



The Unrealised Potential of Council Meetings

Uncovering the Challenges,
Understanding the Opportunities,
Achieving Transparency



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INTRODUCTION

According to governance leaders, the council meeting process is one of the most important yet inefficient processes in council.

It is the core democratic process of local government, yet:

- Few people can execute it end-to-end
- Inefficiencies and multiple systems and processes introduce hidden risks and stress
- Agendas, minutes and videos are made available for the public in a format that is not easy to consume or understand. This does not align with goals for transparent government

Taking advantage of modern technology is crucial for successfully resolving these challenges.

To get the best value from their investment, councils must elevate the importance of this process and fully understand the strategic risks and opportunities the meeting process presents.

We spoke to 40 council meeting administrators and governance leaders to uncover these risks and opportunities.

In this report, we'll highlight the common challenges and provide best practice insights to help councils identify and mitigate key risks, streamline the meeting process, better engage stakeholders, and deliver a higher standard of transparency to the community.



HOW CAN YOU IDENTIFY AND MITIGATE KEY RISKS, STREAMLINE THE MEETING PROCESS AND BETTER ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS?

INSIGHT #1 KEY PERSON RISK

**ONE PERSON MANAGING THE PROCESS
IS A DISASTER WAITING TO HAPPEN.**

In many councils, a single person is responsible for executing the meeting process from end-to-end.

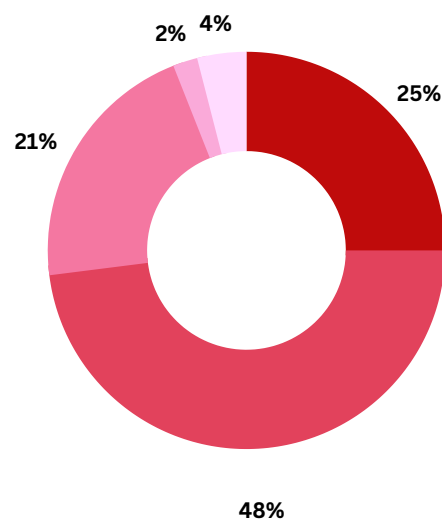
When councils have no redundancy, key person risk emerges. The meeting process is inherently complex with multiple stakeholders, parallel workflows, and systems to be coordinated. The greater the complexity of the process, the greater the risk and the more challenging it is to train people to create sufficient redundancy.

1 in 2 councils rely on a single person to manage the process.

Over half of all councils rely on a single person to manage the meeting process, with many admitting that key staff can't take leave at certain times (25%) and staff must work overtime to make the meeting happen (21%).

For those meeting administrators who can get approved leave, many councils mentioned the responsible person receives numerous texts and phone calls with questions and requests for assistance.

Q. There's commonly only one person responsible for managing the council meeting process. What happens at your council if this person is away?



- We have multiple people that can fill this role
- Key staff can't take leave at certain times
- Other staff members have to work overtime
- Other
- Key information doesn't make the agenda

70% of councils said last-minute changes and formatting issues cause stress and delays.

Many respondents also noted their frustration with chasing report writers who don't respect deadlines, which then creates last minute pressure to solve more finicky formatting issues, adding stress to an already high-pressure situation.

These inefficiencies and frustrations make it difficult to train and unappealing to learn the meeting process, which makes creating redundancy difficult.

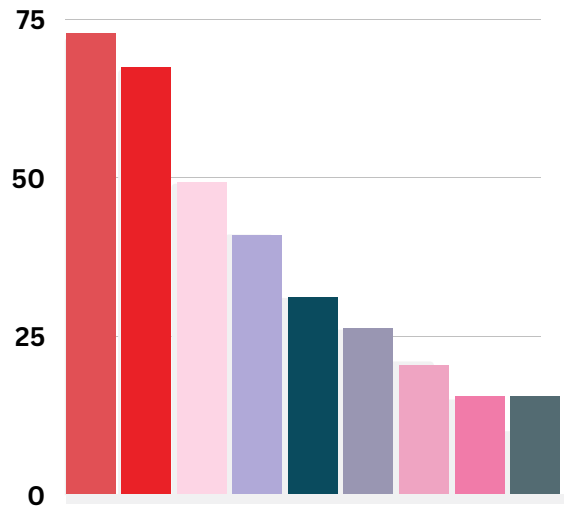
BEST PRACTICE INSIGHT

Rather than simply looking at the agenda and business paper preparation, consider the whole process, end-to-end.

Identify all key stakeholders and the outcomes important to them so you can ensure systems will be appealing to use. When considering systems, look at how they reduce complexity across the whole process for all relevant stakeholders, as well as administrators.

The more streamlined the process is, the easier it is to train people in this role to ensure councils have sufficient redundancy.

Q. When preparing the business paper and agenda, what frustrations does your council commonly experience?



- Last-minute changes and additions are stressful
- Constant formatting issues
- Managing large volumes of documentation
- Issues with attachments, page numbering etc.
- Expensive to change or update templates
- Duplicating effort when cross-referencing
- Unreliable access to IT systems
- Version control hard to track
- Not enough support to fix issues with systems

INSIGHT #2 BUSINESS CONTINUITY

ON-PREM SOLUTIONS ARE INACCESSIBLE AND VULNERABLE TO DISASTERS

We are all aware of disruptions caused by events such as fire and flooding. These events present difficulties when relying on traditional system architecture, leaving councils vulnerable and impacting business continuity.

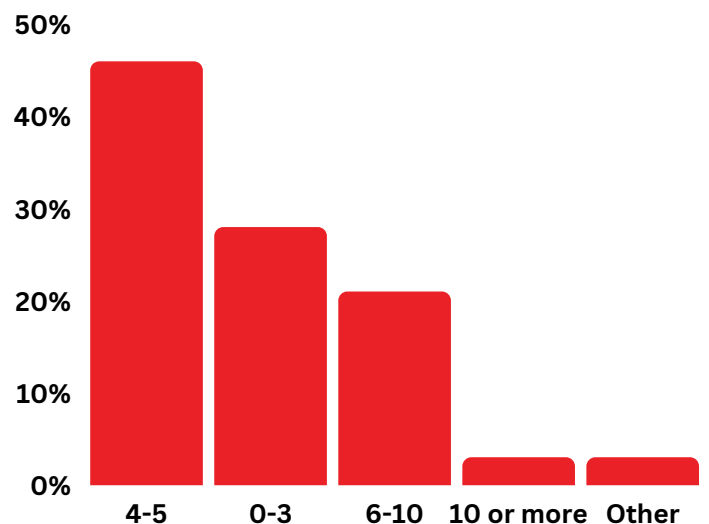
COVID has driven increased take up of remote working and cloud-based solutions, however, councils still lag in utilising cloud solutions for the meeting process. Even if councils use software to manage agenda and business paper compilation, most councils have systems in the process that are not integrated or remotely accessible. This continues to create inefficiencies and quality issues, and deters staff and councillors from engaging with the process.

67% of councils use four or more systems in the meeting process.

Meeting administrators are responsible for managing an array of workflows and tasks beyond agenda and business paper preparation.

These systems range from spreadsheets to webcasting technology. These systems are necessary to plan and execute the council meeting, but often lead to duplication of effort, frustration and wasted time. Rarely do they integrate to support a seamless end-to-end process.

Q. If you think about the complete end-to-end meeting process, how many different technology systems would you use to prepare and execute your council meeting?



Less than 1 in 2 councils have all systems in the meeting process accessible on any device at anytime.

When stakeholders can't access what they need, when they need it, the burden falls on meeting administrators to complete tasks, create workarounds or become a single source of truth to communicate across departments and keep actions on track.

Councils can't realise the full business continuity gains if some systems that support council meetings are not remotely accessible.

Q. Can the right stakeholders access all systems in your meeting management process, on any device at any time?



BEST PRACTICE INSIGHT

Councils are moving to cloud-based IT strategies to overcome issues of system accessibility and to support business continuity.

Having remote access to only some of the systems within the meeting process poses continued risk to business continuity. Ensure your council has identified all the systems involved in the meeting process and consider solutions that provide this capability on one platform.

INSIGHT #3

SUSTAINABILITY

EXCESSIVE PAPER USAGE IS OUT OF ALIGNMENT WITH COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS

Sustainability is a core concern for many Australian communities which is reflected nationally across council community strategic plans. With thousands of pages being printed in the council meeting process, paper waste is an ongoing concern that is out of alignment with the sustainability goals of Australian communities.

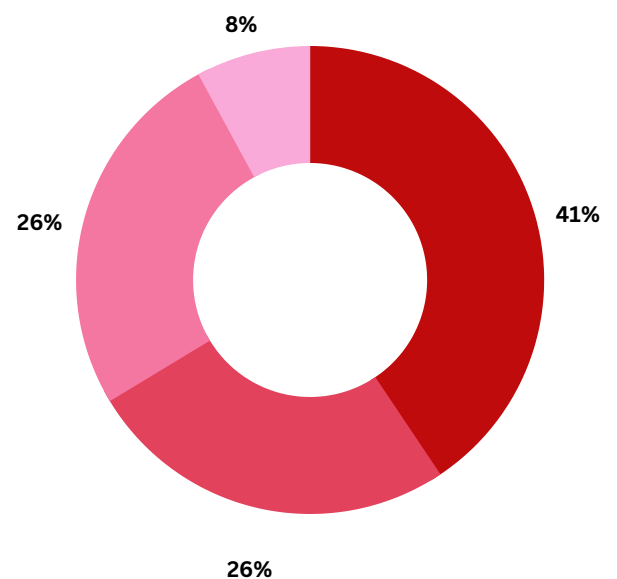
75% of councils are still reliant on hard copy business papers.

Council business papers can reach up to 2000 pages each month. For a council with 10 councillors, that's 20,000 pages or 40 reams of paper, each meeting cycle.

With only one in four respondents saying their council meetings are completely electronic, across Australia huge volumes of paper is being wasted each meeting cycle.

This is not due to a lack of trying to move councils to electronic. Many councils report multiple frustrating, failed attempts at this transition.

Q. Thousands of pages can be printed during the council meeting process. How many of your councillors and executives are using hard-copy business papers?



- A couple
- Most of them
- None
- About half of them

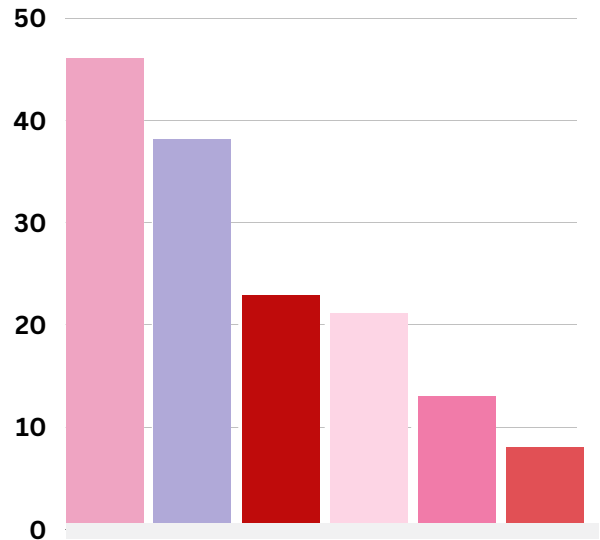
Almost 1 in 2 councils say that staff and councillors get lost in big PDFs.

The data showed that this is the most frustrating aspect of the meeting experience.

Electronic pdfs can be confusing and unreliable. It's difficult to keep up with proceedings, accommodate changes to agenda items and prepare for upcoming items without getting lost.

It's un-surprising that many councillors and staff still prefer the experience of hard copy papers. This is a major reason why attempts to transition to electronic fail.

Q. When taking minutes, what frustrations does your council commonly experience?



- Staff and councillors getting lost in big pdf documents
- Other
- Confusing voting process
- Public not being able to follow proceedings
- Hard to reorder items
- Manual bookmarking for videos creates additional pressure

BEST PRACTICE INSIGHT

Change is easy when the benefits to individuals are clear, and users are supported to realise quick wins. Systems need to ensure that councillors can navigate to wherever they need to be within one click and provide tools that elevate the experience, so the change is appealing.

Ask your vendors about how their training is tailored to each stakeholder. Nothing beats empathy when it comes to driving behaviour change.

INSIGHT #4 OVERSIGHT

LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND OVERSIGHT SLOWS COUNCIL PROGRESS

It's difficult to manage council without real-time visibility on actions and resolutions. It slows progress, adds pressure for meeting administrators, and frustrates stakeholders who are dependent on other parts of council to progress their own actions.

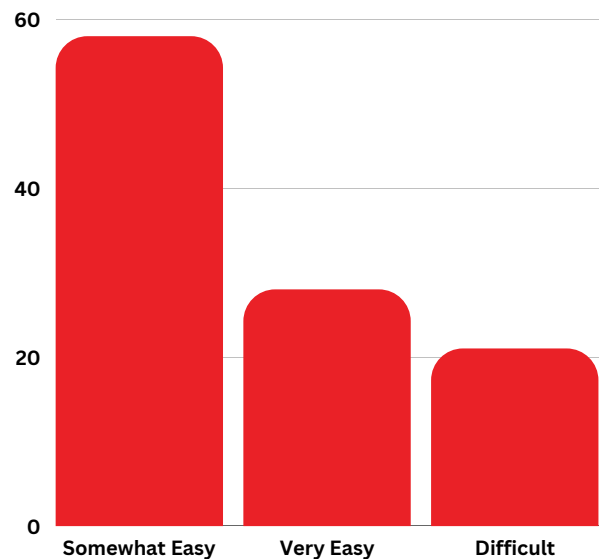
When meeting administrators becomes the single source of truth for meeting information, it can tie up hours of time that could be spent on other tasks.

21% of councils find it difficult to view progress of council actions and resolutions.

Limited capability for reporting means it's difficult to stay on top of managing council.

If you can't see what resolutions are scheduled, drill down to what actions are overdue, upcoming, or in progress with various managers or departments, it's difficult to lead and communicate between council and operations, which slows progress and causes frustration.

Q. How easily can you view progress of council meeting actions and resolutions?



BEST PRACTICE INSIGHT

Ensure there's reporting functionality that allows managers and administrators to get a quick, real-time overview of resolutions and how actions are progressing, without leaning on administrators.

Centralise meeting documentation to ensure all stakeholders can easily access supporting documentation to inform decision-making.

INSIGHT #5 TRANSPARENCY

LACK OF CONSUMABLE INFORMATION REDUCES TRANSPARENCY

If community members can't find information about council decisions easily and view democratic debate, transparency is not being effectively delivered.

Most councils have goals surrounding transparent and accountable leadership in their council community strategic plans. Council meetings are an important vehicle for communicating decisions and transparently demonstrating the health of local democracy.

90% of councils run Hybrid Meetings, but say they're difficult to manage.

For meeting administrators, managing the complexity of a hybrid environment is challenging.

While COVID saw hybrid meetings become legislated in most states many councils noted they don't have the technology that allows for easy management of the many moving parts of council such as moving motions, requests to speak, voting, on top of procedural challenges, especially with new councillors.

Q. Can you have councillors attend the same meeting both online and in person i.e. Hybrid Meeting (if your jurisdiction allows)?



Live streaming and video conferencing adds complexity.

For those that are using video conferencing and live streaming, many councils note the complexity this adds to the in-meeting experience. This is particularly the case for councils who also bookmark agenda items against the live stream.

While this service makes the meetings more consumable for the community, it adds pressure to meeting administrators who feel the process should be more streamlined.

BEST PRACTICE INSIGHT

To increase transparency, meeting information needs to be consumable.

The community should be able to quickly scan bookmarked information for the agenda items of interest, and access what they need within a click or two.

As hybrid meetings are legislated in most states, it's important to ask vendors to demonstrate how they can support video conferencing and live streaming, and what tools they have available to support council activities from a remote location.

SUMMARY

The council meeting is the core democratic process of local government. It's the one process that must happen on time, and it also happens to be one of the most complex processes in council.

Meeting administrators can attest to the frustration and stress the process entails, however change involves gathering support across multiple levels of government management.

Improvements to the meeting process happen when councils elevate the internal conversation around meetings away from it being just another administrative process, to a process with significant strategic risks, opportunities, and unrealised potential.

It's only by valuing the meeting process that councils will be able to:

- Mitigate key person risk making it simple for multiple people to be trained in the process
- Ensure business continuity by making systems remotely accessible
- Improve sustainability and alignment of council actions with environmental goals.
- Build trust with the community by delivering transparency via easily consumable information
- Improve accountability and oversight to speed up progress of council initiatives.

A HUGE THANK YOU TO THE 40 COUNCIL MEETING ADMINISTRATORS AND GOVERNANCE LEADERS WHO TOOK THE TIME TO PROVIDE US WITH THEIR INSIGHTS.