

Local Government Listen, Learn and Lead Gender Equity Program

Findings and Evaluation



Local Government Victoria



Environment,
Land, Water
and Planning

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Listen, Learn and Lead Gender Equity Program

Program Overview

The Local Government Listen, Learn and Lead Gender Equity Program (the Program) supports councils to advance gender equity and diversity in their organisations by facilitating rich discussions between Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and council staff about gender equity.

The Program supports the Local Government Ministerial Statement (Action 17), which outlines the importance of **Strengthening Local Support for Social Inclusion** and aligns with the broader Victorian Gender Equality Strategy, which aims to build behavioural change and improve employment practices to deliver gender equity.

The aim of the program is to identify strategies and implement actions to improve outcomes for women in leadership positions in councils by: encouraging a deeper level of insight into the barriers to gender equality that need to be tackled within councils; informing the development or enhancement of council's gender equity actions; and sharing insights and identifying opportunities for sector-wide action where combining efforts will lead to greater impact.

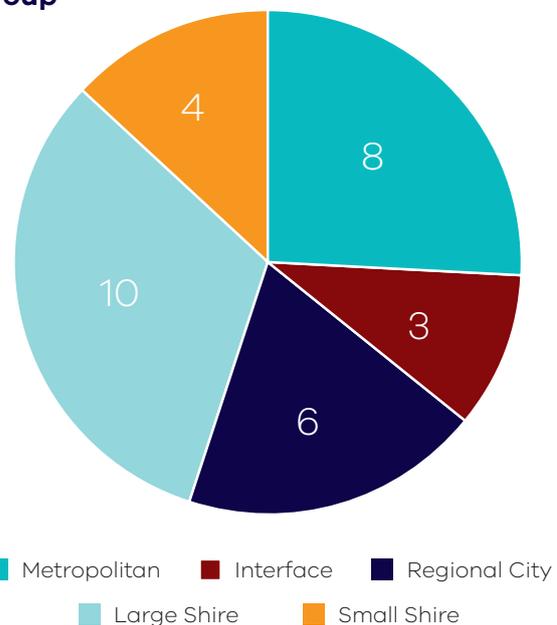
The program is modelled on the successful Male Champions of Change program and supports councils to advance gender equity and diversity in their organisations.

The program model is simple and adaptable to the conditions of each council. The program comprises a series of focus groups with council staff that are facilitated by the CEO. Discussion is focussed on the experiences of women in the council workplace and what factors prevent women from moving into senior positions.

Participating Councils

Thirty-one Victorian councils participated in the Program in 2017. This which included representatives from each of the council comparator groups (i.e. Metropolitan, Interface, Regional City, Large Shire and Small Shire). A list and geographic representation of participating councils is at Appendices 1 and 2.

Fig. 1. Participating councils by comparator group



Supporting Resources

Councils were provided with a variety of supporting resources to assist participants to conduct the focus group sessions, as well as providing an inter-council support network to share ideas, success stories and other relevant published material. The following outlines the initiatives developed by LGV to support the implementation of the Program.

Local Government Listen, Learn and Lead Gender Equity Program Guide

The Local Government Listen, Learn and Lead Gender Equity Program Guide (the Guide) outlines the Program's objectives and provides participants with the necessary information to successfully implement the Program in their organisation. The Guide details a useful step-by-step process to effectively engage staff, encourage conversation, gather feedback and identify actions to improve gender equality in local government.



The Guide also features key focus group questions that are useful for stimulating conversation and encouraging participants to share personal insights that will assist in identifying significant barriers to gender equity.

Yammer Network

A dedicated online *Yammer* forum was established to enable participating CEOs and Listen, Learn and Lead Coordinators to communicate with each other. The forum's 65 members were encouraged to share their experiences, supporting documents, including promotional material, and ask questions about techniques other councils found to be useful during the Program's implementation.

Supporting Webinar

The Local Government Listen, Learn and Lead Gender Equity Program Webinar outlines the objectives, key steps and recommended timelines of the program. The step-by-step webinar provides information about each step of the Listen, Learn and Lead process to guide councils in implementing the program in their organisation and is available at:

<https://www.localgovernment.vic.gov.au/our-programs/gender-equity>

Promotional Video

A promotional video was developed to promote the benefits of the Program and encourage councils to participate. The video features support from the Hon Natalie Hutchins MP, Dr Graeme Emonson, Executive Director of Local Government Victoria, and local government CEOs including Vijaya Vaidyanath (Yarra City Council), Justine Linley (Ballarat City Council), Chris Eddy (Hobsons Bay City Council) and former Brimbank City Council CEO, Paul Younis.

The video is available at:

<https://www.localgovernment.vic.gov.au/our-programs/gender-equity>

Program Findings

The Local Government Listen, Learn and Lead Gender Equity Program saw council CEOs host discussions with employees about barriers to women's advancement, policies and practices that have supported women and changes that could be implemented to enable more women to hold senior and leadership roles.

Councils held multiple focus group sessions to encourage a broader range of perspectives and gain a deeper understanding of the personal experiences of staff and the impact of gender inequality on both men and women in their organisations.

The following themes were identified by council employees as being the most significant challenges to improving gender equity in their workplace. Opportunities for improvement were also documented.

Key Findings

The following are issues and proposed actions that were prominent across each focus group cohort.

Flexible Working Arrangements

Inflexible working conditions were considered the most significant impediment to achieving gender equality in local government organisations. Flexible working arrangements were credited with providing employees, particularly women, the opportunity to simultaneously achieve an improved work-life balance and career advancement. Whilst it was acknowledged that some positions often don't have the capacity for flexibility, such as many customer service roles, inconsistency in the application of flexible work arrangements means many of its advantages were not being realised. For example, flexible arrangements granted by managerial discretion were considered a common occurrence with '*consistent inconsistency in managers' approach to job flexibility*' being recognised as a barrier to women's advancement in many local government organisations.

Conversely, council employees noted that they felt more comfortable requesting flexible work arrangements where senior management espoused 'family first' attitudes and utilised such arrangements themselves. These comments complemented the view held by many female participants that requesting workplace flexibility programs, particularly following a parental leave absence, would disadvantage their careers.

For example, several female participants stated that they often returned to work from parental leave earlier than expected because they felt pressure to be back in the workplace.

Male employees noted they were also reluctant to request flexible arrangements because such arrangements were largely seen as a means of supporting working mothers. However, several male participants stated they would be more comfortable requesting flexibility arrangements for themselves if the organisational culture encouraged more men to adopt such arrangements. They claimed that this would then enable them to support women to pursue career opportunities without a prolonged absence from the workplace to fulfil childcare commitments.

Improved Maternity Leave Practices

Participants identified several improvements to existing maternity leave practices and attitudes that would foster a more supportive work environment and make it easier for women to return to work after a maternity leave absence.

Many women stated they felt detached from the workplace whilst on maternity leave, which made transitioning back to work more difficult and stressful. Further compounding this issue was the view that one's role would likely evolve during their absence and they would then be inadequately prepared for new responsibilities, as well as the perception that they would need to work harder to prove they are committed to their role.

By providing advanced notice of professional development opportunities or any major changes in the organisation whilst on maternity leave, employees stated they would feel more valued and less isolated during their period of leave. Similarly, participants stated that having direct contact with their employer and not human resource representatives would create a greater sense of trust and an improved understanding of expectations. Such communication would also extend to managers engaging employees on parental leave through a 'keeping in touch' program, which participants identified as a useful tool in retaining staff and improving engagement.

Increased Support for Pregnant Employees and Parental Leave

A participant of the Program stated they did

'not feel comfortable in being able to talk to the manager about pregnancy, maternity leave and opportunities when returning to work'

This is a sentiment shared by many across a variety of councils. Other participants described a feeling of resentment towards pregnant employees and working parents, particularly if they were granted flexible working arrangements and not always present in the workplace. Equally, other employees credited managerial encouragement to return to work in a part-time capacity as a significant factor in ensuring the organisation was supportive of one's pregnancy and leave arrangements.

By modelling an attitude that normalises parental leave as being akin to any other leave, it was claimed that those in leadership positions could improve attitudes toward pregnant employees and working parents, and reduce any perception of bias or prejudice.

Maternity Leave and Superannuation

Creating a workplace that actively supports pregnant employees and working parents was noted as an effective strategy to retaining staff and enabling a successful return to work for working parents. Participants stated their organisations could demonstrate their commitment to gender equity by adopting comprehensive leave and childcare assistance policies, which would support and encourage women to remain in the workforce and avoid prolonged absences that may inhibit career progression.

Many participants noted the adverse impact parental leave has on one's superannuation contributions. The fact that employers are not required to make contributions for Parental Leave Pay means employees who take leave can be significantly financially disadvantaged in the long-term. Consequently, a common suggestion was to offer employees employer-funded superannuation contributions while on paid and unpaid parental leave.

It was not specified whether these contributions would be paid at the minimum rate or above legal requirements.

Other supportive actions included employer-funded childcare allowances and onsite 'parents' rooms' that could either be staffed by a carer or be equipped with resources to help parents care for their children at work. The latter suggestion was particularly relevant for those in small shire or regional councils where geographic isolation and a limited availability of services for young families means childcare and support networks are often non-existent or unaffordable.

Addressing the 'Confidence Gap'

Participants from all groups noted the presence of a phenomenon known as the 'confidence gap', whereby women are often less likely to put themselves forward for promotions and new assignments. For example, one female participant claimed that:

'women believe they need to tick all the boxes to apply for a position, whereas men will back themselves at 50/50'

whilst another stated that:

'women don't apply unless they know they can do it; men apply if they think they can do it.'

It was also claimed that men will usually attribute their success to their personal qualities, qualifications and skills, while women will attribute theirs to 'working hard', 'getting lucky' or a positive support network.

To overcome the self-doubt that some women experience, focus group participants suggested that professional development opportunities, such as secondments and short-courses, could be promoted to develop the skills of women and provide them with the confidence to apply for senior positions. However, as noted at several councils, it is important that secondment opportunities are not continually filled by staff from within the same team to ensure that learning opportunities are maximised and employees are exposed to as many new skills and processes as possible.

Furthermore, by creating a working environment that more readily recognises transferrable skills and one's capacity to 'learn on the job', female participants claimed they would be more confident in their abilities and more likely to apply for senior roles.

Maternal Bias

Results from the focus group sessions made it apparent that many women feel they are perceived to be less competent and committed to their career once they become a mother. Female participants stated they felt extreme pressure to adopt more responsibility at work in order to show their colleagues and managers that they were as invested in their role as they were prior to becoming a mother. Not only did these employees feel this was unsustainable, but it also had a negative impact on their work-life balance and general wellbeing.

This unnecessary, and often incorrect, assumption that women will neglect their careers to satisfy family responsibilities was considered to have a significant negative impact on future earnings, and leadership and career opportunities.

Gender Neutral Recruitment Initiatives

Participants continually highlighted the presence of job advertisements and promotional material reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes for certain roles. It was often claimed that such material only serves to reinforce occupational segregation and further entrench unconscious bias in the recruitment of staff. For example, council websites displaying men in outdoor teams and women in administrative settings were said to discourage people from applying for non-traditional roles and promote the existence of the 'glass ceiling'.

By adopting gender-neutral recruitment practices, participants agreed that women's employment in the local government sector would increase, as would their career opportunities. Many believed that removing gender-identifying information from a job advertisement and a prospective employee's application would minimise the risk of gender bias in the appointment of an employee. It was also claimed that women may be more inclined to apply for a particular position if the advertisement outlined workplace flexibility arrangements available within the organisation.

Other improvements to recruitment practices and gender bias included introducing 'unconscious bias' training for staff, specifically those on selection panels, and challenging the everyday language used within organisations, such as 'depot boys' and 'accounts ladies', which promote gender stereotypes. Prominently featuring relevant accreditation, such as a particular organisation being a 'White Ribbon Workplace', 'equal opportunity employer', and a 'Breastfeeding Friendly Workplace' were also seen as a positive means of attracting female staff to various roles.

Senior Leadership

The following are issues and proposed actions that were predominantly identified by members of the 'senior leadership' focus group sessions.

Female Mentorship

Many senior women (i.e. women with significant experience in the local government sector) credited strong female mentorship as a critical factor in their professional development and career progression.

The presence of female role models was identified as a primary influence on one's professional success and necessary to ensure female staff have the confidence to pursue senior leadership roles. Specifically, female leaders who personally encouraged female staff to follow secondment opportunities and shared stories of their own career pathway were recognised as being the most supportive and inspiring. Moreover, female leaders that utilised flexible working arrangements were also said to provide staff with the confidence they need to successfully balance work commitments and family life.



Although mentors were seen to be crucial to women's advancement within local government, several participants suggested that they were intimidated by the prospect of approaching women in senior leadership positions for guidance. As such, one suggestion was to introduce formal mentoring programs, with mandated meetings and milestones, to ensure all female staff have the opportunity to receive coaching and are not disadvantaged by what was considered to be a lack of self-confidence or social mobility.

Increased confidence in one's abilities, greater access to professional networks, improved leadership skills and the development of new technical skills were also recognised as benefits of a mentoring program and an effective means of supporting women's advancement.

Emerging Women

The following are issues and proposed actions that were predominantly identified by members of the 'emerging women' focus group sessions.

Career Planning

Participants of the 'emerging women' focus groups stated that a lack of career planning and development was a barrier to improving gender equity in local government, and significantly decreased the retention of women in the sector. Not only was the absence of a talent pipeline for women an impediment to improving the career prospects and leadership opportunities of female staff, but it was also attributed to a decrease in job satisfaction and workplace engagement. Furthermore, one participant stated that the:

'majority of position descriptions have local government experience listed as desired criteria. This limits the opportunities for new graduates and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds from applying, which reduces the diversity of our workplace.'

By utilising narrow selection criteria, participants believed potential employees were being deterred from applying for positions in local government, which further minimised diversity in the sector.

Improved Study Arrangements

Many participants of the 'emerging women' focus group sessions outlined their ambition to undertake external study in the belief that it is necessary to be considered for future opportunities and to further their careers. Whilst many councils were noted as being supportive of their employees' desire to gain further qualifications, such attitudes were not universally shared.

Some participants believed that balancing work and study created pressure from their managers who saw further education as a distraction from their everyday role. However, others said their managers were supportive of their study, but were unsure of how to help them complete their study, whilst also fulfilling their work commitments.

Several suggestions to encourage study and flexible work arrangements included offering sabbaticals from work at peak times during the academic year, employer subsidies to pursue qualifications relevant to local government, allocating time during the working week to fulfil study commitments, and ensuring communication between the student and manager is clear and frequent to avoid any misunderstandings. Such communication includes ensuring study leave is approved prior to one's enrolment and keeping colleagues informed of study commitments, availability and their workplace responsibilities.

Workplace Safety

To support flexible work arrangements, some participants expressed the need for added security at work to enable employees to adopt non-traditional working hours. Without adequate car park lighting, secure buildings and other security services, it was noted that those wanting to adopt flexible arrangements were limited by their belief that they would be unsafe in doing so.

If measures existed to make employees confident that they were safe when exercising their flexible working hours, it was believed that women would be more likely to use flexibility to achieve a successful work-life balance, thus remaining engaged in the work place and minimising the prolonged absences that have traditionally limited their career progression and leadership opportunities.

Men

Councils need to ensure there is workplace flexibility for both male and female employees. A common complaint across councils is that paternity/parental leave is not promoted as widely as maternity leave within the organisation.

Men should be encouraged to consider flexible work arrangements if they have young children. This can help reduce pressure on the other partner – often a woman – to compromise their career for caring duties. If there were more men working flexibly and/or taking parental leave, they would serve as role models for other men to follow suit.

A workshop consisting of senior leadership men summed up the general sentiment well:

‘With women carrying out the majority of unpaid caring work, and men locked into being the breadwinner, creating workplaces that support women and men to balance paid work and share caring responsibilities is critical to achieving gender equality’

Rural and Regional Participants

The following are issues and proposed actions that were predominantly identified by participants from rural and regional councils.

Professional Development Opportunities

Participants identified the lack of access to training and professional development opportunities in rural councils as a significant barrier to achieving gender equity in their organisations. Inadequate distance learning arrangements and poor access to educational programs were identified as limiting many of the upskilling opportunities available to rural council employees that are often afforded to their metropolitan equivalent.

Financial constraints also reduce councils’ ability to support employees to attend training courses, further limiting the career advancement of rural council employees. Participants noted that these circumstances discourage potential employees from moving to rural councils and often entrench employees, particularly women, in support and administrative roles where opportunities for career progression are limited.

Further compounding the issue is the view that senior positions are often only available when existing staff retire or move to other organisations. Consequently, prospective employees are deterred from working in rural local government and look for employment opportunities where career progression is more achievable. In order to advance their careers, it was outlined that employees feel pressure to leave the region in pursuit of more opportunities and less likely to view local government as an employer of choice.

Geographic Isolation

There is a perception that senior staff are likely to prefer to live in more populated municipalities where more schooling and housing opportunities exist. Participants noted they were also likely to have larger support networks to assist with child care and enable a greater work-life balance where higher populations existed. The limited availability of childcare facilities in rural councils was seen to reduce employment opportunities for women as they were often forced to continue to care for their children at the expense of returning to full time employment.

Flexible working arrangements were suggested as a means of overcoming some of these constraints, but a lack of resources, technology and internal procedures (e.g. laptops, work phones and established flexibility policies) often prohibit options for flexible working arrangements to be implemented.

Horsham and rural councils such as Indigo, Yarriambiack, Loddon, Buloke and Pyrenees have all participated in the program. This has provided an opportunity for shared learnings and experiences.

Program Evaluation

General

As part of the Program, the participating councils were requested to complete an evaluation.

Overall satisfaction with the Listen, Learn and Lead Program was high, with 55.6% rating it as 'good' and 44.4% rating it as 'very good'.

Feedback from participating councils indicates that the program is an effective way to understand barriers to gender equity and how to address them. Comments from participants have pointed to the value of a direct conversation with the CEO. This enabled staff experiences to be heard at the most senior level and steps to be taken to address the issues raised through policies and processes, and taking a close look at culture through a gender lens. Several councils have also begun drafting internal gender equity strategies to affect positive long-term change and improve gender equality.

One participant summed up their experience of the Program as:

'The program as a whole was great and should be continued in all LGA's across Victoria. The session questions supported and guided staff in the right direction to give us a great insight into changes we need to make internally to strive for equality.'

Survey Areas

The survey consisted of 16 questions and can be broken down into four broad themes i.e. satisfaction with Program process or format; satisfaction with resources available for Program; usefulness of findings from Program; and improvements that can be made to the Program.

Program Process

The Listen, Learn and Lead process received overwhelmingly positive reviews, with over 92% of participants rating it as 'very good' or 'good'.

Councils also found it quite easy to follow the sessions, with 93% rating it as 'good' or 'very good'. According to one participant, there was:

'Plenty of time and scope to run the program to suit local needs'

Resources Available for Program

The Program Guide was well received by the councils with 93% of the participants rating it as 'good' or 'very good'. Councils also appreciated the suggested focus group questions contained in the Program Guide as it assisted them in having honest conversations with their staff about gender equity.

Overall, the councils were very satisfied with the resources provided to help them in carrying out the Program, with one participant stating:

'The format of having open and honest discussions with the CEO worked really well for our Council. The feedback summary layout really helped us when it came to making an action plan.'

Usefulness of Findings from Program

Councils were able to utilise the feedback received from the Listen, Learn and Lead sessions to inform and enhance their gender equity plans. They found it particularly useful to draw out key themes, issues and comments from the sessions to present to their leadership team, with 93% of participants rating it as 'good' or 'very good'.

The usefulness of the Program was summarised well by one participant:

'The feedback/key themes from all staff was fantastic. We identified a number of key focus areas that moving forward will formulate internal works to be undertake within the organisation. Many staff found the reflection session we held very valuable in closing the loop after the sessions'.

Improvements for Future

The participating councils also provided suggestions on how the Program might be improved going forward. A few common themes arose after analysis of the survey comments, as outlined below.

Many of the participants thought it would be valuable to introduce more mixed focus group sessions to include the experiences of men. This would provide a benchmark for the views of men in the organisation about gender equity as well as, offer an avenue for identifying potential allies and male champions. Some of the smaller councils also found it difficult finding enough participants for the sessions, as they do not have enough female staff to fill each of the three groupings suggested in the Program Guide.

The participants also suggested it would be useful to better utilise the Listen, Learn and Lead Coordinators as networks to share positive gender equity initiatives between councils. In particular, there could be more purposeful use of the Yammer group, and a post-project forum for the Coordinators to exchange information, feedback and initiatives to reduce duplicated efforts across the sector.

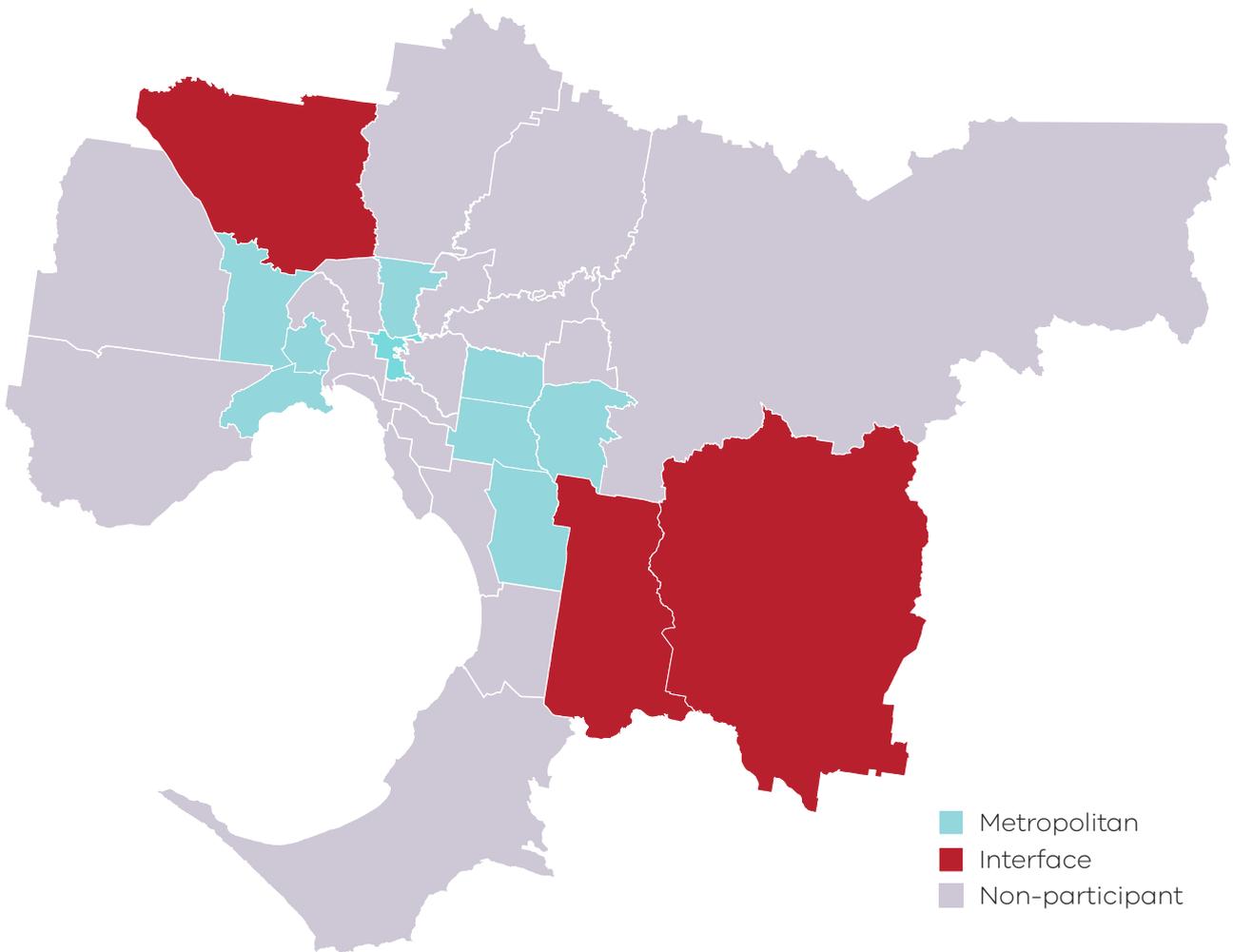
Finally, some councils suggested that in future Listen, Learn and Lead programs, it would be beneficial to provide more frequent communication from LGV. In particular, councils sought more communication on issues such as, the grant acquittal process and timelines on next steps and outputs.



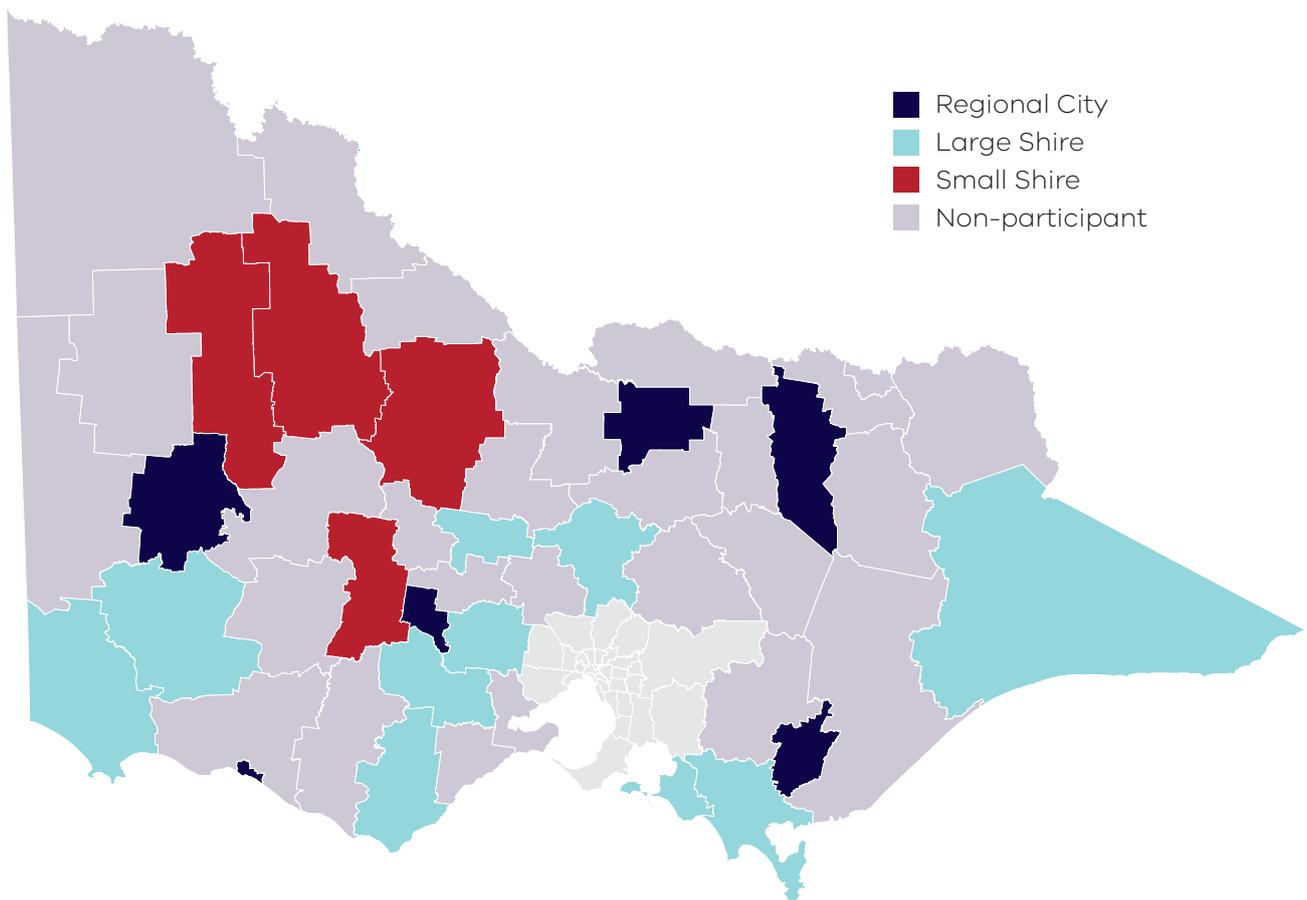
Appendix 1: List of Participating Councils by Comparator Groups

Metropolitan	Interface	Regional City	Large Shire	Small Shire
Brimbank City	Cardinia Shire	Ballarat City	Bass Coast Shire	Buloke Shire
Greater Dandenong City	Casey City	Greater Shepparton City	Colac-Otway Shire	Loddon Shire
Hobsons Bay City	Hume City	Horsham Rural City	East Gippsland Shire	Pyrenees Shire
Knox City		Latrobe City	Glenelg Shire	Yarriambiack Shire
Maribyrnong City		Wangaratta Rural City	Golden Plains Shire	
Monash City		Warrnambool City	Mitchell Shire	
Whitehorse City			Moorabool Shire	
Yarra City			Mount Alexander Shire	
			South Gippsland Shire	
			Southern Grampians Shire	

Appendix 2a: Map of Participating Councils: Metropolitan and Interface



Appendix 2b: Map of Participating Councils: Regional City, Large Shire and Small Shire



Appendix 3: Frequently Asked Questions

Below is a list of frequently asked questions and answers that was used to assist councils structure and implement the program in their organisations.

What are the definitions to use?

Gender equity refers to the provision of fairness and justice in the distribution of benefits and responsibilities between women and men.

Gender equality is the outcome reached through gender equity. It is the equal participation and the equal valuing of women, men, girls and boys in all aspects of public and private life.

Gender is defined by a person based on how they identify as male, female or non-binary (neither male nor female).

Can men be involved in the Listen Learn and Lead program?

Yes! Although the program recommends that most of the focus groups are for women's attendance only, some of the focus groups may be for men only or attended by both men and women. The decisions about gender mix in the focus groups is up to each council.

Men have a valuable role to play in advancing gender equity. Opportunities should be made available for men to talk about their experiences of gender equity in the workplace.

How could we promote the program in council?

Consider the internal communication channels available to you in council and to whom you want to communicate.

For wide communications, you could use:

- staff newsletter
- CEOs message
- post the item on the intranet, including video message from the CEO and program coordinator
- Yammer
- posters
- postcards
- all staff meetings

For targeted communications, you could use:

- a personal email from the CEO
- a calendar invitation from the CEOs calendar
- an item on specific meeting agendas, e.g., women's group or social inclusion group meetings

Can we adapt the key messages supplied in the program booklet?

Yes! You are welcome to use the key messages as they appear in the Listen, Learn and Lead Program Guide or adapt them to address specific circumstances at your council. Key messages are generally short, simple statements that provide clear information about what the program is about, why council is running the program and what goals are sought.

May council use on our website the video on the LGV Listen, Learn and Lead webpage?

Yes! You are welcome to use the resources on the Listen, Learn and Lead webpage. We have heard from one council that Google Chrome is the most stable platform for embedding the video. You could also consider creating your own video using comments from the CEO, the program coordinator and other council staff, and other data specific to your council such as gender ratios in senior roles.

In the guide there is a template for the feedback forms. Is it ok if I change this to suit us?

Yes! You are welcome to adapt the template for feedback.

Local Government Victoria will need to receive feedback from councils as outlined in the template but councils may provide additional information.

How to I identify the themes arising from our focus groups?

The main way you will collect information from your focus groups is by taking notes while participants are talking. However, it can be a daunting task trying to identify themes when you are faced with pages and pages of notes. Here are some strategies:

- Read over your notes to get an initial sense of the recurring themes. Then reread with a set of highlighter pens and mark each theme in a different colour.
- Set up your focus groups so that participants do some of the theme categorising for you. At the end of a session, or at intervals throughout a session, you can ask participants to write up the top 3-5 issues of importance to them. Collect these sheets after the session.
- Ask participants to nominate key themes, which you will then write up onto butcher's paper and hang around the room. Ask participants to make notes under each theme to elaborate on the idea and place a red dot against the one or two themes of greatest importance to them.
- If you have the technology available, take notes on a device so that you can later search for key themes or create a word cloud that visually presents the most frequently recurring themes. A word cloud is a fun graphic to include in your internal reports.

Should the final report to LGV summarise themes arising from all focus groups or should councils provide a separate report for each focus group?

Local Government Victoria will need to receive the themes arising from all focus groups. LGV does not need to receive themes arising from individual focus group sessions. Please also include an explanation around each of the themes council provides so that LGV understands the context.

It will be helpful for councils to understand the overall themes as well as themes arising from each focus group. The themes arising from each focus group may differ depending on who attends the focus group. For example, themes may be different for a mixed gender group, a group of part time women and a group of senior women. That information will be helpful for councils to understand how to target an effective response.

Council would like to form a working group to oversee the Listen, Learn and Lead Gender Equity Program and the development of a gender equity action plan. Is that ok?

Yes! Bringing together senior staff and interested and motivated staff to support the program and develop a gender equity action plan is a great idea. Where possible, a female representative from each department or service unit to support the gender equity work will ensure wider support across council.

Can we run our own number of focus groups?

Yes! The program requires that councils run a minimum of three focus groups: women staff, women in senior roles and women in senior leadership role. If your council wishes to run more focus groups, please go ahead. You may wish to run more groups so that staff who work part-time or off-site can take part.

Your council may also wish to offer email correspondence with the program coordinator or CEO, or one-to-one conversations with the program coordinator or CEO. Council may wish to run a group for senior men and women in leadership roles, or a group specifically for men. The number of focus groups should meet council interests and needs.

Could we include another person from the executive leadership group to facilitate the focus groups?

Yes! If you would like to include additional facilitators in your focus groups, please go ahead. The key value of the program is that staff have an opportunity to be heard by the CEO, so please ensure that the program is managed to align with the CEOs calendar and that the CEO can attend the focus groups.

How do we start work on a gender equity action plan?

In the first instance, the themes arising from the focus group conversations held as part of the Listen, Learn and Lead Gender Equity Program will suggest where to focus your strategic work. Through the focus groups, specific barriers might be identified that could be dealt with through a targeted mechanism, such as a change to a HR process. However, councils are reminded that a gender equity plan is broader than a set of targeted actions and will require a broader, strategic approach to gender equity.

Consider the opportunities in your council for a gender equity plan to interact with existing policies or plans. Some councils have established a gender equity working group to oversee the development and implementation of the strategy over the longer term.

Consider also, how you will monitor the gender equity action plan over time and evaluate the effectiveness of the actions included in the plan.

Have other councils done an audit as part of the program?

Yes. An audit is a useful way to learn more about council. An audit can investigate various areas to gather specific data of interest. An audit can be undertaken to discover where in council women are concentrated. One council was surprised to discover that female employees were most likely to be employed at level 6 or below, having previously believed that gender equity was high. Data helped to reveal the actual conditions at council. Audits can also be undertaken on existing policies such as workplace flexibility to understand how the policy is implemented across the organisation.

Some staff think the program is sexist

Some councils have reported that some staff are concerned that men are not included on a gender equity working group, or are not included in a focus group. Some councils have also heard that the program is about 'promoting unqualified women'.

The program is about addressing systematic barriers to women's professional advancement. Data shows that women are underrepresented in senior roles. The program aims to identify barriers and take steps to eliminate those barriers so that women have an equal opportunity to advance in council to senior roles.



