

Cr Martin Taylor Responses as Requested to PAEC Questions.

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

I acknowledge that confidentiality plays a legitimate role in local government decision making where required by law such as protecting commercially sensitive information, safeguarding legal privilege, or respecting the privacy of individuals. These instances are clearly provided for under the *Local Government Act 2020* (Vic) and governance rules.

That said, I also recognise that the use of confidentiality must be the exception, not the rule. There have been occasions where the community has expressed concern about whether matters have been unnecessarily classified as confidential. This I believe highlights the need for continual review of our practices within the Whittlesea City Council to ensure that confidentiality is applied only when legally required and that decisions are made as openly as possible.

Personally, I am comfortable with the statutory basis for confidentiality but believe there is room for improvement in how councillors are briefed, how resolutions are framed, and how we explain to the community why confidentiality applies. This would ensure greater confidence in the decision making process.

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

Balancing confidentiality with transparency requires clearer frameworks and stronger communication practices. I believe this could be achieved by:

- a. Clearer Justifications - Requiring council officers to provide written reasons that directly reference the relevant legislative provision when recommending confidentiality.
- b. Regular Review - Establishing a system to periodically review confidential resolutions and release information once the grounds for confidentiality no longer apply.
- c. Plain English Explanations - Improving public reporting by issuing summaries in plain language so the community understands why a matter was confidential and what outcomes were achieved; and
- d. Proactive Disclosure - Where possible, publishing redacted versions of reports to provide transparency without compromising sensitive information.

Such measures would allow councillors and staff to meet legal obligations while also strengthening community trust.

3. What have been the barriers and enablers to your council having a culture that makes councillors and staff feel safe to speak up when they identify fraud or corruption both internally and formally through public interest disclosures?

Barriers

- a. Fear of Reprisal – Council staff and councillors may fear negative consequences, including reputational damage or workplace conflict, if they raise concerns.
- b. Uncertainty About Processes - Some Council staff and councillors may lack clarity on the correct process for reporting, or may not fully understand the protections available under the *Public Interest Disclosures Act 2012* (Vic); and
- c. Organisational Culture - In the past, councils across Victoria have faced challenges with cultures of hierarchy or mistrust, which can discourage openness.

Enablers

- a. Clear Policies and Training - Accessible whistleblowing and disclosure policies, supported by regular training for councillors and council staff.
- b. Independent Pathways - Access to external integrity agencies, such as IBAC, which reinforces that complaints will be handled impartially.
- c. Leadership Example – The Mayor, Councillors and senior council officers who model integrity and support for transparency, showing through action that speaking up is valued and protected; and
- d. Supportive Governance Frameworks - Regular reinforcement of rights, responsibilities, and protections under council's Governance Rules, Model Code of Conduct, and integrity legislation.

By addressing the barriers and strengthening the enablers, Whittlesea City Council can foster a stronger culture of integrity where council staff and councillors feel confident to raise concerns.

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

No, integrity agencies such as the Local Government Inspectorate (LGI), The Independent Broad based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC), the Victorian Ombudsman, and the Victorian Auditor General's Office (VAGO) play an essential role in maintaining accountability across the local government sector. They are independent, well resourced, and legally empowered to investigate allegations of fraud and corruption.

Timeliness are often affected by the lack of agency resources, the lack of investigative resources, complexity of investigations and the volume of cases these agencies receive. In some instances, councillors and council staff may perceive delays or limited feedback, which can reduce confidence in the process.

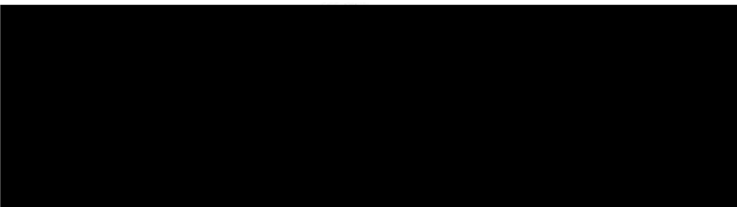
To strengthen this area, I would support:

- a. Increased Resourcing for integrity agencies to ensure more timely investigations.
- b. The Development and Increased Resourcing of integrity agencies staff and investigative capabilities and competencies.
- c. Clearer Communication with councils when investigations have commenced, within the limits of confidentiality; and
- d. Sector Wide Feedback where integrity agencies share systemic findings and lessons learned, enabling councils to improve prevention measures.

Overall, while integrity agencies are both willing and capable, further improvements in the above would enhance community confidence and council governance outcomes.

Should further elaboration on any of the above issues be required, I am available to provide additional explanation and supporting detail.

Kind Regards



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