PERCEPTIONS
OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Jan 2024

Council
Watch
KEEPING THEM HONEST

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INTRODUCTION

Local Government is a complex field. It employs 50,000 staff in Victoria alone. Victorian councils collect around $12B in revenue annually.

Community angst towards councils is ever present and the role of local councils has evolved dramatically. This report seeks to measure the perceptions of ordinary Victorians towards Local Councils.

METHODOLOGY

A group of people of different ages and interests in local government designed the survey, for ease of access and participation by a broad base of the community The questions were based around a wide range of issues within councils. We also designed the "what services do you expect" to allow users to select their top 10 of the service delivery areas councils offer. We looked through 15 Council websites to identify all service categories. We specifically excluded

We commenced accepting survey results in August 2023 and closed the survey in December 2023. A 4-month period enabled a good cross-section of responses.

Council Watch designed an online survey using MailChimp to collect respondent perceptions of Local Government. We decided to use MailChimp as it is a recognized and trusted brand, and the format (online) allowed easy promotion of the survey. The survey was advertised online through social media channels (Facebook/Instagram/Messenger) at an approximate cost of $2,500.
The survey was designed to allow random replies, yet we note that this will attract participation by those invested in Councils. This is a similar methodology used by Councils for community consultation. This enabled us to access a wide variety of perceptions. We recognise that like any survey on local councils, those more interested in the topics were more likely to reply. The results are sufficiently clear, however, to suggest a more precise statistical sampling of the population would be worthwhile.

Social Media users across the whole of Victoria were targeted with advertisements (There was only an 18+ age restriction)

The headlines were images of Local Councils and the following slogans:

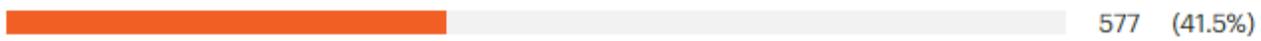- What do you think of Councils?
- What do you think of Local Government?

The ads were seen by around 50,000 people reflecting a response rate of around 3% which is consistent with industry expectations. Almost equal amounts of men and women were targeted.

We garnered 1389 responses from people across Victoria.

- around 63% of the responses were from people who were not identified on our database, mailing list, or membership lists.
- 37% were on our database, having engaged with us on Council issues prior - this may lead them to a specific view of the role of Councils by this cohort.
- People over the age of 35 were the main respondents.
- More men than women chose to engage.
- The average age aligns with the age of home ownership.
- The survey did not attract many people under 25 and this aligns with industry feedback from Councils.

Female

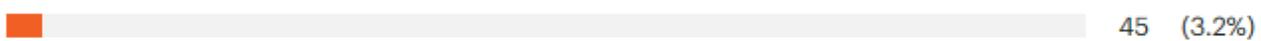577 (41.5%)

Male

761 (54.8%)

Non-Binary

2 (0.1%)

Prefer to Self-Identify

4 (0.3%)

Prefer not to Disclose

45 (3.2%)

"What is your age?"

Under 18

1 (0.1%)

18—24

1 (0.1%)

25—34

24 (1.7%)

35—44

82 (5.9%)

45—54

232 (16.7%)

55—64

437 (31.5%)

65+

612 (44.1%)
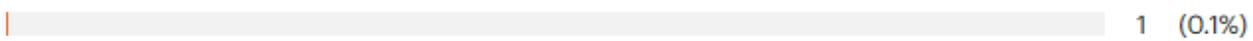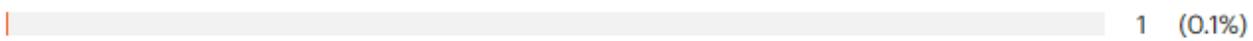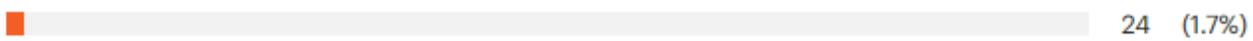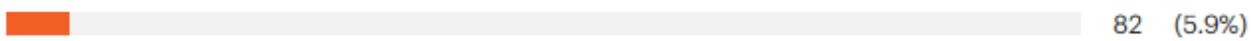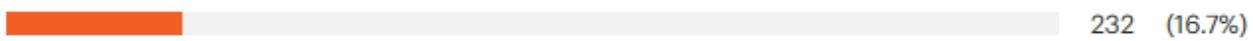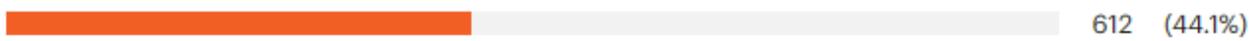
FINDINGS SUMMARY

What are essential Council Services?

SERVICE AREA	RANKING
Roads (incl. upgrading)	90%
Footpaths	85%
Parks & Gardens	72%
Libraries	58%
Aged care and Support services	53%
Sport & Recreational	52%
Planning	46%
Family Services	46%
Local laws & Permits	45%
Emergency Management	36%
Community Development	34%
Pets & Animals	32%
Health & Safety	31%
Youth Services	30%
Business Support	24%
Environment & Climate Change	13%
Arts & Culture	12%
Equality/Diversity/LGBTQIA+	4%

COUNCIL PERFORMANCE

- 80.5% of respondents rated their council TERRIBLE or POOR.
- 1.9% of respondents rated their council GOOD or EXCELLENT.

PAYING RATES

- 61.3% of respondents said rates bills were harder than last year.
- 26.8% said rates were much harder than last year.
- 0.4% said rates were easier to pay than last year.
- 94% of respondents paid rates. 6% did not.

COUNCIL MEETINGS

- 57% of respondents have attended or watched a council meeting.
- 12% in the last month, 32% in the last 12 months
- 43% have never seen a council meeting

COUNCILLOR PERSONAL INTEREST RETURNS

- 16% knew Councillors had to complete these
- 76% had "no idea"

POLITICAL CANDIDATES - ELECTIONS

- 92% want more NON-party-aligned candidates

SOCIAL MEDIA

- 51% follow their local Council on social media
- 29% follow 1 or more Councillors in their municipality

COUNCIL DEBATE

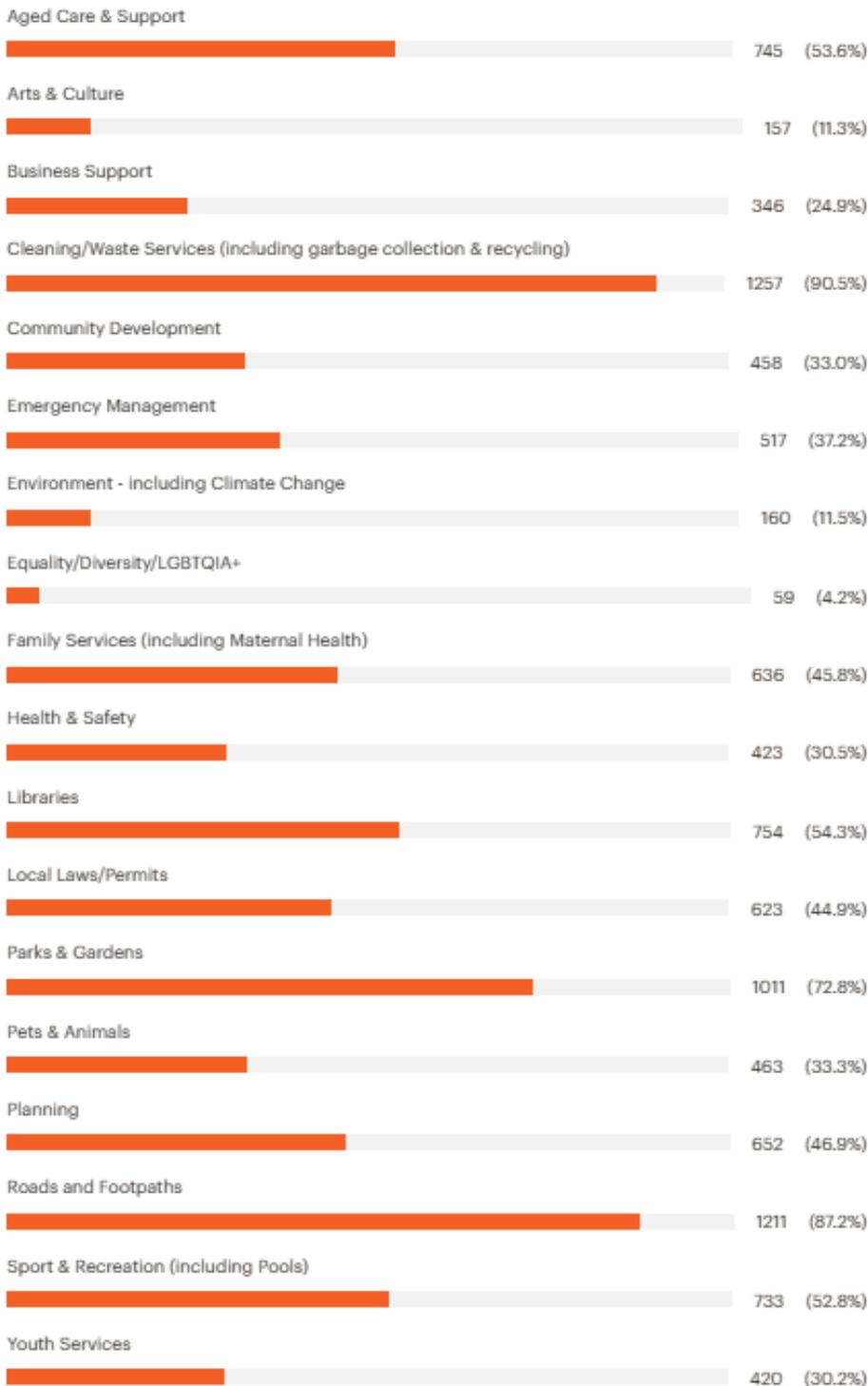- 92% said there is not enough debate in our councils

CORRUPTION

- 96% said there is Corruption in our Councils
- Councillors were twice as likely to be the source of corruption
- Areas prone to corruption were Contract/Procurement choice, Project tendering, Expense Claims, Councillor decision-making & Choice of suppliers

BIGGEST ISSUES IN COUNCILS - PERCEPTIONS

- Roads not being maintained - potholes and damage levels high
- Local Streets are dirty
- Footpaths in poor condition
- Closure of Aged Care services and support
- Traffic and Congestion on Council roads
- Poor Community Consultation
- Assets not maintained properly
- Community Consultation is a very poor standard
- More green open space needed
- Social causes being fostered by Councils
- CEO excessive power
- Overstaffed and poor service
- Poor Management Standards and Conduct
- Spending on Consultants is excessive
- Just revenue raising all the time
- Spending on Councillors' pet projects
- Poor customer satisfaction/experiences
- Poor town planning - overdevelopment
- Don't admit when they make a mistake
- Councils don't listen to the community
- Council strategies and plans don't align with expectations of the council's role
- Councillor Conduct can be terrible
- No longer employ local people
- Act like Dictators
- Council Staff do not care about the community

DATA

"What do you consider the essential "CORE" services Council should provide at a MINIMUM? (please pick only the items you think are absolutely essential)"

Aged Care & Support
745 (53.6%)

Arts & Culture
157 (11.3%)

Business Support
346 (24.9%)

Cleaning/Waste Services (including garbage collection & recycling)
1257 (90.5%)

Community Development
458 (33.0%)

Emergency Management
517 (37.2%)

Environment - including Climate Change
160 (11.5%)

Equality/Diversity/LGBTQIA+
59 (4.2%)

Family Services (including Maternal Health)
636 (45.8%)

Health & Safety
423 (30.5%)

Libraries
754 (54.3%)

Local Laws/Permits
623 (44.9%)

Parks & Gardens
1011 (72.8%)

Pets & Animals
463 (33.3%)

Planning
652 (46.9%)

Roads and Footpaths
1211 (87.2%)

Sport & Recreation (including Pools)
733 (52.8%)

Youth Services
420 (30.2%)

Question 2 has 1389 answers (Radio Buttons)

"How Would you rate your council's current performance?"

Terrible

483 (34.8%)

Poor

635 (45.7%)

OK

245 (17.6%)

Good

22 (1.6%)

Excellent

4 (0.3%)
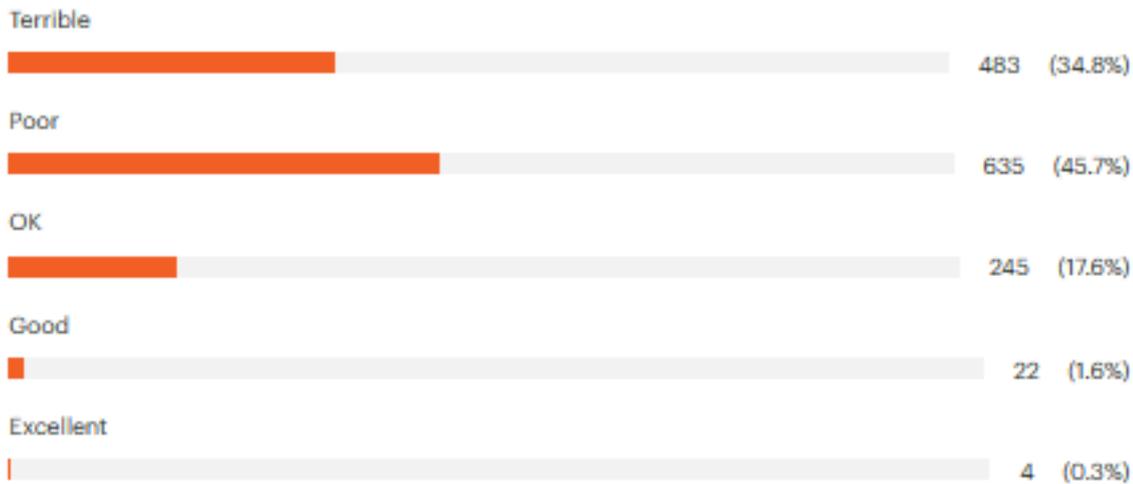
Question 4 has 1389 answers (Radio Buttons)

"Thinking about paying your rates this year, is it:"

Easier than last year

5 (0.4%)

The same as last year

440 (31.7%)

Harder than last year

479 (34.5%)

MUCH harder than last year

372 (26.8%)

I don't pay rates

93 (6.7%)
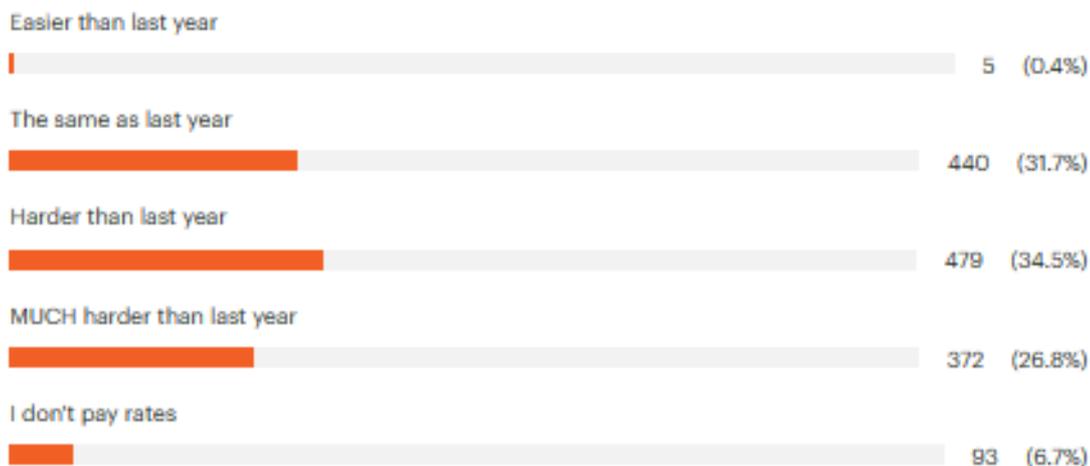
"When did you last attend in person, or watch a council meeting (online)"

In the last month

175   (12.6%)

In the last 3 months

158   (11.4%)
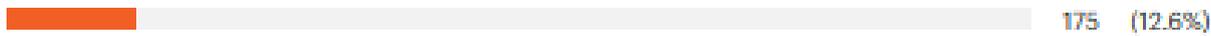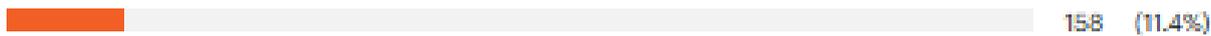
In the last 6-12 months

115   (8.3%)

More than a year ago

342   (24.6%)

Never

599   (43.1%)
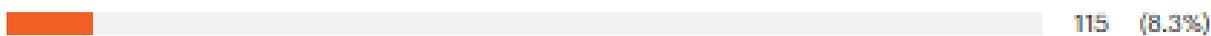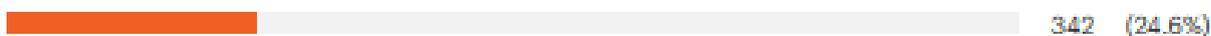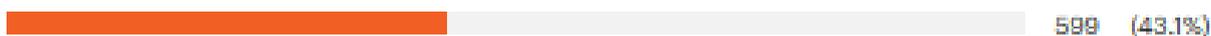
"Who gets paid more?"
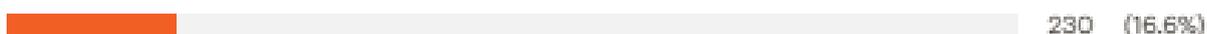
CEO

1231   (88.6%)

A Mayor

158   (11.4%)
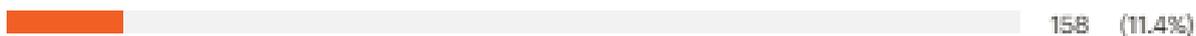
"Do you know if Councillors have to complete a "personal interest return" like state MPs do?"

Yes, they do

230   (16.6%)

No, they dont

96   (6.9%)

No idea

1063   (76.5%)
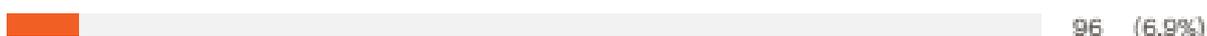
"When it comes to council election candidates, do you want more:"

Independent Candidates

1276 (91.9%)

Political Party Candidates

113 (8.1%)

"Do you follow your Local Council on Social Media?"

Yes

671 (48.3%)

No

718 (51.7%)
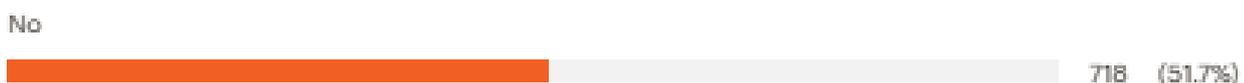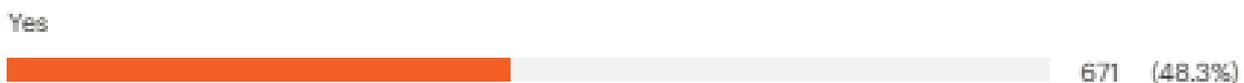
"Do you follow any Councillors on Social media?"

Yes

390 (28.1%)

No

999 (71.9%)

"Do you think there is enough DEBATE in the council meeting between Councillors?"

Yes, it is sufficient

110 (7.9%)

No, more is needed

1279 (92.1%)
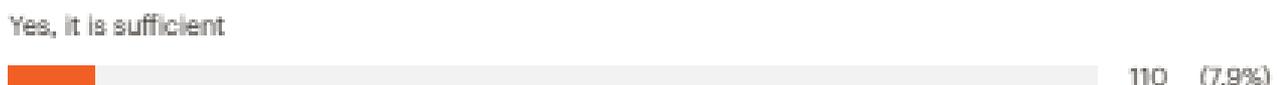
"Do you think there is corruption in Local Government?"

Yes

1329   (96.6%)

No

47   (3.4%)
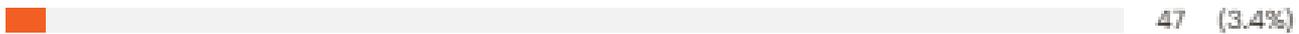
"Where is there likely to be the highest risk of corruption in Local Government?"

Staff

454   (32.7%)

Councillors

935   (67.3%)
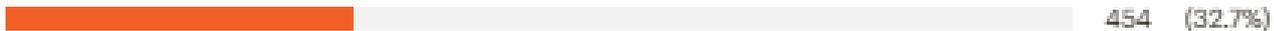
"What areas do you think might be prone to corruption? (Tick all that apply)"

Staff hiring

743   (53.5%)
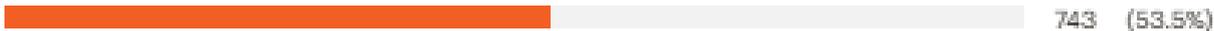
Contractor choice - who gets the contract (Procurement)

1225   (88.2%)

Large Project Tendering

1042   (75.0%)

Council Officers providing information to Councillors

756   (54.4%)

Supplier choice

845   (60.8%)
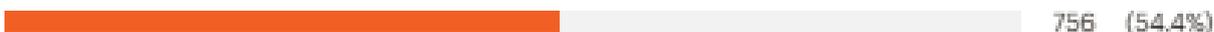
Expense claims/reimbursements

873   (62.9%)

Councillor Decision Making

1064   (76.6%)

"If Council Watch created Podcasts, What topics would you like to hear? (tick any you want)"

Rates/Rate Capping
886 (63.8%)

Complaints & Complaint Handling
750 (54.0%)

What is the role of a Council?
793 (57.1%)

Overdevelopment & Planning
686 (49.4%)

Community Engagement
620 (44.6%)

The Whole Local Gov Sector
562 (40.5%)

Transparency
983 (70.8%)

Where $12 Billion is actually spent annually?
896 (64.5%)

Council Meetings
568 (40.9%)

Decision Making
748 (53.9%)

CEO and EXEC Salaries
852 (61.3%)

Elections 2024
472 (34.0%)

Struggling to Pay Rates
368 (26.5%)

Fines & Fees
531 (38.2%)

CONCLUSIONS

The role of Local Councils is complex and ever-changing.

Most Victorians want Councils to get "core services" right. Residents do not feel councils are getting the service delivery and outcomes right.

There is a perception that Councils are not being run properly and that CEOs and other executives are distracted and pandering to vocal minorities and lobby groups on minor issues. There is consistent feedback that some councillors are using their positions to drag councils into political issues, which survey respondents remain unhappy with.

More importantly, people who responded to the survey are not focused on climate change, equality, indigenous issues, and LGBTQIA+ issues (as a priority within Councils and their role), yet these issues are <u>dominant</u> in Council forums, policy, discussions, and priorities. Much feedback from participants was that these issues were amplified unnecessarily. There is a statistical over-representation of these issues within Councils and Council policy focus, compared to the expectations of respondents.

Roads continue to be the biggest statewide problem for all councils, with not enough being done. The community is very vocal that roads are in very poor condition across Councils.

There are very strong perceptions around Council corruption, mostly focused on Councillors, but also focused on the behaviour and lack of transparency of the organisation and staff. There is a trust deficit in our Councils.

Trust deficits have arisen because people do not feel that Councils are doing the job expected of them and are focused on too many issues.

Voters are becoming increasingly aware and much more sophisticated in their expectations of Councillors and the performance expectations of Council organisations.

The role of Local Government needs to be clearly defined. It is this lack of clear definitions and guidelines that is causing much of the problem in councils managing community expectations.

Much of the problem in terms of trust, image and respect of the sector lies in 3 main issues:

- *A defined role of local government that is simple and unambiguous.*
- *The role of Councillors in representing their community.*
- *The performance and transparency of Council administrations.*

Some will claim that Councils should be more than just "Roads, Rates, and rubbish", and perhaps this is true as the role of Councils has and will continue to evolve. Victorians do not align their views on the role of councils with the claims of the industry itself.
Whilst the view of Councillors, CEOs, and executives may have evolved and expanded over time, those who continue to pay for the system do not agree with the current industry views of the role of local councils.

Perhaps the industry has failed to consult with the general public adequately to align with public expectations of councils, and perhaps the reality for Councils is the community may never agree with the push into a much wider spectrum of non-service related delivery - e.g. social issues, and political causes.

This should serve as a warning to Councillors, CEOs, and executives alike.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We highly recommend that the Local Government Minister introduce a Statewide survey on the role and expectations of Councils annually, to be completed in conjunction with the Statewide Community Satisfaction Survey.

We highly recommend that the State Government consider a much more precise definition of the role of Councils as the current legislation is ambiguous.

We highly recommend that the State Government establishes an amended definition of the role of Councillors, to better reflect community expectations that their councillors will represent them on issues that are not necessarily debated by the whole Council.

We recommend all Councils adopt a much more transparent operating policy, where everything is public unless it is deemed confidential under the strict definitions in the Local Government Act. (Many administrations are still wrongly classifying items as confidential when they do not meet the threshold)

We recommend that the VEC insist that any candidates must declare current or former political party membership on their application as a candidate and that the VEC make this information available.

We recommend Council Conflict of Interest registers be made available to the public via council websites.

We recommend the live streaming of Council briefing meetings.

We recommend the live streaming of all Council committee meetings.

We recommend that all decisions of the Council have all voting records listed in the minutes of the Council meetings.

We recommend that Councillors debate and explain their decisions to the community much more clearly, thereby responding more effectively to community expectations.

We recommend one statewide standard of meeting procedure and governance rules for consistency.