

Parliamentary Inquiry into Fraud and Corruption Control in Local Government - Additional Questions – Mayor Jarrod Bell, Hume City Council

1. How comfortable are you with the current use of confidentiality in meetings within your Council?

I am generally comfortable with the current use of confidential sessions within my Council. Over recent years at Hume City Council, there has been a noticeable and positive reduction in the number of matters considered in confidential session. This is a trend I have supported and encouraged.

Confidential sessions remain necessary in certain circumstances, particularly where matters involve commercially sensitive information, contractual negotiations, or personal privacy considerations. However, there has been a clear and deliberate shift towards greater transparency. For example, we have implemented a practice of splitting reports so that any aspects which can be considered and resolved in open session are done so, while only those elements requiring confidentiality (such as detailed contract or tender information) remain in closed session. This hybrid approach works well to balance the need for confidentiality with the expectation of transparency.

a. How could the need for confidentiality be better balanced with the requirement for Council decisions to be reported transparently?

The approach currently adopted at Hume, splitting reports and allowing debate and voting on non-confidential elements in open session is an effective model. Additionally, providing clear public summaries of decisions taken in confidential session, once the commercial or sensitive elements have passed, further enhances transparency without compromising legal or contractual obligations. This could be standardised across the sector to ensure consistency and public confidence.

2. What have been the barriers and enablers to your council having a culture that makes councillors and council staff feel safe to 'speak up' when they identify fraud or corruption (both internally and formally through Public Interest Disclosures)?

Hume City Council has strong governance frameworks and well-communicated policies that support a culture of integrity. The clear articulation of expected standards, combined with accessible internal reporting pathways and training, enables both councillors and staff to feel confident in raising concerns. Importantly, Local Government in Victoria operates under some of the most rigorous integrity and conduct standards of any tier of government in Australia, which underpins a strong compliance culture.

Barriers tend to relate more broadly to perceptions of risk to professional relationships or reputational harm, which can make individuals hesitant to speak up. Ongoing education and reinforcement of protections under the Public Interest Disclosures framework help to mitigate this.

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a. Do you feel confident that integrity agencies are willing and able to investigate suspected fraud and corruption incidents in an appropriate and timely manner?

I am confident in the willingness of integrity agencies to investigate suspected fraud and corruption. However, I believe that resourcing constraints may limit their ability to always respond as quickly as desired. Larger councils, such as Hume, have increasingly taken on the responsibility of conducting investigations under the supervision of integrity agencies. While this approach helps alleviate the burden on those agencies and is appropriate for well-resourced councils, it may not be feasible for smaller councils with limited capacity. Continued investment in integrity agencies and clear escalation pathways are important to ensure consistency and timeliness across the sector.