Victorian Local Governance Association

The Journey from Citizen to Councillor

A report on newly elected councillors in Victoria

2014

VLGA

Victorian Local Governance Association

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About the VLGA

The Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA) is a peak body that links local government, councillors and community leaders to collaboratively build and strengthen local governance and democracy.

Our membership consists of local governments (representing over 80% of Victoria's population), community organisations and individuals.

Our Vision is for Victorian communities to be inclusive, sustainable and dynamic, characterised by strong leadership and effective local governance.

We believe that transparent, accountable and democratic governance policies and practices in all settings enable citizens to create their own sustainable futures.

Vision
Our communities will be inclusive, sustainable and dynamic characterised by strong leadership and effective local governance.

Mission
The VLGA is a unique peak body for councillors, community leaders and local governments working to build and strengthen their capacity to work together for progressive social change.

Values
We believe that transparent, accountable and democratic governance policies and practices in all settings enable citizens to create their own sustainable futures.

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THE JOURNEY FROM CITIZEN TO COUNCILLOR

'It's an opportunity to make a difference if you're willing to put the work in … because it's hard work, it's hard... But I love it, so I don't know how you convey that. You need to be someone that understands that you only get out of it what you put in …'

In October 2012, 299 non-incumbent councillors were elected to Victorian local government. Of these, and others elected in 2013, 271 had never before held office. In 2013, the VLGA initiated an action research project to capture the experiences of these newly-elected councillors. This report tells the story of their journey so far.

KEY FINDINGS

The decision to stand

All of the new councillors we surveyed were motivated by a keen sense of wanting to make a difference in their community. Most had been actively involved in community life for many years. They found the step into local government a natural progression, enabling the further pursuit of community issues and needs.

For some, becoming a councillor had not been part of their thinking – rather, a coincidence of timing, opportunity and a passion for particular issues had persuaded them to stand.

Life stage and financial security were also important considerations, recognising the time and energy required of councillors and the need to juggle family and work commitments.

Understanding the role of councillor

The overwhelming majority have approached the journey from citizen to councillor with energy, enthusiasm and a clear view of what they want to achieve – and this is still the case, 18 months into their first term. They see their primary task as being advocacy for, and effective representation of, their community.

Most councillors, even those who knew just a little about local government prior to being elected, consider that they now have a solid understanding both of the role of councillor and of local government. Many have been surprised to learn of the breadth of local government activity.

Life as a councillor

Overall, new councillors are confident that their voice is being heard at council, despite their relative lack of experience; most were clearly aware that their assertiveness and confidence have developed over the term of their appointment.

Typically, the ability of their council to work together as a team and achieve common objectives was rated highly; indeed, relationships with fellow councillors and officers were highly significant in their experience of the role.

New councillors were aware of their different 'identity', both as a councillor and as member of a councillor group. Nonetheless, an overwhelming majority were confident that they were perceived in their community as approachable and hard-working advocates for community.

New councillors often spoke to the 'politics' aspect of the role. Many experienced the degree of negotiation, public scrutiny and contestation involved as a challenge.

The experience of men, women and younger people appear to be similar in important respects. The exception is the experience of bullying and/or sexism which was more likely to be encountered by women. Participants were very aware of the diversity of community and were concerned to foster participation amongst different groups - young councillors, in particular, were motivated to bring forward the views and experiences of young people.

Challenges as a councillor

Typically, the key challenges identified by new councillors relate to a perceived lack of political effectiveness; this includes being unable to gain influence, a sense of political agendas getting in the way and having the appearance but not the effect of power. At times, relationships with fellow councillors, council staff and community were also tested.

Initially, most had found the amount and complexity of information, a challenge. Overall, however, there was a high level of satisfaction with the training and support provided.

Rewards

A clear message is the understanding that you only get out what you are prepared to put in. New councillors told us of the great outcomes to be achieved if you are prepared to actively seek a deeper understanding of issues and a better, more engaged relationship with colleagues and community members.

BACKGROUND

In 2013, the VLGA initiated a research project to elicit the experiences of newly-elected councillors. It was prompted by anecdotal evidence which suggested that some aspects of the transition, from citizen to councillor, posed particular difficulties and challenges.

This report provides some insight into the experience of newly-elected councillors. This includes the reasons for standing for council, their relationship with the local community and with fellow councillors, the information needed to work effectively, the rewards and the challenges.

The research project had two components. First, a literature review was prepared with the support of the Australian Centre for Excellence in Local Government Research (ACELG); this review confirmed a lack of empirical data about the specific experience of new councillors and suggested it an area worthy of local investigation (UTS, 2013). It also guided the design of the surveys, which formed the second component of the project. A summary of the key issues from the literature review is attached (Appendix A).

Two surveys were conducted by the VLGA. The first was a quantitative survey conducted over December 2013-January 2014. The voluntary, online survey captured the views of 62 respondents (a response rate of 23%); women and men were equally represented. Between them, the respondents represented 41 different councils across the State (52% of all councils); 6 regional (60% of regional councils); 19 metropolitan (61% of metropolitan councils); and 16 rural (42% of rural councils).

The second was a set of open-ended interviews of 12 people (March 2014); these were conducted over the phone and, on average, took 45 minutes to complete. Most of the quotations which follow are derived from those conversations.

Together, the surveys explored the expectations and experiences of first-time councillors, particularly their perceptions of the role and the challenges of meeting their own expectations and those of their community. The design of the qualitative phase was informed by the outcomes of the online survey and allowed some themes to be explored in greater depth. Further details about the project method and the sample population can be found in Appendix B.

THE DECISION TO STAND

The literature suggests that people do not just drift into politics – rather there are certain demographic and experiential 'stepping stones' at play (Verhelst and Kerrouche, 2012). Therefore, we were keen to explore those factors and stepping stones which influenced the decision of respondents to contest the 2012 election.

Typically, people identified that they were motivated by the opportunity to pursue a specific area of interest or issue. Those issues cited most frequently related to health and wellbeing, community services, governance, and planning and development. Governance, in particular, was rated highly, irrespective of the type of council, rural or urban.

Across the project, there were many similarities in the views of elected representatives – and, as elsewhere, it was striking that where differences did exist, they were rarely along gender lines (Manion and Sumich, 2013b). One notable exception was in the priority accorded different issues. For example, the top three reasons that women gave for standing, were 'health wellbeing and community services'; 'governance' and equal third, 'environment and climate change' and 'neighbourhood quality and character'. Men identified 'community infrastructure', 'planning and development' and 'rates and finances' as the top three reasons for standing.

We teased out these issues in the interviews. Without exception, our interviewees approached their election with a clear sense of **wanting to make a difference to their community** – sometimes to fix what they perceived to be current wrongs but always to contribute and give back to a place and community which was important to them.

> *'… the driving force is the opportunity to make a difference within the community'*

> *'When I found that love for my community, I said "I want to contribute back" '*

> *'I felt that I needed to do something with purpose, rather just working at my job … [I] needed to do something where money wasn't the main motivator'*

The timing had to be right too - although as one respondent put it:

> *'Are you ever really ready until you take the plunge? There's never a right time because you can always throw up barriers'*

Interviewees often identified that they were of an age when they could make a contribution – most often because they were relatively 'young' or because they were retired – or were at a time in family life when they could afford to give time to the role.

'I had finished having children … and I was at a transition point in my career which meant that I was going to have more flexibility to dedicate to community-related service … and I knew that I would have the time to dedicate to perform the role as I think it should be performed'

Our survey results indicated that roughly half of respondents spent 11-31 hours per week on council activities; and half 31 – 50 hours. Women were more likely to spend more than 31 hours per week on council business, than men. For half of the respondents the time spent on council activity was as they expected – for the remainder, it was 'more' or 'much more' than they had first anticipated. As one councillor put it, '*you need to be prepared to give of yourself and your time – but learn to say no.*'

For some it was more a case of the timing of the electoral cycle – one respondent, for example, had withdrawn from a previous election because someone nominated whom he knew would take some of his votes – two others had run at a previous state election and, though not successful, were encouraged by their level of support and decided to throw their hat in the ring of local government instead. Another judged that he would be too old to stand next time around.

Concerns about the make-up and performance of the (then) council were often cited as factors which influenced a decision to contest; these typically revolved around decision-making processes and the need for greater transparency and accountability to community, matters of central concern to the work of the VLGA.

' … I wanted to shake that up a bit, I wanted us to have a voice and I wanted us to be a bit tougher and a bit more bold in terms of our advocacy … in terms of council … being an advocate for the people in this area – that mattered to me on principle'

'The issue … most people had, was the lack of transparency that they were getting from council, so my main goal was to change the way council approached the community … '

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF COUNCILLOR

We invited survey respondents to reflect on how much they knew about the role of local government, prior to being elected. Most (70%) perceived that they had at least some working knowledge of the role of local government; 28% perceived that they knew just 'a little'.

In the interviews, we asked respondents to reflect more closely on their early understanding of the role of *councillor* (rather than the role of local government) – and how this had changed since being elected. Typically, they reported that their experience of the role was broadly as expected, though there were some 'surprises'.

> *'I think I just … had more of that typical sort of stereotypical view of it, like rates, roads, rubbish … almost like they're administrators of the most boring bits of public policy rather than movers and shakers and people who can really get things done for the community'*

> *'In my experience, I knew very, very little about the role of councillors. Over the campaign period I learnt more and more and that changed how I was campaigning … I learned that councils took part in this, and advocated for this and worked on this … everything under the sun, cradle to grave stuff'*

> *'I always use the analogy that you see the iceberg and you see local government council and you really don't see what's underneath which is a bigger portion - so that, and much, much more'*

We asked survey respondents to identify what they felt was their most important task, as a new councillor. More than half of the respondents identified advocacy and effective representation of their community as their primary task – and this was consistent across both gender groups and across council types.

There was, however, a notable difference in the way men and women articulated this task. In the brief space of the survey form, women tended to refer to *process*, using the language of understanding, listening, consulting and 'giving voice' to community; men were more likely to refer to concrete outcomes, with a focus on delivery as the end result.

However, qualitative feedback confirmed that, even though the words may differ, the intent is the same**; overwhelmingly, the focus of newly-elected councillors is to serve their community; and it is this aspect of the role that has given them the greatest satisfaction.** This is consistent with experience elsewhere which suggests that this desire to serve the community is the most important motivator of those seeking office (Pederson, 2013; Bottom and Copus, 2011).

LIFE AS A COUNCILLOR

We were keen to understand what else might be involved in this transition from citizen to councillor and the expectations at play (Rao, 1998). Clearly, it is not just a question of a time commitment and a willingness to give back to community. Our sense was that it would also likely involve a significant transition in 'self' – in terms of identity, relationships and the skills requisite to the new role.

Identity and discrimination

As described by one interviewee, '*there is no such thing as a job description for a councillor … it's what you make of the role*'. At the time of writing, legislation is before the Victorian Parliament which seeks to formally articulate the role of a councillor. But what does it mean to 'be' a councillor? There are no set hours and few mandatory tasks. It is the type of role that depends almost wholly on the person who occupies it for its form and character. Councillors are not highly paid; those who seek out the role of councillor are motivated by other factors. This 'personal' element of each councillor's story is a defining feature of local representation.

The findings support this idea that in the role of councillor, identity and occupation are blurred, each informing the other. New councillors, on assuming the role, were clearly aware of the way it changed them, through learning skills, discovering abilities they did not know that they had and acting in 'boundary-pushing' ways that extended their understandings of themselves. This happened through relationships with community, experienced both as individuals and as part of the council collective, with views, needs, expectations and constant scrutiny. It also clearly happened through the push and pull of relationships with council officers and fellow councillors.

As anticipated, most of the survey respondents were active members of community organisations prior to election. The skills rated the least difficult to understand in the first year of office were 'community' skills. They knew community well, on personal and professional levels and were familiar with, and experienced in, working within local networks and groups (Verhelst and Kerrouche, 2012). Running through their experience, however, was a sense of awareness that the interface of relations with community had changed. With election came the formalities of office and the taking up of the councillor role with all its perceptions and social connotations. New councillors noted that this was what community often saw first –

> '*Some who don't know me probably think of me as they imagine most councillors – [ie] negatively - and it's a combination of sometimes more – or exaggerated – respect than we deserve, alongside a depth of contempt that is a bit difficult to understand …'*

For people emerging from a background of community involvement and engagement, the new dynamic of the councillor–community relationship was sometimes unexpected. New councillors went through a process of coming to terms with this, which involved thinking about and seeking out, a new understanding of themselves. As put by one new councillor:

> *'Once you become part of the group, whether or not you've been against a local government, lobbying against them during your campaign, when you get on, you're part of the team, you're one of them and so you instantly get defensive when … I guess local government cops a lot of flak …'*

Being 'one of them', part of the team (or 'the machine' as it was put by one interviewee) and the challenges this posed to councillors' understandings of themselves was a key theme of our findings. Elected to office on particular issues and views, councillors were faced with the realisation that much of their action and power is circumscribed by the necessity of acting in concert with others - *'that's part of the learning process … [it] doesn't matter how strong a viewpoint you have, if you haven't got four people who agree with you…'*. Within the council itself, new councillors came to know a lot more about themselves through having to negotiate goals and recognise the validity of others' skill sets.

Notwithstanding these new realities of being one of a team, **an overwhelming majority of our survey respondents were confident that they were perceived in their community as approachable, hard-working advocates for community - showing leadership and trying to make a difference.**

For some survey respondents and one interviewee, **the dynamism of working with fellow councillors was the most positive part of the role**. Arguing, debating and pitting one's reasoning against others, not only brought new ideas to the fore but showed this new councillor something personally valuable - *'I love how I'm just so malleable'*. It forced another to realise that *'It's important for you to stand up and say hey, I am an equal part of the decision making round this table, therefore, I have to be heard'*.

Charting the boundaries between councillors and council officers was also a steep learning curve for new councillors, but one which appears to have contributed a great deal to the way each individual shaped their role –

> *'I think that probably the officers' dream councillor is someone who never challenges anything … and just goes with the flow … I said I can't [always] do that for you, but I'll try and be a little bit more working with [the] team'*

One interviewee associated the interaction with officers with being educated about the diversity of local government, a process that was experienced as transformational – *'be prepared to take your mind and personality to a place you never thought you'd go'.*

Relationships with fellow councillors and officers were highly significant in the experience of new councillors. Some saw '*developing a team environment with other councillors and officers*' as the most important task they faced in the first year of office. For the majority, this task appears to have been achieved with success – most survey respondents rated their council's ability to work as a team as high or very high. But this was not everyone's experience.

Although not asked directly about the incidence of bullying, sexism or ageism in their council, a few survey respondents, both male and female, volunteered that this had been evident. In the interviews, a direct question elicited four responses, three from women who reported having experienced sexism; and one from a man who observed that bullying was part of 'the game'. These findings cannot be taken as a measure of the extent to which sexism and bullying exists in the chamber, but there is significant research which indicates that it is of concern in local government (ALGWA, 2009:7; Manion and Sumich, 2013b; Fawcett Society, 2014). The quotes below will be familiar to many women working in sectors which have, traditionally, been male-dominated.

For one new councillor, gender-based discrimination was perceived as overt – '*we have a sexist culture in our council and we are yet to see a collaborative, respectful approach*'. For another '*it's so subtle, just so subtle that you think "is it or isn't it?" … '*.

A key theme to emerge was the possibility of discrimination being viewed just as part of the culture of a council. As described by one interviewee, '*they think they can just get away with it, as in the fact that there is a culture there that just makes that OK.*' In some cases, the incident could have been, but wasn't, effectively managed '*when I look back now … I think the Mayor, the Mayor could have been more active*'.

In recognising this, new councillors emphasised the critical importance of naming issues of discrimination when they occurred.

> '*At times, for expedience, it's swept under the carpet and at other times because people feel aggrieved and actually make a point of saying they felt such and such, then it's dealt with. Otherwise if it's not brought up as something that needs to be dealt with, people just move on … the problem is it'll rise again … It needs to be dealt with so that the two people can solve it between themselves*'

Naming discrimination was understood to require leadership and in the experience of at least one interviewee, the CEO has played a significant part in this, emphasising good conduct expectations. But new councillors themselves also felt called on to demonstrate leadership – in the words of one interviewee '*very early on they realised I wasn't going to be just this inexperienced pushover. Because I might be inexperienced but I'm never a pushover…please realise that you are never going to bully me*'.

'My' voice

'We've broken the women thing, well and truly! We now have 4 elected women and a couple of young men (under 30)'

The design of the online survey did not allow for analysis of the 'differentness' that each new councillor brought to council. The interviews, however, unearthed all kinds of stories about different views, approaches and voices brought to council decision making tables around the State. In part this relates to the demographic represented by the new councillors we interviewed - in part, by the kinds of networks and groups they belong to in their communities, separate from their councillor role. The diversity of life experience represented in just the few typical examples which follow, speaks to the imperative of having diversity in representation on councils and of identifying barriers to broader participation (Manion and Sumich, 2013b).

A councillor employed

New councillors, who were in other paid employment, spoke of the challenge of trying to manage the demands of work, together with that additional workload generated through council. One respondent, for example, a full time worker has found that:

'… the way that council meetings and commitments are structured is not friendly to those who work full time, and this rules out a lot of people'

Another spoke of the difficulties in accessing support in her new role because of the time constraints imposed, not only by her job but by the distance she would likely need to travel to attend a workshop or information session. For another, there was the challenge of trying to maintain a small business.

A farmer or rural representative

A number of councillors saw their presence on council as important in adding a voice for rural citizens. In councils where there is a mix of rural and urban development, the presence of a voice for those rural residents, was seen as a critical opportunity.

'Certainly [now] the farming community and the small towns think they've got representation … I'm the first farmer, there's been one or two farmers in the last 25 years on council … that community feels it's been disenfranchised to some extent due to the change in electoral rules over time …'

' So I sort of thought you know, well this is getting pretty close to home, so it's time to get in there and have a fight … there's never really been a rural representative on the council and that's basically what started it off'

A young(er) councillor

> 'I felt like I'd seen the same characters in our local newspaper for years and years and while I had no objection to what they were doing, I just felt like we needed fresh young people to get involved'

Our 'young' councillors were all, in some way, motivated to stand by a desire to see their own demographic have a voice directly on council.

> 'Local government democracy has to be diverse … I guess the general make-up of regional councils in Victoria is 70 year old men and it has been for a very long time and I think that … getting young people involved and engaged is very important … I guess a lot of councillors can get jaded in their experiences and they fall into a certain routine … A young councillor [gets] involved, and gets elected and comes into the group [and] can bring some energy – and I've felt that, and I'm happy that I've been able to bring that …'

A parent of young children

> 'No one knew what the former councillors were doing, because they never saw their councillors … they were all old and went to the 'older' functions. Because I've got school age kids, they [community] see me at everything.'

This new councillor reported that his parenting roles intersect very well with his work as a councillor; he can bring the views and experiences of a whole segment of the community – families with school-aged children. Though older than 35, he is perceived as the 'young councillor', with a different look and approach.

A political aspirant

There were also those typically 'younger' councillors for whom local government had come to represent a stepping-stone for longer-term career aspirations in politics – in ways that they had not previously anticipated.

> ' … local government, [is] the most direct form of government and the most interesting and engaging … so it does set you up definitely with those grassroots skills of talking to people and communicating to people…'

> 'My career has been on a flat trajectory for so long … what being a councillor has done … has [helped me to realise] that my big interest lies in policy and legislation and lobbying and being an activist and … you don't have to chain yourself to a bulldozer to be an activist, you can be an activist in other ways …'

POLITICS AS YOU MAKE IT

In the previous sections, we have touched upon some of the transitions of 'self' for new councillors developing an identity as a councillor, as a representative and sometimes as a voice for a particular section of the community. Another common transition described by new councillors was that shift from citizen to politician. As one respondent put it:

> *'When I thought politics … I'd always think about state and federal politics, I never … thought about local politics, local government politics …'*

Our findings from both the online data and interviews, suggest that, typically, new councillors had found a way to make politics into something at which they feel effective, despite their initial surprise at the political nature of being a councillor; that is, politics in the sense of activities associated with governance. Typically, respondents expressed their experience this way:

> *'I suppose I was never prepared for the level of politics that comes with being a councillor… the negotiations that have to be undertaken, the bargaining tools you've got to use, … it's more just different words and arguing … trying to get people on side …'*

> *'It caught me unawares that being a local government councillor was being a politician … it never occurred to me that I was becoming an actual politician … It really caught me unawares'*

> *'You've got to learn how to exercise your power and remember that you do have some power – it's not individualised, it's collective …'*

> *'The politicisation of so many things is the tricky area. As planners, councils are both regulators and representatives – two aspects of the role that can be in conflict. Things become politicised, become a political, not an administrative, issue'*

By the end of their first year of the term, most of the interviewees shared that they were reasonably satisfied at their ability, and opportunity, to influence and persuade their councillor colleagues. **Despite being new to the role, they were satisfied that their voice was being heard and, where they won outcomes for the community, felt a great sense of achievement**. They had quickly come to a realisation about what is needed to make it all work.

> *'I think I'm building relationships well and I've got good relationships with several of them [fellow councillors] which is … the only way you're ever going to get anything done. But they're not fake relationships, I feel like they're really good, solid connections with people who understand my passions and … play devil's advocate with me when I come up with ideas. They really challenge my thinking before they give me their support…'*

'You have to take ownership … you really have to step up to the plate, yourself, and just assert yourself … '

'…the last six months have been really interesting because I've really been coming out of my shell … I'm finding my feet in terms of who I will be as a councillor, how brave I am, how bold I'll be'

'[One very important lesson is to go] slow and steady, promises are easily broken and promises made can come unstuck very quickly.'

One respondent, despite his newness, described how he was able to have a mediating influence in a turbulent time in council – he was able to talk with other councillors and smooth over a rough patch and an evident degree of antagonism in the chamber.

These anecdotes are consistent with the quantitative survey results. We asked new councillors to rate their ability to perform what we would broadly classify as 'political skills' – the ability to influence and persuade, to work in partnership with others to achieve goals, to critically evaluate arguments. The trend, across both genders and all types of councils, showed that new councillors rated their skills of this type relatively highly prior to their election, but reported significant increases in their self-rating following 12 months in the role. Skills involving personal qualities and learned political skills were those most frequently identified as essential.

CHALLENGES

In the survey, we asked our councillors to identify the lowest point of their first 18 months in the role. Experiences which were reported as negative were typically related to a perceived lack of political effectiveness; this included being unable to gain influence, a sense of political agendas getting in the way of best outcomes, having the appearance but not the effect of power, and evidence of behind-the-scenes decision making. Elsewhere, some of these factors have been associated with a level of disillusionment amongst women councillors, increasing with length of tenure; they have been proposed as an indicator of their likelihood of standing again (Manion and Sumich, 2013a). It suggests that continued engagement with the councillors in *this* project, could add to our understanding of those factors influencing their decision whether or not to run again.

The qualitative feedback was, generally, consistent with the survey feedback – but the intensity of individual experience, expressed to us in conversation, was always compelling and gave important insight to the effect of those challenges. The focus tended to be upon relationships with fellow councillors, council staff and community.

With councillors

> '… there have been … councillors … who have sort of set up a little block, where they sort of get together and vote without having us – [it] doesn't matter how well you present an argument if a block votes against you … that's something I have found difficult to cope with … it still churns me up'

Happily, all of our interviewees felt that their voice was being heard in the council chamber despite their lack of experience and most felt that, over time, their capacity to influence would grow. This contrasts with the reported experience of new (women) councillors in NSW who felt that their input was often not valued by experienced representatives (Manion and Sumich, 2013a). However, some expressed a certain frustration at, as one respondent put it, *'holding … ground against people with entrenched values'* and positions.

> *'Councillors who have been on council for a while get complacent and this is in conflict with new councillors who are eager to learn'*

With council staff

Challenges in dealing with council staff and understanding '*the intersection between council and council officer'* was another area of challenge identified by some new councillors:

> '*… if you don't have that ability to understand the technical side of stuff and to argue with the officers, I think it can be very challenging'*
>
> '*I think the one thing that I didn't anticipate was … the difficulty at times in dealing with council officers. For me that's probably been the biggest surprise'*
>
> '*In keeping true to your views, your values and whatever else … you're faced with the choice of either burning bridges with those relationships or just keeping quiet for the sake of peace … and to me, I just don't have it in me to just be silent when … things need changing, things need pointing out'*

One respondent was of the view that councillor colleagues enjoyed a different, easier relationship to senior council staff, because of links outside of council, through sport.

With community

A small number of our respondents, both in the survey and in interview, identified challenges outside of council, particularly community angst on certain issues and community expectations of them as councillor; they perceived a lack of community understanding of the limitations and realities of their role (Burdess and O'Toole, 2004):

> '*… I think the amount of scrutiny and responsibility seems to be disproportionate in that there is a huge amount of expectations on the councillors and yet they have very little overall power and control over the things that they've been trusted to do'*
>
> '*… there is a significant amount of community misinformation about what councillors do – People don't quite have the reality of what a councillor does… I didn't when I first went for it … and I had to learn very quickly'*
>
> '*It was more the level of expectation I put on myself to be able to show the community I'm keen to do things for them – what I did learn was that Rome wasn't built in a day and I've been able to turn that "I want it done now" to "I want it done but let's do it like this and let's do it the right way instead of doing it rushed and making a hash of it"… That's the major thing I can honestly say, the understanding that you might not make someone happy today but you'll keep the whole community happy in a year'*

Information

As put by one interviewee '*… it all comes in a great big wheelbarrow full that's dumped on you and you have to absorb it and make decisions …'*. From both surveys, it was clear that another challenge for new councillors is the significant amount of unfamiliar and sometimes complex information with which they are expected to deal. New councillors noted that '*… the supply of information from staff … is extremely important'*, central to the ability to understand council business, make informed decisions and effectively respond to community requests and issues. This is particularly so in the areas noted as the most challenging, namely budgeting, finances, planning, governance and procedures. This is consistent with the findings of Manion and Sumich (2013a), in their NSW-based research into the experience of women councillors.

In general, new councillors considered the information they received to be high quality and sufficient for their needs – '*I believe I have been provided with all the resources, information and advice I have needed when I asked for it and as I needed it'*. Both survey respondents and interviewees noted the efforts made by officers and others to explain issues, answer questions and generally support councillors in their role. That this support was both needed, and appreciated, is reflected in the survey, where a wide range of supports - from council briefings and training, to resources provided by peak bodies - were rated highly useful by the majority of respondents (Manion and Sumich, 2013b).

To manage the information task, new councillors have developed a range of skills from learning '*what you need and who you need to ask for it'* to becoming '*very good at reading … prepared to read things you don't understand'* and even to developing the confidence to first reject an officer report then to request another, with additional, or different, details.

A number of new councillors were of the view that issues around the depth and quantity of information, particularly with regard to budgeting and financial literacy, were probably inevitable and not the fault of council process per se – '*the training is there but I think it is still quite a daunting task for new councillors'.* One interviewee was prepared for this task and, after election, approached the issue of information on the understanding that '*as a councillor I was expected to stand back and look rather than be involved'*.

This idea, that councillors need the 'big picture' before the detail was echoed by a number of interviewees – '*sometimes … I'd love it in dot points rather than full prose, that makes it easy for me to read and if I need any clarification with the dot points I'll come and talk to you about it'*. This view was related to an understanding reached by a number of new councillors through the experience of the first year - that '*there is a whole organisation that sits behind the role of councillors, each with an important, and distinct, role to play'.*

REWARDS

To focus on the negative aspects and difficulties of being a new councillor would be to misrepresent the typical experience of those councillors who participated in this project. **The majority of respondents found the positive aspects of their new role much easier to identify than those that made it difficult**. This was, for us, a notable finding of this project and somewhat contrary to the tenor of the anecdotal feedback we had previously received. This is not to suggest that the life of a new councillor is without difficulty; this was explored in the previous section. However, it does suggest that **there is terrific scope to celebrate the role of councillor as one of immense satisfaction and reward**.

We invited our interviewees to reflect on their overall sense of the role, 18 months into their first term. Typically, the theme was positive:

> *'It's a really good starting place … you learn a lot, you get to have all sorts of really cool, great experiences and I mean you've got to be tough, you've got to weather the bad stuff as well … but incredibly worthwhile, incredibly rewarding and even though it's a tough gig, I wouldn't change it for the world'*

> *'It's fun. I actually do really enjoy it. A lot of people, they see it as a task or a chore … But I think if you're going to go on council, you've got to look at it … from a fun point of view. What you do is you're making people's lives better'*

Our respondents often returned to the idea of making a difference and the satisfaction of participating and of bringing their voice to council. For example:

> *'I really love when we're in briefing and we're in chambers and we're debating an issue and I love the arguments … because both sides present really good arguments'*

> *'Realise that the things to you do every day are affected by council and experience the richness that is local government and community – the two, side by side'*

New councillors also spoke of their links outside of council and the sense of *privilege* and *honour* they experienced both in representing, and working with, community:

> *'I get a lot of joy out of seeing people make a positive contribution to their community and how their contribution builds the community where they are'*

> *'There is something I think inherently empowering and inherently inspiring about being able to effect change and influence your community. This is my home town and I'm really passionate about it … the fact that you're there is inherently empowering'*

CONCLUSION

The VLGA stands for responsive local governance and the democratic collaboration of councils with their communities. This encompasses a concern for the nature and quality of local decision-making, including the formal structures and practices of representative democracy. Our local government councillors are central to these practices.

This research sought to gain a better understanding of the experiences of new councillors; the shifts in thinking that come with the role, the sacrifices made by those who seek it and the challenges and rewards. Anecdotal evidence had suggested to us that managing the many demands of this new position posed significant difficulties. The new councillors who have participated in this research, both online and over the phone, have given most generously of their time and their confidence – and afforded us a window into their journey, from citizen to councillor.

Potentially, the timing of this project offers us a baseline for comparison of councillors' views, later in their term. Meantime, what appears to matter to all the participants in this research was the act of contribution – whether it be to a debate with fellow councillors or to the progression issues closer to home, new councillors were oriented toward making their communities better places. Implicit in this is the clear understanding that to do so, you need to participate.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research would clearly not have been possible without the willing and generous cooperation of those new councillors who participated in this project. Our challenge has been to do justice to the views and stories that you have shared.

You know who you are – so, thank you.

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APPENDIX A: LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature found there to be a lack of studies that look specifically at the experiences of newly elected councillors, confirming it to be an area worthy of local investigation (UTS, 2013).

However, there is a significant body of research that is able to shed some light on aspects of this experience. In Australia, Manion and Sumich's (2013a; 2013b) work with women councillors has highlighted the nature of the role through the lens of gender. Internationally, studies have explored the backgrounds of councillors and the factors that lead candidates to pursue local election. It has also examined how these motivating factors align with models of representation and the changing nature of local governance.

Seeking office

Research suggests that citizens do not drift into politics - but neither are they predestined for office (Verhelst and Kerrouche, 2012). Instead there are some identifiable 'stepping stones' that usually lead the way. These stepping stones are both demographic and experiential.

European researchers studied the backgrounds of local councillors in 16 countries and found that gender (male), age (middle-years) and education (professional) were associated with participation as a councillor in local government (Reynaert 2012).

Contributing to these factors are individual motivations. Pederson (2013) outlines a framework for understanding motivations to engage in public office which encompasses five dimensions – commitment to the public interest, attraction to policy making, self-sacrifice and a 'user' orientation (to assist users of public services). Research suggests that the most important motivation driving citizens is a desire to serve the community (Bottom and Copus, 2011).

Work by Verhelst and Kerrouche (2012) suggests that in addition to demographic characteristics and individual motivations, membership of local organisations is a central factor in formulating the path to office for citizens. Membership fosters organisational and communicative skills that lend themselves to the councillor role. It also offers citizens the opportunity to build and expand their personal networks.

Representation

Elected representatives provide councils democratic legitimacy and are consequently subject to citizen expectations of what this legitimacy should look like. Burdess and O'Toole (2004) outline three views of representation; 'interest' representation (where elected representatives are viewed by citizens as their personal advocate); 'corporate' representation (where elected representatives are viewed as trustees and expected to 'act for' the

whole municipality; and 'mirror' representation (where representatives are expected to reflect community opinion, interest, class and physical type).

All of these perspectives on representation come to the fore for councillors upon entering office and interacting with the different expectations at work in the community. Studies have found that these expectations are shifting. A tendency for citizens to project their own characteristics onto elected representatives has declined, replaced by tendency for citizens to focus on what councillors actually do and how they act in their representative role (Rao 1998).

Government to governance

Similar to the shift taking place in public expectations, the environment in which councillors work is undergoing change, captured by the idea of a shift from government to 'governance'.

Conditions of globalisation, mass communication and urbanisation are driving new ideas about what government should and shouldn't do. More actors are involved in public decision making and governments at all levels are facing new participatory demands. This has implications for elected councillors entering office. Instead of occupying central stage in the locality, research suggests that councillors now must '*face a struggle for engagement themselves in a complex series of governance networks'* (Copus 2010)*.

In these conditions, there is greater emphasis on the role of political leaders and increasing calls on councillors to develop stronger leadership styles and abilities (Bochel and Bochel 2010). There are also increasing calls on councillors entering office, to draw on a range of new communication methods including online and through the use of social media (Stanyer 2008).

APPENDIX B: METHOD

All of those councillors never-before-elected in October 2012, a pool of 271, were contacted by email and invited to participate in an anonymous self-completion online survey. During December 2013 – January 2014, the views of 62 newly-elected councillors were captured in this way (a response rate of 23%).

Women and men were equally represented in this sample (analysis of the full cohort of new councillors elected in 2012, shows that 39% were women). Study participants were typically Australian-born, spoke English as their first language and were aged between 40 and 70 years. Most were in paid employment, for at least some of the time - and 44% of respondents described their area of training as being in either a profession or management. The great majority (77%) were actively involved in a community organisation at the time of their election.

Between them, the online respondents represented 41 different councils around the State (52% of all councils); 6 regional (60% of regional councils); 19 metropolitan (61% of metropolitan councils); and 16 rural (42% of rural councils).

The qualitative survey (conducted in March 2014) drew on the experiences of 6 men and 6 women; interviews were conducted over the phone and, on average, took 45 minutes to complete. Some of this group had previously indicated an interest in the project – the remainder were invited to participate from the pool of new councillors across the State; our intention was to ensure input from councillors across different types of councils, together with a mix of gender and age groups.

It is important to bear in mind that the on-line survey was voluntary and therefore self-selecting, which immediately introduces a significant bias into the results reported here. Similarly, the men and women who were interviewed for this project were approached deliberatively. So, whilst it would be wrong to assume that the views represented here are wholly representative of new councillors across the State, they do offer a snapshot of that collective experience.