

BREAKING BARRIERS: A STUDY OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH 2023



Presented by Professor Andrea Carson, La Trobe University, and Professor Leah Ruppner, University of Melbourne with research support from QDOS Research and in partnership with Victorian Local Governance Association.

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OSF | Breaking Barriers: A Study of Women's Participation and Representation in Local Government [<https://osf.io/9vjdb/>]

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The opinions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of La Trobe University, University of Melbourne or the VLGA. The authors are responsible for any omissions or errors.

We acknowledge and thank QDOS Research for contributing subject interviews to the research.

We also acknowledge and celebrate the First Nations people on whose traditional lands we meet and work, and whose cultures are among the oldest in human history.

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Foreword

The Victorian Local Governance Association is proud to be partnering with the University of Melbourne and La Trobe University to undertake the ARC Linkage Grant Research Project, ‘Women in Local Government: Understanding Their Political Trajectories’.

As we enter the last year of this four-year project and into the next local government election cycle, the research to date has generated new knowledge about barriers to female political representation, their political performance and pathways to higher tiers of elected office. By following men and women councillors across an election cycle, the research has compared and measured women's experiences of local politics with the aim to develop a new framework to map and address obstacles preventing political equity.

This research is the first of its kind in Australia. As evidenced in this latest report, the research provides invaluable insights into women’s experiences of local government in Victoria and gives us a roadmap for achieving gender equity in elected representative roles. This should provide significant public benefits by advancing female participation across all levels of government.

The results of this research, whilst disheartening, highlight the important role the VLGA in providing resources and delivering programs that encourage and equip councillors to uphold the highest standards of civility and respect in how they carry out their duties and interact with each other and community members. The results highlight the need for more robust and effective remedies when discourse breaks down.

The research sheds light on the challenges faced by women councillors, particularly the concerning prevalence of bullying and harassment. The VLGA’s commitment to encouraging diverse women to stand for local council positions aligns with the report's insights, emphasizing the importance of adequate support mechanisms and systemic remedies.

Local councillors are community leaders who play an essential role in delivering services and infrastructure to our diverse local communities. Gender Equity is essential for good governance and decision making and researching, recognising, advocating, training and supporting women candidates and councillors is crucial for enhanced democracy in local government.

The VLGA has an important role to play in affecting change by:

1. Leading the development and embedding of the Women’s Charter, which promotes the principles of: gender equity, encouraging diversity in representation, and women’s active citizenship. This has been adopted by 74 out of the 79 Victorian LGA’s.
2. Advocating for systemic change, as outlined in the “Local Government Culture Project” to ensure a safe working environment for all councillors.
3. Encouraging women from a diverse range of backgrounds to stand for local council and using the findings of this report to support their retention once elected.
4. Advocating for continued state government investment in recognised programs which support women councillors, such as the VLGA’s Local Women Leading Change (LWLC) program. At least 1000 women need to stand in the 2024 local government elections if the shared target of 50 per cent women councillors by 2025 is to be achieved. Current investment is not enough. Whilst the LWLC program contributes towards the Victorian Government’s Gender Equality Strategy goals, it would be more effective with improvements such as sustainable long-term state government support to ensure timely programs throughout election cycles.

Kathryn Arndt
Chief Executive Officer



Letter from the Researchers

Women's equal representation in all tiers of government is far from parity. In Australia, about a third (38%) of the federal House of Representative seats are occupied by women. This makes Australia 36th in the world, up from 57th in 2019, for women's parliamentary representation but a significant fall from 15th in 1999. One bright spot for women's representation is local government, which tends to have higher than average rates of women's representation, with women currently at 43.8% in Victoria and 39.3% nationwide. However, local government is often overlooked as a key area for increasing women's representation. It tends to hold less power, is more regional and rural, and garners less media attention. Yet, it is crucial to understanding women's experiences in local government, and the reasons they drop out, mitigating the barriers to equal gender representation at all levels of government.

This *Breaking Barriers* report is one part of a larger, multi-year research project addressing these key questions. Our ARC-funded project – “Women in Local Government: Understanding their Political Trajectories” – is building a deep evidence base to understand the factors that: 1) pull women into local government, 2) affect their performance within these democratic spaces, 3) provide a pathway for political participation in higher tiers of government (i.e. state and national parliaments), and 4) push them out of local government.

By working in direct partnership with the Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA), this project is following the 2020-2024 cohort of Victorian councillors. To date, we have undertaken four statewide local government surveys of men and women councillors to understand their experiences in their first two years as elected representatives. This has provided us with rich data to answer a range of questions on work and family demands, inter-role strain, experiences with trolling and harassment and satisfaction with their roles. These surveys are matched with interviews from women councillors to add nuance to their unique experiences.

This research has been peer-reviewed and published in a range of international and Australian academic journals. Our first article, "The Missing Cohort: Women in Local Government" uses our surveys and interviews to investigate women's experiences in running for Victorian local government and gender differences in electoral success and experiences as a councillor. The findings reveal a positive story about women's electability, despite fewer women running for office, their success rate is higher than men's. While this is encouraging for gender parity, the data also shows a missing cohort of younger women. Paid full-time work, childrearing and household responsibilities without adequate supports are key barriers to elected office for younger women. Ultimately, we identify key issues in the theme of 'Parliament as a Gendered Workplace' and makes recommendations to narrow the gender gap in politics.

Our second research article, “From online trolls to ‘Slut Shaming’: Understanding the role of incivility and gender abuse in local government” applies our survey data from two time periods to identify that women councillors experience a range of gender-based harassment and general incivility, at rates significantly higher than men councillors. These experiences serve as a major ‘push’ factor for women’s decisions not to participate in local government or to recontest.

This latest report adds to our larger multi-year research project. Here, we provide in-depth interviews with 19 women councillors from regional and metropolitan councils. We selected councils that have different gender compositions – those with more women, more men or equal representation by gender and region (metro and rural). These interviews deepen our understanding of women’s experiences and barriers to participation in a range of local government settings.

The overall research project concludes at the next election in October 2024. In the meantime, we have more work to do as we follow this cohort of women (and men) councillors over their full four-year term. We thank the councillors that have participated in our research to date. It is through their generosity in time, energy and insights that we document the major barriers and opportunities for women in local government. Through their honesty and hard work, we are able to gauge the effectiveness of current resources to help support their candidature. We also could not do this vital work without the direct support of our industry partner – the Victoria Local Governance Association – and its CEO Kathryn Arndt. Women’s representation in all levels of government is critical – together, we can work towards gender parity in public representation.

Thank you from the researchers.

Co-leads Professor Andrea Carson at La Trobe University and Professor Leah Ruppanner, University of Melbourne.

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***Note:** The images used in this report are illustrative and not pictures of Victorian women councillors.*

Research Context



The Project

Research Background

Researchers from La Trobe University, the University of Melbourne and Australian National University are investigating the under-representation of women in politics with the support of the Victorian Local Governance Association. This Australian Research Council funded longitudinal study focuses on local government to better understand women's participation in local government. It follows the cohort of Councillors elected to Victorian Councils in 2020.

This qualitative research component of the project seeks to better understand the barriers and performance of women in local government, this includes questions about what are the obstacles preventing them putting their hand up to run in the first place.

Once elected, what is their experience like? Do they feel welcome and supported? Is the role fulfilling? What are the differences between their expectations and experience? What was missing that might have helped them when they were new to the role? Does gender composition on council (i.e. majority women, equal representation, or majority men) make a difference to women councillors' perceptions of their council's performance.

Research Objective

The primary objective of this qualitative component of the research was to provide deeper insights about their experience as local government representatives from women currently serving as Councillors across Victoria, to inform the broader ARC-funded broader study.



Executive Summary



Executive Summary

Women sought election based on a history of community engagement or a deep interest in a particular issue or area.

- Many said they were drawn to the role to make a change within their communities.
- Most were surprised by the reality of what the role entailed. Some women found it interesting and rewarding. Others were surprised by the political nature of the role.
- Many found the workload significantly greater than first expected.

Many found the role challenging but ultimately fulfilling.

- Some Councillors spoke about the new skills they'd acquired, the projects they'd been able to help bring to fruition and just generally making a positive difference in the community.
- A number were appreciative of being able to expand their skills through the training and courses offered, especially through the VLGA and The Australian Institute of Company Directors.
- Most felt as though they were able to follow their interests in the role and take on responsibilities aligned with their skills and interests.
- Most spoke of the 'reality check' once they started in the role; they found local government was significantly more complex than they'd anticipated. This gave them an appreciation of how challenging it was to get the things done they had intended.

Councillors experienced challenges with the dynamics of their Council but described it in different ways.

- Many spoke of a very challenging work environment. Most thought it was an issue of personalities and individual attributes rather than applying a gendered lens. While several, across all Council compositions, spoke of "boys clubs" and difficulties with male Councillors, some described difficulties with women Councillors as well, even in gender-balanced and majority women Councils.
- Others thought the challenges they faced were due to their younger age. Sometimes they were described as part of a broader, negative culture.
- A number of Councillors did see interactions explicitly as gendered. They used phrases such "internalised misogyny", "sausage fest", "boys club" and described instances of "mansplaining" and male counterparts taking credit for ideas they had initially put forward. These types of comments were made across the mix of Councils represented in this research, regardless of their gender composition.
- Some Councillors described some effort going into establishing and maintaining a positive, collaborative working culture – they were less likely to describe negative experiences and interactions. These Councillors were more likely to be from Councils where women weren't the small minority.

Executive Summary

The State Government's gender parity target for women Councillors was almost universally seen as good and important.

- Part of what drove some women to run was a desire for a more gender-representative Council.
- However, a number said (regardless of their Council's gender composition), that parity without cultural change would not be enough to attract more women to run for and remain on Council. Examples cited by several were that if aggressive, bullying behaviour or publicly shaming women Councillors for using childcare allowances were acceptable behaviours, then Council culture was a real barrier to women's participation.

Hostility from other Councillors or constituents was common.

- There was a strong sense that some Councillors were not there for the benefit of their community. These Councillors were seen as there just to, "play politics" and were often seen as obstructionist and occasionally destructive to good governance. They were very hard to work with, to the extent that some of the Councillors interviewed were considering not recontesting the next election.
- In most but not all cases, these obstructionist Councillors were males. This "toxic" type was described by Councillors across the range of Councils included in this research.

- Others spoke of the many negative experiences they'd had out in the community and particularly online. Some had been approached by hostile residents on the streets or been sent aggressive emails or threatening text messages. Some had sought intervention from police.
- While many found social media a useful communication tool, others refused to have accounts – often due to hostile experiences.

Many felt that there was no real accountability for bullying or harassment from other Councillors.

- Of the several who had experienced hostility in the role, none thought the existing system for dealing with the behaviour was adequate. This included Councillors from majority women Councils.
- Many lamented the fact that normal workplace standards didn't seem to apply in the Council setting. Many said there was no way to hold other Councillors to account for disruptive or problematic behaviour.
- The Code of Conduct was considered risky because it wasn't anonymous, was slow and ineffectual.
- CEOs were also viewed as being in a difficult position in trying to manage disruptive Councillors.

Executive Summary

Juggling other commitments was challenging, especially those with caring and work responsibilities, but some practices instigated during COVID have helped.

- A supportive family and Council were very important factors in women's satisfaction with the Councillor role.
- Many Councillors without caring responsibilities said they didn't know how those with young children could perform the role (certainly not alongside paid work as well).
- Following election, some Councillors had reassessed other commitments and made changes, such as taking on less paid work, to be able to accommodate the Council role. If they had the opportunity to become Mayor, this helped a bit more due to the higher remuneration.
- The option of attending meetings and briefings online made it easier for many women to attend, particularly those with caring responsibilities.

Childcare allowances/reimbursements as an explicit line item in Council budgets resulted in adverse attention.

- Many spoke of either themselves or others being called out publicly (by other Councillors, the local media and/or residents) for accessing the childcare allowance to which they were entitled as part of their role.

- After negative experiences, some had stopped using it altogether as they felt it was being weaponised against them. In the few Councils, where the allowance was used without fear of it being used against them, it was an important support for women with children.

Formalised support networks and training opportunities were important.

- A good support network was considered very important by nearly all Councillors interviewed.
- Many also spoke of the importance and value they'd found in mentors and women in local government groups.
- There was also praise for some of the courses available to Councillors, particularly those that educated Councillors on their strategic role versus the operational side of Council under the CEO. However, because these were not mandatory, and sometimes people ran for Council without an understanding of the bigger picture, a number of Councillors felt their Councils lacked a sufficiently robust skillset to make an on-going contribution.
- Some observed that the gap between assumptions of a Councillor's role and reality led to some on their Council becoming 'absent' Councillors.

Executive Summary

The current remuneration was considered a significant barrier, particularly for younger women in earlier stages of their careers.

- Many said the job was very demanding, involved long hours, poor treatment at times and often high stress. Added to this is low remuneration which Councillors felt would further limit to pool of people that would be likely to run for Council, including younger women.
- Many also thought that there were people who wouldn't be able to afford to take on the role given the pressure it put on capacity to also do other paid work.

Future Plans

- Those who found the role rewarding and positive were generally more likely to think they would recontest. Those who had experienced bullying and challenging Council dynamics indicated they were less likely to recontest.
- Personal circumstances including re-establishing careers, age of children and stage of life, also impacted on whether these women would recontest at the next election.

- Nearly all said they weren't considering running for a State or Federal seat. There were various reasons given including "too tired", "just not for me" and, "I don't need to be hated by more people".

Key Recommendations

The research finds that providing women councillors in local government with a range of resources and supports provides a critical test case to overcome institutionalized barriers to their political and economic successes. We find women councillors carry similar problems managing work, family and councillor roles as the general population of working women. While it is true that councils provide subsidies for childcare expenses, our survey and interview data show that this measure is underutilized for several reasons and can be stigmatized. To overcome this, we make four recommendations related to role strain and online incivility to address these obstacles to women's participation in elected local government.

Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1:** Amend the Local Government (Planning and Reporting) Regulations 2020 to not require reimbursements of childcare costs or expenses incurred by a councillor who is a carer in a carer relationship as a reported expense item in the Annual Report or elsewhere published.
- **Recommendation 2:** Promote equal utilisation of childcare provisions by male councillors to ensure parity and normalise its use, enabling ALL councillors with young children to fulfil their responsibilities without feeling role strain.
- **Recommendation 3:** Establish and evaluate a pilot childcare subsidy program, incorporating feedback mechanisms for policy adjustments, and utilise insights from the women in the pilot to trial in other government settings with below-parity women's participation.
- **Recommendation 4:** Support and provide additional resources for the eSafety Commissioner, Local Government Inspectorate and other relevant bodies to address online bullying, harassment and trolling of candidates and councillors on social media platforms.

Research Methodology



Research Methodology

Interviews

Qdos undertook 19 one-on-one in-depth interviews with current women Councillors. The sample recruited by La Trobe University, endeavoured to capture a breadth of metropolitan and regional Councils of different composition.

Interviews were conducted between mid-May and mid-June 2023.

Interviews with women Councillors	Metropolitan Councils	Regional Councils
Councils where Councillors are predominantly men	3 x Interviews	3 x Interviews
Councils with a balance of men and women Councillors	4 x Interviews	2 x Interviews
Councils where Councillors are predominantly women	3 x Interviews	4 x Interviews

The methodology of one-on-one interviews was designed to allow research participants to confidentially talk about their experiences.

The interviews were structured around the themes:

- The experience of running for Council (motivators, obstacle, supports);
- Overall experiences as an elected representative (Council dynamics/cohesion/diversity, rewards and challenges);
- Gender representation at Council (impacts of gender composition of Council dynamics, State Government move to gender parity by 2025, initiatives to include more women on Council, challenges faced by women to enter local government);
- What needs to change to encourage more women, particularly younger women, to run for Council; and
- Their future plans and likelihood of running for Council at the next election.

Key Findings



The Experience of Running for Council

Motivators for becoming a Councillor

Councillors listed a range of factors that motivated them to run, the main ones were:

- A desire to represent, support and create change within their local community. This may have been general representation, a particular cause e.g. the environment, improving housing services, the condition of local infrastructure, representing a cultural group.
- Encouraged by family, friends, community groups, work colleagues and mentors (e.g. serving or former Councillors) or a political party. Some said this support was one of the biggest advantages when running. Some also said support and information from groups like Women in Local Democracy and the Australian Local Government Women's Association helped in their decision to run.

Other motivators of note were:

- It looked like a convenient/ flexible job.
- They had specific skills/experience to offer.
- They wanted to improve the standard of Council.
- Some wanted to try improve their Council's gender balance.

Obstacles to running for Council

- For women with children or elderly relatives, caring responsibilities often made campaigning difficult, more so if they had other paid work. They said a supportive partner was vital and many weren't sure how single parents on Council coped.
- Campaigning during COVID presented new challenges, such as the inability to engage face to face and having to use social media which was challenging for some (mainly older) Councillors.
- Some felt their own confidence was an obstacle due to unfamiliarity with campaigning in general and/or questioning whether they had the skill-set to be a Councillor. Some reflected that young women were often less confident about stepping forward for these sorts of roles. This also raised issues of appropriate training and induction.
- Some noted that it was expensive to mount a campaign when running for Council.
- A few felt their political views, and in some case, their cultural background, were at odds with parts of the local community and had led to unwanted scrutiny.
- Some felt that the potentially hostile nature of the Council chamber may have put off some young women from running.



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Overall Experience as an Elected Representative

Positive experiences

Councillors mentioned aspects of the job they found most fulfilling:

- **Achievements:** Seeing projects and policies that they championed come to fruition and generally making a positive difference in the community.
- **Applying their skills:** Most felt as though they were able to follow their interests in the role and take on responsibilities aligned with their skills and interests (e.g. communication, governance and project management).
- **Learning:** Many were proud of the fact that they had acquired new and valuable skills such as public speaking, running meetings and learning how local government functioned and the strategic nature of a Councillor's role. For some, the extent of this learning curve was one of the most surprising aspects of being on Council.
- **People:** Some had enjoyed establishing positive working relationships with colleagues and developing a greater engagement with their community.

Negative experiences

- **Workload:** Many were very surprised by the workload and time commitment. While it reflected the role's importance, some had found this particularly stressful as it heavily imposed on other parts of their lives. Some had relinquished other paid work to accommodate their Council role.
- **Complexity and obstacles:** Many said the job was a big "reality check" and they often felt overwhelmed by the volume and complexity of new information and found it difficult to achieve what they had intended. Many thought substandard induction/training for new Councillors led to unrealistic expectations, disappointment and even a few Councillors leaving after one term or during their term.
- **Remuneration:** Given the workload, time commitment and complexities of the role, many felt Councillors were seriously underpaid. They thought the relatively meagre allowance was a deterrent to many young women running.

- **Politicking:** Some had been surprised at how political Council was (with power blocs and 'horse trading') as opposed to the collegiate community organisation they had expected.
- **Bullying, harassment and conflict:** See *next slide*.



Council Cohesiveness

How well their Council functions overall

- Participants' views varied when it came to how well their Council functioned. Some thought, for the most part, it was respectful, cooperative and productive. While there was politicking and conflict, this was usually resolved amicably and a conscientious majority provided an effective barrier to any damaging influences and kept the focus on community needs. However, this was not always the case.

Bullying, harassment and conflict

- Some said their Council was a toxic work environment with frequent bullying. While the worst example of these were more likely to be from Councils whose composition was 'balanced' or 'minority women', some Councillors in majority women Councils also described aggressive behaviour.
- Some attributed this to clashing **political power blocs** (including intimidation of independents) but many said it was due to highly combative and **recalcitrant personalities** often with selfish agendas and a lack of community concern. Some of these difficult people were said to be well

established and to have powerful backing.

- Bullying wasn't restricted to the Council chamber with some participants having been angrily confronted by members of the public or subject to abuse via **social media**, email and text messages. While some saw this as an inevitable part of political office, others had found it very intimidating with a few questioning whether they would run again, and some going to the police.
- Those who had been Mayor said the abuse toward them had been especially vitriolic.

Gendered aggression

- Many thought bullying in Council derived from politics and aggressive personalities rather than gender – some spoke of conflict with or amongst women Councillors. Others, though, felt behaviours were clearly misogynist in nature with some even mentioning sexual harassment.
- Councillors also said some of the abuse on social media was hateful to women and while they acknowledged the value of Twitter etc., a few had reduced or ended their use of social media to avoid this.

- Some felt it was hard to speak up against this abuse for fear of political reprisals.
- Some thought younger women with progressive values were targeted by elements of the public.
- A few said that some women who had considered running had been put off when they learned what other women had endured.



Dealing with Bullying and Harassment

Current mechanisms for dealing with bullying

- Views varied about the effectiveness of their Council's processes for dealing with harassment between Councillors, either in-person or on-line. However, many felt the processes were vague and ineffective.
- Several thought, when it came to addressing bullying by Councillors, Council did not observe the sorts of standards seen in most other workplaces.
- Some said that invoking the Code of Conduct was problematic as it was not anonymous and put victims in the firing line.
- A few had been offered counselling services which they also felt were inadequate and did not address the substantive problem.
- Some also mentioned that Councillors on occasion harassed Council staff which was currently a disciplinary "grey area".

How they wanted to deal with bullying

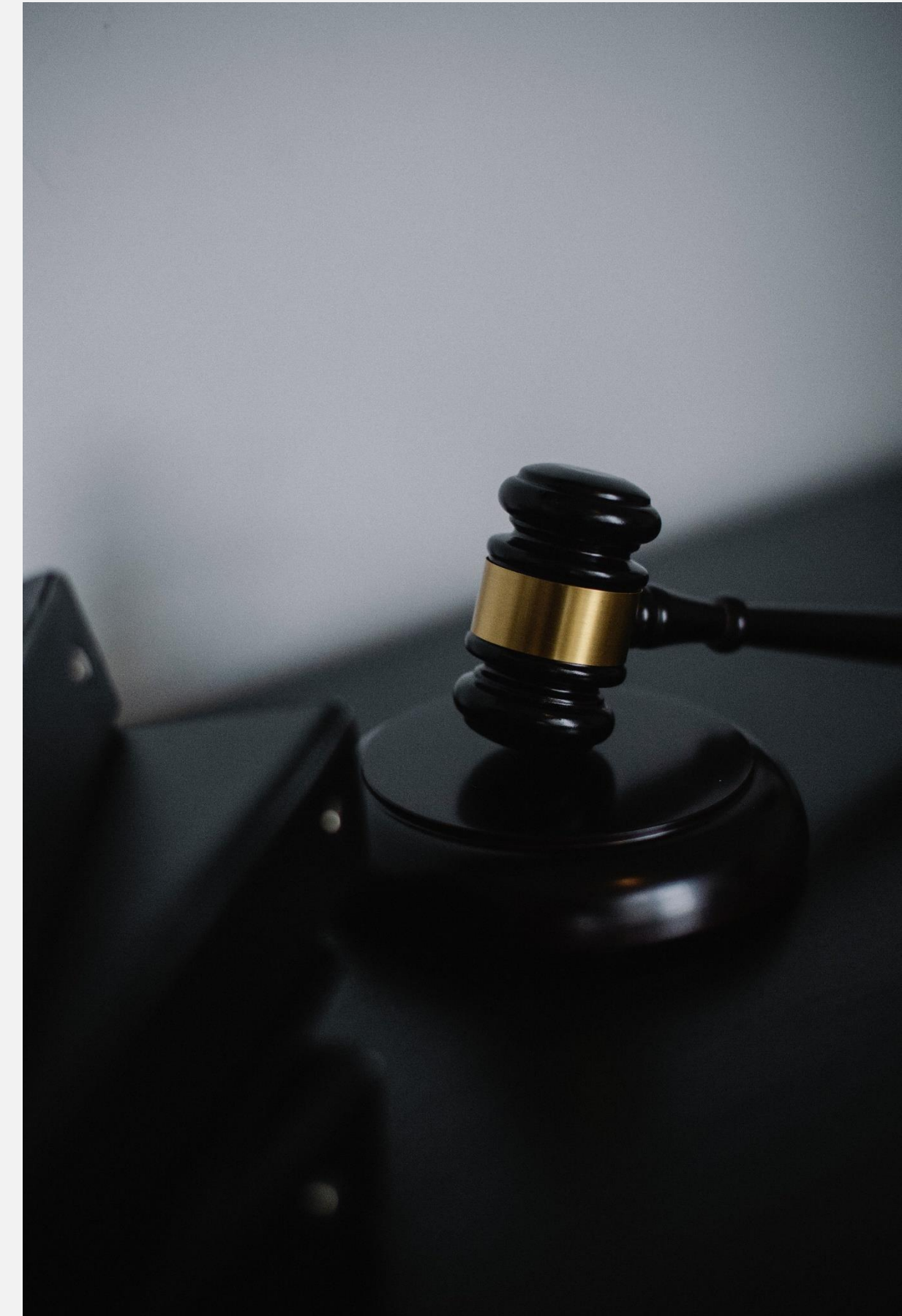
- Most felt that, to reduce bullying, there needed to be better Councillor training (again, they

suggested a more comprehensive induction program), very clear standards, an enforceable Code of Conduct (that could be used anonymously) and serious consequences for individual inappropriate behaviour.

- Some said that current mechanisms, which invariably meant an entire Council being dismissed, should be amended so that individual Councillors could be removed for infringing these standards. They did also note complexities such as the need for by-elections here.

Gender composition and Council dynamics

- Many said their Council was cooperative and community-focused and neither Councillors nor issues were viewed through a gendered lens. Still, some mentioned a negative culture (a "boys club") in which mostly older, long-serving male Councillors tried to control debates and the business of Council. There was also consistent mention of childcare being weaponized against women Councillors (see next slide).



Gender Representation at Council and Perceived Impacts

- Participants also mentioned disrespectful behaviors toward women Councillors such as “mansplaining” and male Councillors taking credit for suggestions female Councillors had put forward. This culture was seen as particularly challenging and at times intimidating for young women who had just been elected.
- Many participants also talked about being criticised for seeking **reimbursement for childcare expenses**. Most said this was a specified item on annual reports and drew considerable hostility from a few Councillors and the local media. They saw this an obstacle to women's participation in democracy that men rarely had to face. Some had stopped applying for reimbursement (or not used it at all) and a few said they may not run again because of this criticism.
- This negative culture (and sexist bullying) were less common in **majority women Councils** where some described a positive and productive working environment and a noticeable improvement on previous male-dominated Councils. Still, even here, participants spoke of combative personalities and political clashes with sometimes created a difficult environment.
- Participants generally felt they were heard but this was less likely in minority women Councils, although

all participants were confident that they could choose which portfolios and committees they joined.

Changing Council's culture

- In addition to the previously mentioned approaches for dealing with bullying, participants also suggested the use of mediators to guide Councils on appropriate behaviour although these would need to be carefully selected to avoid bias. Some thought organisations like ALGWA could be valuable here.
- Some noted that improving Council's culture was part of a broad societal need to improve attitudes to women and to encourage women to take on positions of authority like becoming a Councillor - hence the importance of gender parity as a starting point.

Gender parity

- Overall, there was strong support for gender balanced Councils as a matter of fairness. Some supported more majority women Councils, as they felt women were generally more cooperative, empathetic, open to discussion and community-minded than males.
- All supported the **State Government target** for gender parity by 2025, albeit several expressed doubts about it being attained by then.



Encouraging Younger Women to Run for Council

- While most supported this in principle, there was skepticism it would come to fruition, given the obstacles that needed to be removed. (One participant preferred a push for more representation at state and federal levels rather than at the lowly-paid and under-resourced local level.)
- Some also stressed that achieving gender parity was not just about encouraging new women to enter Council but also about retaining women Councillors.

Encouraging young women to run for Council

Participants mentioned current aspects of being on Council they thought could encourage young women to run:

- The role's **community value** (e.g. helping to improve the local area and people's lives and contributing to the democratic process).
- **Personal benefits** – these included learning about government, acquiring valuable and employable skills and developing resilience. Some also felt young women should know that

being a Councillor offered a career opportunity or at least **a way back into the workforce** for those who (often because of children) had left for a time.

- They thought it important to point out that to some degree, the role offered **flexibility** of hours and contact (e.g. remote meetings) so there was an opportunity for those with caring responsibilities to structure their Council hours around their other commitments.
- However, some felt that even more flexibility of hours was needed to allow people to maintain other jobs and fulfil caring duties. They thought at present, some who might join Council were reluctant to do so because it meant jeopardising their regular job.
- Also, flexibility could be a double-edged sword as a lack of boundaries around Council commitments meant it encroached on the rest of their commitments and lives .

- For most, **childcare reimbursement** should be treated as a right that should not be able to be weaponised, so Councils should stop listing it as a separate line item on the budget.



Encouraging Younger Women to Run for Council

- **Role models & mentors** were seen as key. Mentions included other, more experienced Councillors (and ex-Councillors), support groups, formal organisation (e.g. ALGWA), political parties for those affiliated, who could provide inspiration and guidance to young women. Those who had had this sort of on-going support found it invaluable. Some noted that young women at times doubted their abilities to contribute to Council and a supportive mentor or group could help counter this.
- They also mentioned changes they felt were needed to make Council more attractive for young women (and all Councillors):
- **Better pay** to make it a viable job. Most thought the current remuneration was laughable considering the extensive workload, public scrutiny and in some cases, abuse they received. Unless they were in the mayoral role, or had other sources of income, it was very challenging to remain on Council.
 - **Better training** as part of the induction process, so

that new Councillors clearly understood what the position entailed. This might counter misconceptions about the role and responsibilities which some felt led to disillusionment during their term. Some mentioned they'd benefitted from VLGA, ALGA and Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD) courses.

- Some mentioned compulsory information sessions before lodgement of nominations to at least give all new candidates some idea of the role and time commitment that would be required.
- Some also noted that young women felt more confident about joining their Council if there had been a history of women Councillors. Consequently, they thought that maintaining a **consistent female presence** in Council to avoid a male-centred structure was important.
- **Effective disciplinary processes** to show prospective Councillors that they had effective ways of dealing with bullying, sexism and toxic behaviours.



Future Plans

- While some participants were enthusiastic about remaining in the role to see through projects or get the opportunity to serve (or re-serve) as mayor, several weren't sure if they would run again.
- The main dis-incentives were the on-going time commitment, their experience of a toxic culture, bullying, the poor remuneration and for a couple, the prospect of a face-to-face election campaign.
- Some felt it was also important to allow new blood on Council so serving two to three terms was sufficient for them.
- Very few of these participants were considering running for a seat in state or federal parliament. This decision was based on different reasons including:
 - the need to re-establish their careers
 - the demands on their time and its impact on the work and family lives
 - the toll of the hostility and scrutiny they'd experienced on Council
 - a desire to retire



Detailed Findings





The Experience of Running for Council



Motivators for becoming a Councillor

Community involvement

- Many had joined the Council having become interested in local community issues. Some felt they had become more interested in contributing to the community now they had children.

I love the community. My background...I wanted to have a voice behalf of the community. Be a representative for the community. (Interview 7, Metro Council, Balanced)

I've got young (children). I thought (I) could be involved in the community and make a change for the better. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

What motivated me to run was the state of our facilities and infrastructure.... (I thought) it's time for democracy...a lot of things were starting to fall in the cracks. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

I was always involved in the local community..(joined Council as part of a specific protest) ...when they said run for Council I thought 'it is the next step up' I do like politics. I'll give it a crack. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)

- Some were adamant that they were here for the community and not a party-political agenda.

I'm an independent...I'm purely here for my community, I have no interest in political dogma or party politics or furthering my career beyond local government'. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

- Some mentioned that, once on Council, they removed themselves from external committees to avoid conflicts of interest.

Whether I get elected next time that isn't what drives me, doing good work and supporting people that do great work in the community with good governance. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

People from diverse cultural background, I'm able to raise their voice. (Interview 7, Metro Council, Balanced)

Making sure I was a voice on the ground for my local community... I was already spending a lot of time volunteering and I loved it. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Just altruistic, make the community better. (Interview 6, Regional Council, Balanced)

Once I got on Council I got off all of my committees...mainly because, at that stage we had a lot of community grants. (Interview 3, Regional Council, Balanced)

I live in a rural town that has been neglected...hence I thought I would put my hand up...make a difference. I know the area and I'm passionate about where we live. (Interview 20, Regional Council, Balanced)



Motivators for becoming a Councillor

Political & activist affiliations

- Some belonged to political parties or were involved in specific causes such as the environment or housing and were encouraged through activism to participate in the political process.

I am passionate about issues like housing, climate change, sustainability and strengthening our social fabric.

Local government is a really good place for people like me. (Interview 11, Metro Council, Minority Women)

- A few felt their connection to a political party helped her with the mechanics of running.

I did find it helpful... (party colleague) really helped guide us and let us know what to do and how to do it...he elevated us...he's been a really excellent mentor. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

Convenient/ flexible job

- A couple thought that, in addition to offering a chance to participate in the democratic process and help the community, being on Council was a convenient part-time job.

Really good flexibility mostly (of) a part-time job. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

There's a lot of flexibility in local government. To have a part-time job that was meaningful and flexible in my community was one of thing that attracted me. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

- Some who had jobs outside Council said, however, that with children and a Council role, it was too difficult to continue in their regular job.

You couldn't...it would be very hard to have a young family, be a Councillor and work. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

I found myself an armchair commentator in politics ...I wanted my voice and the voice of my constituents to be heard louder. (Interview 13, Regional Council, Minority Women)

(I thought) 'I'm volunteering this much time already in my community it would be nice if I could get paid to do so'. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

I decided to run against a person I thought was not very kind to community. (Interview 19, Metro Council, Majority Women)

I've always had a deep interest in local government, and I've always been a joiner. (Interview 17, Regional Council, Balanced)

I was (working) two days a week, it was too hard picking up the kids. With Council work, even though you don't get paid much, it covered what my part-time was. I was able to (organise) around the kids. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)

I didn't have a job at that time so I had a lot of time on my hands and I assessed the playing field and thought it's worth doing. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)



Motivators for becoming a Councillor (continued)

Encouragement by family and friends

- Some had been encouraged to join Council by family, friends, work colleagues, community groups or existing Councillors (inc. Mayors). Some also felt that family circumstances, such as their partner taking on more household duties, made running for Council more viable.
- A couple said they were encouraged to run as part of an attempt to bring more women onto Council.

My husband was the one who encouraged me to run...(and) someone in the community suggested it to me. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

In that ward...the female Councillor wasn't running again. I spoke to her and got her endorsement. Something that really helped get me elected was having the endorsement of a female Councillor (with a cultural and political background more traditional to the area). (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

They had skills to offer

I could see I had a skillset that would be beneficial. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

I thought I could be a more engaged Councillor and bring my skillset to decision making. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Interesting challenge

- A couple saw being on Council as a departure from their regular work and life that could provide some valuable learning experiences.

I was doing some volunteering with community groups and I was loving the engagement. I was driving back to my (regular job) and thinking this is so boring. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

(Mayor) was on a mission to boost the numbers of women in Council at that time. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

I just decided one day I was going to run and a former colleague said 'yeah, you should'. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

(With) kids...husband is around...if he was still working I wouldn't have done it. (Interview 3, Regional Council, Balanced)

It had not been on my radar. (I talked to) a (politically active friend) ...she said 'a great way to get to know your community, why don't you just do it. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

I decided I have other talents rather than just sitting in front of a computer preparing documents...I wanted to spend more time around people. I'm interested in a huge variety of things which is perfect for Council. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)

I heard about the Council role and thought 'that sounds like me', I'm going to give it a go. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)



Motivators for becoming a Councillor (continued)

In a financial position to do so

- While not a sole motivator in and of itself, for some the fact that they were financially secure meant they could now act on their ambition to join Council.

Financially, I was in a position where I could earn less as a Councillor. I wanted a meaningful career and I was prepared to take a pay cut. There would be others that would say 'I would love to do that as a career' but can't afford it. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

Wanted to improve the quality of Council

- Some, including a few who had some previous involvement with Council, thought it was not performing as it should and needed new people on board.

The Council group we had were atrocious. Morale was low, lots of redundancies. I thought 'I can't complain if I don't put my hand up'. I wanted to see the change. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

Need for gender balance on Council

- A few said they decided to run because they saw a need for a gender balance on Council.

Initially, gender ...seeing women politicians (overseas), how quotas were working quite well there... (I thought) 'I can probably do something like that'. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

(My platform was) change is needed: younger, fresh, not enough women on Council. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

Watching Council meetings, it was an appalling charade of leadership and management and I thought 'I think I can bring a lot to this with my background'...so I threw my hat in the ring. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

I was very disenfranchised with the Councillor representing my area at the time. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

What motivated me was seeing my demographic, my gender weren't particularly well-represented in Council. We're a small Council. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)



Obstacles to running for Council

Family/ caring responsibilities

- Participants said family responsibilities deterred some they knew from running and made a few existing Councillors question if they should run again. (The issues of childcare and other family responsibilities emerged in various contexts throughout the interviews).

The first term (I did) only one term...my kids were still very young and I feel guilty mother...I came back (later). (Interview 7, Metro Council, Balanced)

Unfamiliar with political campaigning

- Some were hesitant to run for Council because they were simply unfamiliar with the process of campaigning for office.

(I) don't know where to start. (Interview 7, Metro Council, Balanced)

Campaigning during COVID lockdown

- For some, COVID made campaigning difficult. Initially, they weren't sure how to approach it then had to become familiar with online communications like social media and Zoom which was a difficult adjustment for some (esp. those who were older). (As indicated later, online campaigning also offered benefits).

We ran during COVID so it was quite challenging to cut through, engage with the community. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

I was working (part-time) (with a child) (supporting older family members) managing all that. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

Those first few months of on again/ off again COVID restrictions made it hard to engage with the other Councillors ... to build those relationships. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

I found (campaigning during lockdown) hard...I want to meet people...so they know who I am so they vote for me...not online...I'm not good online...Zooms and all that, very difficult. (Interview 7, Metro Council, Balanced)

I am hopeless in social media, it's not fit for everybody. You need various techniques for reaching out to people. (Interview 7, Metro Council, Balanced)

During COVID lockdown... I can't sit idle, we put signs up....Incumbents all had a massive advantage. They were very well known. (Interview 13, Regional Council, Minority Women)



Obstacles to running for Council (continued)

Cost of campaigning

- Some thought campaigning for a place on Council had become more expensive than in years past as people were now using more signs, printed materials and online resources. COVID lockdowns had also necessitated more mailouts.

It cost me \$8,000. I didn't scrimp. You can only claim \$1,000 back which is woeful....the cost of running is prohibitive for some women. (Interview 19, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Remuneration

- Some felt that the financial remuneration for the time, commitment and stress of being on Council was not enough and this affected the calibre of people running. (This issue frequently came up during the interviews).

Self-doubt about suitability for Council

- Some were initially unsure if they had the skills, experience and personal qualities needed to be a Councillor. Some suggested that young women generally were reluctant to 'put themselves out there' as a candidate and undervalued their worth as a potential Council member. They felt that women who had already served on committees were more confident about running.

It was partly my confidence whether I was good enough. I had thought of pulling out a few times during the campaign but (after) a few meetings on zoom I felt like I'd gone past the point of no return. So that kept me going. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

- Some thought this sort of doubt reflected the inadequate induction process and a lack of training for the role. (This topic is discussed in more detail in 'What they would tell young women considering running').

It became quite a financial commitment. I spent over \$2,000 for corflutes and printing. (Interview 17, Regional Council, Balanced)

It wasn't good having an election during COVID. You needed a lot of money (to promote yourself). (Interview 12, Metro Council, Minority Women)

(Social media) that's another expense. (Interview 17, Regional Council, Balanced)

In Queensland... Councillors get around \$100 - 110,000 and it's classed as a full-time job. You get a different calibre of people, someone who's taking it seriously and you're going to get really good outcomes because people are able to focus full-time on this. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

It's difficult at first because you've got to put yourself out there. A lot of women don't say 'I'm really good at this. This is why you should vote for me'. You feel you've got to prove yourself and that's why so many women have (been on) a committee. I haven't (known) many women that have just gone bang, 'I'm going to run for Council. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)

It's daunting I still get butterflies (at) election time. Even the run-up to an election the relationships change on Council. It's not a pleasant time. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)



Obstacles in running for Council (continued)

Scrutiny and criticism

- While running for Council, many participants had been subjected to scrutiny and criticism from the public and other Councillors (see *Bullying and Harassment*). Some felt young women seeing this would be deterred from running. A few also thought that, because of harassment, some Councillors only stayed for one term.

I've said to a few people in community 'you'd be great you should run and I'll support you be a mentor' but people have just said 'there's no way, we've seen what it's like'. It increasingly doesn't feel like a particularly safe or productive workplace. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

- One said she had also been trolled by an opponent on social media during the election.

Political differences

- One participant said her political allegiances were seen as not in keeping with the local area.

I was in (a particular party) already and the opportunity came up..... It was traditionally (other party) area...I was told I was in the wrong party. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

Negative perceptions of Council

- Aside from direct bullying, a few felt that their Council had a reputation for conflict and dysfunction and as a result they were wary of entering that environment.
- One thought Council's negative reputation led to people in the community automatically being suspicious of her motives for running.

I worry that no young women will want to run having seen what's happened in the last few months. It's just too much. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

I have often thought it's about my gender and age but it's evident that it's a really hard gig no matter who you are but I don't think it's made easier by gender. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

The cynicism within the community before they even get to know you, they've made assumptions and judgements about who you are and why you're even running. To try and defend yourself probably doesn't look good...then you'll just look like every other politicianI found it really hard and I was surprised that some of the fiercest critics, on social media, were actually women. (Interview 11, Metro Council, Minority Women)

The incumbent Councillor was absolutely a troll on social media....He was just a dirty tactic man and that was just so hard, he did not care for the rules of ethical fair play campaigning...really undemocratic. (Interview 19, Metro Council, Majority Women)



Support/ advantages while running for Council

Existing affiliations

- Some said their affiliation with **activist groups and causes** helped with networking.

It helped me make the connections I needed to make with other community leaders to get the word out that I was running and build partnerships in the community. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

- Some said they were assisted materially or at least supported by existing **political party affiliations**.

Also, through a member of the local (specific political party) branch. That helped really greatly but they're also like cheerleaders, really supportive. They may not have done anything tangibly but that motivating was really valuable. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

- Some simply said the **community** overall supported them. They said being well known and recognisable in the community helped their campaign and their vote.

I was on a real shoestring budget. Luckily, I did have a good community profile, a good community page, a community activist. I felt that helped me. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Understanding employer

- A very small minority said their employer was prepared to accommodate the time they needed to commit to Council work.

I've been lucky ...they were willing to let me drop back to three days a week. When I was elected Mayor they let me take a year off. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)

I did get a lot of support and endorsement from people in the community. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

There was overlap (between political party and activist links) that social justice environment. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

Yeah, the party helped but ..you always do it yourself. (Interview 7, Metro Council, Balanced)

I don't know whether (party affiliation) helped (to be elected)...it's up to people which way they want to vote. (Interview 7, Metro Council, Balanced)

It's not politics, for me it's very community-grounded.... the community is my (other) family. I felt really supported by them. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

The community and the residents, I work for them, they support me. (Interview 7, Metro Council, Balanced)



Support/ advantages while running for Council (continued)

Support team

- Some found their dedicated volunteer support teams invaluable. A few had doubts about continuing but said their commitment to their support team kept them going.

I had no idea about running a campaign and we wound up with this big team of volunteers. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

I set up a team and we talked strategy. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

Information sources

- Participants mentioned various information sources that helped them decide if they wanted to run for Council. These included the Women In Local Democracy group.

The Women In Local Democracy group, they had training sessions leading up to the election....and they had Ruth McGowan come and do a 'how to get elected' session. Through (WILD) there was that booklet on all the things you need to do to get elected. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

Mentors

- Experienced Councillors and other mentors also played a big role in advising some participants about what it took to run and be part of Council.
- Similarly, some said material support and encouragement from likeminded candidates was very helpful.

I had volunteer letterboxers. Someone helping on social media. Someone coordinating the volunteer walkers. A campaign manager. There was no going back. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

I (ran) with a group of women, we didn't form a party, just an alliance ...to support each other ...tips on how to speak at a forum or how to put a poster together. (Interview 13, Regional Council, Minority Women)

One of the other candidates I shared values with (wasn't elected) we shared our resources and were really collaborative, we were running on the same kinds of platform. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)



Support/ advantages while running for Council (continued)

Advantages of remote campaigning

- Many participants had entered Council during COVID and had to campaign remotely due to the lockdowns. Some felt this was advantageous as it put candidates on a level playing field.

As a mother of three young kids, it was really good because everyone was on an equal playing field. No one was allowed to door knock. You could only do letterboxing. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

- Also, some felt that, for them and possibly other women first entering Council, remote campaigning had the advantage of not having to engage so much face-to-face.

I class myself as more introvert than extrovert. In lockdown, I didn't doorknock. I did Facebook live streaming and got to meet people that way. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

- Instead, a large part of remote campaigning involved the use of social media. Some were unfamiliar with this but others preferred it to 'door knocking' and had a careful social media strategy.

Social media was definitely a key component of a successful campaign. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

- Some saw remote campaigning as more convenient to women with young children.

In many ways (COVID restrictions) facilitated women's involvement...they were able to do campaigning work at night once the kids had gone to bed ...smash out posts and update websites and do the phone calls during the day. In that sense it was a silver lining. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

(Participants also talked about the negatives of dealing with social media while on Council. See 'Social Media Harassment').

No door knocking which I was grateful for because I didn't really want to do that. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

It was really good knowing that no one could do anything.... Writing and communication I don't find hard. Everyone's in the same boat, I've just got to communicate better than everyone else. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

Lockdown made it difficult but might have helped ... I wanted a quiet campaign....no pressure to stand on train platforms. (Interview 11, Metro Council, Minority Women)

A friend in marketing helped me set up a marketing plan and how I'd market myself, strengths, weaknesses, what should I target in my posts. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

I had to upskill and learn about it. I set up a Council Facebook page and Instagram page. Friends that were very cluey with social media helped me set that up. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

(The fact that campaigning would be online) was a factor that made me think 'this is fine, it's hard but this is good'. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)



**Overall
Experiences as an
Elected
Representative**



Overall cohesion and cooperativeness of Council

- The reported level of cohesion and cooperation varied across Councils. Some felt their Council worked well together and voted on issues from the perspective of community interest rather than political gain. These people said that while there was some ‘horse trading’, conflict and obstruction, a cooperative majority prevented the dissenting minority from dominating.

There are issues. We have two Councillors that are very difficult...The rest of the group is committed to doing what's right for the community. When you have a majority that is focused on good outcomes for the community you can just move past one Councillor's frustrations. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

Apparently we've got a really good Council. There's slight stabs and sometimes I find it's almost at the disrespectful side, people just having digs at each other. (Interview 6, Regional Council, Balanced)

- Others, however, said their Council was riven by conflict and bullying due to clashes between political blocs (see ‘Negative Experiences/ Challenges’), difficult personalities and for a few, negative male attitudes toward women (see ‘Challenges and obstacles for women to enter local government’).
- Some felt the introduction of remote communications during COVID had altered the Council dynamic. It had introduced much needed flexibility but as people weren't physically together as much now, there were gaps in some Councillors' knowledge of issues.

COVID has had an effect, because people don't need to come into the chamber they can hybrid and they're just not coming. (Some are) popping in and out all day to strategy session. If they're not there, they're not informed. (Interview 3, Regional Council, Balanced)

- One said strategy sessions with a local government mentor had improved cooperativeness among Councillors. The value of mentors was discussed in various contexts throughout the interviews.

Sometimes there's a little bit (of political conflict) but not like we hear in the city Councils.... During election time that did happen. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

The majority are really good, things have always gone through. We've been lucky with that. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)

Ninety percent of (the role is) fantastic but 5% is alright and 5% is absolutely horrible. That horrible is behaviour behind the scenes sometimes. The Inspectorate really needs more money. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)

We see differently on many issues but we are relatively collaborative...when I put (a disturbing incident of harassment) to them they said 'what can we do to help?'. They've always been very supportive and appreciate that wellbeing and safety is paramount to doing the job. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

We've put things in place. We wanted to have more direction in the broader issues. We now have strategic conversations each month. Then Councillors feel they've got influence over the direction things are going. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)



Overall diversity of Council

- Some felt their Council reflected their **community's diversity** which they greatly appreciated.

(We have a diverse Council) we have (majority) women and (a range of cultural backgrounds) ... our Council is a mirror of our community. It's not all privilege. A lot of the women are working class. A lot of women have children on the spectrum. Having that diversity and mental health it's not something we don't speak about. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

We've got women of colour...I've felt like our Councillors reflected our community really well. We matched the profile of the community quite well. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)

- Others, though, felt Council didn't reflect their diverse community or perhaps reflected the community's lack of diversity.

A range of male, female voices and different ethnicities (in the community but) we're a very white Council. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

Diversity in Council is something we desperately need. Councils where it's very monotone, where you've got privilege are not the Councils that change things. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

It needs to be a multicultural balance. We are a multicultural society and anything less than that is indicative of our inherent racism. (Interview 13, Regional Council, Minority Women)

- Some noted big **age differences** between Councillors. They welcomed both young and old being represented but felt that this was a source of conflict. A couple thought that, with the Council largely made up of older males, young women were reluctant to run.

It's age where the biggest differences are...(more older people) it's more an age thing than a gender thing. (Interview 3, Regional Council, Balanced)

- Some thought the role of Councillor was more accessible to a settled, retired person which led to a lack of diversity.

We just attract older people...it's not a female thing (it's a stage of life thing). (Interview 3, Regional Council, Balanced)

Pretty much we're white (population) and Council reflects it. (Interview 3, Regional Council, Balanced)

It's women, it's different ethnic groups, different ages, different experiences. Have that conversation together to trigger selection of people. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

Having a strong, dynamic, diverse and robust democracy at a local level means alot. Right now, we've got state and federal Labor if you replicate that at a local level you've got a one tone government and it's not what we need. We need diversity. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

(Because of the requirement to have someone who lives in the community and who has the time) you get someone who's retired, very settled where they live; but are they up on youth needs? (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

That's significant, it's an older cohort so it's 40's, 50's and 60's. So, no I don't think it's representative. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

I'm the only person that's first-generation migrant on the Council, so everyone else is Anglo-Australian. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)



Positive experiences

Interesting and challenging work

- Most had found being a Councillor a rewarding, challenging and surprising experience.

I love the job... every day I have no idea what's going to be down the other end when I pick up my phone...it is a really dynamic environment to be a part of. It continues to challenge me and I just love it. (Interview 17, Regional Council, Balanced)

I (appreciate) the opportunity, It's been a really steep learning curve. (Interview 11, Metro Council, Minority Women)

Making a contribution to the community and to issues

- For many Councillors, the sense of achievement that they were doing something important for their community was the greatest personal benefit of being on Council.

I had the most amazing experience... I got advocacy from a group ...after (many years) we opened their sporting facility. Getting that result for a community group is just amazing. I had to fight tooth and nail to keep their project in the budget.... if not (the club) would have completely folded. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

I thought I knew what local government was and I was amazed... It's incredible what Council's do for their communities...we're absolutely vital. We do so much for so little and we provide valuable services that make such a difference in people lives. (Interview 17, Regional Council, Balanced)

- Some derived satisfaction from being able to bring established skills (e.g. management and consultancy) to the issues of Council.

I've worked with lots of industry sectors so I do have views on many of the issues that come before us at Council so I feel I can make a contribution. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

- Some particularly liked meeting locals and interacting with the community.

I particularly enjoy the community engagement side of it. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

I've got a really good sense of purpose. It's quite humbling. I'm making decisions that will affect the Shire in fifty years time. (Interview 6, Regional Council, Balanced)

Given my fascination with organisation dynamics and the role leaders play, it ticks a lot of boxes of interest. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

That really gives me a buzz about being on local government, putting a budget through and driving infrastructure. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)

My job is to help people do good stuff for our community. Whether it's our officers, community group, connecting local businesses. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

It's incredibly satisfying. I look around town and see projects I've been involved with...people enjoying it and that just makes me so happy. (Interview 17, Regional Council, Balanced)

You realise how many good people there are in the community especially volunteers...people are just so generous with their time. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)



Positive experiences (continued)

The learning experience/ Developing skills

- Some particularly valued the fact that they had learned so much in the role about the workings of local government, specific services and areas, organisations and democratic processes. They also appreciated learning particular skills such as public speaking, strategic thinking and running meetings. Some had expanded their knowledge through courses like AICD. For some, this learning had been one of the most surprising experiences on Council.

I have enjoyed the learning curves on so many things to be able to fulfil what I see as my role as a Councillor....I have learned a lot...what it means to be in local government. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

I've learned a hell of a lot about strategic thinking and decision making. What I've learned is amazing and I'm in an infinitely better position to get so many different roles (now). I've learned how to listen deeply and work with a range of ideas... how to advocate for people on things... how to chair and manage meetings and conflict. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

- For some, part of that learning experience was character development, e.g. becoming more resilient and patient.

Resilience in myself. There were many times I thought 'this isn't for me' but I've been able to get the support I need and overcome it. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Being patient with people...with Council. Local Government can be really slow and frustrating. I'm a better listener, I now look at a big picture ...more strategically. (Interview 17, Regional Council, Balanced)

I've learned life skills ...how to talk to people... disseminate information, make decisions on balance. I've learned that in my community there are amazing people doing amazing things and they don't get credit for it. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

That board experience has been amazing I wasn't expecting that...how to develop a presence, influence. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

The skills you learn are a lot more than you expect. You get really good at looking at things on a much higher level ... 'I want to do a certain thing' becomes 'how can we achieve something broader and (more) holistic'. You get really good in that strategic stuff. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

I'm enjoying it....it's super interesting...to get insights into how things work. People in community groups will invite you in to tell you what they're doing and why ...I feel like now I've absorbed a lot of information that I can now push back out into the community. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)



Positive experiences (continued)

Interaction with colleagues

- While many Councillors related negative experiences with colleagues, some saw their interactions and relationships with other Councillors, the Mayor, the CEO and Council staff as the most positive aspects of their time on Council. These provided friendships, mentorships, learning experiences and professional connections.

I'm very proud ...my Council work very close and we listen. We disagree but we understand...we work very well. I support harmony, we respect (each) other we never argue. (Interview 7, Metro Council, Balanced)

The relationship with the CEO is great. He's always smiling, always smoothing the waters, always wanting to find a better outcome for the organisation. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

I get a lot of support from (some) colleagues. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

You work with some fantastic officers. They're dedicated, terrific people to work with. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)

The Mayor is excellent he's been really supportive of women's issues. He was one of the people who planted the seed to help me think about running for Council. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

I get on really well with the CEO. I think she does a fabulous job. (Interview 6, Regional Council, Balanced)

Very good relationship with the CEO, the staff and the Director...very good team. (Interview 7, Metro Council, Balanced)

I have no issues we're all working really well...we disagree but in respect...I say 'you are here for the community, I am here for the community as well'...we are friends, we work together. (Interview 7, Metro Council, Balanced)

I've made some amazing connections... doors will open now that never would have. I've got a strong Councillor ally...were it not for her I don't know that I'd last the distance. (Interview 11, Metro Council, Minority Women)



Negative experiences/ challenges

Heavy workload & time commitment

- Most found the workload and the time commitment for Councillors very challenging. Many thought they had an idea of what to expect when joining Council but had found it a more complex, demanding and time-consuming job than they had anticipated and that the steep learning curve had at times been quite stressful. This raised concerns about the induction process not adequately preparing people (see slide 50 for further detail about induction and training concerns). Some noted that people joined with a specific issue or agenda and found that difficult to fulfil as the job involved much more.

I came with the idea it would be a flexible job, something I could do while the kids were at school or after hours.... naively I thought it would be nice, family friendly. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

- It was particularly challenging for those who also had careers and/or had to care for young children or older relatives. They said an understanding partner was very important and the role was even more difficult for single parents.

My husband has been amazing, incredibly supportive and even now if I've got Council meeting days, I don't think for a second. You absolutely need support. (Interview 17, Regional Council, Balanced)

- Some had moved to a part-time or other arrangements with their regular job but others said their normal employer didn't offer any flexibility or leave for Council duties. Some had relinquished other work or did many of their Council duties outside working hours.

I only can do after work...after my normal job or weekend. Usually, we meet until 5:30 then until nine or 10. (Interview 7, Metro Council, Balanced)

The first six months it was a steep learning curve... it was really overwhelming and a lot of work. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

I struggled to maintain my job.... it's a big burden. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

I don't think information sessions leading into (the role) were sufficient... (they suggested that it was only about 10 or 15 hours a week. That's a load of rubbish. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

I'd do 60 hours (a week) easy. (Interview 20, Regional Council, Balanced)

It's much, much harder than I expected. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

(Despite previous exposure) I still didn't appreciate what the role of the Councillor was...the amount of work. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

I was doing paid employment on top of (Council) ...it was too much. I've had to give up my paid employment I'll miss out on that really amazing opportunity and growth for my professional development. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)



Negative experiences/ challenges (continued)

Heavy workload & time commitment (continued)

- Some were concerned about the extent to which Council duties disrupted their work/life balance and took them away from family activities.
- Some also thought the open-ended, unstructured nature of Council duties meant it was hard to separate from their life.

The job has occupied me in a way that no other work has... sometimes to a damaging extent. You want to be able to not think about work when you're in bed and it's 3am. It's been an all-consuming position. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

- Because of the job's demands, a couple had thought about leaving before the end of their term.

The second term was getting to that point (of quitting)...(but) I'd like to see (certain things) happen. (Interview 3, Regional Council, Balanced)

- Some who had also been Mayor said the workload in that position was even more demanding (see also Impact of Gender Composition on Council dynamics - Female Mayors).

We came out of lockdown so we had all the events that couldn't happen the year before and the year before that. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

You can do the role as much or as little as what you want. There's no KPI's, no framework of how many hours you need to do per week. ...you can risk burning out because of the open-endedness of the job. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

You try to set up barriers and say 'I'm going to be home for after school every day' but invariably meetings get put on and it's out of your control... there is a lot of pressure....it can take a toll on family life. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Some Councillors have resigned (due to) COVID burnout.... retaining someone is more cost effective than turnover. The time and energy I've spent educating myself....and continuity for the community for the officers. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)



Negative experiences/ challenges (continued)

Bullying & harassment – by other Councillors

- Participants thought debate and interaction among Councillors was generally robust but respectful. Many, though, said they and others were the victims of bullying and harassment by Councillors. A couple even mentioned sexual harassment.

Some Councillors have resigned, some of it's sexual harassment. It's not good. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

- They said a lot of this said bullying was due to **extremely hostile, intimidating and combative personalities**. Some were said to be very well-established Councillors who had public and political backing who appeared to be there for personal prestige and political reasons rather than the good of the community. A few thought these sorts of personalities seriously obstructed Council's ability to function effectively, had undermined previously productive councils and even made others feel unsafe. Even in some majority women Councils there was a high turnover of women because they did not want to deal with particularly aggressive Councillors.

Terrible man; a vicious bully. (Interview 12, Metro Council, Minority Women)

One of (the women who didn't run for Council) was explicit about her reason for not running, it was to do with the bad Councillor that we had to deal with. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

- Some found it too intimidating to try and defend themselves when attacked as they thought it would lead to more bullying. This was particularly difficult for young women dealing with older established males (see also Challenges and Obstacles for Women to enter Local Government).

I want to keep my mental health in check.... to defend yourself but I am reluctant to because I know there'll then be an awful, toxic pile on. I just stay out of that space. (Interview 11, Metro Council, Minority Women)

If you complain about (the criticism) or call it out it's seen that you're not fit to do the job. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

(The other difficult Councillor) is a very abrasive person.... that's why I'd never take a leadership role I'm too exhausted to deal with (this Councillor). (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)

If things get worse, who's going to be left and how unrepresentative that might become. The people who push through are often very well resourced or have their own dysfunction, lack empathy or a narcissist or megalomaniac or desperate to use this as a stepping stone ...or they've got the strong backing of a party. (Interview 11, Metro Council, Minority Women)

It's a pit of snakes. Politics attracts two types of people...the egotistical megalomaniac and the person who has a good heart and wants to help people. (Interview 13, Regional Council, Minority Women)

We've got lots of women. But the women and anyone under 40 won't stay for more than one term. I am almost certain it's because of this man. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)

This happens everywhere ...metro, regional, small, big Councils where there is an unsavoury element (and) personal politics ...awful personal attacks. If you don't have support it can be really challenging. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

(There are) very difficult Councillors, a lot of bullying, ego. (Seeing) a really excellent Council, doing incredible things ...fall apart. Poor decision making, (political conflict) that I don't like. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)



Negative experiences/ challenges (continued)

Bullying & harassment – by other Councillors (continued)

- Bullying also derived from **political conflict** between party voting blocs, intimidation of independents and **interpersonal clashes over issues**.

In the first term I experienced some bullying. I felt very targeted. A lot had to do with the fact that I was independent. People couldn't put me in a box and saw me as a bit of a threat. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

(One) person really pushed to challenge me on everything. It was very much a personal thing. A nasty experience....it got to the point where I thought I really want to quit...the emotional turmoil it causes ... the personal politics, it can be really terrible. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

- A few said Councillors sometimes bullied Council staff and dealing with this was a grey area.

Bullying & harassment – by the public

- Some talked about intimidating encounters with members of the public dissatisfied with decisions or who generally felt the Councillor did not represent them or deserve to be in that role. Younger women found this especially intimidating and felt they may be targeted more, especially those who brought progressive ideas to Council.

I had someone lay into me verbally ...and I was on my own. It was a female. She didn't like a decision we'd made. (Interview 11, Metro Council, Minority Women)

- Some noted that being a **smaller regional Council** raised additional issues of the public having more direct access to Councillors than in larger metro Councils.

Because we're such a small Council the proximity between Councillors and the community is very direct....in bigger Councils often a staff member who would do that liaison with community. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

A completely unsafe working environment. We've lost heaps of staff. Awful to (see)...it all being destroyed. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

It's rife with corruption....full of people actively working against me, looking to tarnish my reputation. (Interview 13, Regional Council, Minority Women)

A lot of Councillors have quit. We have lost a lot of talented people because of this kind of bullying...it can build up into something you feel you can't beat. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Pretty tough..... there's some fierce tough women who are very supportive but it does feel like a very lonely pursuit sometimes. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

They've been disrespectful to officers. That's not right, we're under a code of conduct. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)

I've been confronted in the street...I can't imagine the older men would have had those confrontations. People saying 'you don't represent us you know nothing about us, who do you think you are'. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

In a town as small as we are, people know where you live. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)



Negative experiences/ challenges (continued)

Social media harassment

- Most Councillors thought a social media presence was important in their role but nearly all had experienced some level of social media criticism. Many weren't particularly concerned about this and simply accepted it as part of any political role.

It took the keyboard warriors two days to sniff me out. I just thought, if I can't cope with this I might as well just pull out right now because this is what it's going to be like. (Interview 6, Regional Council, Balanced)

- Others, though, felt it was excessive, threatening and constituted harassment. A couple had received messages so threatening they went to the police about them.

Social media makes me want to vomit. It's just so horrendous and so vicious. (Interview 6, Regional Council, Balanced)

(Criticism happens) online at community events. Social media is the space in which it's most vitriolic. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

- Some felt that, rather than being gendered, attacks resulted from conflict over issues and politics.

I don't think being female makes any difference. Being a Councillor you're a trashing (target) rather than it being a sexual thing. (Interview 20, Regional Council, Balanced)

- Others, though, said comments directed at women had been sexually aggressive and misogynist.

One explicitly gendered criticism (involving a serious threat) that I can't imagine happening to my male colleagues. That frightened me quite profoundly. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

Some of them are just disgusting, the type of comments. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

In terms of social media... I typically have a pretty friendly time. I haven't directly experienced some of the terrible things that other people have. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Social media's a problem...the bullying that I experienced from my Councillor colleagues, social media's a big aspect of it... It's extremely insidious. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

My personal space was invaded and it was really tough ...people sending really weird scary stuff. You think you can deal with it but you can't, it became overwhelming. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

None (in my Council) have had any. There are a couple of keyboard warriors but they tend to focus on Council rather than individual(s). (Interview 17, Regional Council, Balanced)

(Criticisms) haven't been gender-based, they've been age-based (being younger) ...'newcomer, what would she know. She doesn't represent us'. Perhaps there's a gendered lens. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

Some just want to tell you you're a dumb kid. It probably is to do with gender. My guess is 'dumb kid' is actually 'dumb girl.' (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)



Negative experiences/ challenges (continued)

Social media harassment (continued)

- A few had greatly reduced their social media engagement to avoid clashes with trolls and some said the harassment made them reconsider running again. They agreed the hostility of social media trolling would put some young women off entirely.

Absolutely. I got off Facebook because I had so much heat. (Interview 13, Regional Council, Minority Women)

I had a Councillor Facebook page. I took that down because I couldn't be bothered. I just got tired of some of the comments and thought 'I don't need this'. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)

- Some noted that female Mayors received particularly venomous comments.

I've been pretty lucky, it hasn't been too bad. But one of my colleagues. She just got torn apart. Our Mayor doesn't have a social media presence because it was too negative. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced).

Negative traditional media

- Participants were less inclined to mention traditional media but some felt that they or other Councillors had been targeted and heavily criticised there.

Almost all Councillors have had a ribbing from the local newspaper. (Interview 13, Regional Council, Minority Women)

We have a very biased local media, so that's been challenging trying to cut through that. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

There's been hostile media interest. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)

I don't like it; I wish I didn't need to do it. I don't even comment on any community group pages anymore. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

Social media is potentially a deal breaker for a number of us because (the public) have opinions they want to share. The lack of respect in the community...they voice it in whatever way they choose. Twenty years ago that wasn't a thing...it's a game changer. (Interview 11, Metro Council, Minority Women)

Most people contact you because they want something done or they are angry.... Online all the time can be really tough and I have to step away from it. Time with family and friends is so vital when you're on Council because you can get sucked into that vortex. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

COVID really changed people throughout the community and social media. We've got these people... that are turning up to Council meetings...they're not nasty or disruptive but you know they're going to run for Council or they put stuff on Facebook about you. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)



Negative experiences/ challenges (continued)

Current processes for addressing bullying and harassment

- Most thought mechanisms for addressing **bullying and harassment within Council** were inadequate and did not meet normal workplace conduct standards. The Code of Conduct system was considered risky because it wasn't anonymous, moved slowly and seemed weak.

In a workplace context I think it's not adequate. There are claims of bullying from members that don't come to anything. A lack of adequate strategies. I don't think workplace health and safety extend to Councillors in the same way it does to a normal workplace. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

Characters who would not get away with it in a normal setting can absolutely get away with it as a Councillor. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

- When it came to social media, some said that, rather than a Council-wide policy, each Councillor dealt with it as they saw fit but there was some talk of a more formal process coming into place.

It's up to you. Some Councils have a Mayor and Councillor face-to-face that their comms team manage, we don't have that, we've talked about it. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

- Some felt the recommended counselling services were also inadequate.

You can seek support through internal counselling the EAS...I didn't find that helpful at all. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

- Most thought Council's way of dealing with **harassment from the public** was also inadequate.

Support within the organisation (re: public harassment) hasn't been particularly strong. I reported (a very threatening incident) ...they said 'we've noted it down but you decide how you want it acted on'. I didn't think it should have been incumbent on me to determine how I wanted to act on it. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

There is no other level...Council staff have the CEO where they can get that support. When you don't have the support as a Councillor, you can feel really alone. Processes are there but are truncated and take a long time to work through to get a result that is not always good. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

The bullying and harassment I've experienced there's very little ability to address it. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

When the problem is Councillors and the Councillors hire and fire the CEO, that's a complicated dynamic. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

Councils don't have strong enough controls around personal politics. A lot you go to the Inspectorate. There is a process within Council but that takes time. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

If people start getting nasty and personal, what's the comeback, who can you go to, to mediate that? (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)



Negative experiences/ challenges (continued)

How Councillors want bullying and harassment addressed

- Participants tended to think there should be a clearer and more formalised process for **reviewing** Councillors' conduct and more severe **penalties** for inappropriate and aggressive behaviour.

Absolutely, there needs to be better regulation of unethical behaviour....(it) needs to be called out way more than it is. (Interview 19, Metro Council, Majority Women)

- Some thought there should be a mechanism for dismissing individual Councillors rather than the whole Council as the potential upheaval this caused seemed to be an obstacle to confronting bad behaviour. They noted, however, that individual dismissal would require a by-election.

I would love some kind of performance review so it's not so hard to get rid of Councillors who are ineffective or toxic. (Interview 11, Metro Council, Minority Women)

(Running) a by-election... Council would have to pay for and it's likely that person (if allowed to run) would win again. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

- Some also felt there needed to be a formal processes for dealing with community members' unacceptable behaviour toward Councillors.
- Some Councillors said organisations like the ALGWA and experienced women Councillors had often provided them with the best guidance in response to bullying and harassment.

Support groups, especially ones that support women have been really supportive for me. ((Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Government needs to step in and do a mandatory Code of Conduct to make it really strict...The Inspectorate, it's really hard (with) behaviour behind the scenes ... it costs so much to get an arbiter in and it's a toothless tiger. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)

We talked with the ALGA...if you could sack individual Councillors and replace (them) with an administrator. At the moment we all go down with the ship and it's not really fair. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

I did seek advice from fellow Councillors, the CEO and a women's organisation called ALGWA for which I was really eternally grateful... I was able to get the support I needed. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

(I didn't find the EAS counselling helpful) I found reaching out to other female mentors to guide me through this. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)



Negative experiences/ challenges (continued)

Politicking

- Some were surprised at how political being on Council was. A few had perceived Council as more of a community organisation and found the political mindset very surprising.
- Some felt that one of the most dispiriting aspects of being a Councillor was seeing politics, rigid party-based voting blocs and 'horse trading' undermine good ideas. One said questionable politicking led to dubious decisions including a Mayoral vote in which a woman appeared to make way for a man.

I misjudged the extent to which it is politics...I put my hand up to be a local Councillor and to be engaged and to represent. (Interview 11, Metro Council, Minority Women)

The harsh reality for me was 'these are not your friends'....It's just understanding that. When you first go in you feel like you want some allies but it's really just a professional relationship. When that expectation doesn't meet reality it can be challenging. (Interview 19, Metro Council, Majority Women)

(In my regular job) decisions are based on evidence and a plan, there's clear recommendations and we move forward in that direction, it was clear that politics doesn't. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

- Some were relieved that, following the last election, some of the more ardent politically-driven Councillors were gone.

We had a lot more political players in the last term, more party politics a lot more voting blocs. The current Council are a lot more open to understand, more curious...we don't have those stagnant voting blocs...it feels like we're assessing each issue as it comes. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Something I and women find challenging, the politicking...You've done good work...community debate, policy, none of that at the end of the day counts for anything... (Before the last election) we never had any discussions about what would be best for our community, the fact that 51% of our community are women, having a different view. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

The run up to the Mayoralty, the whole experience of deal making, faction forming which is not how I would want to work ...if I hadn't been able to change that in (a regular job) I would have left the organisation. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

I've learnt about power dynamics and how they can corrupt people. (Interview 13, Regional Council, Minority Women)

I don't think I realised when I was running for Council that I was becoming a politician, it seems really naïve now. I never thought of it as political, I thought of it as leaders in our community, I didn't connect it to state and federal politics....it's the grass roots nature of it. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)



Negative experiences/ challenges (continued)

Inadequate remuneration

- Many said financial remuneration for Council duties was inadequate. They felt that, given the demands of the role, Councillors should be paid more.
- Some thought poor remuneration deterred large swathes of the community from running for Council which drastically reduced the talent pool. In particular, some thought the standard allowance of \$37,000 a year was not sufficient to make being on Council viable for a lot of young women who had considerable family expenses and/or more lucrative career options. They tended to think those who were financially secure or retired were better placed to run which made Council less democratic.

One of the things local government need to address is remuneration and make it so that it is paid as a full-time role. Remuneration really lets down a lot of women because they say 'I'm juggling having a job and looking after children, I don't need a third responsibility'. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

- Some also noted that, as it compelled many Councillors to do other jobs to make ends meet, the poor remuneration worked against people committing sufficiently to Council business.

The aspect of being paid as Councillor is not enough to do it as a full-time job so you need to be doing other work. That is discriminatory ... it is a 24/7 job. People will call you on Saturdays and Sundays, in the middle of the night. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

You won't (attract young women) because remuneration is appalling. (Interview 19, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Remuneration for Councillors is a big issue...it leads to poor decision making. We get about \$37,000 a year...for the level of decision making...It's not a liveable wage. (We) need to supplement income with additional paid employment. What that means is people's brains are even more dispersed thinking about other things. You don't have time to go down deep and understand what you're voting on. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

If you pay people a liveable wage to make strategic decision making you're going to get better decision making. You will actually attract people to this job and more importantly, retain people. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

The remuneration's a joke for what we do. (Interview 11, Metro Council, Minority Women)

Why wouldn't they apply? A significant loss of income. No compulsory superannuation payments.... I've taken a \$50,000 pay cut to do this job. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)



Negative experiences/ challenges (continued)

Substandard induction/ training

- Views varied about the extent to which new Councillors should be trained in the role before they started. A couple thought learning too much about the reality of Council might be off-putting but Councillors tended to say that a much more comprehensive introduction to the job (including training before and after the election) was needed.

There needs to be an induction program for Councillors pre and post (election), to be more realistic about what it is that a Councillor can do....(to clarify that) Local government, it's community engagement...it's about what the community (want) not personal gain. (Interview 19, Metro Council, Majority Women)

- Some felt many new Councillors were unsure of the job's requirements, were often overwhelmed by the volume and complexity of work, weren't aware of their legal liabilities and didn't understand that they were part of a board and their main role was strategic not operational. It was suggested that, because of limited training, they and others had been impatient with the process and frustrated by apparent red tape and obstacles to obtaining information.

The whole idea of what really is our role, what can it influence, what can we do? Where do we stop asking questions because we can't go into operational territory? What's the best way to get things done? if you don't know that you come across as aggressive or confrontational. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

- Some wanted comprehensive courses or programs and felt the Australian Local Government Women's Association provided good examples.

It's just this little half and hour thing. There should be like a 10-week local government course. Something a little bit more formal on what it is to be a Councillor. Beter mechanisms on what local government is about. (Interview 19, Metro Council, Majority Women)

There's some great programs like Women In Local Democracy and the Australian Local Government Women's Association. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

Induction was pretty average, very basic I didn't think (it) was very good. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

It was initially quite tough ... our induction was pretty much all online so we didn't really get to meet the Councillors for some time and didn't get to gel as a team and that opportunity to understand each other. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

We should be having a mini AICD course when we first are elected.... what we got didn't (cover) any of that. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

Education, what you can and can't do. Councillors get unhappy when they feel something should happen but it's not possible...unrealistic expectation. (Interview 19, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Elections aren't until 18 months you need to start advertising now and doing some information sessions. Look at the local act or what governance means and giving especially women some skillsets that would help them when they get into local government. (Interview 20, Regional Council, Balanced)

You'd probably lose a ton of great applicants but you need time to reconcile how big an undertaking it is. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)



A composite image split vertically. The left side shows a woman with long dark hair in a white blazer, her right hand extended. The right side shows an older woman with short white hair in a bright red textured blazer, her left hand shaking the other woman's. The background on the right includes a wooden shelf with a Buddha statue and a candle. The text 'Gender Representation at Council and Perceived Impacts' is overlaid on the left side in a bold, dark blue font.

Gender Representation at Council and Perceived Impacts



Impact of gender composition on Council dynamics

Overall impact

- Views varied about the impact of a Council's gender composition on its dynamics and culture including the tone and outcome of debates and meetings.
- Some thought Councillors did not view each other or issues through a gendered lens and that previous gender-balanced or predominantly women Councils had been about the same attitudinally as the current one in which women were in the minority.

(Gender) does (play a role) a little bit but I think we're ok. Sometimes you go 'what did you say that for?' For the most part we're pretty good. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

Last term we had more women than men and ...same thing...no issue at all. (Interview 7, Metro Council, Balanced)

- Others, however, felt that gender balance had a profound effect on Council dynamics. Some from **majority women Councils** said they worked more collaboratively than if it was majority male. Some in **minority women Councils** also believed a gender balance or majority women Council would work more cooperatively. They felt that women, more than men, tended to discuss and explore issues with patience and empathy.

If we have more women on Council, the pressure of (majority) men on issues (saying) 'I think I'll be a better stronger leader, you stand down now' ... we'd challenge that. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

If men are really dominant, that can be really problematic because women's voices don't get heard because they know when to have restraint. In our environment there are more women...it works really well ...no one dominates ...we know when to stop talking. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)

It could be (different if more woman were on Council) but I'm wary of making blanket generalisations. (Interview 11, Metro Council, Minority Women)

I've never been treated differently...always with respect. What you give is what you get. Gender's never been a card that's been played. (Interview 17, Regional Council, Balanced)

Were all very collegiate with one another we do get along, trying to respectfully disagree on things. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

Women, we talk and listen and woman is like a balance, make it work and make it better. (Interview 7, Metro Council, Balanced)

Decision making is different by women... (more women) provide more space for thinking in different ways. It feels narrower (in a male majority Council). (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

Females tend to negotiate better...there is respect...you can have a difference of opinion but be respectful. (Interview 20, Regional Council, Balanced)



Impact of gender composition on Council dynamics (continued)

Overall impact (continued)

- A few suggested that women were more in touch than men with the local community and were more focused on a positive outcome for the community rather than personal or political gain.
Women know more how the community runs because men have gone off to work and women have brought the children in. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)
- Some participants said that their Council had a **history of women Councillors** which appeared to be a positive and welcoming factor for young women.
Why we have the numbers (of young women) in our Council, there's been lots of women in the past. There's a culture of having women on Council. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)
- Conversely, a couple noted that the loss of women Councillors after an election had led to a more toxic and less productive Council (see Negative and Hostile Council Environment).
- Even in majority women Councils, however, there were still issues and conflict with aggressive and disruptive males (and sometimes females) (see Negative and Hostile Council Environment).
There are still alpha males who make it uncomfortable and hard for women even though (we are) a majority. It's the squeaky wheel of men that are trying to overtake. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Committee and Portfolio preferences

- Participants were asked if people on Council were able to choose the committees and portfolios they wanted. Most said there was a fair process for doing this at their Council. No one mentioned gender specific obstacles to women being on the committees they wanted.
We do it really well.... we try to give everyone their top preferences. If there's overlap we talk through it. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

We're in touch with local community groups, there's empathy there...an informality that men don't get as much.... You're part of the community a little bit more. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)

Absolutely. Women talk more, they're more inclusive....women do discuss things longer and they've got more empathy for community. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)

People get to be on the committees of their choice)....we tend to work it out among ourselves it's not a big deal. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

Being in a minority position (politically) committees are a really good way to have some impact and build your leadership skills and work with other people. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

People are respectful. If it's something you really want to do they let you have that portfolio. (Interview 6, Regional Council, Balanced)



Impact of gender composition on Council dynamics (continued)

Extent to which the Councillor feels heard

- Most Councillors said they had a positive working relationship with their male colleagues but views were mixed about the extent to which they (or other women Councillors) were heard. They felt that, in general, they could express their views but due to overbearing Councillors and social conditioning for women to not speak up, it was sometimes difficult for women to assert their voice. While situations varied across the cohorts, women in Minority Women Councils tended to face more difficulties in being heard. While not always the case, some also felt that it was a particular struggle for young women starting out to be heard.

Yeah, I do feel really heard. I enjoy robust debate. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

I know some women have issues of not being listened to. It's not something I've come across personally. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

- Some said there were times when their views were overlooked while a male with similar views was listened to.

Sometimes I feel like I say something and no one hears it then the man says it and (they say) 'that's a great idea'.... it's really frustrating...it's still there. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

- Again, there were concerns about particularly hostile people in Council making it difficult for others (men and women) to be heard.

Even seasoned males who have had a massive career across multidisciplinary areas, can be broken to tears and I've seen it. Those manipulative, egomaniac people... they'll attack anything. (Interview 13, Regional Council, Minority Women)

If I've got something to say I'll stick my hand up and say it. I don't feel like I've been shut down. (Interview 6, Regional Council, Balanced)

My experience of discrimination in Council ... of men being men and women trying to assert themselves and be heard; there are challenges with that. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

Everyone's views are listened to. We are very lucky the situation in our Council...(other Councils) the aggression and lack of respect for each is horrifying. (Interview 20, Regional Council, Balanced)

It is getting better for women but there's subconscious programming that 'we need to be quiet and let the man in the room speak.' (Interview 13, Regional Council, Minority Women)

I'm at the younger end but I feel that rarely matters. ...it's about who has the best ideas. I'm able to have an effect in the Councillor group. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)

Yes (she feels heard) but often I'm cut off or spoken over that didn't happen to my male predecessor. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)



Impact of gender composition on Council dynamics (continued)

Women Mayors

- Some participants had been Mayor or Deputy Mayor. They tended to think being in that role expanded on the learning experience of being a Councillor and gave them even more useful skills. They also said it added greatly to the time commitment of being a Councillor and this had deterred some they knew from seeking this position.

I don't have dinner with my children at least three nights a week. On weekends I'm expected to be at events that often prevent me participating in my own family's events. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

- Some said where the Mayor and/ or the CEO were women, there was generally a good working relationship between them and the Councillors.

It's hard to know but the experience I've had of seeing women in those leadership roles has been really positive. If I was lacking that I'd feel very sad. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)

- Some thought a history of women Mayors also seemed to suggest a welcoming environment for women looking to run.

It would be at least 50% Mayors that are female. It feels like a place you could be part of. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

- Some, however, thought Mayors (and possibly women Mayors) were more susceptible to social media attacks and abuse from the public and because of these, one was not going to recontest.
- A couple thought the prospect of higher pay if they became Mayor might make it more enticing for young women to run for Council although they weren't sure if those considering running were thinking that far ahead.

(Being deputy Mayor.) It was a really good experience...to be in that position I really enjoyed the fact that.... people were really happy to have me there. The community benefits of the status were really good but I'm glad (it's finished). (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

I would (run for Mayor) if I had the numbers but I don't see it happening. Just moving forward in my career...there's not a lot of time and I don't think I can do both (a job and be Mayor) I haven't decided (if I'll run again) it depends what my situation is. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

Another female Mayor ...(describes incident) . These are not things I've heard our male counterparts experience. So, there are gendered (incidents). (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)



State Government gender parity target for local government

There's been a move in recent years to increase female representation across local government, so it more accurately reflects our broader community.

The State Government has set a target for gender parity by 2025; it's currently at 43.8%.

State Government gender parity target for local government (continued)

- Not all participants were not previously aware of this target. With varying degrees of enthusiasm, all supported a state government push for gender parity on local Councils; they saw it as a matter of fairness and being representative of the community

It's a good ambition I don't disagree with it at all, we're half the population. (Interview 3, Regional Council, Balanced)

- There were, however, some concerns and doubts about this goal. Some had been involved in campaigns to encourage female leadership and political participation and noted the difficulties of bringing in young women. Some were also sceptical of any state government's commitment to a goal like this and for a few the idea of gender parity evoked merit-based conversations.

How do we get young women in?...We've tried...we just can't get someone in their 20s to do it. They're at uni they've got HECS fees or they're in the early stage of their career striving to get to a level they want, they haven't got the time. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)

I think it's good, it's very important but I'm not sure they will make the decisions that will actually deliver that. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

- A few again acknowledged the responsibilities, pressures and judgement women and particularly mothers faced when taking on additional roles such as a Councillor.

I agree and support that wholeheartedly but reality (is) challenging. We have too many roles, sometimes I feel guilty to work, study and join politics.... 'am I a good mother?'. (Interview 7, Metro Council, Balanced)

- One was also concerned about a move to bring more women onto local ahead of state or federal government as she felt local government had the worst pay and conditions.
- A few also mentioned that achieving parity would involve retaining more of the existing Councillors.

It's great, important I support it wholeheartedly. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

Nothing more I want than to see more women get up. (Interview 13, Regional Council, Minority Women)

The more women from a range of backgrounds, interests and ages would really have an impact on who gets voted in. I am very supportive of women getting elected. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

It's fantastic...it has to be like that. How can you be representative of your community when there's no parity? But, I don't want to be there because of what's between my legs, I want to be there because of what's in between my ears. If it's just tokenism I'm not interested. (Interview 6, Regional Council, Balanced)

I hope soon we'll be at 50:50 ...(but) my fear about us getting to 50:50 in local government first is ... we achieved it at the low paid, crappily-treated, overworked level of government. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)

It's not just about tapping new ones on the shoulder but retention of the current ones. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)



Challenges and obstacles for women to enter local government

Childcare responsibilities for young mothers

- Participants generally agreed, a cohort of women with young families was missing from Council.
They're the women I really want to reach out to, to stand up and run, to hear all voices on Council. One of the most enriching things has been to listen to every type of person not just privileged. Women who struggle and who have experienced a lot of barriers in their life are such an important voice, they really are in tune with what's going on out there. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)
- Many felt that childcare demands, particularly if coupled with careers, were an obstacle for young women entering Council.
It's very hard, I don't know how other women do it. I can see a lot of people where it could not be an option because of their full-time job. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)
I don't know how people with carer responsibilities manage. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)
- Some thought mothers of young children were at times criticised for taking on a role outside the home and were discouraged from running for Council.
A woman stood down from campaigning because people had said 'you've got young children, it's brutal on Council you won't survive'...(from) the community. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)
- They also felt that women may think the cost of childcare meant being on Council was not financially feasible. A few said their Council offered good childcare arrangements such as full reimbursement for childcare costs and if more young women knew about this they would be more encouraged to run for Council. Some thought state government childcare subsidies might help this.
- As indicated on the next slide, childcare reimbursement was also a source of controversy.

The other thing is women really find it hard to run for Council (because of) the logistics of childcare and having your kids around. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

We have a reasonably good childcare policy. There's no dollar cap on childcare you can reimburse. Other Councils make it a lot easier to do it, Ours is good, it's not amazing. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

Generally, people male or female with children don't (want to run again) ...it's too much time away from family and if there's negative criticisms the kids get it in the schoolyard. (Interview 3, Regional Council, Balanced)

(A woman who) is considering Council ... said 'how would I manage the kids? ...with sporting activities I'm running around left, right and centre'. (Interview 20, Regional Council, Balanced)

Part of the reason I could justify coming on Council and a pay cut was that having four young kids, childcare was a massive expense. If I could get those fees reimbursed.... Reimbursing childcare is essential to getting women into local Council. That could be publicised more. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)



Challenges and obstacles for women to enter local government (continued)

Criticism for reimbursement of childcare expenses

- Reimbursement for childcare costs was a contentious issue in some Councils with women who claimed this, criticised and even bullied by other Councillors or the local media. Because of a fear of being targeted, some had decided not to claim these expenses.

(One) Councillor took a potshot at the single parent woman Councillor with two children for claiming childcare expenses....it's a legitimate expense. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

One of your entitlements is paid childcare. Using that entitlement can be weaponised as a Councillor. It can be thrown in your face...thrown into the media...by the community. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Councillors say ... 'I feel like I get harassed'. I know more that don't reimburse their childcare expenses than do. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

- Some thought this deterred young women from entering Council or compelled others to leave.

Women Councillors they've been harassed because they can claim childcare through the shire. If you want young women on it, you've got to give them the peace of mind that their children will be looked after. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)

- Participants advised that these expenses not be listed separately in annual reports due to the antagonism they attracted. A few who said their Council listed childcare reimbursement under 'general expenses' now felt more comfortable applying for reimbursement.

Women are really tired of having to advocate for things that men already get...we have an additional barrier where we have to deal with another layer of bullying and criticism for the fact we bear the major load of primary care. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

A lot of the women have said 'I was criticised by people in the community...I chose not to run so I didn't have to deal with that kind of criticism'. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

There's an actual column for childcare. It really stands out like dog's balls. It should be linked in with something else, the cost of governance. (Interview 6, Regional Council, Balanced)

Doing something about childcare. That means either making it some kind of anonymous pool of money rather than accountable to individuals. Or upping our pay enough and scrapping childcare allowances. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)

It used to be separated out as childcare but now, which I'm grateful of, there is Councillor allowance and expenses... you can no longer see (someone) spent \$5,000 on childcare. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)



Challenges and obstacles for women to enter local government (continued)

Negative attitudes directed at women

- In addition to direct bullying, some participants talked about a toxic, male-dominated Council environment (a **'boys club'**, **'a sausage fest'**) where (mostly older and well-established) males exhibited **disrespectful, dismissive and condescending attitudes** to women Councillors (such as 'mansplaining'). Some noted incidents such as Council's reluctance to vote a young mother as Mayor and a CEO bypassing a female Mayor to consult a former male Mayor about issues.

I've spoken to a lot of women through ALGWA, 'how do we deal with this?'. Women are intimidated by men using their voice...always to dominate discussion. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

- Again, some felt that it was even more difficult for younger women to deal with this and some said young women they knew had been deterred from running because of this culture.

It's different for men and women. I'm a young woman in an old demographic...for many people I'm the age of their children. I'm spoken to in a confrontational and intimidating way that I don't think men would be spoken to. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

- A few thought that **if women spoke up** against this sort of behaviour (inc. sexual harassment) they would suffer political repercussions at election time.

Women are targeted very subtly. We experienced mansplaining. (Women) putting in good ideas and a few seconds later it's put in by another man....not hearing the women's voices in the room. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

I've spoken to women in regional areas where the bullying is very much 'what are you doing in Council. You should be at home...is this just like a part-time thing for you'. Not taking you seriously on Council. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

It's a private school boys club and if you're not in it you don't go for a scotch after work with the boys and get deals done. You have to cajole and hurdle over things...a women coming up in a man's world, it's very frustrating. (Interview 13, Regional Council, Minority Women)



Challenges and obstacles for women to enter local government (continued)

Negative attitudes directed at women (continued)

- A few said meeting procedures made it hard to point out issues such as males taking credit for an idea that a female colleague had first come up with.

It takes energy to say 'that's what so and so asked'. Meeting protocols and who can speak when, often precludes making that point. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

- Because of these sorts of behaviours, a few, whose Council had previously been predominantly male, expressed relief that it was now gender balanced or predominantly women.

I got to experience the prior Council that (was majority male) I'm not being sexually harassed in (the current) Council. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Women Councillors not supporting women

- A few thought some women in Council were trying to play the same game as confrontational males. Some felt that women adhering to factional allegiances and political blocks were often going against the needs of women generally.

I don't think it's just about your biological gender and how you refer to yourself. There are woman who are aggressive, assertive, who will clamber over people to get the control and power they want and represent the old way of doing things. (Interview 11, Metro Council, Minority Women)

- Some were also disappointed that women Councillors (including a Mayor) weren't championing issues of importance to women.

Not as much (gender impact) as I would have hoped...You would hope the women would be standing up more for children, libraries, it hasn't really played out that way. (Interview 3, Regional Council, Balanced)

The emotional stuff that's where the male side often dismisses (saying) 'if you can't handle those sorts of comments you shouldn't be here'. We'd just talked about psychological safety and they come out with that. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

it was weaponised against you, (they say) ... 'I'll run candidates against you in the next election'...so you just got on with it. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

ALGWA, they would not even consider joining it... (they think) 'we've never had a problem'... I don't think they get it...(ALGWA) I get it, I support it. (Interview 3, Regional Council, Balanced)

We all know that factions are important in local government and this is where women can do other women a disservice. I believe political factions have no place on councils. They become power bases where you entrench this system where it's not about merit, it's about numbers. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Stockholm Syndrome, supporting (name of Councillor). She has internalised misogyny. (Interview 12, Metro Council, Minority Women)



How to change negative cultures in Council

- Again, participants felt that there needed to be **effective mechanisms and penalties** to deal with bullying and these should only impact the perpetrator not the whole Council.

Independently regulating conduct. Code of Conduct and (having to prosecute) things yourself puts you in the firing line and (politicises) it. It's unhelpful. If it's done independently everybody's safer but that involves beefing up the regulator. They need the resources to do the job properly. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)

- Participants also thought Councils' negative political and organisational culture could be changed through more **education, mediation and clear guidelines for conduct**. Some recommended coaching about a more positive culture, mentors for new Councillors and reliable and trustworthy mediators.

Other Councils have culture conversations.... about values...It takes someone who has experience of that or has mentoring or coaching, that's how culture can change. I had some coaching from a very experienced person, that was really helpful...maybe some guidelines. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

- A couple felt aggressive male behaviour in Council needed to be discussed outside the Council chamber in **one-on-one meetings**.

You need to confront it through Councillor-only time ...sit down and talk about hard topics, it might be a bit more comfortable (than in the chamber) Those meetings need to be open and a safe space for women to speak out where there's no repercussions outside of it. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

- A couple felt changing Councils' culture was part of a **broader societal process** of accepting women's right to express themselves more fervently in public roles such as politics.

Men are conditioned to just step in and do something whereas woman will just step back. (Interview 13, Regional Council, Minority Women)

- A couple thought **term limits** might help avoid entrenched councillors and factions.

There needs to be more in the way the CEO holds Councillors accountable for their behaviour to staff. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

(Every six months we've met with the local government mentor...we have a strategy session)... When there's poor behaviour how do we respond to that? (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

If the structure of how the political game is played suits people who are hard-nosed, thick skinned, aggressive, ambitious, who ends up in the room? What kind of democratic ...representation do we get. How on earth is that going to be diverse and representative? (Interview 11, Metro Council, Minority Women)

(After an event where women weren't invited to speak) We have to change the system in which we work. (Interview 12, Metro Council, Minority Women)

Term limits. Even if it was four or five terms it would solve my problem. It's not unreasonable for someone to have a maximum of 12, 16 or 20 years on Council. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)



How to Encourage Younger Women to run for Council



How to encourage younger women to run for Council

When asked how they would encourage young women to run for Council, participants talked in terms of two main themes:

- The positive aspects of being a Councillor that they felt might attract young women to the role.**
- Initiatives and changes that they felt could overcome some of the obstacles previously stated.**

Positive aspects of being a Councillor

A way of effecting valuable change in the community

- Some would emphasise to young women the reason they entered Council in the first place, that it was an effective way of achieving positive change in the local community.

Absolutely do it. It's the most satisfying thing you'll do in your life. It's a great sense of purpose and you're a change maker. (Interview 6, Regional Council, Balanced)

Learning opportunities

- Most would advise young women to take advantage of the myriad learning and skill development opportunities (public speaking, governance courses, government knowledge, etc.) that being on Council offered.

Sign up for all the training and the learning, there is a lot to learn. Our CEO's very good with the induction program and ongoing training. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

A Council role helps career progress during breaks

- Most thought being on Council provided good general career training. One participant also felt that Council provided a way for women, who may have been out of it for a while after having children, to re-enter the workforce. Unlike regular jobs, a lack of experience didn't necessarily work against those running for Council.

It's an opportunity, you have those career breaks when you're having children and you feel stagnating in your career, being elected to Council enables you to re-enter the workforce in a place you haven't had the demonstrated experience to get to that place because of childcare breaks. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

A wonderful way to use your skills in contributing to community. To showcase what it's like being a woman in power and we still don't have enough of those. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)

What better way to make change in your society. It's in many ways very rewarding. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

You can do great stuff. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

Look at the things you can do, the things your community will receive from your participation, the acknowledgement of your demographic? (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

I would encourage people to do it. It is a privilege, an amazing learning opportunity. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

Do all the course(s), the AICD course, watch and learn from people you respect. There are some really good opportunities and you'll get skills you don't expect and suddenly you're like 'everyone's listening to me'. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

You have that opportunity to leap into another role (whereas) in a standard job interview (they'd say) 'you've had two years out with childcare'. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)



Positive aspects of being a Councillor (continued)

Excellent support is available through mentors, groups and organisations

- Participants felt it was very important young women considering running for local Council knew there were **mentors and positive role models** who could provide inspiration and guidance to make the best of a Council role and to help cope with the difficulties of the job.
(One younger woman said she ran) because it was me encouraging her. Enabling (her) and the Mayor many years ago enabled me. Women enabling other women. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)
The (female) Councillor that I connected with and seeing she'd had kids when she was on Council. (Having) a role model was important. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)
- They would also let young women know they could seek **support from organisations** like ALGWA.
Mentoring absolutely...ALGWA they do mentoring. (Interview 19, Metro Council, Majority Women)
- Some would advise young women thinking of running about the value of a good support group.
Have a good support network. (Interview 11, Metro Council, Minority Women)
- A few participants had also found informal discussion groups with other Councillors a useful avenue for exploring issues outside the confines of the Council chamber.
Have a circle inside and outside....have good people around you. (Interview 19, Metro Council, Majority Women)
Get a posse of people to support you because you'll need it. (Interview 13, Regional Council, Minority Women)
- A few thought political party affiliation had provided a valuable support structure.
(One Councillor) came through The Greens. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)



Speak to the current Councillor, they can share how you become (a Councillor) any barrier you come across. (Interview 7, Metro Council, Balanced)

The informal groups ...women who catch up regularly,... providing that social support.... tactics and strategies to manage (difficult behaviours) and get good outcomes for the community. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

I'd love to mentor someone. I've got a mentor and she's been amazing. I don't think I'd be the Councillor I am now without her help. She's been a wealth of information. (Interview 6, Regional Council, Balanced)

Find people who will support you...just being around other women in local government, even in a Council with majority women, it just acts as a protective barrier against all of the bullshit. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)

Don't feel that because you don't have all the resources at your fingertips that you can't do it. Start a community group online, it costs nothing. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Positive aspects of being a Councillor (continued)

There are flexible options for young mothers

- Participants again noted that childcare commitments dissuaded many young women from running for Council. They felt that, if women knew there were options to help them deal with the juggling act of family commitments and a being Councillor, they might be more willing to run.
- These options included **childcare services and reimbursement** for childcare fees.

If there was flexibility...the availability of childcare would make huge difference to a lot of women considering coming into Council. (Interview 20, Regional Council, Balanced)

I have an 18-month-old and the great thing about Council is that childcare is pretty much covered in its entirety, that should encourage women and carers to do it, I don't know if it extends to support with other care. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

- Similarly, they thought letting young women know there were flexible arrangements like hybrid contact and **online meetings**, might encourage more women to run.

I would tell them that the flexibility's a lot better now after COVID...you can come into meetings online (hybrid). Before COVID we had to be there in person. It's kind of a game changer...I was chairing a meeting (then) changed and played with (her baby). (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

- This took on even more importance in rural and regional settings where young women might have to drive great distances to a Council meeting.

Flexibility around briefings would encourage, particularly younger women, knowing they don't have to get in a car in a rural setting and drive an hour to a Council meeting and get in the car and drive home again. (Interview 17, Regional Council, Balanced)



There is support in the form of daycare if you need to...which certainly helps. (Interview 20, Regional Council, Balanced)

With COVID, online is so much more predominant. It does give a lot more flexibility. (although) rurally the (internet) coverage is quite poor...but we manage. (Interview 20, Regional Council, Balanced)

(Child) was ill, she didn't want to leave him so she Zoomed in to the meeting. That flexibility now. You don't have to be there but you can still get information and take part in the briefing. (Interview 17, Regional Council, Balanced)

There is support through the Council where you can do the job more after hours...we have a lot of meetings after hours through Zoom now more compatible to allow women to be involved. A lot of women choose Zoom for meetings.... a lot of people working from home. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Transitioning to a hybrid was the biggest help in terms of family friendliness...issues briefings, Council meetings...that's been a real support. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Initiatives and changes needed

Better remuneration

- Participants reiterated that, to make it a viable job for young women, Councillors needed to be paid better.

If we were remunerated properly. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

Better training

- Some said that better training, as part of the induction process, was vital so that new Councillors had a clearer idea of what the job involved. Some thought a short course covering various aspects of the job of Councillor might make the introduction to the role easier for young women and might encourage more to seek election.

Run some short course...three hour and give them a taste...public speaking in chamber is not everybody's skill. (Interview 7, Metro Council, Balanced)

- They thought this might counter concerns of those who felt they didn't fully understand the role or who had misconceptions about it and subsequently became disillusioned. They thought training after the election could also help retain young women on Council.

If we were told the risk of our responsibilities up front. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

Better disciplinary processes in Council

- As noted, there were many concerns about extremely difficult and combative personalities, bullying and in some cases sexual harassment in Council. Participants reiterated that, for young women to feel confident about running, they needed to know effective processes were in place to deter or at least deal with this sort of behaviour.



Run some more leadership programs leading into it...not just this token two-hour session. (Interview 8, Metro Council, Balanced)

More training for Councillors throughout their term...I got a really rushed (induction process) which I found insufficient which left holes in my knowledge. More thorough training, more regular ... Every year every Council should have to re-induct and retrain their Councillors on a number of things including gender equity, harassment, safety in the workplace, duty of care. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

I started with mentoring and the next year someone else had a mentor....she said 'you did some mentoring with (person named) is that how you got the Mayoralty?' I've been able to normalise professional development. (Interview 19, Metro Council, Majority Women)

There needs to be genuine sanctions for behaviour. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

We need to be really clear to prospective Councillors and the community ... that sort of behaviour is not tolerated and has consequences. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

Initiatives & changes needed (continued)

Address social conditioning

- A few said that society tended to condition women to be less assertive than men and as a result tacitly discouraged young women from roles like public office. They felt it was important that current women Councillors encouraged young women to assert and express themselves through these sorts of roles.

The huge issue is a self-made barrier....social conditioning. That lack of assertiveness is prompted by the perception that if we're assertive we're just being rude and a lot of women don't want to be perceived as rude...we sit back meekly and we don't have an opinion ...or the boys club will work to push that woman out...she's outspoken dangerous. (Interview 13, Regional Council, Minority Women)

Advocate issues important to women

- One participant said her Council attracted women because it was known for addressing progressive issues.

The young ones have seen progressive stuff being done. We flew the rainbow flag and people liked that. (It's not just) rates, rates, rubbish, we've do social issues as well. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)

Create a welcoming environment

- A few felt they currently had good representation of women at their Council because of a history of women's participation and a supportive environment.

It's great. We have a cohesive team generally. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)



(Strong female presence in Council) It's just the ethos within Council they have been very supportive of women within Council and Councillors. (Interview 20, Regional Council, Balanced)

We're very fortunate our governance is very strong and we are in a very respectful Council. Sometimes you have to quote the code of conduct but generally it's because people are very passionate and it's aggressive against what's happening rather than personal. (Interview 20, Regional Council, Balanced)

Additional advice

In addition to providing information designed to encourage young women to run, these Councillors had advice on how to approach the role of Councillor. This, in some cases, involved cautionary information.

What the job involves

How Council functions

- Some participants would explain to aspiring young women Councillors the fundamentals of how Council operated. This included the procedure, the components of local government and the limitations on Councillors' authority.

Then explain how it works, all the practical stuff...as a counsellor you cannot direct staff. (Interview 3, Regional Council, Balanced)

The limits of what Council does ...the only way we get things done is through a Council meeting, the practical stuff. ...We have committees...You can negotiate, you can't dictate. (Interview 3, Regional Council, Balanced)

- They would also encourage young women to actively learn as much as they could about Council before running and during their terms in office.

Do your research, particularly the Council plan and go to a number of Council meetings to get a more genuine feel for things... the breadth and the depth of the issues involved including going to a meeting on a night when there's multiple submitters who are angry and upset. (Interview 11, Metro Council, Minority Women)

Do some homework prior. Make sure you know what you're getting into. (Interview 20, Regional Council, Balanced)

There needs to be a spelling out – 'This is What is Involved!'. Letting people know the extent of the commitment and that Council is like being on a Board. (Interview 12, Metro Council, Minority Women)

Declaring interests if you've got a business... if you want the footy club to have new clubrooms and you're the president, you're not allowed in the room. (Interview 3, Regional Council, Balanced)

For women who have intentions to run, we need proper training. Give them preparation... conflict resolution, public speaking skill, all the skills the Councillor need to have. (Interview 7, Metro Council, Balanced)

I did the VLGA training and tapped into ALGA when I was going through my decision to run and found that really helpful. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

Do your bloody research! Know what you're walking into.... and go to every single Women in Government event you can go to. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)



Additional advice (continued)

What the job involves (continued)

The difficulties of the job

- A few felt that it was important to divest aspiring Councillors of any unrealistic expectations and let know about the often very challenging aspects of the role.
- These included the **heavy workload and time commitment**.

You need to be cognisant (that being on Council is a 24/7 job). When I do mentor women or men I say 'you've got to make this commitment'...if you are not ok with things like that then it's probably not for you. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)
- Similarly, some said they would advise young women that it was important to actively maintain **work/ life balance**.

Be mindful not to let it swallow your whole life...don't feel guilty in taking time for yourself. It's really easy to burn out. (Interview 6, Regional Council, Balanced)
- They also felt they should warn young women that they would encounter some **aggressive and confrontational Councillors** and public hostility.

Watch your back ... people don't like women who stand up for themselves and ...smart women. When I encourage women to get into politics...there's a caveat 'you're going to have a bad time'. (Interview 13, Regional Council, Minority Women)
- Some said they would let young women know that dealing with these sorts of situation was a way of developing resilience.

Realise it's so open-ended you can spend a full-time job. How are you going to protect yourself with it and create balance and make sure you're having perspective that's away from Council? (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

I want more women involved but I don't want to set them up for failure ...having a sense they were over-promised and under-delivered... right expectations. (Interview 11, Metro Council, Minority Women)

It's a tough job. Understand, it doesn't matter what you do, someone's going to be upset with you... work out are you going to be able to cope with that. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Find a way to work with them... to learn a lot of tools to cope with really difficult situations. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

Absolutely run but you've got to be thick-skinned. Don't take anything personally. Just run your own game and everyone will try and stop you. (Interview 19, Metro Council, Majority Women)



Additional advice (continued)

Attitude and approach to being on Council

Understand your values

- Some said it was vital for a Councillor to understand their values and how they related to the job.

Be very clear on who you are as a person and what matters to you as a person, your values and hold onto those. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

Maintain a positive mindset

- Some felt it was essential that Councillors were confident they could make a positive change.

Believe in yourself. You don't have to have skills in public office. Just believe in things you think need to be done that you feel passionately about. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Treat others respectfully

To be patient...be respectful. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)

Be organised

If you're a good time manager you'll do well. (Interview 20, Regional Council, Balanced)

Stay community-minded

- Some would remind young women that the main reason to become a Councillor was to help the community, that they should always keep them in mind and engage directly with them to engender trust and respect.

I'm of the opinion you need to be with your community.... listening to community on the ground at sports events, community events and be out and be seen. When I advocate for things I know the things that are important to my community because they let me know. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)



Have a clear message as to what dent you're going to make in the fabric of society. (Interview 13, Regional Council, Minority Women)

Don't be afraid to put your hand up.... Mainly, don't be scared of it, have a go. (Interview 17, Regional Council, Balanced)

Have confidence in yourself...if you want to make a difference...you lead by example. If you can get your community behind you, you can make a change. (Interview 20, Regional Council, Balanced)

When you think 'I'm not cut out for this' or 'I'm not a politician', don't. Think of what you can contribute.. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

(Being on Council) taught me anything you believe in is possible....don't say no to anything, map it out step by step. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Learn to multi-task even more. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)

Be diligent and work hard on the community. That's why they voted you in, you work for them. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)

Future plans



Likelihood of running again

- Some were keen to continue in Council to serve their community and complete projects they had started while others weren't certain if they would run again.

About five or six (out of 10 likelihood)...the jury is still out. (Interview 10, Metro Council, Minority Women)

At this stage it's probably about an eight. It's too far away...a lot can happen in your life. (Interview 17, Regional Council, Balanced)

They noted a range of obstacles to running again:

Family responsibilities

I'll have teenagers....I don't want to be absent. (Interview 11, Metro Council, Minority Women)

Bullying

- Due to bullying, a couple had serious doubts about running again but would try and persist and would still advocate people joining Council because of the good work it can do.

At this point I intend to (run again) but I can only do it if (my group) are back in the majority. (If not) I'm not sure I can do another four years of it, it's so awful. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

Do I want to run again? It's a horrible work environment that nobody else in the country would be expected to put up with. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)

- One Councillor considered quitting but had received great community support to stay.

I was overwhelmed by support from the community to give it another go. People that surrounded you (and said) 'we can see what's happening'. (Interview 18, Metro Council, Majority Women)

I'm not sure...I still love it. I'll talk to my husband without his support I couldn't do it... I probably will. (Interview 16, Regional Council, Balanced)

Projects I've started that I really want to see come to fruition. I don't think that will happen in the next 12 months. The first term you're really just cutting your teeth. (Interview 6, Regional Council, Balanced)

I've said 'yes' and 'no', I've nearly quit three times so I don't know. I want to have a family. I've got to work out a way that I have the life balance to run again. I love this job. (Interview 13, Regional Council, Minority Women)

Absolutely (worth persisting) ... I've seen how good it can be when we have (good leaders)... it's just fragile. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

If there's the really good people running, I'm more likely to. If I don't, it will be because of this one man. (Interview 1, Metro Council, Balanced)



Likelihood of running again (continued)

Inadequate remuneration

- Some reiterated concerns that being a Councillor did not pay well enough to justify it as a job.

The conversation I'm having with myself is 'do I re-contest?... I don't know. I'm not interested in \$37,000 a year anymore. All the skills and the professional development I've had the privilege to be a part of at Council, I can take and earn myself \$120,000 in a job that's going to pay me superannuation, sick pay, a job I can be home every night and have dinner with my kids and I don't have to work on weekends.... I can't afford to keep doing it. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Stress of campaigning

- Next time, campaigning would be more face to face, not remote as it was during lockdown, which some thought could be intimidating.

Workload conflicting with other commitments

- Many Councillors had to juggle full or part-time jobs in addition to being on Council. Some said this had forced them to reconsider if they would run again.

Other career avenues

- Some thought it might be time to move on and pursue other career possibilities.

Are there other things I could be doing with my career beyond staying on Council? Is it time to move on? (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

I have to deal with personal harassment. It's a hell of a lot to ask of someone for \$34,000. You wonder why women don't run, why young people don't run. (Group 4, Metro Council, Balanced)

I'm now moving into another phase in my life where all the kids are in school, I'd like to work more but I'm not sure I can do both... 30 grand from Council) it's not enough to live on. If it was full-time I'd love to do it. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

Metro Councils do facilitate people who work full-time a lot better than regional Councils so that's frustrating. All the other Councillors are retired or semi-retired. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)

I would (run for Mayor) if I had the numbers but I don't see it happening. Just moving forward in my career...there's not a lot of time and I don't think I can do both (a job and be Mayor) I haven't decided (if I'll run again) it depends what my situation is. (Interview 9, Regional Council, Minority Women)



Likelihood of running again (continued)

Further careers in public office

- Some were asked if they were considering **running for office at the state or federal level**.
- A few felt it was a possibility but most weren't considering this as they were concerned about even greater scrutiny and criticism than they experienced in Council and party politics. They also noted that it was expensive to run for office at state and federal level.

Possibly. It depends on timing and your own desires and what is going on in the political world. (Interview 2, Regional Council, Balanced)

I don't think I could face politics again...government can do incredible things and it's an absolute necessity but I would always now stay in the background advising. (Interview 14, Regional Council, Minority Women)

I struggle with party politics, that narrative. It's cost prohibitive to be an independent state or federal MP. (Interview 19, Metro Council, Majority Women)

I'm not interested in being hated by 60,000 people...I'm not politically aligned, I'm not interested in the extra hours, I'm not interested in the travel. (Interview 15, Metro Council, Majority Women)

Not in a million years...when I've thought about it the children were younger and it was just too hard. Not for me. (Interview 17, Regional Council, Balanced)

I don't think I'd want to get involved in State politics, Federal, I'd consider a Senate seat, you're less likely to be targeted. (Interview 11, Metro Council, Minority Women)





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Qdos acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we live and work – the Boon Wurrung, Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Wadawurrung peoples.

We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.