

VLGA

Victorian
Local Governance
Association

2025 VLGA Victorian Councillor Census



Foreword

The Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA) is pleased to release the 2025 VLGA Victorian Councillor Census Findings Report.

Building on the success of our inaugural Census in 2024, the VLGA again invited all serving Victorian councillors to participate in the 2025 Census. I am pleased to report that more than half of the councillor cohort responded, with a total of 329 participants. This strong engagement reflects the value councillors place on having their voices heard and shaping the future of local governance in Victoria. I extend my sincere thanks to every councillor who took the time to contribute.

The 2025 Census provides a comprehensive snapshot of councillors' experiences, perspectives and challenges one year into a new council term. As demonstrated by the sector's response to the 2024 findings, this data is not only informative – it is influential. It informs the VLGA's advocacy priorities, strengthens our policy positions, and guides the development of targeted training and support programs. Most importantly, it ensures that councillors themselves are directly shaping the conversations that impact their roles and responsibilities.

This year, the Census has been refined and expanded. As part of our commitment to conducting the Census annually, we have carefully structured this survey to enable meaningful tracking of trends and change across the council term. At the same time, it remains responsive and adaptable to emerging issues within the sector. In 2025, particular emphasis was placed on councillor training – including the introduction of mandatory training requirements – as well as a renewed and detailed examination of incivility, abuse and hostility experienced by councillors in the course of their duties.

The Census also explores differences in experience between first term and returning councillors. This distinction is particularly significant given that 57% of councillors elected in the 2024 local government elections were serving for the first time. Understanding these varying perspectives strengthens our capacity to tailor support, improve induction and professional development pathways, and ensure sustainable leadership within the sector.

Where relevant, comparisons with 2024 results have been included to highlight emerging patterns and shifts over time.

The VLGA remains steadfast in its mission to support councillors in delivering strong, diverse and effective community representation. The VLGA Victorian Councillor Census is now an integral pillar of that mission – providing oversight, insight and direction to ensure our advocacy and member services remain grounded in lived experience.

To preserve the integrity and independence of the process, the VLGA again commissioned QDOS Research to collect and manage the data.

This approach guarantees the anonymity of respondents and ensures the findings are robust, credible and independently validated.

We commend this report to you and look forward to continuing to work alongside Victorian councillors to strengthen good governance across our state.

Kathryn Arndt
Chief Executive Officer

Professional development and training

Once elected most councillors completed the mandatory online training and agreed that it was relevant and gave them a good understanding of the role. However, a significant minority disagreed or were neutral on these points. Councillors were fairly evenly divided on whether the mandatory training was comprehensive enough and unnecessarily repetitive with other training modules provided.

Councillors said they wanted the training to be less theoretical and officer oriented and more practical and councillor focused. There was also a strong call for more training around conflict resolution and managing public scrutiny. Women were slightly more likely to have informed themselves in all areas.

Talking to a political party or politician to gain different insights about being a councillor was more common among younger councillors, those in metropolitan or interface councils and the university educated.

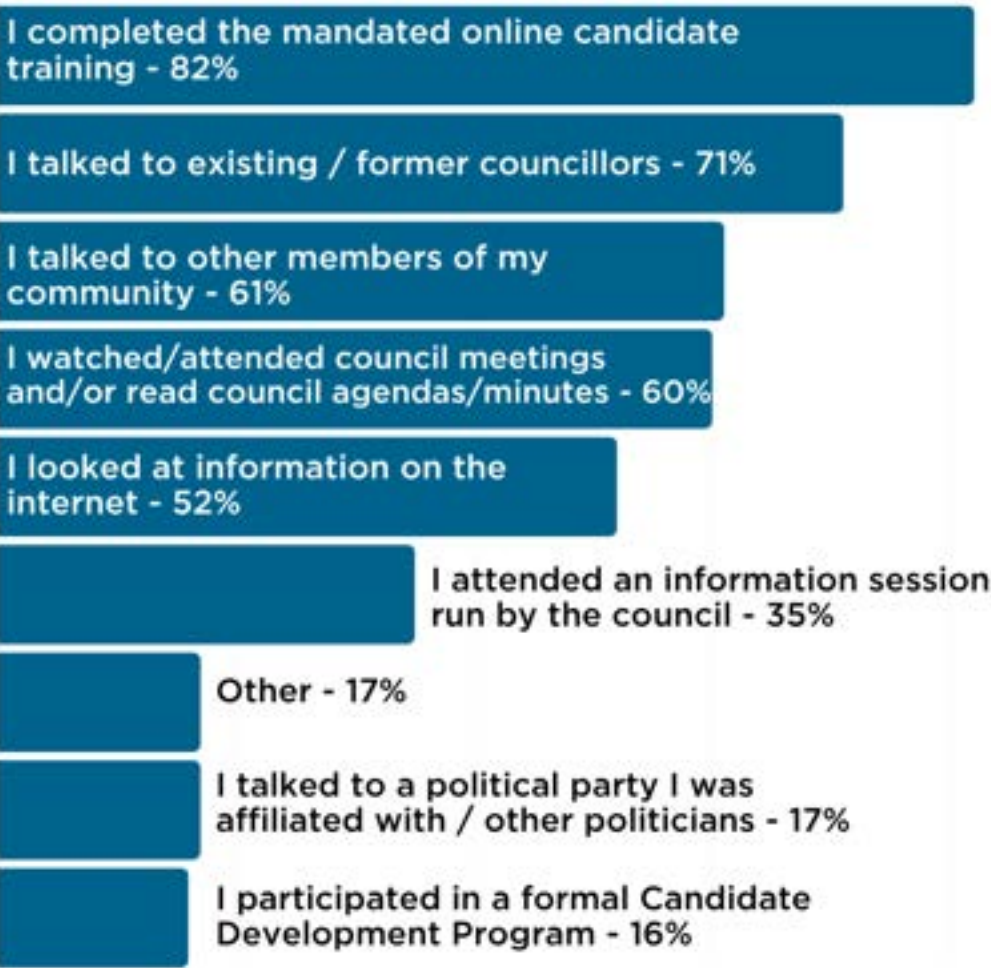
Motivation to stand

What motivated you to become a councillor?

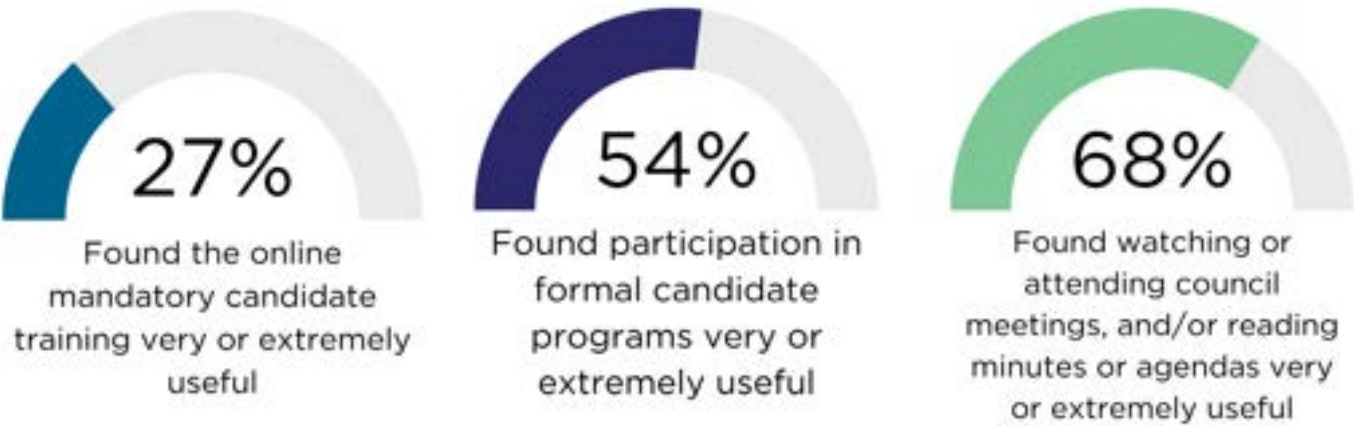


Informed candidacy

What did you do to inform yourself about what it means to be a councillor before you decided to stand as a candidate in the 2024 election?



Candidate Training Opportunities



Councillor induction training

The mandatory training generally rated well but a significant minority were either negative or neutral about it. People were divided around whether it was comprehensive or repetitious with post election training.

Councillors valued induction training but felt it was too theoretical, unbalanced, and disconnected from the realities of their role. They want more hands-on, practical learning: mock meetings, simulations, and clear governance instruction.

They felt that training is often front-loaded and inflexible, disadvantaging those who work full-time or have family commitments, especially since it's unpaid. Some reported that facilitators tended to skew toward an "officers' lens," rather than councillor experience.

There was a powerful call for wellbeing support; resilience training, conflict resolution, and managing public scrutiny. Also, many want ongoing development, mentorship, feedback loops, and more equitable, inclusive content (gender, culture, diversity).



"It was too rushed during first 4-6 weeks of induction, I would've preferred ... periodically in the first 6-9 months."

"More ex mayors and long term councillors needed to run training ... training was skewed to an officer point of view."

"There was no practical support for managing conflict, online harassment, bullying, or wellbeing."

"There was a lot of information that was very broad and insubstantial ... training on things that would affect us ... would have been more beneficial."

What's in a name?

Victoria's councils are divided up into 5 categories, depending on location and population. These are:

Metropolitan Councils

Located within the Greater Melbourne area, these are urbanized, densely populated.

Councils: Banyule, Bayside, Boroondara, Brimbank, Darebin, Glen Eira, Greater Dandenong, Hobsons Bay, Kingston, Knox, Manningham, Maribyrnong, Maroondah, Melbourne, Monash, Moonee Valley, Port Phillip, Stonnington, Whitehorse, Yarra

Interface Councils

A specific group of councils forming a ring around metropolitan Melbourne, acting as a boundary between urban and regional areas.

Councils: Cardinia, Casey, Hume, Melton, Mornington Peninsula, Nillumbik, Whittlesea, Wyndham, Yarra Ranges

Regional Cities

Major regional centres outside of Greater Melbourne that serve as economic hubs.

Councils: Ballarat, Greater Bendigo, Greater Geelong, Greater Shepparton, Horsham, Latrobe, Mildura, Wangaratta, Warrnambool, Wodonga.

Rural Councils (Large & Small Shires)

Covering the rest of Victoria, these are separated into Large Shires and Small Shires based on population size.

Large Shires: Bass Coast, Baw Baw, Campaspe, Colac-Otway, Corangamite, East Gippsland, Glenelg, Golden Plains, Macedon Ranges, Mitchell, Moira, Moorabool, Mount Alexander, Moyne, South Gippsland, Southern Grampians, Surf Coast, Swan Hill, Wellington

Small Shires: Alpine, Ararat, Benalla, Borough of Queenscliffe, Buloke, Central Goldfields, Gannawarra, Hepburn, Hindmarsh, Indigo, Loddon, Mansfield, Murrindindi, Northern Grampians, Pyrenees, Strathbogie, Towong, West Wimmera, Yarriambiack

These definitions have been based on data provided by the Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

Demands of the role and councillor abilities

Councillors describe their role as requiring deep commitment but it being under-resourced, and many treat it like a full-time job even while juggling other work. There's a strong sense that community engagement is central but challenging, especially given the vast geography of some wards and limited time. Councillors indicated that within their councillor responsibilities, their priority is strategic governance and policy-making, with low remuneration and lack of structural support making the role financially unsustainable for many.

Councillors also emphasise the need to balance formal obligations (meetings, briefings) with informal engagement and express a desire for clearer role expectations and more systemic support. Many councillors expected the large time commitment but, in each case, a majority of councillors answered that the demands of the role were “more than expected”. This was especially so in relation to reading council documents and preparing for and attending meetings. First term councillors were notably more likely to report that the time commitment was greater than expected.

How things have changed

2024



2025



“In practice, I dedicate over 40 hours per week to my councillor duties; ... Mornings involve reading briefing papers ... My evenings are filled with ... committee responsibilities ... there is very little downtime.”

The average week of a councillor

Activity	Average hours & minutes per week
Council / Committee meeting preparation and attending internal briefings	10:31
Reading council documents	8:10
Attending events	7:57
Responding to community enquiries	6:26
Representing council on community committees, boards etc	6:23
Advocacy on behalf of the community to other levels of government / government agencies	4:40

When looking at an average councillor week, those who are retired spend much more time responding to community enquiries with 9.9 hours compared to 4.8 for those employed full time.

The role of mayor averaged 52 hours per week, and those in metropolitan or interface councils averaged 43 hours a week compared to 35 for regional, large or small shires, but we did not capture travel time.

What the data tells us

Councillors were confident in their ability to respond to matters raised by the community, engage with the issues, ask the right questions and express their views, as well as representing the council and setting the strategic direction.

More than three quarters of councillors felt that the demands of the role were too high for the remuneration they received. Many found the time required to perform the role greater than they had expected, particularly so for the time required to read council documents and attend and prepare for meetings and events.

They prioritised attending Council meetings and briefings, setting the strategic direction of council and reactive and proactive communication with the community.

Councillors mentioned the high workload, low remuneration and the challenges of balancing priorities of policy and strategy, community engagement, their own wellbeing.

Role confidence

Councillors were generally confident in their ability to undertake their various roles but councillors in their first term consistently rated their abilities lower than others.

All councillors



First term councillors



What the data tells us

First time councillors were more likely to rate their abilities in councillor duties lower than those with greater experience and found it harder to prioritise time consulting the community with efforts focused on attending briefings, and information sessions. They found it harder to dedicate as much time to councillor duties, with many first term councillors reporting stress, burnout, and mental health strain due to workloads, high expectations, and toxic politics.

First term councillors were more likely to report that the mandatory training was valuable to them getting a greater understanding of the role, but expressed concerns about more experienced councillors not being supportive of their councillor group seeking adequate or additional training, preferring to skip through quickly. Some expressed that this felt like a deliberate effort to keep them in the dark about aspects of the role and their ability to influence.

“It is difficult to do everything, and being a diligent councillor is a full-time job. I can only do as much as I do because my other work... is not full time.”

“As a first term councillor, I’ve focused on learning. I think each year of my term I’ll focus on something new. I haven’t stressed about being prolific on social media, trying to build my confidence as a leader.”

“I don’t have the time or resources to do as much as I should in feedback to my community... I am involved in many strategic meetings and committees - the community have no idea that these are happening. They only see the newsworthy events - often negative... I am not paid enough for the time I spend on council business.”

Councillor influence and power

Councillors were divided about how much influence they have in their community and their capacity to effect change but most felt their input was valued by other councillors.

They were almost evenly divided over whether councillors had a limited ability to effect change.

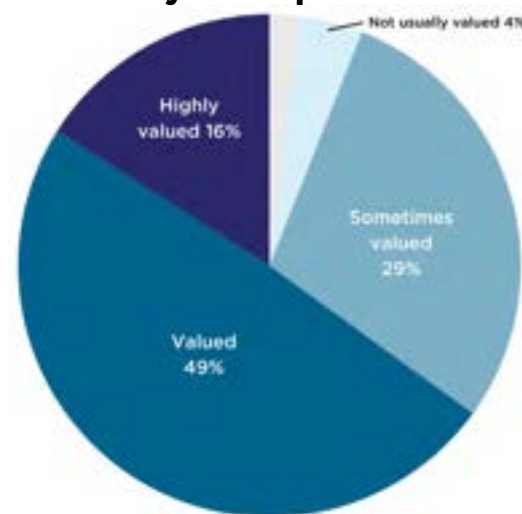
Most felt their input was valued by other councillors but one third felt their input was valued 'sometimes' or less.

A small majority of councillors said that council had about the level of power they expected except on planning matters where a majority felt council had less power than expected.

Compared to expectations, those who felt council had less power consistently outnumbered those who felt it had more power across areas including capital expenditure, budget and service delivery priorities and setting rates.

A big majority felt councils' power was significantly constrained by other levels of Government and financial resources. A reluctance to change from Chief Executive Officer (CEO), officers and councillors was also seen as constraining.

What best describes the way the majority of councillors consider your input to Council deliberations?



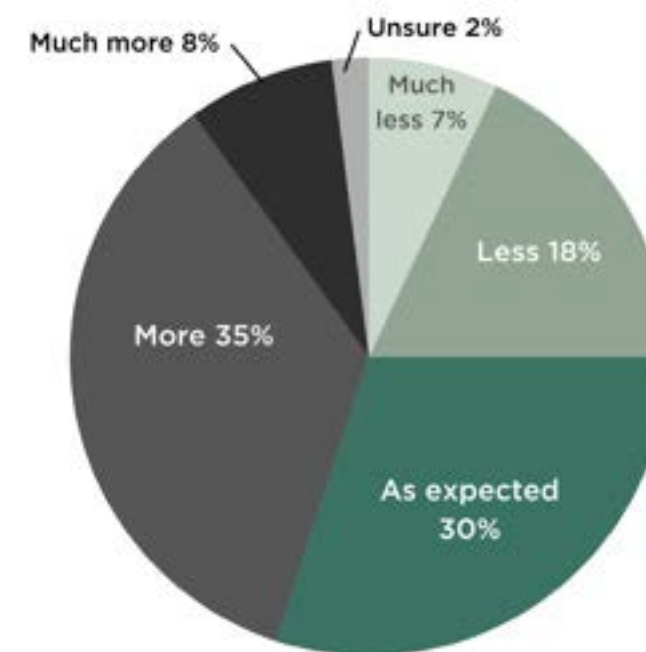
What the data tells us

Feeling their input was valued or highly valued was higher for mayors (85%) and deputy mayors (76%) compared to other councillors (60%).

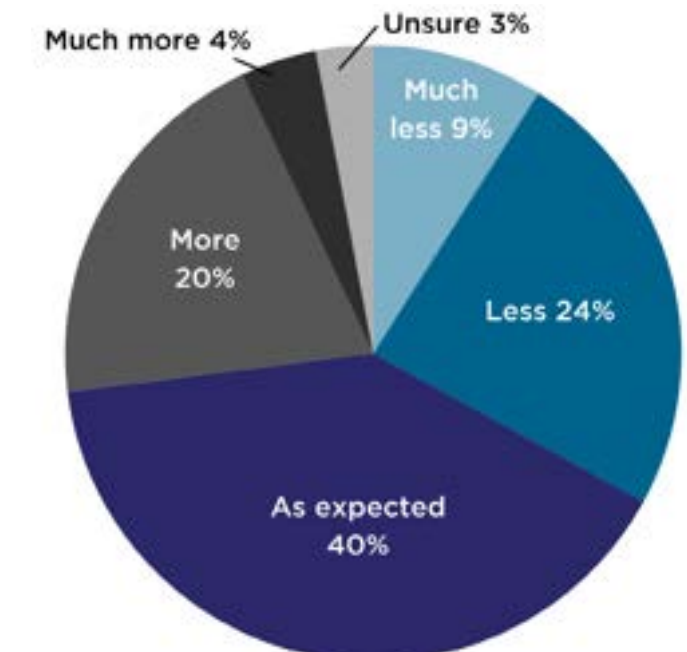
Feeling their input was valued or highly valued was lower among councillors under 39 years old (59%) and those who have retired (44%) compared to aged 40-59 (72%) or those employed full time (73%).

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

2024



2025

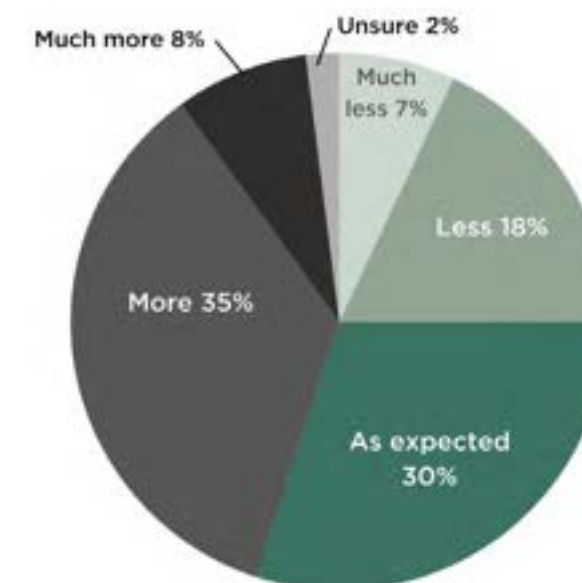


Councillors sense of influence in their community has dropped in 2025. Less influence up 8%, as expected up 10% and more influence down 20%.

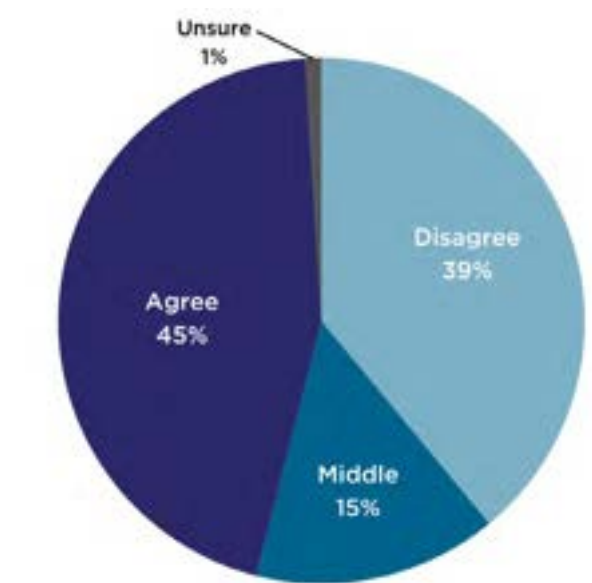
Agreement with this statement was much lower among mayors at 26%, compared to 47% agreement from other councillors.

Councillors have a limited ability to effect positive change

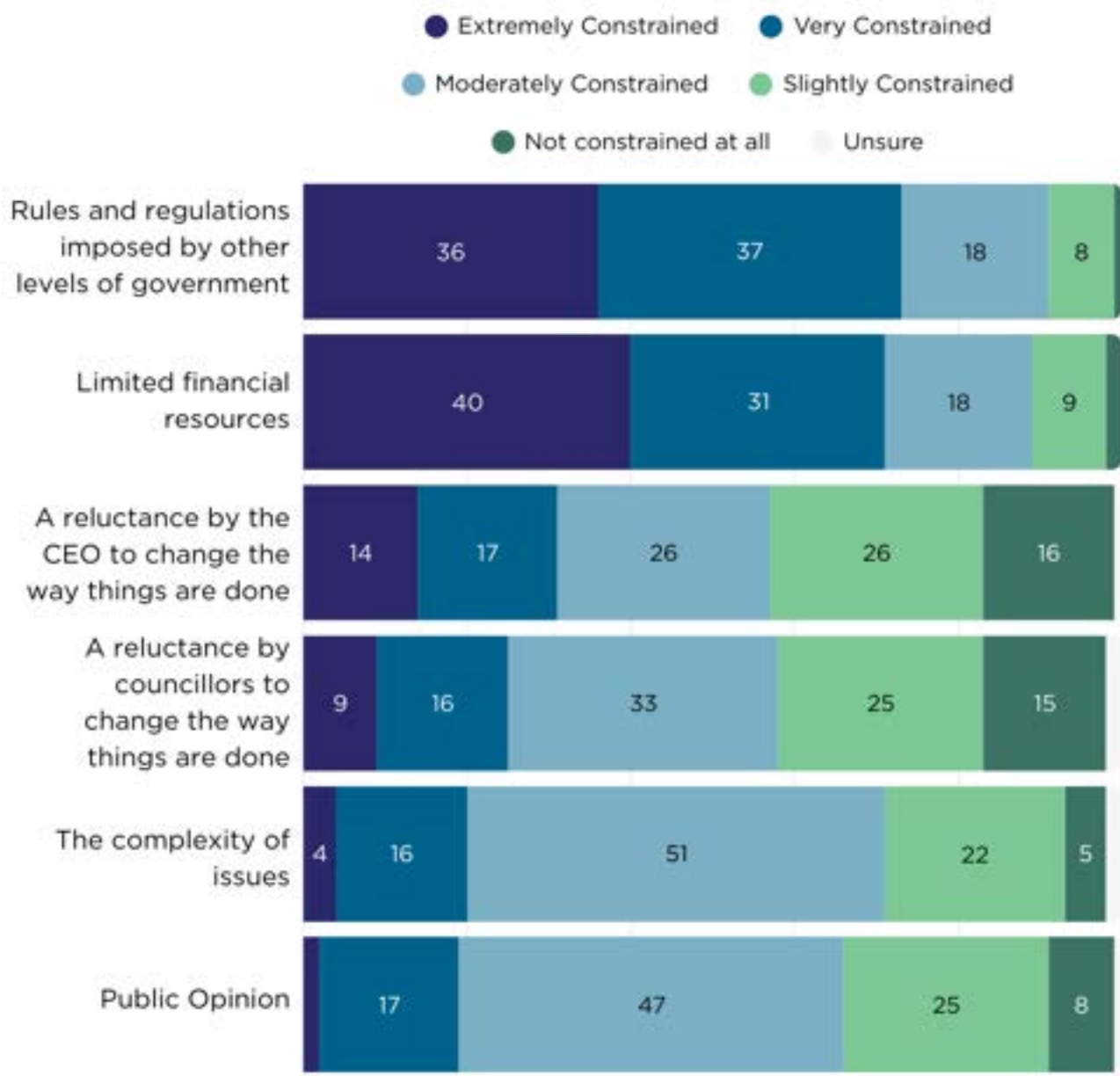
2024



2025



Restraint of power



What the data tells us

72% of councillors serving in small shires felt Councils' power was extremely constrained by limited financial resources, compared to 35% across other municipalities.



Try not to undermine the council even when they disagree with a majority decision

A clear majority reported that they tried not to undermine council decisions they did not agree with.

Councillors under 39 years of age were much more likely to agree with this statement (50%) rather than strongly agree (35%), with about half of councillors in all other age groups responding strongly agree. This disparity was specific just for age, not length of experience.

Councillors from a metropolitan council were slightly more likely to disagree with this statement (6%) than those from regional councils (2%)

“I’ve been astounded at how little influence we have over anything. Even the council vision and plan which were effectively developed before we were elected, were rushed through while we were flat out doing compulsory training and then presented as ‘our’ plan when we had no input.”

“Since stepping into this role, I’ve come to realise just how much more complex things are from the inside than they appear... The issues we deal with, the decisions we make, and the processes behind them all require far more time.”

Abuse and harassment

Around half of councillors said that in their experience abuse from the public had been a moderate to very big problem. A majority had experienced threatening or intimidating behaviour from the public.

Bullying and non-sexual harassment from the public was experienced by one quarter of male and half of women councillors.

Half of all women councillors had experienced threatening or intimidating behaviour and bullying and non-sexual harassment from another councillor – the latter twice as common for women as men. More than one in seven women regularly experienced these types of abuse from another councillor.

Councillors spoke of the personal impact of the abuse they had suffered. For some it made them more determined to push for change, others found it had a negative impact on their confidence, wellbeing, capacity to do their job and likelihood of running again.

Most men felt the arrangements in place to deal with inappropriate and improper from the public was effective but one third said they were ineffective. Women were more evenly split on the effectiveness of the arrangements regarding bad behaviour from the public.

The gender variance was even greater in regard to the arrangements to deal with inappropriate and improper from other councillors. Almost two thirds of men felt they were effective, but most women felt they were ineffective.

What the data tells us

The 2025 Census results reflect a new councillor group 12 months into their term, whereas the 2024 Census captured a councillor group at the end of a term, reflecting on the previous 4 years.

53% of first-time councilors believe the dispute resolutions mechanisms in place are adequate compared to 39% of councillors with 3-8 years' experience. Councillors with more than 2 years' experience were twice as likely to strongly disagree (16% compared to 8%).

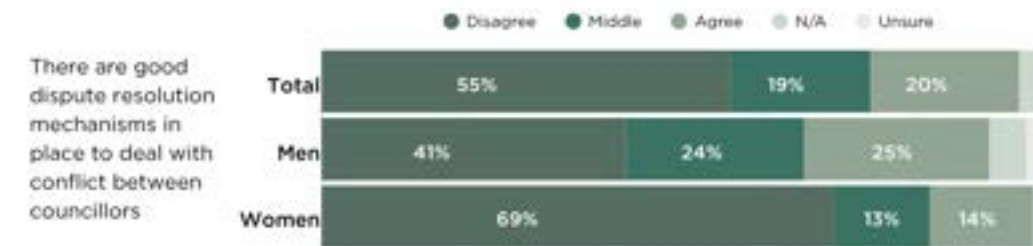
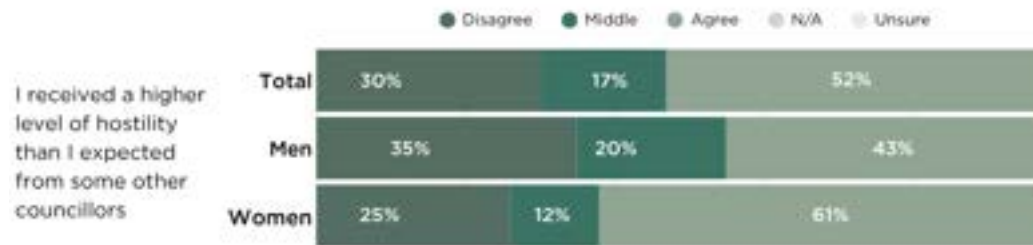
If a councillor had experienced threatening or intimidating behaviour, they were much less likely to agree that there are effective dispute resolution mechanisms in place to deal with conflict (39% compared to 64%).

“The harassment is rarely direct. Being stone walled and isolated is more typical. Deliberate actions to undermine or frustrate genuine attempts at engagement and contributing to processes.”

2025

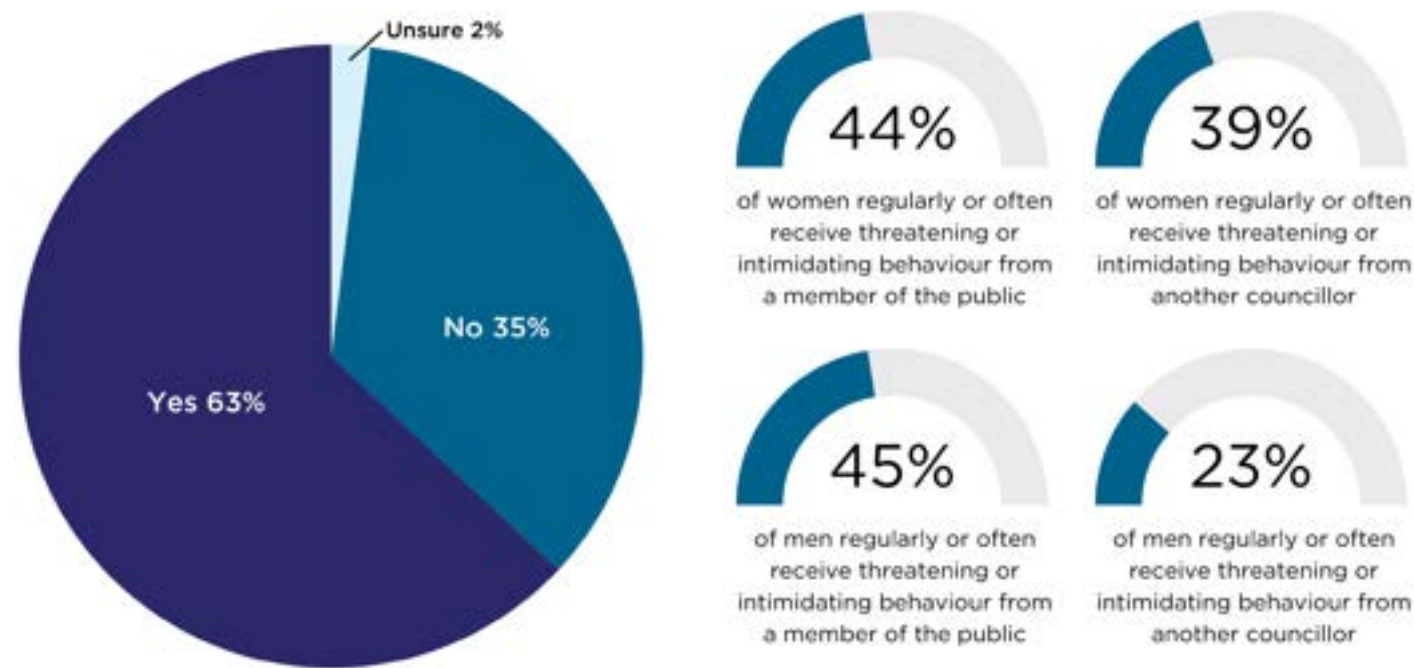


2024

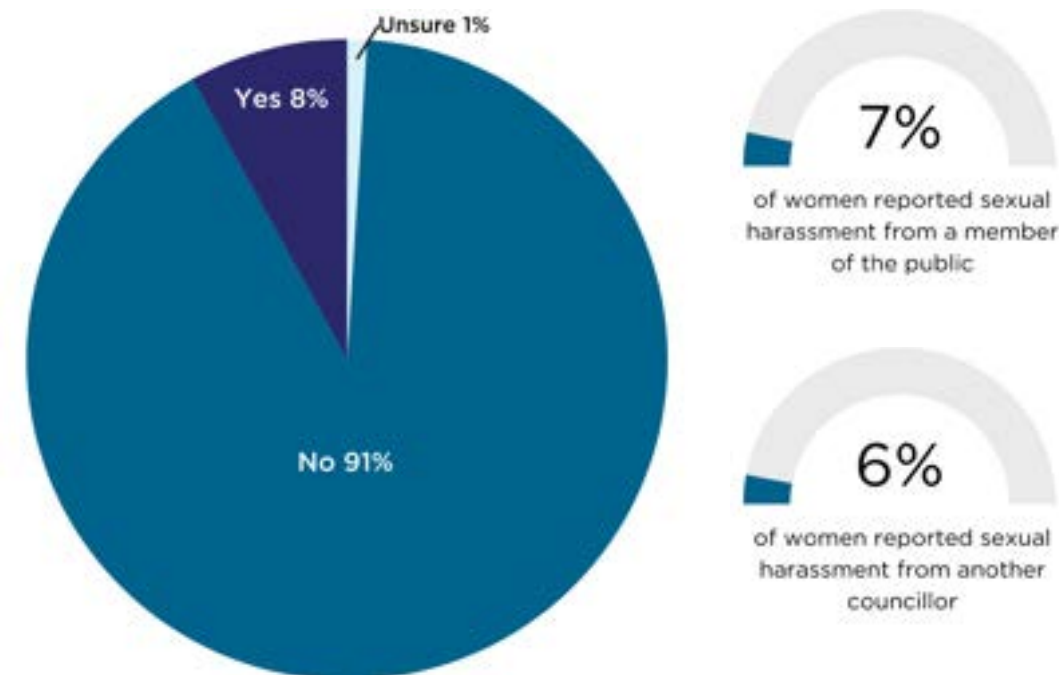


Hostility, bullying and harassment

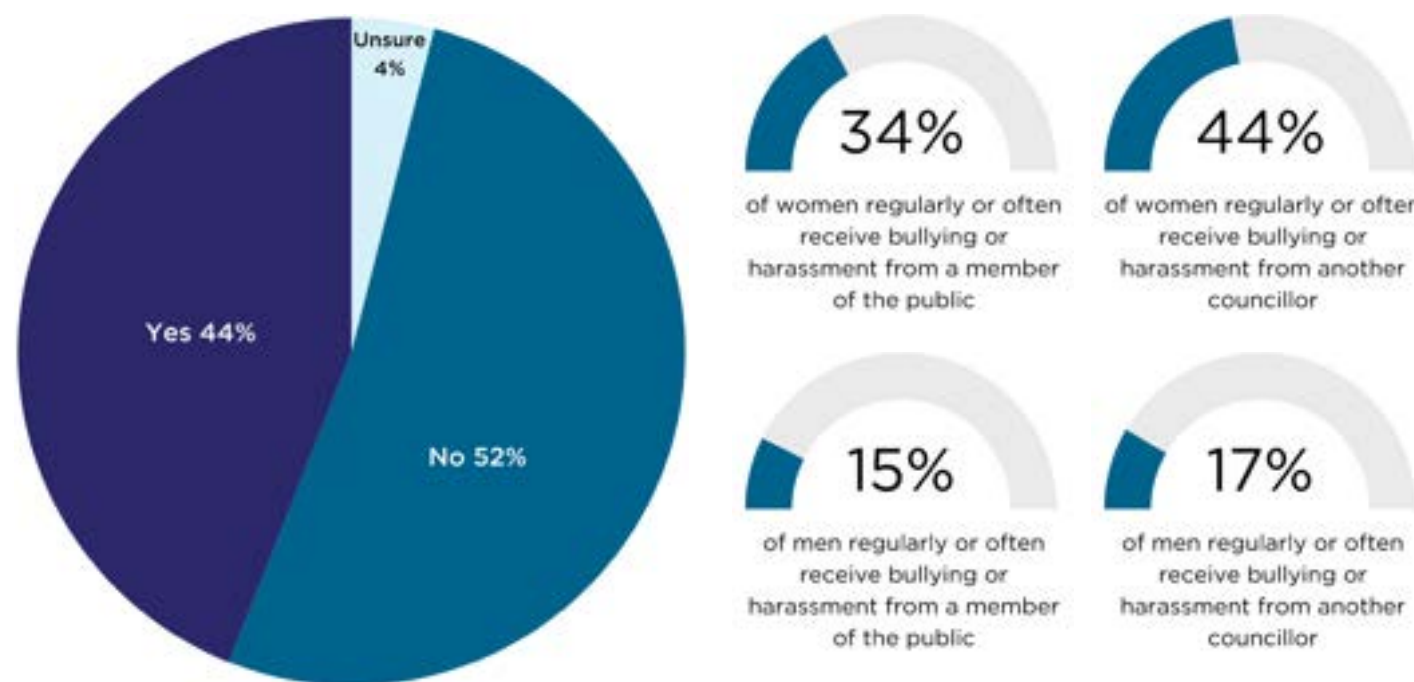
In your role as councillor, have you experienced threatening or intimidating behaviour?



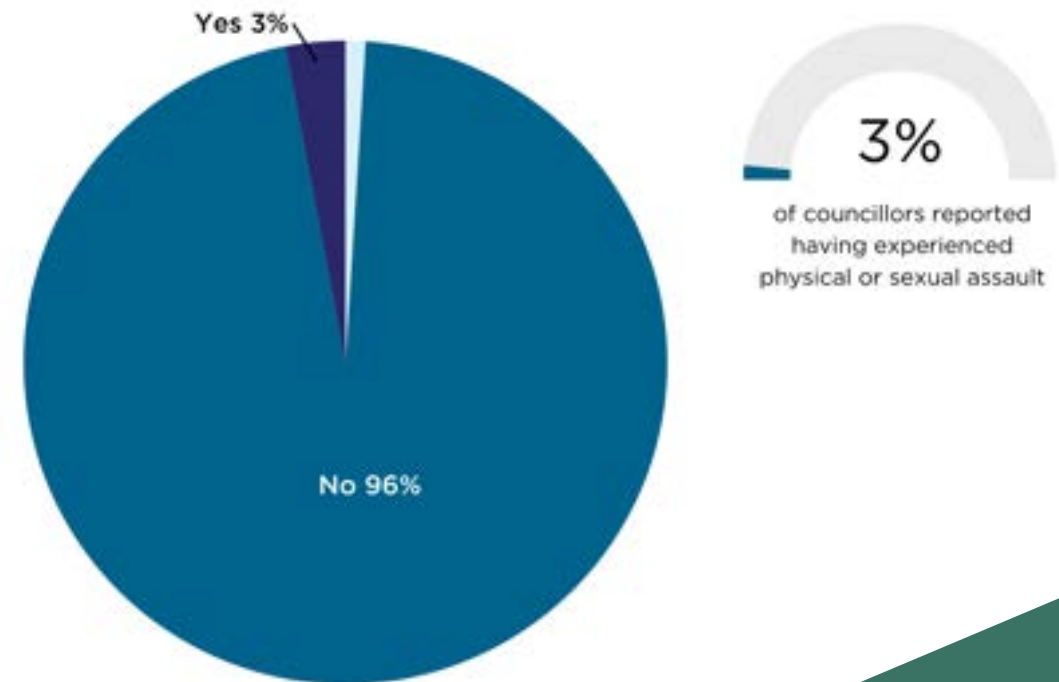
In your role as councillor, have you experienced sexual harassment?



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



In your role as councillor, have you experienced physical or sexual assault?



What the data tells us

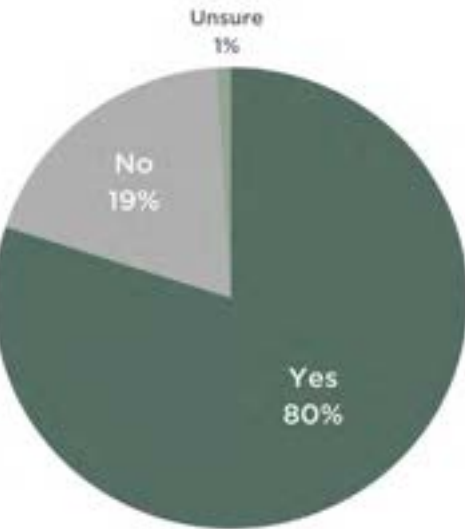
Experiencing threatening behaviour from the public was a fairly common experience for councillors. Yet for councillors under 39 years of age it was much more likely (78% compared to 58% for aged over 39).

Threatening behaviour from the public was experienced evenly across gender, but when we focus more specifically on bullying and both non-sexual, and sexual harassment, women were significantly more likely to be impacted. 13% of women reported experiencing sexual harassment compared to 2% of men. Also 48% of women experienced bullying specifically from another councillor compared to 22% of men.

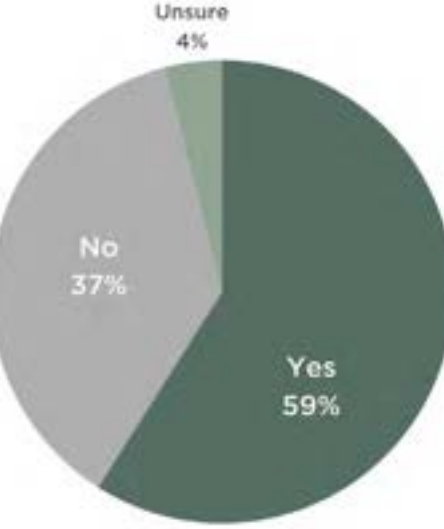
Consistent bullying from members of the public was more common in Metropolitan councils (42%) compared to Regional (30%). The data also demonstrated that If you were retired, you were more likely to have not experienced threatening or intimidating behaviour (53% compared to 32%).

How this compares to 2024

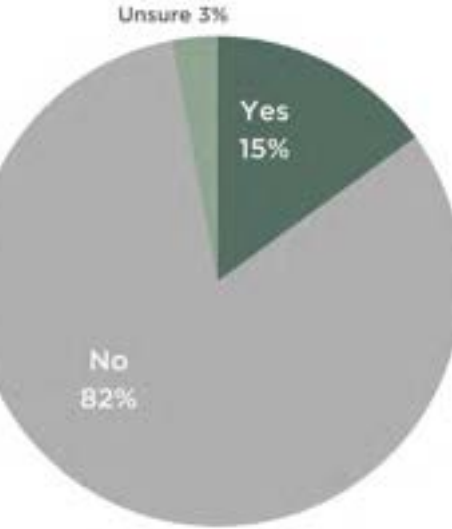
In your role as councillor, have you experienced threatening or intimidating behaviour?



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



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



Public incivility

A majority of councillors had experienced threatening or intimidating behaviour from the public.

59% of councillors reported experiencing threatening or intimidating behaviour from members of the public, 10% said that this was a regular occurrence, 34% occasionally and with 15% saying this happened rarely.

Across the data, women were more likely than men to have experienced abuse, especially bullying and non-sexual harassment, and intimidation from other councillors, but when specifically looking at threatening or intimidating behaviour experienced from members of the public, gender results were much more similar across the board and a general issue for everyone (61% women, 57% Men).

Experiencing threatening or intimidating behaviour from members of the public was more common if:

- You were under the age of 39 (78% compared to 51% for those aged 60 or over)
- You were the Mayor or Deputy Mayor (77% compared to 55% to neither role)

It was slightly more common if you were a councillor in a Metropolitan (63%) or Large Shire (68%) compared to Regional (57%) or Small Shire (46%), and something we want to track over time.

Several highlight the emotional toll: stress, anxiety, resignation, and reduced engagement. For some, the role still inspires them to push for systemic change, but for others, the ongoing hostility dampens their commitment and makes the job feel less safe and less collaborative.

“I have spent significant time proving that bad behaviour has occurred ... trying to mitigate misinformation ... frustration and stress ... prefer to spend my time on ... good things.”

“The intimidation was shocking and undermined ... my independence ... party political ... highly destructive ... a cause of mental health issues ...”

Abuse

Bullying and non-sexual harassment from the public was experienced by one quarter of male and half of female councillors.

Half of all women councillors had experienced threatening or intimidating behaviour and bullying and non-sexual harassment from another councillor – the latter twice as common for women as men. More than one in seven women regularly experienced these types of abuse from another councillor.

In their comments councillors spoke of the personal impact of the abuse they had suffered. For some it made them more determined to push for change, others found it had a negative impact on their confidence, wellbeing, capacity to do their job and likelihood of running again. Some councillors report few or minimal experiences of abuse, but many point to subtle, persistent forms of disrespect, gaslighting, and political intimidation. While not always overtly threatening, these behaviours erode trust and confidence.

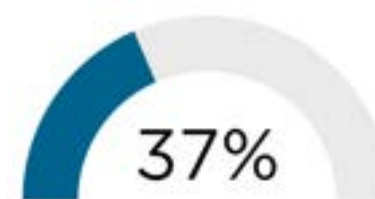
Women were much more likely to say that arrangements in place to deal with inappropriate and improper behaviours by another councillor were effective (35% compared to men 63%)

In turn, those who had experienced bullying and non-sexual harassment were much less likely to respond that they felt supported by other councillors (10% compared to 45%) or supported by the CEO (41% compared to 69%)

“It’s made me really question the role ... I’m unlikely to run for council again – it’s not a safe work environment.”

“Abuse is emotional and subtle, but persistent”

Dealing with incivility



think arrangements in place to deal with inappropriate behaviour from the public were either not in place or ineffective



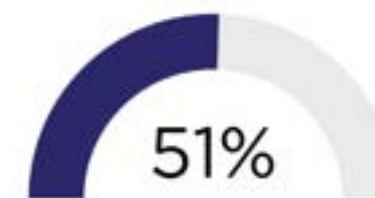
of women think arrangements in place to deal with inappropriate behaviour from the public were either not in place or ineffective



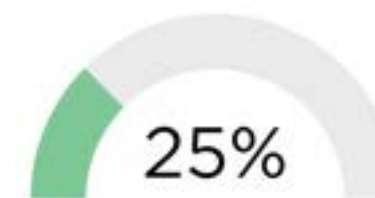
of men think arrangements in place to deal with inappropriate behaviour from the public were either not in place or ineffective



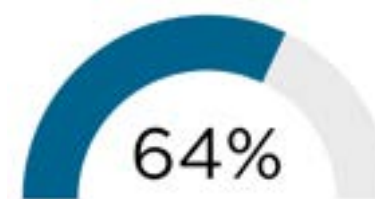
think arrangements in place to deal with inappropriate behaviour from another councillor were either not in place or ineffective



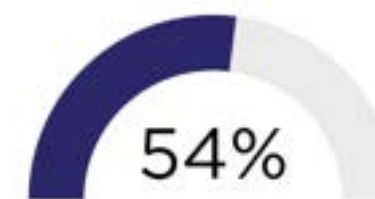
of women think arrangements in place to deal with inappropriate behaviour from another councillor were either not in place or ineffective



of women think arrangements in place to deal with inappropriate behaviour from another councillor were either not in place or ineffective



think arrangements in place to deal with inappropriate behaviour from council staff were effective

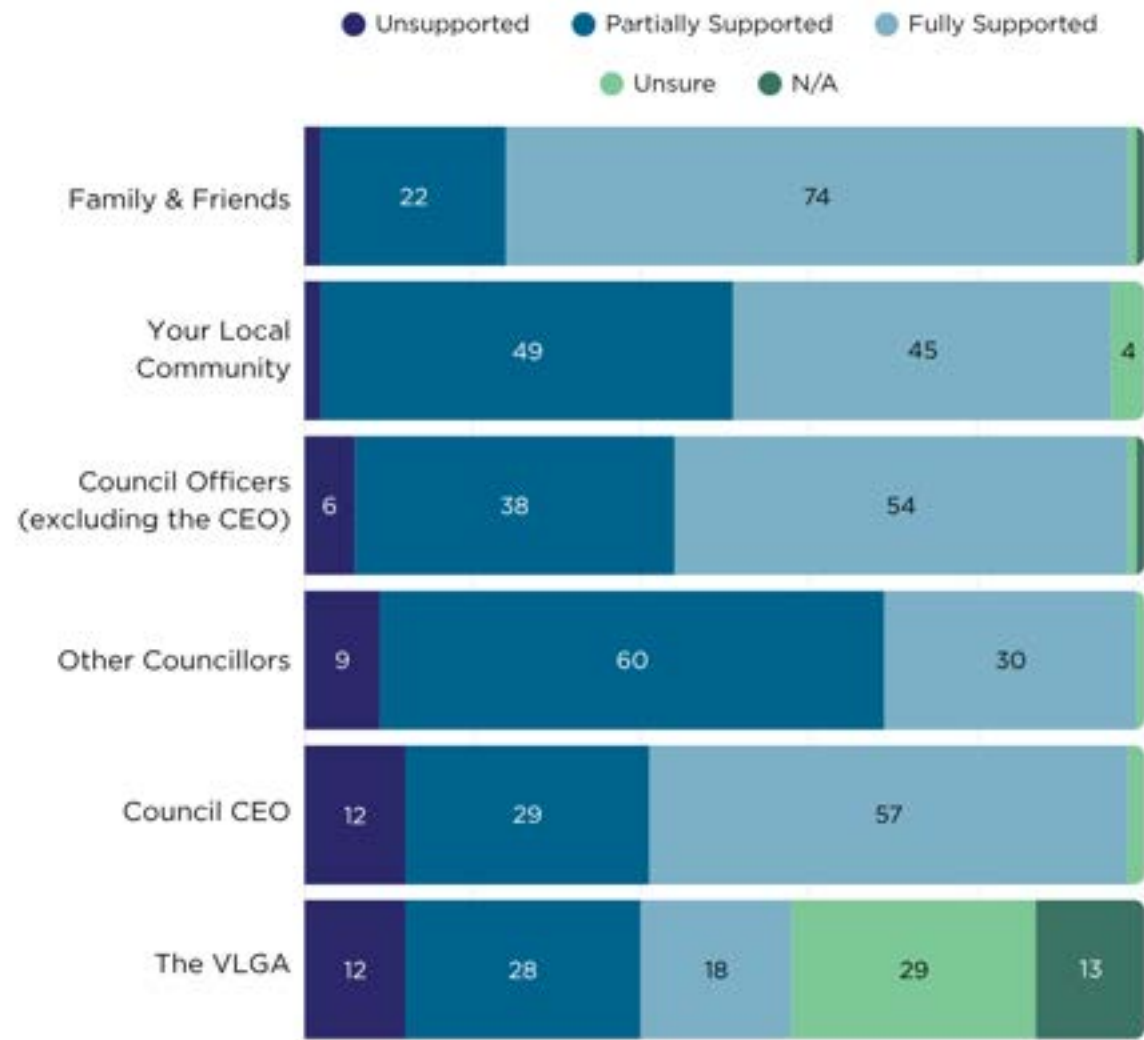


of women think arrangements in place to deal with inappropriate behaviour from council staff were effective



of men think arrangements in place to deal with inappropriate behaviour from council staff were effective

Support networks

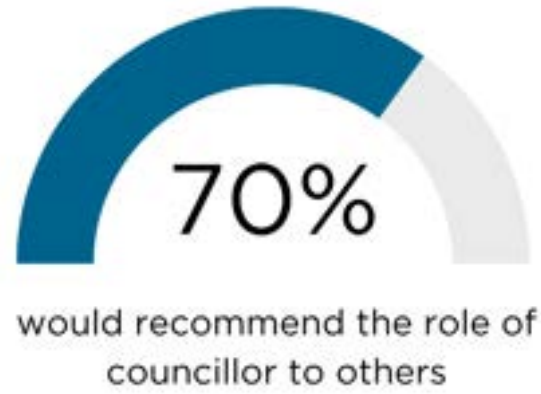


Experienced bullying and non-sexual harassment vs Had not experienced bullying and non-sexual harassment

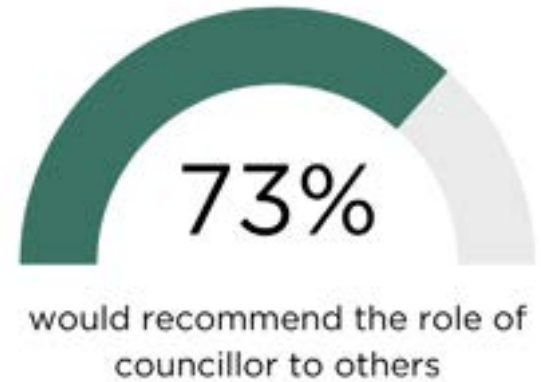


Recommending the role

2025



2024



What the data tells us

Councillors in a leadership role, or who had served multiple terms were more likely to recommend the role. 87% of mayors were likely or very likely to recommend the role compared to 68% of other councillors.

84% of councillors who were serving a third or subsequent term were likely or very likely to recommend the role compared to 68% of other councillors. 60% of councillors with children under 12 at home to care for likely or very likely to recommend the role, compared to 75% without any caring responsibilities.

“I didn’t realise I would enjoy it so much... I am very fortunate to have a respectful group, who do not attack each other and we have been able to govern very effectively”

“Until we address these systemic failures, local government will continue to break good people who enter it for the right reasons and I would not recommend anyone takes up this position”

Profile of participants

The 2025 VLGA Victorian Councillor Census was conducted in October 2025.

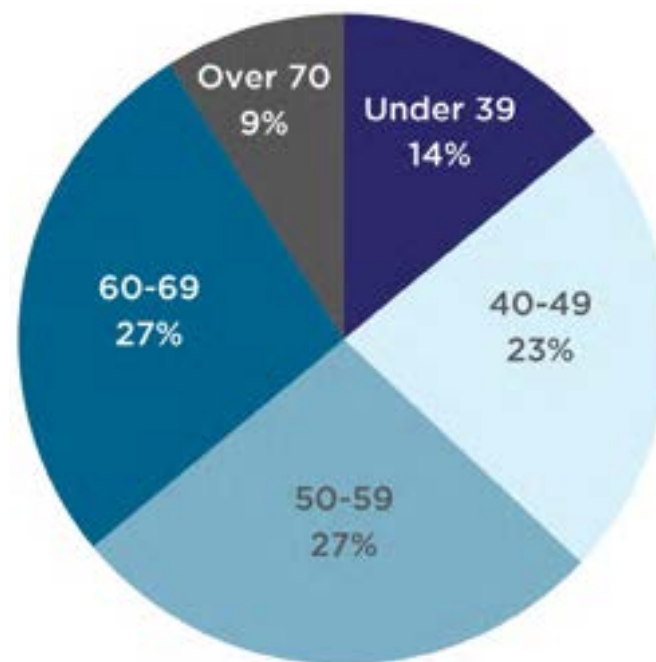
The VLGA distributed the Census electronically to all current, serving Victorian councillors (n=646).

The Census included a mixture of 24 quantitative and 4 qualitative questions.

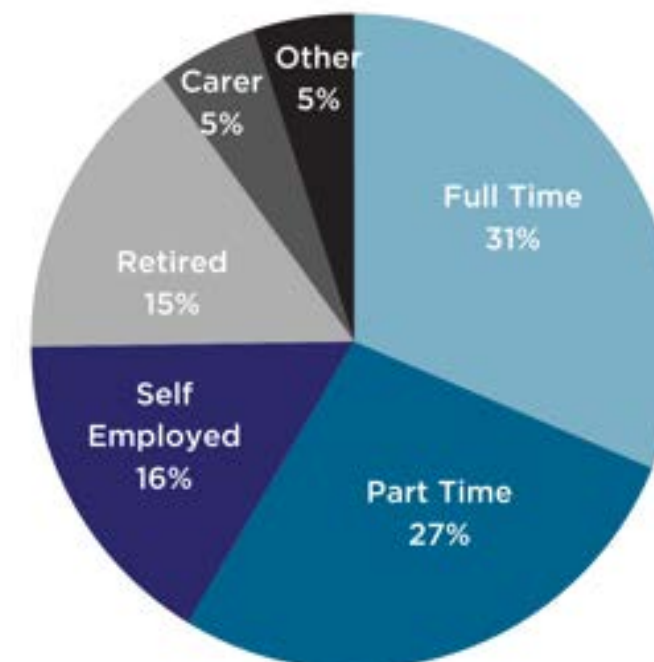
Profile of participating councillors

- 329 participants
- An average age of around 54 years.
- 49% were women, 49% men and 2% non-binary/self described/rather not say.
- 4% were of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent.
- The average number of years served as a councillor was 5, with 54% in their first term.
- The average time spent on council activities each week was 39 hours.
- 15% of councillors were born outside of Australia
- 37% were from a metropolitan council, 11% interface, 25% regional, 13% a large shire and 14% a small shire.
- 74% of councillors are employed and either work full or part time.
- 64% had a university qualification or higher, 25% TAFE/certificate/diploma, 8% secondary school completion and 3% some secondary school or less education.
- 43% had children under 18 years old living at home.

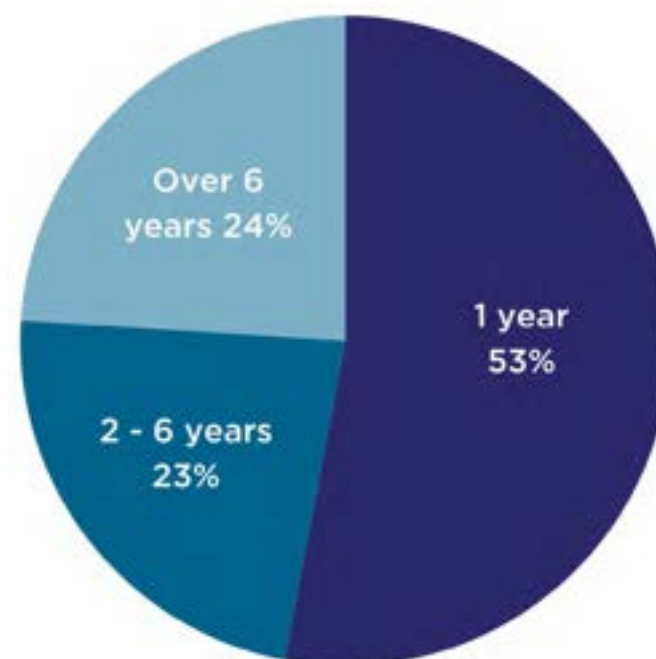
Councillor Age



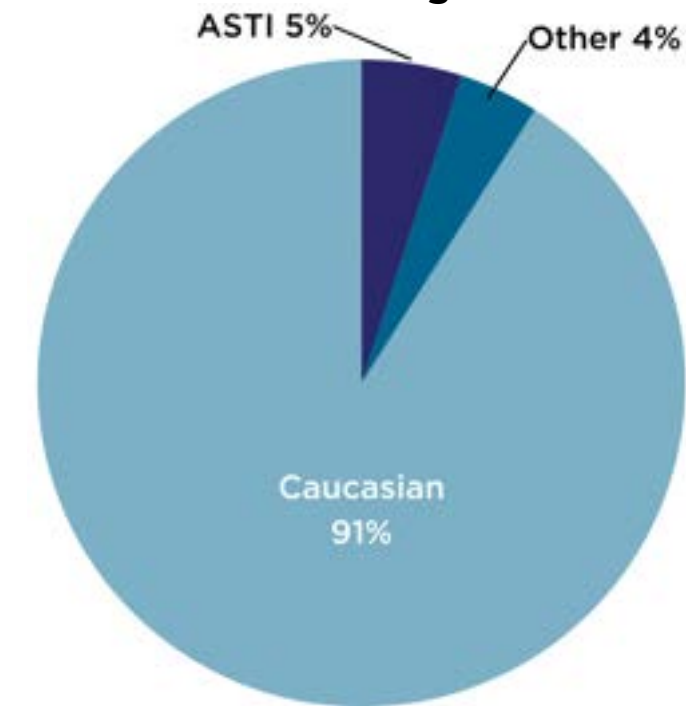
Councillor Employment Status



Years as a councillor



Cultural Background



Conclusion

The 2025 VLGA Victorian Councillor Census provides a valuable and timely insight into the evolving challenges and pressures faced by councillors in the performance of their roles. The strength of this report lies not only in the data collected, but in the willingness of councillors to share candid reflections on their lived experiences. This transparency enables both the VLGA and the different tiers of government to respond more effectively to the issues impacting the sector and to support meaningful improvements to the councillor working environment.

The role of a councillor is inherently complex - diverse in scope, demanding in nature, and shaped by a range of external and internal pressures. As these pressures continue to shift, the need for informed, responsive and targeted support becomes increasingly critical. The VLGA remains uniquely positioned to lead this work and to help define a clear and constructive path forward.

This year's Census has been deliberately designed to address key data gaps, particularly in understanding the cumulative impact of incivility, growing personal pressures and constrained council resources. By capturing these dimensions, the Census deepens our understanding of the role and provides a stronger evidence base to inform advocacy, policy and program development. The VLGA's commitment to conducting the Census annually will ensure that we can track changes over time, monitor emerging trends, and continue to respond with insight and purpose.

The qualitative insights shared by councillors are both compelling and instructive. These accounts not only illuminate the realities of the role but also play a critical role in shaping the sector's response. Every contribution strengthens our collective understanding and supports the pursuit of practical, positive change.

As a member-based, independent organisation, the VLGA is the only peak body dedicated solely to supporting councillors and councils through a focus on good governance. We remain committed to working in partnership with the sector to strengthen culture, enhance capability, and improve the environment in which councillors serve.

How the Census continues to inform our program of work

- The VLGA will continue to conduct the Census annually to capture and track councillor demographics, attitudes and key challenges for local council governance over the council term.
- Establishment of a dedicated support (akin to an EAP) and mediation service for councillors that are widely promoted and available
- Certification of our four-year mandatory Councillor Professional Development Program that directly aligns with Local Government Victoria's guidelines
- The expansion of the VLGA's community leadership programs to encourage informed candidates in 2028 that represent the diversity of their community
- Ongoing delivery of the Mary Rogers Awards for Women in Local Government.

Our plan to respond



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



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



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



Formalise Councillor
Professional
Development to meet
the mandatory
guidelines.



Expand community leadership
programs to encourage
informed candidates in 2028
that reflect the diversity of
their community.



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



Victorian
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