

LGA South Australia Leadership and Behavioural Management Review

Prepared by:

Dr Valerie O’Keeffe, Dr Sara Howard

Flinders University, College of Business, Government & Law

Dr Annabelle Neall

Flinders University, College of Education, Psychology & Social Work

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Executive Summary

The *Leadership and Behavioural Management Review* offers valuable insights into sector culture and wellbeing through the lens of elected council behaviours. Behaviours are the product of people interacting in a shared environment to achieve a purpose. Factors within that environment will have both positive and undesirable influences on attitudes, values and behaviours that may help or hinder organisational, in this case, council performance.

The management of behaviours in council is arduous due to the complexity of the context in which local government operates, the unique nature of roles of elected council, and the limited ability to successfully apply remedies to unconstructive behaviour. In this review, the impact of regular disruption in (and beyond) council chamber was viewed as a significant problem due to flow-on effects for wellbeing and effectiveness of the chamber and council staff. Nonetheless, respondents were proud of how they serve their communities through representation and delivery of quality services and facilities.

Local government, being close to the community, is highly connected to their local residents and addresses a variety of community needs including infrastructure, social and community development programs, and essential services that promote sustainability, health, safety, social and economic development. Local council is often the first point of contact for community members. In the current geopolitical, climatic, technological and social contexts in which we live, local government is called on to meet a wide range of community expectations. Elected council consequently find growing demands on their skills, time and energy to serve well. This review finds that most elected council (and staff) are highly committed and motivated to serve, and derive great satisfaction from their roles, but strain is evident and unconstructive behaviours are an outcome. This review finds that the structural role design of elected council requires review, more targeted and team-oriented learning and development opportunities must be made available, and legislative contexts related to roles and responsibilities, and community expectations, require clarification.

1. Overview

The LGA South Australia *Leadership and Behavioural Management Review* surveyed and interviewed mayors, councillors, Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and administration staff from across the 68 South Australian councils, who were serving in the current term (November 2022 to December 2025 when data collection ceased). It examined council culture, leadership, behavioural norms, health, safety and wellbeing, available supports, role clarity, community interactions, and future intentions of elected council members. The intent was to examine examples of good practice that can be leveraged across the sector, as well as opportunities and priorities for improvement.

Deliberately, researchers did not seek to identify individual participants or councils in the review to facilitate confidentiality, participation and honest reporting. Ethical requirements applied to the review prioritise managing risk to participants to prevent stigma and further harm.

The elected council survey was distributed to all current elected council members. Former elected council members who had served in the current term were also encouraged to participate.

The administration survey was distributed to all current CEOs and principal governance and senior administration roles (identified by LGA SA) across the 68 local government councils.

Survey participation included:

- 160 elected council members, comprising 42 mayors. More than one-quarter of elected council respondents were current or former mayors (27%), 10% deputy mayors and more than half the sample were councillors (60%).
- 92 administration staff including 29 CEOs. More than half of administration respondents were either CEOs (32%) or Governance Officers (30%).

Interviews were offered to elected council and administration staff who had previously participated in the survey. Interviews aimed to discover deeper detail and examples related to the same topics in the survey. Interviews were held online in individual or group format.

Interviews included 53 respondents within 33 sessions, summarised as follows:

- 21 individual interviews (i.e. 21 respondents).
- 11 group interviews involving a total of 32 respondents. Groups varied from 2 to 5 people
- The 53 respondents were:
 - Mayors – 16
 - Councillors – 21
 - CEOs – 6
 - Administration – 8
 - Policy – 2
- Collectively 32 women and 21 men participated, with 27 respondents from metropolitan councils and 26 from regional councils.

Participation rates in surveys and interviews were positive, however there are always limitations to this type of research. *Participation was voluntary* and involved opting in. Individuals who had experienced or witnessed unconstructive behaviours in their council may have been more motivated to participate, particularly if seeking acknowledgement of their experiences, or hoping to inform improvements to prevent similar exposures to others in the future.

Conversely, those perceiving their council environment as positive and collaborative, or with no direct or indirect experience of unconstructive behaviours may have been less inclined to participate.

Gender representation in the survey was balanced across elected council but for administration staff, women were almost two-thirds of respondents, likely reflecting the population of staff across the sector.

In the interview sample, women outnumbered men (total sample included 21 [40%] men and 32 [60%] women) across roles; however, among CEOs, women were under-represented (five men and one woman). This also likely reflects the population of CEOs across local government.

Two salient features emerge from the review:

First, the sector demonstrates *strong civic commitment* and many examples of effective *collaboration*, yet faces persistent cultural, behavioural and structural challenges that hamper governance and wellbeing. Strengthened legislation, systems, clearer behavioural expectations and improved health safety and wellbeing frameworks are needed to support safe, respectful and effective civic leadership.

Second, cultivating *psychological safety*¹ across councils and roles is a priority. Psychological safety refers to the ability of individuals to freely express opinions and ideas at council respectfully, professionally and honestly, without fear. This is only possible in a culture of respect, learning and innovation. It requires clear role relationships, shared goals and purpose, skilled leaders, and learning communication skills based in curiosity and goodwill. Psychological safety is particularly relevant to administration staff who consistently rated less favourably in surveys on dimensions of culture and health safety and wellbeing. Interviews revealed a key factor in these ratings were their perception of lack of role clarity and for some, undervaluing of governance advice in their interactions with elected council.

2. Council culture and behaviours

Although some responses suggest there are some councils experiencing poor behaviour which significantly impacts their culture, respondents generally described council culture as *friendly, positive and supportive*, though less often *innovative or motivating*. Administration staff rated less favourably than elected council, particularly regarding *professionalism, inclusiveness and strategic conduct*. Over half of CEOs disagreed that councils behave *strategically*, compared to 15% of councillors. Despite these differences, around half of mayors and councillors rated councils' representation of community interests as "very good."

Survey respondents across roles considered that *acting as a representative, informed and responsible decision maker and representing the interests of its community* were either 'important' or 'very important'

Constructive behaviours across roles, such as *informed participation in decision-making*, were rated as occurring 'sometimes' to 'often' in surveys. However, in interviews, discrepancies emerged between councillors and administration staff about what constitutes strategic behaviour, revealing differing expectations and role interpretations.

However, in interviews, positive perspectives were reported in 52% of all responses, indicating *collaboration, teamwork and community outcomes* focus. Mixed perspectives were reported in 32% of responses, indicating both strong teamwork and disruptive behaviour by a minority, and 18% of responses reported unconstructive behaviours adversely affecting performance.

3. Leadership, role design and supports

The *mayor's leadership* was universally identified as pivotal to setting cultural tone, shaping debate and reinforcing behavioural standards. **Strong mayoral leadership, particularly through strong relationships with the CEO, improves positive and productive council performance**, particularly during conflict.

Survey findings showed *learning and development opportunities* were viewed more positively by CEOs and administration staff than by councillors, who expressed most interest in enhanced *mentoring, structured professional development and clearer expectations*. Although in surveys most councillors reported understanding their roles, interviews showed that clarity does not

¹ Psychological safety refers to the ability of individuals to freely express opinions at work respectfully, professionally and honestly, without fear. This is only possible in a culture of respect, learning and innovation. <https://www.apa.org/topics/healthy-workplaces/psychological-safety>

always translate into confident and collaborative practice. Team building is required to facilitate this.

Surveys showed support systems were rated 'slightly' to 'moderately' effective across roles. *Peer support* was seen as the most consistent and valuable resource. Interviews revealed that administration staff provide substantial support to elected council but reported emotional strain during heavy workloads and conflict. In terms of supports, surveys showed *The Behavioural Standards Panel* and *LGA Mutual Risk Management Service* were seen as least effective, with many respondents unsure of their impact, though there was also low awareness of these services by some councillors.

4. Health, safety and wellbeing

Health, safety and wellbeing concerns emerged as one of the *most urgent issues requiring review*. Interviews showed many councillors had limited understanding of how to meet their obligations under the *Local Government Act 1999* (s. 75G) and the *Work Health and Safety Act 2012*. Administration staff and elected council reported that existing work health and safety systems focus on employees rather than elected council, leading to gaps in psychological safety and risk management between roles.

Survey findings indicate a highly variable perception of psychological safety across councils, with strongest support for '*our council supports stress prevention*' from mayors and administration staff. *Council members reasonable action on behaviours to not affect the health and safety of others* was rated as 'agree' by elected council, but less favourably by administration.

In interviews, reported wellbeing risks included social isolation for mayors, and at the extreme, bullying, intimidation, and weaponised complaints for a few councillors. *Serious personal harm* was *relatively rare* in surveys but more evident in interviews, where around 20% (10 of 53) of interviewees reported experiencing significant harm, predominantly women. CEOs also reported significant stress levels linked to their role in managing staff wellbeing and councillor misconduct. Surveys and interviews concurred that awareness and perceived effectiveness of Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) were 'low' to 'moderate', indicating a need for improved confidential access, promotion and tailored support for all roles, particularly in regional locations.

5. Behavioural standards and unconstructive behaviour

While constructive cultures exist across councils, unconstructive behaviours remain a persistent and costly challenge. On average, survey respondents identified 2.8 councillors *in their council* exhibiting these behaviours, with administration staff reporting the highest numbers (3.5). Of councillors, 15% reported not observing or experiencing unconstructive behaviour. Unconstructive behaviours reported included disruptive conduct, factionalism, bullying and undermining colleagues, with gossip and misinformation reported most frequently.

Serious personal harm was *relatively rare* in surveys (around 4% reported this) but more evident in interviews. Witnessing harm was more common than experiencing it. Live-streaming meetings and making them publicly available was widely viewed by interviewees as improving accountability and conduct of participants in the chamber.

6. Disputes and complaints management

Across surveys and interviews, confidence in current disputes and complaints processes was low. Between one-quarter and one-third of survey respondents believed disputes were not resolved effectively, and around 20% of councillors were satisfied with outcomes. There is strong support across roles for shifting to a clearer, tiered, early-intervention model with proportional consequences and greater independence from mayors and CEOs.

7. System and structural improvements

Three key areas for strengthening systems and structures emerged:

7.1. Behaviour and conduct frameworks

Respondents across roles called for clearer, faster, tiered and proportionate consequences. In interviews, some mayors and CEOs called for stronger mayoral authority to refer councillor behaviours for counselling and early intervention. Respondents also sought mechanisms that reduce political influence and prevent weaponisation.

7.2. Health, safety and wellbeing structures

Strongly emerging in interviews and consistent with survey findings, developing and implementing *health, safety and wellbeing management systems* that apply specifically to elected council were a priority. Such a system must align with legislative work health and safety principles, (including psychosocial hazard regulations), and operationalise obligations under the *Local Government Act 1999*, particularly S. 75G, to promote clarity and effective application in practice. Classification of elected members under the WHS Act as 'others' should also be reviewed as part of this process, acknowledging the complexity of their work in the service of local government.

7.3. Community interface and transparency

Respondents in surveys and interviews advocated for updated transparency frameworks for timely sharing of information to the community, improved public education about council roles, and stronger information standards to counter community misinformation. Fundamental to improving community understanding of local government functions is greater cross-government liaison, collaboration and messaging to promote seamless service delivery.

8. Future intentions and role satisfaction

Surveys revealed elected council reported high satisfaction from serving council: 42% of mayors and 47% of councillors were 'very satisfied', and generally experienced low levels of burnout. However, willingness to recommend the role was lower, influenced by workload pressures, hostility in and outside the chamber, and role ambiguity. Around half of elected council who participated in the review indicated intention to recontest in 2026, around 30% were unsure, and 20% will not, citing low allowances, hostility and overall wellbeing concerns. These findings were consistent with interview comments on role satisfaction and advice to potential candidates.

9. Community interaction

Community engagement was seen as the *most rewarding aspect of council service*. Yet misinformation, unrealistic expectations, social-media hostility and aggression were common challenges experienced across all roles in surveys and interviews. The rise of uncivil behaviours more generally in society is immediately experienced by local councils given their close community connection. These issues highlight the need for clearer communication strategies and accessible, accurate public information at the local government level, reinforced by greater collaboration and support at state and federal levels.

10. Conclusion

The sector shows strong civic purpose, commitment and connection, delivering positive impact for local communities with diverse profiles and needs across SA. However, without further intervention, the emerging cultural, behavioural and systemic challenges councils face will persist and undermine the existing strengths of local government. Priority opportunities for reform include:

- strengthened behavioural frameworks with stronger proportionate consequences;
- formal health, safety and wellbeing frameworks modelled on and consistent with WHS legislation specifically designed for elected council to operationalise obligations under Local Government Act S.75G;
- improved role design and clarity, particularly for elected council and their interface with administration;
- enhanced supports, particularly access to employee assistance programs, training and team building initiatives;
- streamlined and efficient complaints management processes that are equitable and aligned to principles of natural justice; and
- stronger transparency and community information sharing systems.

Addressing these issues holistically will support safer, more respectful and effective local governance, while enhancing elected council performance, health, safety, wellbeing and role satisfaction. In turn these improvements will enable local government to maintain quality service delivery for communities.

Key findings

Like other organisations, unconstructive behaviours in councils arise primarily from systemic issues that influence how participants interact to achieve their goals and meet expectations. Rarely are unconstructive behaviours only a problem of antisocial individuals. Features of the system in which individuals and teams interact largely determine how individual attitudes and values are expressed through behaviours. Given this, the most effective approaches to preventing undesirable behaviours target their sources in features of the system, primarily through role design and organisational structures².

How external and internal structures (including legislation, codes of conduct, operational policies, processes, procedures, and practices) are designed and implemented shapes the environment (physical, psychological and policy) in which councils conduct business. Structures and practices largely define how elected council and administration staff interact in their roles, ultimately shaping council culture and effectiveness of performance.

Key findings of this review include:

- 1. Experience of council culture is mostly perceived as positive** - Survey findings show across roles that council culture was mostly considered *friendly*, *positive* and *supportive* (on average rated at 'moderate' levels) while respondents across roles were least likely to describe council as *innovative*, *motivating* and *rewarding*. Perceptions varied between roles, with distinct differences between elected council (rating most favourably) and administration staff (rating least favourably) on all listed adjectives describing aspects of elected council culture. Administration staff showed a distinct pattern of reporting less favourably than all other roles across the survey. Interviews reveal possible reasons for their less favourable responses may arise from feeling lower role autonomy and recognition of skills, and higher role strain, collectively leading to poorer health, safety and wellbeing.

Implication: Despite positive views of council culture from the elected council, survey and interview data indicate administration staff perceive council culture to be less supportive of them in fulfilling their roles and point to the need for improved role clarity (also for councillors), recognition and support in their interactions with elected council and the community. Unfavourable perceptions of the quality of work interactions adversely affect individual's experiences of organisational culture, influencing psychological safety.

- 2. Councils continue to deliver for their communities** - Despite concerns related to unconstructive behaviours, respondents across roles emphasised that councils continue to deliver quality outcomes for their communities. Survey and interview findings concur and reveal key aspects considered to be working well in many councils include:
 - ability to represent the interests of the community
 - quality of informed and responsible decision making
 - providing public services developed in a socially just and sustainable manner
 - calm and respectful leadership, strong impartial chairing, and consistency and integrity in applying standards
 - early and informal intervention in deteriorating behaviour

² Li, Y., Tuckey, M. R., Neall, A. M., Rose, A., & Wilson, L. (2023). Changing the underlying conditions relevant to workplace bullying through organisational redesign. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(5), 4373.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20054373>

- supportive peer relationships, informal networks and social connection, and
- briefings, information sessions and pre-meeting workshops that enable whole of chamber discussion.

Implication: While unconstructive behaviours impede efficiency in some councils, overall elected council considered their council continued to perform well for their communities through strong representation, and delivery of quality services, facilities and governance.

- 3. Developing collaborative team culture is critical** – Effective councils have developed strong working relationships between elected council members, CEOs and administration staff. Survey findings indicate that constructive and collaborative working relationships were experienced ‘sometimes’ to ‘often’ across all roles. Interview findings reveal that respondents across roles consistently viewed constructive behaviours as fundamental for collaborative relationships. Yet, the experience of collaboration is not universal and requires greater focus and team building initiatives across councils. **Key to this are the pairings of mayor-CEO, and councillor-administration relationships.** Mayor-CEO relationships are critical in creating the leadership context for councils, but attention is needed to develop similar *complementarity*³ in the councillor-administration role interface (see Key finding 5).

Implication: Poor collaboration and team culture creates fertile ground for unconstructive behaviour, which in turn further undermines council culture. Standards of behaviour are influenced by factors including role clarity, level of councillor engagement and capacity, and leadership skills and intent of mayor and CEO. Where regular disruption arises, council effectiveness and individual wellbeing and performance is adversely affected.

- 4. Strong leadership sets the foundation of effective council performance** – leadership in councils is substantially determined by the skills, abilities and quality of relationships between mayors and CEOs, and was widely viewed as the foundation for successful council performance. Respondents reinforced how this relationship is key to building collaboration and co-operation that shapes culture and sets the ‘tone’ for behaviour of council.

Implication: Sustained strong leadership requires strong support systems and relationship management skills as well as sufficient time and opportunities to build trust. Selection of individuals to council, and available, effective professional development provisions (including coaching, mentoring, and training) become key determinants of the success of the mayor-CEO relationship.

- 5. Role design determines clarity of roles, responsibilities, relationships and interactions** Role design refers to the content and structure of *roles, responsibilities and relationships* – the ‘3 Rs’ and how they interface with other roles, both in intent and practice⁴. Key to performing roles and responsibilities effectively, is the third element of the ‘3 Rs’ – *relationships*. Consistent with a large body of organisational behavioural research, how respondents experience performing their roles in practice was viewed by many as the *source of unconstructive behaviours* which are symptomatic of broader system factors. Evident in surveys and further unpacked in interviews, respondents across roles perceive role clarity, and the interplay between strategic thinking and operational effectiveness as

³ Complementarity means a relationship or situation in which two or more different things, in this case roles, improve or emphasise each other's qualities.

⁴ Parker, S. K., Van den Broeck, A., & Holman, D. (2017). Work Design Influences: A Synthesis of Multilevel Factors that Affect the Design of Jobs. *The Academy of Management Annals.*, 11(1), 267–308.
<https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2014.0054>

fundamental to council's success in delivering community-focused services. While most elected council indicated a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in surveys, interviews revealed a more nuanced perception of blurred boundaries and uncertainty in practice. What requires attention is the *relationship* element that enables successful execution of *roles and responsibilities*. Moderate levels of collaboration between councillors and administration staff were described in surveys and interviews (e.g. framing motions, community liaison, managing social media). Surveys indicated that many respondents experienced *constructive, respectful and collaborative* working relationships 'sometimes' to 'often', however on average, administration staff consistently reported this as occurring 'sometimes' compared to the elected council (rating 'often' on average). Differences may be influenced by varying perceptions of how to apply policies and procedures, and the value elected council place on governance expertise, leading to blurred role boundaries that create dissatisfaction between administration staff and councillors, reducing effectiveness.

Implication: The success of both individual and team performance is reliant on each member understanding their *role, responsibilities* and boundaries as well as the interdependencies of tasks with others. Clarification, particularly of the practical execution of roles and responsibilities; developing shared understanding of effective practices; and team building initiatives to build *relationships* will enhance effectiveness in achieving organisational goals. The mayor-CEO pairing is a model for how similar cohesion can be achieved between role pairings to *promote complementarity* between councillors and administration staff. The review identified examples of effective working relationships between councillors and administration staff, and these should be examined to identify processes, and training and development strategies that can be leveraged across councils.

6. **Unconstructive and harmful behaviours do exist within councils** – Survey findings show that while many councils maintain constructive cultures, a meaningful minority of councillors are disruptive and can create disproportionate harm to individuals and council effectiveness. Unconstructive behaviours include rudeness, intimidation, trivialising contributions, constant interruptions, and shouting. Survey and interview responses supported published research evidence⁵ that disrespectful behaviours begin with low level incivility and rudeness that left unchecked, escalate to more disruptive and harmful behaviours including aggression, humiliation, intimidation, discrimination and bullying. Survey and interview findings consistently showed respondents viewed these behaviours as detrimental to collaboration, cooperation and strategic thinking. Survey and interview respondents considered disruptive behaviours to be a problem of an average of 2-3 elected council members within their council. Deliberately, the review did not seek to identify individual councils to encourage accurate reporting and minimise further harmful consequences. Respondents were from councils of all sizes and in all regions. Free text survey comments indicate 55% of elected council responses highlight occurrences of serious unconstructive behaviours, 25% describe mixed or moderate issues, and 20% report constructive cultures with these findings being consistent with interview responses

⁵ O'Keeffe, V., Howard, S., Neall, A., Cebulla, A., & Hordacre, A-L. 2024. *Harmful Behaviours in the Workplace: A Literature Review*. Adelaide: Australian Industrial Transformation Institute, Flinders University of South Australia. https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-10/harmful_behaviours_report_formatted_for_accessibility.pdf

across roles. The impact of regular disruption was viewed as a significant problem due to flow-on effects for wellbeing and effectiveness of the chamber and council staff.

Implication: It is essential that all participants understand that how they show up in their roles matters and impacts others. Heightened levels of emotion are contagious in teams and harm co-operation and cohesion. Positive mindsets and self-regulation are fundamental to professional interactions, and must be supported by coaching, feedback, team building and psychological supports that should be readily available to enhance the personal effectiveness of all roles participating in all councils.

- 7. Harm has occurred due to exposure to harmful behaviours** – Personal experience of harmful behaviours was rare in the survey, with around 4% of elected council reporting they ‘always’ experience one or more of the harmful behaviours listed. Despite low reporting, such exposures result in significant impacts to health, safety and wellbeing. Bullying is specified as a harmful behaviour in S. 75G of the Local Government Act, 1999. Survey respondents (17%) reported experiencing bullying from elected council either ‘often’ or ‘always’, with a further 22% reporting this as ‘sometimes’. Around 20% (n=10 of 53 respondents) in interviews reported significant personal harm from experiencing unconstructive behaviours in their council roles. Most were women. Behaviours were described as abuse, trivialisation of contributions, discrimination, aggression, intimidation and gaslighting. The nature of harm included anxiety, depression, hypervigilance, withdrawal and physical health disorders. Around half of those harmed (n=5) reported impacts on employment, finances (medical and legal costs) and reputation loss.

Implication: In addition to system-level interventions (primary prevention) that target the sources of harmful behaviours; local council-team level (secondary) and individual level (tertiary) interventions are essential to ensure harm is minimised when exposure has occurred. Key to minimising impact involves ensuring individuals receive timely wrap-around support, acknowledging that harmful behaviour(s) and harm have occurred. Also, witnesses should reinforce such behaviours are not tolerated, as these strategies minimise damaging outcomes (e.g. trauma) experienced by targets of harmful behaviour.

- 8. Psychological safety in councils requires ongoing effort** – Perceptions of psychological safety in councils varied across survey respondents in all roles. Mayors consistently reported higher levels of psychological safety across measures (‘agree’) than all other roles, while councillors were more ambivalent (rating ‘neither agree nor disagree’ to ‘agree’). Consistently, elected council rated highly on statements asking about personal effort to contribute to psychological safety in council (clearly rating ‘agree’). Consistently, elected council reported more highly than CEOs and administration staff on psychological safety. Of concern, administration staff consistently reported lower levels across all psychological safety survey items except *council provides support for stress prevention*. As employees of the organisation, staff have clear, formalised work health and safety systems and coverage. Overall, they reported positive experiences of health, safety and wellbeing, yet some described episodes of high strain and fatigue (more evident in interviews, and as an issue in regions due to fewer staff). Where disruptive behaviours were more common, staff reported higher workloads due to handling high volumes of complaints and supporting meetings involving disruptive behaviour. Least agreement across roles was shown for *council members take reasonable care that their acts or omissions do not adversely affect the*

health and safety of others. This finding warrants review to improve procedures that document expectations, training, monitoring, and performance management for elected council.

Implication: It is vital that councils develop and maintain a culture of learning from constructive and honest feedback, so that all participants can learn from mistakes and setbacks and understand what is and is not helpful to others, especially when operating under pressure or high workloads. Streamlining procedures, smoothing bottlenecks and ensuring adequate resources will further support more manageable workloads. Administration staff interviews suggest workloads may be more affected by recruitment challenges in regional locations.

9. Prevention and management of unconstructive behaviour - Interviews revealed the Behaviour Standards Framework was seen as effective in principle; but experienced and viewed as poorly implemented.

- a. The **Behaviour Standards Panel** was seen by most respondents in surveys and interviews as ineffective in preventing and managing unconstructive behaviours in councils. More than one quarter of all survey respondents (except mayors) rated the Panel as 'not at all effective'. Interviewees described the process as costly, time intensive, overly legally focused, inequitable and prone to misuse. Respondents frequently emphasised the perceived lack of consequences for members repeatedly breaching standards.
- b. The **LGA Mutual Behavioural Standards Risk Management Service** is available to councils to assist in prevention, but its availability is not well understood. Survey findings show awareness of the LGA Mutual Risk Management Service was 'low to moderate' by elected council and consequently viewed as 'least effective' as a support service. These provisions also attracted the most 'unsure/not applicable' responses for all raters in the survey (ranging from 26% to 37%). This finding warrants further promotion of the service across councils and review of resourcing to ensure ability to respond in a timely and consultative manner.

Implication: It is critical that the LGA Mutual Behavioural Standards Risk Management Service increases their visibility among elected council and administration staff and enhances accessibility to their services. Additionally, without perceived consequences for unconstructive behaviour, the Behaviour Standards Panel is not currently a sufficient deterrent or prevention strategy and may infer tolerance for repeated unacceptable behaviour. This Panel, its supporting structures and processes must be reviewed.

10. Improvements to systems, structures and supports are a priority – Survey respondents rated information sessions and briefings as 'moderately' to 'highly' effective in sharing information and exploring strategic options, meaning that much deliberation and discussion had occurred prior to voting and was done outside time restrictive chamber protocols. This is an effective strategy that should be leveraged across councils. Survey and interview respondents also identified various opportunities for improving the design of systems, structures and supports, with a significant number identifying legislative improvements to the Local Government Act, 1999 (and supporting codes and frameworks), being the primary governance instrument that establishes formal arrangements. Specific suggestions included:

- updating the currency and flexibility of practices (e.g. use of technology in meetings, meeting protocols)
- better clarifying roles in terms of boundaries and interactions, promoting the *relationships* aspect of *roles and responsibilities*, and extending representation of diversity in council
- improving the clarity of access to supports (work health and safety provisions, access to Employee Assistance Program, adequacy and scope of allowances)
- improving independence of investigation and resolution of behaviour management (e.g. removing the substantial responsibility from the mayor, increasing penalties)
- aligning aspects of elected council's role design with contemporary standards for semi-professional roles (e.g. by improving access to learning and development including finance, risk, and other function-related forms of training, and health, safety and wellbeing supports, including protections while performing council functions) and
- introducing compulsory voting in council elections as a strategy for ensuring higher calibre and more diverse elected council membership (identified by a meaningful minority).

Implication: There were numerous improvements identified by respondents for systems, structures and supports. Exploration should be considered and decisions executed with a high degree of sector-wide consultation and co-design across representative participants and to minimise unintended consequences. The key is to ensure best-fit solutions that provide flexibility across diverse council and community profiles, promote retention, and ensure highly effective council performance.

Key recommendations

The proposed improvements are organised across three levels: *system-level* (primary prevention), *local council team-level* (secondary), and *individual-level* (tertiary) focused interventions. This structure reflects evidence-based prevention science principles that *prioritise the elimination or minimisation* of sources of risk at the system level, strengthen structural conditions and relationships at the group level, and provide support to individuals where harm is occurring.

This tiered approach also aligns with regulatory frameworks for managing psychosocial hazards, which emphasise *prevention at the source*, risk management through organisational controls, and appropriate individual support responses.

1. Systems and structural improvements

These recommendations focus on the structures defining leadership practices, behavioural expectations, and accountability mechanisms that shape how people act within the system. By influencing conduct and decision-making at a structural level, they provide the strongest, most sustainable strategies to promote collaborative and respectful behaviours, and minimise harm.

1.1 Governance, role clarity and boundaries

Structural role ambiguity is a key driver of governance disruption and behavioural conflict. When boundaries between the mayor–CEO relationship and elected council–administration roles are, or feel unclear; misunderstandings, unrealistic expectations, and interpersonal tensions are more likely. In particular, the burden placed on mayors to manage all counterproductive

behaviour creates undue pressure and may weaken shared accountability. Strengthening role clarity at both the role and system levels — supported by evidence-informed governance practices, can minimise conflict, promote trust, and improve overall council functioning.

Key to establishing a systematic, prevention-based approach in councils is to establish a management system based on core business processes, that embeds and operationalises health, safety and wellbeing as a key requirement for elected council role execution. Such a management system should be aligned to the broad legislative requirements of the Work Health and Safety Act, 2012. The Local Government Act, 1999 S. 75G addresses health and safety duties in the council context and these operate “*in addition to and do(es) not limit the operation of the Work Health and Safety Act*”, which classifies elected council as ‘other persons’. In practice this means they have limited coverage and unclear obligations. Development of an integrated management system will require a highly consultative and co-designed process to engage elected council across a diversity of council profiles. The LGA Mutual Behavioural Standards Risk Management Service is available to assist councils establish such systems and should be adequately resourced and widely promoted to councils to achieve this outcome.

Key recommendation 1.1.1: Develop an integrated management system at council level, built on core business processes, that integrates and operationalises the principles of the Work Health and Safety Act, 2012 into the Local Government Act, 1999 (S.75G) and clearly relates these to the execution of the roles of elected council. Review the classification of elected council as ‘other persons’ under the Work Health and Safety Act, 2012 to better reflect the reality of the work they perform in the service of council.

Key recommendation 1.1.2: In developing an integrated management system based on core business processes that operationalises work health and safety for elected council, ensure a consultative and participative process is conducted that engages elected council across diverse council profiles. The intent is to ensure processes and practices are easily understood and applied, and elected council are adequately trained in their requirements.

Key recommendation 1.1.3: Ensure adequate resourcing of, and promote the LGA Mutual Behavioural Standards Risk Management Service to councils to provide advice and support to establish effective health, safety and wellbeing structures and processes in councils. These structures must be specifically relevant to elected council, and operationalise requirements of the Local Government Act, 1999 S. 75G. Key to this work should be inclusion of the principles and processes specified in the South Australian [*Managing Psychosocial Hazards at Work Code of Practice*](#) which provides guidance under the *Work Health and Safety Act, 2012* and took effect from 19 February 2026.

Key recommendation 1.1.4: Clarify and distinguish mayor–CEO and councillor–administration boundaries and interfaces through a formal and consultative review of how role descriptions are enacted in practice and communicate outcomes clearly to all elected council and staff. The key is to ensure best-fit solutions that provide flexibility of practice across diverse council and community profiles, promote retention, and ensure highly effective council performance.

Key recommendation 1.1.5: Identify and analyse high-functioning mayor-CEO partnerships (and councillor – administration relationships) to identify the practices, behaviours, and governance structures that support trust, role clarity, emotional intelligence, and regular communication.

Key recommendation 1.1.6: Provide targeted training on good governance practices, focusing specifically on role clarity, accountability, system functioning and relationship building in addition to building the personal characteristics focused on in generic leadership development.

1.2 Strengthening role design through a process approach

Most council members indicated in the survey they had clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, though interviewees often expressed challenges in meeting role expectations in practice. *Role design*⁶ refers to the structure of roles including key responsibilities and outcomes, the skills and abilities necessary to achieve these, and the adequacy of resources (time, equipment, information, policies and procedures) available to meet role expectations. Elected council effectiveness starts with recruiting talented and experienced candidates, providing clear roles, accountabilities and supports, and developing capabilities.

Clear roles improve efficiency, cooperation and performance at individual and team levels, and enhance commitment, collaboration and retention. *Attraction and retention* of candidates to council can be strengthened through aligning expectations, incentives, allowances and supports with the real complexity and demands of council roles.

Research on role design and psychosocial risk shows that misalignment between expectations, workload, and rewards contributes to strain, frustration, and turnover⁷. The findings of this review show elected council members are often motivated by *purpose and impact* - seeking to serve and drive change and may become disillusioned when progress is slower or more constrained than anticipated.

Administration staff, by contrast, are more likely to value *professional development, role clarity, and stability*. Combined, survey and interview data show administration staff in general are experiencing poor psychological safety, through the quality of interactions with some elected council. Attention is needed to review administration role clarity, and provide team building opportunities between elected members and administration staff to build *complementarity* in roles and strengthen collaborative and effective practice.

Clear pre-nomination information for elected council members (including realistic time commitments and responsibilities), improved working conditions, equitable diversity pathways, access to learning and development opportunities (including peer mentoring), and better allowances that reflect workload and contribution are critical for sustainable engagement, performance and retention.

Key recommendation 1.2.1: Consult with elected council to clarify role outcomes, expectations, working interfaces and relationships. Improving the role clarity between councillors and administration to emphasise the interdependence of strategy, operations and governance will identify role boundaries and interfaces, promote collaboration and role satisfaction, improve retention, and benefit individual and council performance.

⁶ Role design principles - <https://www.hr.admin.cam.ac.uk/pay-benefits/grading%20-%20faq/grading/principles-job-design>

⁷ Lee, K. C., Haines, S., Gable, K. N., Bruce, S. P., Kostrzewa, A., Mantione, M. M., Oliphant, C., Richter, S. K., Wende, H. M., Burrell, A. A., & Gordy, X. Z. (2025). Exploration of Psychosocial Hazards: Job Demands, Rewards and Recognitions, and Autonomy to Address Workforce Well-Being. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education.*, 89(8). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajpe.2025.101459>

Key recommendation 1.2.2: The review identified examples of effective working relationships between councillors and administration staff, and these should be examined to identify processes, and training and development strategies that can be leveraged across councils.

Key recommendation 1.2.3: Enhance participation supports for elected council following targeted consultation to promote engagement and reduce barriers to participation. Examples should include adequate allowances, flexible meeting formats, online access options and peer mentoring for elected council, by adapting and extending mayoral programs to councillors.

Key recommendation 1.2.4: Review adequacy and equity of allowances and access to supports for elected council to reflect workload, demands and value of contribution.

Key recommendation 1.2.5: Develop and implement targeted communication campaigns that promote the value, impact, and professional development opportunities associated with serving on council, with the aim of strengthening attraction, diversity, and retention of high-quality candidates.

Key recommendation 1.2.6: Elected council relationships with administration staff require specific attention to improve the working relationships and performance of council. Combined survey and interview data show administration staff experience poorer psychological safety related to unconstructive interactions with elected council. A consultative review is required to improve councillor and administration role clarity, interfaces, and working relationships to promote collaboration and team building.

1.3 Early and informal intervention strategies

Interview respondents highlighted the urgent need for strategies that address unconstructive behaviours early, before they escalate into formal complaints or entrenched conflict. Evidence from organisational behaviour research shows that timely, informal interventions, such as reflective conversations, coaching, and mediation; are more effective in restoring professional relationships and maintaining a positive governance culture than reactive, formal processes, which should be the last option. Equipping mayors and other leaders with the skills and resources to address incivility early supports constructive feedback, sets clear behavioural expectations, and fosters trust and psychological safety across councils.

Key recommendation 1.3.1: Train and support mayors to facilitate reflective conversations and provide constructive feedback to councillors, with the aim of addressing incivility early. Foundations should be built between mayors and councillors early in the term to identify motivations and goals, and discuss how council may be able to facilitate these.

Key recommendation 1.3.2: Promote and facilitate access to the LGA Mutual Behavioural Standards Risk Management Service as a structured support for *preventing and managing* emerging behavioural risks in elected council.

Key recommendation 1.3.3: Implement an *early intervention program* to address unconstructive behaviours early and informally before escalating to formal complaints. The program should include early coaching and feedback with documented outcomes, supported by mediation and conciliation, that focuses on issue resolution. The program should be supported by engaging trained and independent professionals including accredited mediators and organisational psychologists.

1.4 Reforming behavioural standards and complaint systems

Trust in procedural fairness is essential for healthy governance. When complaints systems are perceived as opaque, overly legalistic, or punitive, they can escalate conflict rather than resolve it, undermining confidence across the sector. Respondents indicated that current formal reporting processes are often viewed as ineffective because they are difficult to navigate, slow, focused more on sanction than resolution, but often have few or minor consequences.

Strengthening fairness requires clearer alignment with principles of natural justice, greater transparency regarding processes and the extent of mayoral involvement, and equitable access to supports such as the employee assistance program and legal advice. Earlier, more informal reporting pathways are needed to enable concerns to be addressed before positions harden and harm occurs. Increasing visibility of how complaints are managed, including sharing de-identified case studies demonstrating effective practices and outcomes; may further support consistent understanding and confidence in the system.

Key recommendation 1.4.1: Review the design and implementation of the Behavioural Management Standards Framework, particularly the processes for complaint management prior to, and once referred to the Behavioural Standards Panel. The aim is to ensure clarity, timeliness and simplicity of process, ensure fairness for all parties to a complaint, and ensure consequences and penalties are defensible and proportionate to the impacts of the unconstructive behaviour. Penalties and consequences must be reviewed and made stronger than current provisions to have deterrent value. The role of the mayor should be reviewed to minimise the burden of behaviour management and to ensure fairness and transparency. There is need for greater consistency and transparency in the management of unconstructive behaviour complaints across councils, and publishing of outcomes should be considered as part of such a review. Any review should be conducted in consultation with representative groups of members of council chambers (i.e. elected council and senior administration staff).

Key recommendation 1.4.2: Implement an early intervention model for managing unconstructive behaviour disputes before escalation to a complaint. A model is currently under development by LGA SA and should be trialled as a priority. A model should include clearer authority for mayors to manage behaviour early (including referrals to assistance), as well as independent mechanisms that reduce the perception of political influence within complaint handling. It is also essential that a revised model bridges the gap between public expectations and the limited effectiveness of current practices.

Key recommendation 1.4.3: Establish dedicated early-reporting channels, such as confidential online forms or a designated ombud/liaison officer, that allow individuals to raise concerns quickly and informally. Ensure these pathways provide guidance on next steps, protect against punitive consequences for the party reporting, and prioritise fair and equitable resources and resolution for all parties, including the individual who is the subject of the complaint.

Key recommendation 1.4.4: Implement independent members on recruitment and contracting panels for key governance processes (e.g., CEO hiring and extension, performance review committees, and external consultancy procurement) to strengthen transparency, reduce perceived conflicts of interest, and reinforce procedural fairness.

1.5 Monitoring, benchmarking and accountability

Evidence from organisational psychology and safety science shows that systematic monitoring makes risks visible, strengthens accountability, and shifts organisations from reactive responses to proactive prevention. Regular benchmarking of health, safety, wellbeing, and governance system health enables early identification of emerging risks, while behavioural and governance key performance indicators (KPIs) clarify expectations and reinforce standards.

Structured feedback loops to chambers ensure that data drives reflection, learning, and timely correction to keep processes on course. Ongoing monitoring of psychosocial safety climate (PSC)⁸, burnout, engagement, and objective indicators will support early intervention, reducing the likelihood of harm and sustaining healthy governance cultures. Regularly reporting findings to the chamber further enables corrective and preventive actions that align strategic priorities with operational practice.

Key recommendation 1.5.1: Establish regular benchmarking surveys on health, safety, wellbeing and governance system health, which could include regularly delivering components of the survey used in this review, along with measuring psychosocial safety climate (PSC) to track progress. Other key system data that should be measured at least annually include the items in the Benchmarking Survey (see Appendix B), conducted in parallel with this review.

Key recommendation 1.5.2: Develop clear KPIs for governance performance and behavioural culture and formally embed these into the role descriptions and performance expectations of mayors and CEOs to strengthen accountability and alignment.

Key recommendation 1.5.3: Monitor burnout and engagement annually through short surveys and objective performance data (at individual and system levels), to detect and act on behavioural risks early.

1.6 Embedding behavioural science expertise

Shifting from compliance-focused, legalistic responses to evidence-informed, behavioural systems-based approaches will enable councils to address the sources of behaviour rather than the symptoms. Organisational safety and psychology expertise can strengthen the design of structures, investigations, coaching, team building and advice by providing insight into behaviour, team dynamics, and systemic factors affecting performance. Integrating this expertise supports more effective interventions, proactive risk management, and a culture of collaboration, learning and accountability. Such expertise can also assist in identifying policies, processes and practices that are working effectively across the sector and can be tailored and leveraged more widely.

Key recommendation 1.6.1: Embed behavioural science (e.g. organisational psychologists, trained mediators, psychosocial work health and safety specialists) expertise into structural design initiatives, investigations, coaching, team building and advisory services to provide evidence-based insight and systems-based responses to behavioural dynamics.

⁸ Psychosocial safety climate refers to the organisational policies, practices and procedures that support psychological health and safety in organisations. Assessment tools are available at <https://stresscave.net/psc-tools/>

2. Local council team level interventions

These recommendations focus on enhancing collective functioning by improving how teams operate together, by refining meeting practices, strengthening council culture, and supporting relationship growth. They aim to foster more effective collaboration, constructive communication, and trust among members, ensuring that interactions are productive, respectful, and aligned with shared goals.

2.1 Improving meeting effectiveness and collaboration

Structured collaboration limits political disagreement that can escalate into personal conflict. Research on team effectiveness and governance practice shows that clear decision-making protocols, defined roles, and disciplined meeting structures improve efficiency, reduce ambiguity, and minimise interpersonal strain. When deliberations explicitly balance community benefit, risk management, and long-term sustainability, discussions are more likely to remain focused on shared purpose rather than individual positions. Encouraging exposure to practices in other councils can also foster innovation, perspective-taking, and continuous improvement. Strengthening meeting effectiveness therefore supports both a climate of quality performance and co-operative relationships, focused on shared purpose and outcomes.

Key recommendation 2.1.1: Clarify and standardise decision-making protocols, including defined roles, speaking procedures, and criteria for decisions, to improve efficiency, maintain focus on strategic benefits and risks, and reduce ambiguity.

Key recommendation 2.1.2: Embed structured deliberation frameworks that explicitly consider community benefit, risk management, and long-term sustainability in major decisions.

Key recommendation 2.1.3: Encourage cross-council observation and learning, including attendance at other council meetings or structured exchange opportunities, to promote innovation and adoption of effective practices.

Key recommendation 2.1.4: Leverage the effectiveness of information sharing and briefing sessions across councils to promote out-of-chamber discussion, exploration of ideas and creative problem solving. Information sessions can counter the time constraints and formalities necessary in chamber that restrict broader team engagement.

2.2 Strengthening council culture, trust and psychological safety

Psychological safety and trust built informally strengthens formal governance interactions. Research on team effectiveness shows that relationship capital, developed through informal connection and shared experiences; enhances psychological safety, improves conflict management, and supports higher-quality decision-making. In contrast, rushed, high-pressure interactions raise emotional reactivity, compounding poor meeting preparation, and collectively increase the risk of misunderstanding and interpersonal strain. Deliberately creating time and space for relationship-building strengthens trust, mutual understanding, and produces more constructive governance dynamics. In organising these activities, the locations, timing and nature of events should be varied to be more inclusive and facilitate maximum participation.

A healthy culture promotes psychological safety and will enable participants to feel safe to express opinions, provide honest feedback and share ideas that can improve individual relationships, contribute to group problem solving, and quality of decision making

Key recommendation 2.2.1: Schedule dedicated informal and inclusive engagement opportunities at least twice annually (e.g., facilitated dinners, retreats, or pre-/post-meeting social sessions) separate from formal agenda time to build relationship capital.

Key recommendation 2.2.2: Incorporate structured team-building activities into annual planning cycles, including facilitated workshops focused on communication norms, conflict resolution, and shared purpose.

3. Individual support and capability

These recommendations focus on providing support and resources to facilitate individual role effectiveness, particularly if/when exposed to high demands or harm. While essential, they are not sufficient on their own because they respond to individual needs rather than addressing underlying systemic issues and sources of risk.

3.1 Equitable, timely and consistent access to psychological support

Immediate support is critical for reducing harm and promoting recovery, and must be consistent, confidential, and independent of local governance structures. Evidence from occupational health and crisis management research confirms that timely access to psychological support reduces long-term stress, limits escalation of harm, and improves overall wellbeing. Ensuring equitable access for all elected council and staff, regardless of location, helps maintain trust in support systems and encourages help-seeking when needed.

Key recommendation 3.1.1: Provide universal, confidential, and timely access to Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services for all elected council members and staff across councils, including regional councils, without requiring CEO approval or other managerial gatekeeping.

3.2 Enhancing quality and relevance of learning, development and training

Training is most effective when it is practical, context-specific, and focused on observable behaviour change rather than abstract legal compliance. Although training is reported to be available (in [surveys](#)), [interview](#) respondents indicated current approaches are often overly legalistic and insufficiently grounded in real council scenarios. Strengthening clarity around conflict of interest, aligning media training with the realities of mayoral spokesperson roles, equipping administration staff with bystander intervention skills, and using scenario-based, interactive learning methods will better support application in practice.

Leadership development opportunities for mayors are established, but councillors reported having fewer opportunities for coaching and mentoring to develop the skills in collaboration and teamwork that is so fundamental to successful partnerships with administration staff. Greater opportunities are needed for councillors to access (at least informal) coaching and mentoring from experienced peers.

Shifting toward applied behavioural learning can enhance capability, confidence, and consistency in governance conduct.

Key recommendation 3.2.1: Review and redesign training programs to prioritise applied, behaviour-focused learning, using real council scenarios and interactive, scenario-based exercises.

Key recommendation 3.2.2: Strengthen conflict of interest training to provide clear, practical guidance and decision-making tools relevant to council contexts, using case studies of good practice.

Key recommendation 3.2.3: Provide tailored media training for mayors, aligned with their formal spokesperson responsibilities and role in responding to high-pressure communication environments (notably crises like floods, bushfires, algal bloom, and significant local events).

Key recommendation 3.2.4: Develop councillor skills in collaboration and teamwork through increasing coaching and mentoring opportunities (with experienced peers), through structured programs, and informal networking opportunities across councils.

Key recommendation 3.2.5: Introduce bystander intervention training for all members of the chamber, equipping them with practical strategies to respond when witnessing inappropriate or escalating behaviours.

1. Introduction

In 2023, the Local Government Association (LGA) and councils worked with the State Government on reforms that introduced clearer leadership roles for mayors, strengthened expectations for constructive working relationships, and established a new Behavioural Management Framework. Currently, councils continue to report behavioural challenges, both within councils and from the community, prompting LGA and LGA Mutual to provide support to multiple councils. A sector-wide, evidence-based review was identified as necessary to understand current issues and identify improvement opportunities.

In July 2025, LGA formally engaged Flinders University to undertake an independent Local Government Leadership and Behaviour Management Review. The aims of the review were to:

- Collect and analyse qualitative and quantitative data to provide insights into leadership culture and behavioural issues within councils.
- Understand sector-wide strengths and challenges in managing behavioural issues.
- Examine how culture, both within councils and in the broader environment, influences working relationships and behaviour management.
- Explore how formal and informal processes and procedures support (or hinder) effective behaviour management.
- Use research findings to identify key strategies for the LGA to better support leadership and improve behaviour management across the sector.

The purpose of this report is to provide a clear, evidence-based overview of behavioural management within the local government sector. It brings together insights from councils and stakeholders to identify current strengths, persistent challenges, and emerging risks. The report aims to inform LGA's strategic direction by highlighting where support, training, and policy refinement can strengthen leadership culture and improve sector-wide behavioural outcomes.

1.1 Background and context

The State Government introduced the Behavioural Management Framework as a major component of its 2021 local government reforms. Under this framework, Councils continue to take responsibility for managing behaviour in the first instance, prior to any complaints being referred to the Behavioural Standards Panel. Key elements under the framework include Behavioural Standards for Council Members, requirements for Councils to adopt a Behavioural Management Policy, and an option to adopt a Behavioural Support Policy. All initiatives focused on achieving stronger council member conduct by clarifying roles and responsibilities, providing tools to manage behaviour, and separating behavioural matters from issues that affect the integrity of council decisions.

1.1.1. Conceptualising behaviour in councils

Behaviour does not exist in isolation. Councils and the communities they serve function within an environment shaped by geopolitical, economic, technological and climatic factors that are increasing community uncertainty, often altering social and structural relationships. Combined, these factors impact livelihoods and shape community behaviour, leading to strain often expressed as mistrust and frustration. Widespread strain creates environments where unconstructive behaviours are more likely to emerge and escalate. Inevitably these dynamics flow into the organisations that serve us and in which we work. Local government is no exception, where council chambers become the space for managing local impacts.

1.1.2. Defining behaviour

*In this review, we define **unconstructive behaviours** as a range of unacceptable interpersonal behaviours directed at, and/or adversely affecting others, arising from, or during activities in the service of council. The behaviours aim to gain advantage for personal reasons and/or disadvantage the target(s) by regularly disrupting proceedings, undermining, excluding, humiliating, or harassing others, and/or by withholding necessary resources.*

*Conversely, **constructive behaviour** is defined as respectful, professional engagement undertaken in the spirit of collaboration and co-operation to achieve positive benefit for the community. Such behaviours involve listening, taking turns in speaking, being timely, responsive and prepared for council activities.*

Unconstructive behaviours in organisations typically develop gradually through an interaction of personal, organisational and contextual factors. These behaviours, ranging from subtle incivility to exclusion, harassment and bullying, are interpersonal actions intended to undermine, disadvantage or harm others. They often emerge when people face competing demands in their roles and lack the resources needed to cope effectively. According to the Job Demands–Resources model⁹, excessive demands (activities that require effort) can create strain, exhaustion and heightened perceptions of threat, while insufficient resources (factors that assist in meeting demands) reduce individuals’ capacity to respond appropriately, increasing the likelihood of antisocial or self-protective behaviour.

1.1.3. Scope

The project’s request for quotation (RFQ) clearly demarcated the focus of this review (see Table 1). The objectives were clearly to provide an independent, comprehensive, representative assessment of all experiences of council members (positive and negative) sector-wide to develop recommendations that reflect the system (structures, processes, culture, environment) in which council responsibilities and activities occur.

Table 1: Identified scope for the Leadership and Behavioural Management Research and Engagement Project

In scope	Out of scope
Design and distribute a sector-wider survey focused on council culture, leadership strengths and behavioural management issues. Include questions that explore effective behavioural management practices to understand what is/isn’t working well within councils.	Delivery of proposed strategy to address findings
Deliver in-person consultation with a representative sample of councils across metropolitan and regional South Australia. Include virtual consultation option if needed to supplement in-person sessions. Ensure consultation also explores positive examples of behaviour and successful approaches to behavioural management.	Implementation of recommendations

⁹ Demerouti, E., Bakker, A. B., Nachreiner, F., & Schaufeli, W. B. (2001). The job demands–resources model of burnout. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86, 499–512.

In scope	Out of scope
Collect qualitative and quantitative data on culture of collaboration and behavioural issues, including perceptions and examples. Identify areas of strength in leadership and management of behavioural issues.	Investigations into council behavioural issues
Analyse data to identify cultural influences and behavioural themes, potential causes and sector-wide trends (influences within and outside of councils control).	Investigations into individual complaints or council-specific disputes
Assess the impacts of leadership culture, the strengths and behavioural issues on council operations, staff wellbeing and council reputation and financial implications.	Legal analysis or advice regarding conduct or complaints
Develop a final report including evidence-based recommendations.	Internal staff surveys or reviews conducted independently by councils.
Presentation of findings to LGA Board of Directors and LGA Mutual Board.	

Extracted from pp12-13 of the RFQ

1.2. Method

To strengthen member engagement and build a comprehensive understanding of council culture, the project implemented multiple forms of data collection. First, two sector-wide surveys were co-designed and delivered to elected council and senior administration staff respectively from all 68 South Australian councils to explore experiences of leadership and behaviour in councils. Follow up interviews were conducted with a sample of respondents from the survey, who volunteered to share further insights and experiences of serving in or on council.

1.2.1. Survey

Content of both surveys was co-designed with the LGA Review Advisory Group and addressed the same core topics (see Appendix A). Items included a combination of quantitative rating scales and qualitative free-text questions to capture both breadth and depth of insights. The surveys were open for four weeks (Thursday 18 September to Sunday 19 October 2025) and were widely promoted by LGA SA to maximise participation across the sector.

- The elected council survey was distributed to all council members within the current sitting term of council (November 2022 – October 2025) across the 68 local government councils. Former council members who served in this term of council were also encouraged to participate.
- 160 elected council members responded to the survey¹⁰ comprising 42 mayors. More than one-quarter of elected council respondents were current or former mayors (27%), 10% deputy mayors and more than half the sample were councillors (60%).
- The administration survey was distributed to all current CEOs and principal governance and senior administration roles (identified by LGA SA) across the 68 councils.

¹⁰ Survey drop-out rate was 15% resulting in 135 elected council members completing the survey. Data analysis includes all responses provided to a question to ensure maximum capture of perspectives.

- 92 administration staff including 29 CEOs completed the survey¹¹, noting some CEOs may have delegated the task to another role. More than half of administration respondents were either CEOs (32%) or Governance Officers (30%). ‘Other’ staff included Executive Assistants, Corporate Support, WHS and Risk Coordinator.

1.2.2. Interviews

Elected council and administration staff who had participated in the [survey](#) were invited to express interest (by supplying email or phone contact) in learning more about participating in a follow up individual or group [interview](#). Interviews aimed to discover deeper detail and examples of the contexts, nature and impacts of unconstructive behaviour, as well as to identify good examples of practice and potential improvements. [Interviews](#) largely examined the same topics as the [survey](#) and were conducted between 18 November and 19 December 2025.

Most respondents shared their perspectives in a group setting. Individual interviews were made available to respondents who had concerns about the level of confidentiality possible in a group format. Sessions were 1.5 hours (on average) in duration and conducted online under an ethics protocol approved by the Flinders University Human Research Ethics Committee – number 8925). All interviews were conducted by a Flinders University researcher, transcribed using Microsoft Teams software or Microsoft Word Dictate, then reviewed and analysed by the Flinders research team. Strict confidentiality provisions ensure that transcripts can only be accessed by the Flinders University research team.

1.2.3. Benchmarking survey

In parallel to the Flinders University research, the Council Benchmarking Survey was conducted by the LGA in November 2025. This survey examined council behavioural management policies and procedures to better understand level of implementation, effectiveness, volume of disputes and complaints, and resources invested in responding to behavioural issues.

Survey questions were developed in collaboration with Flinders University researchers, and the survey was distributed and analysed by LGA SA. Responses were received from 25 councils (including 20 regional and 5 metropolitan).

Findings were consistent with responses received during the *Leadership and Behaviour Management Review* [survey](#) and [interviews](#) and reflected a range of experiences. The findings indicate that few councils tailor policies to their specific environment, with 48% of respondents indicating policies had been ‘ineffective’ and 20% indicating ‘somewhat’ or ‘very effective’. One-third of the sample ‘did not know’ whether the policies were effective, or the question was not applicable (possibly that they had not experienced use of the policies). A further one-quarter rated policies as ‘neither effective nor ineffective’.

The Benchmarking survey also examines the resources expended by councils in managing behaviours, specifically mayor and staff time, external provider costs, and type of external assistance engaged.

Findings are presented in the LGA SA Benchmarking report, at Appendix B.

¹¹ Survey drop-out rate was 10% resulting in 83 administration staff completing the survey. Data analysis includes all responses provided to a question to ensure maximum capture of perspectives.

1.2.4. Analysis strategy

Researchers collated and synthesised data across all sources to develop a comprehensive picture of collaboration, effective practices, behavioural issues, and leadership strengths within the sector. This combined dataset enabled identification of key themes, areas of effective practice, and opportunities for strengthening behavioural management across councils.

- In accordance with Flinders University processes for responsible use of artificial intelligence in research¹² Microsoft Copilot with Enterprise Data Protection (EDM) was used to assist in qualitative data analysis (survey free text and interview transcripts), ensuring that data remained confidential while providing summaries of key questions. Consistency of outputs was then verified by a researcher cross-referencing samples of original transcripts.
- Due to the large volume of data collected, the aim of analysis was to present summary-level findings (i.e. the main features of the dataset). For the quantitative survey data, descriptive statistics were calculated, meaning frequency of responses and average rating scale scores are presented (either in tables or figures).
- For the qualitative data, analysis was aided by producing summaries of free text survey comments and interview content across role groups.
- Analysis aimed to identify key themes, nature of theme sentiment (positive to negative), and shared experiences and differences in perceptions and circumstances for each role (mayors, councillors, CEOs and administration).

Finally, content of each theme across groups was interpreted to identify and develop targeted strategies and recommendations for improvement across councils.

2. Findings

2.1. Overall key themes

1. ***Distinct council cultures*** - Respondents to surveys and interviews described *strong positive perceptions of their councils as being friendly, positive and supportive*. Each council has its own distinct culture that is shaped by how its members interact in the local council environment. Respondents endorsed that the behaviours that are condoned or accepted become the norm. Although, overall views of the prevailing culture were positive, many councils reported episodes of unconstructive behaviours. There was strong agreement across roles that unconstructive behaviours are most effectively managed by early and informal intervention to re-set standards. Established standards allow members to be held accountable, and when aligned with the mission of serving their local communities, provide the foundation for healthy culture.
2. ***The quality of the mayor - CEO relationship*** was viewed as critical in determining council culture, which lays the foundation for standards of respectful, collaborative behaviour. There was wide support for the view that constructive behaviour is necessary for effective decision making and underpins successful council performance.
3. ***Elected council behaviour is a product of environment and individual factors*** – respondents acknowledged both the environment (structures, processes, physical and social contexts) and individual factors shape behaviour. *A supportive environment*

¹² <https://library.flinders.edu.au/researchers/ai-tools-in-research>

promotes constructive behaviour, benefiting role effectiveness, while unsupportive environments (featuring role strain, complex structures and inadequate resources) increase expression of individual coping responses often resulting in unconstructive behaviours. Effective behavioural responses require interventions at all levels – system, environment, team and individual.

4. ***Effectively representing and serving the local community to make positive change*** is highly *motivating* to both elected council members and administration staff and the key driver to participation. How successfully that is achieved depends on role structure and personal skills. Strategies are needed to improve attraction, retention and professional development to ensure high quality, well-suited candidates to serve in and on council. Such strategies should recognise *contemporary council roles are semi-professional in nature*, requiring technical, commercial and business skills, as well as community connection and service mindset. Fundamental to applying these skills effectively are non-technical skills including self-management, respectful communication, listening, collaboration, curiosity-driven problem solving, and ability to engage others.
5. ***Role design, particularly role clarity requires review*** to establish clear responsibilities and interfaces between strategic, policy and operational roles and objectives. The quality of the mayor-CEO relationship is central to the effectiveness of council, but this is equally supported by the effectiveness of the working relationships between councillors and senior administration staff. Given consistent differences in experiences between councillors and administration staff in the surveys and interviews, these relationships require further clarification in practice, and to be supported to develop *complementarity* through training and development that strengthens collaboration and role effectiveness.
6. ***Serving the community is a key part of role satisfaction*** – elected council emphasised much of their role satisfaction came from representing the community and making informed decisions to provide community benefit. Survey and interview responses rated this function as ‘highly important’ but received the lowest survey rating for performance. Like theme 5 (above), this finding is worthy of further assessment to understand how improvements can be made to increase opportunities and skill development for councillors and administration staff, as this outcome is likely best achieved through *effective collaboration between roles*.
7. ***Constructive, respectful and collaborative relationships were not regularly experienced by all***. It may be valuable to build in more (formal and informal) team building opportunities within council annual programs to promote development of interpersonal relationships and provide opportunities for interactions that are less rushed and without high pressure or levels of emotion. These opportunities should take a variety of forms and be inclusive of the diversity of the membership, considering timing and location.
8. ***Coaching and mentoring opportunities*** are valuable for assisting leaders in working effectively in teams and in dealing with diverse communities experiencing changing times. Access to coaching and mentoring was reported by a few; mayors though a significant number of councillors identified the need for, and value of mentoring and coaching opportunities for councillors at differing stages of their service. Peer mentoring and personal coaching are highly valuable for enhancing ‘people management’ skills that raise leader awareness of how their behaviour impacts others.

9. **Formalised health, safety and wellbeing structures** should be extended to clearly apply to elected council members. Systems, policies and processes should be modelled on legislative principles and duties from work health and safety management systems and legislation and adapted to address the roles and responsibilities of elected council in the context of S.75G of the Local Government Act, 1999.
10. **Unconstructive behaviours are a significant issue affecting performance across councils.** Although overall, respondents report positive cultures, unconstructive behaviours occur in councils across all regions to varying degrees. Whether the prevalence is high or low, frequent or infrequent, unconstructive behaviours impact council performance by draining participants of time, energy and resources. *Harmful (more severe) behaviours are relatively infrequent, but harm has occurred* to a small but significant number of (mainly) councillors due to serious and sustained exposures. These cases are sentinel warning signs and highlight the *necessity for early intervention* to address sources, and *provide early health, safety and wellbeing supports* that are easily accessible, equitable, confidential and designed for council contexts.

2.1.1. Survey participation

The surveys (conducted in September-October 2025) captured contributions from a broad mix of roles and backgrounds, providing well-rounded representation of the South Australian local government sector. A breakdown of respondent demographics is shown in Table 2 (below) and key insights are listed below:

- All seven local government regions were represented in the survey responses. Proportionately strong responses were received from both regional and metropolitan councils.
- All council sizes were captured, though around half of respondents were associated with medium-sized councils (i.e., 77 (46%) elected council and 42 (46%) of administration).
- There was equal representation of male and female respondents in the council members survey, but administration respondents were twice as likely to be female than male
- All age groups were represented in the surveys. Council members tended to be older than administration respondents, with more than half (54%) reporting an age over 60 years, compared with only 15% of administration respondents.
- All employment types and tenure lengths were represented in the surveys. More than one-third of council members (36%) and administration staff (34%) reported having nine or more years of experience in their roles. Additionally, more than one-quarter (27%) of council members indicated they were retired.

2.1.2. Interview – individual and group participation

Interview sessions followed survey delivery (in September-October 2025) and were conducted across four weeks (from Tuesday 18 November to Friday 19 December 2025), involving 53 respondents within 33 sessions, summarised as follows:

- 21 individual interviews (i.e. 21 respondents).
- 11 group interviews involving a total of 32 respondents. Groups varied from 2 to 5 people
- The 53 respondents were:
 - Mayors – 16 (4 men and 12 women)

- Councillors – 21 (9 men and 12 women)
- CEOs – 6 (5 men and 1 woman)
- Administration – 8 (3 men and 5 women)
- Policy – 2 (0 men and 2 women)
- Collectively 32 women and 21 men participated
- 27 respondents were from metropolitan councils and 26 from regional councils.

There were 7 eligible respondents (2 metropolitan and 5 regional) who had accepted a scheduled interview time but did not attend. Interviews produced 43 hours and 20 minutes of data for analysis.

Table 2: Overview of survey respondent demographics

Local Government Region	Council Members (n = 160)	Administration (n = 92)	Age	Council Members (n = 160)	Administration (n = 92)
Eyre Peninsula	11 (7%)	7 (8%)	Less than 30 years	3 (2%)	2 (2%)
Northern and Yorke	29 (18%)	11 (12%)	30-39 years	10 (6%)	12 (13%)
Limestone Coast	24 (15%)	20 (22%)	40-49 years	21 (13%)	27 (29%)
Murraylands and Riverland	14 (9%)	10 (11%)	50-59 years	33 (20%)	32 (35%)
Southern and Hills	20 (13%)	7 (8%)	60+ years	85 (53%)	14 (15%)
Spencer Gulf Cities	5 (3%)	1 (1%)	Prefer not to say	8 (5%)	5 (5%)
Greater Adelaide	55 (34%)	29 (30%)	Time Served On / In Council	Council Members (n = 160)	Administration (n = 92)
I'm not sure	1 (1%)	-	Less than 12 months	1 (1%)	8 (9%)
Prefer not to say	1 (1%)	7 (8%)	1-4 years	58 (36%)	25 (27%)
Council Size	Council Members (n = 160)	Administration (n = 92)	5-8 years	40 (25%)	21 (23%)
Small (population up to 10,000 people)	53 (33%)	32 (35%)	9+ years	57 (36%)	31 (34%)
Medium (population between 10,001 and 50,000 people)	77 (48%)	42 (46%)	Prefer not to say	4 (2%)	7 (7%)
Large (population over 50,001 people)	30 (18%)	12 (13%)	Employment Status	Council Members (n = 160)	
I'm not sure	-	3 (3%)	Full-time	52 (32%)	
Prefer not to say	-	3 (3%)	Part-time	18 (11%)	
Gender	Council Members (n = 160)	Administration (n = 92)	Self-employed	26 (16%)	
Male	74 (46%)	30 (33%)	Retired	43 (27%)	
Female	80 (50%)	55 (60%)	Other	15 (9%)	
Prefer not to say	6 (4%)	7 (7%)	Prefer not to say	6 (4%)	

2.2. Council culture

Culture is a feature of organisational groups influenced by the extent to which group and individual attitudes, values, and motivations align in the context of organisational structures. Culture is often described simply as ‘the way we do things here’¹³ and is expressed through behaviour. The survey examined perceptions of elected council and administration staff toward culture in councils to better understand motivations to serve and role satisfaction (through specific features of council activity). In line with the focus on leadership and behaviour of elected council, a more specific examination of elected council culture sought views on a range of council attributes and elected councils’ capacity to make changes in the community.

While many facets of council culture were explored in the survey, respondents in both surveys and interviews expressed positive views about the performance of council in representing and delivering valuable services and facilities to their communities.

2.2.1. Motivators

Survey findings

Serving and making a positive contribution to the community were the most frequent motivators for why **council members** decided to stand for council, as summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Reasons why council members stood for council

Motivator	Number (%) of elected council (n=160)
To serve community	143 (89)
To make change in community	100 (63)
My values	71 (44)
I was asked	35 (22)
To resolve an issue	27 (17)
My political beliefs	14 (9)
Other	10 (6)

Council members most valued the following about their roles:

- Community engagement and connection
- Representation and decision making
- Accountability and financial sustainability

Administration

Serving community was also a frequent motivator for **administration staff** to work for council (see Table 4) although only surpassed by use of professional skills and capabilities.

¹³ Kennedy, A. A. (1982). *Corporate cultures: The rites and rituals of corporate life*. Reading, Mass.; Don Mills, Ontario: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Table 4: Reasons why administration staff joined council

Motivator	Number (%) of administration (n=92)
To use my professional skills/capabilities	71 (77)
To serve community	58 (63)
Income and benefits	43 (47)
To make change in community	42 (46)
My values	40 (44)
My beliefs	22 (24)
Other	9 (10)

Administration staff most valued the following about their work:

- **Collaboration and teamwork** to achieve long-term benefits for the community
- Having a meaningful **purpose**, opportunity to make a difference within the community
- **Task variety** and problem solving - the diverse projects, issues and responsibilities

2.2.2. Satisfaction with council activities

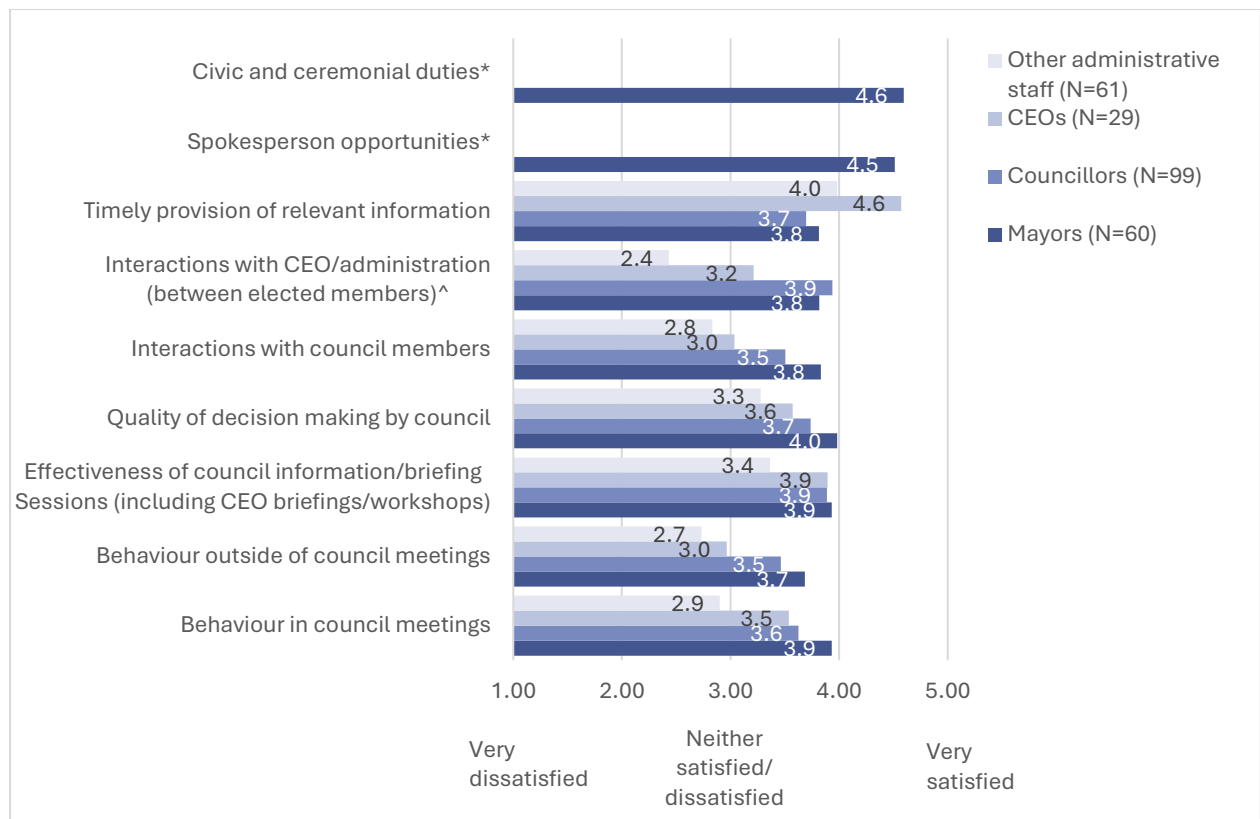
Survey findings

On average, survey respondents were most satisfied with *the effectiveness of council information or briefing sessions* and the *quality of decision making by council* (see Figure 1). In contrast, all raters showed least satisfaction (on average) with *council member behaviour outside of council meetings*. For the remaining activities, ratings varied more notably across roles. For example:

- Other administration staff tended to be dissatisfied with *interactions between elected council* – 23% reported being ‘very dissatisfied’ and 37% reported being ‘dissatisfied’ (this compares to 14% and 10% of CEOs, respectively).
- Other administration staff were approximately twice as likely to be dissatisfied to some extent with *behaviour in council meetings*; 44% reported being either ‘dissatisfied’ or ‘very dissatisfied’ compared to 27% of CEOs, 24% of councillors and 13% of mayors.
- All CEOs (except n=1 who reported ‘unsure’) were satisfied to some extent with the *timely provision of relevant information*, compared to 65% of mayors, 66% of councillors and 77% of other administration staff rating ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’.

Other administration staff generally provided the lowest/least satisfied ratings across the activities. Additionally, mayors tended to be ‘satisfied’ (19%) or ‘very satisfied’ (65%) with *spokesperson opportunities* and with *civic and ceremonial duties*, rating 16% and 72%, respectively.

Figure 1: Average ratings regarding satisfaction with council activities, by rater group



Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding 'Unsure'; this is typically less than 5% of respondents. Consequently, the number of respondents included may vary per item.

*These items were not asked of administration staff or councillors.

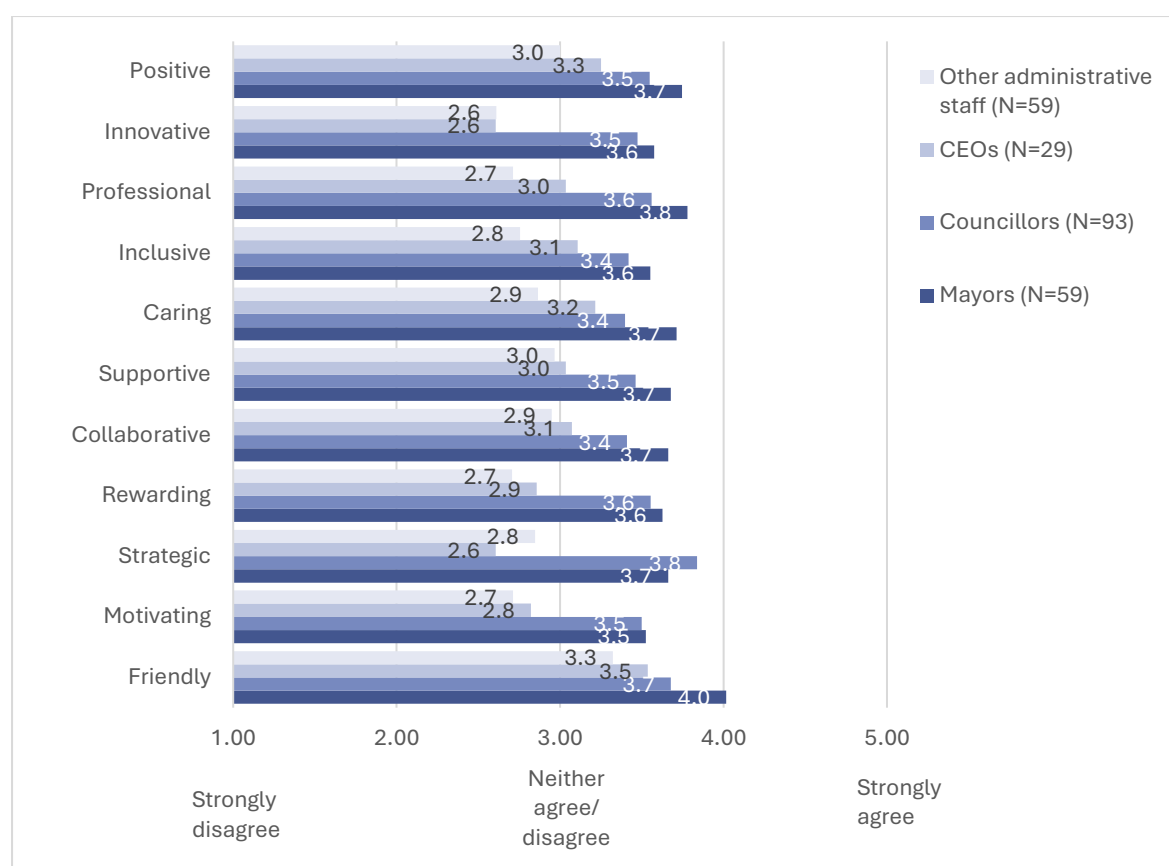
^Elected council rated interactions with CEO/administration and Administration rated interactions with elected council.

2.3. Elected council culture

Survey findings

Based on average ratings from all respondents, most agreement (at neutral to moderate levels) was shown for an elected council culture that is *friendly*, *positive* and *supportive*. Least overall agreement was shown for being *innovative*, *motivating* and *rewarding*. However, as shown in Figure 2, different roles perceived different elected council culture attributes to be present, with CEOs and administration staff more inclined to hold neutral feelings about these descriptors.

Figure 2: Average agreement ratings of elected council culture adjectives, by rater group



Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding 'Unsure'; this is typically less than 5% of respondents. Consequently, the number of respondents included may vary per item.

Perceptions of being *innovative* seemed to clearly divide respondents – disagreement from administration (the most common rating provided by CEOs was 'strongly disagree' (28%) and 'disagree' for other administration staff (37%)) and agreement from elected council members (the most common rating provided by mayors and councillors was 'agree', sitting at 35% and 33%, respectively).

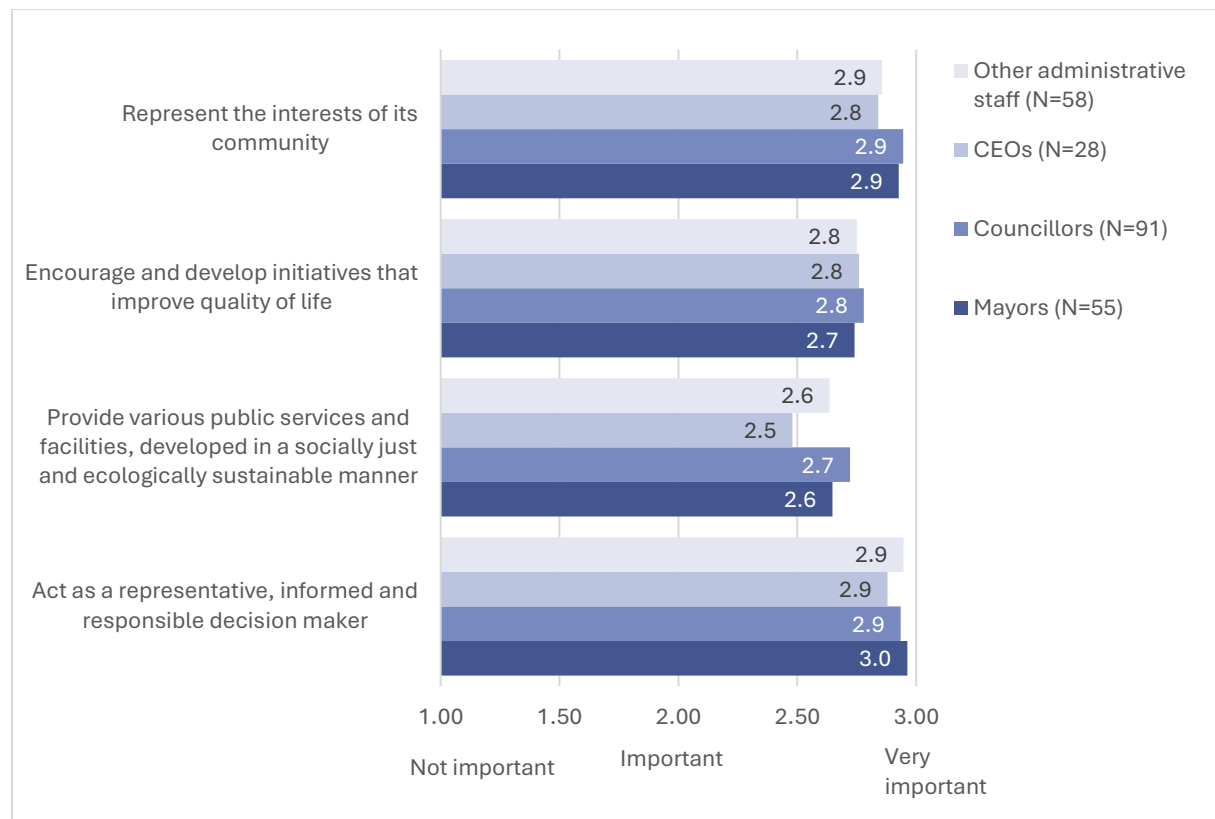
Overall, other administration staff seemed to regularly provide more critical responses compared to other roles. For example, they disagreed to some extent that elected council culture is *inclusive* (8% 'strongly disagree' and 41% 'disagree') and *professional* (12% 'strongly disagree' and 41% 'disagree') – more than double the rates of other roles. Large discrepancies were also shown between administration and elected council perceptions of the elected council culture being *strategic*. For example, 52% of CEOs reported 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' compared to 42% of other administration staff 15% of mayors and 14% of councillors.

2.3.1. Importance and performance of council attributes

Survey findings

All respondents considered that *acting as a representative, informed and responsible decision maker* and *representing the interests of its community* were either 'important' or 'very important' (see Figure 3). Elected council were slightly more inclined to report these as 'very important'. Somewhat lesser importance was placed overall on council *providing various public services and facilities, developed in a socially just and ecologically sustainable manner* although few rated this as 'not important' (n=7).

Figure 3: Average ratings about importance of elected council attributes, by rater group

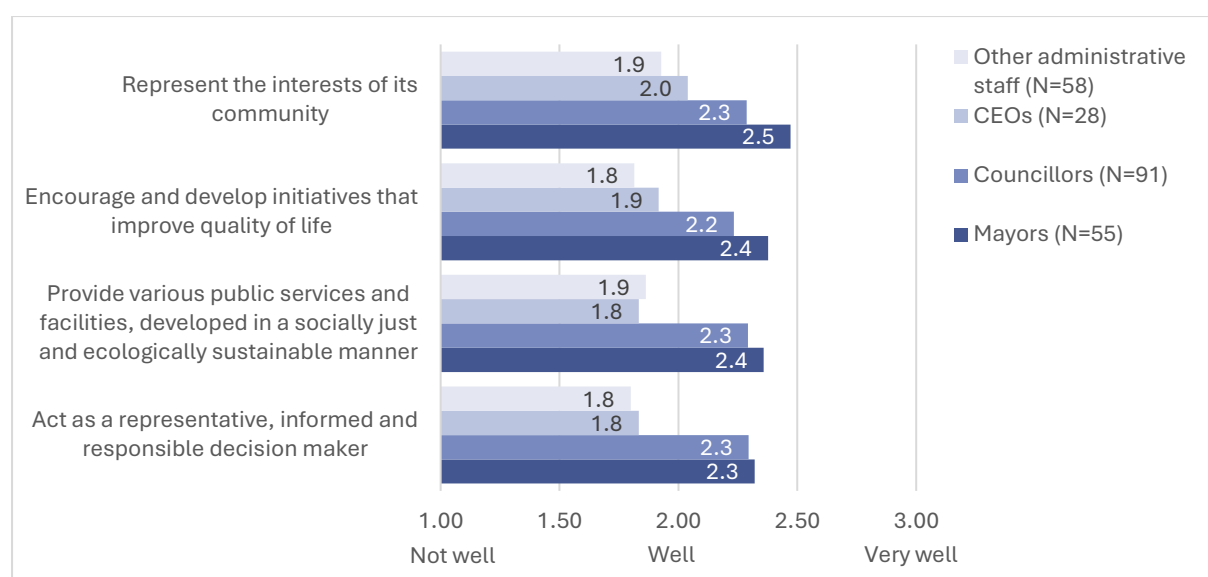


Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding 'Unsure'; this is typically less than 5% of respondents. Consequently, the number of respondents included may vary per item.

Respondents generally endorsed that the attributes were being achieved 'well', although those in administration roles appeared to apply a more critical lens than elected council members (see Figure 4). *Representing the interests of its community* was considered a relative high performer for elected council with 54% of mayors, 47% of councillors, 29% of other administration staff and 25% of CEOs viewing this as being performed 'very well'. Around one-quarter of CEOs and one-third of other administration staff rated each of these attributes as not being performed well. These ratings came from individuals representing six of the seven local council regions, each of the three council population sizes, both genders and all five age groups.

Perhaps the most salient need for councils to address is *acting as a representative, informed and responsible decision maker* which achieved the highest importance ratings but lowest performance ratings overall (all respondents averaged 2.9 and 2.1, respectively).

Figure 4: Average ratings about performance of elected council attributes, by rater group

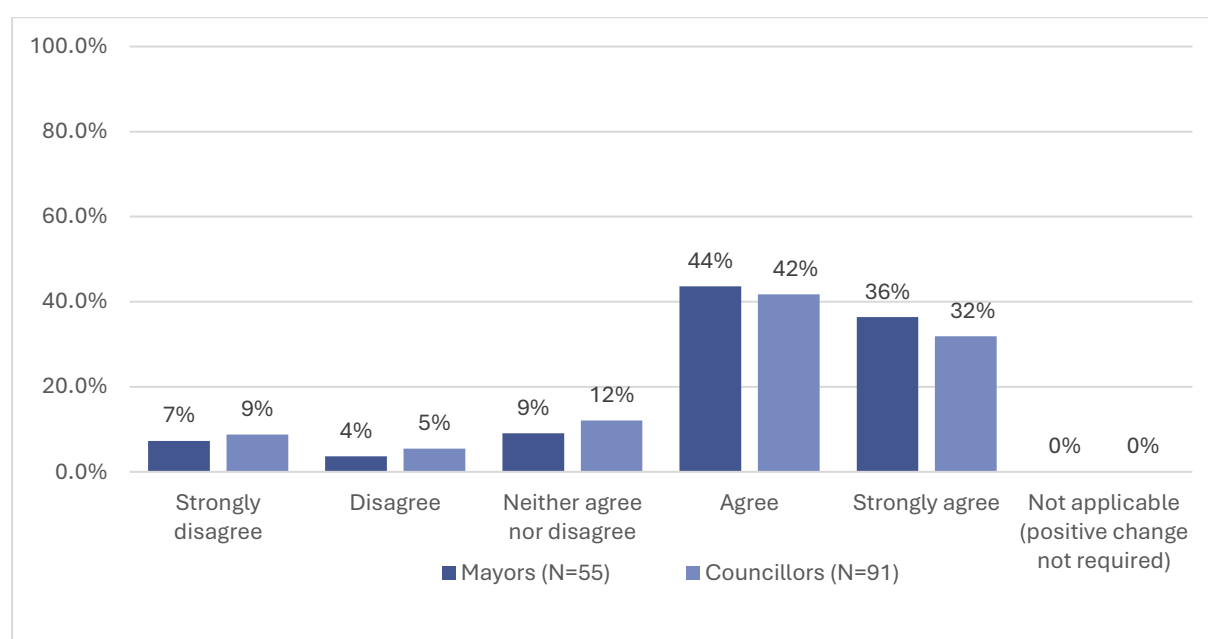


Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding 'Unsure'; this is typically less than 5% of respondents. Consequently, the number of respondents included may vary per item.

2.3.2. Effecting positive change

Survey findings indicate that no elected council members selected “not applicable” when asked about positive change within their council, suggesting a shared view that there is always room for improvement in any organisation or governing body. Mayors and councillors tended to believe they had the ability to effect positive change with around three-quarters or more agreeing to some extent (see Figure 5). Those who expressed some level of disagreement represented a range of council regions and sizes, as well as both genders; however, they tended to be aged 50 years or older.

Figure 5: Frequency of agreement ratings about ability to effect positive change within council, by rater group



In free text responses, survey respondents were asked to describe the strengths of their council. Elected council reported that while there are pockets of dysfunction and poor behaviour, most

councils demonstrate a culture grounded in respect, collaboration, and community focus, strengthened by proactive leadership and structured engagement initiatives. Persistent challenges reported include managing difficult individuals, maintaining social cohesion, and bridging divides between **elected council and administration staff**. Overall positive perspectives were reported in 52% of responses indicating collaboration, teamwork and community outcomes focus. Mixed perspectives were reported in 32% of responses, indicating both strong teamwork and disruptive behaviour by a minority, and 18% of responses reported dysfunctional behaviours adversely affecting performance.

Administration staff mostly report seeing genuine community-centred commitment and strong teamwork where leadership and induction are effective, but a meaningful minority (15%) report factionalism, incivility and inconsistent behaviours that weaken outcomes. Overall, 65% of responses reflected positive perspectives, including pride in community impact, a strong sense of purpose, and professional fulfilment. Neutral sentiment was expressed in 20% of comments, reflecting ineffective processes or poor role clarity/performance, and negative perceptions were evident in 15% of responses, indicating factionalism, incivility, poor leadership and pockets of unconstructive behaviour. A comparison of sentiment by role is provided in Table 5.

Table 5: Sentiment analysis by role for council culture (% of responses)

Sentiment rating	Elected council	Administration staff
Positive	52%	65%
Neutral/mixed	32%	20%
Negative	18%	15%

Interview perspectives - council culture

All roles identified the role of mayor as key in providing leadership in the chamber, seeing it as critical in setting up the culture for collaborative engagement but also for managing standards of behaviour when interactions move from professional to disruptive and disrespectful.

a. Mayor–CEO relationship

Interview respondents across roles highlighted the importance of the mayor-CEO relationship in promoting a positive council culture. CEOs saw this shared leadership role as *the single biggest influence* on whole-of-council culture. Healthy CEO–mayor dynamics were described as a product of role clarity, respected boundaries, and level of emotional intelligence that promoted trust and frequent communication, collaboration and co-operation.

b. Organisational culture vs chamber culture

CEOs describe well-developed, values-driven cultures within the administration, built around trust, teamwork, customer focus, and growth. However, they report misalignment between staff culture and elected council culture in the chamber, suggesting there are different perceptions of roles and varying levels of knowledge and insight on process and risk management.

Where this misalignment is significant, council morale can diminish if councillor behaviour is not effectively managed. One CEO reflected:

“Our strengths are aligned to our values... but there’s a disconnect between values-driven decision-making for staff and the elected council members.”

Administration respondents describe their role in shaping council culture as largely indirect but had real influence on council performance and community outcomes. While many administration staff are not frontline, they take pride in *creating the conditions* for good decisions by the elected council through establishing clear processes to ensure lawful conduct, and beneficial outcomes by maintaining high levels of integrity in process and practice. Supporting transparency, accountability, and ethical decision-making was repeatedly cited as personally meaningful, motivating and directly contributing to a positive council culture through building strong internal relationships. In councils seen to be functioning well, respondents identified they collectively laid the foundations for developing collegial executive teams and respectful councillors, through growing trusted working relationships. Administration staff saw their impact on council culture in the following examples:

“Our value is in setting up the environment for good decisions —that’s where the real community benefit comes from.”

“When it works, you can actually see a council start functioning the way it should.”

c. Effecting change

Although over three-quarters of **councillors** in the survey agreed they were able to effect positive change, they cited a range of views and examples of how behaviours shaped culture for change across councils. Aligned to survey findings indicating the importance of, but inadequate opportunities to be a *representative, informed and responsible decision maker*, a meaningful number of councillors in interviews expressed frustration with complex processes, and the behaviours of some longer term councillors, that stifled their ability to make positive change. Since changing to another council, one reflected on their previous experience this way:

“The systems and the culture of that particular council were... absolutely counterproductive to being an effective elected representative... they put a lot of effort into keeping the status quo...”

A range of councillors described where one or two individuals in a council committed to deeply held personal agendas can become too dominant, leading to a culture where members feel uncomfortable and lose trust. These conditions were seen to undermine open debate and encourage silence and withdrawal. One member described it this way:

“The resulting culture is becoming cautious, scripted, and “managed,” rather than candid and deliberative”.

2.4. Leadership in council

2.4.1. Leadership qualities and behaviour of council members

a. General behaviours

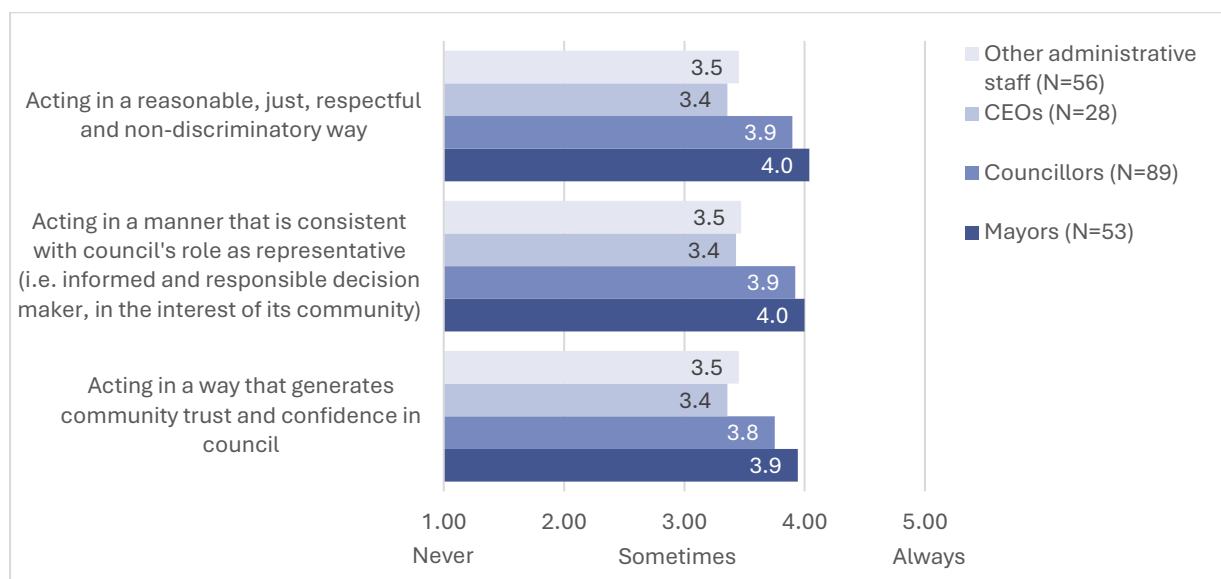
Survey findings

Generally, survey respondents encountered professional, role-aligned behaviours either ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’ (see Figure 6). In particular:

- More than half of mayors (62%) and councillors (56%) reported ‘often’ experiencing council members who *act in a way that generates community trust and confidence in council*

- More than one-quarter of councillors (27%) ‘always’ experienced *council members acting in a manner that is consistent with council’s role as representative*
- More than half of mayors (57%) felt council members ‘often’ *act in a reasonable, just, respectful and non-discriminatory way* and one-third of councillors (33%) indicated they ‘always’ experience this.

Figure 6: Average regularity of personal experience with council member behaviour, by rater group



Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding ‘Unsure’; this is typically less than 5% of respondents. Consequently, the number of respondents included may vary per item.

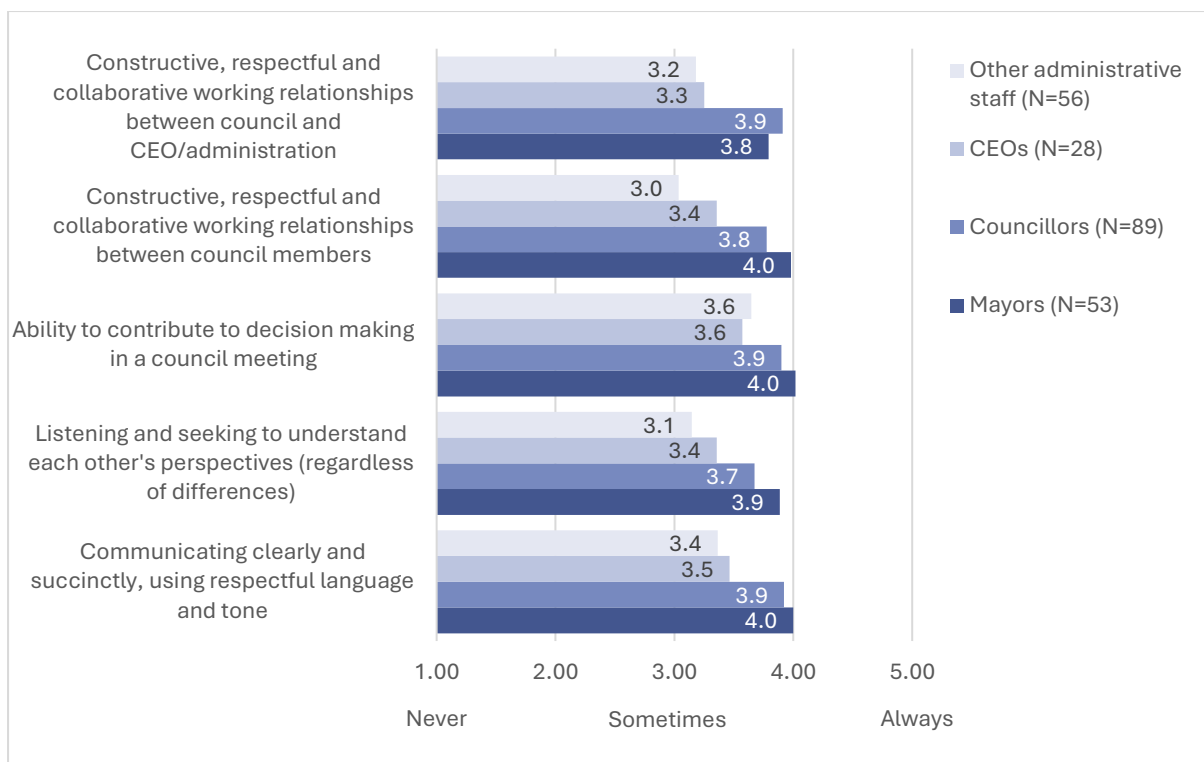
b. Constructive and positive behaviours

Constructive working behaviours were also experienced by most with reasonable regularity, occurring, on average, ‘sometimes’ to ‘often’ (see

Figure 7). Overall, *ability to contribute to decision making in a council meeting* was rated as the most frequently experienced across roles. Collaborative working relationships seemed more elusive at times for some than others with behaviour prevalence ratings differing slightly between roles. For example,

- The lowest rating for *constructive, respectful and collaborative working relationships between council members* (a rating of ‘sometimes’) was provided by other administration staff. This contrasts with mayors who tended to report this as occurring ‘often’.
- At least five people in each role indicated *constructive, respectful and collaborative working relationships between council and CEO/administration* were experienced ‘rarely’. Councillors rating in this way (n=10) represented four local government regions, all council/population sizes, both genders and most age groups. Administration (n=18) came from equally diverse backgrounds.

Figure 7: Average regularity of constructive council member behaviours, by rater group



Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding 'Unsure'; this is typically less than 5% of respondents. Consequently, the number of respondents included may vary per item.

Interview perspectives - constructive behaviours

Respondents universally considered that constructive behaviours laid the foundation for collaboration and co-operation in councils. Constructive approaches were seen to have an instrumental role in both establishing norms for positive interactions while also acting as circuit-breakers in intense interactions likely to escalate to unconstructive behaviours.

c. Leadership – strength of mayor-CEO relationship sets the standard

Mayors often thought effective leadership featured calm, consistent and fair interactions that encouraged professionalism, while balancing sufficient debate with enforcing rules. When this balance was disrupted, conflicts were likely to escalate. Explaining this, mayors commented sometimes feeling caught between building collegiality and ensuring accountability in the chamber. Respondents across roles agreed behaviour that is allowed to persist sets the tone of the chamber and saw the mayor's role as leader was to quickly establish what is acceptable, tolerated, or discouraged. All interviewees, particularly mayors noted the importance of respectful behaviours (listening, preparation, calling out inappropriate behaviour) being established early with councillors as key to building trust and psychological safety.

Councillors consistently emphasised the critical role of mayor's leadership in determining council culture and constructive behaviours. They largely agreed that capable, impartial chairing keeps debate focused, makes airtime fair, and de-escalates conflict; while weak chairing leads to disorder, contested rulings, and mistrust of process. Where mayors lack leadership and chairing skills, visible CEO support improves compliance with procedures. Throughout interviews, respondents across roles emphasised the critical nature of the relationship between mayors and CEOs in running efficient and effective chambers. One councillor observed the behaviours that support a strong culture:

“Culture strengthens where you play the issue, not the person. If you prepare, debate robustly, and then “leave it in the chamber” culture is constructive and cohesive, even when votes split”.

d. Understanding another’s perspective

Mayors valued strategies that helped them understand another perspective or alternative ideas and solutions. Fundamental to achieving this, mayors cited the willingness to actively listen, approaching conversations with curiosity and openness to ideas. These strategies were most effective when first had during private conversations before taking issues into the chamber. Mayors emphasised the importance of working together, being supportive of each other and respectful in language and approach as key to having a satisfying experience in council. Such respect was described as essential for protecting wellbeing, given the demands of the role. Mayors summarised these ideas as follows:

“Informal, relational activities make a big difference – shared workshops, informal debriefs, one on one coffees are critical to building trust and knowing each other as people”

“If you can get on socially, it’s much easier to get on formally”

“Those non-formal moments are where trust is actually built”

e. Creating conditions to support constructive behaviours

Councillors spoke of desire for collaborative working relationships with peers and administration staff, some highlighting the value of working in collaboration with administration staff. Working together to prepare briefings and frame motions was highly effective for navigating sometimes mysterious processes and increasing the likelihood of achieving intended outcomes. One member described how this can happen well:

“Things work well when we can collaborate with colleagues especially staff, who are willing to help you if you listen and work together”

Mayors and councillors highlighted the constructive value of creating enabling conditions through practices and structures like information briefings and workshops that help bring people together regularly and informally. These practices allow equal sharing of information and encourage open discussion. Other activities that support building constructive environments were identified as:

- Quiet conversations, mediated discussions, and regular check-ins at first signs of tension
- Informal debriefings after difficult meetings
- Informal peer support e.g. buddying, mentoring
- Neutral, fair and consistent application of rules to all members.

f. Role clarity and respect for boundaries

Along with mayors and administration staff, **CEOs** most of all valued clear role boundaries as key to constructive engagement. CEOs emphasised the instrumental nature of early, informal conversations and relationship building in creating the environment for collaboration and co-operation. All respondent groups acknowledged the value of information briefings and workshops outside chambers in allowing frank discussions that help develop understanding of different perspectives, while encouraging open-mindedness. There is value in further team development to achieve clear understanding of how role complementarity can be most effective in achieving mutual outcomes.

CEOs see themselves as having a key role in whole of chamber or team coaching delivered early and throughout the term, prioritising cultivating communication, respect and understanding of roles and responsibilities. CEOs more than other groups, acknowledged the importance of tackling unacceptable dynamics collectively (rather than singling out individuals), as most effective in embedding group norms for accountability.

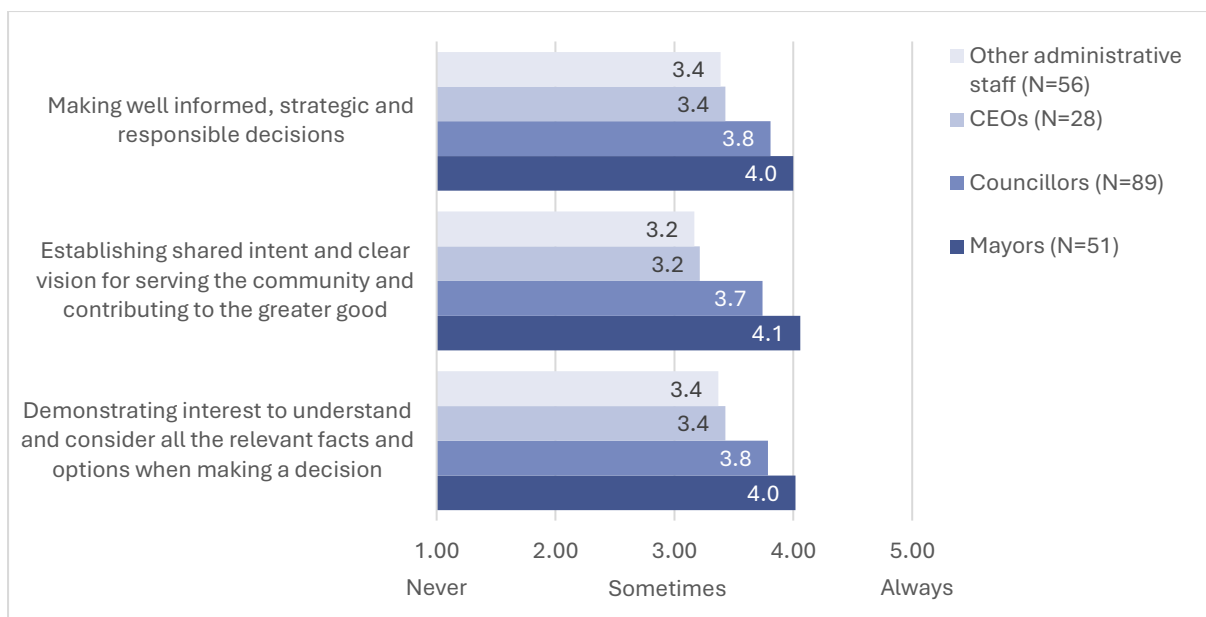
Administration staff see themselves as having an important role in setting up transparent, lawful processes to support elected council to make defensible and strategic decisions for the community. Key to this was establishing foundations for collaborative and respectful engagement. They also reinforced the importance of role clarity, respecting boundaries and the importance of collaboration at both the mayor-CEO interface and the councillor-administration staff interfaces. Administration staff also emphasised the critical nature of the mayor's leadership role in laying the foundations for constructive behaviour, beginning with skilful people management and chairing abilities, seeing these as the strongest enablers of constructive behaviours in the chamber.

2.4.2 Strategic decision-making behaviours

Survey findings

On average, surveyed elected council considered these behaviours to occur 'often' whereas administration staff were more likely to view them as occurring 'sometimes' (see Figure 8). Furthermore, mayors were most likely to report experiencing strategic decision-making and other administration staff the least – it is possible they have different opportunities for exposure. *Establishing shared intent and clear vision for serving the community and contributing to the greater good* was the most likely to be viewed as occurring 'never' or 'rarely' (2% of mayors, 12% of councillors, 32% of CEOs and 23% of other administration staff). In these instances, it is unclear whether this is the case because it does not occur or because it is poorly communicated or shared across the council.

Figure 8: Average ratings about strategic decision-making behaviours, by rater group



Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding 'Unsure'; this is typically less than 5% of respondents. Consequently, the number of respondents included may vary per item.

Interview perspectives - strategic decision-making behaviours

Interview respondents largely saw strategic decision-making behaviours through the lens of leadership. The quality of leadership, particularly skill in chairing, managing behaviour dynamics and refocusing debate was seen as critical in creating the environment and culture that enables strategic thinking, a long-term vision, creativity and curiosity to explore innovative ideas.

a. Values-driven versus political and factional decision-making

CEOs had strong views that strategic decision-making should be values-driven above political or factional factors. CEOs also emphasised the difference between strategic versus operational focus, where strategy primarily involved long-term planning, asset management, and ensuring financial sustainability. More than other roles, CEOs observe that operational issues can dominate debate, particularly when involving emotive or micro-local issues. CEOs saw their main role was to translate council's strategy into operations but found that in practice, roles often become blurred. CEOs noted the highly variable quality of strategic decision-making was largely dependent on the mayor's abilities and experience to lead debate and decision-making.

Mayors concurred with CEOs that the strength of the mayor-CEO relationship, skills and temperament of councillors and mayor's ability to chair well and keep meetings focused were critical to the success of strategic decision-making. Poor behaviour and conflict in chambers could often derail strategy, with one mayor noting:

"Once respect and trust are there, you can survive the hard conversations about priorities"

Councillors agreed to some extent with administration staff that decision-making was more often reactive than strategic, inconsistent and easily sidetracked by internal politics. They observed that debate can become dominated by personalities rather than community need and undermined by poor behaviour and conflict. Some councillors felt meetings were at times overloaded with operational detail making genuine strategy challenging. Debates could then become draining for those attempting to act strategically or challenge poor behaviour.

b. Civic motivation and long-term intent

Mayors reflected that strategic decision-making involved both values driven and community focused benefit arising from strong civic motivation and long-term intent to improve community outcomes. They noted that formal strategic structures exist (e.g. briefings, planning meetings and workshops) but effectiveness can be mixed depending on level of engagement by councillors and willingness to be innovative and focus on merits of options above personal or political preferences. Some councils open briefings to the community, with some mayors reporting benefits from hearing community perspectives early, though others report mixed outcomes with one mayor observing:

“When sessions are opened to the public, discussion can become stifled and members are reluctant to float left-field ideas”

c. Leadership behaviours enable collective and strategic decision-making

Most **mayors** described deep motivation to serve their community by playing a leading role in shaping long-term outcomes. Mayors frequently noted how a constructive and strategically focused environment heavily depended on their ability to “set the tone” of the chamber through modelling calmness, respect, fairness and trustworthiness. The mayor-CEO role was also noted as critical to keeping the strategic focus while driving operational outcomes. One mayor summarised it this way:

“The sole focus of the job is representing your community and making collective decisions for the long-term future – not just the next four years”

Councillors perceived the “authoritarian” leadership styles sometimes defaulted to in council tended to stifle rather than facilitate productive, strategically oriented outcomes, and occasionally involved power dynamics that shutdown problem solving and creative thinking essential for strategy, with one reflecting:

“Some people enjoy having power but when misused, it shuts down new ideas”

CEOs reflected on the level of strategic foresight and skill in mayors and councillors, noting it is not a pre-requisite for the role. Elected council come from a variety of backgrounds and not necessarily with the broad professional knowledge needed to manage the breadth of services in councils, with one CEO noting:

“They are elected politicians, not necessarily trained and experienced in strategy, finance and the like”

Administration staff identified that mayor’s leadership effectiveness in the chamber was strongly linked to their level of preparation and skill in refocusing debate on strategic outcomes and community benefit. Poor chairing was seen to allow debate to deviate from strategic thinking and intent to escalating stress for staff and members. Administration staff commented:

“If the mayor comes in prepared, having read the papers and stops people talking over others, everything settles quickly and we focus on making good decisions”

Mayors highlighted the need for a collaborative approach that allows discussion and deliberation, but boundaries are needed to prevent meetings and issues being sidetracked into personal agendas. Mayors acknowledge that a collaborative environment encourages listening, curious engagement and respectful disagreement, while building trust and safety. Conversely mayors noted too much consultation can be perceived as weak and indecisive if poor behaviour is not actively addressed, as explained by one:

“If you don’t balance collaboration with firmness, one person can hijack the process.”

Mayors valued opportunities to cultivate a relational approach including one-to-one conversations, adopting a calm approach and building trust. Fundamental to achieving trust was fairly applying processes and procedures, maintaining role boundaries and building personal and team capability through ‘real world’ scenario-based training and peer support.

Some **councillors and administration staff** noted aspects of “authoritarian” leadership where the mayor overly controls dynamics and behaviour, especially when under pressure. Interview respondents acknowledged overly directive styles make for efficient agenda management and timing, contain questioning and challenges, but curtail open dialogue which often creates active resistance from councillors. Other leadership approaches observed in chambers can become overly focused on procedural detail as a way of controlling the agenda. Respondents made the following observations of how this affects strategic thinking:

“The process became the battleground instead of the issue itself.”

“Being technically right didn’t make it feel fair.”

“We followed the rules perfectly and still lost trust.”

All respondents acknowledged that leadership style directly affects council effectiveness and reputation. Specific examples included:

- Consistent leadership builds credibility and stability internally and externally.
- Erratic or reactive leadership undermines confidence.
- Behavioural spillover affects staff and community relationships.
- Functional leadership enables a focus on strategy and delivery, while inconsistent leadership drains the chamber of energy and cooperation, often leading to poor decision making.

Respondents across roles summarised their reflections on leadership as a foundation to strategic outcomes as follows:

“The mayor’s style is the council’s operating system.”

“Leadership behaviour ends up in the newspaper faster than policy ever does.”

CEOs noted the essential need to establish boundaries between strategic and political leadership and operational management to prevent disruption that when escalates, forces CEOs into “buffering” roles to re-set stability and protect staff.

CEOs offered these reflections:

“You have to set boundaries at the beginning – what’s political and what’s operational”

“It all boils down to trust and having those relationships first of all with your mayor”

In summary, respondents identified the importance of strong relationships and clear role boundaries between mayor and CEO, where they co-operate and collaborate to manage council business. The mayors’ role was seen as to lead with shaping culture, strategy and policy outcomes, and avoid managing staff, operations and process, where these are the role of CEOs. Practical strategies for achieving harmonious and effective relationships included having regular one-to-one meetings, active relationship building activities, and for both mayor and CEO to individually meet with councillors early in the term to understand their aims and identify opportunities to work together while clarifying role boundaries.

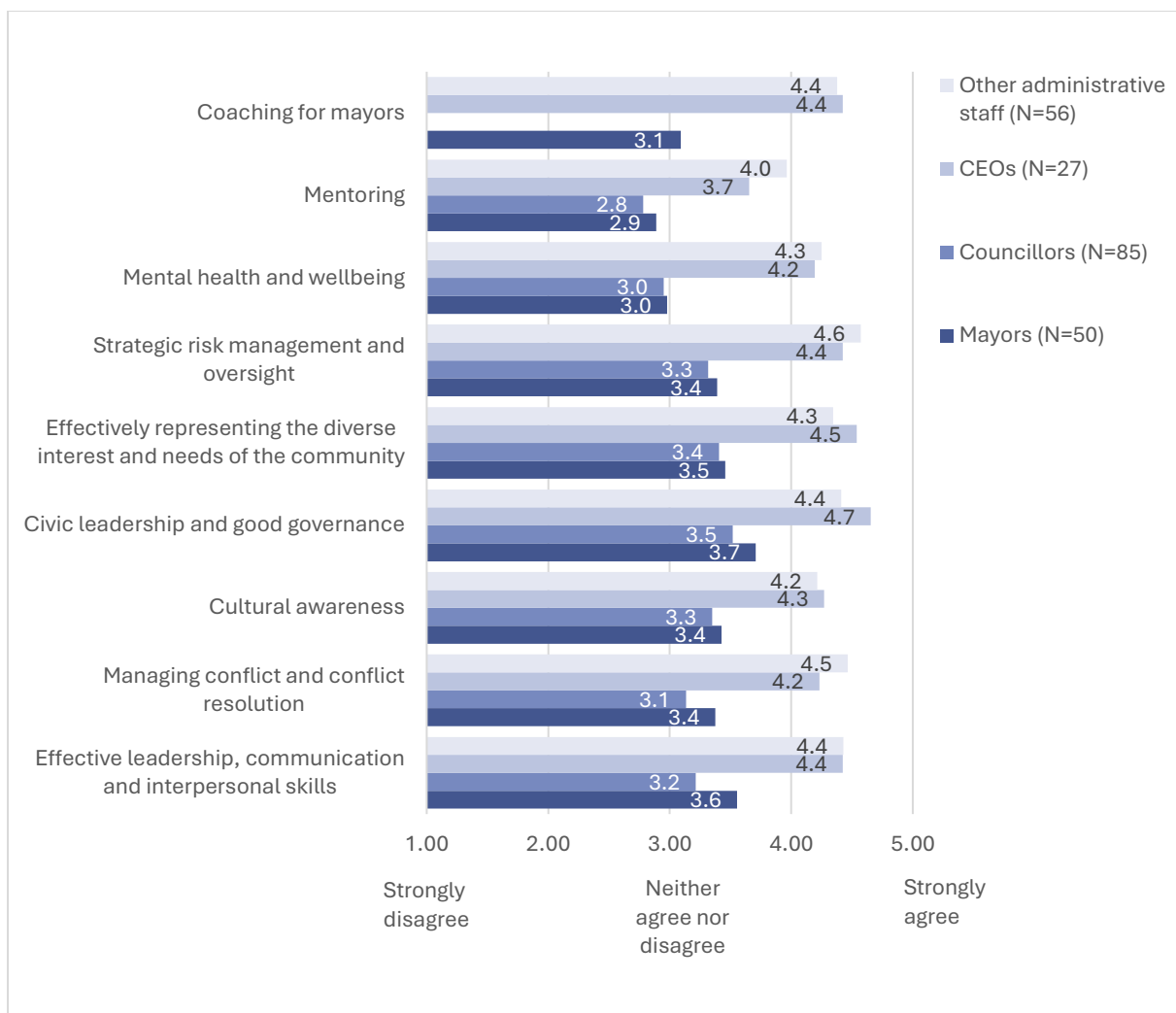
2.5. Learning and development opportunities

Survey findings

On average, CEOs and other administration staff 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that there were adequate opportunities to further develop their skills and knowledge across a range of subject matter (see

Figure 9). Overall, such agreement was typically more muted for mayors and councillors. All raters showed most agreement that there were adequate opportunities to upskill in *civic leadership and good governance* with 60% or more of elected council and around 90% of administration rating 'agree' or 'strongly agree' for this item. In contrast, all raters indicated there was most room to increase opportunities for mentoring.

Figure 9: Average ratings about adequate skill development opportunities, by rater group



Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding 'Unsure/Not applicable'; this is typically less than 5% of respondents. Consequently, the number of respondents included may vary per item. 'Coaching for mayors' was not asked of councillors.

Interview perspectives – learning and development opportunities

Interviews did not specifically explore learning and development opportunities because LGA has recently reviewed learning development standards and implementation, rather comments arose during discussions about role performance, structures and types of support. Consistent themes identified were:

- **Mandatory training and induction** – overall, respondents described training and development opportunities as positive and valuable. Yet, several newly elected **councillors** identified training was too late and overly legalistic, increasing their stress when coming to terms with a new role. Training was more valued when *provided consistently*.
- **Training design and delivery** – Respondents across roles often identified improvements to training in general, noting it is not sufficiently tailored to council contexts i.e. does not currently use specific practical scenario-based examples (e.g. conflict of interest, meeting procedures), and interactive modes of delivery (e.g. overuse of lecture-style and PowerPoint slides).
- **LGA provided training** - was received positively overall as being very helpful for understanding process but sometimes inaccessible, delayed or overly legalistic

- *Mentoring opportunities* – several newly elected councillors shared they struggled to navigate systems without mentoring from more experienced peers or former mayors or councillors. There is an opportunity to implement more formalised programs for new councillors to provide mentoring to set them up for success
- *Private coaching* - small numbers of respondents, typically mayors and CEOs, discussed the value of private coaching they had undertaken, though noted it was more available to leadership roles than councillors
- *Governance specific training* - administration staff valued the quality and availability of governance specific training and continuous improvement sessions, and the opportunity to learn with peers from other councils.
- *Spokesperson training* - given the role of mayor is as spokesperson for the council and the increasing frequency of high profile local major events (e.g. floods, fires, algal bloom, economic development issues), there is a strong need for formal media training and coaching related to responding skilfully and strategically to crisis events.

2.6. Support frameworks to perform the role

Survey findings

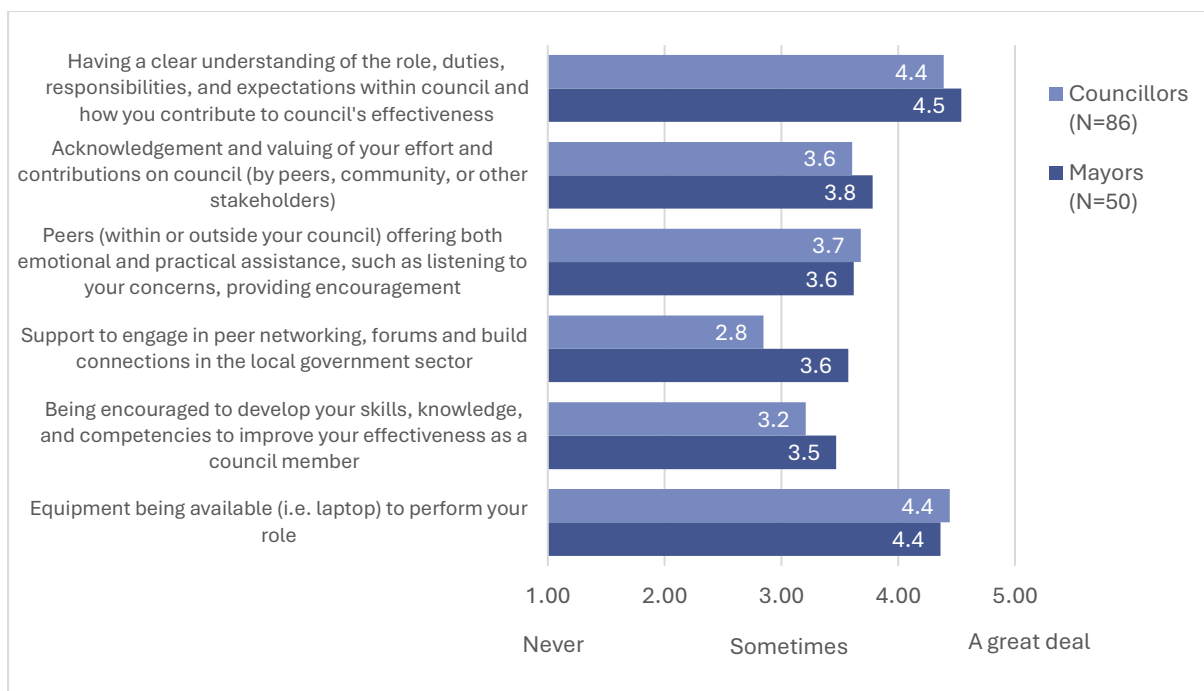
2.6.1. Awareness of supports

In the context of this survey question, ‘supports’ refers to resources necessary to perform the role successfully, including essential knowledge, access to current information, adequate time, equipment and social support, including peer relationships and networks. Supports and resources are a fundamental enabler for performing any role or task well.

Surveyed elected council were united in their perceptions that they had a *clear understanding of the role, duties, responsibilities, and expectations within council and how they contribute to council’s effectiveness*, reporting this occurred ‘often’ to ‘a great deal of the time’ (see Figure 10). **Mayors** rated this occurred ‘a great deal’ (64%) compared to **councillors** 54%, and ‘very often’ for 26% of mayors and 34% of councillors. In fact, no one rated ‘never’ to this aspect. Equally positive, more than half of mayors (58%) and councillors (59%) reported that *equipment is available to perform their role* ‘a great deal’ of the time.

The greatest perceived division in support between mayors and councillors appeared to relate to *engaging in peer networking, forums and building connections in the local government sector and being encouraged to develop your skills, knowledge and competencies to improve your effectiveness as a council member*. Around one in four mayors (27%) and one in five (21%) councillors, respectively, reported this ‘rarely’ occurs.

Figure 10: Average support and resource ratings, by rater group

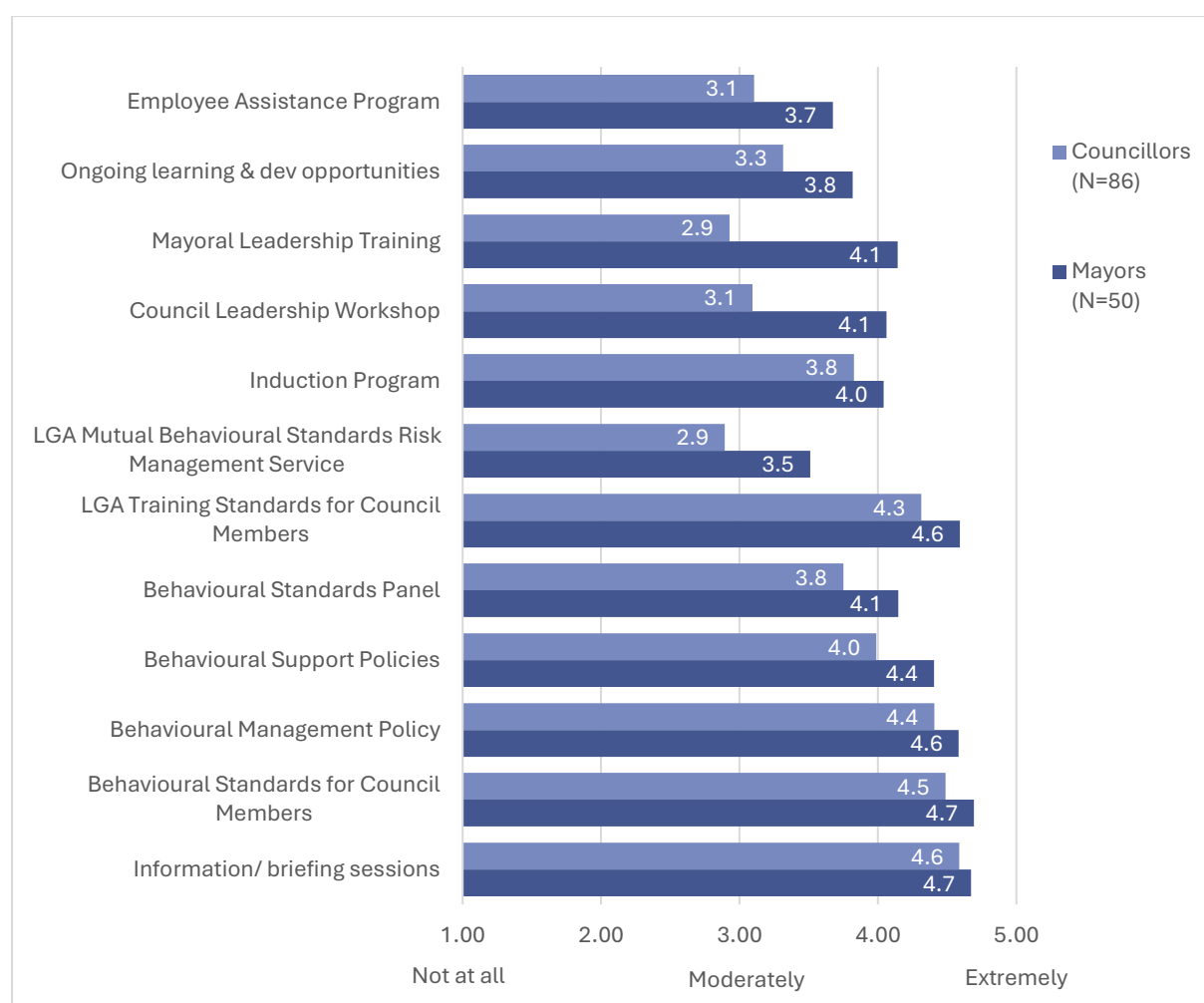


Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding 'Unsure'; this is typically less than 5% of respondents. Consequently, the number of respondents included may vary per item. These items were not asked of those from administration.

Being aware of training and support provisions is an essential part of elected council being able to build skills and competencies and the more effective the initiatives are, the more likely skills are to be transferred and implemented from the 'classroom' to chamber and beyond. As shown in

Figure 11, mayors and councillors were 'very' to 'extremely' aware of information/ briefing sessions (including CEO briefings/workshops), Behaviour Standards for Council Members and the Behavioural Management Policy - no elected council rated 'not at all' or 'slightly' to their awareness of these. The LGA Training Standards for Council Members (mandatory training) was also well known with no respondents choosing 'not at all' for this item. In contrast, **elected council** were least aware of the LGA Mutual Behavioural Standards Risk Management Service (20% of mayors indicated no or slight awareness compared with 38% of councillors rating in this way).

Figure 11: Average ratings about awareness of support initiatives and provisions, by rater group



Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding 'Unsure/Not applicable'; this is typically less than 5% of respondents. Consequently, the number of respondents included may vary per item. These items were not asked of those from administration.

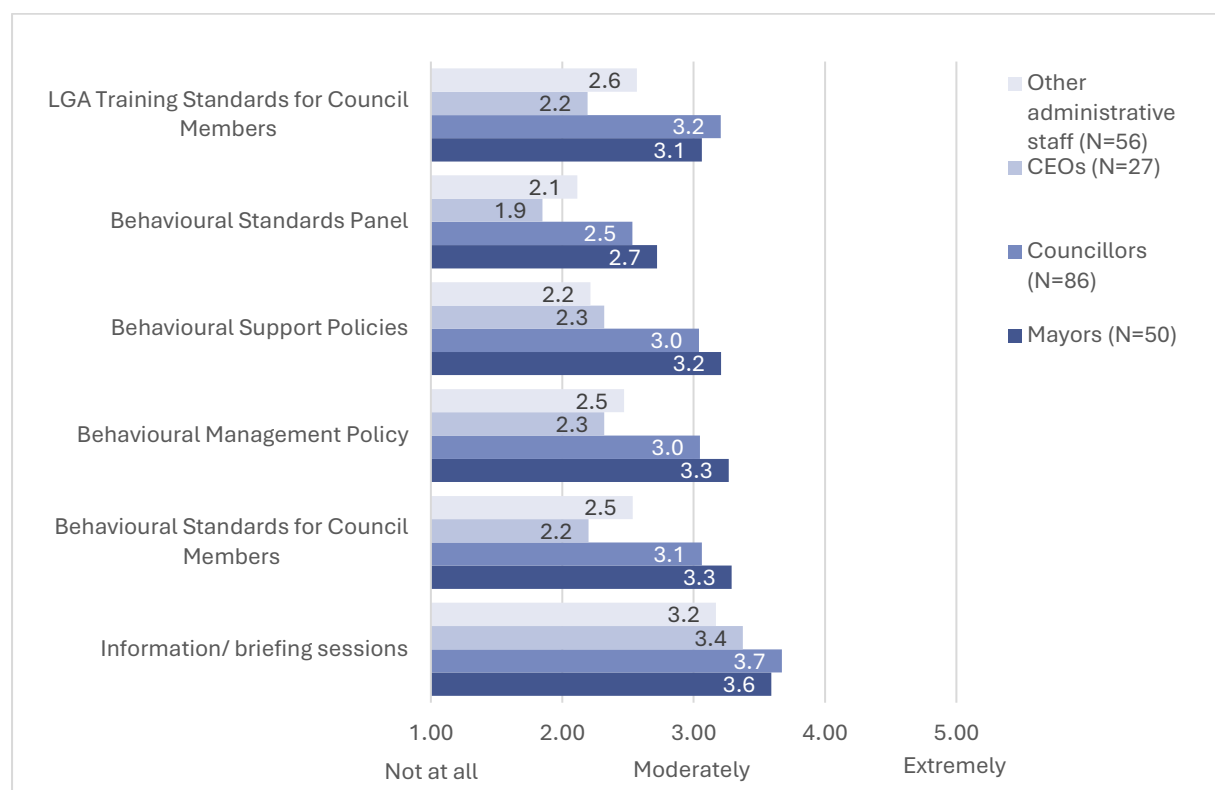
2.6.2 Effectiveness of supports

Logically, effectiveness ratings lagged awareness ratings. In general, the provisions were typically rated as 'slightly' to 'moderately' effective with mayors providing the most positive ratings and CEOs the least (see Figure 12 and Figure 13). Overall, the Behavioural Standards Panel and LGA Mutual Behavioural Standards Risk Management Service were viewed as least effective although these provisions also attracted the most 'unsure/not applicable' responses for all raters (ranging from 26% to 37%). Information/briefing sessions were generally rated as the most effective. Understandably, role influenced perceptions of effectiveness with some nuances including:

- More than one-quarter of councillors (25%), CEOs (30%) and other administration staff (32%) indicated the Behavioural Standards Panel was 'not at all' effective, compared to 16% of mayors.
- For the Behavioural Standards for Council Members, Behavioural Management Policy and Behavioural Support Policies, CEOs and other administration staff were approximately twice as likely to view these negatively compared to mayors and councillors.

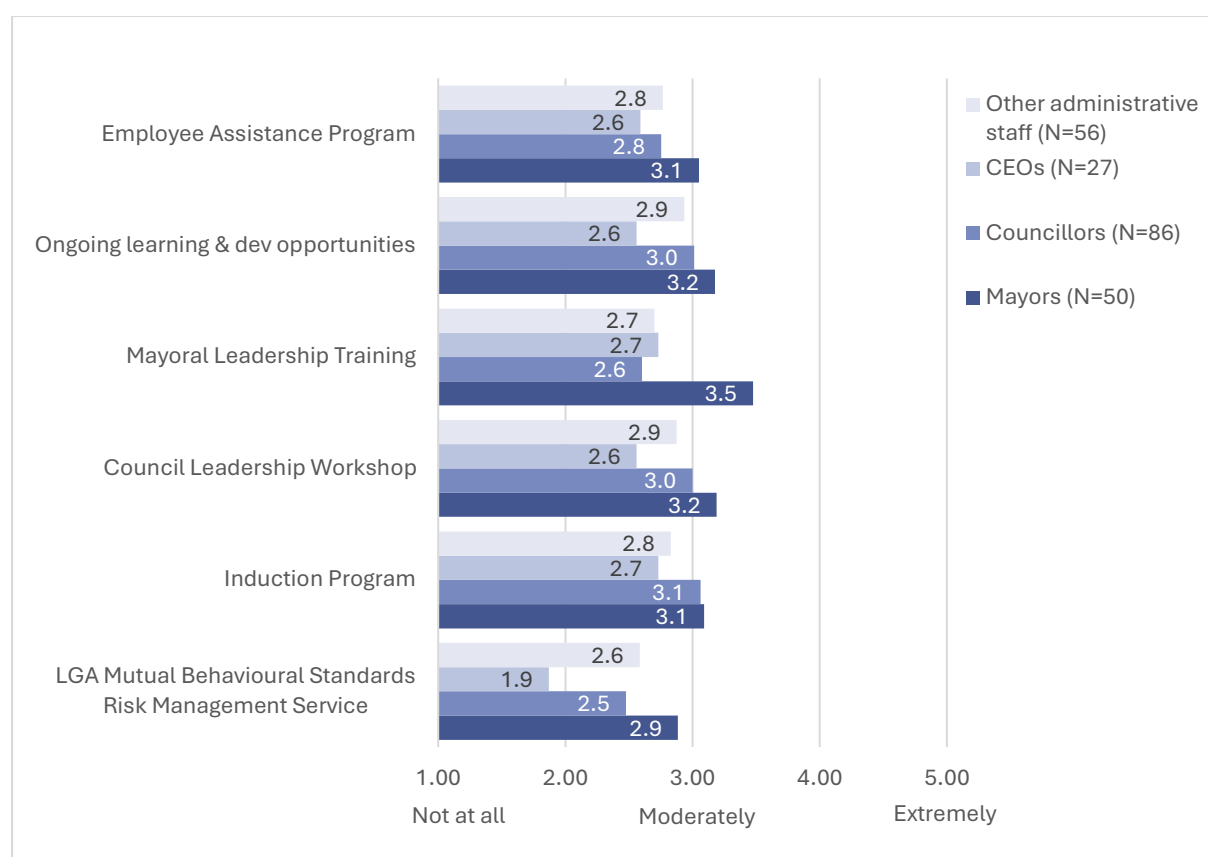
- CEOs were considerably more likely to rate LGA Training Standards for Council Members (mandatory training) as ‘not at all’ effective (30%) compared to other administration staff (18%), councillors (12%) and mayors (8%).
- CEOs were considerably more likely to rate LGA Mutual Behavioural Standards Risk Management Service as ‘not at all’ effective (41%) compared to other administration staff (11%), councillors (27%) and mayors (8%).
- Councillors were most likely to report Mayoral Leadership Training as not effective (22% rating ‘not at all’) compared to other administration staff (12%), CEOs (11%) and mayors (2%).
- CEOs were most inclined to view ongoing learning and development opportunities as less effective (59% reporting ‘not at all’ or ‘slightly’ effective) compared to other administration staff (32%), councillors (31%) and mayors (28%).

Figure 12: Average ratings about effectiveness of support initiatives and provisions, by rater group



Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding ‘Unsure/Not applicable’. Consequently, the number of respondents included may vary per item.

Figure 13: Average ratings about effectiveness of support initiatives and provisions, by rater group (continued)



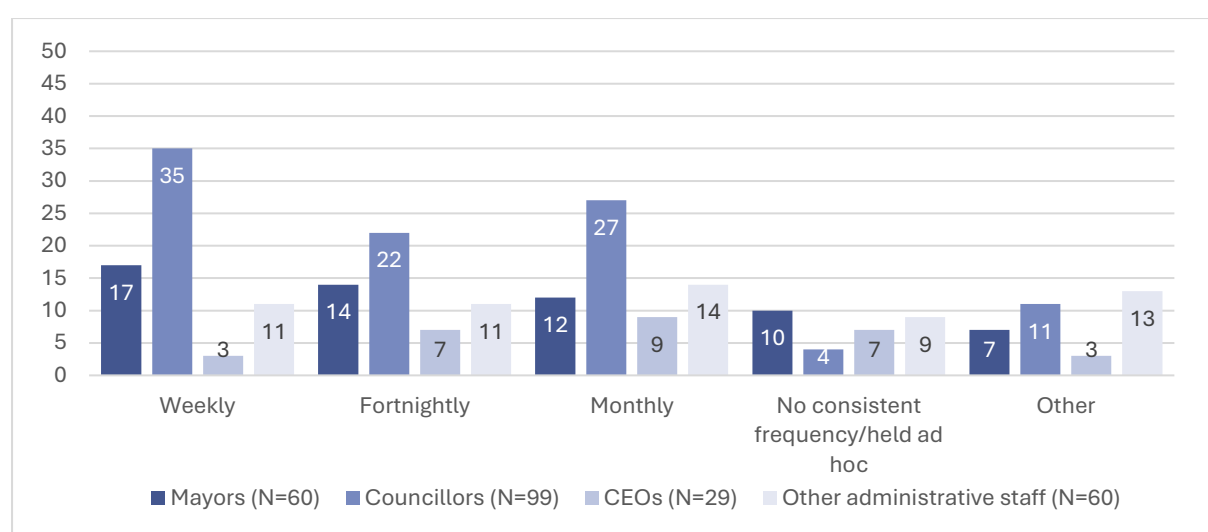
Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding 'Unsure/Not applicable'. Consequently, the number of respondents included may vary per item.

a. Frequency of information/briefing sessions

How often information and briefing sessions are held was highly variable with all nominated frequencies endorsed from weekly to ad hoc/inconsistent (see Figure 14). Relatively even proportions of all raters reported weekly (27%), fortnightly (22%) and monthly (25%) sessions. Several councillors from the same council used the 'other' response to explain that sessions were ad hoc and had recently shifted to being held online due to poor behaviour.

Weekly sessions were most likely to be reported by councillors from councils with large populations (47% of respondents in this council size provided this rating) and monthly sessions were about twice as likely to be reported by those from councils with small populations (38% of respondents in this council size provided this rating).

Figure 14: Number of respondents reporting frequency of information/briefing sessions, by rater group



Two other administration staff reported 'unsure' and are not shown here.

Interview perspectives - supports

Across all roles, respondents described an environment where many supports exist. For councillors these were most notably training, information, administrative guidance and peer support. However, quality, accessibility and effectiveness may vary significantly across councils and providers. The following themes emerged from [interviews](#):

b. Peer support

Peer support was consistently described as the most effective and reliable support because it was both *available* and *genuinely helpful*. For **mayors**, informal check-ins, quick phone calls and regional networks were described as 'lifelines', particularly during times of conflict, with one commenting:

"Talking to someone with a similar responsibility often helps... one phone call can be really helpful."

Councillors also described strong peer support in some councils, where colleagues "look after each other" emotionally and practically, as described relating to care of an unwell colleague:

"We look after each other a bit... when things are tough, we give some practical help, like meals."

CEOs similarly rely on regional or professional peer networks that offer experienced, confidential advice, with one acknowledging:

"I have a really good support mechanism around me with other CEOs."

Administration staff described experiencing peer support internally, within governance teams, as a stable source of support and advice when workloads became heavy.

Overall, peer support was highly effective in weathering the challenges of serving council, with all groups describing them as trusted, genuine and responsive, through offering emotional support and practical advice additional to formal channels.

c. Support from the LGA and ALGWA

The LGA was widely acknowledged as a source of training, behaviour guidance, templates and governance advice, but respondents described varying levels of effectiveness. Some found the

LGA's support helpful for understanding processes, with **elected council members** valuing LGA training for foundational governance education, while **CEOs** looked to LGA for support with legal and policy interpretation.

The Australian Local Government Women's Association (ALGWA) was mentioned mostly by women **councillors**, often describing it as a very supportive and empowering addition to formal avenues, especially for mayors:

"ALGWA... they've helped me way more than any other formal support in local government."

The support from formal bodies was viewed inconsistently across interview respondents, especially by **mayors**. LGA was considered a valuable and reliable source of procedural guidance for most, but a few perceived it as too legalistic, slow, or unsupportive in contentious situations. ALGWA was often seen as a source of emotional support for women in elected council, offering safety, solidarity and practical advice from peers.

d. CEO–mayor and CEO–staff relationships

The quality of relationships was seen by interview respondents to be high impact but also variable across councils. A strong relationship between the mayor and CEO was described as one of the most critical supports for **mayors** and strongly influenced organisational stability, with one mayor reflecting:

"We have a partnership... that helps everything run smoothly."

However, when these relationships faltered, some **mayors** reported feeling isolated, and some **CEOs** felt politically exposed, with one surmising:

"When push comes to shove, you're out on your own."

Administration staff describe the support of the CEO as a stabilising force, especially when managing challenging chambers, by providing protection and distance between councillors.

e. Administration staff support

Councillors in many councils are well supported by **administration** staff who help drafting motions, provide conflict-of-interest guidance, interpret behavioural complaints and explain meeting procedures. This support was often highly valued, as explained by one councillor:

"They will always help with writing motions... they're terrific at solving issues."

For **administration**, however, providing this level of support can feel emotionally and operationally taxing when workloads are high. Overall, administration support was viewed as highly effective for many councillors, but at times demanding for administration staff with potential for periods of overload.

f. Value of workshops, briefings and induction training

Workshops and briefings were widely described as valuable when held before meetings, used for problem-solving and run in a psychologically safe environment. **Councillors** often described their value this way:

"Most things are worked through in workshops... our meetings are then quick and efficient."

Elected council also valued training if provided consistently. Several newly elected councillors in some councils described receiving late or inadequate induction, leaving them feeling ill-equipped and vulnerable to criticism. Workshops, information sessions and training were

largely seen as effective when well-delivered; but with lower impact where councils lacked structure, consistency or psychological safety.

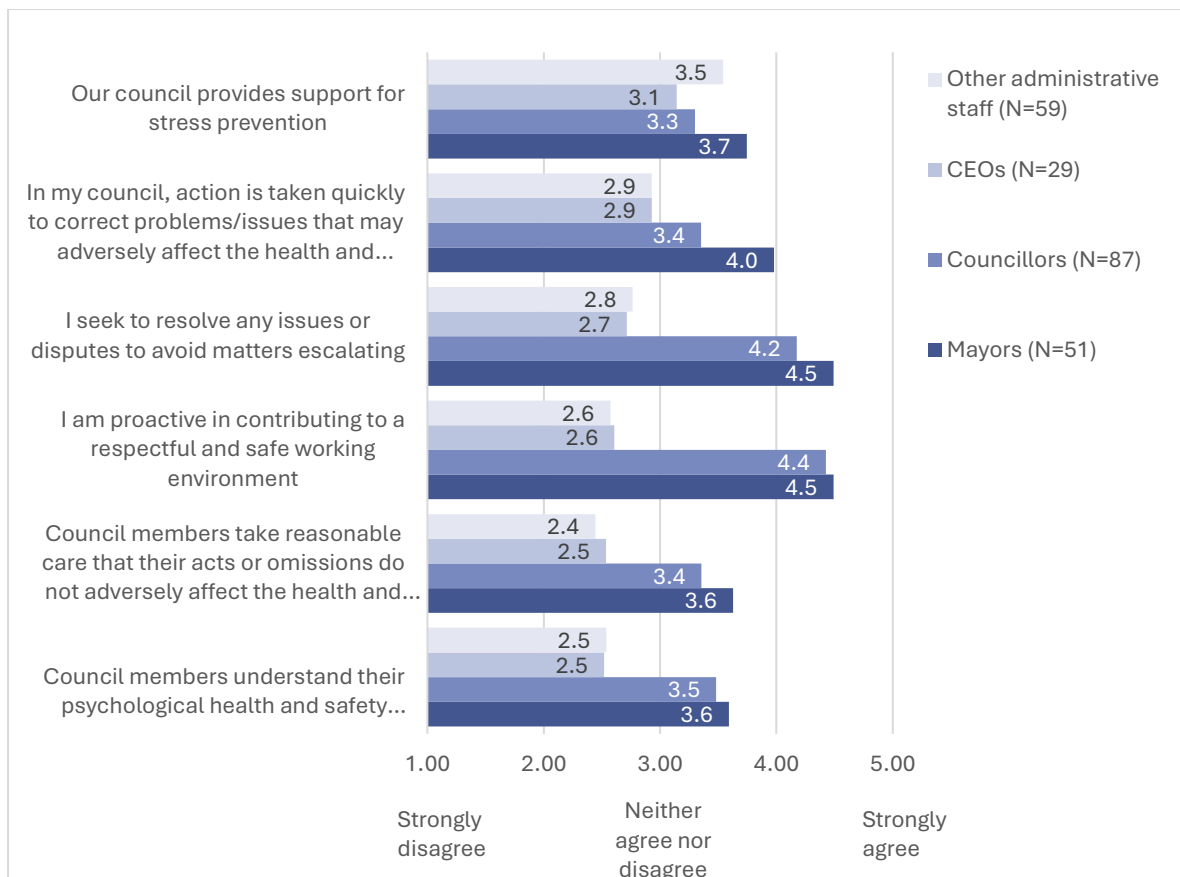
2.7. Health, safety and wellbeing in councils

Survey findings

Six statements were included in the survey to examine behaviours and supports that create a psychologically safe environment within councils. Figure 13 shows a highly variable perception of psychologically safe environment where higher scores indicate a healthier work environment and reduced risk of people experiencing burnout and depression. **Mayors** (on average) consistently rated their council as psychologically safer than other roles across all items.

The most endorsed item by **administration** was *our council provides support for stress prevention* whereas **elected council** were most likely to agree that they are *proactive in contributing to a respectful and safe working environment*. Overall, least agreement was shown for *council members take reasonable care that their acts or omissions do not adversely affect the health and safety of others*. This would suggest more is needed to check understanding of and support tangible application of this principle. For **mayors** and **CEOs**, their lowest ratings were for *council members understand their psychological health and safety duties*. Similarly, further clarification on this for all stakeholders is needed.

Figure 15: Average ratings for council being a supportive, psychologically safe environment, by rater group



Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding 'Unsure'; this is typically less than 5% of respondents. Consequently, the number of respondents included may vary per item.

Interview perspectives – health safety and wellbeing

Interview responses were consistent with survey findings, (where perceptions were mostly rated within the mid-range as 'neither agree nor disagree' and approaching slightly 'agree'). Survey findings indicate **administration staff** were *most agreeable* that *council provides support for stress prevention*, with lowest ratings in general across roles for *council action is taken quickly to correct adverse conditions* and *councillors take reasonable care not to adversely affect others*.

Interviewees across roles noted that in many councils, leaders are creating *safe and trusting environments that are highly protective of health, safety and wellbeing*, and pave the way for effective performance. Specific examples that were frequently identified as *working well* were:

- Workshops and information briefings to discuss and resolve issues before meetings
- Informal social events that provide opportunities to understand colleagues as people, and appreciate their views
- Informal peer support and coaching, particularly peer networks within and between councils was seen as helpful in learning from others, building confidence and providing empathy from shared experiences
- Robust and practically applied formal WHS systems were seen (by **administration staff**) as largely working effectively through risk management processes (incident reporting, risk assessment and security protocols, CEO WHS leadership) applied in practice
- Training workshops and induction were widely identified across roles as supporting confidence, and enabling effective and efficient practice that reduces conflict, and

- Healthy, open, respectful council culture that is values driven was widely viewed as effective in supporting health safety and wellbeing, even when facing internal and external stressors.

Interview respondents were highly engaged related to health, safety and wellbeing. Significantly, they spoke of distinct differences in their experiences and understanding of health, safety and wellbeing standards and the specific protections available to them. **Elected council** (mayors and councillors) had very different perspectives and lower satisfaction compared to council staff (**CEOs and administration**).

Differences arise largely due to structural factors where council staff are employees of council and have clear duties and protections under the *Work Health and Safety Act, 2012*. This legislation establishes clear duties and standards of risk management for work health and safety. However, **elected council** are defined as ‘other persons’ under the WHS Act who are **owed a duty of care by council**, though they shared in interviews they often have a poor understanding of how these arrangements apply in practice and strong views about varying levels of implementation.

In interviews, **elected council** rarely mentioned their health and safety duties under S. 75G of the Local Government Act, 1999 that address member’s own acts or omissions adversely affecting the health and safety of others. Rather than discussing their duties, more frequently elected council discussed S. 75G as a tool commonly weaponised as grounds to substantiate complaints often over trivial issues. At the extreme, relatively infrequent examples were given of escalating cycles of claims expressed as S. 75G complaints. Elected council appeared not to be aware that Local Government Act S.75G provisions apply *in addition to operation of the WHS Act, 2012*, and were more likely to suggest they were not (adequately) protected by the WHS Act.

Several **mayors** reported experiencing isolation, loneliness and high psychological loads, especially when dealing with behavioural issues from councillors or public hostility with inadequate support. *Psychological safety* was described as often compromised through working in chambers they perceived as unsafe due to disruptive behaviours in meetings, the strain of dealing with factions and refusal to comply with procedures. One described it this way:

“As mayor you feel quite isolated when you’re under pressure to fix things without having the knowledge, skills or resources”

In contrast, several **mayors** also spoke of the value of *mentoring and emotional support* from peers and former mayors as a key source of advice to strategise and navigate complex issues.

For a significant but small sample of **elected council**, stories of intimidation and psychological harm from peers were expressed, leading to low psychological safety. The main sources of stress they described were *hostile behaviours* from colleagues, *weaponised complaints* often escalating in reciprocating cycles, *lack of support* to perform the role, and fear of retaliation. Elected council members described some of the behaviours encountered as bullying, gaslighting, exclusion, targeting, and trivialising contributions, all acting to undermine confidence and effectiveness. Two described their experiences:

“The principal member can interpret ‘guidance’ however they like....it can feel like intimidation”

“I was always aware anything I said could be weaponised against me.”

CEOs were universally clear in their commitment to ensuring high standards of health, safety and wellbeing for their staff but shared that they often experienced high levels of stress themselves from managing staff wellbeing, navigating councillor misconduct, and dealing with

political conflict, in and out of the chamber. Maintaining a level of *psychological safety* in council was seen as a constant challenge, where CEOs felt they had little authority to manage elected council behaviours which hindered their ability to protect staff from councillor rudeness and disrespect. CEOs reported occasionally directly experiencing aggression from councillors, who were frustrated by '*political interference*' in their work, and the lack of consequences for councillors with repeated disruptive behaviours. One CEO observed:

"Staff are protected under WHS, but elected council are not covered. When councillor behaviour harms staff I have almost no tools."

Administration overall reported positive experiences of work health and safety, however some described episodes of *strain and fatigue*. Where disruptive behaviours were more common in a council, administration staff reported *higher workloads* due to handling multiple complaints and *supporting meetings* often stalled with episodes of disruptive behaviour. Administration staff were most frustrated by councillors misusing procedures to put pressure on others, and *declining guidance and governance advice*. One shared the following reflection:

"You feel like you are saying no all the time, but they just don't want to listen to how they can do what they want to achieve in the proper way"

In summary: the area of **elected council health safety and wellbeing** was a significant theme emerging from the review, and an area for *priority attention* to ensure more effective and transparent practices through clearer understanding of, and expectations for fulfilling legislative duties.

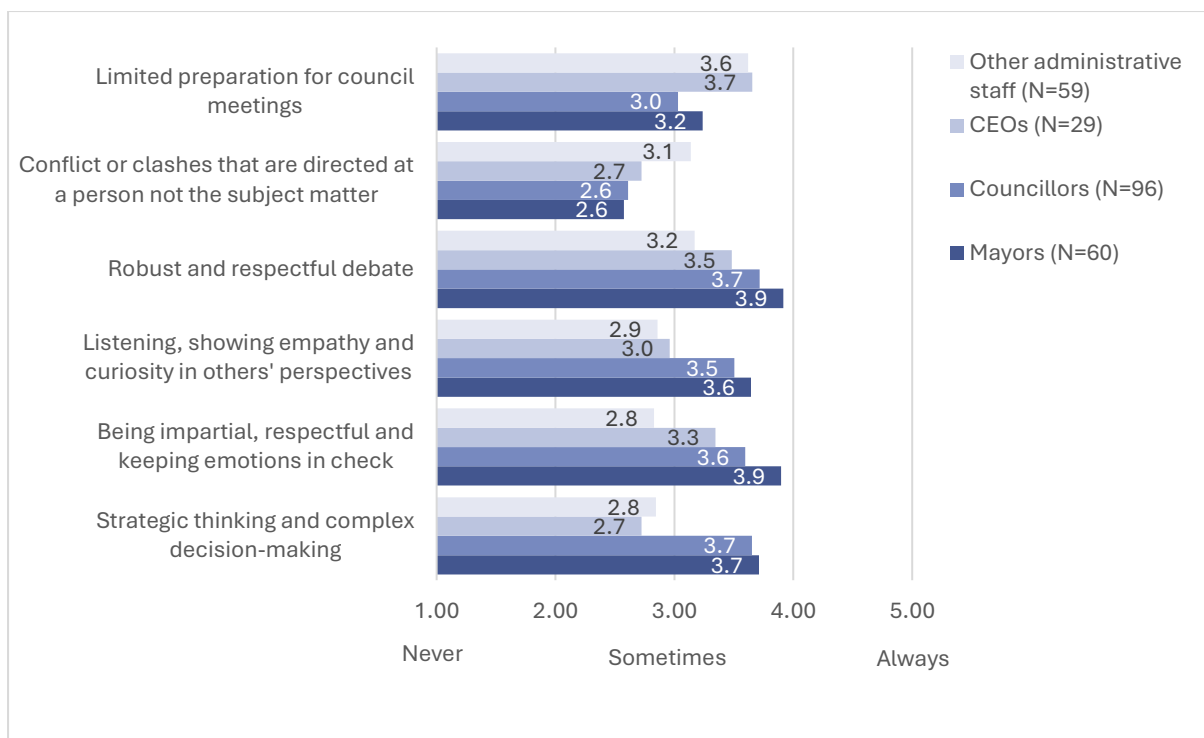
2.8. Behaviour of council members

2.8.1. Experience of council members in the chamber

Survey findings

Overall, *robust and respectful debate* was the most experienced behaviour (see Figure 16), occurring 'sometimes' or 'often' for most respondents – 47% of **mayors** experienced this 'often', 43% of **councillors**, 41% of **CEOs** and 32% of other **administration** staff. This is complemented by *conflict or clashes that are directed at a person not the subject matter* being experienced 'rarely' to 'sometimes' (on average). However, 44% of other **administration** staff indicated this occurred 'often' or 'always' – around twice the rate as other roles.

Figure 16: Frequency (average) of different behaviours experienced amongst council members, by rater group



Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding 'Unsure'; this is typically less than 5% of respondents. Consequently, the number of respondents included may vary per item.

Other divergences in behaviours experienced include:

- Mayors and councillors were most likely to experience *strategic thinking and complex decision-making* 'often' (reported by 48% and 47%, respectively), whereas CEOs were most likely to report experiencing this 'rarely' (45%) and other administration staff 'sometimes' (47%)
- *Listening, showing empathy and curiosity in others' perspectives* was more frequently experienced by mayors (53% reported 'often') and councillors (44%) than CEOs (19%) and other administration staff (17% reported 'often').
- More than half of CEOs (62%) and other administration staff (58%) reported *limited preparation for council meetings* occurs among council members 'often' or 'always' whereas elected council members were most likely to report this as occurring 'sometimes' (43% of mayors and 42% of councillors).

Interview perspectives – positive behaviours

Administration staff reported receiving professional and respectful treatment from mayors and CEOs. They most valued experiences of teamwork where everyone was respectful of roles, and working in councils where cultures were healthy, enabling robust debate where disagreement remained professional.

CEOs recounted experiences of trust-building and transparency through having honest and frank conversations and working to achieve role clarity while maintaining collaboration. In negotiating their relationship with the mayor, one CEO commented this way:

"I said to the mayor, 'you're the spokesperson for council'. We worked out our roles. Our relationship became stronger".

CEOs also highlighted positive examples of respectful behaviour shown by elected council toward council staff, where councillors *sought feedback* on their framing of issues constructively and *worked toward shared outcomes*.

Councillors reported experiencing collegial and respectful interactions with each other, even after heated debates, with one sharing the following recollection:

“We had a big difference of opinion in the chamber, but at the break, we walked out, had coffee and talked about sport”

Councillors also appreciated *support from administration* in assisting them in learning about governance processes and to grow into their roles by developing more nuanced understanding of how to use processes to achieve successful and timely outcomes. One councillor shared the following reflection on working with administration staff:

“I realised we’re there to look at the city as a whole, not just your ward”

All roles shared experiences of politeness and constructive handling of disagreements with colleagues inside and outside the chamber, indicating that despite inevitable differences and tensions, most councils regularly engaged in polite, respectful and collaborative interactions.

2.8.2. Prevalence of unconstructive behaviours

Survey findings

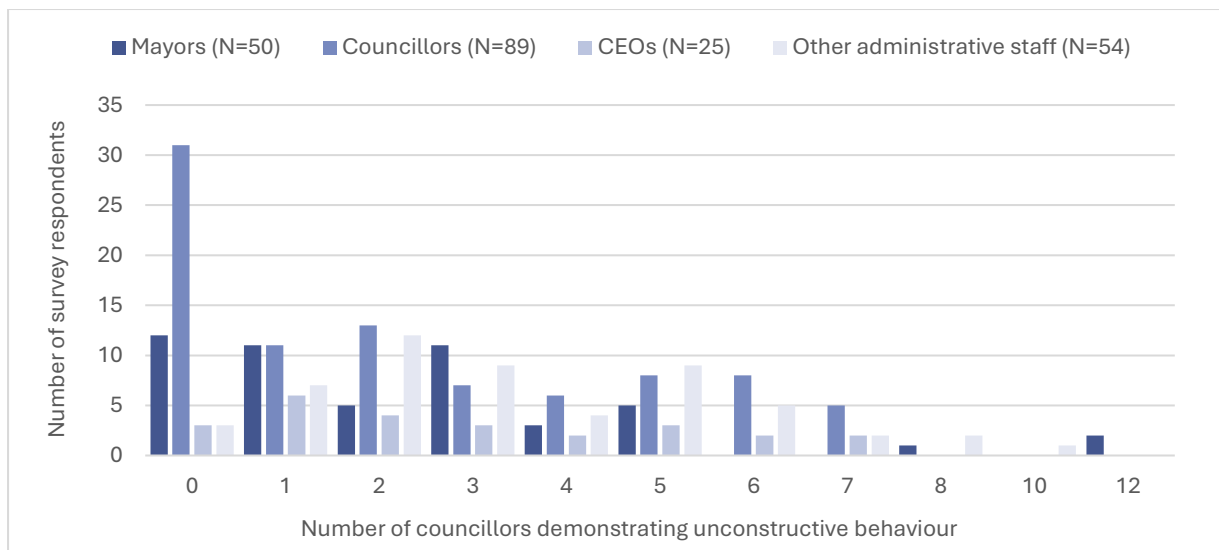
*The average number of councillors who regularly demonstrate unconstructive behaviours in a council is 2.8, although this perception varies according to role. Other **administration** staff reported the greatest number of councillors, on average (3.5; see Table 6) but **mayors** reported the greatest absolute number of councillors engaging in these behaviours (i.e. 12).*

Figure 17 shows the distribution of how many unconstructive councillors each rater role nominated. More than one-third of **councillors** (35%) indicated that no people showed unconstructive behaviours, compared to 24% of mayors, 12% of CEOs and 6% of other administration staff.

Table 6: Summary of ratings for number of councillors regularly demonstrating unconstructive behaviour, by rater group

	Mayors (N=50)	Councillors (N=89)	CEOs (N=29)	Administration staff (N=63)
Average rating	2.5	2.3	2.9	3.5
Minimum rating provided	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Maximum rating provided	12.0	7.0	7.0	10.0

Figure 17: number of councillors who regularly demonstrate unconstructive behaviour in your council, by rater group



No respondents reported 9 or 11 councillors, one other administration staff reported 10 councillors and two mayors reported 12 councillors. One mayor and two other administration staff reported 8 councillors.

Survey respondents were invited to provide context to their ratings on the extent of disruptive behaviours within the elected body. Of the **elected council**, 55% described negative or unconstructive behaviours including bullying, factional behaviours, lack of preparation, disruptive agendas and disrespectful treatment of staff and colleagues

“They bully, lie and push their agenda, whether it is the right decision for the council and community or not”

“Bullying, exclusion, ridicule, name calling, unjust accusations and racism have been part of the behaviour of a small group of councillors”

Twenty-five percent of **elected council** identified mixed perceptions of behaviours, including observations of occasional poor preparation, weak debating skills, or minor interpersonal tensions not causing significant disruption.

“There’s an age-old discourse between two councillors that will never be solved.”

“Some members attempt to dominate proceedings and grandstand for public consumption”

Twenty percent of elected council reported positive and constructive behaviours as demonstrated through respectful debate, professional conduct, and collaborative decision making.

“We all work well together and respect each other.”

“Our chamber from all accounts is very respectful to each other. We have robust debates...all members are respectful during and after the meetings.”

For **elected council** comments:

- A majority (55%) of responses highlight serious unconstructive behaviours: bullying, factional voting blocs, personal attacks, misuse of complaints processes, and disrespect toward staff.

- One quarter (25%) describe mixed or moderate issues: poor preparation, weak debate, or interpersonal friction that is disruptive but not toxic.
- One fifth (20%) report constructive cultures, where respectful debate and collaboration prevail.

The findings suggest that while many councils maintain constructive cultures, *a minority of disruptive councillors can create disproportionate harm*. Addressing factionalism, bullying, and misuse of complaints systems should be the priority for cultural improvement, alongside reinforcing training and role clarity for those who are often under-prepared.

For **administration staff**, 60% of comments reflected negative sentiment, highlighting incidents of bullying, factionalism, disrespect towards staff, leaks of information, dominating debate, poor preparation and political point scoring. Two made the following observations:

“Seven out of the current 11 elected council members regularly demonstrate unconstructive behaviour, however they hold the balance of power, so they get away with it.”

“There is one councillor who is consistently rude, abrasive and unreasonable... I have personally been bullied by them repeatedly.”

Like the councillors, administration staff comments showed neutral sentiment, describing occasional occurrences of poor preparation, disengagement and interpersonal tensions. *Some chambers were described as divided* but not completely dysfunctional.

“About a third of the chamber are unconstructive on a regular basis. This has caused apathy in a large number of the remaining chamber.”

Positive and constructive behaviours were reported in 15% of the examples provided by administration staff and included respectful debate, professional conduct and collaborative decision making.

“Councillors on the whole demonstrate constructive behaviour.”

“The Council I currently work for is exemplary in this space.”

For **administration staff** comments:

- Majority (60%) of accounts highlight serious unconstructive behaviours: bullying, factional voting blocs, undermining staff, leaks, and disruptive agendas.
- One quarter (25%) describe moderate or situational issues: poor preparation, disengagement, factional divides that sap morale.
- A minority (15%) report constructive cultures, where respectful debate and collaboration prevail.

2.8.3. Personal experience of harmful behaviours

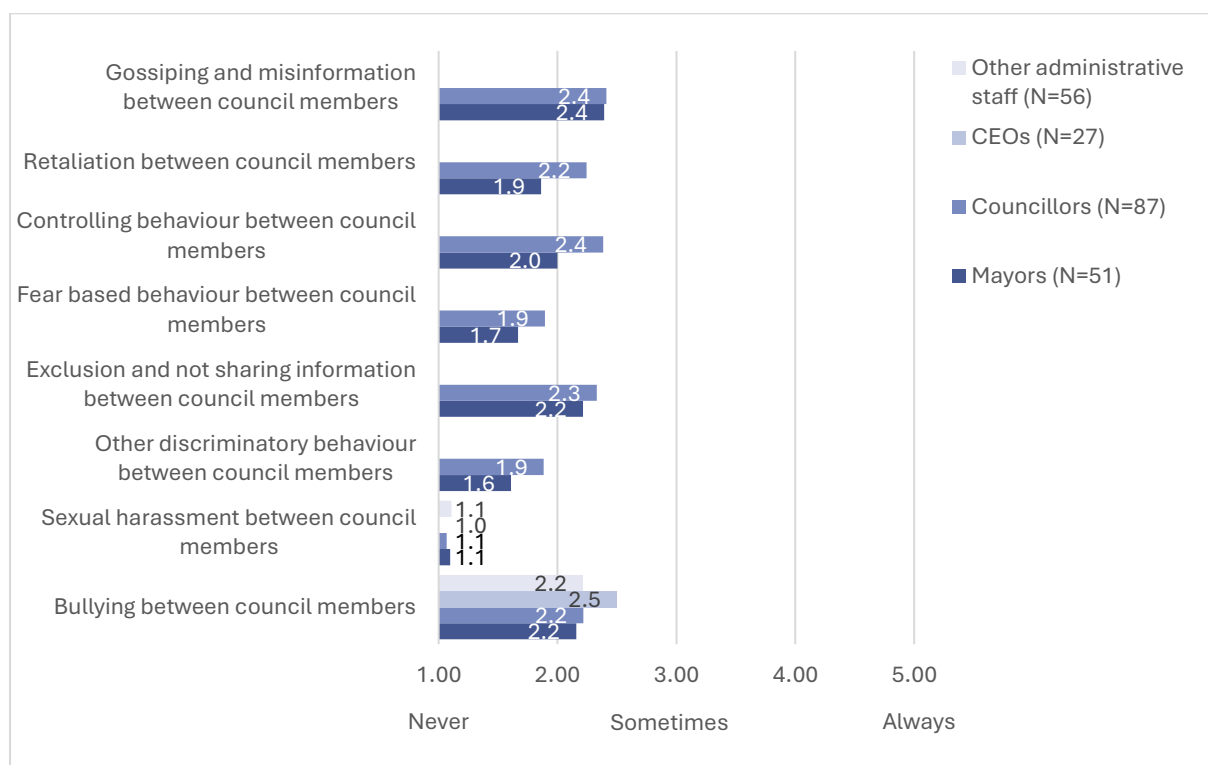
Survey findings

Personal experience of *harmful behaviours from council members* in this term was *relatively rare* (see Figure 18). The Behavioural Standards specifically prohibit sexual harassment and bullying of other council members or staff. Sexual harassment was virtually ‘never’ experienced with 12 people (5%) not rating this as ‘never’. The 8 elected council members and 4 administration staff reporting this came from a range of council regions and sizes and were from several age groups although three-quarters (n=8) were female.

Of the harmful behaviours listed in the [survey](#), **elected council** members were most likely to report experiencing *gossiping and misinformation*. Councillors were particularly more likely than mayors to report experiencing *controlling behaviour* (e.g. intimidation, excessive oversight) and *retaliation* (e.g. weaponising procedures, complaints). Around one-quarter of **councillors** (24%) reported experiencing controlling behaviour ‘often’ or ‘always’ compared to 16% of **mayors** and one in five councillors (20%) reported ‘often’ or ‘always’ experiencing retaliation compared to 10% of mayors.

There appear to be *small pockets where a range of harmful behaviours are perceived to be the norm* rather than the exception. Seven council members (six of whom are **councillors**) or 4% reported ‘always’ experiencing one or more of the harmful behaviours listed. These respondents represented five different councils across three local government regions. Three **administration** staff (including one CEO) or 4% indicated they ‘always’ experienced bullying from council members. These respondents were from at least two different councils representing two different local government regions.

Figure 18: Average ratings for personal experience of harmful behaviours, by rater group



Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding ‘Unsure’; this is typically less than 5% of respondents. Consequently, the number of respondents included may vary per item.

*These items were not asked of administration staff or councillors.

Bullying is a specific form of harmful behaviour defined in the *Behavioural Standards for Council Members* as:

- (a) *repeatedly behaving unreasonably towards another council member or employee AND*
- (b) *the behaviour could reasonably be considered to be distressing, victimising, threatening or humiliating.*

In general (including under the WHS legislation), definitions of bullying behaviour also include the risk it presents to psychological and/or physical health and safety.

Bullying behaviour constitutes a *pattern of repeated behaviour across time* and may consist of a range of behaviours directed at the target(s), including the various harmful behaviours additionally examined in this part of the survey.

Across roles, respondents to the survey reported a concerning frequency of experiencing bullying behaviours from elected council members, with a total of 17.2% rating ‘often’ and ‘always’. A further 22.6% of the sample reported experiencing bullying behaviours ‘sometimes’ (see Table 7).

Councillors were most likely to report experiencing bullying ‘always’ (8%), followed by **mayors** (4%). **CEOs** were most likely to report experiencing bullying ‘often’ (18.5%), followed by **administration** staff (12.5%).

Thirty-nine percent of respondents reported ‘never’ experiencing bullying behaviours in their roles in council.

Table 7: Personal experience of bullying by role (n = 221)

Extent you have personally experienced from council members	Mayors (N=51)		Councillors (N=87)		CEOs		Administrative staff	
					(N=27)		(N=56)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Bullying								
Never	18	35.3	40	46	8	29.6	20	35.7
Rarely	15	29.4	12	13.8	4	14.8	15	26.8
Sometimes	12	23.5	18	20.7	8	29.6	12	21.4
Often	4	7.8	10	11.5	5	18.5	7	12.5
Always	2	3.9	7	8	1	3.7	2	3.6
Unsure	0	0	0	0	1	3.7	0	0

2.8.4. Witnessing harmful behaviours

On average, witnessing harmful behaviours between council members was somewhat more commonly reported than directly experiencing these behaviours (see Figure 19). Consistent with the prevalence of personal experience, least witnessed was sexual harassment (average scores ranging from 1.1 to 1.2) and most witnessed was gossiping and misinformation (average scores ranging from 2.5 to 3.0).

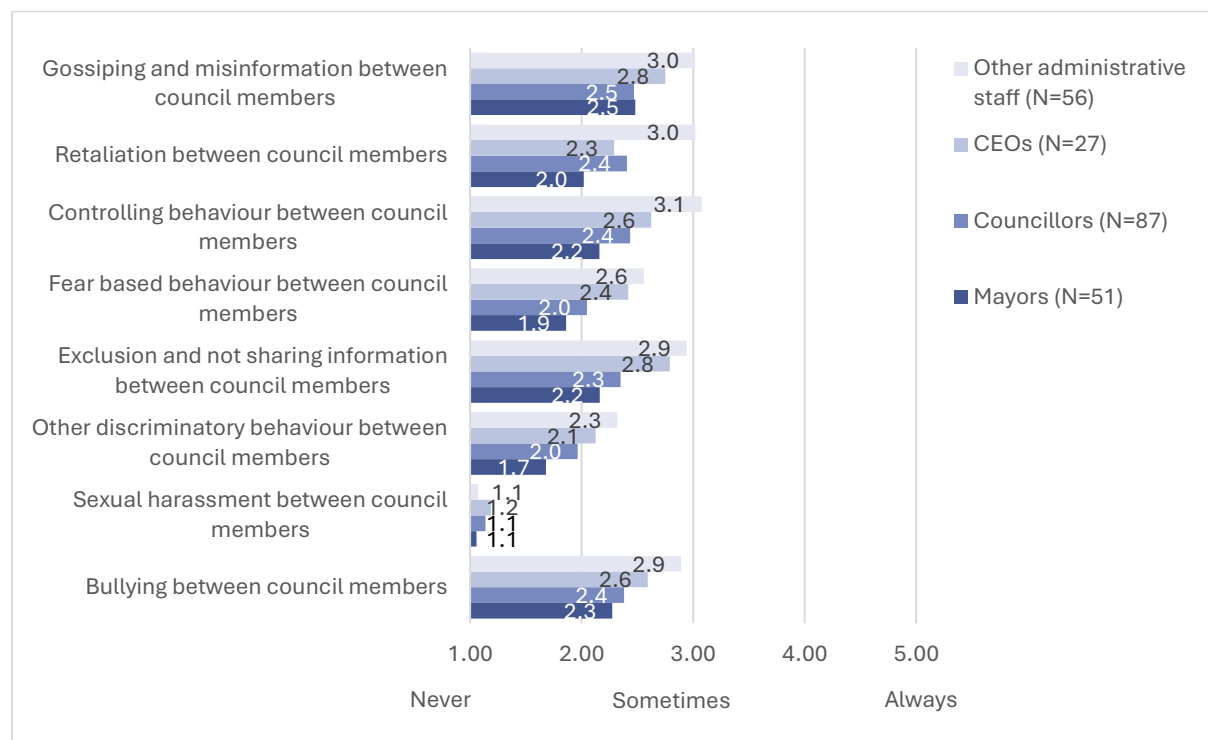
Observing harmful behaviours between council members was highly variable across respondents with **mayors** least likely to report this and other **administration** staff most likely. The most common behaviours ‘often’ or ‘always’ witnessed by administration include:

- *Gossiping and misinformation* – 42% of CEOs and 39% of administration staff reported this
- *Retaliation* – 29% of CEOs and 44% of other administration staff
- *Exclusion and not sharing information* – one-third (33%) of both CEOs and other administrative
- *Controlling behaviour* – 29% of CEOs and 37% of other administration staff.

Note that no free text response option was provided in the survey to elicit descriptive information on examples of or experience of harmful behaviours, as this issue was more

appropriately examined in interview sessions where discussion could be more nuanced and psychological support could be offered as needed.

Figure 19: Average ratings for witnessing harmful behaviours from elected council, by rater group



Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding 'Unsure'; this is typically less than 5% of respondents. Consequently, the number of respondents included may vary per item.

Interview perspectives – harmful behaviours

a. Experience of harmful behaviours

Noting the likelihood of selection bias (where people who have strong views and/or wish to drive change are more highly motivated to participate), around one-fifth (20%) of interview respondents described examples of serious personally directed unconstructive behaviour that had resulted in significant personal harm. Harms described included health, wellbeing, financial and reputational damage. *Most of these respondents were women.* **Elected council** were most affected (including mayors and councillors), however one **administration** staff member also disclosed significant adverse impacts on wellbeing from interactions with councillors and community representatives.

Other examples reported by **elected council** included levels of distress, arising from weaponised complaint processes, that were described as a 'campaign of targeting'. Many felt to varying degrees that the complaint handling processes of the Behaviour Management Framework did not deliver natural justice for them and were unfair. Of these interviewees, several reported the confidentiality provisions prevented disclosure of the circumstances of the complaint when allegations were unfounded, preventing them from clearing their name. A small number of these elected council members described ongoing shame and embarrassment from being unable to explain their actions to colleagues or community members. A small number of

elected council members reported being anxious about encountering the initiator of their mistreatment, or community members who may judge them, when out in public.

Of these interviewees (n=10), several reported having experienced ongoing bullying, consisting of personal attacks and targeting by factional behaviour. Interviewees occasionally described “misuse of power” arising from behaviour of mayors, or longstanding councillors with influential relationships in both the chamber and the community.

b. Dysfunction starts in the chamber and spreads

Several interviewees (men and women) across roles, described “dysfunction” in the chamber when mayors were unable to manage meetings that became disrupted by unconstructive behaviours. The outcomes reported from frequent and/or prolonged exposure were erosion of trust, disengagement and silence. Several **councillors** struggling with poor wellbeing reported being encouraged by council leadership to take leave or attend only every third meeting. The intent was to minimise exposure to the intense environment, but instead they were criticised for non-attendance and “laziness” by other councillors (often those engaged in the mistreatment), exacerbating their distress.

Most interviewees who had experienced *harmful behaviours* (n=10) described them as ‘gendered’ with the intent to target, undermine, discredit and trivialise issues (generally) raised by women councillors. Behaviours were characterised as bullying and harassment, personal agendas, intimidation, obstruction, exclusion, withholding information, ganging up, and weaponising processes. Interview respondents in general recognised the importance of *strong and respectful CEO-mayor relationships* as critical in creating safe, constructive and effective council environments. Where this relationship was weak; targeting, gendered behaviour, and aggression could become normalised because the behaviour was perceived to be condoned.

Three **elected council** interviewees described their experience as “having a target on my back” expressing the relentlessness of experiencing disrespectful behaviour ranging from eyerolling, ignoring and trivialising contributions to exclusion and overt aggression. Other interviewees across roles (men and women) described the use of defamatory comments made to discredit elected council. Several respondents described how codes of conduct were weaponised, like alleging breaches of conflict of interest or confidentiality. One councillor described an email instruction directing other councillors to exclude them from information sharing.

A small but concerning number of **councillors** also described perceived misinterpretations of leadership and guidance, including Section 58 of the Local Government Act being used to impose unreasonable control over, and intrusion into activities, persistent abuse from mayor or CEO, and vulnerability due to legislative requirements to declare extensive personal information in the register of interests. One respondent summarised it this way:

“Those who have been in council a while can become skilled at using legislation and process to control and shutdown newer members with different ideas”

c. Value of and access to supports

Interviewed councillors often described mayors as ‘gatekeepers’ of complaints, a perception perpetuated by confidentiality provisions where complainant anonymity allows weaponising of complaints because the complainant ‘never has to prove their case’ in what one respondent described as ‘sort of a reverse onus of proof’.

This group of **councillors** regularly expressed distrust in the *Employee Assistance Program (EAP)*, a key formal support, citing concerns about confidentiality and effectiveness. Many

noted having to access the service via the CEO, seeing this as a ‘gatekeeping’ role that undermined confidentiality, as expressed below:

“There’s no confidentiality in the EAP – you have to get permission or a code to access it from the CEO”

Many of the women elected council members noted the value of assistance from *the Australian Local Government Women’s Association (ALGWA)* in supporting them to navigate the complexities of serving in local government. Respondents emphasised how ALGWA provided practical and psychological support, including informal peer interactions and coaching from those with shared experiences. Three elected council members pointed to research done by ALGWA documenting high levels of turnover in councils (particularly in the first term) significantly affecting women and identified examples of this in the South Australian context. Beyond the issues core to the initial relationship breakdown, many interviewees (across roles) identified how weaponising processes to limit reasonable challenges and questioning, exacerbated psychological harm through the lack of support for subjects of complaint processes that incurred significant personal costs in legal fees.

Two councillors also noted *inexperienced governance staff* (particularly in country councils) can exacerbate challenges for councillors where views are contested and issues are complex. Members, particularly when newly elected, need the skill and knowledge of staff to assist in navigating complexities and following appropriate processes. Where this is absent, inaccurate or delayed, it adds to councillors’ stress from high workloads and time commitments.

Respondents widely noted the value of making live streaming and recordings of council meetings publicly available in improving behaviour in the chamber and at least provide a record of events to assist in accurately evaluating events surrounding complaints.

d. CEO and administration staff experiences

Surveys and interviews highlight the concerning implications for **administration** staff work health and safety from exposure to unconstructive behaviours by the elected body.

Administration interviews noted staff also fear of retribution from leadership and councillors contributing to WHS issues (low psychological safety, bullying, intimidation and incivility). A few staff also explained they attract unconstructive behaviours from community members, including persistent and sometimes badgering phone calls, freedom from information requests (FOIs) being weaponised to swamp staff in work, and being misrepresented on social media.

CEOs discussed the challenges of having elected council significantly influencing their performance review process. One CEO described the relationship with elected council members on their performance review panel as a ‘delicate balance’ between maintaining independence to enact operational imperatives (e.g. financial sustainability, legislative compliance, asset management, staff management) and translating council decisions into strategic action that achieves community benefit. Leaning too far one way can harm perceptions of ‘doing a good job’ and adversely affect contract extension, particularly where **elected council** often deviate into operational decision making. CEOs described the stress and role conflict they experienced in navigating this complexity of council leadership and believe more skilled and independent community members on such panels would provide greater impartiality.

2.9. Behaviour Standards Framework

The Behaviour Standards Framework under the Local Government Act (an addition in the South Australian 2022 reforms), establishes a mandatory, structured approach to managing councillor conduct, focusing on respectful interaction and accountability. The framework is designed to move beyond basic compliance to foster better governance by separating behaviour from integrity matters (like conflicts of interest).

The framework includes four main components aimed at ensuring high standards of conduct:

- **Behavioural Standards** (mandatory adoption): Set by the Minister, these prescribe the minimum standards of behaviour for all council members, such as acting respectfully, avoiding bullying and harassment, and complying with policies.
- **Behavioural Management Policy** (mandatory adoption): Each council must adopt a policy for managing complaints arising from breaches of the behaviour standards.
- **Behavioural Support Policy** (optional adoption): Councils may adopt additional, specific policies, such as agreed meeting behaviours or social media guidelines, which must be consistent with the mandatory standards.
- **Behavioural Standards Panel (Independent Body)**: A statutory body that investigates and manages serious, repeated, or unresolved complaints escalated from council level.

Consequences of Breaches:

If a member breaches the standards, councils can require apologies, training, or impose sanctions. Repeated or serious breaches can be referred to the Behavioural Standards Panel, which can impose stronger sanctions, including suspension.

2.9.1. Difference between disputes and complaints

The framework distinguishes between interpersonal disagreements (disputes) that are addressed locally, and violations of the code (complaints) which address more serious, repeated or prolonged behaviours. The framework aims to encourage the resolution of disputes at a local level before they escalate into formal complaints requiring investigation.

The difference between disputes and complaints is summarised in Table 8.

Table 8: Differences between disputes and complaints within the Behaviour Standards Framework

Feature	Dispute	Complaint
Definition	A disagreement, difference of opinion, or, often, a "heated" exchange between parties.	A formal allegation that a council member has acted inconsistently with the Behavioural Standards.
Nature	Interpersonal conflict, often, but not always, minor.	A formal breach of the prescribed code of conduct or policy.
Resolution	Ideally handled directly or facilitated by the mayor/member informally.	Managed through formal council policies/procedures.

Escalation	May escalate into a complaint if behaviour becomes unacceptable.	Can be referred to the Behavioural Standards Panel (if repeated/serious).
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2.9.2. Disputes and complaints management

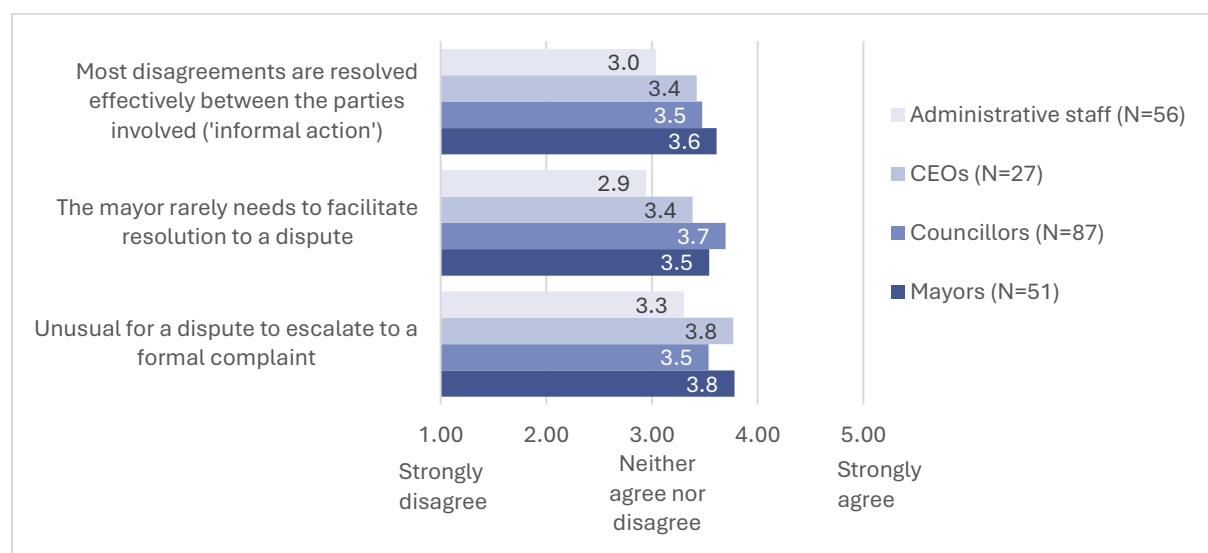
Survey findings

Survey respondents were somewhat ambivalent about the prevalence and management of disputes, tending to ‘neither agree nor disagree’, on average, that *most disagreements are resolved effectively between parties, the mayor rarely needs to facilitate resolution to a dispute, and it is unusual for a dispute to escalate to a formal complaint* (see Figure 20). **Councillors and mayors** were slightly more inclined to agree with these statements than **CEOs and administration** staff although a reasonable number of all respondents disagreed with each of these statements. For example:

- Around 16% of mayors, one-quarter (24%) of councillors and approaching one-third of CEOs (30%) and other administration staff (32%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that *most disagreements are resolved effectively between the parties involved ('informal action')*
- More than one-third (37%) of other administration staff disagreed to some extent that *the mayor rarely needs to facilitate resolution to a dispute*.
- One-quarter of councillors (27%), administration staff (25%), mayors (22%) and CEOs (15%) disagreed to some extent that *it is unusual for a dispute to escalate to a formal complaint*.

Those showing disagreement spanned many council sizes and regions.

Figure 20: Average ratings about elected council behaviour regarding disputes, by rater group



Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding 'Unsure'; this is typically less than 5% of respondents. Consequently, the number of respondents included may vary per item.

Despite some uncertainty regarding how commonly disputes escalate to formal complaints, approximately three quarters of **elected council** indicated they had not lodged a complaint during this term (see Figure 21). Of the 26 respondents who had lodged a complaint, they came from diverse council regions and sizes.

Overall, **elected council** members' satisfaction with the complete complaints process seemed slightly indifferent (see Figure 22). That said,

- Mayors were most likely to report satisfaction with investigation of a complaint (37% indicating satisfied or very satisfied) and least likely to report satisfaction with resolving a complaint (23% rated dissatisfied or very dissatisfied).
- Councillors were most likely to report satisfaction with assessing a complaint (19% rating satisfied or very satisfied) and least likely to report satisfaction with the outcome of the process (21% rating dissatisfied or very dissatisfied).

Figure 21: Elected council member involvement in lodging a complaint during this council term, by rater group

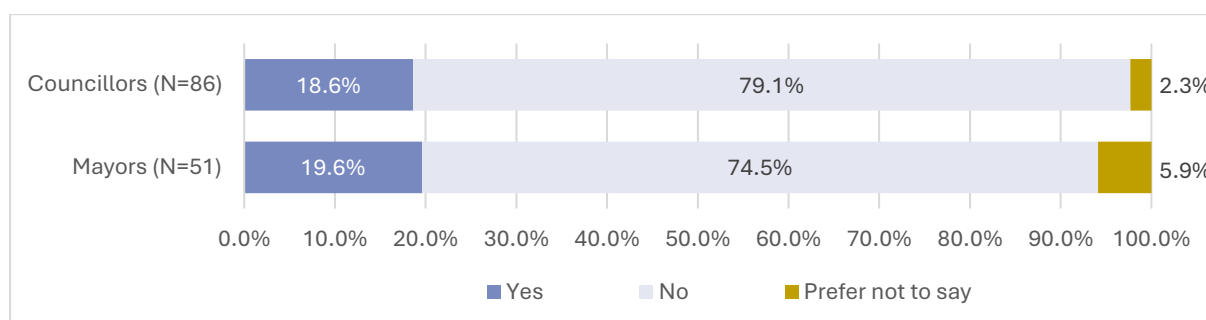
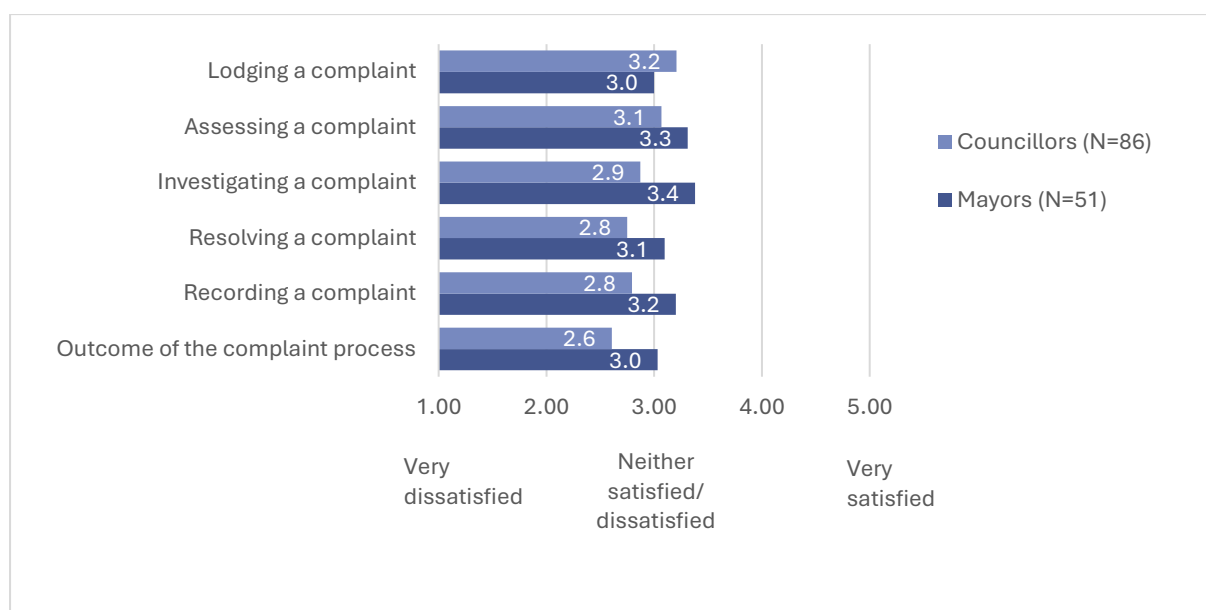


Figure 22: Average satisfaction ratings of the complaints process for those who have been involved, by rater group



Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding 'Not applicable/Don't know'. The proportion of respondents reporting 'Not applicable/Don't know' ranged from 39% (outcome of the process) to 59% (lodging a complaint) for mayors and from 62% (outcome of the process) to 72% (lodging a complaint) for councillors. Thus, the number of respondents included varies per item. These items were not asked of those from administration.

Interview perspectives – disputes and complaints management

The survey findings indicate a reasonable number (between one-third of CEOs and administration staff and one-quarter of elected council members) disagreed that *disagreements are resolved between the parties*, that *it is unusual for disputes to escalate* and *mayors rarely need to facilitate a resolution*. While around 20% of elected council disclosed

making a complaint, one quarter reported some satisfaction with assessing complaints, but they were also least likely to be satisfied with outcomes of the process (around 20% dissatisfied). Interview findings highlighted some of the reasons for low levels of satisfaction with the complaints management process, as follows:

a. Process is only effective when trusted

Mayors' perspectives emphasised that the Behavioural Standards framework only improves culture when it is believed in, trusted, seen as fair and effective, and will make change. They described the following impacts on culture:

- Early, informal intervention supports learning and repairs culture.
- Delayed, formal complaint processes can entrench conflict and polarisation, enabling harm to continue as the process proceeds.
- Inconsistent application of standards undermines confidence and legitimacy (particularly where minor or no consequences occur and behaviours persist).
- Centralised, transparent processes were considered more culturally protective than inconsistent local handling (particularly where **mayors** may be seen as biased).

Mayors offered the following reflections on the effectiveness of the behaviour standards:

"The formal process comes too late – by then the damage is done."

"Apologies without consequences don't change behaviour."

"Culture improves when people actually believe there will be a fair response."

b. Weaponised to cause harm

The behaviour standards process was the theme that elicited the most negative responses from **elected council** members, who raised consistent concerns about weaponised complaints, and poor natural justice, confidentiality and right of reply. Behaviour standards and complaints processes were sometimes described as being used strategically to silence or discredit, rather than constructively resolve issues and promote accountability. Specifically, there were concerns about how confidentiality processes were applied.

Elected council members offered the following observations of the behaviour standards process:

"It's not about correcting behaviour – it's about control"

"I was named in that complaint.... and I had no right of reply to it"

"If someone is going to raise a complaint against another person...the person raising the complaint should also be public"

c. Protection of initiators increases harm

Many **CEOs** expressed frustration with behavioural standards processes and governance structures that do not protect staff, address persistent poor behaviour, resolve issues quickly and apply consequences consistently. A few CEOs were concerned that the current application of the behaviour management system can protect initiators and actually harms the individual subject of the complaint.

CEOs described the following effects:

“If a staff member behaved that way, they would be performance managed... but for elected council members, we’re not prepared to act.”

“The system doesn’t work. The bar is too high to require real consequences... harm is done while the process goes on.”

d. Inefficient, ineffective and costly

Reflecting the perspectives of **elected council and CEOs, administration staff** generally agreed that the behaviour standards do not work to improve behaviour. Panel process and procedures were considered slow, legalistic, under-resourced, and lacking consequences. Repeat offenders often face minimal consequences and are not held to the same standards as council staff, as reflected in the following quotes:

“The behaviour standards are not effective, there’s no consequences for behaving badly”

“If staff members behaved like elected council, they would be gone by now”

2.10. Prevention and management of unconstructive behaviour

Unconstructive behaviours present a costly and persistent problem for local government. Responses require improved systems focused on a ‘prevention first’ mindset that will promote collaborative and respectful cultures. *Structures* designed to *interact* within a *systems framework* are *most effective* in preventing unconstructive behaviours at their *source*, which is the *environment* in which people interact. Effective prevention requires:

- Improved health safety and wellbeing *systems* designed for, and made explicit to elected council, that are grounded in management systems approaches modelled on work health and safety management and legislative principles, aligned to the LGA Act, 1999 (particularly S.75G), and
- Applying human resource management (HRM) strategies to improve the *role design* of elected council by including processes such as performance management, recruitment and retention adapted to the local government context.

The employee assistance program (EAP) is established in local government, providing valuable psychological interventions. However, supports provided at individual level, primarily aimed at coping with difficult experiences, are a necessary part of an integrated approach, but *do not effectively and systematically address causes*.

2.10.1. Employee Assistance Program (EAP) support

Survey findings

Awareness and perceived effectiveness of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) were examined in the survey as a component of support frameworks to assist elected council and staff to successfully perform their roles (full results available in Section 2.6). Findings show:

- **Mayors** were most aware of the EAP, rating their awareness as moderate to high (average score 3.7), compared to **councillors** who rated awareness at moderate levels (average score 3.1)
- Perceived effectiveness was rated as slight to moderate by **councillors** (average score 2.8) compared to **mayors** who rated slightly higher at moderate levels (average score of 3.1)

Summary: These findings suggest that the EAP service requires better promotion and timely, confidential access across all councils. Its effectiveness should be reviewed to ensure better matching to council specific needs.

Interview perspectives – employee assistance support

Respondents across roles perceived wellbeing supports to vary in effectiveness because they were only available for some elected council, less likely in regions; and often not trusted. EAP access varies across councils, where **CEOs and administration** generally have reliable access while **mayors and councillors** may not, or require CEO approval, as noted by several elected council. One stated:

“We don’t have access to EAP without the CEO’s discretion.”

Several councillors stated feeling ambivalent about EAP confidentiality, particularly if requiring indirect access. Given the high emotional toll of unconstructive behaviours in some councils, this gap in access when wellbeing is impacted, is inequitable and likely worsens harm.

In general, support quality appears to vary across councils. Supports exist across roles but are not well integrated or systematic. The most valued supports identified in interviews (consistent with survey findings) were peer networks, strong relationships and capable administration staff. Access to these supports was often informal or relationship dependent, while the least effective supports including complaints processes, and access to EAP or legal advice (related to complaints) are often formal but inconsistent.

2.10.2. Improved systems and structures

Surveys did not explicitly address systems and structures and these were mostly address under the area of ‘supports’. Interview findings indicate both consistencies and inconsistencies compared to survey responses, indicating *mixed satisfaction* with structures and supports to perform the role. This pattern of reporting may reflect *selection bias* (those with strong views are more likely to participate and/or seek to drive change), and nature of interview questions, where respondents were asked about strengths, weaknesses and opportunities in their roles.

Although survey findings indicate **elected council** report *positive levels of role satisfaction*, believe they mostly have *clear understanding of their roles, responsibilities, duties and expectations*; and reasonable *access to resources* to perform their roles; when they had the opportunity to provide reflective comments in an interview, many identified various tensions between the role description and reality of practice.

Interview perspectives highlighted **two key areas** to improve the *effectiveness of council systems and structures*, often seen by interview respondents across roles, as laying the foundation for preventing unconstructive behaviours in council.

First, councillors (predominantly) identified a strong desire for **improved role clarity** and provided specific examples and suggestions for improving the broader *role design* of councillors, (and administration staff where relevant), through differentiating *role boundaries* and *interfaces* between council members and staff. Role design also includes the suitability and availability of resources to support performance, including *capability development* resources (training, education) and opportunities to use and grow capabilities (knowledge, skills and abilities).

The **second** area of focus was the **relevance and application of legislation**, particularly the Local Government Act, 1999; in how *role structures and practices* are established and enacted

within the reality of the role. The design of roles significantly contributes to determining working environment, culture and relationships. Many respondents (across all roles) identified the need for ‘reforms’ to bridge the gap between performance of council activities and contemporary work practices, protections and supports for similar semi-professional roles across industry. Interview perspectives highlighted the following improvements:

a. Improving role design for mayors and councillors

Survey and interview data emphasise the need for strengthened policy and legislative clarity around roles, powers and boundaries. Survey results indicate perceived levels of misalignment and ambiguous separation between governing, presiding and operational functions that increase misunderstanding and create grounds for conflict.

Respondents (across roles) proposed improvements that:

- Specify role distinctions and interfaces
- Mandate comprehensive and timely induction for newly elected councillors and mayors
- Improve understanding and application of governance processes, using scenario-based training and education
- Create transparent rules for how information is accessed and shared.

These improvements were viewed as ways to minimise informal power imbalances, increase capacity for new councillors to perform effectively, and improve the quality of strategic decision-making.

Looking upstream, many respondents noted that improvements must also address the *recruitment and retention challenge* faced by councils. Legislative or policy changes that recognise the complexity of the role, through *improved allowance frameworks*, stronger behaviour management processes, and clearer expectations of conduct in community relations would assist in attracting capable candidates and reduce attrition. Several expressed that without better role design, the system will continue to draw from a narrower pool of people.

Respondents also identified significant gaps in *wellbeing, safety and support structures*, particularly for **councillors and mayors**. Several recommended legislating:

- *Consistent access* to independent wellbeing support, debriefing services and conflict-management assistance, especially during prolonged complaint processes.
- Policy improvements that ensure support is independent of internal discretion or relationships to reduce perceived conflicts of interest and protect confidentiality.

Strengthening structural supports to perform the role well was viewed as essential for a healthy governance ecosystem.

b. Suggestions for legislative, policy and structural improvements

Three areas of policy and structural improvements were proposed by interview respondents.

First, there is a strong call for review of ***behaviour and conduct frameworks***. While existing standards are considered essential, they were widely described as “working only for reasonable people”. Most respondents proposed improvements that:

- Introduce faster, tiered consequences and simplified pathways for low-level behavioural issues (early intervention models, with informal and formal elements)
- Provide stronger provisions to address repeat behavioural incidents, including clearer authority for mayors to manage behaviour early, as well as independent mechanisms that reduce the perception of political influence within complaint handling, and

- Bridge the gap between public expectations and the limited effectiveness of current practices.

The aim of these improvements is to shift from a model that is reported as ‘easily weaponised’ to one that resolves issues early, proportionately, and with procedural clarity and consistency.

Aligned to behaviour management, respondents also identified the need for **meeting procedure review**, noting that procedural rules intended as ‘guardrails’ to ensure orderly, democratic debate, often become mechanisms for tactical advantage. Reform ideas include:

- *Modernising meeting structures* to limit procedural deviations,
- Improving the clarity of mayoral authority and powers, and
- Introducing provisions to design for and support fair debate.

Second, many respondents identified significant gaps in **health, safety and wellbeing management**, with supports for wellbeing identified as an area requiring most urgent improvement.

Many **councillors** expressed the view that their protections for health, safety and wellbeing were inadequate, due to their status as ‘others’ under work health and safety legislation, and no specific provisions beyond S. 75G in the Local Government Act, 1999. The status of elected members as ‘other persons’ in terms of WHS is inadequate and ineffective in managing risk. No elected council mentioned their duties for health, safety and wellbeing, under S. 75G, only in relation to behaviour management. This finding suggests that the WHS requirements are not sufficiently strong, transparent and ‘operationalised’ for elected council. Three councillors noted the inconsistency of being deemed as ‘employed’ for the purposes of taxation.

Formalised health, safety and wellbeing structures must be extended to clearly apply to elected council members. Systems, policies and processes should be *modelled on legislative principles and duties from work health and safety management systems* and legislation (including specific psychosocial hazards regulations) to explicitly enact requirements of S.75G and be adapted to address the roles and responsibilities of elected council in the context of S.75G of the Local Government Act, 1999. The classification of elected members as ‘other persons’ under the Work Health and Safety Act, 2012 should also be reviewed.

Finally, respondents pointed to greater efforts to manage the *community interface*, advocating for a modern transparency framework that supports public understanding and trust without stifling early-stage exploration of ideas. This could include state-level policy on briefing openness, public education about the roles and limits of councils, and strengthened requirements for accurate information dissemination. *Improving transparency and civic literacy of council functions* was viewed as essential to counter misinformation, inaccurately apportioned blame, and support more constructive council–community relationships.

2.11. Future intentions

Given local government elections will be held in November 2026, the survey included a question examining intentions of elected council to nominate for another term. As this question does not directly relate to leadership and behaviours in council, and is not relevant to administration staff, the interview process did not include questions exploring future intentions.

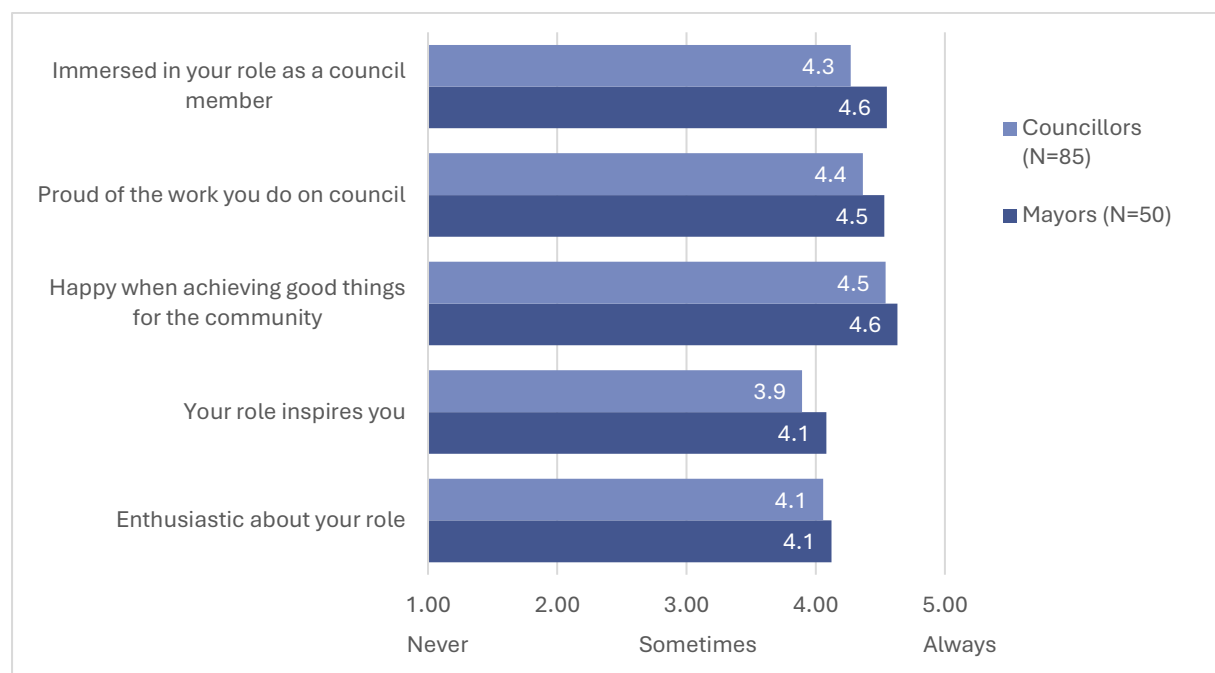
2.11.1. Elected council members

At the time of survey completion, elected council often reported having **feelings of engagement** in their roles (see Figure 23). Consistent with motivators to stand for council,

common sources of positivity and fulfillment were *feeling happy when achieving good things for the community* and *feeling proud of the work you do on council*. Only one councillor (male, over 50 years of age who has served in more than one term) reported ‘rarely’ feeling this way for these items. All remaining respondents reported feeling this way ‘sometimes’ or more regularly for these feelings.

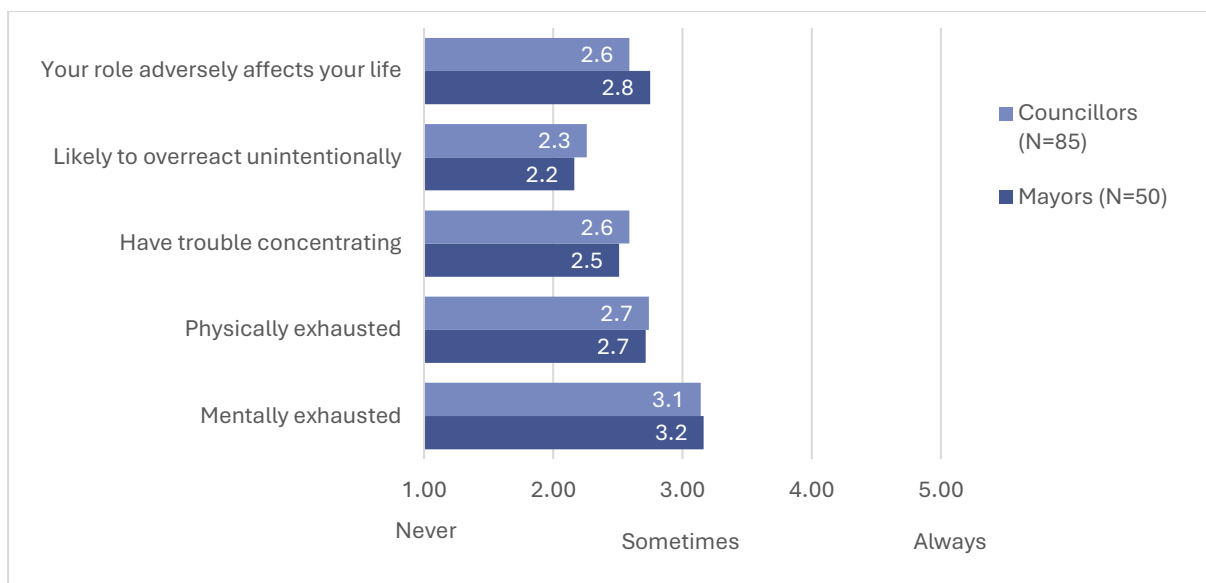
Additionally, on average, elected council reported generally low rates of **burnout symptoms** with most reporting ‘rarely’ to ‘sometimes’ experiencing these (see Figure 24). *Feeling mentally exhausted* was the most commonly reported symptom on average with 10% of mayors and 7% of councillors reporting ‘always’ experiencing this. The five mayors indicating this represented four local government regions with small and medium-sized populations and similarly, the six councillors indicating this represented four local government regions with small, medium and large-sized populations. Three of the four council regions were represented in both.

Figure 23: Average ratings for feelings of engagement, by rater group



Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding ‘Unsure’; this is typically less than 5% of respondents. Consequently, the number of respondents included may vary per item. These items were not asked of administration.

Figure 24: Average ratings for symptoms of burnout, by rater group



Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding 'Unsure'; this is typically less than 5% of respondents. Consequently, the number of respondents included may vary per item. These items were not asked of administration.

Next most commonly reported was *their role adversely affecting their life*, 'always' experienced by 10% of **mayors** and 9% of **councillors**. Four of the five mayors and four of the eight councillors reporting in this way also reported 'always' feeling mentally exhausted. The average number of hours per week spent on council activities for those 'always' experiencing their role adversely impacts their life ranged from 30 to 50 hours for mayors and 5 to 20 hours for councillors. Males and females across multiple age groups were represented in the five mayors whereas the eight councillors were all females aged 50 years and older.

Five **councillors** reported 'always' experiencing more than one of the burnout symptoms listed, with one **mayor** 'always' experiencing all five burnout symptoms. Although this number of individuals only represents a small proportion of respondents, it is essential for their wellbeing and effectiveness as council members that these symptoms are followed up and monitored regularly. These individuals are vulnerable and likely to benefit from additional support to promote resilience, health and safety.

Further analysis shows that **elected council** members reporting their role 'always' adversely affects their life (n=13) also tended to personally experience a range of harmful behaviours (see Table 9). These results support that controlling behaviour (intimidation and excessive oversight), bullying, and retaliation (weaponising procedures, complaints process or personalising debate and issues) in particular have significant and lasting impacts for targets.

Table 9: Number (%) of elected council members whose role is always adversely affecting their life and their personal experience of harmful behaviour by council members

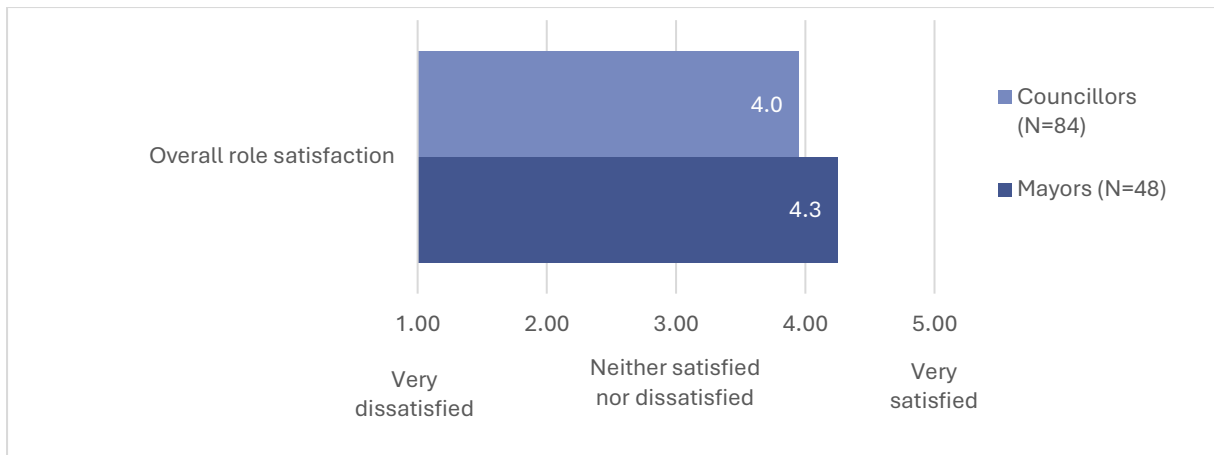
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Bullying	3 (23)	1 (8)	2 (15)	1 (8)	6 (46)*
Sexual harassment	12 (92)	0 (0)	1 (8)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Other discriminatory behaviour	4 (31)	2 (15)	2 (15)	2 (15)	3 (23)
Exclusion and not sharing information	1 (7)	2 (15)	3 (23)	3 (23)	4 (31)
Fear-based behaviour	2 (15)	0 (0)	4 (31)	5 (38)	2 (15)
Controlling behaviour	2 (15)	1 (8)	1 (8)	1 (8)	8 (61)*
Retaliation	3 (23)	1 (8)	2 (15)	2 (15)	5 (38)*
Gossiping and misinformation	2 (15)	0 (0)	3 (23)	4 (31)	4 (31)

**For reference, from the total 138 elected council members who reported on personal experience of harmful behaviours (also see Section x), a total of 9 elected council members reported 'always' experiencing bullying, 11 'always' experiencing controlling behaviour and 8 'always' experiencing retaliation. Thus, this cohort of 13 individuals represents 67% of those always experience bullying, 73% of those always experiencing controlling behaviour and 62% of those always experiencing retaliation.*

Only two of the 13 negatively impacted elected council members intend to run again in the 2026 council election and despite providing a range of overall role satisfaction ratings, none of the 13 agreed they would recommend their role to others. This can adversely impact the reputation of council representatives generally as well as the pipeline of elected council going forward.

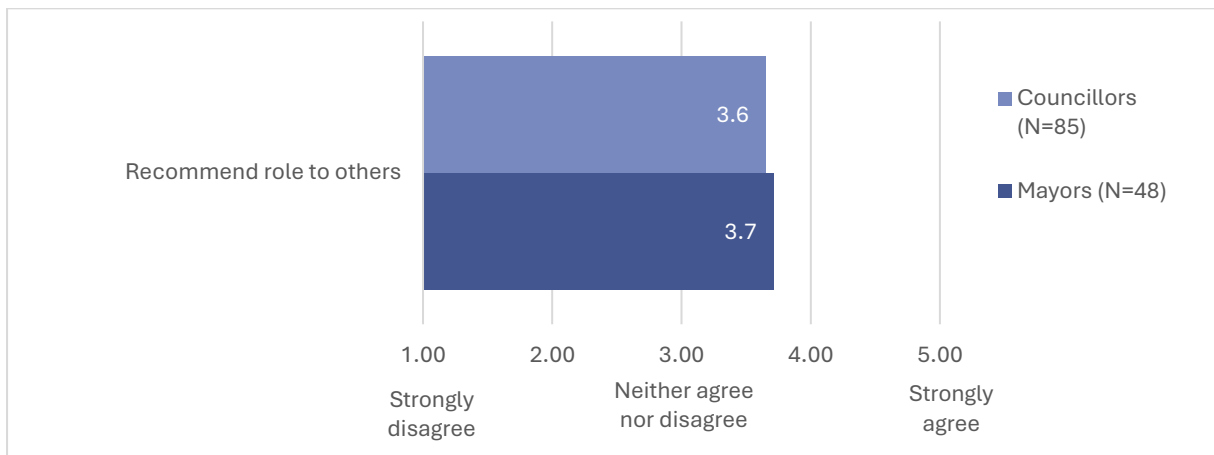
For all the elected council responding to the survey, the majority were **satisfied with their role** (see Figure 25). In fact, approaching half were 'very satisfied' with their role (42% of mayors and 47% of councillors). Those reporting being 'dissatisfied' or 'very dissatisfied' (n=16) represented both genders, multiple age groups, five different local government regions and all population sizes. There was slightly less positivity, on average, with respect to whether elected council members would **recommend their role to others** (see Figure 26), influenced by 21% of councillors and 28% of mayors 'neither agreeing nor disagreeing'. Twenty elected council members disagreed to some extent that they would recommend their role to others. As above, these respondents represented a range of council and personal demographics.

Figure 25: Extent of satisfaction elected council members have with their role, by rater group



Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding 'Prefer not to say'; this is typically less than 5% of respondents. This item was not asked of administration.

Figure 26: Extent elected council members would recommend their role to others, by rater group

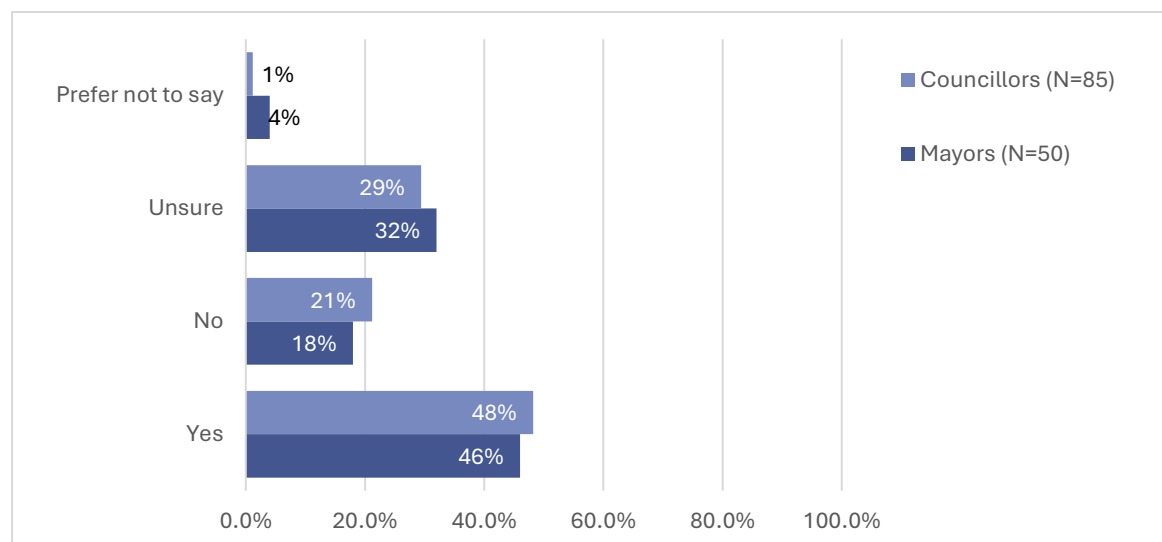


Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding 'Prefer not to say'; this is typically less than 5% of respondents. This item was not asked of administration.

In terms of likeliness for elected council members to **run in the 2026 election**, approaching half of respondents indicated they would (see

Figure 27) although around one-third were unsure. Similar rates of councillors and mayors responded to all rating options.

Figure 27: Elected council member intentions to run in the 2026 election



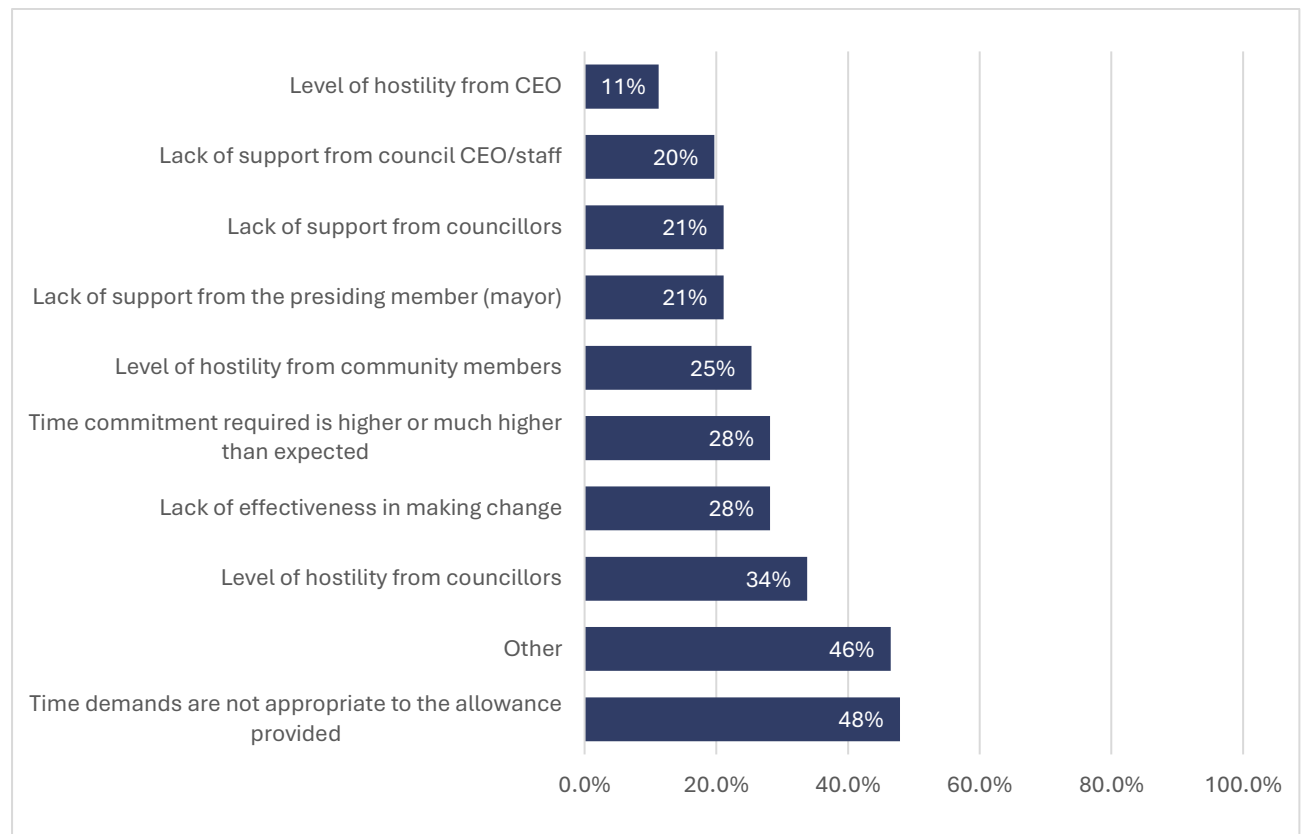
Respondents who did *not* indicate they would definitely run for election in 2026 (i.e. those not responding ‘yes’; n=71) were asked to indicate the factors driving that decision. Collectively, elected council members unlikely to run in the 2026 election were most likely to indicate this was due to *time demands are not appropriate to the allowance provided* (48% reported in this way, see Figure 28). Potentially discontinuing mayors were almost twice as likely to report this (67% of 27) compared to councillors (36% of 44). *Other* reasons (46%) and *level of hostility from councillors* (34%) were other common reasons not to run again. *Other* reasons provided included:

- Age
- Carer responsibilities
- Work-life balance conflict
- Competing interests
- Lack of interest
- Completed several terms and wanting to give others the opportunity to have a voice
- Hostility of the mayor
- Toxic work environment
 - One councillor shared:

“The fact that a small minority of elected council can relentlessly make such a toxic environment and facilitate online abuse has made my third term of council my last. The satisfaction in making good decisions for the community has been so greatly outweighed by the emotional exhaustion of these people which is very disappointing”
- Lack of legal protections (no parliamentary privilege in the chamber)
- Takes too long for changes to take effect

- Changes in roles and responsibilities/how spend time, for example a mayor stated:
 - *“The role has changed since I have been in. I don’t like how much time I have to spend on talking to EMs about behaviour, I don’t like having to mediate things, I am sick of being used by the media for content and have all but stopped my (what was extensive) social media. I did all of my own socials and it was too much to monitor and too depressing”.*

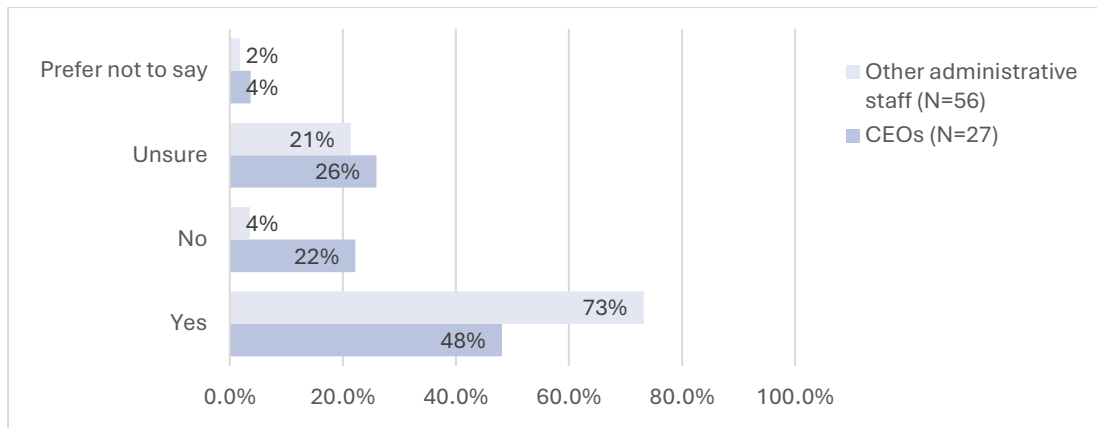
Figure 28: Reasons why elected council members (n=71) did not indicate ‘yes’ to running in the 2026 election



2.11.2. Administration

In terms of the likelihood of administration staff **remaining working for their council in next 12 months**, around half of CEOs (48%) and three-quarters of other administration staff (73%) indicated they would stay, although about one-quarter were unsure (see Figure 29). CEOs were much more likely to indicate their turnover.

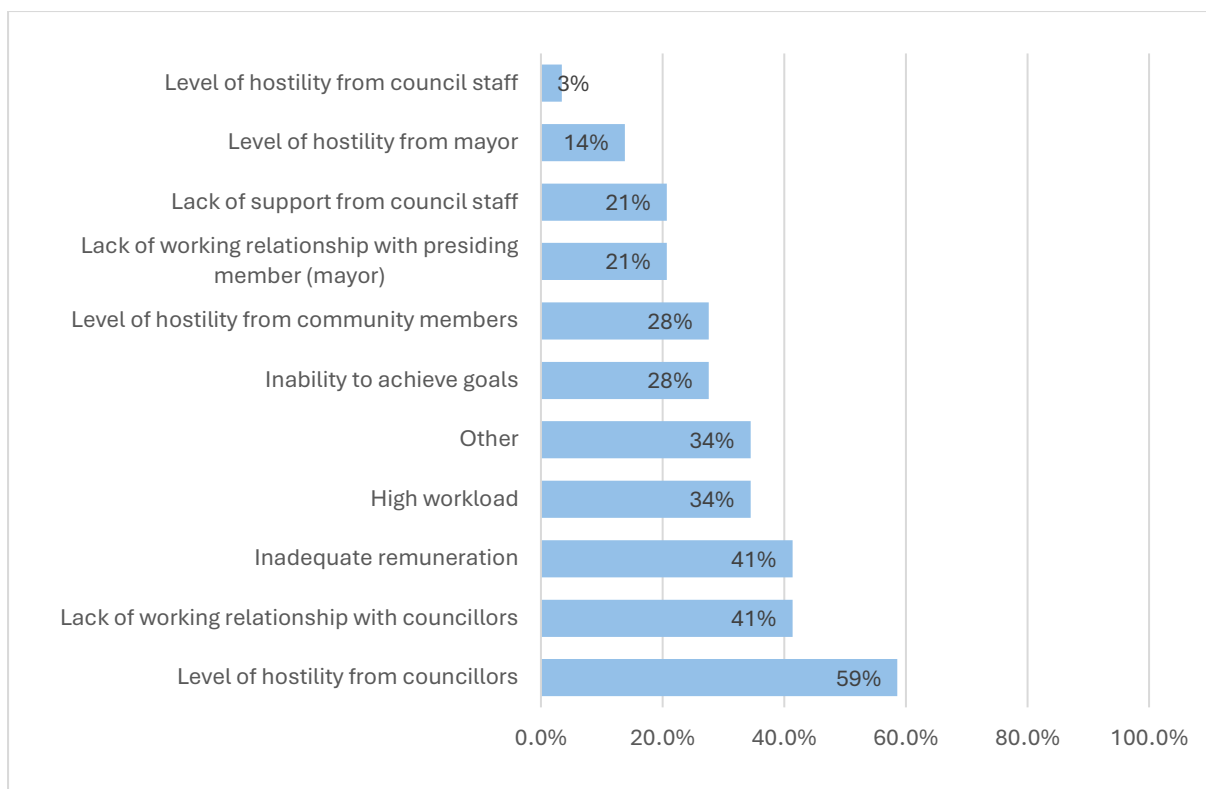
Figure 29: Administration intentions to remain working for their council for the next 12 months



The prevalence of reasons why administration staff would leave was similar between the two rater groups; level of hostility from councillors (59%), lack of working relationship with councillors (41%) and inadequate remuneration (41%) were the most common drivers (see Figure 30). In the *other* category, the reasons provided included:

- Social loafing/bare minimum effort from colleague(s)
- Lack of systems in place
- Lack of strategic direction from Executive Manager
- Lack of strong and decisive action for poor behaviour at various levels. One CEO felt there was a
 - *“Lack of accountability generally applied to councillors and lack of tools in the toolbox for the mayor and the rest of the councillors to address behaviour earlier. These people should not be allowed to represent community especially when they failed the test previously”.*
- Retirement
- Not preferred work area/team/discipline

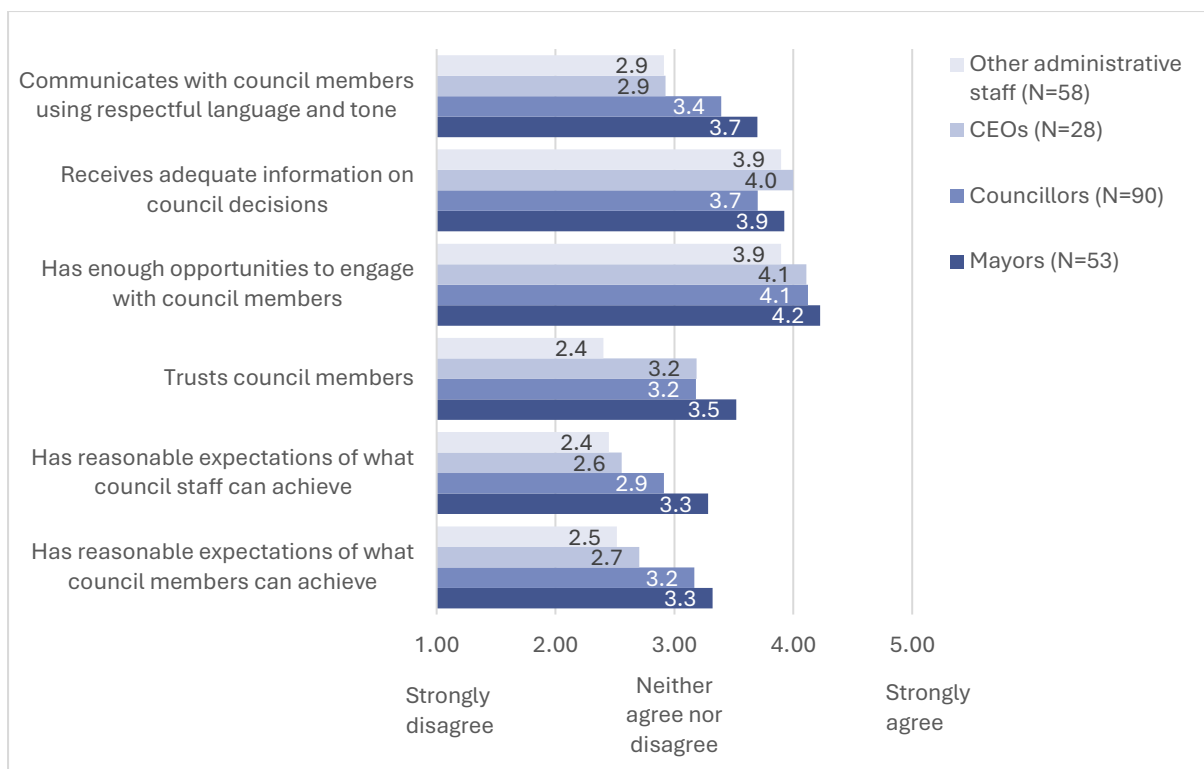
Figure 30: Reasons why administration staff (n=29) did not indicate 'yes' to remaining at their council for the next 12 months



In surveys and interviews, respondents across all roles emphasised their strong value of, and satisfaction derived from community interaction, often noting this as the key motivation for serving in or on council. Yet, engaging with the community can also present challenges.

Figure 31 shows there was general consensus that the community the council services has *enough opportunities to engage with council members and receives adequate information on council decisions*. In contrast, ratings were lowest for community *having reasonable expectations of what council staff and council members can achieve*.

Figure 31: Average ratings of community beliefs and expectations, by rater group



Calculation of average ratings excludes those responding 'Unsure'; this is typically less than 5% of respondents. Consequently, the number of respondents included may vary per item.

2.12. Concerns regarding community interactions:

Survey findings

One hundred and thirty (**elected council**) survey respondents provided a range of comments describing concerns with community interaction. At least 10% of those who chose to provide comments indicated no concerns. The most common issues were:

- Misinformation and vitriolic comments on social media
- Unreasonable expectations of council role and authority, and
- Aggression, safety and wellbeing.

a. Misinformation and vitriolic comments on social media

Despite information being available and presented in public domains (although some admitting this can be hard to find or needing to know where to look), *apathy and lack of engagement* from some community members results in them relying on *social media posts* (especially Facebook) as a primary source of information. Many councillors believe social media permits too many unsubstantiated comments, including some where the language used can be quite *untrue, unfair or defamatory*. This can result in an ill-informed community and **elected council** who are less willing to be publicly available. Elected council members often felt they had little legal protection and ability to redress criticism on social media, resulting in some members no longer engaging in any community social media and having all their emails screened prior to receipt.

In contrast, other elected council members believe that there is *limited information from council administration* about activities and that social media and local newspapers could be better utilised to improve community awareness. Further, some councillors stated that council responses to telephone or email requests can be slow or insufficient due to understaffing,

suggesting this as a reason some community members may find social media appealing. One **councillor** explained:

“Quite a few residents post issues on social media. When I ask them to contact me via email to address their issue, they become aggressive as to why I can’t use their social media as a report”.

However, some respondents observed that councillors can also create unproductive, divisive dialogues when they share their views with social media and newspapers. Community members are often interacting with council because there is an issue and they are frustrated, so contact is ‘negative in tone for the most part’.

Several respondents were disappointed how media reporting of unconstructive behaviours in councils are exaggerated and misrepresented in the media, as one noted:

“There is a trend in the media and community to lump all councils together when some experience bad behaviour. It diminishes respect for council in the community”

b. Unreasonable expectations of council role and authority

Many comments related to unreasonable requests (e.g. cutting down street or private trees) that cannot be done for legal reasons or are not within council authority. Regardless of explanations, community members often become irritated or upset. Two respondents commented this way:

“The community often misunderstands the role and powers of councils, especially related to planning and development policy where the traditional role of councils has been largely usurped by the State Government”.

“It is often difficult to explain to residents the differing responsibilities between the three tiers of Government. If anything at all goes wrong, it is always local government that is blamed”.

“The wider community, however, seem to blame council for literally everything. It is disheartening, no matter how hard both councillors and staff try to change the rhetoric”.

CEOs also described their stress levels as being exacerbated by *unmanageable expectations* and making *high stakes decisions*, often in the face of community pressure.

c. Aggression, safety and wellbeing

Many **elected council** members noted that the public can “dehumanise” councillors and staff, and councillors and mayors often commented on having little support to deal with abuse and disrespect (especially in regional councils). One respondent noted that large gatherings of supporters with strong views can be very challenging to deal with, and require skilful engagement, reflecting:

“When an issue has a high level of emotion involved and large groups of supporters, it can be harder for both sides to listen and understand opposing views”

Others noted that community backlash can arise where **councillors** become part of the problem by seeking out and representing only a narrow view within their community and failing to share data and information provided in decision-making that makes the process transparent.

Other significant issues included:

- Small vocal minorities, mostly including former councillors and unsuccessful candidates who abuse council members and make repeated vexatious complaints to administration, the Ombudsman and ICAC. This affected a very small number of councils, but with significant impact. **Mayors and CEOs** felt unable to act to prevent it

- Lack of communication and support from State Government to verify situations, which hinder local government in updating or clarifying issues for the community
- Community members bring *operational matters* to councillors, despite them needing to act at a *strategic* level. Such role confusion can create conflict with administration staff
- **Elected council** receive *insufficient allowances* to enable, facilitate, or encourage them to be available to the community unless specifically contacted.

Many respondents also noted the following opportunities to *improve community expectations* and awareness of council roles and functions:

- Issue a monthly written report from the mayor
- Prepare a video summary message from the mayor following each council meeting
- Provide statewide education and awareness campaign to more clearly explain role of elected council and councils more generally, to the public. This initiative would assist in improving civic engagement and attraction of new councillors to serve on council.

Interview perspectives – community interactions

Interview perspectives were largely consistent with survey responses and free text commentary. Community behaviour, ranging from misunderstanding of council responsibilities to misinformation, and aggressive or abusive conduct, was consistently described across roles as a major *external pressure* shaping council performance, **elected council** wellbeing, and decision-making dynamics. Although the nature of the impact varied across roles, respondents agreed that community behaviour can heavily influence *workload, trust, culture, behavioural escalations*, and *psychological safety*, both inside and outside the chamber.

Summarised by role, the key themes are presented below:

d. Mayors as public face of council

Mayors described themselves as the *public face* of the council, and often the primary target for community behaviour that becomes hostile, misinformed, or personalised. This affects both their *capacity to lead* and the *functioning of the chamber*, because external tension spills into internal dynamics. Common issues included:

- Increased scrutiny and online abuse make it difficult to lead constructively.
- *Misinformation* increases community frustration and pressure on council decisions.
- *Community misunderstanding* of council versus state government responsibilities causes misplaced blame.
- *Positive community engagement* can sustain morale and legitimacy, when trust is maintained.
- External complaints or campaigns can intensify behavioural issues in the chamber.

One **mayor** noted how strong misinformation cycles can escalate quickly:

“The behaviour of the public at times is absolutely terrible... the mistrust of governments is becoming worse.”

Others observed that transparency can help counter public distrust:

“I can just say, go watch the briefing and you’ll see how we made these decisions.”

e. Elected council see community engagement has dual impacts

Elected council often experience direct and personal interactions with the community, often positive, but also often draining, confrontational or unsafe. Public misconceptions about

council powers can create a constant cycle of responding, correcting or defending. Their key issues were:

- *Direct exposure*: councillors frequently deal personally with community members
- *Unrealistic community expectations* often can lead to frustration when councillors cannot solve state-level problems.
- *Public hostility*, including intimidation and online harassment can affect councillors' sense of safety.
- *Fear of community backlash* can reduce willingness to challenge perceptions.

Community hostility can have long-term personal impacts, with one describing:

"I don't feel I can go out in my community freely now... the experience was so confronting."

Misinformation often drives community irritation, with one councillor (reflecting the views of many other respondents), stating:

"They often complain about things that are state matters... but we get the blame."

f. CEOs see community behaviour as an operational and reputational risk

CEOs emphasised the *operational consequences* of hostile or misinformed community behaviour. This included increased staff workload, reputational management, safety concerns, and greater political pressure on council. CEOs identified the following key issues:

- *Significant resources* go into managing community complaints, misunderstandings, and escalations.
- *Strain on the CEO - mayor relationship* when community issues become politicised.
- *Risk escalation* (safety, WHS, legal exposure) when community disquiet intensifies.
- *Staff impact*: community aggression directed at front-facing staff increases burnout.

CEO respondents summarised these issues in the following observations:

"When things blow up in the community, it puts the entire council under pressure."

"Some of the public are unreasonable... you can argue with facts but it won't change their view."

g. Administration staff see community behaviour increasing workload and psychological strain

Administration staff often act as the interface between community expectations and council processes, with difficult community behaviour influencing politics and administration. This often results in increased complaints handling, challenging interactions, and pressure to respond to misinformation. Administration staff raised the following examples:

- *Increasing workload* from community complaints and requests.
- *Abusive or aggressive community behaviour* takes effort to de-escalate
- *Misinformation-driven enquiries* that require time-consuming clarification.
- *Feeling caught between elected council and the public*, managing expectations from both sides.
- *Community pressure frequently spills into chamber dynamics*, influencing councillor behaviour and adding to administrative work.

Administration staff described the challenges as follows:

"We get grief from the community through email or in person... it all comes through us."

"People complain based on misinformation a lot, and it feeds bad behaviour in council."

Across all roles, community behaviour adversely affects:

Decision-making

- Misguided or emotionally charged community campaigns distract from policy focus.
- Councillors spend time responding to misinformation, rather than making policy.

Culture and behaviour

- Public hostility exacerbates internal tensions and contributes to conflict escalation.

Workload and efficiency

- A large proportion of complaints arise from misunderstanding, requiring significant time to explain or correct.

Wellbeing and psychological safety

- Community aggression, online or in person, harms morale, and increases stress.

Reputation and trust

- Visible conflict (internally or externally) erodes community trust, which feeds further adverse behaviour.

3. Limitations

The following limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this review. While the review provides valuable insights into both positive and unconstructive behaviours and experiences within councils, several methodological and contextual factors may influence the results.

3.1. Voluntary opt-in participation

Participation in this research was *voluntary*, with individuals opting in by choosing to complete the survey and in addition, accepting an invitation to be interviewed. In the context of examining behaviours within councils, this recruitment approach may have introduced *self-selection bias*.

3.1.1. Self-selection bias

Individuals who had experienced unconstructive or harmful behaviours in their council may have been more motivated to participate, particularly if they were seeking acknowledgement of their experiences, or hoped to contribute to improvements to prevent similar exposures to others in the future.

Conversely, those who perceived their council environment as positive and collaborative, or who had no direct or indirect experience of behaviour-related complaints, may have been less inclined to participate. For all respondents, the review relied on *self-reported data*, where findings are subject to recall bias (what people remember about events) and individual interpretation of behaviours and experiences, noting these perceptions have real impacts for those affected by them. These limitations should be considered when interpreting results.

3.1.2. Gender representation

This potential participation bias may be reflected in the relatively high proportion of women in the interview sample reporting experiences of harmful behaviour. *Gender representation* in the survey was relatively balanced among **elected council** respondents (n = 160; 74 men [46%], 80 women [50%]). In contrast, within the **administration** staff (n = 92), women comprised almost two-thirds of respondents (55 [60%]) compared to men (30 [33%]). This representation is likely to represent the population of administration staff across councils where women are over-represented compared to men.

In the interview sample, women outnumbered men (total sample was 21 [40%] men and 32 [60%] women) across most respondent roles; however, among CEOs, women were under-represented (five men and one woman). This also likely reflects the population of CEOs across local government. A detailed statistical profile of interview respondents cannot be provided, as demographic information such as council name or location, council size, years of experience, and age was not collected. This decision was made by the researchers for ethical reasons requiring risks of identifying individual respondents and councils be minimised. Managing these risks are critical to prevent further harm by stigmatising individuals and councils, which would be counterproductive to improving council performance.

3.1.3. Timing of interviews

Interviews (in individual and group formats) were conducted during the end-of-year period (24 November to 19 December, 2025), which may have constrained availability for some potential respondents and influenced who was able to take part. Timing may also have influenced the self-selection bias toward those highly motivated to take part.

3.2. Design of surveys and interviews

3.2.1. Survey

The survey was co-designed with LGA to be comprehensive and included rating scales and free text fields for providing optional additional comments. This resulted in a lengthy survey taking an average of one hour to complete. Due to confidentiality and anonymity protections, the survey was delivered online and had to be completed in one sitting (it could not be saved and returned to, as that would have required login details to be stored). Length of survey, time to complete and the inability to complete in multiple settings may have contributed to respondent fatigue, potentially affecting completion rates and/or the depth and quality of responses.

3.2.2. Interviews – individual and group formats

For reasons of efficiency, interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams. Due to timing and availability of respondents, more individual interviews were conducted than planned. Individual interviews were intended for those respondents likely to need privacy and/or psychological support (n=10). An additional 11 individual interviews were made available to facilitate maximum participation given the timing of interviews sessions in December. Group interviews included 11 sessions involving 32 respondents, with groups ranging between 2 and 5 participants.

Use of the Microsoft Teams platform did present some problems for elected council members who had resigned during their current term and no longer had access to council resources. In these few cases, interviews were conducted by mobile phone with voice recording, either through Teams from the interviewer end, or a transcribed voice recording using Microsoft Word Dictate.

Interviews were scheduled for 90 minutes to allow reasonable opportunity for all respondents to contribute. However, this time commitment at the busy end of year period may further have enhanced self-selection bias.

Notwithstanding the limitations of study design, participants in individual and group interviews had the opportunity to provide detailed and nuanced experiences and perceptions of their roles in council, the quality of leadership, culture, structures and supports and the impacts of these on behaviour.

Deliberately, the review sought to identify ***strengths, weaknesses and opportunities*** for improvement in the *prevention and management of unconstructive behaviours*. Respondents felt free to identify a wide range of ideas and suggestions for improvements – large and small, not possible to explore in the highly structured questions included in the survey.

The strength of using quantitative and qualitative approaches sequentially enabled responses to survey questions to be explored in more detail through interviews, to understand the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of responses, provide contextual examples, and yield broader, richer and more nuanced perspectives, sometimes including contradictions. It should be noted that researchers did not attempt to verify the accuracy of information reported by participants in interviews, because the intent was to understand the interviewee perspective of processes, practices and events through their lived experience.

4. Acknowledgements

Examining leadership and behaviour in organisations, including councils, is a sensitive process. It requires high levels of trust building, planning and risk management to ensure the findings are as accurate as possible, representative of the experiences of the people involved, and focus on sources and outcomes of behaviour and practice.

The aim must always be to drive improvement (leveraging what is working well and addressing what is not) while minimising stigma and further harm. For these reasons it is important that reviews of this nature are *independent* and conducted with a high level of ethical practice.

The research team gratefully acknowledges the support, guidance and patience of **the LGA South Australia Board** and **Review Advisory Group**, under the diligent leadership of Ms Rowena McLean, whose deep knowledge of the sector has been critical in guiding this review.

The **LGA Leadership and Behavioural Management Review Advisory Group Members** are:

Ms Rowena McLean (Director, Sector Development, LGA SA)

Mr Nathan Petrus (CEO, LGA Mutual)

Ms Lauren Grantham (Project Lead, LGA SA)

Mr Michael McCarthy (Manager, Governance, LGA SA)

Ms Katherine Russell (Manager, Policy and Projects, LGA SA)

Reviews of this nature are not possible without funding, and we thank **LGA Mutual** (through CEO, Mr Nathan Petrus) for this essential support. LGA Mutual also provided guidance on project management, enabling high levels of participation in the review.

The valuable support of Mayor Dr Heather Holmes-Ross, (President of **LGA South Australia**) and Ms Karen Teaha, (Interim Chief Executive Officer, **LGA South Australia**) have assisted the smooth and timely conduct of the review through skilful and efficient sector liaison, instrumental to garnering the interest and participation of elected council and staff in this work.

This *Leadership and Behavioural Management Review* would not have been possible without the essential contribution of a diversity of **elected council and senior administration staff in councils across South Australia** who made their time available to participate, and freely shared their knowledge, experiences and suggestions to inform recommendations for improvement.

Collectively, the body of information collated by this review provides a strong foundation for the local government sector to move toward improving systems (including legislation), structures and support that extends collaboration, engagement and intra-council relationships that can further enhance council performance in the service of local communities.

The research team also acknowledge and appreciate the assistance of Ms Louise Roberts of Flinders University for her generous administration support during preparation of this report.

5. Conclusions

This review highlights a local government sector with strong foundations of civic purpose, community commitment and a clear dedication to service across both elected members and administration staff. Participants consistently expressed pride in their contribution to local communities and a strong desire to improve the systems and relationships that underpin effective local governance. These strengths provide a stable platform for further development and reform.

At the same time, the review identifies several persistent cultural, behavioural and structural challenges that, if left unaddressed, risk undermining council performance and the wellbeing of those who serve within it. While many councils demonstrate constructive cultures and productive working relationships, experiences vary significantly across the sector. Unconstructive behaviours, role ambiguity, inconsistent health, safety and wellbeing practices, and limited confidence in current complaints and dispute-resolution processes were recurring themes. The cumulative effects of these challenges can impede collaboration, reduce psychological safety and place strain on both elected members and staff.

The findings reinforce the need for clearer behavioural expectations, stronger behavioural management provisions, contemporary health, safety and wellbeing frameworks that apply specifically to elected members, and greater clarity around roles and responsibilities. Strengthening support systems, including professional development, mentoring, team-based learning and confidential wellbeing services, particularly the Employee Assistance Program, will further assist individual elected council and staff to perform their roles confidently and constructively. Modernising and streamlining complaints management systems, strengthening penalties, improving transparency, and enhancing community education about local government functions will also help reduce misinformation and support more respectful civic engagement.

Taken together, the evidence points to a sector that is both capable and motivated to improve. By implementing targeted reforms, councils can reinforce positive cultural attributes, strengthen governance capability and enhance the safety and respectfulness of the council environment. These improvements will contribute to more effective decision-making, better alignment between elected members and administration, and more sustainable workloads for those who serve.

With co-ordinated action, local government is well positioned to build on its existing strengths, support the wellbeing and performance of its people, and maintain high-quality service delivery for communities across South Australia.

6. Appendix A

Topics examined in surveys and interviews for elected council and administration staff included:

- What motivated you to serve in/on Council?
- What do you most enjoy about your role in Council?
- What do you least enjoy about your role?

Leadership and culture

- What do you see as the strengths of your elected Council culture?
Consider the shared values, ability to take others' perspective, active listening, effectiveness of strategic decision making, inclusive and constructive approach
- Does this differ between interactions inside and outside the Chamber? If so, how?
- What are the areas that can be improved?

Roles and resources

Mayors and Councillors are provided support and resources to fulfill their responsibilities. Resources may include factors like, equipment, training and development, peer support and guidance in managing the demands of the role.

- What are some of the examples of resources you have available?
- How suitable/effective are the resources you have available to perform your role?
- What could be improved?

Interactions with others

- Please describe the behaviours you have encountered personally in interactions with others that impact on you performing your role

Consider helpful and hindering behaviours from

- Peers
- Council senior staff, including CEOs and senior administrative managers
- Community members

Consider helpful and hindering behaviours from

- Please describe the behaviours you have witnessed in interactions between others that impact on you performing your role
 - Peers
 - Council senior staff, including CEOs and senior administrative managers
 - Community members

The Behavioural Standards for Council Members also state that council members may not bully or sexually harass other council members or council employees.

- How effective is the Behaviour Management Framework in addressing undesirable/harmful behaviours in elected members?

Harmful behaviours also include:

Discrimination, exclusion, withholding information, fear-based or controlling behaviour, retaliation against those who raise concerns, gossip and misinformation

Consider:

- Behavioural Standards for Council Members
 - Behavioural Support Policies
 - Behaviour Management Policy
 - LGA Training Standards for Council Members (mandatory training)
-
- What is working well?
 - What could be improved to make these processes more effective?
 - What other programs, initiatives or support do you consider is needed to support a positive, collaborative culture within your council?

Prevention and early intervention

- Management of disputes [Elected Council members only]
A ***dispute*** is generally considered a difference of opinion or disagreement between two parties. It may involve a heated discussion or some other unsatisfactory exchange between parties but may not amount to conduct inconsistent with the behavioural standards. A ***complaint*** relates to unacceptable behaviour, where conduct is believed to be inconsistent with the behavioural requirements/standards and is escalated.
- In your Council environment, how effectively are disagreements resolved?
- *What are the effective practices that your council uses to respond to issues before they become formal complaints?*
- What are the strengths and challenges faced by Councils in managing behavioural issues?
- What's working well?
- What are the opportunities for improvement?

What other programs, initiatives or support do you consider are needed to support a positive, collaborative culture within your council?

[If time] What advice would you give to someone considering nominating for council in the next election in 2026?

7. Appendix B

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Council Benchmarking Survey – Behavioural Management Administration

Summary of survey findings

Councils were asked to complete 32 questions on their council behavioural management policies and procedures, in the Council Benchmarking Survey. Survey responses were received from 25 councils (20 x regional councils and 5 x metropolitan councils). Administrative staff responsible for behavioural management processes within council were invited to respond to the survey, including key governance staff, other relevant senior staff and/or CEO.

A summary of responses is provided below, and survey participants will be provided with a copy of the survey findings.

1. What major amendments were introduced to the Behavioural Management policy, and why?

2. Major amendments

- Defined “responsible person.”
- Allowed reimbursement of personal legal expenses in certain cases.
- Added section on creating, managing, and reviewing Directions under 75G.
- Introduced additional behavioural expectations (majority of policy unchanged).
- Included a detailed staged process and revised sequence for better coherence.

3. Reasons for changes

- To align with council’s self-set expectations at the start of each term.
- To embed these standards into the adopted policy for consistency.
- To logically connect new standards and improve clarity and structure.

4. Additional comments on the effectiveness of your council’s Behavioural support policy included:

Limited use or no policy

- Policy not used when it should have been.

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- Some councils have no Behavioural Support Policy or have not faced issues under current standards.
- Policy mechanisms remain untested in some councils.

Commitment and adherence issues

- Individual council member commitment is inconsistent.
- Policy only works if adhered to by elected members and administration.

Policy development and reversal

- Some councils developed and consulted with community on a policy but later abandoned adoption.
- Others agreed on approach after review and consultation.

Perceived ineffectiveness

- Fear of retaliation prevents reporting behaviour issues.
- Mayors' authority unclear and outcomes weak; Behavioural Panel role unclear.
- Framework seen as enabling cover-ups and escalating bad behaviour.
- Legislative scope too narrow—only applies during council business, leaving loopholes.

Positive but short-lived impact

- Initially improved relationships but loses visibility over time without reminders.

Current context

- No behavioural issues reported in some councils; effectiveness untested.
- Some elected members believe the policy unnecessary.

5. For those councils who responded 'Yes', the forms of support council has offered to council members affected by behavioural issues includes:

- Legal advice, but only offered from fear of retribution
- Training, informal liaison, mediation
- EAP services
- Independent consultant
- Access to the Mayor and CEO for support and advice
- Access to external resources to support resolving complaints within the policy

General themes from comments on council's behavioural management

administration. Note, commentary does not reflect a majority view from respondents rather is a snapshot of comments provided in the survey.

Current Use

- Many councils have not yet tested the new Behavioural Standards or policies.
- Some councils report no complaints or issues requiring policy implementation.

Administrative Burden

- Managing behavioural complaints can be time-consuming and resource-intensive, sometimes resembling a full-time role.
- Significant workload for Mayor, CEO, and governance staff.
- Considerable time spent on policy development and framework administration, even without active complaints.

System Limitations

- Tools are limited and ineffective; lack of penalties fails to deter poor behaviour.
- Framework intended to simplify processes has instead become more complex, increasing burden and conflict.
- Responsible officers face challenges in remaining impartial and may lack necessary skills.
- Behavioural Panel role unclear; system perceived as broken.

External Management

- Some councils refer all complaints to external providers for independence.

Legislative and Structural Issues

- Current legislation allows individuals with multiple complaints to nominate and be elected, unlike other roles requiring "fit and proper" tests.
- Scope of legislation and test for enacting 75G seen as too restrictive; calls for lowering threshold for WHS management.

Elected Members

- One council commented they have fewer issues compared to last term, attributed to the calibre of council members. This council affirmed focus should be on attracting high-calibre candidates to reduce behavioural problems.

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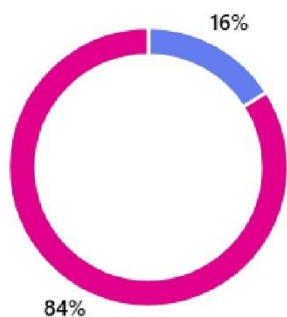
Other Observations

- Informal resolution attempts include specialised counselling; legal involvement only as last resort.
- Cohesive councils experience minimal issues, reducing administrative strain.

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The following questions explore how councils develop, apply, resource, and evaluate their behavioural management and support policies—including policy adoption, effectiveness, dispute resolution practices, use of external expertise, administrative burden, and the time and costs involved in both preventing and managing behavioural issues.

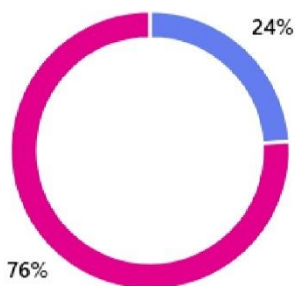
6. Has your council adopted a Behavioural Management Policy that varies from the LGA Model Behavioural Management Policy?



Yes	4
No	21

Councils may adopt their own behavioural support policies to support appropriate behaviour by council members, including directions or guidelines relating to behaviours that members must observe. These behavioural support policies must not be inconsistent with the Behavioural Standards.

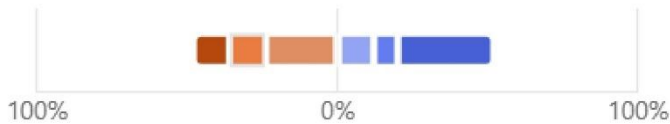
7. Has your council adopted one or more behavioural support policies?



Yes	6
No	19

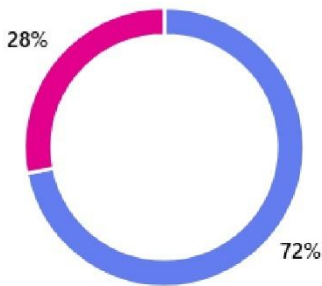
Note: All councils who answered yes said they have adopted one policy.

8. How effective do you consider council's Behavioural Support Policy/policies have been in supporting effective working relationships?



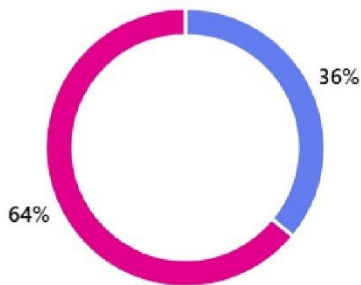
Very ineffective	12%	3
Somewhat ineffective	12%	3
Neither effective nor ineffective	24%	6
Somewhat effective	12%	3
Very effective	8%	2
Not applicable/Don't know	32%	8

9. Does your council provide access to an Employee Assistance Program for council members?



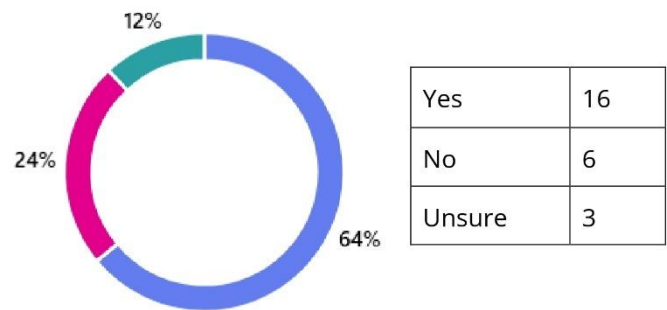
Yes	18
No	7

10. Does your council provide other forms of support for council members affected by behavioural issues?

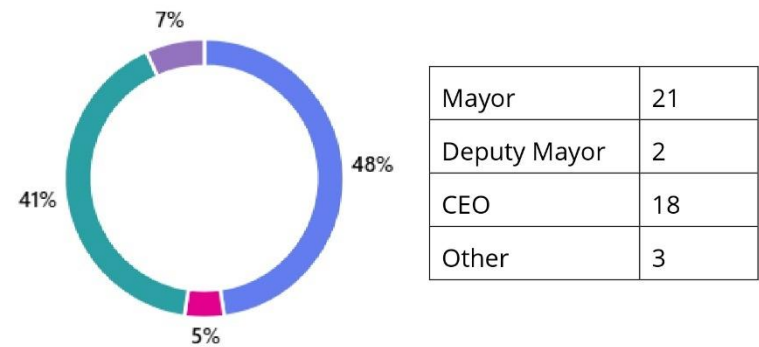


Yes	9
No	16

11. Do you consider most council member disputes are resolved informally?



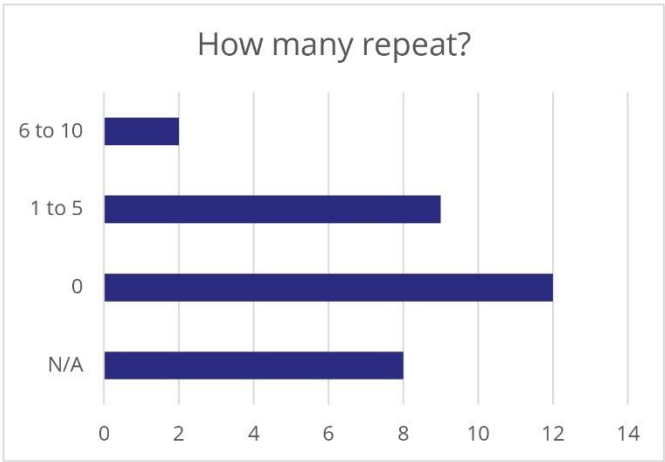
12. Who usually handles informal disputes with council members?



13. How many formal behavioural complaints relating to council members have been made in the current term of council?

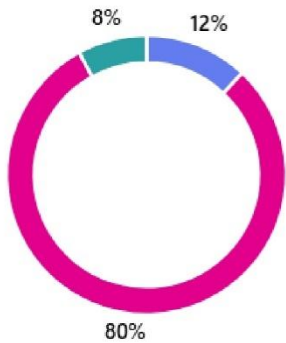


14. Of the formal complaints received, how many are repeat complaints about the same council member?



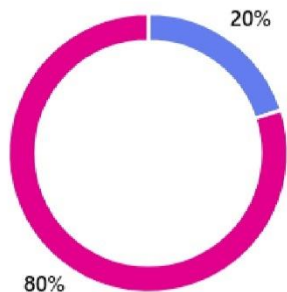
N/A	8
0	12
1 to 5	9
6 to 10	2
N/A	8

15. Are there council members who regularly submit formal complaints?



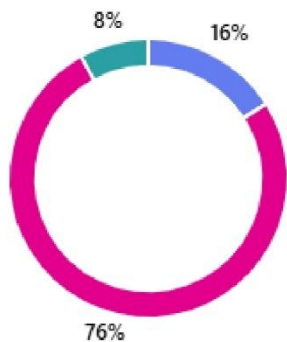
Yes	3
No	20
Unsure	2

16. Has your council referred any complaints to the Behavioural Standards Panel?



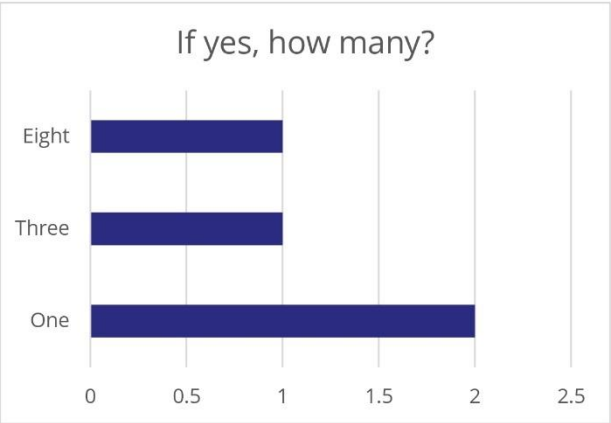
Yes	5
No	20
Unsure	0

17. Do you have any eligible complaints you anticipate will be sent to the Behavioural Standards Panel?



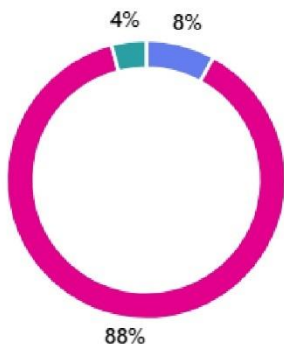
Yes	4
No	19
Unsure	2

18. If yes, how many?



One	2
Three	1
Eight	1

19. Have any behavioural issues been referred to the LGA Mutual Behavioural Standards Risk Management Service?



Yes	2
No	22
Unsure	1

20. If yes, how many?

3
No solution from service - was referred to independent legal providers. LGA schemes did pay for organisational psychologists to prepare report on the disfunction in the Council and the steps that we should implement to have a safe environment for Council Members

Preventing behavioural issues

21. In this term of council, what investment has council made in preventing behavioural management issues (in addition to the mandatory training)?

Respondents provided approximates.

22. Approximate investment to prevent behavioural issues (\$)



Not sure	2
Mandatory Training only	3
\$0	9
\$1-\$5000	6
\$5001-\$20,000	2
>\$20,000	3

23. Council member time preventing (hours)



Not sure	2
Mandatory Training only	1
0	7
1-15	6
16-30	3
31-50	4
>50	2

24. Council staff time preventing behavioural issues (hours)



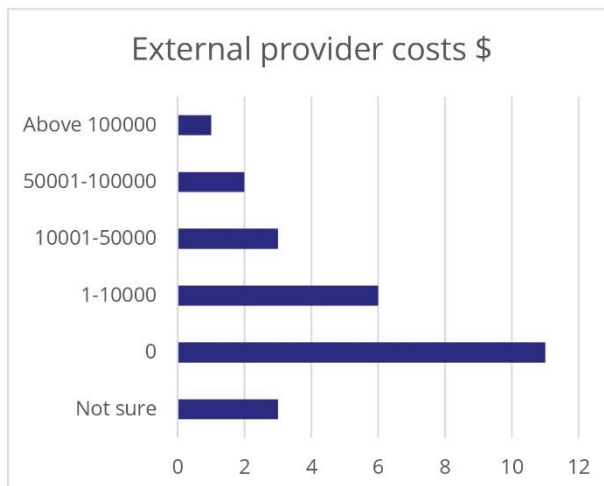
Not sure	3
Mandatory Training only	3
0	5
1-50	9
51-100	3
Above 100	2

Managing behavioural issues

25. In this term of council, what level of investment has council made in managing council member behavioural complaints?

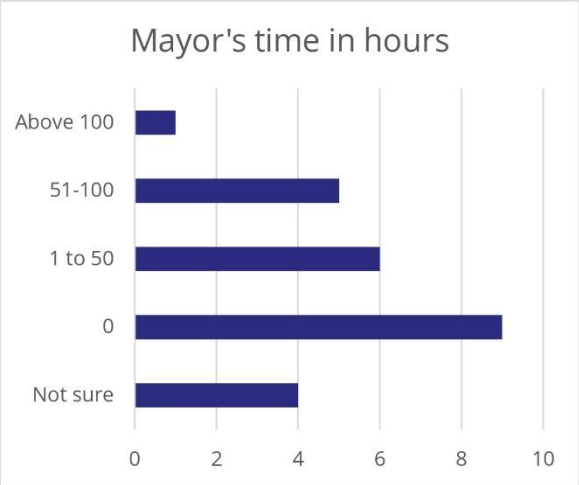
Participants provided approximates for the following:

26. External provider costs (\$)



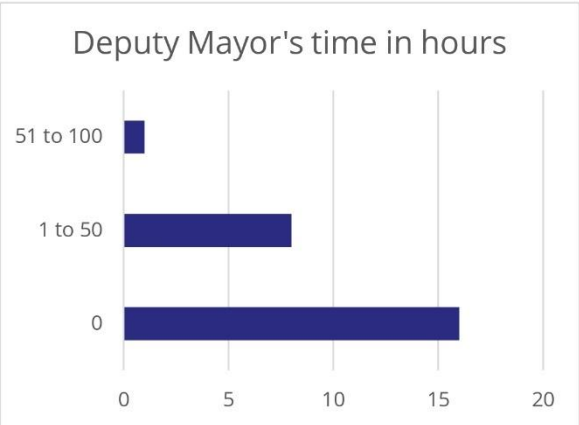
Not sure	3
0	11
1-10000	6
10001-50000	3
50001-100000	2
Above 100000	1

27. Mayor's time (hours)



Not sure	4
0	9
1-50	6
51-100	5
Above 100	1

28. Deputy Mayor's time (hours)



0	16
1-50	8
51-100	1

29. Other responsible persons (hours)



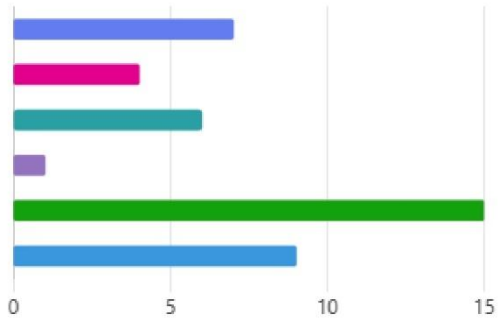
Not sure	2
0	14
1-50	5
51-100	2
Above 100	2

30. Staff time (hours)



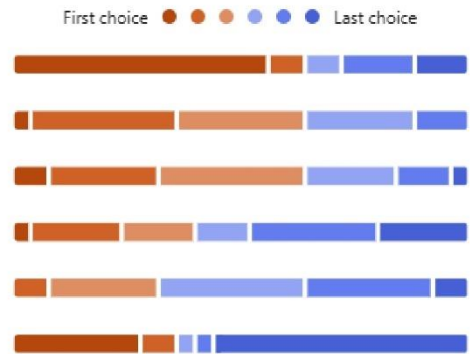
Not sure	3
0	9
1-50	4
51-100	4
101-500	3
Above 500	5

31. What type of external expertise has council engaged in managing council behavioural matters?



Psychology (such as organisational or clinical psychology)	7
Human resources	4
Mediation	6
Conciliation	1
Legal	15
Other	9

32. What types of external expertise has council engaged most frequently?



1 st Choice	Legal
2 nd Choice	Human resources
3 rd Choice	Mediation
4 th Choice	Psychology
5 th Choice	Conciliation
6 th Choice	Other

