

Moving On

Women and Retirement from Victorian Local Government

Prepared for
the Municipal
Association
of Victoria
and the
Victorian Local
Governance
Association



Marion Frere

ENQUIRIES

The Women's Participation in Local Government Coalition has initiated the Strengthening Communities through Women's Participation (SCWP) project. This initiative, funded by the State Government's Community Support Fund, is designed to support women in leadership positions locally. For more details, contact the Coalition directly.

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WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION
IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT
COALITION
STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES
THROUGH WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION



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Department for
Victorian Communities

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The recommendations of the Reference Group are included in the body of the report.

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Foreword

When we first conceived of a project which looked at the retirement patterns of women councillors in local government, we did so based on an assumption that there were reasons why women, in particular, came to the decision not to re-nominate.

What has emerged is a fascinating picture of the complex role of the modern councillor. The report provides direct insight into workload issues, council culture and roles, gender specific concerns, family and career pressures which have impacted on the decision of women councillors not to continue in this role. Interestingly, it has also revealed that the decision not to restand may well be influenced by considerations of professional career advancement and positive changes in personal direction as well as by the demands and challenges of the position itself.

Importantly, there are some significant issues raised in relation to the public perception of local government, its culture, conduct of council business, relationships between councillors, administration, remuneration and workload have all which impacted heavily on the experience of councillors who participated in this research. It is imperative that these issues, particularly where they are negative in nature, are addressed by the local government sector to ensure that councils can attract, sustain and retain great people in these critical roles.

This report provides clear and direct recommendations to the State Government, the peak bodies and importantly to each individual council on how to create the sorts of environments which will support councillors to carry out their roles effectively.

I feel that this will have positive implications for all councillors, both men and women, throughout Victoria.

On behalf of the Women's Participation in Local Government Coalition I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the Department for Victorian Communities for their active support of this project, in both financial and intellectual terms. Dr Marion Frere has produced a report which is both incisive and substantive and will be of great use for the local government sector and the Coalition in its continued work in supporting equal representation of women and men in Victorian local governments.



Mayor Judith Voce
Chair,
Women's Participation in
Local Government Coalition

Contents

> Foreword	ii		
> Acknowledgements	Inside front cover		
> Executive Summary	2		
> Recommendations of Reference Group	5		
> Introduction	7		
> Project Description	9		
Background	9		
Terminology	9		
Methodology	9		
Participants	10		
1 A Councillor’s Life	11	3 Council Workload and Culture	26
Becoming a Councillor	12	Role of Council	27
Retiring From Council	13	Workload	28
Stage of Life	13	The Role of a Councillor	29
Health and Wellbeing	13	Workplace Culture and Practices	30
Time for Me	14	The Politics of Local Government	32
Career and Money	14	Public Life, Privacy and Safety	34
New Challenges	14		
Relief and Regret – How I’m Feeling Now	15	4 Women, Work and Remuneration	35
2 Women, Leadership and Local Government	17	Work	36
Women and Leadership	18	Councillor Allowances and Expenses	37
Women and Local Government	19	Other Resources and Supports	39
Gender Awareness	19	> Conclusion – Final Reflections	41
Sexual Harassment and Discrimination	22	> Appendix 1:	
Balancing Council and Family Life	23	Interview Schedule	43
Carer Responsibilities	23	> Appendix 2:	
Partners and Friends	25	Retirement Rates 2003	
		Local Government Elections	44
		> Appendix 3:	
		Local Government	
		Context	44
		> Appendix 4:	
		The Role of a Councillor	47
		> Appendix 5:	
		Further Resources	51

Executive Summary

The Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA) and the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) (on behalf of the Women's Participation in Local Government Coalition [WPILGC]) were funded by the Office of Women's Policy, Department for Victorian Communities to undertake a research project *Attrition Among Women Councillors in Victoria*.

This report, entitled *Moving On: Women and Retirement from Local Government*, sets out the qualitative findings of this research project. It is based on the experiences of 19 of the 21 women who retired from councils at the March 2003 elections. It explores the reasons for their retirement, drawing from the detail of their experiences of council life in a range of areas. While their stories are diverse, the 19 participants in this research clearly demonstrate that their decision to retire from council had been made after seriously weighing up the pros and cons of council life.

The commitment of all participants to the importance of local government remains very high. In reflecting on their experience, all were able to point to a number of high points. These included satisfaction with particular achievements, the attainment of new knowledge and skills, and access to new opportunities. In a reflection of the positive nature of much of their experiences as councillors, 15 out of 19 participants in the research had completed more than one term on council.

At the same time, significant relief was expressed by all at the increased ability they had, post-retirement, to focus more fully on their families, friends, jobs and businesses. They found that increased time and energy to put into these spheres of their lives had been a major positive outcome of their decision to retire.

In exploring the reasons for women's retirement from local government, this research is divided into four areas: A Councillor's Life; Women, Leadership and Local Government; Council Culture and Workload; Women, Work and Remuneration.

A COUNCILLOR'S LIFE

The report commences with a general section that introduces the range of positive and negative reasons that may impact on the decision to retire from council. On the one hand it shows that women may make a conscious decision to have a life that allows more time for them to look after their own health and wellbeing as well as to enjoy their family, friends and other activities. On the other hand, they may choose not to continue their life as a councillor with its high stress and significant demands on their time and energy. It emphasises the complex nature of this decision for the participants who all had to weigh up a variety of considerations to do with their council, home and working personas.

Key findings include:

- ▶ Retirement was usually the result of a combination of positive life changes and dissatisfaction with aspects of council life.
- ▶ All participants demonstrated a number of positive outcomes from their experience as a councillor.
- ▶ Improving health and wellbeing were major factors in the decision to retire.
- ▶ Work and career development played a large role in the decision to retire.
- ▶ 15 out of 19 participants had completed more than one term on council.
- ▶ Over half of the participants indicated that they would like to have stayed on council or were open to the possibility of returning to council.
- ▶ All participants noted decreased levels of stress and more time for other activities as a result of their retirement from council.

WOMEN, LEADERSHIP AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The second of these sections looks at the broader social role of women in relation to community leadership and local government. It examines some of the key assumptions about gender that continue to influence the kind of experience women have in local government. It provides a background for further examination of issues that women stressed in the research related to balancing the competing demands of women's multiple roles and the need for improvement in certain aspects of council culture. It emphasises the need to improve the sustainability of women on council by recognising the impact that these competing demands have on councillors' ability to participate to their full capacity.

Key findings include:

- ▶ Improving the balance of representation on council so that it reflects the diversity of the community it represents is a key priority.
- ▶ Women on council make a positive contribution to local government through their different perspective on community life.
- ▶ The chief executive officer (CEO) plays a key role in creating a culture in council that is gender aware.
- ▶ The level of public scrutiny is higher for women on council who are expected to perform at least as well as the men if not to a higher standard.
- ▶ The time commitment of council means that participation in local government is difficult for women with carer responsibilities.
- ▶ The level of support provided by council for women with carer responsibilities is inadequate.
- ▶ The impact of council life on other family members was an important element of the decision to retire.

COUNCIL CULTURE AND WORKLOAD

The third section of the report looks at the day-to-day experience of women on council. Starting at the macro-level, it seeks to capture changes in the role of local government and raises a number of structural concerns, including the status of local government in relation to other levels of government and the impact of council amalgamation on the role of a councillor. At a micro-level, this section highlights the important issues that exist to differing degrees within all councils in relation to workload, culture and processes of local government, the political environment and the public nature of council life.

Key findings include:

- ▶ The responsibilities of governance do not remove traditional expectations of councillors, given unchanged community understandings of the role.
- ▶ There is a continuing lack of clarity in the role of local government as a third tier of government.
- ▶ The workload was regarded as onerous by all participants.
- ▶ Workload is particularly high in a councillor's first term and generally decreases in the second term.
- ▶ The workload and the difficulties of balancing council, home and work life were very significant factors in the decision to retire.
- ▶ The management styles of the mayor and the CEO were a key contributing factor to the type of experience women had on council.
- ▶ Unprofessional and unethical behaviour on council contributed in some instances to low morale and decreased the desire to remain on council.
- ▶ The political nature of council, including an increased level of party-based politics, was a significant determinant of women's experience on council.
- ▶ The public nature of council life potentially raises serious issues for women on council in relation to personal privacy and safety.

WOMEN, WORK AND REMUNERATION

In the final section, attention is given to the link between the need for financial security including through paid work, the level of remuneration provided by council and the decision made by women on whether to remain on council or to retire. These issues are central to the sustainability of council life for individual women and include consideration of workplace demands and supports, councillor allowances and expenses and other resources and supports.

Key findings include:

-
- ▶ **For many women, conflict occurs between the need to earn a viable income and the demands of council.**

 - ▶ **The culture and practices of some councils are geared to those who have a high degree of flexibility in their working lives or who are not in paid work.**

 - ▶ **A number of individuals had changed their work to part-time or retired from work to fulfil council requirements.**

 - ▶ **For business owners, involvement in council means less time to ensure the growth and stability of their business.**

-
- ▶ **All participants bar one considered that the level of reimbursement did not reflect the amount or value of work the job entailed.**

 - ▶ **If the allowance is not seen to adequately compensate people for council, those who need to earn a liveable income will find it more difficult to participate.**

 - ▶ **The taxable status of the allowance and the absence of superannuation, workers compensation, holiday, family and sick leave were significant issues.**

 - ▶ **Differences exist between councils in relation to the acceptability of making claims for reimbursement for expenses.**

 - ▶ **Most participants did have access to some form of training and development, but many could not participate due to delivery, time and distance constraints.**

 - ▶ **Access to a variety of supports including other councillors, mentors and regional networks was important in enhancing sustainability.**

Included in the appendices is information about the study process and the context in which this research has occurred, including: Interview Schedule, Retirement Rates 2003 Local Government Elections, Local Government Context, The Role of a Councillor, and Further Resources.

Recommendations of Reference Group

REPRESENTATION

Recommendation 1:

That in pursuit of more diversely representative Councils in Victoria, the State Government, Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) and Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA) continue with their own efforts and, in particular, continue to support the program work of the Women's Participation in Local Government Coalition (WPILGC).

ALLOWANCES AND REIMBURSEMENTS

Recommendation 2:

That in preparation for the November 2004 local government elections, the State Government should consider a review of and increase to the levels of councillor remuneration set in 2000 and a process for regular increases in the future.

Recommendation 3:

That for the purposes of promoting greater diversity of and equity in councillor representation, the MAV and VLGA provide clear guidance to all councils on the expenses for which councillors may seek reimbursement. This should include expenses incurred as a result of carer and childcare responsibilities, business costs, support/farm assistance where such costs arise directly in connection with a councillor being relieved to attend to meetings, functions or other sanctioned official duties.

GOVERNANCE

The report has identified key governance and risk management issues for Victorian councils in the following areas:

- The lawful conduct of elected councillors in relation to sexual harassment and discrimination legislation
- The personal responsibility of each councillor for his/her own behaviour especially in relation to sexual harassment, discrimination and professional conduct towards fellow councillors
- The personal safety and privacy of councillors when conducting council business and associated activities within the community
- The absence of a 'family-friendly' culture in some local governments to better support the participation of councillors.

Recommendation 4:

That the peak local government bodies refer the above emerging issues to the Good Governance Advisory Committee (GGAC) for guidance with reference to the following:

- Existing codes of conduct and behaviour
- Training opportunities
- Raising awareness within the sector
- 'Family-friendly' council practices and attitudes.

Recommendation 5:

The local government peak bodies work with CEOs and mayors to alert them to their leadership responsibilities in the conduct of council business and in managing any negative behaviour of individual councillors.

Recommendation 6:

That Victorian councils consider strategies to ensure the safety and privacy of their councillors, for example the provision of a mobile phone for conducting council business, to eliminate reliance on the use of a private home line.

RESEARCH

Recommendation 7:

That, for trend analyses and broader research purposes, the State Government and local government peak bodies upgrade their data collections of councillor elections to ensure accurate, comparative data are collected, maintained and include gender details and number of terms served.

PERCEPTIONS ON THE ROLE OF A COUNCILLOR

Recommendation 8:

That all Victorian councils, the local government peak bodies and the State Government work towards improving community understanding of the nature and complexities of the role of elected councillors, with a view to addressing the stresses experienced and the unreasonable expectations which some communities might have of their councillors.

Recommendation 9:

That each Victorian council seeks to work with their local print and other media with a view to the media presenting more positive and illuminating articles about the contributions made by councillors to community life.

Recommendation 10:

That each Victorian council conducting educational/information sessions to promote standing for local government, provide information to clarify expectations about local remuneration levels, workloads, public profile, party politics and sources of support.

Recommendation 11:

That existing information kits which are made available from the local government peak bodies to potential candidates include a summary of the key findings of this research.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Recommendation 12:

That WPILGC and the local government peak bodies expand their professional development activities to provide particular support to women councillors in the area of time management and workload strategies.

Recommendation 13:

That all providers of training and development courses for councillors aiming to enhance their contribution to council work, make course content available on-line or in hard copy to assist those too remote from on-site attendance.

Recommendation 14:

That the WPILGC through its projects continues to develop and offer a range of strategies aimed to improve council support for women, including the concept of local networks.

Introduction

Moving On: Women and Retirement from Victorian Local Government is based on interviews with 19 of the 21 women who retired from Victorian councils at the March 2003 elections. It explores the reasons for their retirement, drawing from the detail of their experiences of council life in a range of areas.

While their stories are diverse, the 19 participants in this research clearly demonstrated that their decision to retire from council had been made after seriously weighing up the pros and cons of council life.

As project participants pointed out, council life is both intense and complex. This can make it difficult for an individual to identify any singular reason to explain their decision to retire. More commonly, the reasons for retiring are multi-faceted. On the positive side it may be due to changing family circumstances, a desire to travel or the challenges of a new job. And on the negative side, it may be due to the heavy workload of being a councillor, inadequate support or certain aspects of council culture. Indeed for most participants, there was a combination of positive and negative reasons for retirement.

In seeking to unravel some of the complexity of council and the impact that being a councillor has on other aspects of women's lives, this research is divided into four main areas.

A COUNCILLOR'S LIFE

The report commences with a general section that introduces the range of positive and negative reasons that may impact on the decision to retire from council. On the one hand it shows that women may make a conscious decision to have a life that allows more time for them to look after their own health and wellbeing as well as to enjoy their family, friends and other activities. On the other hand, they may choose not to continue their life as a councillor with its high stress and significant demands on their time and energy. It emphasises the complex nature of this decision for the participants who all had to weigh up a variety of considerations to do with their council, home and working personas.

WOMEN, LEADERSHIP AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The second of these sections looks at the broader social role of women in relation to community leadership and local government. It examines some of the key assumptions about gender that continue to influence the kind of experience women have in local government. It provides a background for further examination of issues that women stressed in the research related to balancing the competing demands of women's multiple roles and the need for improvement in certain aspects of council culture. It emphasises the need to improve the sustainability of women on council by recognising the impact that these competing demands have on women's ability to participate to their full capacity.

COUNCIL CULTURE AND WORKLOAD

The third section of the report looks at the day-to-day experiences of women on council. Starting at the macro-level, it seeks to capture the changing role of local government and raises a number of structural concerns including the status of local government in relation to other levels of government and the impact of amalgamation on the role of a councillor. At a micro-level, this section highlights the important issues that exist to differing degrees within all councils in relation to workload, culture and processes of local government, the political environment and the public nature of council life.

WOMEN, WORK AND REMUNERATION

In the final section, attention is given to the link between the need for financial security, including through paid work, the level of remuneration provided by council and the decision made by women on whether to remain on council or to retire. These issues are central to the sustainability of council life for individual women and include consideration of workplace demands and supports, councillor allowances and expenses and other resources and supports.

An important issue that emerges is that council life for women is varied and comprises a very different set of opportunities and challenges in each local government setting. While some participants were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences, others found their time on council to be more difficult than they had anticipated. This highlights the importance of not homogenising the experience of women and local government. Important differences are to be found between councils and even within one council from one term to the next depending on such factors as who is elected, who is mayor, the relationship between councillors and management, the role of political parties and the relationship between council and the community.

Despite such differences however, key findings do emerge in this research that provide a strong indication of the reasons why women in Victoria retire from council as well as a range of suggestions that might improve the sustainability of council life for women.

Included in the appendices is information about the study process and the context in which this research has occurred, including: Interview Schedule, Retirement Rates 2003 Local Government Elections, Local Government Context, The Role of a Councillor, and Further Resources.

Project Description

BACKGROUND

The VLGA and the MAV (on behalf of the WPILGC) were funded by the Office of Women's Policy, Department for Victorian Communities to undertake a research project entitled *Attrition Among Women Councillors in Victoria*.

This report, entitled *Moving On: Women and Retirement from Victorian Local Government* sets out the qualitative findings of this research project. It aims to identify the factors that contributed to the decision to retire from local government by women councillors in Victoria in March 2003. It aims to improve our understanding of the local government experience for women in Victoria and provide direction for the ways in which women's participation can be strengthened.

This research project is linked to the Strengthening Communities through Women's Participation (SCWP) – a project that comprises a range of initiatives aimed at further increasing women's participation in community leadership activities across Victoria over a three-year period from 2001–2004. In particular, SCWP aims to increase the political participation of women in Victorian local governments.

TERMINOLOGY

The term 'retirement' has been used throughout the report in preference to the term 'resignation'. This is in accordance with section 68 of the *Local Government Act (1989)*, which provides for resignation to be a formal process that may happen during the term of office, not at the end of a term.

METHODOLOGY

The findings of this report are based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with women who retired from council at the March 2003 elections.

Of a total of 21 women who were eligible to take part in this study, 19 were willing and able to participate. Of the remaining two, one was unwilling to participate and one was willing but unable to participate. This represents a very high participation rate of 90.5%.

The majority of interviews were conducted on a face-to-face basis, with two being conducted by phone. All interviews were conducted in confidence and participants were given the chance to alter the record of interview before the presentation of research findings. The confidentiality of participation resulted in frank disclosures from participants about the realities of council life, including the negative as well as the positive aspects of their experiences. In some instances, this included disclosure of incidents of unlawful behaviour, including sexual harassment and discrimination. In order to protect the anonymity of participants, these incidents (and any others that can identify a particular participant) are discussed in general terms only. The nature and implications of such experiences, however, remain central to the findings of this report.

While a full interview schedule is included at Appendix One, questions revolved around the following four themes:

- The culture and processes of local government
- Resource and support needs of councillors
- The balance of family, community, paid work and local government commitments
- The impact of broader social attitudes and values in relation to women's role.

In order to maximise their contributions to research findings, all participants were given the opportunity to comment on this report at the draft stage to ensure that their own concerns and suggestions were included in the final report.

PARTICIPANTS

The 19 participants in this study were invited to provide information on a range of personal characteristics. Most agreed to provide this information which included a question on age, race or ethnicity and socio-economic status.

Of the 19 participants, nine were located in rural areas with the remaining 10 in metropolitan Melbourne.

Participants ranged in age from 27 to 69 years, with the majority of participants (10) aged between 50 and 59 years. One person was in her 20s, two were in their 30s, three were in their 40s and two were over 60 years of age. One participant declined to give her age.

All participants described themselves as Anglo- or Celtic-Australian.

When asked to define themselves as low-, medium- or high-income earners, most participants self-described as of medium income (12). Three defined themselves as low-income earners and three as high-income earners. This information was not collected from one participant.

Other information that was also provided included the number of terms on council. Of those women who participated in the research, 15 out of 19 had completed more than one term on council.

**TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT’S PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS**

LOCATION				
Rural	Metropolitan			
9	10			
AGE				
20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69
1	2	3	10	2
RACE/ETHNICITY				
Anglo-Celtic				
19				
INCOME				
Low	Medium	High		
3	12	3		
NUMBER OF TERMS ON COUNCIL				
One Term	Two Terms	Three Terms		
4	12	3		

A Councillor's Life

KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ Retirement was usually the result of a combination of positive life changes and dissatisfaction with aspects of council life.
- ▶ All participants demonstrated a number of positive outcomes from their experience as a councillor.
- ▶ Improving health and wellbeing were major factors in the decision to retire.
- ▶ Work and career development played a large role in the decision to retire.
- ▶ 15 out of 19 participants had completed more than one term on council.
- ▶ Over half of the participants indicated that they would like to have stayed on council or were open to the possibility of returning to council.
- ▶ All participants noted decreased levels of stress and more time for other activities as a result of their retirement from council.

There is a range of reasons that prompted women in this research to put up their hand to stand for council. Indeed, the various expectations they held of council life and the goals they hoped to achieve played a key role in shaping their experience of council from the outset. Not surprisingly, the extent to which these expectations were met or not met influenced both the timing and reasons for retirement.

This section provides a brief overview of the reasons why women entered council in the first instance and a thematic introduction to the reasons for retirement. Importantly, it shows the ways in which participants had to weigh up the positive reasons for leaving local government with those that reflected a negative experience of council life. As such it emphasises that the reality for most participants deciding to retire from council was a complex mix of both positive and negative reasons.

BECOMING A COUNCILLOR

All participants in the study clearly recognised that their decision to stand had grown from a pre-existing interest in local communities and an understanding of the importance of local government.

For some, participation was very closely linked to their identification with their local area.

- >> **I loved my ward. I chose that ward because I saw it as a ward that needed representation... [The people] were disempowered in the sense that they were used to having things done to them rather than done for them. I wanted to turn it around to become a challenging, demanding group of people and I think to some extent that happened.**

For some, this included their identity as community advocates or activists with interests in areas as diverse as youth centres, health centres, football clubs, kindergarten committees, environmental issues and planning issues.

In a variety of ways, participation in community leadership activities was a way of giving back to the community.

- >> **I have a very strong sense of wanting to put back into the community I belong to. When you're in a position to do that, when everything's going well in your life – your family life, your work life – then I think it's really the time to put back into your community.**

For others, there was a realisation that their life experiences would enable them to contribute positively to local government. Indeed, several explicitly stated that they were not happy with the way in which various issues were being handled by their council and believed that they could do a better job. This motivated them to stand and take part in the resolution of issues that were important to them.

Also important were a number of fundamental values that relate to the importance of democracy and participation in local communities. The value of local government in enabling ordinary people to have a role in moulding their communities was a strong attraction. For some participants in this study, the post-amalgamation return of elections in 1997 provided an added impetus to stand.

- >> **I decided to stand when I saw that democracy was coming back to local government. I thought it was an important time to ensure that the best possible structure was set up – that it wasn't any sort of quasi-democracy or puppet government.**

In addition to what was seen as a return of local democracy, it was clear that one of the goals was to see some balance on local government, in relation to gender but also in relation to other factors such as age and family status.

- >> **Somewhere during that first term of council after amalgamation, I sort of suddenly realised that we had a council of seven men, mostly elderly men, and that there was really no sense of balance of representation.**

For one participant, this was a result of publicity in the local paper that directly discussed issues related to the low representation of women on local council. There was also some recognition of the value of acting as a role model to other women.

- >> **Also, by me standing, I felt I related to the average woman... If they could see me as standing as a councillor, maybe they could see themselves or their daughters standing for council... You've just got to want to, and then do the best you can.**

RETIRING FROM COUNCIL

The decision to retire from council was one that was taken very seriously by all participants in this research.

Importantly, over half of the participants indicated that they would like to have stayed on council or were open to the possibility of returning at a later date. While 9 of the 19 respondents were clear that their decision to retire was final (mostly due to changing personal circumstances including stage of life, health and wellbeing), 10 of the 19 respondents indicated a possibility that they would have liked to have continued in the role or return to it at a later date if their personal circumstances were different or if certain changes were made to council workload and culture.

This finding reflects the mixed experiences that women have on council. In the words of the following respondent, this range was a part of what made it so valuable.

>> I loved every bit of council – the good, the bad and the ugly.

Following on from this, it is important to recognise that women who choose to retire usually do so for a range of positive and negative reasons. On the one hand they may actively choose to have a life that is less stressful and allows more time for them to look after their own health and wellbeing as well as to enjoy their family, friends and other activities. At the same time, they are also actively saying no to life as a councillor with its very high demands on their time, intellectual capacity and people management skills.

>> Leaving council, it's a question of whether I'm running to or running from, isn't it? I think it's both.

In providing an overview of reasons for retirement, this section seeks to set the scene for the more detailed analysis that is contained in the sections to follow. It emphasises the complex nature of this decision for the participants who all had to weigh up a variety of considerations to do with their council, home and working personas. Even for those women who were very clear about their desire to move on to the next stage of their lives, the capacity for critical reflection on their time as a councillor is demonstrated in their analysis of their own experiences and the ways in which these experiences had changed them and shaped their future options.

STAGE OF LIFE

Participants were very clear that stage of life is of critical importance in relation to the decision to retire. This was an issue for those who were close to or in retirement from working life and who wished to spend more time with their partners and to travel.

>> I'm older now. My husband and I...we've got things we want to do with our lives and I thought I really don't want to be tied down. I really can't give it what it needs to have.

It was important to those with increasing family responsibilities including the care of children (in some instances through blended or adopted families) and elderly parents.

For others, it was time to leave the area or move to a new location in search of work.

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

It was clear that health concerns were a major contributing factor to the decision to retire for a significant number of women in the study. While the majority of participants reported feeling very tired as a result of the high workload demanded of them as a councillor, others reported a series of serious health concerns that were seen to be insurmountable unless some of the stresses and strains of council life were removed.

>> I just knew that if I got sick again I didn't know what the repercussions were going to be. I just had to take a look at myself and say how many years have I got left? Can I put my time into local government and neglect my own health?

As one respondent pointed out, the decision became one of weighing up the good things about being a councillor against the impact continuing in the role would have on her health.

>> You have to get real about your health. There's no one else that's going to do that for you.

TIME FOR ME

Closely linked to the importance of improving health and wellbeing is the fact that almost all respondents cited the need for more personal time as a major reason for choosing to retire. Wanting to 'get a life', creating more time for personal pursuits, for thinking time and for time alone were raised repeatedly as key issues. The implication is, of course, that as a councillor the time for personal relaxation or contemplation is severely limited.

- >> **Well everyone always asks what are you going to do after council? What are you going to do? I just think well, I'm going to get a life. Because basically you just don't have your own life when you're on council. If you're one of those people like me that puts in and puts in and puts in, if that's the way you are, then it's all just council and everything else you do has to revolve around council commitments.**

For some this is about taking the time to focus on the bigger questions of life and where they were headed. Described as 'life change time', its about finding the time and the energy to start thinking about life rather than feeling stressed all the time. Furthermore, its also about creating the opportunities to move forward on various parts of life that have been put on hold while council took precedence.

- >> **I think the question of who I wanted to be became important; it was time to set myself new goals and new targets after a six-year cycle.**

Also important was the chance to take up new interests (or pick up old ones) such as playing a musical instrument, dancing, walking, reading, gardening, family history and travel.

CAREER AND MONEY

For some participants the decision to retire was closely bound up with career decisions that saw them moving in new directions or into more challenging and consuming positions. This flows from the reality that a woman's career can often be placed 'on hold' while she fulfils the duties of a councillor. While the opportunities offered by the new positions were welcomed, there was some regret that the demands of new work were not able to be reconciled with the demands of council. In these instances, work had to come before council because, quite simply, it paid the mortgage and shored up superannuation.

- >> **I found it very difficult to have to make that decision but I got my new job in August last year which was a promotion and was effectively much more involved than my previous job. It required me to have a lot more head-space around the issues and I just found trying to find that extra 25-30 hours per week for council on top of a very...full-time job... I was struggling.**

For a number of participants, there was an added complication due to the fact that the search for work meant that they needed to move or spend a significant amount of time commuting – all of which made it impossible to remain on council.

On the up side, participants recognised that their time on council had a very significant positive affect on their ability to find work that fulfils and challenges them.

- >> **It certainly assisted me getting my new job. I'm sure it did. It provided me with the opportunity to have leadership outputs that I didn't have with my previous job. Having a recent experience of being a community leader was important... I think it's been really useful in just showing you that you can get things done.**

NEW CHALLENGES

For most women, council provides a number of challenges that relate directly to personal goals that they set for themselves in standing for election or during their terms as a councillor.

For example, respondents had set themselves clear priorities in relation to a range of issues in their community including the environment, planning and issues affecting families, young people and older people. While many of these goals were very long term, a number had clear milestones that, when achieved, provided an enormous degree of satisfaction to the individuals who had pursued them. For some, the achievement of a particular goal was a reason for deciding to retire.

- >> **When I realised I'd achieved this goal and I'd been able to educate some of the councillors, I was able to step back and have a look. I could have set more goals but I felt like I'd done my bit.**

For others, it was simply time for new challenges. This reflected in part a limited willingness to continue to deal with what was seen as the ‘grind’ of council business. It also reflected a recognition that enthusiasm for council can wane over time and when the ‘spark’ has gone it is time to move on to something else and let someone else have their turn on council.

- >> **I think the fact that I lost the spark for it, maybe because I worked for so many years and so many hours, I think that was the motivator and all the other things just fitted in. So that’s the spark that you need and it had just waned a little bit, probably because I’m tired.**

Within this discussion of the need to move on was a refreshing recognition of the need to create space for newcomers and thereby retain the freshness of council and, indeed, democracy.

- >> **I have a really strong view, we’re not god’s gift to the community. If you take the view that democracy can be well served by capable, committed and interested people in the local community it doesn’t mean that you’re the chosen one. I think that your energy and your views change during your life, and certainly your enthusiasm can vary, and it’s important that other people can have those opportunities. That you have a renewable democracy. The argument is the balance – you don’t want everybody leaving. You want renewal and change, plus some consistency.**



RELIEF AND REGRET – HOW I’M FEELING NOW

The interviews were conducted approximately two months after the end of their term on council and interviewees expressed a range of emotions in relation to how they were feeling about their decision to retire.

Two participants felt like they had not had a real choice in the decision – it had been taken out of their control. Two would like to have stayed if family constraints had been different but were happy with the decision that they had made under the circumstances.

- >> **I found it difficult to decide not to stand again. I felt almost as though I didn’t have a choice and I was really concerned to let go of some of the projects. So it’s been quite interesting to move away and to realise you still can have an input, influence and support to do things. And the other thing, I felt a bit guilty about not standing again. I felt like I was letting the side down. I felt I was letting the community down, I felt I was letting the staff down.**

Others felt that they had made the right decision for a mix of reasons including positive life changes (lifestyle, family, career) combined with some concern about the desirability or sustainability of certain aspects of council life (workload, culture, support).

- >> **I think I’m feeling a bit of relief because I’d had a very bad 18 months leading up to the end of council, so yes a bit of relief. A little bit of sadness because I’m a real people person and I really enjoyed the contact with council officers as well as the community. I didn’t even mind going home to my answering machine full of messages from residents complaining about this, that or the other... Definitely I’m more relaxed. I really feel I’ve made the right decision.**

Sustainability was repeatedly raised as an issue in the sense that people did not feel they could make changes that they needed to make in their home or working lives and remain on council. It was often a case of one or the other – family or council, study or council, work or council. For the following respondent, remaining on council would have meant foregoing the chance to take stock of her life and define her new life direction.

- >> **There is a bit of sadness about leaving. But I'd have to balance keeping going with the chance of renewal.**

For many participants, leaving council is a time of significant disruption and grief.

- >> **It was hard while you were in but it's hard while you're out too... It was three years that you live, breathe, work, talk council, and then all of a sudden it's gone.**

Given that council life was reported to be all-encompassing by most women, the importance of transition strategies was raised by a number of participants who were able to identify how they had eased themselves out of council into 'normal' life. For some this was quite a conscious strategy, for others it was less conscious but not less effective. Tactics included those that started before the end of council including a slow withdrawal from various activities. Others were put in place after retirement including keeping very busy, travel and holidays. For one person, outside assistance was obtained for this period of transition.

- >> **Part of that was also to go to counselling and I've done that just to help me through the transition period because I really believed that I would grieve when I left because I loved it so much. I found all that to be very valuable and I would recommend it to other people in the same position.**

One undisputed outcome for participants is that there is noticeably less stress in their lives as a result of their retirement. In part this is a result of a slower pace, less meetings to attend and less paperwork to contend with. In addition, it is also attributable to the relief of no longer feeling like they are on duty all the time.

- >> **I didn't realise until the last couple of weeks of my term how physically demanding it had been. I sort of crumpled up really. I became extremely tired. I felt like crying all the time. And I realised that for three years I had kept myself braced. Someone would call my name and I'd take a deep breath and brace myself.**

Not surprisingly, being able to let this feeling go is an enormous source of relief.

- >> **I can remember vividly driving into a meeting one night and I just felt as though this huge weight had lifted off my shoulders. It was a feeling of freedom, and that was amazing that feeling. It was just incredible that all these pressures had gone. I could relax.**

Other positive spin-offs include more time at home, being able to manage things better, not being tired, and not rushing all the time. These changes can also result in better health and wellbeing.

- >> **My health is better. I was diagnosed with some fairly serious health issues and because I've slowed down I'm more healthy.**

Women, Leadership and Local Government

KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ Improving the balance of representation on council so that it reflects the diversity of the community it represents is a key priority.
- ▶ Women on council make a positive contribution to local government through their different perspective on community life.
- ▶ The CEO plays a key role in creating a culture in council that is gender aware.
- ▶ The level of public scrutiny is higher for women on council, who are expected to perform at least as well as the men if not to a higher standard.
- ▶ The time commitment of council means that participation in local government is difficult for women with carer responsibilities.
- ▶ The level of support provided by council for women with carer responsibilities is inadequate.
- ▶ The impact of council life on other family members was an important element of the decision to retire.

A wide range of views was expressed by respondents on the links between broad social attitudes and values in relation to women's roles and their own experiences both as leaders of local communities and as members of local government.

In order to explore whether or not these issues had an impact on the decision to retire from council, it is important to look at the ways in which participants saw their experience of leadership and local government through the lens of gender. That is, whether or not the fact that they were women affected the type of experience they had on council including any specific actions they took, the way they interacted with other key players and their relationship with their communities.

The challenge inherent in this analysis is what changes could take place within the local government sphere that would make it more possible for a broader cross section of the community to be able to play a leadership role. As will be discussed in the remainder of this report, this question must be central to consideration of council culture, workload and remuneration.

- >> Young people starting out in their career (unless they want a political career) and people with young families or single mums or the diverse range of people in our community that you'd love to have reflected on your council – they're not going to do it. They couldn't provide the time at the times you need them to be there, and the skills that you need to undertake some of the jobs are really daunting.

WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP

Evidence of the existence of what were considered 'traditional' approaches to the role of women in relation to public life was provided by a number of participants. In particular, this reflected the long-standing belief that women's proper role was in the home (private sphere) rather than on council (public sphere). The change brought about by the increasing visibility of women in positions of leadership, including on council, was cause for some disruption to these traditional notions.

- >> **When I became Mayor, I remember vividly someone saying to me, oh, you're the new Mayor, do you know what you're doing? And I thought, would they have said that to a man? No, I think it was said because I was a woman, and they'd had so few female councillors in the city let alone a female mayor. So they weren't quite sure what to do with their old attitudes.**

Without question, part of this unease is a result of the shift in power relations that necessarily happens in a community in which women take on more leadership positions and are therefore in a stronger position to determine the future shape of local infrastructure and networks. For some participants this was seen to have already resulted in a positive change in attitudes that support women taking on an increased public leadership role.

- >> **If you're in there and you're conscientious, if you've built your experience up, if you do the job well, there is a respect that comes through. People wanted to see women on council.**

For others, the intractability of certain attitudes about the role of women was a bit of a shock.

- >> **They're from cultures where they do not have women answering them back, and...all of a sudden, there's a woman answering back, what's going on here? I have memories of being surrounded by five of them saying that women should not work, that they were proud of the fact that once they got married they'd always supported their wives. And I thought, I really honestly thought, that these attitudes were gone even in the country.**

As well as concern about women being in the public sphere per se, there was also concern that once there they simply wouldn't have the necessary knowledge (especially technical knowledge) to be able to fulfil the demands of the job.

- >> **I had a resident once come up to me and say girls don't know anything about drains...and that's why voters won't trust them. Well I actually do know about drains so I wondered if I should make this a bold point in my pamphlet. I just thought it was so funny.**

As the above quote attests, one of the principal ways in which respondents dealt with these lingering attitudes was through a good sense of humour.

Overall, while recognising that attitudes such as those expressed above still existed, respondents rarely let them get in the way of their determination to participate in community decision-making processes.

- >> **I've never been a person who felt constrained by my gender. Big picture there probably have been major constraints but I've never acknowledged them, I've just ploughed on regardless. I figure unless you're willing to take time out to tackle that issue it can stop you getting on with what you want to do. So I've always just got on with what I want to do.**

Participants strongly believed that having women on council did make a positive difference to the direction of decisions made by council. In one way, this can be attributed to the specific experiences of community life that can bring a vital reality to consideration of issues at council level.

- >> **I would say that being a woman did make a difference. I think that women have a different perspective on council. Because we're mums we know about school, we know about the bus system, we know about the shops and all the things our kids need, playgrounds etc.**

For others, it also served as evidence of a different approach to understanding issues and reaching decisions.

- >> **I found, generally speaking, that women have got a much broader canvas that they look at. Men tend to be quite focused on any particular issue whereas women are much broader in their thinking and they see possibilities or ramifications in things that wouldn't occur to a male.**



WOMEN AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

For several of the participants, the initial issue was the need to bring balance to council, so that the different perspectives provided by individual councillors could better reflect the diversity of the community it represents. It was stressed time and again that this input was highly valued by community members and that women in the community expected women on council to stand up and represent them, to get their issues on the agenda.

>> **It definitely was a gender issue... They're not people, unlike other parts of the city, who will still be rolled over. These people are educated and they want to feel confident and inspired by somebody and definitely a female candidate is a benefit in demographics like that, no question. A lot of females live there, a lot of single females, a lot of gay couples that work hard, know what they want, are decisive and definitely want a female representative.**

However, recognising that the community likes to see a balanced council that represents and reflects the community does not, however, automatically go hand-in-hand with a view that women need specifically targeted assistance to get on to council.

>> **I don't believe in affirmative action, so I am what I am, and if people can't live with that, that's their problem not mine. I think it probably impacted positively on other people. I think that people like to see women in council.**

For others, there was a conscious decision not to push the 'woman candidate' ticket at election time.

>> **I didn't feel isolated being the only woman. People made more of it than I did. My campaign manager was determined that I should say that we need women on council and use that as a campaign tool and I wouldn't.**

Such differences are indicative of the larger debate about the ways in which community participation and leadership are shaped by notions of gender, including questions about differences in the negotiation, consultation and management skills of women as compared to men. While views varied among participants as to the degree to which their specific experience had been shaped by pre-existing gender expectations, what was clear was that each individual had developed a range of strategies to deal with difficulties that did arise in regard to council culture or decision-making processes.

There is broad agreement that having women on council changes things. However, there is a range of views on how this change is manifested in daily council life and the long term implications for both the role of women in local government and for local government more broadly.

Issues related to the role of women in public life more generally that were raised above also play a part in our understandings of council. Questions about whether or not women consider that they are treated differently to men on council, and whether or not they bring different talents to the council table remain very relevant. Not surprisingly, answers to such questions were very diverse.

GENDER AWARENESS

For some women, council was not experienced as a place in which gender issues made life difficult for women.

>> **It was inclusive in relation to gender. There was a certain respect there. Women weren't just someone you smiled at then made decisions without.**

However, this experience of council as inclusive of gender or gender neutral sat in polar opposition to instances of sexual harassment and discrimination. The experience of most women sat somewhere between these two extremes. Importantly, most (though not all) reported that gender awareness had improved during the time that they were on council due in part to their own hard work in making sure that they were able to play an equal role to the men.

Despite this range of experience, all participants demonstrated a very clear awareness of the ways in which issues related to gender had impacted on their experience as women in council. These included difficulties in relation to council spaces, language, and stereotyped assumptions about women's interests, skills and knowledge.

The ability to clearly articulate these issues and to demonstrate the ways in which they had experienced them personally did not automatically mean that participants saw them as particularly problematic or limiting.

>> Gender has never been an issue for me. Maybe I'm different from some people but I don't think of myself as a female. I thought of myself as a councillor representing the community. I never had any problems with any of the relationships I had with management or with other councillors because I was female. I never at any time in my six years in local government felt disadvantaged because I was a female.

For others, the experience was less positive. Council spaces were not always seen as comfortable for women, particularly in instances where there was only one woman on council.

>> Am I saying that the council room is not comfortable for women? For the only woman – yes... Sometimes I felt a little bit like an intruder. A room of men. Going into a councillor recreation room that's all men you do feel intimidated.

While the issues of sexual harassment and discrimination are discussed below, a number of participants experienced an undercurrent of negative gender-based attitudes or comments from other councillors and from council management.

>> The culture in council is bad, naïve. If they could have got away with it they would have patted me on the head and said you've done a nice job dear. One of them came up to me and asked how's the little girl going? Well, I'm in my thirties, I've got a house of my own, I've got a mortgage, a full-time job and they're calling me a little girl. I really feel that they dismissed me. Not all of them, but the majority of them.

Participants in trying to describe how they felt about council used the term 'boys' club' repeatedly.

>> I did have their respect but men are men and they did tend to be a kind of 'boys' club'. And, well I don't drink and I don't smoke and I didn't stay around after the meeting and have a social drink... I myself might have stepped back from the closeness. I've never involved my family life with council life and because there were never any other women there, well you're not actually excluded but you feel like you don't want to overstep your mark.

>> It's very much a 'boys' club'. And that goes for the senior officers as well as other councillors. The typical scenario is the 'all the boys down the pub after work' type of thing, slap on the back, the dirty jokes, the rah rah rah, you know. It's an attitude. We're all here, we're all mates together. It's not even chauvinistic; it's just male. It's a male thing and they just do it when they get together in a group.

This culture was also seen to have the potential to extend beyond council into council management. As the following account attests, the CEO can play a critical role in creating a culture that is gender sensitive.

>> Initially for the first 18 months when I first became a councillor we had a CEO that I found enormously difficult to work with and who I believe engendered a real 'boys' club' type atmosphere within the organisation and I found that very difficult... When we got a new CEO it was like a breath of fresh air, the whole culture, the whole organisation changed completely and it wasn't an issue at all after that... I guess it was just his whole philosophy about the organisation, the fact that he deliberately wanted women in his management team and could see that they made a valuable contribution.

For one participant, having a female CEO was a significant way in which the importance of gender equality could be stressed.

>> Having a woman running the council was a very strong statement.

Importantly, the fact that it was a 'boys' club' was not seen to be surprising to those women who experienced council in this way. It didn't seem to daunt them from taking part in any way, although some expressed a degree of weariness at repeatedly dealing with the same issues related to sexist language or assumptions about what roles women should take up when in council.

>> Being a woman in a 'boys' club' didn't provide any more challenges than I'm used to in life.

Indeed, participants were able to demonstrate a range of ways in which they dealt with challenges that came their way and which they felt were not conducive to a gender inclusive council. These were mostly in relation to the language used in council (including the underlying attitudes particular language was portraying) and also in relation to the allocation of council duties including committee membership and issue portfolios.

In regard to the use of sexist language, the main strategies were to ignore it (to a point), to laugh it off, to provide a witty response or to simply bite back.

- >> **There are always times when the blokes get a bit blokey and the jokes get a little bit over the top. There was one particular councillor who loved to get stuck into women, to run women down, but he always did it in a jocular way. Whether that was hiding a really serious problem he has with women I don't know. My strategy was to ignore him and not laugh at his jokes. Once or twice I argued with him over issues. But generally I'd just ignore him and that worked fine.**
- >> **There would be the odd comment meant as bait and so I'd just bite. It seemed to be appropriate to bite. Sometimes you'd just sit back but if it was said in the council domain you felt compelled to say something. It would be a quick retort and nothing more than that – not frivolous but making sure the gallery saw.**

For some respondents, a degree of latitude was given to older male councillors who used terms like 'sheila' or 'lady'. It was seen as a reflection of generational attitudes that would not have been accepted in younger male councillors.

For others, the issue became more serious.

- >> **I felt their language left a lot to be desired. I don't necessarily mean swearing. There were plenty of sexist jokes and snide comments and all that sort of thing... I sort of went along with it for a little while until I decided I'd had enough... It did get to the stage where I actually had to almost threaten legal action to one councillor over a statement that he had made that I felt was most derogatory. He apologised to me on the phone but I said I don't accept that – I want a formal apology in front of the whole council... That was very hard, to push it that far, because it could have gone the other way. It could've got quite difficult, but I actually gained his respect after that.**

In addition to the language of council, ample evidence was also provided about the ways in which women can be pigeonholed into certain 'soft' areas of council business, most notably community services, and out of other 'hard' areas including auditing, economic management and planning. While not true of all councils, it was repeatedly referred to as one of the gender battlegrounds of council where women had to fight hard to gain positions on certain committees, or to undertake particular roles or tasks.

- >> **A couple of the guys knew me before I got elected. One brave soul who didn't know me made a comment at the very first meeting we had that I should pick up the community services area. I can remember slamming my fist down on the table and saying no, (for) two reasons. One is I do it all day at work; I'd rather do something more adventurous and it would be really good for one of you guys to pick it up. And, two, why is it suddenly a woman's issue? ... It was about setting parameters. I'm here as an equal partner at this table and I expect to be treated just the same as everyone else.**

As far as the performance of women on council is concerned, there was widespread recognition among participants that women had to perform at least as well as the men if not to a higher standard. It was considered that the level of public scrutiny was higher for women and there was still a sense that they had to prove that they had rightfully earned their place at the council table.

- >> **I am sure the gallery used to watch and count how long I was out of the room. What time I clocked in and out.**

Within the council room, it was suggested that jealousy could be an issue, especially if the woman is successful, is mayor or is chair of one of the more powerful committees and in charge of male participants.

Furthermore, there is some pressure that women have to perform well because they are somehow there as the representatives of all women – a poor performance therefore reflects badly on all women. As the following quote attests, this suggests that women on council play a different, higher profile role in the minds not only of their constituents but of their fellow councillors as well. Once again, they have to be better than the men at their job to prove they should keep their place in council.

>> I guess we have had a couple of women councillors who did not perform well and I was conscious that their lack of skill or lack of performance reflected badly on women... There were concerns about the level of performance of some of the male councillors as well... Whether the other men felt that that reflected badly on men, I don't think they would have. Because that's not the way men think. The men did speak about the way other male councillors performed but perhaps in a different way.

Further issues that were raised by respondents included the formality of council meetings and infrastructure that were seen to serve as a disincentive to the participation of women.

Furthermore, when it is a woman who is mayor, the workload can be heavier as communities struggle with the notion that a female mayor's male partner could fulfil some of the tasks traditionally undertaken by a mayoress.

>> People were quite comfortable with me being the mayor, a female mayor, but they couldn't handle my husband as the mayoress. So that means...for a woman to be the mayor, there are more demands on you than for a bloke, because you're mayoress as well and you just have to do both.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND DISCRIMINATION

In addition to the negative gender-based attitudes and practices referred to above, two incidents of sexual harassment and discrimination were reported in the course of the research. In both cases, experiences of sexual harassment and discrimination were part of a general council culture of manipulation and intimidation. Such experiences played a major contributing role in the decision of the affected individuals to retire.

In the first case, incidents of sexual harassment were described as a part of a council culture that was not very safe for women.

>> The culture of the council was a 'boys' club' totally and completely. I mean I can describe incidents of sexual harassment, I mean serious sexual harassment, cornered alone in the back room by a male councillor. Suggestions that you were wearing your name-tag too close to your crotch, insinuations about your sexuality. I think the worst one was being cornered alone in the back room by a leering male councillor... But I was probably not the only one, it was probably happening to others. I was the only female that retaliated.

In the other case, the issue was reported to and dealt with through the appropriate external authority. It intensified over an 18-month period and included verbal abuse and physical intimidation.

>> He rang me up and abused me, yelled at me over the phone, how dare you blah blah blah. He made some incredibly outrageous comments. It was just obnoxious and completely inappropriate. I was really hurt and very upset. Anyway, he then rang me back after yelling at me for 15 minutes and had another go at me. I said I would see him in council. I raised it with him in public. First he told me that I was incapable of holding the office and incapable of understanding anything. I asked him in what way am I incapable. Then he got up and called me names and stormed out of the council. By that stage I'd had enough of him... I could have taken it further but I said no, I want to leave council.

For this respondent, one of the most frustrating aspects of this experience was the difficulty she encountered in her attempts to get some help. Council management did not provide any direct support, nor did they give advice on what outside mechanisms could be engaged for support. According to the respondent, there were a number of points at which management could have stepped in to diffuse the situation.

>> I do believe the CEO when he saw him losing it should have pulled him back. I didn't feel supported at all during the process. I was even made to feel a bit like I'd brought the council down by doing it, by making it public. Up until that point anything that went on, no one would have known about it. I think that I decided that it was not something to avoid, people had to know.



BALANCING COUNCIL AND FAMILY LIFE

There is widespread agreement among research respondents that the culture of local government is not conducive to the participation of women who have the demands of family life to contend with in addition to the demands of council.

>> **Arguably, in the best-case scenario, I would have done another term if I could have had the time with my daughter and my career – whether...[working] part-time...[could] have allowed that to happen. The reality is you can't do part-time work and be a councillor and financially sustain yourself.**

CARER RESPONSIBILITIES

Most of the respondents in the research did not consider it feasible to enter local government until their children had either left home or were in high school. Not one participant had made the decision to enter local government with a child under the age of 11. For all of those participants with teenage children, the desire to spend more time with their family was a major reason for their retirement. For some, the care of elderly parents had been difficult to reconcile with council working hours and had contributed to their decision. Other participants pointed to the impact council had on their partners, new relationships and friendships.

>> **In the end it was the work and family thing that defeated me because it's not balanceable. I had started council with a partner but it didn't stand the test of time. There wasn't much time. Well I think I was very engaged in my new role and I think he found that quite difficult. So then I got another involvement in the shape of my daughter. So in the end I couldn't give to everybody. I took on a very demanding job as well as council as well as motherhood and in the end I couldn't continue. So the juggling just became too hard because the price was me.**

In reality, there is little recognition in the way that council operates for the multiple demands on women's time including in particular the demands centred on home and family (those related to paid work will be discussed in the final section of this report). When it came down to it, and often after a long number of years of juggling the two, women chose their relationships and families above council.

One of the implications of this issue is that participation in local government is much less open to women with young families. Women clearly waited until their children were older before they decided to stand. A number stated that they simply couldn't have done it with a family at home, particularly given the after business hours work that home life entails.

Specific issues that were raised in relation to children included the expectation that councillors and their partners would attend functions that were not appropriate for children without the offer of child care. Indeed, child care was not even considered an issue for some councils. In addition, while it is theoretically possible to use formal child care and claim reimbursement, the reality is that it's almost impossible to find child care at night.

Suggestions included the need for councils to pay more attention to making child care available or planning meetings at more appropriate times for women. Also important is the need for some flexibility in relation to school holidays, when the demands of children for care invariably increase. For those women with children of school age, the school holidays were times when they tended to opt out of more additional activities, preferring to be with their children.

In addition to child care, the role of partners and extended family members (including grandmothers in particular) was repeatedly highlighted. This point illustrates the impact that council life has on the individual councillor and also on other members of her family. Taking this impact into account in the decision to retire is not therefore surprising.

>> **Particularly the last three years it's been very emotional and, well, a lot of stresses were involved for a number of reasons. That was hard on my kids. My kids know the other families from around here, everyone knows everyone. They don't need to grow up in that environment where there are certain families that are involved – I would be coming home and trying not to whinge too much about them because I knew they knew my kids. So those sorts of issues came up too.**

The positive spin-offs from the decision to retire were already clear in the first few months after council had ended.

>> **Since March, I think I've just realised how much time I haven't been at home over the last few years. Every day our daughter says, are you out tonight mum? So I think...I didn't realise that essentially I was out between five and six nights a week.**

>> **She now has mummy a lot more often than before and she really likes that. When I go home I don't have to rush off – all that's gone. She really likes the new lifestyle. I think I'm much calmer and much more relaxed in myself too.**

In addition to the care of children, a number of respondents pointed to their increasing responsibilities in relation to carer for elderly parents and other relatives. For one respondent the decision to retire came down to deciding what was really important and the answer was carer for her mother and carer for her partner.

In terms of sharing the carer load, respondents had different experiences in relation to the ways in which their partners and families had been able to adjust and take on additional responsibilities as a result of the time away from family that being on council required. More specifically, it was clear that while some partners had been well able to play a larger role in keeping the home running smoothly, others were less willing to do so.

>> **I just don't think that men, at all, take their fair share of maintaining things. It makes me just think, it's really hard to maintain the standards that you want to and keep doing everything else as well. And what happens is you just get completely stressed and worn out. I ended up going to see a psychiatrist because I was so depressed and so upset.**

For others, this flexibility and support was more readily available.

>> **My 17-year old daughter was super supportive. So every Monday night she'd cook a meal. I also had a husband who studied for three years while I looked after the kids so he thought it was actually his turn to do this. Payback time!**

As the following respondent points out, this has important implications for how we think about the different experiences of council life reported by women and men.

>> **Partners are really important in terms of support. If I look at the male councillors, what I see is that they have partners and they always had someone to go home to... Their home life was organised for them in a way that was not the same for me. I have to go home and do all those other things. If I wasn't there, none of it would get done. So being a woman on council is different to being a man on council.**

One of the common solutions to the need to keep home life running smoothly was the use of councillor allowance to buy in-home help for cleaning, ironing and gardening.

>> **From my point of view there's no point in trying to be superwoman. You need to face up to the fact that you're going to need some help to do what you want to do. So unless you have a partner who is prepared to pick up all of those duties then you end up having to employ people to help around the home. So that's how I got through.**

PARTNERS AND FRIENDS

There is little question that involvement in council can challenge existing relationships. These include the sort of challenges outlined above in relation to time commitments and changing responsibilities around the home as well as those of a more intimate nature. For some of the women in this research, their involvement in council challenged their partners in ways that they had not anticipated. This included a degree of resentment at the high profile nature of the role in the community, a role that shifted the balance of power wielded in the community in favour of the wife.

Such issues point to the need to balance the different needs of each partner in a relationship and include the recognition that such needs are inevitably bound up with all the complex elements of our lives, including life stage, work demands and leisure needs.

- >> **My husband retired from full-time employment after my first year as a councillor... I think this is really the pivotal thing. It was a case of having to put my family first. He wants to be able to travel and I felt that another three years would be difficult for him to cope with. Not difficult for me to cope with but for him to cope with... But I feel that there is a gender thing in there because if my husband had been a councillor and he was finding it stimulating and rewarding and interesting, then the question wouldn't be asked about whether I wanted him to be as flexible and able to travel.**

For some of those women in a relationship, retiring from council was a chance for renewal. The positive flow-on effects of more time and more energy were very welcomed.

- >> **Now I can think a lot more about my family and relationships. I pay a lot more attention to what people are telling me. I have the opportunity to do more analysis of my relationships. Relationships aren't all that demanding unless there's a crisis. There was always a meeting to go to, preparation to do for council – these things took precedence. My personal relationships have certainly improved now that I've got more time.**

For those women not in a relationship, a number believed that they simply could not have been a councillor and involved with someone at the same time. Others were open to the possibility but did not see how they could have found the time or energy to start a new relationship. Indeed, leaving council was seen as a positive opportunity to re-prioritise that aspect of their lives.

- >> **It'll give me time to have a relationship with someone if I want to because I don't have to say, well, from Monday through to Thursday I'm not available. So if someone wants to take me to a show or to dinner I can do it.**

Council Workload and Culture

KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ The responsibilities of governance do not remove traditional expectations of councillors, given unchanged community understandings of the role.

- ▶ There is a continuing lack of clarity in the role of local government as a third tier of government.

- ▶ The workload was regarded as onerous by all participants.

- ▶ Workload is particularly high in a councillor's first term and generally decreases in the second term.

- ▶ The workload and the difficulties of balancing council, home and work life were very significant factors in the decision to retire.

- ▶ The management styles of the mayor and the CEO were a key contributing factor to the type of experience women had on council.

- ▶ Unprofessional and unethical behaviour on council contributed in some instances to low morale and decreased the desire to remain on council.

- ▶ The political nature of council, including an increased level of party-based politics, was a significant determinant of women's experience on council.

- ▶ The public nature of council life potentially raises serious issues for women on council in relation to personal privacy and safety.

In this section, a number of issues related to the daily business of council life are examined. Starting at the macro-level, it looks at the changing role of local government and raises a number of structural concerns, including the status of local government in relation to other levels of government and the impact of amalgamation on the role of a councillor. At a micro-level, this section highlights the important issues that exist to differing degrees within all councils in relation to workload, culture and practices, public life and the politics of local government.

Not surprisingly there was a wide range of responses reported in the research on the degree to which issues of council culture and workload impacted on the decision of individual women to retire. For many, there were serious issues related to the frustrations of council life in terms of lack of funding and the slow pace of bureaucratic change. For others, it was about the political nature of council life with the increasing prevalence of party-based decision-making and the 'short-termism' brought on by a narrow focus on elections rather than long-term visions. For others, the public nature of council life with its potential threat to personal privacy and safety was a negative aspect of the job.

For all participants, however, the very high workload and the resulting conflicts that this caused with other aspects of women's lives was a serious cause for concern.

ROLE OF COUNCIL

One of the most attractive and challenging aspects of being a councillor for women is the breadth and diversity of the role of local government in the community. While this means that the learning curve is a steep one, it is a source of satisfaction to those who choose to be involved.

- >> **Council is a really interesting being. You have a moral, social and legal obligation to the people you represent. You are on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. You have a real sense of obligation and responsibility thrust upon you. I was okay about that, that didn't bother me.**

Five of the participants in the study had experience as councillors prior to amalgamation as well as more recently in the post-amalgamation era. Important evidence was provided by these participants as to the different nature of these two experiences including, in particular, the changing role of council and its ongoing relation to community expectations of council.

While theoretically the role of council post-amalgamation is to be a governing board, it was consistently reported that community expectations of council have not changed and that the level of understanding of this new role is low.

- >> **I think that a lot of people that were involved pre-amalgamation and now struggle to see the difference between local government then and what it is now, and the community hasn't understood that either, and they still don't. They still expect you to come out and look at the pothole they've got and the grass that hasn't been cut, and the tree that's fallen over... Now I think being a board member, being that conduit, making sure that the policy decisions are robust, that the concentration is on the community and meeting the community's needs. That's the role.**

Indeed, the need to increase community awareness of the role of council was repeatedly emphasised as one important way of making the job of a councillor more feasible in that it would make community expectations more realistic. Strategies to improve understandings of council's changed role included meeting with community groups, holding public forums and making information available through the press.

The impact on communities themselves, however, was also noted as one important outcome of the amalgamation process. This was characterised largely as a loss of community identity with implications for the ways in which communities engaged with their councils, including in relation to voluntary work.

- >> **People said, you know, it's not us, we no longer own it. We no longer feel like we belong to any part of it, it's too big and they got lost in amongst it.**
- >> **A lot of people in the community were still hurting and grieving for their loss of identity, loss of participation, loss of voice and one of the things I wanted to do as mayor was to re-engage the community.**

In addition to structural issues that relate to the changes brought about by amalgamation, concerns were also raised about the lack of constitutional reference to local government and about the relationship with both State and Federal governments.

- >> **To do the job properly – we are a third tier of government and if we want to be recognised as a real tier of government and not just being pandered to we need two things. We need constitutional recognition and we need to be acknowledged as equal partners with our state and federal colleagues.**

These two issues are particularly grating for those participants who emphasised the critical nature of the work undertaken by local government in a broad range of areas.

- >> **It's almost like you're an afterthought as far as the government is concerned. If I sit back and look at it from outside, local government does pretty much all the work. It has all the interrelationships with the community whether it be the aged, the young, whatever. It does what the State and Federal governments could never do.**

These broad concerns relate to the long-term position of local government as a key player in Australian political life and in local communities. Lack of clarity about this role, frustrating relationships with other government departments and Ministers and chronic under-funding led to a degree of annoyance and anger for some participants.



WORKLOAD

- >> **You feel as though you are hitting a brick wall all the time. It's broader than just frustration with your own council. It's about funding, recognition of the role of local government, lack of respect.**

Such frustrations were direct contributory factors to the decision to retire for a number of respondents. It made them feel like they were not able to achieve anything for their residents.

- >> **I think that local government is hopelessly under-funded. That was another thing that I just didn't like. I hate listening to the people complain, I hate saying yes I'll fix it up and then have them ringing up saying well you haven't done anything yet. And you think, but I've tried, and if you say to them well I actually tried, but unfortunately I failed, it just sounds like you're making excuses. In the end it was that sort of feeling plus the fact that I wasn't achieving anything that made me want to throw in the towel.**

While participants were not concerned at the direction local government was taking in relation to governance issues in theory (in fact there was a high level of support for this move), the reality was proving difficult to manage. In addition to changing community expectations and improving the structural position of local government in relation to other tiers, this difficulty was also intrinsically tied up with issues of workload and remuneration.

- >> **If you want to have a board of governance, then you should have people who are appointed who have the skills and the time and are properly remunerated. If it's going to be an elected thing, then the people who are elected need to have more power, more responsibility, and more resources.**

While there was some variation in the workload reported by respondents, there was widespread agreement that it was onerous. Not only is the range of tasks broad and time-consuming, the position of a councillor as a public leader can have unexpected (and unwelcome) incursions into an individual's private and family lives.

- >> **Overall, the cost was huge. It's not something you can measure in dollars. People get perceptions about who you are. Sometimes they can be negative and sometimes they can be positive. You sacrifice your peace of mind really. Every other job I've had before, you go to work, you come home you've got time to yourself. You might have problems but you deal with it. With council it's with you all the time.**

The discussion that follows looks at the job of being a councillor and the amount of time it requires. It is important to bear in mind when considering these questions that the work is undertaken on a primarily voluntary basis on top of the commitments of family and working lives.

- >> **The reality is that the role of a councillor now compared to what it was before amalgamation is huge. There are less councillors and the workload is enormous. As much as I loved it, it was absolutely enormous and daunting, 160 odd services the council provided, then all the strategic stuff, all the political stuff. I thrived on it, I loved it – but it came at a cost.**

THE ROLE OF A COUNCILLOR

All participants were able to list a very wide range of components that went into making up the job of the councillor. In the context of the changed council role discussed above, respondents reported that the post-amalgamation emphasis on council governance did not diminish many of the more traditional councillor tasks, given community expectations of the role. While the job varied across councils, in summary it involves council meetings (including committee and policy or issue specific meetings), community meetings and consultations, meetings with individual residents, answering phone messages and letters, following up issues with council officers, social events and networking, research and preparation for meeting debate, speech writing, liaison with other councils, lobbying other councillors, meeting with external agencies, including other government bodies, attending conferences and training.

Not surprisingly, words used to describe the workload included ‘enormous’, ‘huge’, ‘chaotic, and finally, ‘unsustainable’. The following respondent said she could receive up to 60 or 70 phone calls a week.

>> **It was big. I think I aged a bit, developed some grey hairs.**

For a large majority of participants, the workload and the impossibility of balancing council, home and work life was the overriding factor in the decision to retire.

>> **The workload and juggling everything is really what it comes down to. You have to be prepared to start at 5am and if you don't finish 'til midnight – you don't finish 'til midnight. You make sure that you are prepared for the next day before you go to bed.**

Without exception, the lifestyle for these councillors was very hectic.

>> **You're constantly running; you're constantly rushing from place to place. You might have to go from work to a meeting and rush home and feed the cats or the kids first. Then you get home at 10.30 or 11 at night. It doesn't leave you much time for anything else if you're fully involved.**

Respondents placed the time commitment at between eight and 40 hours per week for a councillor, with those women who had served as mayor invariably describing it as a full-time job. Most considered council to be a seven-day a week job, with evening work from Monday through to Thursday. One respondent graphed her hours in her first year on council – the results are described in the following quote.

>> **What it showed was that it was up and down, from [around] 12 hours to 46 hours when you went off to a conference or something... There was no averaging out; it was all over the place. But it gradually increased over time, which was slightly concerning. It started at around an average of 24 hours per week. I think it would have peaked in the second year up to about 30 hours.**

In addition to all the tasks outlined above, the time required of councillors for travel (particularly in rural areas) is substantial.

>> **We've got a huge amount of square kilometres in our city and when I was mayor I sometimes did nearly 800km a day. I had to go from here to there and pick up a cheque for something, and then on to somewhere else for a meeting, then on the road again, a drama festival opening at night... After that was finished and I drove back home it was something like 2am... Then you're supposed to be back there again in the morning.**

To deal with the workload, respondents put a number of strategies in place for themselves and also identified a number of changes to council processes that would improve the sustainability of the situation.

One important way of increasing efficiency was to limit the areas of involvement in council, focusing more intently on specific issues, roles or policy areas.

>> **It could have been a full-time job but I didn't let it. I limited it to eight to 10 hours per week. I did this by not attending community meetings and the time I did spend was really focused. There needed to be something in it for me (on a personal or council level) otherwise I wasn't interested. Initially other councillors thought that this meant that they had to take on my burden. But when I explained it to them they were fine. It worked well.**

Also, it was important to recognise personal limits and say no when necessary.

- >> **I'm a fairly defined person and I could indicate what would be a problem for me – I didn't just not turn up. I was always very clear about what I could engage in and what I couldn't.**

Suggested ways of strengthening the capacity of councillors to engage their time more effectively included the provision of support such as briefing sessions, better secretarial back up, strategies to help focus meeting debate (including shorter meetings) and skills training in areas such as meeting procedure, public speaking, budgets and governance.

The management style of the mayor was also considered to be key to the smooth running of council. In particular, it was seen to be important that mayors were able to delegate responsibility for particular activities to council members, including the allocation of portfolio interest areas.

One final issue of significance in relation to council workload is the view that it is particularly high in the first term of a councillor's involvement and will generally decrease in the second term. As pointed out earlier, of those women who participated in the research, 15 out of 19 had done more than one term on council. Changes in the political nature of council, or the emergence of particularly difficult issues meant that in some cases the second term was much more difficult than the first. However, there was agreement that the development of confidence and skills over time makes an individual more able to manage the workload the second time around.

- >> **My first year in council was a huge learning curve. The first three years of council were perhaps more hard work than the second three years.**



WORKPLACE CULTURE AND PRACTICES

There were a number of specific issues related to the culture of council and the processes of council business that were identified by research participants as contributing to their dissatisfaction with council life. While the gendered nature of workplace culture was discussed in detail in the previous section of this report, the nature of team processes and ethical behaviour, the pace of council business, the role of management and questions of public life, privacy and safety were considered significant by a number of respondents.

Some women experienced a very positive team spirit in their particular council, at times across traditional party lines.

- >> **I found that in the three years I had that the culture within council was fantastic. We had a really good team of people. We as seven councillors were totally different in our ideas. It was one of the great things about council. Four of the previous councillors had been returned and the three new councillors were women... The culture was fantastic because at the end of the day we were a team and there was a really good understanding that whatever the vote, once the decision had been made by council it was a council decision and we all stepped behind that.**

This whole-of-council commitment was seen as an important way of shoring up community confidence in council. Indeed, failure to have such a team approach in place can make participation in council a much less pleasant and more risky experience.

- >> **Anything that went on in the council chamber in private meetings would be leaked out so there was no sense of privacy. Sometimes staff would leak stuff that was a bit bizarre. I mean it was more annoying than anything.**

Some accounts of councillor behaviour detailed incidents that had surprised and dismayed project participants. While instances of gender-based harassment and discrimination have been documented earlier in the report, there was also evidence of other negative attitudes and actions.

>> **Sometimes it just comes down to personalities. I saw a few tantrums, things thrown, storming out – behind closed doors. This was childish and surprised me, disappointed me. It should be an honour to serve.**

>> **Some of the things, it was just appalling. There would be screaming fits during council. The other councillors would sometimes put up with it. One councillor in particular was positively abusive to other councillors during council meetings. Full-on abuse. The CEO would use this; play the councillors off against each other. Really temperamental stuff that just affected everyone – all the senior management staff, all the other councillors.**

Additional examples of bad behaviour included negative attitudes in relation to age.

>> **I looked around and remembered that over the years I had seen some councillors ridicule older councillors who had begun to put their views less precisely.**

For those participants who witnessed such unprofessional behaviour, the desire to stay involved markedly decreased. For others, bad behaviour was found less in others' tantrums or verbal abuse but more in unethical practices that they felt undermined the integrity of council. Described by one councillor as 'moral poverty', there was little doubt that such behaviour did play a role for a number of women in their decision to leave.

>> **You get to the stage where the people you work with, the people you come into contact with, other councillors, whoever, other members of the community, they don't all have the same standards and ethics as you and the way you operate and the way they operate are sometimes quite different. There have been times when that has been uncomfortable and difficult for me. That people don't share the same standards, integrity, ethics – whatever you like to call it. I guess that would have been another factor.**

One response was for the whole of council to try and develop a code of practice at a planning day that covered issues such as communication, respect and trust. In one instance where this was done, it was never formally adopted or implemented.

While team culture and ethics were an issue for some, for others the frustration or disillusionment was more about the processes of council decision-making. There is also a sense that the work of a councillor is very constant, there is rarely any down time, and that this can cause people to become fatigued with endless procedural matters. In the words of one respondent, there was a 'sort of drip, drip, drip of continual frustration'.

Furthermore, some dissatisfaction was portrayed with the focus on detail rather than on long-term visionary decision-making, which led to a very low morale and a feeling of 'flatness'.

>> **I think I probably would have coped with the workload and being full-time and being on the council and everything else had we just merely been focusing on where we were heading for the next 10 or 20 years, as opposed to where we were heading tomorrow. It's so much more rewarding to see that bigger picture and see where we are and try and work towards a goal... It's the harder work to do, it's never popular, but in terms of being able to see that greater picture, it was far more rewarding.**

One respondent made the suggestion that the same three-year term for all councillors (as opposed to staggered three-year terms) had the effect of stifling long-term visionary decision-making. In such a system, there is always the potential that a turnover in councillors at election time will mean that the new councillors could in fact rescind longer term, visionary decisions made by the previous council.

In all of these issues related to council culture and practices, the role of council management and staff is key. In particular, the role of the CEO is considered critical. For some, the CEO played a very positive role.

>> **The CEO was quite a mediator, put a lot of issues in a different light and stressed the need to work together. This was positive, and made it a good atmosphere to work in.**

Others felt like they were more of a nuisance to the CEO.

- >> **I think the CEO would have really liked to minimise the role of councillors, you don't really need them to run things. Whereas for us it's about putting up projects, things like that. We had to fight also to get our community projects set up. I guess he would have really liked us not to be around. I don't think he was too upset with having commissioners.**

While no one respondent indicated that a particular difficulty with a CEO or staff member had been the deciding factor in their retirement, the importance of their role is clear. Good working relations contributed significantly to the satisfaction of councillors with their job, particularly when they felt like action was being taken in relation to issues they had raised. Bad working relations increased feelings of frustration and powerlessness.

A number of people expressed a need for greater secretarial support to be provided by council. While it is often the case that the mayor will have access to a dedicated personal assistant and office space, in some instances this was not the case, a factor that made the job requirements very difficult to fulfil.

- >> **When I was mayor, there was no office for the mayor... There's a very big office for the CEO, but there was no room for the mayor... They wanted me to have a dog box with no window at one stage, and I flatly refused. I felt as mayor you really needed to have your own office, your own secretary.**



THE POLITICS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Politics, in all its various guises, was a key determinant of the experience of participants on council and, in a number of cases, played a key role in the decision to leave. It had a big impact on the culture of council, in particular whether it resulted in a team-based approach to decision-making or whether a council assumed that it would divide on pre-determined voting lines.

- >> **Although local government is small-time politics compared to state or federal, no matter how well we all got on together there is always a time when politics are played to get things done. It's the nature of [the] beast I guess.**

For a significant number of participants, the experience of council politics was not a positive one.

- >> **If I had to pick one word to describe my experience it would be disillusioned. Not so much about council but about politics for sure. It was not a difficult decision to leave.**
- >> **There's a lot of crap that goes on. The politicising of things just drives me insane because I'm not a political animal and to me it's wasting everyone's time when issues just get turned into a political football. So I'd had enough of that – I don't miss that at all.**

Voting blocs or power cliques were seen to come together in a variety of ways. Often councils were divided into the 'old' councillors (those that had already served on council) and the 'new' councillors (those that were new to the job). Within this division, it was often the case that the 'old' councillors were seen as being resistant to change. Other divisions included those based on parochial interests, for example between regional centres and rural areas, or others that were more personality based.

- >> **There were just a couple of people in the town who told the others what the decisions would be and that was it. It was a strong male group.**

While the 'politics' can be used to describe any form of power play, in the discussion about local government it was usually used in relation to political parties. For a number of participants in this study, involvement with a political party had been important to their involvement in local government

in the first instance. While not always explicitly linked to their local government experience by participants, it should be noted in this regard that four of the nineteen participants had stood as candidates in recent state and federal elections. Three of these had been as members of a political party and one as an independent. One additional participant did emphasise that one of her reasons for entering local government had been as a possible stepping-stone to a career in state or federal politics.

There was substantial agreement that there has been an increase in the role of political parties in local government in recent years. Concern with the nature of the change that this has brought about was raised across the board, with most people suggesting that it has the potential to undermine the community focus of local government.

Not all respondents, however, experienced strong party-based determination of debate in their local council.

>> **The divisions in council were not party based. In the first council there were four of us that basically shared views. That included a member of the National Party, a socialist, a member of the Labor Party and me so, no, it's totally not about parties. There were strong ties and friendships across the council. It's not political.**

>> **The councillors were quite a diverse group of people but characterised absolutely by their desire to do the best for the city. It was always the main factor across party lines, across gender and across petty carry-on lines. In the end that was the unifying thing and that's what held us together. No matter where people were on their views, that was what they ended up making their decision on.**

For others, the increasing role of political parties was seen to weaken the grass roots ties that had made local government different from state or federal government.

>> **There were individuals who aren't there for the community and who made it as difficult as possible... It was just, there was an undertone, I suppose, about the way people behaved, how they spoke, how they debated, and I felt that that was particularly immature, and quite negative most of the time. I believe it was being undermined, and that's sad.**

For those who were members of a political party, the conflict between the interests of the residents and the interests of the party had the potential to cause difficulties.

>> **One conflict that you can have is about being really open and accountable to your residents. That's not always what the party wants. If you're taking a more libertarian attitude to what the world wants – that's not so okay with the party. As a councillor, you've got to be so much more accepting of that grass roots element, whereas in the party it's very top down. You're sort of sussing out what's going on below. You try and stick up for your local community... Often they're using the council to get at people in other factions.**

Such an atmosphere can have a very negative effect on council morale and, as the following quote suggests, on individual confidence.

>> **For three years we just lost every decision and that became very disheartening – there was no chance of winning anything... I really started to question my own ability and confidence in the decisions I was making. I just decided to get out.**

The political nature of local government was indeed a contributing factor to the decision to retire by a number of participants.

>> **By definition it's a political forum so politics come into it, numbers games – who has the numbers to get this done; who has the numbers to get that done. Whilst I obviously took part in that for six years by choice, my choice is that it's not something that I enjoy so it's not something that I'm going to continue with. I would prefer to put my energy and time into more positive enterprises than spend time playing power games and all that sort of political carrying on.**

While some saw the increasing influence of political parties in local government as inevitable, there was a uniform concern to see that the local nature of local government and the close links it has with the communities it serves was not lost. In the words of one respondent, local government was 'too important' to be undermined by party politics.

PUBLIC LIFE, PRIVACY AND SAFETY

The final and very important issue to consider in relation to council culture and practices is the impact of the public nature of the councillor's role. Seen as having both positive and negative elements to it, the impacts on privacy and safety were keenly felt by participants. The public nature of the job was certainly seen as something very difficult to prepare for in relation to how it will impact on the individual councillor, but also on their family, friends and standing in their community. In all of this, local media was seen to play a pivotal role, causing significant amounts of distress for several participants.

- >> **You do become very public property and I don't think you can prepare people for that. I don't think I had a very good perception of that until I moved away from it.**

While a number of respondents enjoyed the extrovert aspects of the job, others found it personally challenging and emotionally draining. For some, it was described as a major contributing factor to the exhaustion that characterised their time as councillor. For others, the high community profile provided a source of energy that was in fact very sustaining.

Privacy, however, was an issue for all participants.

- >> **Privacy was a huge issue. Like getting calls on Christmas Day and Boxing Day because you really do get that sort of stuff... Community members would always come up to me in the supermarket when I went to do my shopping. If I was really stressed this was hard.**

Numerous stories were recounted of being approached by residents when shopping, at the doctor's waiting room, out at dinner. While sometimes this was not seen as a problem, it did get wearing at times.

In addition, the constant availability of councillors and the fact that their phone numbers and often their addresses are public knowledge, raise a number of serious safety concerns. Participants in this study reported having received abusive and sometimes threatening phone calls from the public.

- >> **During the last 12–18 months I had become increasingly concerned about personal security... A particular community issue, over a proposed street closure in our town, got very volatile. Men from the community came to my work place and home with council issues – I began to feel very vulnerable. I did discuss this concern with the CEO and other councillors and tried to get them to look at reviewing the security issues... Most felt that they lived in a small community and didn't think it was an issue. I am not saying this was my decision for giving up council, but it was taken into consideration.**

Steps that were identified as possible ways of minimising safety concerns included the provision of a silent phone line, a mobile phone and access to a car. These supports were identified as particularly important if councillors were visiting people at home or travelling in isolated areas for long distances.

- >> **I did ask for a mobile phone because security is an issue. You're going around visiting people in their houses. I didn't have a car so it's not like you're in a situation where you can run off and get in your car. Often you've got to hang around. After a while on council I would ask officers to come out with me.**

One of the key ways in which issues related to public life and privacy are experienced by women on council is through the local media. This was directly raised by a number of participants as one of the most negative aspects of their experience on council. Not only did it upset individual councillors but it also impacted significantly on family and friends.

The media could make life extremely difficult for councillors and their families. Respondents pointed to numerous examples where the local paper had failed to print accurate stories, including slanderous and defamatory statements, presented at times in what was described as 'vitriolic' language.

- >> **I think one of the things I found hardest was something we didn't have a lot of control over and that was our hostile press. I think I found that really hard. To know that the staff were working well, to know that the councillors were supporting each other even though our views were different, to know that there was mutual respect there and then to have articles in the press that implied that things were not like this.**

Women, Work and Remuneration

KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ For many women, conflict occurs between the need to earn a viable income and the demands of council.

- ▶ The culture and practices of most councils are geared to those who have a high degree of flexibility in their working lives or who are not in paid work.

- ▶ A number of individuals had changed their work to part-time or retired from work to fulfil council requirements.

- ▶ For business owners, involvement in council means less time to ensure the growth and stability of their business.

- ▶ All participants bar one considered that the level of reimbursement did not reflect the amount or value of work the job entailed.

- ▶ If the allowance is not seen to adequately compensate people for council, those who need to earn a liveable income will find it more difficult to participate.

- ▶ The taxable status of the allowance and the absence of superannuation, workers compensation, holiday, family and sick leave were significant issues.

- ▶ Differences exist between councils in relation to the acceptability of making claims for reimbursement for expenses.

- ▶ Most participants did have access to some form of training and development, but many could not participate due to delivery, time and distance constraints.

- ▶ Access to a variety of supports including other councillors, mentors and regional networks was important in enhancing sustainability.

Previous sections have explored the challenges that women face in managing the myriad responsibilities of home and family life with council. Without doubt, the other important element of this juggling act is that of work, creating for women the ‘triple load’ of home, work and community activities. Key questions are raised in the discussion that follows about the clash that occurs for women between the demands of work and the need to earn a living with the often inflexible demands of council. This relates both to the amount of time it takes to fulfil the requirements of council duties and also to the way in which council structures its remuneration and other supports.

- >> If it was treated like a real job I might not be retiring. Because then I wouldn't be doing three jobs – it is unsustainable.


WORK

A number of participants provided detail on difficulties they had experienced meeting the demands of council and their work, either as wage and salary earners or in their own businesses. There was significant relief expressed by those who were enjoying, the chance to focus more fully on their jobs and their businesses following retirement from Council. They found that increased time and energy to put into this sphere of their lives had been a major positive outcome of their decision to retire. And, as the report details in section one, the desire to see positive career movement had been a motivational factor for some in the final decision to retire. For others, one of the main reasons for leaving was the need to find full-time work or to earn more money.

The relationship between paid work and council work has broad implications for who is able to stand for council. As participants pointed out, it will be difficult, for example, for people who have to earn another income to support others or for single people with no other means of support.

In addition, the culture and practices of most councils are more readily geared to those who have a high degree of flexibility in their working lives, are employed in jobs that align well with the nature of local government involvement, or do not participate in paid employment. For those who do not have this flexibility, the barriers to participation in local government are significantly higher.

>> **I was lucky, I had an understanding employer and if I had to do something for council, that was fine. But if I worked in an office, for example, or if I was a receptionist or if I was a part-time mum, I wouldn't have been able to do it. I would have ended up getting the sack all the time that you take off to be a councillor. So somebody that might be interested in local government and community that has rigid employment circumstances would battle and therefore that is something that does have to be looked at.**

This inflexibility means is that you end up with de facto limits on who can participate in council, due to a mix of factors that centre on the amount of time it takes to do the job, the time of day of these commitments and the reimbursement available for lost earnings during this time. Where there is a mix of councillors in inflexible waged jobs, people who are shift workers or in small workplaces that are not flexible, there can be some strain as there are limited hours available to them to devote to being a councillor. For the following wage and salary earner:

>> **There was a comment made to me about pulling weight. So I put my hand up for everything – I felt I had to prove something. I was on 13 committees when I started. A comment was made to me – if you can't stand the heat get out of the kitchen type of comment. And I'm thinking, well you're retired you've got a few more hours in the day than me.**

Strategies that were put in place by individuals to better balance the competing demands of work and council included a shift to part-time work or job share arrangements. For a number of research participants, the decision to work part-time had been a direct response to the workload of council. Indeed, for two respondents, a decision had been made to retire from full-time jobs in order to fulfil council duties. Such decisions may have very serious consequences for an individual's immediate and long-term financial wellbeing.

Furthermore, as the following quote suggests, such arrangements require supportive work environments.

>> **I went part-time at work. My workplace actually put on someone that job shared with me. I was enormously lucky. Because I worked in a female environment, because I worked in a very supportive professional environment, they were exceptionally proud to have me as a councillor and as a mayor. They were most supportive of that and every other thing I've done since then. That's a very important point.**

For a number of councillors, retirement from council was considered essential if their own businesses were going to survive. Too much time had already been taken by council involvement and respondents considered that it was time to refocus.



COUNCILLOR ALLOWANCES AND EXPENSES

- >> I've got a small business of my own and basically it almost ground to a halt during those six years and I lost a lot of earnings. I didn't have time to dedicate to my business.

And it was clear that the fact of retirement did indeed make a big difference to the amount and quality of the time that was now available for the business.

- >> As our business was expanding things became more and more difficult. I just didn't have the time to think with all the preparation I had to do for council. Since leaving I've had a complete brain download of local government. I can tell that I'm much more on the ball in relation to the business. I'm back into it 110%. I didn't realise how much was being used for local government.

One final factor raised as a contributing consideration to retirement relates to the relationship between council life and business life, particularly in rural areas where, it is suggested the smaller size of the business market and the fact that people are more familiar with each others activities, means that the potential for perceived conflicts of interest are increased.

Participants in this research regarded councillor allowances as an issue of key importance. The debate is regarded as larger than simply being about how much a councillor is paid. Rather, it raises questions about the role of a councillor per se, both in relation to their state and federal counterparts and also in relation to strengthening the professionalism of the service. Underlying such questions is the long history of volunteerism that has characterised council work and the continuing controversy any change to this volunteerism seems to stir up in rural and metropolitan communities alike.

- >> If you pay them more money because that's really perhaps what should happen, you'll have the ratepayers up in arms. Still I think a lot of people think that councillors should actually do it for nothing.

And it raises the question of who can afford to provide such a large amount of voluntary service.

- >> It would be really great to do all these things for nothing if you could afford it but, actually, most people can't afford it these days. I think the cost of living has gone up a lot, even in the time since I had my kids, and people have to live. You have to pay for everything these days so you've got to earn money to be able to survive – it's hard for people to do things for nothing.

Almost all participants considered that the level of reimbursement did not reflect the amount of work the job entailed. This does not mean that the level of reimbursement directly contributed to their decision to retire. While for some this was indeed the case, others were able to earn enough money through other means including work, family support and access to other funds. Only one respondent out of 19 was of the firm view that the level of reimbursement was appropriate.

- >> Remuneration wasn't an issue for me. I think councillors should do it for nothing... I think they should not be remunerated. I think you should do it because you want to do it for the benefit of the community.

For the others, however, the issue of reimbursement was one that raised a host of concerns in relation to the way in which the work of a councillor is valued.

>> **I just think that the debate needs to be had. This government has agreed to look at the allowances. Someone's got to get real. These are huge structural issues. I think whilst we're seen as volunteers, and we are effectively because you wouldn't do it for the money, all the rhetoric in the world about us being equal partners doesn't carry unless they put their money where their mouth is.**

As discussed in relation to work, the low level of the allowance has implications for who is able to participate in council.

>> **There are excellent women out there that I would like to see stand that I know can't because they've got to earn a living. There needs to be at least the equivalent of payment for that 20 hour a week job.**

As a result of this, councillors were reported as being over-represented by those who are not in paid employment (particularly retirees) or who work under more flexible conditions.

>> **I mean, in the old days, councillors tended to be retired businessmen or retired citizens and that doesn't give you diversity. By altering the allowance and making it more of an income, you're going to allow greater flexibility of people on council, like working mums or young mums and we need that.**

More specifically, if the allowance does not compensate people for lost earnings to an adequate extent, those who need to continue to earn an income will find it much more difficult to be able to afford to participate.

For those people running businesses, it was frequently reported that a new person had to be employed to take on some of the tasks that had previously been the responsibility of the woman who was now busy with council. Councillor allowances were frequently used to this end (but were generally only able to cover part of this significant cost).

Other important issues raised by participants relate to the taxable status of the allowance and the fact that it does not include conditions of a salary such as superannuation, workers compensation, holiday, family and sick leave. While this is regarded as an easy solution for council, it can create numerous headaches for councillors.

>> **Because I worked full-time the council allowance was more of a problem for me as it was an allowance that I ended up paying tax on. I don't believe anyone would become a councillor for the remuneration. If you work it out per hour for the 20 or 30 hours I did a week, and then with the tax creep I lost over half of it anyway, it's laughable.**

The low level of remuneration was also seen as a disincentive for the participation of more talented and qualified people. Seen as a priority across the board, attracting such people was particularly important in the light of the additional demands placed on councillors in the post-amalgamation period.

>> **I think the community/government needs to be realistic. If they want good governance to happen at local government then they need to financially recompense people for the sacrifices they make to do it... It certainly needs to be paid better because there are huge costs to individuals who take this on in financial terms.**

In addition to the fixed annual allowance that is paid to councillors, there is also an entitlement that councillors can claim the cost of any reasonable out of pocket costs, including travel, fuel, phone, fax and child care. One very clear finding of this research is the disparities that exist between councils in relation to the low acceptability in some communities of claiming such expenses.

In some councils, making such claims for additional expenses related to council work was not a problem.

>> **The council did make a car available for councillors' use. We were recompensed for the use of our own cars so that was useful as well. We would have a meal together for our meetings, and then the usual thing, mobile phones, fax. None of us needed child care.**

In other councils, however, the expectations either within council or within the community prohibited councillors from claiming on the 'usual things'. For a significant number of respondents, this added significantly to the cost of being a councillor. Both rural and metropolitan councillors recounted stories similar to the following one, in which the respondent (who lived 60km out of town) was embarrassed by a story in the paper setting out councillor expenses.



OTHER RESOURCES AND SUPPORTS

- >> In the second term of government...I just didn't claim anything. I didn't claim a cent for anything. I just didn't want to feel that embarrassment again. Even though it was fair, I just thought no, if that's the way people are going to respond or act, and do things like that, I'm just not going to claim a cent. I got my councillor allowance, but that was it. Sometimes it's not possible to claim expenses.

For one participant the time and cost involved in preparing the documentation for claiming costs was simply not worth it.

- >> I would say that the cost to me personally and to our business, ultimately, was a considerable amount of money. Well, you can claim your costs for your mobile phone calls, your fuel, your running costs and that type of thing. I didn't claim for any of those. I found it was too onerous to do the record-keeping.

Other important issues include the absence of superannuation, a key concern for women who often have interrupted working careers.

- >> Being mayor cost me enormously financially even with the allowance. It had a huge impact on my superannuation that I'm yet to catch up – because I went on a half salary I only put half my super in... There's no superannuation for being mayor. This is one of the areas that I would love to see addressed.

As a way of improving this situation, it was suggested by some participants that attention should be given to alternative payment structures, in particular changing from an allowance to a salary with associated conditions.

- >> I think it should be an allowance that is taxed [PAYE] and it should have proper coverage. I don't think any of that was ever addressed adequately. I don't think we should be paid an allowance. I think we should be paid a salary from the city. And that salary offers us protection and it also offers us superannuation and sick leave and all the things that salaries do.

The importance of access to other resources and supports was consistently identified as one of the critical ways in which women were able to strengthen their capacity to be effective on council. While access to such supports was mixed, a number of common themes arose, particularly in relation to the provision of training and professional development, the level of practical support provided by council and the importance of other support networks.

Most participants did have access to some form of training and development, although, for a variety of reasons, not all had taken up the opportunities that were offered. Subjects and skills that were identified as important targets for training included governance, planning, budgeting and auditing. Most participants had attended some training at the outset of their first term and had found this to be very valuable.

In relation to training targeted to women, a number of participants reported very favourably on training provided by the Australian Local Government Women's Association (ALGWA), as it raised issues that were critical for women on council and that were not on the normal training agenda. For one participant who attended a workshop on women and power just after she had been elected, the topics covered provided important insights into local government that she not previously considered and which proved very useful.

- >> So I think that was a very timely and useful workshop because it identified a number of things that might have become issues and gave us some skills and some tools to work with.

Difficulties with accessing training included its inflexibility (often only offered on one date), the difficulty for those in rural areas of attending training which was mostly offered in Melbourne and the time commitment that training required on top of already busy council lives.

In terms of other forms of support, it was recognised that different situations require different strategies. Having access to a variety of resources, including other councillors, regional networks and family and friends was therefore important.

>> **I did use other people, some in parliament or other councillors that I respected in the area for different issues, depending on what the issues were. You can't leave the council vulnerable by discussing an issue with another council... If I felt it was an issue to do with women councillors, I'd go to the regional women's council and discuss issues with them.**

Regarding mentoring, a number of participants indicated that they had been mentors to other women in council. For others, having access to a mentor or respected colleagues was important.

>> **I had good mentoring support, an excellent friend, so there was always someone I could bounce something off that I knew wouldn't faze her.**

>> **The real support I got was a female manager who's left, she and I were mates all the way through.**

It was suggested that this sort of peer support was more difficult to access in rural areas as opportunities to make these connections may be more limited. To address this issue, in one region, a strong network of women councillors had been established. This network had proven to be a very valuable source of support for its members.

>> **To be able to talk to each other, share experiences, advice, whatever, I found it enormously valuable. I really enjoyed it and I guess I was one of a core of councillors who made sure it continued and happened. I didn't want to see it lapse because I found it enormously valuable. I used to really look forward to it as a bit of time off and a chance to really talk to other women about their experiences... It was a terrific network. It was one of the very positive things that I had in my life as a councillor.**

Other participants pointed to a range of ways in which they had sought to support other women in their local area, including encouraging them to stand for council.

>> **I've been a mentor and I've always encouraged women when I go out in the local community... Before both elections we ran information nights for women only. We stood up and said, 'stand against us if you like'. We encouraged female participation. We think there should be more women. We encouraged women at every opportunity that we could. We did press releases; we did our briefings. If I went anywhere and saw a woman who was involved in anything, I'd say have you thought about taking this further – so I was very active in doing that. And in saying that I was always very positive about what you could gain personally from doing it – how good it was.**

Conclusion: Final Reflections

The range of issues that has been canvassed in this report is necessarily extensive in order to try and capture the multitude of reasons that contribute to the decision of women to retire from local government. As the findings demonstrate, these reasons are often complex and overlapping, drawing on a range of facts in relation to family responsibilities, work and financial considerations, or dissatisfaction with particular elements of council life.

Such disappointments or concerns notwithstanding, the commitment of all participants to the importance of local government remains very high. In reflecting on their experience, all were able to point to a number of high points. These included satisfaction with particular achievements, the attainment of new knowledge and skills, and access to new opportunities.

- >> **Yet when I think about the enjoyment level or satisfaction level. Total commitment equalled total satisfaction.**

Regarded by all as an enormous learning curve, the council experience for the women who took part in this research was variously described as ‘empowering’ and ‘validating’ with the occasional ‘suspicious’ or ‘less trusting’ thrown in.

- >> **It was an amazing experience. I’ve got wins on the board I’ll never forget and you can’t take that away... No amount of political rat-bagging, and I’ve got to admit I was as bad as the others, playing politics, but you can’t take that away. Politics aside, if you focus on the community and get wins, that’s what you’re there for.**

For a number of participants, the experience has resulted in a range of new opportunities, including new careers, promotions, appointments to Ministerial and other advisory committees, and appointments to boards.

The acquisition of skills and knowledge was also recognised as one important outcome, including in the areas of community development, leadership, workplace culture and change, governance, public speaking and meeting procedure. Personal attributes such as confidence, maturity and calmness were also enhanced, as well as the ability to network effectively.

All participants describe themselves as changed by the experience.

- >> **The experience has changed me. I guess I’ve grown up in council. I’ve become more astute, more worldly-wise, I certainly learned how to deal with people better. I’ve also learned a lot about planning, about the environment, about waste management, you name it, there are so many skills you acquire.**
- >> **Did it change me? Oh, yes, you learn things or you get to know things you’d never dream you would have known. You get an insight into people and that’s a privilege. It’s a privilege when they let you into their homes and you have a street meeting and, you know, they deliver flowers to council for you or whatever. That’s really nice. That’s a very humbling experience, but it toughens you, I think. It definitely would have to toughen you if you’re going to survive it, particularly just how political it is.**

As for the next step, well, many were still undecided.

- >> **I've learnt to stand up for myself, I've learnt a number of skills and I've met the most amazing people and done amazing things but you have to move on. I need another challenge now. I don't know what the next step is – it'll be a while before I decide.**

And for those still involved in their local community, the decision to retire from council is not seen as closing the door to further involvement.

- >> **My decision to retire doesn't in any way see me withdrawing from the community. With my understanding of democracy and how it works at the local government level, I know that not being a councillor is not going to prevent me continuing to be involved. In fact I feel I might be even more powerful or as powerful. I don't feel that I've closed a door by not standing or being an elected representative. I left there, knowing that I could really engage with the council at any time I wanted to. I told them that I would probably have a holiday and then that there would probably be something I wanted to be active in and I'd be knocking on the door. I'm not sure if that sounded like a threat or a promise.**

For most, it is simply time to move on.

- >> **Overall, it was a fabulous opportunity, a fabulous experience. I'm glad I've done it, I always wanted to do it and I got there and I did it. But now it's time to move on.**

Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

THEME	QUESTIONS/PROBES
Background history on council	Describe your local area (remote, rural, regional, outer metro, inner metro, population, industry) When did you join local council? How long were you a councillor for? What made you want to become a councillor? Can you briefly describe the highest point of your experience as a councillor? The lowest?
Retirement	When did you retire? If you had to pick one word that describes your feelings about retirement what would it be? Was it a difficult decision to make? Very briefly, do you feel that the decision was made: a) As a positive step to enhance other aspects of your life (career, family)? b) As a negative step reflecting a degree of disillusionment with local council work? (Or a balance of the two?)
Personal/professional opportunities	What positive opportunities can you identify that will stem from your decision to retire? (Career, family, leisure.) What role did these opportunities play in your decision to retire?
The culture and processes of local government	How would you describe the 'culture' of council to someone who was thinking of standing? What are the main jobs that council does? Does it do these effectively? Did any aspects of council culture or processes contribute to your decision to retire? Are there any changes to council culture that would have affected your decision to retire?
Resource and support needs	What resources and supports were available to you as a councillor? Are there any specific gaps in the support offered that you would like to see filled? Does this support need to be targeted to women? Did levels of resource and support contribute to your decision to retire? Are there any changes to resource and support levels that would have affected your decision to retire?
The balance of family, community, paid work and local government	Did working as a councillor impact on other aspects of your life such as family, work and community commitments? How did you balance these commitments? Did the need to balance these different roles contribute to your decision to retire? Are there any changes to the way that local council supports women with different roles (including carer and community roles) that would have affected your decision to retire?
The impact of broader social attitudes and values in relation to women's role	What are the principles that guide your involvement in local government? Do you think that the fact that you are a woman affect the type of experience you had on council? (The way you acted and the way others acted towards you.) Did these factors contribute to your decision to retire? Are there any changes to social attitudes to women's role that you would like to see happen in your community?

THEME	QUESTIONS/PROBES
Personal characteristics	<p>If you feel comfortable, please provide me with information on the following as it may assist us to understand what personal characteristics play a role in women’s decision to retire from local government:</p> <p>Location (remote, rural, regional, inner and outer metropolitan)</p> <p>Socio-economic status (low, medium, high income)</p> <p>Age, life stage</p> <p>Race, ethnicity</p> <p>Family status</p> <p>Is there anything else that is important to you in this regard?</p>
Rewards – Outcomes	<p>If you had to pick one word to describe your experience on council what would it be?</p> <p>How has your experience on council changed you? Had an impact on your future plans? (Positive or negative.)</p> <p>Is there anything else you would like to raise?</p>

Appendix 2: Quantitative Retirement Rates 2003 Victorian Local Government Elections

At the March 2003 Victorian local government elections there were 389 incumbent councillors. 101 (26%) of these were women and 288 (74%) were men. 22% or 84 incumbents ‘retired’ and did not recontest their wards/seats. Of these, 21 were women and 63 were men.

This rate of ‘retirement’ reflects the broader proportion of women and men at 25% and 75% respectively.

Appendix 3: Victorian Local Government Context

This section contains further detail of the role of local governments in Victoria, including an overview of the sector, commentary on council amalgamations, implications of proposed local government reform in 2003 and a description of the role of key local government organisations.

OVERVIEW

There are 79 local governments in the State of Victoria. Each local government has been established under the provisions of the *Victorian Local Government Act 1989*. The Act provides for each local government area or municipal district, to be governed by a democratically elected council. Persons elected to council must be residents or ratepayers in the council’s municipal district.

The Act details the purposes, objectives, functions and powers of a council, thus setting out a broad indication of the role and responsibilities of an elected councillor.

Under the Act, a council must consist of not fewer than five and no more than 12 councillors, who, currently, are elected at triennial elections, that is, for terms of three years. Most councils consist of seven to nine councillors, with several having five and one, the City of Greater Geelong, having 12 elected councillors.

The mayor of a council is elected or chosen by the council, with the position up for re-election by councillors on an annual basis. Any councillor is eligible for election or re-election to the office of mayor. Different provisions apply to the City of Melbourne and the position of Lord Mayor, which in 2000, by amendments to the *City of Melbourne Act*, became subject to election by the community.

Employed staff headed by a CEO support the elected council. The Act details arrangements for a council to employ its CEO and details the main functions the CEO is to perform. These functions include ensuring that the decisions of the council are implemented, managing the council's day-to-day operations, maintaining an appropriate organisation structure of staff and resources, acting under specific delegations and providing advice to the council.

Much of the work of a council is undertaken under formal delegation of its powers, duties and functions. While the council staff and contractors perform the operational work, the council itself performs the planning, policy and review work.

COUNCIL AMALGAMATION

The mid 1990s was a period of major change in Victorian local government. In the period between 1993 and 1994, 2125 elected Victorian councillors were dismissed and commissioners appointed to replace them temporarily. The State Government undertook a range of significant measures to reform the sector. The most influential of these was this sacking of elected councils. In this period, the number of councils was reduced from 210 to 78 in a process of amalgamation, commencing in 1992 by the then Liberal (Kennett) State Government.

Elections were held for three councils in 1995, 20 councils in 1996, and for 55 in 1997.

Since amalgamation local governments have also become more complex, not just by nature of their size, but also due to the wide and increasing range of responsibilities assigned to them under State and Federal legislation. In this context, the role of the councillor has more of a strategic focus.

Prior to amalgamations, 453 elected councillors were women. Following the 1996 and 1997 elections only 129 women were elected as councillors. Whereas in 1993, 20,000 Victorians lived in municipalities without women councillors, this figure increased to 700,000 by 1997.

While the proportion of female councillors remained the same at 22%, the decline in actual numbers of women in local government had major implications for female participation and representation at the local government level. The WPILGC grew out of concern for the level of women's representation in local government, in 1996.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT REFORM 2003

The Bracks State Government introduced reforms to the *Local Government Act (1989)* in the Spring Session of Parliament 2003.

One of the key components of the reforms announced will be the introduction of four-year terms for Victorian councils from 2008.

This reform is aimed at strengthening democracy at the local level and fulfils an election commitment to align local council elections on a common date.

It is hoped that this change will strengthen local government's role as a separate and distinct level of government and provide certainty to citizens and councils, allowing better coordinated, long-term planning throughout the State.

A proposed November election cycle will free councils from the current situation where they are expected to develop a strategic plan and deliver their first budget within a couple of months of being elected.

It is hoped that this will assist councillors, particularly those who are newly elected, to have the opportunity to consult their communities and develop sound policies for the future.

Under the proposed elections timetable, the first elections for four-year terms will be held in November 2004.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS

MUNICIPAL ASSOCIATION OF VICTORIA

Established in 1879, and anointed the official voice of local government in Victoria through the *Municipal Association Act 1907*, the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) is the peak representative and lobbying body for Victoria's 79 councils.

The MAV is a driving and influential force behind a strong and strategically positioned local government sector. Broadly speaking, the MAV's role is to:

- Represent and advocate the interests of local government
- Lobby for a 'fairer deal' for councils
- Raise the sector's profile
- Ensure its long-term security
- Provide policy advice and strategic advice to local government
- Provide insurance services to the sector

Activities the MAV undertakes include: lobbying; campaign management; facilitating dialogue; establishing alliances; issues management; sector representation; statistical research; councillor development; and policy development. Examples of key policy areas the MAV is involved in include: legal; planning; social policy; environment; economic and finance; and governance.

VICTORIAN LOCAL GOVERNANCE ASSOCIATION

The Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA), formed in 1994, exists to promote good governance and sustainability by supporting local governments and communities through programs of advocacy, training, information provision and support. Where possible, the VLGA will work in partnership with governments, other peak bodies, non-government organisations, private enterprise, communities and individuals.

The VLGA believes in the right of communities to manage their own affairs through transparent, accountable and democratic local governance, and in local governments governing for all the community. The VLGA supports local government leadership in social justice and sustainability.

The Association has three membership categories:

- Elected local governments
- Community groups
- Individual citizens

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT COALITION

Victoria's two peak local government organisations, the VLGA and the MAV are working to achieve gender equity in local governments through membership of and support for the Women's Participation in Local Government Coalition (WPILGC). This non-party Coalition of nine key Victorian women's, community and local government organisations was formed in 1996 to work towards the equal participation of women and men in local governments in Victoria. Participating organisations include:

- Australian Local Government Women's Association (ALGWA)
- Ladies of the Action League (LOCAL)
- LGPro (Local Government Professionals)
- Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV)
- Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA)
- Victorian Women's Trust (VWT)
- Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL)
- Women's Planning Network Inc.
- The YWCA.

The WPILGC is responsible for the Strengthening Communities through Women's Participation (SCWP) project, which aims to support Victorian women to increase their participation in leadership roles in the community and to increase the diversity of women who are visible in this way. The Community Support Fund has funded the project for three years (2001-2004). Both the MAV and VLGA are signatories to the project with the VLGA providing the host role. Contact details for the project are contained in Appendix 5.

Appendix 4: The Role of a Councillor

This section provides information about the role of a councillor, including details on councillor remuneration, councillor vacancies and demographic findings including the latest from the Municipal Association of Victoria's Councillors Census.

WHAT DOES A COUNCILLOR DO?

Because councillors are elected to represent their communities at the local level, they undertake a broad range of duties and tasks, which include the following:

- Strategic decision-making and resource allocation for the municipality
- Direct involvement with the local community
- Advocacy with State and Federal Government Departments
- Policy Development.

(Taken from *A Gender Agenda*, second edition 2002)

Schedule 1 of the *Local Government Act* sets out the 'Functions of Councils' and is an indication of the breadth and scope of a councillor's work.

Schedule 1 Functions of Councils

1 General public services including:

Fire prevention and protection
Local emergency and safety services
Animal control, protection and conservation
Animal impounding
Plant control
Tip establishment and operation
Litter control
Collection and disposal of refuse

2 Health, education, welfare and other community services including:

Services for children and families
Health inspection services
Public conveniences
Prevention and abatement of nuisances
Child care and development services and youth services
Aged, disabled and disadvantaged persons services
Migrants services
Cemeteries

3 Planning and land use including:

Building control
Housing and other accommodation

4 Property services including:

Water, drainage, sewerage, gas and electricity
Land use development schemes
Street maintenance and cleaning

5 Recreational and cultural services including:

Halls and public buildings
Sport, recreation, leisure and arts
Parks, gardens and reserves
Libraries and museums
Historic buildings and places
Public entertainment

6 Roads including:

- Bridges
- Footpaths, bicycle paths and nature strips
- Traffic control and signs
- Lighting and drainage of roads

7 Any other functions relating to the peace, order and good government of municipal district including:

- Parking
 - Transport
 - Aerodromes
 - Tourism
 - Information
 - Encouragement of employment opportunities
 - Encouragement of commerce, industry and agriculture
 - Environment control, protection and conservation
 - Municipal enterprises (trading or entrepreneurial)
 - Municipal administration
-

COUNCILLOR REMUNERATION

What and how councillors are paid is guided by strict provisions in the *Local Government Act* and by the prevailing government's policies on councillor remuneration. The Bracks Government has stated that it views councillor allowances not as a form of salary, but as some recognition of the contribution made by those elected to voluntary, part-time roles in the community. With this policy in mind, the way that councils pay allowances to their councillors cannot be compared with the salary of a full-time employee or with hourly rates of a casual or part-time employee.

The Act states that a council must pay each of its councillors the set allowance and that the amount must be the same for each councillor other than for the mayor. Each mayor is paid a higher allowance that is separate from and not in addition to the councillor allowance.

The Victorian arrangements as outlined are broadly similar to those in most other Australian States.

Each Victorian council has to determine, as part of its budgetary processes, how much to pay to its councillors and mayors, under ceilings or limits imposed under the Act. These limits recognise the size/complexity of the council. Councillors and mayors in the largest and most complex councils have access to higher allowances than those in the smaller councils.

Councils are to set their own policies for the reimbursement of councillors' expenses of office and travel, and for the provision of administrative support, resources and facilities. A council has the capacity to establish policies, which ensure that no councillor is out of pocket for any legitimate expenses incurred in connection with carrying out council responsibilities.

A critical aspect of how councillors are remunerated and how their expenses of office are addressed is the consideration of accountability and transparency to the community. Local media and critics of local government have strong interests in the cost of councillor travel, remuneration levels and voluntary working loads.

(More information on the Victorian Government's current policy is to be found in the Policy Statement, September 2000, 'Flexibility and Accountability: the Victorian Government's New Approach to Councillor and Mayoral Allowances'. This policy was released by the Government in response to the 2000 report of the Victorian Allowances Review Panel.)

In 2000 the Government introduced a three-tiered system of councillor allowances based on individual councils' population and revenue, providing some link between the size and complexity of a municipality and the amount of allowance payable to councillors. The levels of allowance, applying from 1 July 2003, in the staged introduction of this framework for councillor remuneration, are:

- Category 1 Councils: councillor – \$5 000 to \$12 000 and mayor – up to \$36 000
- Category 2 Councils: councillor – \$5 000 to \$15 000 and mayor – up to \$46 500
- Category 3 Councils: councillor – \$5 000 to \$18 000 and mayor – up to \$57 000

(Note that a mayor while elected as a councillor can only be paid a mayoral allowance, not both.)

These levels were set by Order in Council in March 2001 and have no provision for indexation or review. Under the prevailing legislation, any increase to these figures will require a new Order in Council.

Councils are categorised by the Government on the basis of the above three levels. Within their allocated category, a council is required to determine the level of allowance appropriate and acceptable to its community. The provisions also require a council to review and set allowances, within the framework, at the first budget immediately after the holding of a general election.

The Government also announced that a council seeking an upgrade of category is required to make a successful application to an allowances review panel to be established by the Government. The Government announced that such a panel would consider a council's anticipated total population and total revenue figures for the financial year just completed, as well as the level of community acceptance of an upgrade of category.

As for the levels and means of councils' reimbursement of councillors for their additional costs and items of office, this is left for individual councils to determine in local policies, taking into consideration local issues and community expectations.

COUNCIL VACANCIES

The Act currently provides, as indicated, for the term of office to be three years. Note that the 2003 reforms announced will include a change to four-year terms. If a councillor does not wish to hold office for a full term, the Act requires that a written resignation is delivered to the CEO. Depending upon the timing of the vacancy thus created and how close this might be to the next anticipated elections, there may be an extraordinary vacancy that will require filling, normally by by-election.

Councillor vacancies may also occur if an elected councillor fails to undertake a mandatory declaration of office (oath of allegiance), dies, is ousted from office or is absent from four consecutive ordinary council meetings without having obtained leave of absence from the council.

COUNCILLOR DEMOGRAPHICS

As of October 2003, there are 79 councils and a total of 621 councillors in Victoria.

178 (29%) of these councillors are female.

Councils with the highest percentage of women councillors:

Alpine (3/5)	60%
Frankston (4/7)	57%
Stonnington (5/9)	56%
Brimbank (5/9)	56%
Maribyrnong (4/7)	57%
Towong (3/5)	60%
Darebin (5/9)	56%
Melbourne (5/4)	56%
Yarra (6/9)	67%

29 councils have female mayors (37% of all mayors):

- Alpine • Greater Shepparton • Stonnington
- Ararat • Indigo • Surf Coast • Banyule • Knox
- Towong • Boroondara • Macedon • Wangaratta
- Brimbank • Mitchell • Warrnambool • Buloke
- Moyne • Whitehorse • Cardinia • Murrindindi
- Wodonga • Frankston • Northern Grampians
- Wyndham • Glen Eira • Port Phillip
- Yarriambiack • Greater Geelong • Queenscliff

There are no female councillors in 5 councils (6%):

- Bayside
- Gannawarra
- Hume
- Mansfield
- Mildura

19 councils have only one female councillor (25%):

- Bass Coast • Golden Plains • Wyndham
- Banyule • Greater Bendigo • Wellington
- Baw Baw • Loddon • West Wimmera
- Mount Alexander • Wodonga • Colac-Otway
- Murrindindi • Central Goldfields • Pyrenees
- Glenelg • Southern Grampians • Hepburn
- Swan Hill

FINDINGS FROM MAV CENSUS

In May 2003, the MAV undertook a census of councillors following the March 2003 elections. 439 of Victoria's 621 councillors responded to the survey, providing important demographic information on the elected representatives of local government.

Some of the key findings in relation to women councillors include the following:

- Of the 439 respondents, 127 were women, (29%).
- 40% of female councillors are in rural councils followed by 31% in metropolitan councils.
- Overall, women councillors are younger than their male counterparts.
- The most common age group for female councillors is 46-55; 32% of women councillors are in this category (33% of male councillors are in this category).
- The next most common age group for women is between the ages 36-45, with 29%. The next most common group for male councillors is 55-65 years (29%).
- Professional/Technical and Small Business represent the two highest occupational categories for female councillors, both with 20%, followed by Primary Producers at 19%. The two highest occupational categories for male councillors are Primary Producer at 30%, and Small Business at 19%.
- 52% of female councillors have tertiary qualifications compared with 45% of male councillors who have tertiary qualifications.
- Female councillors represent the largest percentage in the lowest three categories of income earned by councillors. 63% compared with 33% of male councillors in the lowest three income categories.
- 36% of female councillors earn less than \$15 000, compared with 12% of male councillors.
- 16% percent earn between \$26 000-\$35 000, compared with 12% of male councillors.
- 3% of female councillors are in the income category over \$15 000 compared with 12% of male councillors
- A higher percentage of females (81%) compared with males (61%) served as councillors between 1-6 years.
- A higher percentage of males (39%) compared with females (19%) served for 7 to 25+ years.
- 56% of female councillors have served for a period of between 1-3 years
- 25% have served between 4-6 years.
- Only 9% have served 7-9 years.

Appendix 5: Further Resources

PUBLICATIONS

Publications available from the Women's Participation in Local Government Coalition:

- *A Gender Agenda* – kit for women who want to stand for local government and those who want to assist others to stand (second edition).
- *Victorian Local Government Women's Charter*.
- *Now You're a Councillor* – kit for newly elected women councillors (second edition).
- *Women in Local Government: Attrition Rates and Support Issues* – prepared by the Office of Women's Policy.

Contact VLGA to order your copy on phone (03) 9347 2233 or via email vlga@vlga.org.au

USEFUL WEBPAGES

- WPILGC
www.vlga.org.au/issues/women_gov.html
- Office of Women's Policy
www.women.vic.gov.au
- Victorian Local Governance Association
www.vlga.org.au
- Municipal Association of Victoria
www.mav.asn.au
- Local Government and Regional Services Division
www.dvc.vic.gov.au/local_gov.htm

Why do women choose to retire from local government in Victoria? What are the key trends and patterns which impact on this decision-making? How can these be then used to create organisations and cultures that better sustain councillors in these critical community leadership roles.

Moving On: Women and Retirement from Victorian Local Government seeks answers to these questions.

Prepared for the Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA) and the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) on behalf of the Women's Participation in Local Government Coalition (WPILGC) this qualitative research project is based on the experiences of 19 of the 21 women who retired from councils at the March 2003 elections.

What has emerged is a fascinating picture of the complex role of the modern councillor. The report provides direct insight into workload issues, council culture and roles, gender specific concerns, family and career pressures which have impacted on the decision of women councillors not to continue in this role with important implications for the State Government, the local government sector and councils throughout Victoria.



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IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT
COALITION
STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES
THROUGH WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION



Department for
Victorian Communities

