



COUNCIL BUDGET SPENDING - CONSUMER PRIORITIES

Feb 2024



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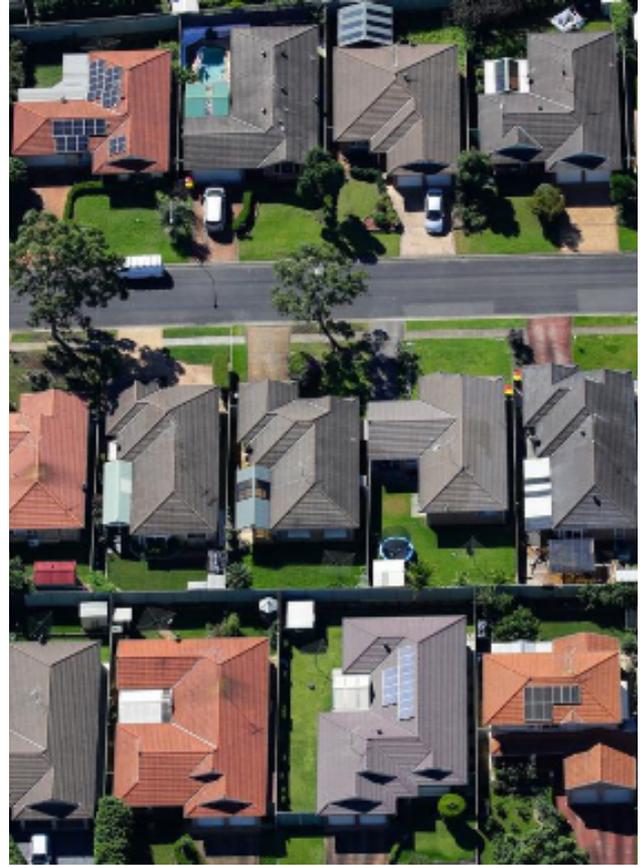


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INTRODUCTION

Local Government is a complex field. It employs 50,000 staff in Victoria alone. Victorian councils collect around \$12B in revenue annually.

Councils seek Community input as part of the budget process each year. Much feedback is that the processes are poorly constructed, difficult, or complex to complete, and engagement is LOW. We sought to report on the Council Budget Priorities of ordinary residents.



METHODOLOGY

The design of data collection needed to be random and VERY simple. The survey was designed with a group of people to ensure ease of participation and access and that it could be done in 60 seconds or less.

We commenced accepting survey results in Nov 2023 and closed the survey in January 2024.

Council Watch designed an online survey with a diverse range of community members. The survey was hosted as a form via our website via a QR Code link to the form. The survey was advertised online through social media channels at an approximate cost of \$2100. The survey was designed to allow random replies. We advertised on Facebook, Instagram and Messenger.

This enabled us to get a wide variety of perceptions, we admit that like any survey on local councils, those more interested in the topics were likely to reply and this survey would be representative of an older (homeowner) audience.

We garnered 1669 responses from people across Victoria and the ad was seen by over 50,000 people. This also reflects the low participation rate in the LG sector, which is consistent with Council engagement practices. We have copied the same model of engagement that Councils typically use.

We identified that there were responses from all municipalities, albeit some more than others. Whilst the research shows an appropriate level of responses to form a statewide view, it is not possible to form specific council results which will be developed further next year.

FINDINGS SUMMARY

Councils generally spend money on the following items in highest to lowest spend:

- **Staff and associated costs**
- **Contractors & materials**
- **Special Projects (building NEW assets)**
- **Asset maintenance and upgrades (Existing)**

Assets include **any item that carries a value**, such as:

parks, roads, footpaths, drains, buildings, vehicles, trucks, equipment, etc.

Councils have a complex asset base that requires strategic planning and complex asset plans to ensure assets are not devalued or in disrepair and that new assets and infrastructure meet growing population needs.

Existing asset renewal is often under pressure with many Councils facing a deficit in actual funding vs need on items such as footpaths, roads, parks, libraries, council buildings, etc.

The top 10 items people expect their Councils to spend on:

- **Roads (including upgrades)**
- **Footpaths (including upgrades)**
- **Removal of dumped rubbish**
- **Parks & Gardens (including NEW)**
- **Weed removal and maintenance**
- **Street & Footpath Cleaning**
- **Aged Care (in-home support)**
- **Planning - faster approvals**
- **Planning - preventing overdevelopment**
- **Small Business Support**

These results send a clear message to Councils, Councillors, and voters.

What do you want YOUR Council to spend money on in this years budget?

Total Responses	1669	%
Roads (including upgrades)	1431	86%
Footpaths (including upgrades)	1126	67%
Removal of dumped rubbish	1066	64%
Parks & Gardens	1059	63%
Weed removal and maintenance	973	58%
Street & Footpath Cleaning	949	57%
Aged Care - in home support	934	56%
Planning - faster approvals/permits	771	46%
Planning - preventing overdevelopment	767	46%
Small business support	765	46%
Sport/Recreation facilities	658	39%
Tree Planting	550	33%
Streetscapes beautification	512	31%
Kids Playgrounds and upgrades	488	29%
Disability support programs	461	28%
Youth Services	413	25%
Kinder/Childcare	329	20%
Animal Welfare & registration	328	20%
Community Centres	325	19%
Community grants programs	281	17%
New aquatic Facilities	272	16%
New Green Passive Open Space	266	16%
Maternal Health	240	14%
Skate Parks and Youth venues	231	14%
Food Health & Permits	225	13%
More Libraries & upgrades	170	10%
Arts and Culture	141	8%
Climate change plans and actions	132	8%
Equality/Diversity	89	5%
Indigenous reconcilliation	55	3%
LGBTQIA+ issues	41	2%

WHAT DO YOU WANT YOUR COUNCIL TO **SPEND LESS** ON?

We asked participants what they wanted LESS spent on.

The responses were varied.

We have grouped them by the highest response to the lowest in terms of #.

- **Climate Change**
- **Political issues/Activism - especially federal and overseas**
- **LGBTQIA+ issues**
- **Staff numbers/salaries**
- **Consultants and Consultant reports**
- **Bike Lanes**
- **CEOs and executives pay**
- **Diversity and equality issues**
- **Indigenous issues and Reconciliation events**
- **Junkets and travel (especially overseas and interstate)**
- **Representative bodies for Councils**

The responses were consistent that less needs to be spent on the above issues.

Whilst Councils may not be spending inordinate amounts on some of these items, it is clear that Victorians do not want money spent in these areas.

BIGGEST ISSUES IN COUNCILS - PERCEPTIONS

We already know from our previous Study - “**Perceptions of local government**” - that Victorians believe the following problems exist in our Councils:

- Roads not being maintained - potholes and damage levels high
- Local Streets are dirty
- Footpaths in poor condition
- Closure of Aged Care services and support
- Traffic and Congestion on Council roads
- Poor Community Consultation
- Assets not maintained properly
- Community Consultation is a very poor standard
- More green open space needed
- Social causes being fostered by Councils
- CEO excessive power
- Overstaffed and poor service
- Poor Management Standards and Conduct
- Spending on Consultants is excessive
- Just revenue raising all the time
- Spending on Councillors’ pet projects
- Poor customer satisfaction/experiences
- Poor town planning - overdevelopment
- Don’t admit when they make a mistake
- Councils don’t listen to the community
- Council strategies and plans don’t align with expectations of the council’s role
- Councillor Conduct can be terrible
- No longer employ local people
- Act like Dictators
- Council Staff do not care about the community

THE SURVEY

Email *

Enter your email

Out of 100 what do you rank your councils overall financial performance as? *

Enter a number 0-100



Please tick the top 10 areas you want YOUR Council to spend YOUR money on.... *

- New Green Passive Open Space
- Roads (including upgrades)
- Footpaths (including upgrades)
- More Libraries & upgrades
- Parks & Gardens - maintenance of existing
- Kinder/Childcare
- Street & Footpath Cleaning
- Disability support programs
- Arts and Culture
- Streetscapes beautification
- Climate change plans and actions
- Equality/Diversity
- LGBTQIA+ issues

- New Aquatic Facilities
- More Kids Playgrounds and upgrades of existing
- Sport/Recreation facilities
- Youth Services
- Food Health & Permits
- Small Business Support
- Animal Welfare & registration
- Maternal Health
- Aged Care - home support and meals on wheels
- Indigenous Reconciliation
- Community Grants programs
- Community Centres
- Planning - preventing overdevelopment
- Tree Planting
- Weed removal and maintenance
- Skate Parks and Youth venues
- Removal of dumped rubbish

Removal of dumped rubbish

Planning - faster approvals of permits

What things would you like your council to spend less on? *

Enter text here

What is your council?

Select an option



Submit



RECOMMENDATIONS

The role of local councils is complex and ever-changing.

The sector budgets for around \$12 Billion in expenses each year.

Some Council budgets are over \$500 Million.

It is not uncommon for councils to complain they are struggling because rate capping limits their annual rate increases.

Roads continue to be the biggest statewide problem for all councils, with not enough being done. The community is very vocal that roads are in very poor condition across Councils.

The results of this survey are clear, ordinary Victorians want Councils to focus on spending their rates money on:

- Roads (including upgrades)**
- Footpaths (including upgrades)**
- Removal of dumped rubbish**
- Parks & Gardens (including NEW)**
- Weed removal and maintenance**
- Street & Footpath Cleaning**
- Aged Care (in-home support)**
- Planning - faster approvals**
- Planning - preventing overdevelopment**
- Small Business Support**

There is no doubt that Councils provide and cover a large range of services and issues in our Local communities.

Councils often spruik that they provide over 100 services.

By asking residents what they wanted their councils to spend money on we were able to see what the expectations are of ordinary Victorians.

The findings are at odds with much of the focus of the sector, they give rise to some serious questions.

- **Where are Councils getting their data from?**
- **How are councils making spending decisions and priorities?**
- **What evidence do councils procure to justify spending?**
- **Are community consultation processes in councils failing?**
- **Why are councils spending large amounts of money on items people don't want them to?**
- **How can councils align with community expectations?**

We recommend that councils conduct annual research into Community priorities on council spending. This should form one part of the budget process foundation. This process should be led by Councillors and CEOs.