



**AUSTRALIAN LOCAL
GOVERNMENT WOMEN'S
ASSOCIATION**
VICTORIAN BRANCH

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Women Stepping Out of Local Government

Reflections and Experiences from Female Councillors who Retired at 2020 Elections

About ALGWA Vic

ALGWA Vic is a strong collective voice for local democracy. It is the pre-eminent leader in a community of dynamic and passionate women in Local Government. We are committed to our intent of advancing leadership to enhance democracy of all Australians. Our membership, events and promotions, enable women at all levels to stay informed, connected and inspired. We are excited to lead change and create a strong, collective voice for our communities by the bringing together of extraordinary women from across the state.

Executive Summary

Towards the end of the Victorian local government 2016-20 term, ALGWA Vic determined to conduct an online survey of retiring female councillors, primarily to capture experiences during their service and their reasons for stepping down. The researcher, ALGWA Vic (former) Metro Vice President, Sandra Wilson, a former councillor and mayor, proposed the research as a result of her own deliberations on retirement and reflections after two terms (eight years) serving on a metropolitan council.

The research gathered valuable insights from thirty (30) women who had been elected to a diversity of Victorian councils, from rural to metropolitan. It covered length of service and leadership i.e. mayor and/or deputy mayor, achievements, challenges, factors influencing their decision to step down. The women also reflected on their skills and professional development and their intentions post-council. The research revealed that a significant talent bank of expertise in local governance and leadership has been lost to councils, but that it is also a potential gain elsewhere in communities and organisations. More than half the women (18) had participated in the Australian Institute of Company Directors program, giving them additional credentials to serve on boards. Almost half the women surveyed (13) had only served one term (four years) and this revelation begs as much focus on the retention of female councillors as the focus on getting more women elected in the first place.

The research demonstrates that the collective contribution of women, whether elected to local government for one term or many terms, is notable even by the measure of a few self-identified achievements that gave each of them most satisfaction. Reasons for retiring ranged from, simply feeling the right time to step down for personal reasons, to the need for more life balance, to the culture of council and the impacts of being a councillor on mental health and well-being. It is unclear what level of support councils across the board offer councillors whose health and well-being are impacted by their role. This area should be

explored further with councils considering whether they are providing an adequate 'duty of care' to elected councillors.

The experience of bullying, harassment (including sexual harassment) whilst a councillor was canvassed. Just over two-thirds (21/30) reported that they had experienced inappropriate behaviours whilst councillors, unsurprisingly, often with negative consequence. Some of these behaviours would undoubtedly meet the definitions of misconduct under the Local Government Act. It would appear that in some cases, internal processes failed to resolve some alleged breaches of codes of conduct, which clearly compounded feelings of detriment. However not all bullying or harassment came from fellow councillors; it was also reported that community can be a source of abuse.

The majority of retiring councillors expressed the desire to continue contributing to their community, stepping up for board positions, supporting other women in local government through mentoring, or progressing their professional journey based on their local government experience. ALGWA Vic seeks to support former female councillors whether they chose not to stand for re-election or whether they were not re-elected at the 2020 elections. They all have attained qualifications, skills and experience from their service which continue to be a value-add.

During the research analysis, a 2003 research report entitled *Moving On: Women and Retirement from Local Government*¹ came to light. It explored similar issues and trends relating to women choosing to retire from council at that time and made recommendations 'to create organisations and cultures that better sustain councillors in these critical community leadership roles'. The findings and recommendations have been compared to the data from this current research with a particular focus on the opportunities for change that were presented in 2003 and whether identified issues have been adequately addressed.

At this time, when gender equity in political representation is in the spotlight even more than usual, learning from women's experiences as councillors and mayors can help develop future initiatives to not only achieve the State Government's 50/50 in local government by 2025² but to maximise the retention of women after election. All said and done, if we want to address issues of concern and improve organisational culture, recommendations should be seriously considered and adopted to effect necessary positive change.

Introduction

This is an overview of the research conducted with female councillors who made the choice to retire from their councils at the 2020 Local Government elections. One hundred and eighty-three (183) councillors (female and male) chose not to recontest the elections. Seventy (70) were women, which equated to 28% of total female councillors (243/637) elected or re-elected at 2016 elections or, 11% of total councillors (female and male). Women did not retire in greater proportion to male councillors. One hundred and thirteen

¹ Marion Frere, *Moving On: Women and Retirement from Local Government* (Women's Participation in Local Government Coalition c/- VLGA 2003)

² *Safe and Strong: A Victorian Gender Equality Strategy* (State of Victoria, Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2016, page 34)

(113) men retired, which equated to 28% of total male councillors (394/637) also retired at the 2020 elections.

The purpose of the research was to explore women's experiences of local government; reasons for stepping down; achievements and challenges; the level of experience and skills gained by women that has been lost to local government; and intentions following retirement including opportunities to channel and support the talent of these accomplished women.

Included in this overview is a series of recommendations that are relevant for ALGWA Vic, the Local Government sector and the Victorian State Government in the context of achieving 50/50 female representation in local government by 2025³, focusing on the retention of women elected, as well as a potential pipeline of retired councillors to increase female representation on boards, particularly government boards.

Methodology

Female councillors who were not recontesting the election after the 2020 nomination period closed, were all contacted via email inviting participation in an online survey. There was a short window of opportunity between 22 September (close of nominations) and 24 October (close of election) to make contact while they still had use of a public council email address and phone number. This period was a busy time for these women completing not just one term of council (four years) but in some cases, concluding multiple terms, with two councillors having served 20 years. It was a time of transition for each of them, therefore it required a number of communication attempts (text messages and follow up phone calls) to bring it to the attention of as many as possible. In the flurry of ending their time on council, some could not recall having received the initial survey link embedded within a 'recognition of contribution' message from the President of ALGWA Vic, therefore a follow-up link was emailed before access to their council contact details was lost. The survey consisted of 23 quantitative and qualitative questions. The final response rate of 42% is considered a very healthy representative sample in the circumstances.

Findings

Profile and length of service

Thirty (30) respondents from 70 retiring female councillors gave representation of all types of councils - Metro (11), Small Shire (7) Large Shire (6) Regional City (4) Interface (2)

Length of service – majority (43%) of retiring women served one term.

13	1-4 years
6	4-8 years
4	8-12 years
5	12-16 years
2	16-20 years

³ Ibid.

Sixteen (16) women served as Mayor with 14 serving two or more terms (three women served four terms as Mayor). Eleven women served as Deputy Mayor, with more than half having served twice and one having served four times.

Achievements in Office

All women reported a vast array of achievements during their time as councillors demonstrating huge pride in their contribution. These achievements included advocacy to other levels of government; capital works and infrastructure development; community engagement; strategic planning and policy development; improved governance; service improvements and bringing leadership through greater transparency; and, unification of council.

"Bringing back to council the youth portfolio after 8 years of no service for young people." Large Shire councillor

"Helped get rural townships uplifted with improved footpaths, planting and streetscapes." Interface councillor

"The building of an Aquatic Centre, Performing Arts Centre and a Children's and Community Hub." Regional City councillor

"Changing the culture of the council to be more equitably focused across the whole municipality". Metro councillor

"Being a signatory to the Victorian Women's Charter and staff reporting annually on our progress." Small shire councillor

"Protecting our old growth trees from being cut down for new developments." Large shire councillor

"Diversity and support in our agriculture sector eg: medical marijuana, cotton, dairy, organic tomatoes etc." Small shire councillor

"Preservation and protection of coastal biodiversity areas and a new waste and recycling service (four bin system) leading the state." Metro councillor

"Leading the setting up of a climate change target. Supporting social enterprise start-ups." Regional City councillor

Challenges in Office

Significant challenges were experienced by all women and many cited the poor behaviour of other councillors (bullying, intimidation, abuse, sexual harassment and stereotyping) and sometimes community members, such as ratepayer groups. When specifically asked if they had experienced "bullying, harassment or sexual harassment" during their time as a councillor, 21/30 responded affirmative.

Other challenges included ineffective processes for holding councillors to account for poor behaviour; toxic social media and stereotyping by media; not feeling respected being part of local government; managing competing demands such as full-time work, family time; big and dense agendas and extensive travel.

"In the last few years.... Felt the relationship between the organisation and the councillors changed and this was caused by accepting and rewarding bad behaviour and those that undermined others." Metro councillor

"Being the only female councillor." Metro councillor and Large Shire councillor and Small Shire councillor

"The continued badgering by certain ratepayer associations whose modus operandi was to seek to damage council reputation." Metro councillor

"Managing full-time work, being at the start of my career and managing time for meetings and getting involved in issues." Metro councillor

"Undermining and bullying from a councillor who avoided a code of conduct matter by resigning and then returning at the next election." Metro councillor

"The many many pages of reading and the constant, daily events to attend that took up so much family time." Metro councillor

"Balancing family, work and council roles in an inflexible environment shaped for retirees." Regional City councillor

"In our rural area the representation of women is low therefore it is sometimes hard to convince other members the importance of a certain area of the business against the tangibles of roads, rates etc." Small Shire councillor

"Tyranny of distance, making a two-hour meeting a day long event." Small shire

Bullying, Harassment and Sexual Harassment

It was clear from some respondents that the impacts of bullying and harassment had a significant impact on their mental health and personal wellbeing. From some, anguish and frustration with the inadequacy of processes to deal with disruption and dysfunction caused by the conduct of some councillors on some councils was apparent. It is not clear what formal support is available to meet a duty of care to councillors who are subject to this kind of behaviour where it has negative impacts. On the specifics of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment, these were some of the comments shared:

"Mainly bullying by male councillors as I was the meat in the sandwich, with 2 blocks of 3 always voting together.... Also, I found bullying and intimidation of female staff by male councillors really difficult...." Interface councillor

"Misogynistic councillors found it difficult to take instruction from a female mayor. The behaviour progressed to defamation and slander of my character and professional ethics." Regional City councillor

"I was not bullied but was not included in casual interactions." Large Shire councillor

“Bullying experienced and saw it all of the time. It was terrible. There were numerous complaints and nothing ever – ever – came of it.” Metro councillor

“Over the 12 years there were some councillors who bullied whoever they liked. I stood up to them especially when I was the target which was most often, and they didn’t like it. I was often told that I must be a man hater....” Small shire councillor

“I received abuse via text, phone, Facebook etc including told to get out of town for my safety etc. reported to Local Government Inspectorate, they are slow and their outcomes are weak and have no effect on these types of people.” Small shire councillor

“Unfortunately, most of the bullying was from the female mayor and her male supporters trying to intimidate and to get me not to attend Council.” Metro councillor

“I really don’t want to go into it. It is one of the reasons I am not running again.” Metro councillor

“I hate, hate, hated the bullying, the lying, the slander and the ongoing disgusting behaviour from two other councillors.” Metro councillor

Reasons for Retiring

Reasons for stepping down were various but fell into a number of broad categories. Often respondents cited numerous reasons (despite being asked the ‘primary’ reason for stepping down). Categorized by the researcher from an open-ended question and responses, in no priority order, the reasons can be broadly expressed as:

- Satisfied with contribution
- culture (within the council)
- work and family balance
- personal health and wellbeing
- age or time for change.

Respondents were invited to give any additional reasons that contributed to their decision making. This may be explored in more detail in potential follow up research.

Qualifications, Skills and Experience Achieved

18/30 women have completed the Australian Institute of Company Directors course during their time as a councillor. A small number (4) would have liked to have completed it, but it was not available at their council. Other formal professional development or qualifications achieved by retired councillors during their service included:

Williamson Community Leadership program

Cranlana Executive Colloquium for Ethical Leadership
MAV and/or VLGA training for Mayors
Advanced Diploma of Public Safety (Emergency Management)
International Study Tour Urban Planning (Washington, San Francisco, Washington)
Diploma of Justice 2020
VMIA Risk Management Training
IBAC Training / Conference
Financial Management training and Financial Competence in Local Government
Crime Stoppers Conference
Directors Refresher course
Governance and operational training for Vic Cemetery Trusts
Mediation
MAV Development training and workshops

The range of 'on the job' skill development and experience gained by councillors includes (in no particular order for the purposes of this overview):

Chairing meetings – face to face and on-line (technical skills)
Community development, community and stakeholder engagement
Dealing with Difficult People, managing and understanding difficult behaviours
Conflict resolution
Governance training and Meeting Procedure training
Audit and Risk Committee experience, risk management
Financial literacy and budgeting skills, budget preparation and capital works projects
Asset management
Media, Public Speaking and Presentation skills
Strategic Planning and Strategic Development
Mentoring
CEO Recruitment, KPIs and Performance, Contract Review and Remuneration
Stronger communication, Active Listening, Analyzing and Problem Solving, critical thinking
Effective Advocacy
Debating skills
Board style negotiations, improved negotiation skills
Planning 101, urban planning knowledge, urban renewal and placemaking
Grant application writing skills, acquittal of grants
Emergency Management responsibilities in a city, maintaining dignity in a crisis
Relationship building, collaboration, developing partnerships
Organisational development, organizational restructure
Leadership skills
Reporting Responsibilities
Codes of Conduct processes
Managing Life Balance, including mental health
Importance of process

Repurposing Talent and Experience

Retired female councillors were invited to select from a range of initiatives that would support them in continuing their contribution and / or development and all but three women selected one or multiple options as follows:

- Becoming a mentor for other women in local government (21)
- Pathways to board positions (18)
- Preparing my resume to capture my skills and experience as a councillor (10)
- Debriefing about my time as a councillor (9)

Other ideas offered by a small number included:

- **“Becoming involved in Arts in our area. Development of our region.”**
- **“Supporting other progressive women and LGBTIQ people to run for council.”**
- **“Sharing my local government experience to inform other government processes.”**

Life After Council

Intentions of women post-council included the following:

“Part time work in the justice area”

“Remain on a couple of boards but take six months off!!”

“Volunteering locally”

“A strategic communications start up”

“Relaxation with family and time for travel”

“Not sure but wanting to use knowledge, skills and contacts to advantage”

“Pivoting to career in stakeholder engagement”

“To look for further challenges”

“A new baby and my day job”

“Translate my skills and experience learned to continue to have an impact”

“Running again in another area”

“Consider board roles”

Sharing Words of Wisdom

All women were asked to provide one piece of advice – words of wisdom – for other women becoming councillors. These words in themselves are a valuable output from this survey. This is a sample:

“Go for it! It is an incredibly rewarding experience and you will develop skills you never anticipated.”

“Listen to your community, learn to ask the right questions and remain positive and optimistic as good leaders provide optimism and hope for their communities.”

“Advise yourself of all the facts about matters on which you are about to make decisions.”

“Listen with curiosity – Speak with honesty – Act with Integrity”

“Use your voice, be on your toes and find courage and self-belief.”

“Get yourself a confidante/mentor from outside of the council. Develop a thick skin!”

Have we ‘moved on’ since ‘Moving On’? – comparing findings and recommendations from research into women retiring from local government (2003)

The ‘Moving On’ research, funded by the Victorian State Government, was based on qualitative data from 19 of the 21 women who retired from councils at the March 2003 elections, seeking the reasons for retirement drawn from their experiences. The findings from this current research almost mirror the experiences of women reported 17 years earlier. They all had satisfaction with achievements and gaining new knowledge and skills; the majority had all completed more than one term on council, and significant relief was expressed by all at the increased ability post-council to focus more on families, friends, jobs and businesses. Improving health and well-being were major factors in the decision to retire. This research has important data on the experiences of women that should be revisited in more detail to compare insights, as many of those findings are as relevant today as they were in 2003.

The ‘Moving On’ report presented 14 recommendations, some of which have been addressed but some have not and, unsurprisingly, women retiring in 2020 have borne similar burdens, which clearly impacted their time in service to their communities. The recommendations are summarized under six key areas: Representation; Allowances and Reimbursements; Governance; Research; Perceptions on the Role of a Councillor; and Professional Development. In brief, some of the issues referenced under the

recommendations area in the report remain concerns and were expressed by respondents in the 2020 research including:

- Lawful conduct in relation to sexual harassment and discrimination and managing negative behaviour of individual councillors
- Personal safety and privacy when conducting council business in the community
- Absence of family friendly culture and support
- Improve community understanding of the role of elected councillors and focus on positive contributions made by councillors

Conclusion

This is an overview of the most significant findings from a survey of retiring female councillors at the immediate end of tenure. This research was conducted with no funding, by a retiring councillor in a volunteer capacity.

The women were all proud of their contribution to their communities through their elected roles on a diversity of councils across Victoria. While reasons for retiring were varied, there were some common threads including the pressure on work life balance, the culture and conduct within councils and/or it simply being the right time to step down to continue life's journey after a satisfying contribution. Women leave local government with immense learnings, qualifications and transferable skills. Supporting such accomplished women to transition to other opportunities post-council is something ALGWA Vic is pursuing as a result of this research. It is pleasing to note that a significant number of retired female councillors have gone on to become mentors to newly-elected women under ALGWA's mentoring program supported by the Victorian State Government. This program has exceeded its target of 20 mentoring relationships, reaching 50+. Using the skills of retired councillors has multiple benefits for all involved.

There are opportunities to do further analysis and consider follow up research, particularly focusing on the experiences of inappropriate behaviour and misconduct in local government and the processes for dealing with such. These are not new issues, as identified by the audit into Sexual Harassment in Local Government by the Victorian Auditor-General's Office⁴, (subsequent to this research). This audit provides additional insights into the incidence of sexual harassment; it being one behaviour in a spectrum of inappropriate behaviours experienced, which also includes bullying and abuse. It seems an imperative to look more deeply at why 43% (13) respondents decided to leave council after one term. In addition exploring the experiences of women who were not re-elected in 2020 would provide further insights. However, finding an easy method of contacting a collective respondent group, as per this research, is challenging. ALGWA Vic conducted this 2020 research in a window of opportunity and as a result gained insightful and valuable data to form a series of important recommendations and advocacy areas. The 2003 research report 'Moving On' had significant findings and recommendations that should be revisited.

Recommendations

⁴ *Sexual Harassment in Local Government* (Victorian Auditor-General's Office, tabled 9 December 2020)

Health and Well-being

1. Acknowledgement and understanding by all local government stakeholders that serving as an elected representative, and some of the commensurate pressures, can have an impact on councillors' health and well-being, particularly mental health. Therefore, all Victorian councils should ensure that councillors have explicit access to support through existing Employee Assistance Programs, or similar, and proactively offer support as a 'duty of care'.
2. Local Government Victoria to promote 'duty of care' for councillors and encouragement of councils through CEOs to provide explicit support through Employee Assistance Programs consistent with legislative obligations. The Local Government Act 2020 at Division 7, S46 Functions of the Chief Executive Officer (f) states 'carrying out the Council's responsibilities as a deemed employer with respect to Councillors, as deemed workers, which arise under or with respect to the Workplace and Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013.
3. All councils to offer an exit interview to all retiring and not re-elected councillors at the end of each term of council and to include the feedback received into ongoing internal and any external cultural reviews as recommendations to improve the culture of councils.

Behaviour and Conduct

4. State Government / Local Government Victoria to keep a watching brief through the appropriate channels and agencies of the use and efficacy of Councillor Codes of Conduct as prescribed under the Local Government Act 2020, including the processes to deal with inappropriate behaviours that undermine good governance and cause dysfunction.
5. VAGO (or other integrity agencies) to consider an audit of Councillor Codes of Conduct, including the frequency of use, efficacy and associated costs of the processes, similar to that undertaken in the Sexual Harassment in Local Government⁵ audit that reviewed complaints and organisational complaint handling processes.
6. Local Government Victoria to continually monitor and program a future review of the Governance and Integrity Regulations, including data from any other external reviews, audits or investigations.
7. Research partnerships and funding to be sought to enable ALGWA Vic to conduct further research and focus groups with former councillors. This would provide additional opportunities for reflection and debrief on councillor experiences with a view to providing feedback to Victorian Government. Further insight into the

⁵ Ibid

experiences of one term councillors is required.

8. ALGWA Vic to explore and examine available training resources relevant to councillors that address the range of inappropriate behaviours and conduct, including sexual harassment.

Culture

9. Local Government Victoria and peak bodies to have ongoing review and analysis of the culture and structure of local government to understand what changes are necessary to ensure the retention of elected women. Include revisiting the recommendations from 'Moving On' by each partner to the research.

Professional Development – pre and post retirement

10. Funding to support councils that do not offer, or do not have the resources to offer, councillor participation in the Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD) program.
11. ALGWA Vic to support and guide former female councillors' continued development through funded initiatives, particularly for those seeking pathways to boards. This may include a bridging or 'booster' program provided by AICD; a program for updating resumes by capturing and translating experiences gained on council; access to coaching or similar.

Exit Support and Recognition

12. Local Government Victoria to explore and promote known programs available through councils or other levels of government that provide exit support, such as counselling and coaching for the next stage of life post-council, for all future retiring councillors to support transition out of local government in recognition of service.
13. The Minister for Local Government to personally acknowledge the contribution of each retiring or non-reelected councillor in correspondence at the conclusion of their term of service. Local Government exists and is governed under State Legislation and the many years of contribution, often at high cost to individuals and their families, should be formally acknowledged at conclusion.

Experiences of Male and Gender Diverse Councillors

14. Research into the experiences of male and non-binary councillors retiring should be considered. Their contribution is equally important, the skills gained are as transferable, but experiences during and post-council are likely to be different to women's experiences. This hypothesis could be explored for greater understanding into the culture of local government. Improvements to culture and structure that

have a positive impact for women elected to local government will undoubtedly provide improvements for men and non-binary people.

About the Author

Sandra Wilson is a former councillor of Hobsons Bay City Council (2012-2020) serving twice as Mayor and Deputy Mayor. Sandra has worked as a consultant and workplace trainer on discrimination, harassment, bullying and flexible work practices; a manager of volunteers, and policy officer for the national peak body for volunteering. She has served as ALGWA Vic's Metro Vice President, writing key advocacy submissions. She holds a Graduate Diploma in Equal Opportunity Administration (Swinburne University) completing research into effective mentoring programs for women.