



# VOTER PRIORITIES

## 2024 VIC COUNCIL ELECTIONS



Sept 2024

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## **DISCLAIMER**

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to our members, volunteers, and those in the general public that have donated and contributed time or money either as part of this survey or in previous opportunities. Without you Council Watch would not exist.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2024, as part of the standard 4-year election cycle, all Victorian Councils (excluding those in administration) are holding elections for all Councillor positions.

With over 3 million votes to be cast in this election cycle and some 2,500 candidates expected to be in the running for around 620 positions, it is interesting that very few organisations poll voters in advance of these elections to measure and report voter perceptions and expectations - most focus on State or Federal elections, leaving Local Government unattended, despite the arguable impact the latter have on the daily lives of Australians. There are some minor efforts from the leader group of local papers (Herald Sun), but this is not consistent across the State. Local Government elections therefore receive very little attention from the media. There are also single issue pledges and requests (e.g. on Climate Change or global conflicts) that rank candidates, but to the best of our knowledge there is no list of questions the average voter wants answered from candidates, or at least one that aims to capture a wider view on things that matter to voters.

In an attempt to fill this gap, we sought the input of thousands of Victorian residents. We asked them to tell us what they expected from candidates in a number of issues like place of residence, and acceptance of donations. We also sought to measure opinions on current Council service delivery, to rank Council services in terms of what they wanted more of (or improvement in), and a range of questions on items like livestreaming all meetings of Councillors, and hardships in paying rates.

Council Watch has decided to implement this for each Council election cycle to measure changes and themes over time. Our 2024 findings reveal:

- Council satisfaction remains low across the state with a few exceptions.
- Voters are focused on cost of living and the pressure of paying rates bills - 70% of people declare struggling to pay their rates more compared to last year.
- Voters expect Councils to provide free parking in high street locations to support local businesses.
- Voters overwhelmingly want improvement in critical infrastructure such as roads and footpaths, more than politically-charged initiatives such as climate change or LGBTQIA+.
- 87% of voters expect Councils to allow people to take as long as needed to pay their rates without penalties.
- 84% of voters expect Councils to offer rates discounts in severe hardship circumstances.
- 82% of voters expect Candidates to live in the ward they seek to represent.
- 90% of Voters expect Councils to do more public consultation.
- 95% of voters do not want candidates to accept donations from developers, political parties, and the gambling industry.
- 76% of voters want Councillors to listen more to the community than to Council staff.
- 91% of voters want Councillor meetings (Briefings and Council Meetings) to be livestreamed.

These outcomes should serve as a clear reset to Council executives around voter expectations, and a signal to candidates what really matters to voters.

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# INTRODUCTION

Every election cycle brings societal and economic impacts and changes that affect the priorities of voters.

The 2024 election cycle has shown that as a State Victoria is battling many conditions, including:

- record state debt levels
- the highest personal tax levels of any Australian State or Territory
- record cost of living pressures
- a housing crisis
- a rental affordability crisis

Against this backdrop, Councils have declared on numerous occasions that they are constrained and under-funded. There is a current State Parliamentary inquiry into the funding of Councils.

The Local Government Act 2020 has also imposed a number of changes on the electoral process, namely:

- All voting is now postal - none is permitted by attendance.
- All metro Councils have been forced to adopt single member ward structures.

Despite all of this, Local Government elections in general receive very little media attention, despite the arguable impact these elections have over the daily life of the general population. There are some localised efforts by some newspapers such as the Herald Sun, but in our opinion these efforts are not consistent across the State - not in the same manner than, for example, polls ahead of Federal elections. Furthermore, some efforts to capture the intentions of voters ahead of Council elections involve single-issue polls and pledges, such as on Climate Change, or global affairs such as the Palestine-Israeli conflict.

In an effort to fill this gap, we designed a short survey aimed to ask Victorian voters their opinion on current Council service delivery, whether they are struggling to pay rates more than last year, whether they want their running candidates and Councillors to accept donations from developers and political parties, and more.

This survey was intentionally a “snap poll” of what matters to voters 60 days out from elections. We ran this survey for about two weeks, from August 17th - August 31st, and we promoted it via social media advertising to get a more representative sample. We collected over 1800 responses from across Victoria, with the exception of one Council (West Wimmera). This is a large enough sample to be statistically reliable, and we estimate that our error rate would be around 2% at 95% confidence.

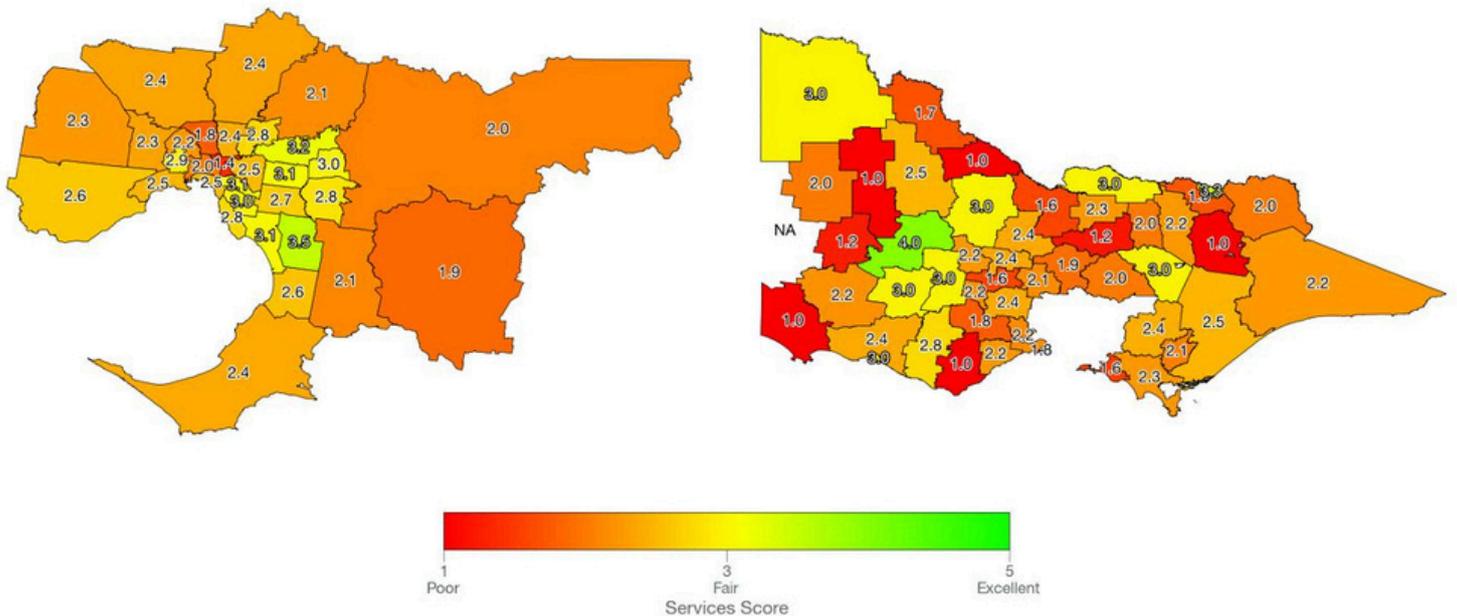
The survey results nonetheless echo wider trends on Victoria and Australia at large: voters are struggling to afford their rates and would like their Councils to help them (at least by not charging them for parking), they would like their candidates to be without financial ties to lobby groups, and would like their Councils to focus on delivery of critical infrastructure first and foremost, amongst other things. Our results should serve as a clear reset to Council executives around voter expectations, and a signal to candidates what really matters to voters.

# SURVEY RESULTS

## PERCEPTIONS OF COUNCIL SERVICES

When we asked the general population how they currently rated their respective Councils on the provision of services, we once again could observe echoes of the broader theme: Councils are failing to provide services that meet the expectations of their constituents. The map below shows the average rating each Council got for this question. With some notable exceptions, most Councils across Victoria rated either poorly or fair at best. Interestingly, however, all the worst rating Councils were located in regional Victoria.

### WHEN IT COMES TO PROVIDING COUNCIL SERVICES, HOW WOULD YOU CURRENTLY RATE YOUR COUNCIL?

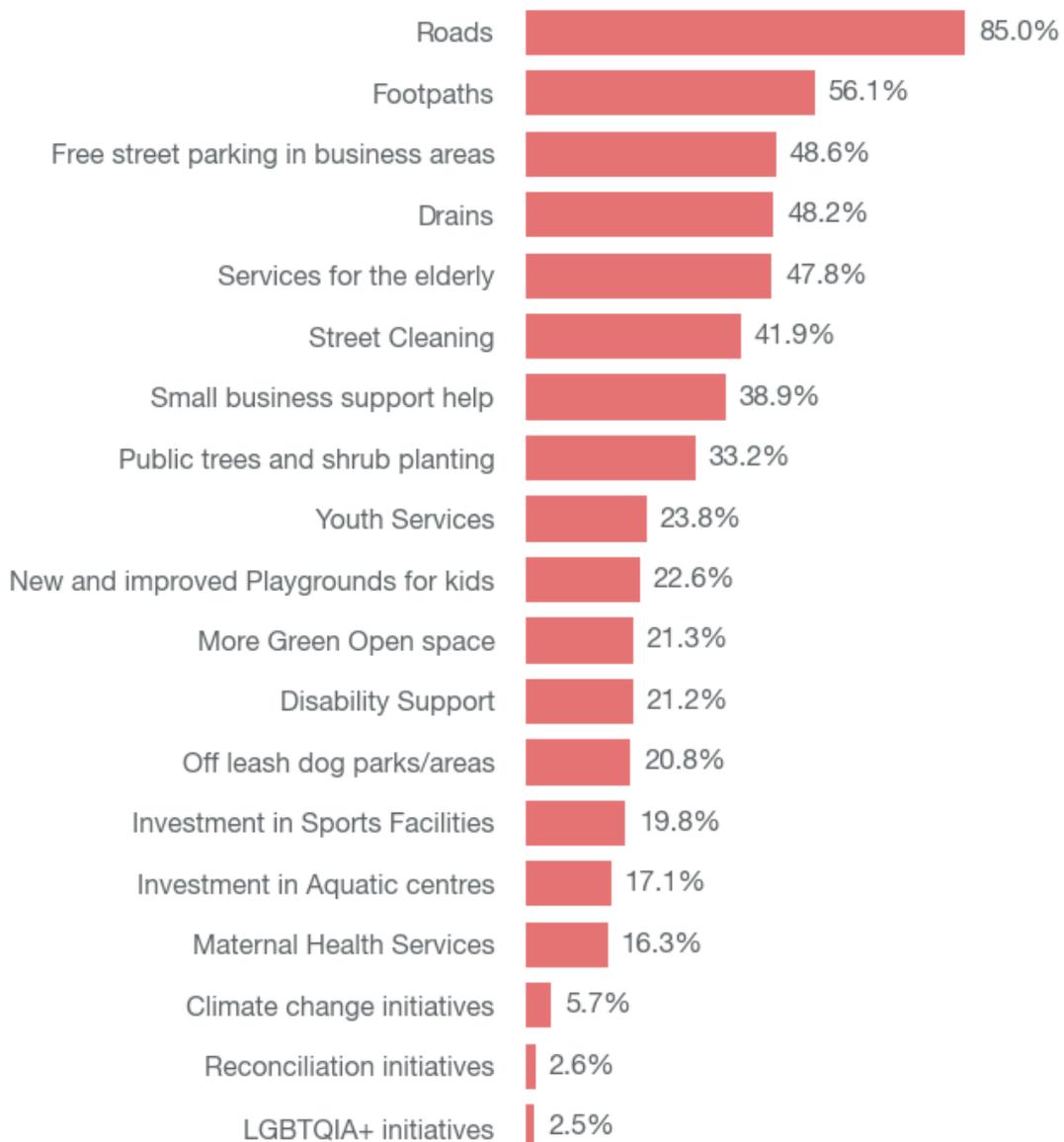


Top 5 Councils	Score	Bottom 5 Councils	Score
Northern Grampians	4.0	Alpine	1.0
Greater Dandenong	3.5	Glenelg	1.0
Wodonga	3.3	Gannawarra	1.0
Manningham	3.2	Colac Otway	1.0
Whitehorse	3.1	Yarrambiak	1.0

We also asked what the general population wanted their Councils to deliver more of, or to improve. Unsurprisingly, the top preferences across the population are heavily skewed towards critical infrastructure such as roads, footpaths and drains, which are all items where Councils have invested very little as of late.

On the other hand, very few members showed preferences and support for the more progressive and politically charged initiatives involving Climate Change, Reconciliation, or LGBTQIA+. These results reinforce our previous results showing, once again, that people want their Council to step out of politics and focus on the basics first and foremost.

**WHEN IT COMES TO WHAT YOU WANT THESE ELECTIONS, WHAT THINGS DO YOU WANT COUNCIL TO DELIVER MORE OF? (ONLY CHOOSE ITEMS YOU WANT MORE OR IMPROVEMENT IN)**

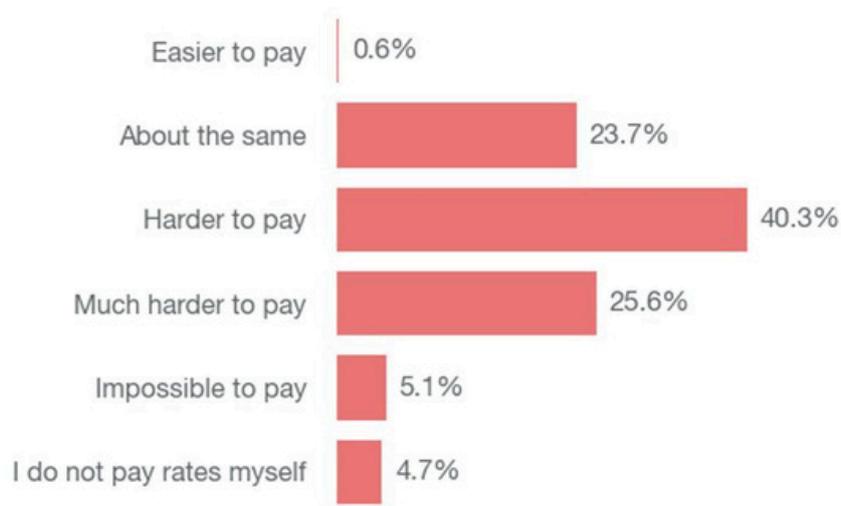


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## RATES

We also asked several questions regarding the difficulties around payment of Council rates. In line with the wider sentiment of the current cost-of-living crisis, the responses indicate that for more than 70% of payers, rates have become harder to pay than last year. We know that more than 1 million Victorians are in mortgage or rent stress as of September 2024, which makes the growing rates harder to pay as a consequence. This is a clear warning sign to the Local Government sector that they will need to plan for cash flow implications and impacts. It is also a clear indicator that Councils need to do more to assist with rates payments, discounts, deferrals and fee waivers.

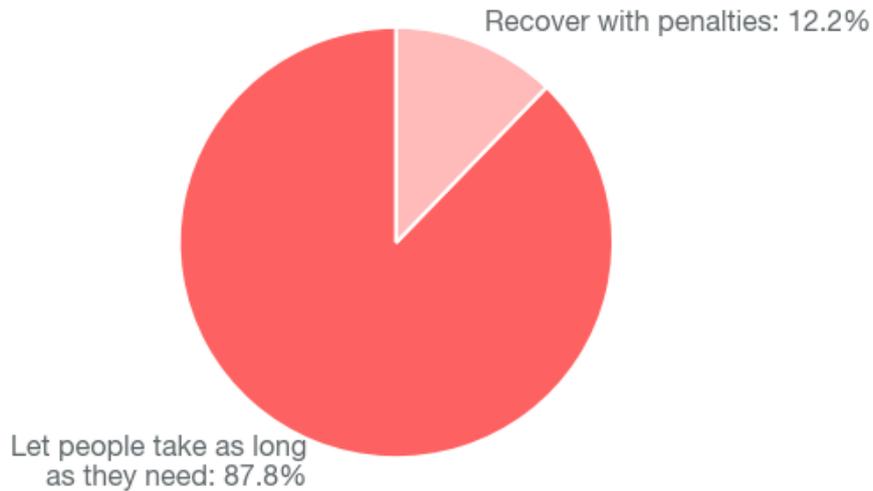
### WHEN IT COMES TO COST OF LIVING AND PAYING RATES, IS THIS YEAR'S RATES:



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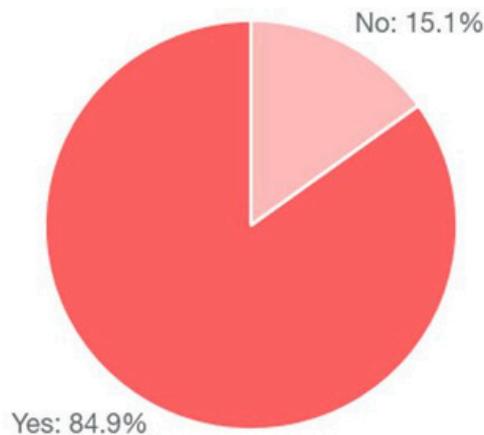
Another sign of consumer expectations, we observe that almost 90% of people expect Councils to allow people as much time as needed to make rates payments and installments and that they should *not* be charged interest or penalties.

**IF PEOPLE ARE STRUGGLING TO PAY RATES, COUNCIL SHOULD:**



In what may surprise Council CEO's and executives, almost 85% of voters expect Councils to offer financial discounts and waivers for those in hardship. This is currently not aligned with industry practice. Therefore, we will advocate to the State Parliament that this should be a serious consideration of legislative reform if Councils will not adopt a widespread model of assisting genuine hardship.

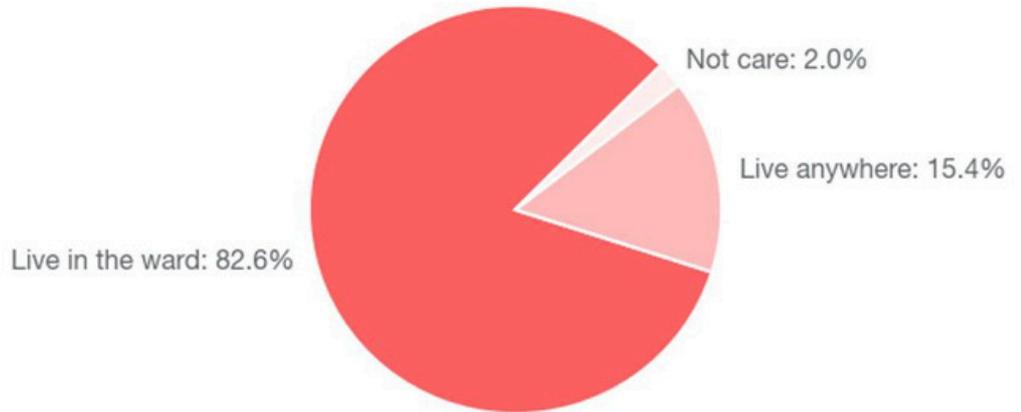
**IF PEOPLE ARE IN GENUINE HARDSHIP, SHOULD COUNCIL OFFER RATES DISCOUNTS?**



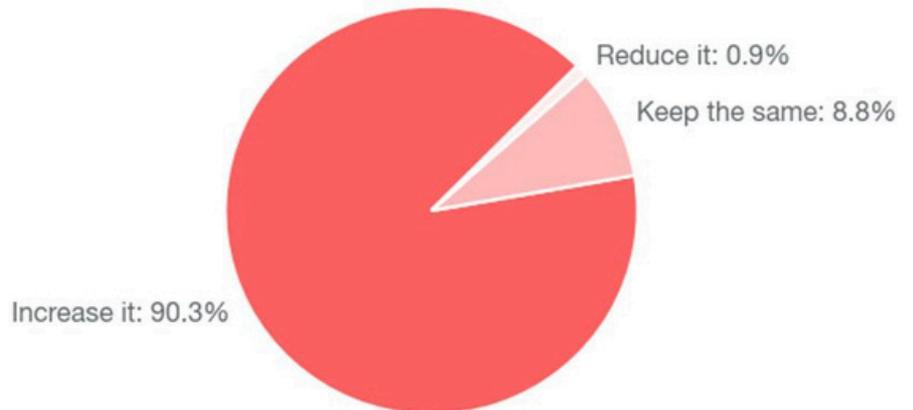
It is also clear that the majority of surveyed voters prefer candidates who live in the ward they represent, with approximately 83% in favour. Community consultation is also another issue where the population wants improvement, as over 90% of surveyed voters want it increased. Councils have therefore a lot of work to do in this space, regardless of who is elected. Finally, people do not want politically compromised candidates, and the latter should take note of these results: over 95% of voters do not want candidates to accept any donations from property developers, political parties, or gambling organisations.

**WHEN IT COMES TO CANDIDATES RUNNING FOR ELECTION, DO YOU WANT THEM TO:**

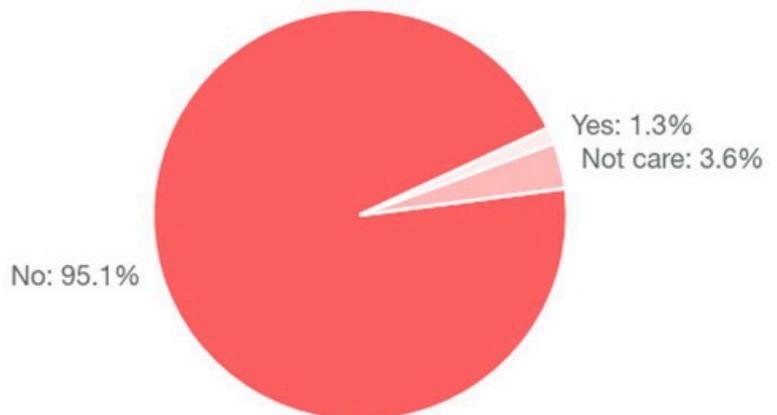
**LIVE IN THE WARD?**



**INCREASE/DECREASE  
COMMUNITY  
CONSULTATION?**



**ACCEPT DONATIONS FROM  
DEVELOPERS, POLITICAL  
PARTIES, GAMBLING  
COMPANIES?**

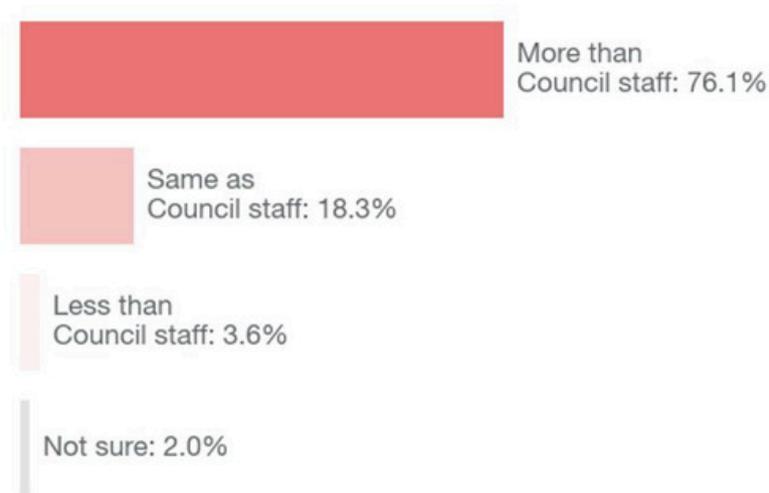


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Having Community consultation increased would be moot if the voices of people were not heard and valued. It is therefore unsurprising that over three quarter of surveyed people prefer their voices being valued more than those of politicians, lobbyists, activists, and managers that fill in the ranks of Council staff.

**This points to a serious perception that the Community believes Councils value the opinions of officers at the risk of those of the Community. There is much work for the sector to do in this space if they are to regain Community confidence.**

### **IF ELECTED, DO YOU WANT COUNCILLORS TO VALUE INPUT FROM RESIDENTS:**



Transparency is also a strong motivation for the Community at large: over 90% of surveyed voters want Councils to open *all* Council meetings and Councillor briefing sessions to the public. This is a clear expectation from the Community and we strongly believe Councils should oblige.

### **WHEN IT COMES TO CANDIDATES RUNNING FOR ELECTION, DO YOU WANT THEM TO**



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# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Council Watch is delighted to present the data we have collected from voters across the state. This report is, to the best of our knowledge, the only tool of in Victoria that has measured voter expectations ahead of the 2024 Council elections in a wide range of issues.

## SERVICE PERFORMANCE

The Victorian heat map reveals that, with few exceptions, Councils' provision of services is overwhelmingly rated between poor and fair at best. This should be a warning sign to all CEO's and Councillors that Councils are not delivering services to Community expectations.

**Recommendation:** Councils should approach the 4 Year Strategic planning process with service and operational performance at the front of mind, and develop clear standards to be met. CEOs need to be held accountable by the Councillor group for the poor service performance in contrast with Community expectations, and Councillors should feel empowered to do so.

## INVESTMENT IN INFRASTRUCTURE

Our survey echoes wider trends in Victoria showing how critical infrastructure such as roads and drains are clearly being left behind. There is arguably little more important than roads, footpaths and drains to ensure a Community can thrive and be resilient against the ever-changing weather.

**Recommendation:** Councils should invest and prioritise the infrastructure and services the constituents find important by overwhelming majority, rather than funding services and initiatives that only serve political or vested interests.

## COST OF LIVING

While the Local Government sector is seeking further flexibility in the rate capping system through the Parliament enquiry into Council funding and sustainability, the wider Community is struggling to afford to pay rates, mortgages, and bills in general. Voters are sending a clear signal to the sector that they do not believe rates should be increases in the manner the sector would like for themselves, in yet another example of political disconnection.

**Recommendation:** Rate capping is clearly a vital mechanism for voters that they do not want Councils to tinker with. Cost of living pressures mean that Councils need to be very careful about imposing increases in rates or fees and charges, and we recommend that Councils find other internal budget mechanisms to redirect funding to fulfill their obligations.

## EXPECTATIONS OF CANDIDATES

There is a clear expectation that the people want their candidates to have some skin in the game, by at least living in the place they seek to represent. They also want their candidates to listen to the people, and not be compromised or tainted by political or financial ties with political parties, gambling companies, developers, or other special interest groups.

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**Recommendation:** It is only sensible that candidates should live in the ward they seek to represent, as this can serve as a basic deterrent to making decisions that impact the ward negatively. We also recommend that candidates pursue a clean political career that aims to elevate the voices of the constituents far above than those who use money to influence politics.

## **EXPECTATIONS OF ELECTED COUNCILLORS**

Finally, it is also clear that the people want their elected Councillors to ensure transparency in meetings and all decision processes, and that they expect their Councillors to elevate their voices far above those of Council staff -- after all, Councillors are the democratically elected representatives of the Community at large, not just mouthpieces for Council staff that cannot be held accountable at the ballot box.

**Recommendation:** Elected Councillors should ensure all meetings and briefings are open to the public, in line with the collective sentiment, and that Councillors listen to the Community first and foremost, in line with their roles as democratically elected representatives.