



Southern Grampians
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8 September 2025

Sarah Connolly
Member of the Victorian Legislative Assembly
Public Accounts and Estimates Committee
Parliament House, Spring Street
East Melbourne, VIC, 3002

Via: paec@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Mrs. Connolly,

Please see the answers requested to the further questions.

CEO RESPONSE:

1. Would standardisation across councils be beneficial? What things would you like to have standardised (e.g. policies, processes, reporting, grant assessment criteria)?
 - l) No, it would not. Our Councilors are elected by our community to govern, and policies, processes and grants must be their call. It is quite unconscionable to think the State Government would set policies for Councils.
2. How does your council ensure that its Audit and Risk Committee is contributing to best practice controls? For example, how your ARC prioritizes its work and meeting agendas and maintains transparency.
 - l) Through the Agenda setting process which includes reports from our Internal Auditors about what is best practice within the sector and any regulatory changes. Also, our independent members are quality individuals with broad experience across Councils.
3. How adequate do you believe the current consequences/penalties for breaches of the Local Government Act or instances of fraud and corruption are? What would you like to see changed?
 - l) Greater resourcing in IBAC and Local Government Inspectorate. Investigations are far too slow moving, and these organisations tend to have to triage complaints.
4. How adequate do you believe current whistleblower protections in the local government sector are and how could these protections be improved?
 - l) They are adequate, but I wonder how many people are aware of the protection available.



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COUNCILOR RESPONSES

1. How comfortable are you with the current use of confidentiality in meetings within your Councils? a. How could the need for confidentiality be better balanced with the requirement for Council decisions to be reported transparently?

- I) **Cr Henry, Cr Heslin:** Yes and no but potentially not in the way you think. I believe that briefings and briefing documents should be confidential as discussions are centered around preliminary discussions and the sharing and testing of ideas that are not often ready for publication. Confidentiality ensures Councilors and officers can speak freely. Additionally, there is a growing mistrust (and in my opinion; unfounded) that information is not made transparent when it is readily available and accessible.
- II) **Cr Barber:** I'm fine with the current use of confidential items in meetings as they are usually directed to commercially sensitive topics like tender evaluations. I would however like to see better transparency for documentation and reports being available to the public. I don't think there is a good enough public process available on how to obtain these documents if a member of the public wished to read over documents of interest to them.
- III) **Cr Manning:** I think the public need to better understand the council process of briefings and meetings. I often hear that people viewing the Council meeting are surprised by the lack of discussion/debate, and do not realise that Cr's have had the opportunity to hear/question/research items on the agenda prior to the council meeting. I think the wording here is also important - "requirement for Council decisions to be reported transparently". Decisions are made by Cr's and reported to the public. and Cr's consult with the public before a decision is made, and that consultation is a part of the information Cr's use to make the decision. Some in the community feel it's their right to have every piece of information, and I agree with this sentiment. But I can't see how it's possible/feasible for this to happen without significant resources. And it would make the role of a Cr redundant?

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

- I) **Cr Henry, Cr Heslin:** Enablers are:
- A strong and fearless CEO
 - Good procurement procedures



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- A robust Audit and Risk committee
- A well rolled out and comprehensive induction process
- Clear access to necessary documents and processes

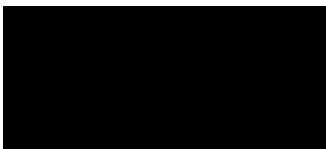
II) **Cr Barber:** I don't have any issue in speaking up against fraudulent or corrupt activities. I do however feel that there is an historic culture of mistrust imbedded in the council for some reason, I don't see that there is any fraudulent misconduct by officers, CEO or councillors. If there was, I would certainly feel safe that I could bring this to the relevant person/s attention.

III) **Cr Manning:** I can only speak of my experience as a Cr. I feel we have an environment where we can freely bring up concerns of this nature among Cr's and the CEO.

3. 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) **Cr Henry, Cr Heslin:** Yes, I sit on Audit and Risk committee and find the external and internal audit process thorough. This is bolstered by three independent members.
- II) **Cr Barber:** I feel reasonably confident that the agencies would investigate as efficiently as possible. However not being involved in council for very long I have not been involved in this process. In my experience with other government agencies there is usually not a lot of haste when it comes to investigating matters. In saying that I have complete faith in our internal audit and risk committee members and believe they would escalate any issues they have to a relevant authority quickly and efficiently.
- III) **Cr Manning:** I have no experience in investigation of fraud/corruption incidents and cannot comment.

Yours Sincerely,



Anthony Doyle
Chief Executive Officer
Southern Grampians Shire Council