expand community leadership programs to encourage diverse and informed candidates in 2028.



Repeat the Victorian Councillor Census annually to identify trends and target support.



Formalise Councillor Professional Development to meet the mandatory guidelines.



Expand Local Women Leading Change to empower more women to nominate in 2028.

VLGA

Victorian
Local Governance
Association

For more information
please contact:

**Victorian Local
Governance
Association**

(03) 9349 7999
vlga@vlga.org.au
www.vlga.org.au

 VicLGA

 viclgassoc

 _vlga

 vlgassoc

 vlgainc