

Media Statement

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The VLGA Calls for Action on Council Culture

The VLGA notes with concern recent reports of conduct issues in Victorian councils.

“Local councils, as the arm of government closest to the people, are responsible for the delivery of a vast array of services and facilities that support the health and wellbeing of their local communities. Over the past two-year period and throughout the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, this essential service delivery was maintained across all 79 councils in Victoria – highlighting the important role that our councils undertake and demonstrating the commitment and skill required of councillors and council staff,” said VLGA Chief Executive Officer, Kathryn Arndt.

“It is disheartening to see essential and impactful work undermined by workplace behaviour that falls short of the standards of dignity, fairness, objectivity, courtesy and respect that community members should expect.”

“Beyond the legal obligations of councils to maintain safe workplaces, nurturing a culture of civil conduct inside and outside of the council chamber is central to good governance.

“There is a difference between the ‘cut and thrust’ of political debate and conduct which threatens the ability of councillors and council officers to do their jobs. We hope to see these complex dynamics addressed through the Victorian Local Government Culture Review Project.

“However, the VLGA submits that in the absence of any genuine community and sector appetite for structural reform, we should recognise that councils operate in a politicised model. And, through a number of mechanisms, provide councillors with the tools to deal constructively with the tensions that arise from working in such an environment.

The VLGA would like to see a number of outcomes from the Culture Review Project:

- A raised awareness of the roles, responsibilities and processes of councils for both candidates and the community (voters)
- Improved mandatory training for candidates – not just programs for women – but for men and women – who wish to stand for local government
- Processes to support diversity and inclusion amongst the councillor groups
- Supports for mayors to perform their leadership roles
- Supports for CEOs to most effectively and safely perform their roles – the VLGA would like to see some structural changes in regard to the CEO employment relationship
- A culture of training and improved governance resources for councillors – the community should demand that councillors invest (as part of the budget process) in professional development to enhance their performance as councillors
- An emphasis on building conflict resolution skills for councillors (whose role it is to disagree with each other at times)
- Increased external supports through expanded roles for monitors and governance organisations such as the VLGA

“It is evident that change is required to ensure that debate and interactions avoid hostility and aggression that compromises the ability of councils to perform at their best – in addition to discouraging people to stand (in local government elections) in the future.” said Ms Arndt.

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