



Safe and Strong Gender Equality Strategy 2022

Submission

October 2021

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The MAV is the statutory peak body for local government in Victoria. The MAV would like to acknowledge the contribution of the councils who responded to our request for their comments and advice during this consultation. While this submission aims to broadly reflect the views of local government in Victoria, it does not purport to reflect the exact views of individual councils.

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Introduction

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) is the peak representative and advocacy body for Victoria's 79 councils. The MAV was formed in 1879 and the *Municipal Association Act 1907* appointed the MAV the official voice of local government in Victoria.

Today, the MAV is a driving and influential force behind a strong and strategically positioned local government sector. Our role is to represent and advocate the interests of local government; raise the sector's profile; ensure its long-term security; facilitate effective networks; support councillors; provide policy and strategic advice; capacity building programs; and insurance services to local government.

The MAV commends the Victorian Government for the significant progress and achievements that have occurred through the reforms of the first iteration of the *Safe and Strong* strategy, launched December 2016. The MAV is proud to be working closely with the State and sector partners to support the strategy's vision and actions. The opportunity provided to the local government sector by the Office for Women as part of this consultation to inform the next iteration of the strategy is also acknowledged and appreciated.

The renewed strategy is an opportunity to evolve the breadth and depth of our gender equality efforts, support integrated whole-of-government and community activity, and contribute to the evidence base for continuous improvement.

To address gender inequality, change is needed across all parts of society, simultaneously reaching multiple settings within our communities. Individuals, organisations, government, and society need to understand and address gender inequality, and social norms need to change by building knowledge and skills, practices and structures.

Gender equality is a priority for Victorian councils in their role as large employers and through the myriad of community facing services they deliver to people across the life cycle. Everyone in local government has a role to play in working to achieve gender equality. This includes councillors, executive leaders, managers, gender equity and primary prevention specialists, and people working at all levels in council from front-line service staff to policy officers and administrators.

There are opportunities to highlight the role of councils across the four pillars in the renewed *Safe and Strong* strategy as they continue to innovate, grow their expertise and lead by example to build safe and equitable communities for all Victorians. Particularly in the priority areas of implementation of the Gender Equality Act 2020 and increased diversity and gender balance in local representation. The local government sector, with appropriate resourcing, is well placed to support this evolution.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the gendered impact that COVID-19 has on all workforces and communities, including local government. The renewed strategy will need to account for the fatigue of our workforces and support a gender-equal recovery.

The role of councils in *Safe and Strong's* pillars

Councils have influence and a critical part to play in each of the four pillars that form the basis of the next iteration of *Safe and Strong*, the Victorian Gender Equality Strategy, being:

- Health and Wellbeing
- Safety
- Economic Equity
- Representation and Leadership

Because of the reach and depth of engagement councils have with their communities they can enable an integrated approach to gender equity across many aspects of the community and all pillars in this strategy.

Health and Wellbeing

Councils are required to develop *Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans* every four years. They are experienced in delivering initiatives to diverse groups within their communities. Services that are regularly delivered include disability, aged care and positive ageing, youth, early years, maternal and child health (MCH), libraries, sport and recreation, planning, and arts and culture. The breadth of these services provides councils with unrivalled reach across their communities and at every life stage.

Councils manage and/or own a wide range of community facilities and spaces. They also have strong existing partnerships with community organisations that use these facilities including those in sport and recreation, neighbourhood houses, and parks and open space. These relationships provide unique opportunities to progress gender equality. Several councils have developed programs and policies to promote gender equity in sports settings. [Moreland City Council](#), for example, leveraged their grounds and facilities allocation policy to require greater gender equity in sports clubs, while many other councils including Moorabool, Moonee Valley, Hepburn and Yarra Ranges, provide gender equity training and action planning support to sports club members and leadership groups.

Maternal and child health services present a particular opportunity to reach every new parent and child in Victoria at a key life stage when gender roles often shift or solidify. Supporting the MCH workforce to embed, promote and role model gender equitable practices would have a far-reaching impact, with opportunities to include gender equity in the training of MCH nurses. Furthermore, this universal service is a key setting through which to support new parents' mental health. The contact MCH nurses have with new parents has been especially crucial for reducing isolation in the context of COVID-19.

Councils are not new to gender equity as an important aspect of overall community health and wellbeing. While they are now required by the Gender Equality Act to undertake gender impact assessments on all policies, programs and services that significantly impact the community, many councils have already developed Gender Equality Strategies, such as [Monash](#), [Mornington Peninsula](#), and [Maribyrnong](#), and supported innovative community programs that promote gender equality. For example, [Darebin City Council](#) and [Nillumbik Shire Council's](#) work

on gender equity in the early years, Wodonga City Council's [Balance for Better Business program](#), and Bayside City Council's [Changing Faces Exhibition \(2019\)](#). For more examples visit the [MAV's website](#).

Under the Health and Wellbeing pillar, the Gender Equality Strategy Renewal Local Government Sector Roundtable Consultation (Local Government Sector Roundtable) identified menopause education along with public programs and education focused on destigmatising sexual and reproductive health as priorities. Councils and the MAV are experienced in delivering public awareness raising campaigns and programs such as [16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence](#), the [Be Kind](#) campaign established during COVID-19, and [EveryAGE Counts](#) a campaign against ageism. This experience and councils' reach across the community can be leveraged to reinforce and promote positive public health messages where people live, work and play especially in rural and regional areas.

Safety

The role of councils in enhancing safety for all members of our communities is an important one. This has traditionally been viewed as an important aspect of promoting community cohesion, health and wellbeing. Women's and gender diverse people's safety – particularly family violence prevention, and safety and access to public space – have been priorities for many councils over many years.

Several councils, including [Casey](#), [Frankston](#), and [Wodonga](#), have preventing family violence and/or violence against women strategies. The importance of councils in the prevention system is receiving greater recognition and investment through the *Free from Violence Strategy* and associated development of the *Local Government Guide to Preventing Family Violence and all forms of Violence Against Women* (the *Local Government Guide*), along with integration of local government into prevention sector workforce development. This development and investment from the Victorian Government builds on over a decade of work undertaken by councils in this space. Many examples of this work are available on the [MAV website](#), as well as the soon to be published booklet, [Communities free from violence: local government leading change](#).

The MAV expects engagement from councils in the prevention of family violence and all forms of violence against women to continue to increase over the coming years with the roll out of the *Local Government Guide* (due to be released April 2022), greater engagement with the [MAV Gender Equality and Preventing Violence Against Women and all forms of Gender-Based Violence Network](#) (GE, PVAW and GBV Network) from diverse areas of council, and enabling aspects of the Gender Equality Act.

Along with council work in prevention, the introduction of the *Family Violence Information Sharing Scheme*, *Child Information Sharing Scheme*, and *Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework* mean that relevant council workforces such as MCH and early childhood are now prescribed to share information to assess and manage family violence risk and to promote the safety and wellbeing of children. Although not family violence specialists, councils are well placed and have long been required to respond to family violence.

Many workforces not prescribed, such as libraries, local laws, customer services and emergency management, also receive disclosures from the public and are increasingly being trained by their councils to identify, respond and refer appropriately. Furthermore, the reach of these roles into the community provides an important avenue for disseminating information related to family violence and support services available at the local level. Anecdotally this has been particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic when many specialist services have been less accessible to the community.

The work of several councils in prevention of family violence and violence against women before, during and after emergencies is significant and will be increasingly important in the recovery from COVID-19 and as the impacts of climate change continue to be felt. Examples include Macedon Ranges Shire, the first council in Australia to develop a strategy for [Preventing Violence Against Women in Emergencies](#) and Casey City Council's work on [Gender and Family Violence Pandemic Response](#).

Councils are a critical partner in the emergency management sector and have an important role to play in relation to disaster planning, relief, and recovery. Gender is a fundamental consideration at all phases of emergency management as it influences different expectations and experiences of people of different genders and can compound the already damaging effects of disaster. It is critical that decisions being made in emergencies and disasters are reflective of everyone impacted.

Women's access to public spaces has been identified as a key safety priority by the Local Government Sector Roundtable, and there is opportunity for councils to have influence and be partnered with in this area. Design and development of outdoor space is a key lever councils can use to improve the safety of and access to public space for all members of the community including women and gender diverse people.

Many councils undertake audits and adopt changes to specific public spaces such as parks, walking or bike paths, and streetscapes, to make them more accessible and responsive to the needs to women and gender diverse people. Increasingly councils are mapping the perceptions and experiences of community members in public space and developing audit tools to guide this process. For example, 24 councils participated in [YourGround](#), a recent project mapping a safer Victoria for women and gender-diverse people. The role of local government in responding to sexist advertising in public space is also being explored with new guidelines for local government under development by [Melbourne City Council and Women's Health Victoria](#).

Another key priority identified by the Local Government Sector Roundtable is the interplay between access to housing and safety. The MAV and Victorian councils have welcomed the Victorian Government's *Big Housing Build*, and the expectation that it will accommodate up to 1,000 victim survivors of family violence. We also recognise that despite the unprecedented level of investment, sustained investment will be needed over at least the next ten years to bring Victoria's level of affordable housing up to an additional 60,000 new public and community homes by 2031.

As part of our work with the State Government to develop a Social and Affordable Housing Compact, the MAV will be seeking commitments that, in addition to the *Big Housing Build*, the state government will invest to ensure to increase the supply of local crisis accommodation options, support services, facilities and amenities in partnership with local service providers. The Compact will provide the opportunity to articulate the intention of a new and respectful partnership with local government which will set the broad parameters for the relationship going forward.

The Compact will support and give the welcomed focus on pathways, including for people experiencing family violence, in the proposed [Ten Year Social and Affordable Housing Strategy](#). *Safe and Strong* should look to align with and enhance this work to avoid duplication across government.

In 2020, the MAV worked closely with the Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO) to develop and encourage participation in the *2020 Sexual Harassment in Local Government survey*. Seventy-five of 79 Victorian councils participated, indicating the importance with which councils view this issue and their desire to find ways to improve.

There is broad acceptance of the recommendations coming out of the *VAGO Sexual Harassment in Local Government Report* (the VAGO Report) by the local government sector. This report provides a roadmap of actions that councils can take to ensure a better understanding of the prevalence, prevention, and response to sexual harassment, both at the organisational level and for elected representatives.

There is a clear need for further education, support and ongoing training for councils to implement the VAGO Report recommendations and understand the intersections of relevant legislation, including the Gender Equality Act 2020 and Local Government Act 2020. There have been no resources or support provided to councils to implement the recommendations and most resources related to workforce sexual harassment are not nuanced to local government sector requirements, particularly those of councillors. The language used (i.e. employees/workplaces), for example, may exclude, confuse or reduce the avenues available to councillors for lodging complaints. There is also a need for greater understanding of sexual harassment as 'serious misconduct' under the new Local Government Act, and greater emphasis needed in the mandatory Code of Conduct training and on incorporating sexual harassment training as part of councillor induction and ongoing professional development.

The MAV is committed to working with our members on the issue of sexual harassment. Our CEO is a member of the Ministerial Taskforce on Workplace Sexual Harassment which is due to release recommendations that should be considered in *Safe and Strong*.

Economic Equity

There are several ways through which councils can influence economic equity: in their capacity as a workplace, through their community and economic development work, and as a major procurer of goods and services.

As workplaces, many councils have implemented organisational development or cultural change programs such as *Workplace Equality and Respect* or a Gender Equity Advocates /Champions of Change program. Other councils have progressively worked to improve equity outcomes in workplace policies and practices such as family violence, sexual harassment, flexible work, leave entitlements, recruitment, and promotion, and have introduced training modules to induction and regular staff training.

Stand out examples of councils' innovation in gender equitable workplace policy include Surf Coast Shire Council, the first organisation in the world to introduce [family violence leave](#) to their enterprise agreement, and Bass Coast Shire Council, which recently introduced greater [gender equity to their parental leave policies](#) including removing the distinction between primary and secondary carers and providing superannuation on unpaid parental leave for up to 12 months.

Victorian councils employ over 50,000 people, the majority of whom are women working in areas of family and community services, aged and disability services and governance. Anecdotally, the impact COVID-19 has had on the workload and mental health of this workforce has been significant, particularly during this current extended lockdown. The renewed *Safe and Strong* should reflect the disproportionate burden COVID-19 has had on women these past two-years and support a Victoria that 'builds back better' in relation to gender equality opportunities and outcomes.

The introduction of the Gender Equality Act 2020 and establishment of the Commission is a significant achievement of the first edition of the *Safe and Strong* Gender Equality Strategy. These advancements will enhance the existing efforts of councils to create equitable workplaces through workplace gender audits and Gender Equality Action Plans, leading to greater consistency across the sector.

The MAV has developed a strong and collegial relationship with the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector (the Commission) in the relatively short period of time since their inception and introduction of the Gender Equality Act 2020. The Commissioner and members of her team have willingly participated in various local government events including an MAV Leadership Forum and several MAV GE, PVAW and GBV Network meetings. The MAV is also contributing to this effort via our CEO's representation on the Implementation Support Advisory Committee and a board member's participation on the Gender Equality Advisory Committee (GEAC).

While councils and the MAV acknowledge that the Commission has worked hard to provide support to public entities and develop strong working relationships with us in their first 18 months, the resourcing and capacity of the Commission to provide the tailored support, guidance and resources needed for councils to successfully and fully implement the obligations of the Gender Equality Act 2020 have been inadequate. The workplace requirements of the Gender Equality Act 2020 show great promise for enhancing councils' efforts to improve gender equality in this sphere of influence but without additional resourcing and tailored support it will not reach its full potential.

The work councils undertake in economic and community development is another area where councils have potential to make significant contributions to economic equity. This could include identifying and contributing to address structural barriers to economic equity in their communities, particularly at the local and regional level and in rural settings, and supporting or implementing initiatives to encourage workforce diversification.

A recent example of research undertaken in this area is Whittlesea City Council's [gender equity in employment project](#) which explored gender equity in employment in the outer suburbs. The [Women Building Surveyors Program](#) is an important example of the State Government partnering with councils to address gendered segregation of a particular workforce. There is also the possibility of applying a gender lens to economic development initiatives that promote local job creation and growth, or the transition to new workforces when regional industries close down (e.g. manufacturing or power generation).

Procurement is a significant part of council business and influence on the community totaling over \$9 billion in expenditure on goods and services per year. Many councils have demonstrated experience in social procurement over a number of years, however gender equitable procurement is an emerging area.

The MAV has a leadership role in collaborative purchasing arrangements of local government and can use associated policy and practice to support gender equality. This may be as simple as seeking data from perspective suppliers on executive team gender and diversity and/or how they are implementing gender equity processes in their workplace. The Social Procurement framework can be strengthened to be more explicit in respect to gender equality outcomes.

Leadership and Representation

Progress has been made towards the target set out in *Safe and Strong* of 50 per cent female representation on councils by 2025. At the 2020 local government elections, female councillors increased from 38.1 per cent to 43.8 per cent, the highest proportion of female elected representatives of any state or territory at any time.

The MAV produced a [100 years of women in local government video](#) celebrating this milestone and the progress achieved over the past century in elected leadership.

The MAV's former President, Coral Ross, was awarded Churchill Fellowship in 2018 to improve gender equality in local government by increasing the number of women councillors.

Her research covering USA, Canada, England, Sweden and Germany found that while there are many overseas programs to elect women which can be implemented in Australia, parity will not be achieved until the systemic and cultural barriers which prevent women being elected are addressed.

Her [report](#) details more than 50 initiatives to elect women, the growing issue of sexual harassment and on-line abuse and she makes 33 recommendations for all three levels of government.

Examples of some of the support required to encourage more women into local government include:

- Women's leadership forums at least two years prior to the election
- Training for women candidates the year of the election
- Webinars and online training to demystify the council process
- Public campaign encouraging the community to 'Ask her to stand'
- A knowledge hub where resources and information can be easily accessed
- Mentoring and sponsorship programs (including mentors of all genders)

All initiatives should be accessible, affordable (subsidized where needed) and flexible, including childcare provision, with an explicit focus on encouraging and supporting women from diverse backgrounds and experiences to stand. Tapping into community organisation, sporting club, school and kinder leadership should be encouraged, as well as more traditional pathways, such as local chambers of commerce.

The MAV has been delivering the Stand for Council campaign since 2008 which supports Victorian councils with a variety of social media activities. It also delivers community and candidate information sessions to help raise awareness about the role and responsibilities of councillors and encourages community members to stand for their local council. In 2020, the MAV delivered 57 Stand for Council information sessions for 45 Victorian councils, including 34 rural/regional and 23 metro, with a total of 946 participants. There's an opportunity ahead of the 2024 elections to work with the State Government to tailor these to further encourage diverse participation.

The establishment of the Local Government Gender Equality Advisory Committee (GEAC) is a significant achievement from the current *Safe and Strong* Strategy. GEAC provides elected and executive local government leaders, along with sector peaks, a forum to come together to discuss, develop and strengthen opportunities for sector leadership. Support for the work of GEAC and associated leadership development projects that arise through this forum will be important in the next Strategy.

The MAV is represented on the Gender Equality Advisory Committee (GEAC) by an MAV Board member who is also Mayor of a regional council. The work of this committee is very much focused on increasing the diversity of elected representation. Four working groups have formed through the GEAC structure, covering the topics of:

- Election strategies and increasing the diversity of women standing
- Culture and respect (identifying aspects of poor culture that may discourage women standing)
- Council workforce development (staff and leadership)
- Structures and barriers to standing (e.g. council meetings held at night, remuneration).

The recommendations being developed through this process should be considered as part of the *Safe and Strong* strategy renewal, as well as communicated to the local government sector providing opportunities to increase buy-in and early adoption

Council organisations, particularly in senior ranks, need to better reflect gender equality and the diversity of the communities they serve within their own workplaces. Like other sectors, councils are making progress with an increasing number of women being appointed to CEO positions over recent years, with women now constituting 24 of Victoria's 79 council CEOs (30 per cent). WGAs undertaken as part of councils' Gender Equality Act responsibilities will help illuminate areas for improvement, particularly in relation to pipelines for career progression.

Programs such as the 'Emerging Leaders' program offered through Local Government Professionals (LGPro) has a solid reputation in the sector, however there are limited places per year. There is also no dedicated stream for women and few incentives to increase participants from under-represented groups, such as people who live with a disability or have a diverse cultural background, with the exception of offering scholarships to nominees from Aboriginal and Torres Strait backgrounds for the first time in 2022. Similarly courses from the Australian Institute of Company Directors are highly regarded and the MAV currently supports the participation of councillors, but cost is prohibitive and limits its accessibility to underrepresented groups and those in other council leadership positions.

The MAV has actively supported the Victorian Government's 'Recognition Matters' program over recent years. There is an opportunity to build on existing awards and recognition programs, such the [LG Pro Awards for Excellence](#) and the [Sally Isaac Scholarship Fund Memorial Award](#) for young women, by building a network of established leaders (i.e. past inductees) who are encouraged and supported to take on more formal mentoring roles for those starting out on their leadership journey.

There is also an opportunity for introducing and promoting a streamlined process for council community award winners (i.e. individuals who have made an outstanding contribution to the community) to have their nominations submitted to the State's equivalent awards, including women and gender diverse people being submitted for consideration through the Recognition Matters program.

MAV Key Priorities for *Safe and Strong*

1. The role of councils is recognised across all four pillars of the next *Safe and Strong* Strategy

As the level of government closest to the community providing unrivalled reach to where people live, learn, work and play across the life cycle, local government can play a pivotal role in promoting gender equality in Victoria. Councils have existing infrastructure that can be effectively engaged to promote gender equality. They know and work with their communities and can contribute to addressing their diverse and intersectional needs. With adequate support, councils can help lead this societal change through the services they deliver, their organisational structure and operations, and through leadership and representation in the community. This reach is particularly important in regional, rural, and remote areas where access to other services and organisations may be limited.

While there are opportunities across the four pillars, it is the view of the MAV that the priorities for local government in this iteration of *Safe and Strong*, are additional support for councils to implement the Gender Equality Act 2020 and increasing the diversity and gender balance in local representation. The local government sector, with appropriate resourcing, is well placed to support this evolution.

2. Local Government Area (LGA) level data is collected and published to support effective research, monitoring and evaluation at the local level

There is diversity across the many communities in Victoria requiring tailored and nuanced approaches in different places and settings. Population data is an important tool for understanding trends, where intervention is needed, and measuring social change over time. This data is vital for research, monitoring and evaluation of gender equality initiatives, yet most of the best current evidence-based data sets are only available as State level data. With the introduction of the Gender Equality Act 2020 requirement to conduct Gender Impact Assessments (GIAs) on all policies, programs and services that impact on the public, councils are increasingly finding this to be a gap, particularly for intersectional data.

This lack of local government area (LGA) level data across platforms and research such as Respect Victoria's Prevention of Family Violence Data Platform, Workplace Gender Equality Agency data, National Community Attitudes Survey and in the outcome measures for the *Safe and Strong* Outcomes Framework means they are limited in their usefulness in helping councils understand the diverse needs and social changes in their local contexts.

The MAV, on behalf of councils, seeks a commitment in the next iteration of *Safe and Strong* to improved LGA level data collection and publication, disaggregated to demonstrate the experiences of diverse groups within communities that will enable more informed and nuanced community planning and strategies to increase gender equality. Additionally, inclusion of LGA level data in the outcome measures of the *Safe and Strong* Outcomes Framework would support local area planning, evaluation and comparisons over time.

3. Ensuring alignment of *Safe and Strong* with other legislative obligations and government strategies

The legislative and policy landscape has developed considerably since the first *Safe and Strong* strategy was released in December 2016, largely in response to the recommendations from the world-first Royal Commission into Family Violence.

Some of the significant changes relevant to local government include:

- Amendment (Section.26) to Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008 (Vic) requiring councils to report on measures they propose to take to reduce family violence
- introduction of the Gender Equality Act 2020 requiring councils to develop and publish their GEAPs and Progress Reports based on results of WGAs, employee experience surveys and GIAs
- *Ending family violence – Victoria's Plan for Change 2016*

- *Free from violence – Victoria’s strategy to prevent family violence and all forms of violence against women 2017*
- new Local Government Act 2020 requiring councils to prepare workforce plans that specify projected staffing requirements and set out measures to seek to ensure gender equality, diversity and inclusion, as well deliberative engagement processes.

Considering the progress that has occurred in the life of the first *Safe and Strong* strategy, there is an opportunity for the renewed strategy to be strengthened and enabled by its connection to other legislation and strategies, including those described above and other legislation such as the Human Rights Charter, Equal Opportunity Act, Occupational Health and Safety Act, and the current review of the Disability Act.

The MAV advocates that the new strategy clearly articulates how the gender equality effort is integrated with relevant work occurring across government and provides guidance on how the work links to other council obligations and broad diversity and inclusion goals, including intersectionality.

With the overlapping nature of gender equality and primary prevention of violence against women, strong alignment between the *Safe and Strong* and *Free from Violence Strategies*, and associated policies and legislation, is of high importance to councils to avoid duplication and improve efficiency and effectiveness.

4. Investment in the MAV and the local government sector to support implementation of relevant aspects of the *Safe and Strong* Strategy, including the Gender Equality Act 2020

The introduction of the Gender Equality Act 2020 and establishment of the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector is a significant achievement of the first edition of the *Safe and Strong* Gender Equality Strategy that will enhance the existing efforts of councils to create equitable workplaces and communities through workplace gender audits, Gender Equality Action Plans, and gender impact assessments, leading to greater effort and consistency across the sector.

While the introduction of this new legislation is welcomed by councils, the new obligations create immense pressure on existing resources and time. There is a need to upskill teams across diverse business units so they can undertake gender impact assessments as required by the Act, however this is an area new to most workers. Councils have requested advocacy support from the MAV around this issue however our resources in this area are limited.

Over the last decade the primary prevention of family violence and violence against women workforce in local government has steadily increased, as evidenced by the [MAV Gender Equality and Preventing Violence Against Women Survey of Victorian Councils 2018-19 Summary Report](#). All councils have roles ‘contributing’ to primary prevention and many have ‘specialist’ primary prevention officers. While there is a strong overlap between primary prevention and gender equality work, the additional workload the Gender Equality Act 2020 has

required of councils, particularly the need to build capacity of their organisations, is largely falling to this existing workforce without additional resourcing.

The MAV requests that the Victorian Government adequately resource councils to implement the Gender Equality Act 2020 and support development of a specialist workforce, similar and complimentary to the primary prevention roles.

Alternatively, the MAV recommends that the second edition of *Safe and Strong* considers resourcing the MAV to provide tailored support to councils, and sector coordination and capacity building in a similar role to that funded under the *Free from Violence Strategy*, described below.

The MAV is currently in receipt of two-year funding (2021-2023) from the Office for Preventing Family Violence and Coordination, through the *Free from violence* strategy, which resources 2.0 FTE to staff the preventing family violence and all forms of violence against women portfolio. This funding is provided to continue the MAV's support of councils to build capacity and capability in their prevention efforts, but supporting implementation of the Gender Equality Act 2020 and *Safe and Strong* is explicitly outside its scope.

A similar model of funding and provision of support to councils would be beneficial and cost effective to bolster councils' efforts to successfully meet their requirements under the Gender Equality Act and progress other work under the *Safe and Strong* strategy such as reaching the 50/50 elected representative target at the next council elections in 2024.

The impact of this type of resourcing is demonstrated by the engagement of councils in primary prevention work and how sophisticated this work is becoming. Attendance at [MAV GE, PVAW and GBV Network](#) meetings continues to grow, with between 50 and 70 council representatives attending quarterly meetings, there are over 100 council members of the online Teams network, and councils make up almost 500 of the 1,200 subscribers we have to our fortnightly [Preventing Violence Against Women and Gender Equality e-news](#). The high engagement from councils in the co-design process for the new *Local Government Guide to Prevent Family Violence and all forms of Violence Against Women*, which had over 100 participants, is also testament to the benefits of this type of investment.

With a dedicated resource to support local government in progressing their gender equality efforts, the MAV would be able to provide the tailored resources needed for the different council audiences, share best practice across the raft of community facing activity where councils are required to undertake a GIA, coordinate topic specific discussion forums and networking opportunities, and contribute to the evidence base to understand what transformative work is occurring in councils and where opportunities remain untapped.

5. Support for gender equal and diverse representation among councillors and senior organisational leaders

Achieving 50 per cent women councillors and Mayors by 2025 was a key priority of the first *Safe and Strong* strategy and significant progress has been made towards this goal. With the next local government election in 2024 the final opportunity to reach this target, focus should be kept

on achieving 50 per cent women councillors and Mayors for the next strategy, along with retaining women councillors for the long term. Representation of diverse women in achieving this goal should also be a focus.

The work of the Gender Equality Advisory Committee includes consideration of how to increase the diversity of women councillors and is an important opportunity to understand what is needed to increase gender parity and diversity. GEAC will be providing recommendations to both the Minister for Women and the Minister for Local Government which should be considered in the *Safe and Strong* renewal and communicated to the local government sector to provide opportunities for increase buy-in and early adoption. The MAV would encourage regular engagement with Local Government Victoria, which is providing the Secretariat for GEAC, to ensure that this takes place.

There continues to be opportunity for the workforce demographics within councils to better reflect gender equality and the diversity of the communities they serve. This is particularly relevant at senior management and executive levels. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of women being appointed CEOs, now comprising 30 per cent of positions. It would be of great interest for a small research program to be undertaken to understand this increase in numbers.

The MAV encourages the next *Safe and Strong* Strategy to include investment in direct programs or initiatives that actively support and encourage diverse women to develop leadership skills and to stand for council. Programs could include mentoring, sponsorship and professional development programs, women's leadership forums, targeted community leadership programs, and specific marketing and training campaigns. These programs should be comprehensive and commence well before the 2024 election. They should also be accessible financially and in terms of timing and method of delivery. The MAV encourages the next *Safe and Strong* strategy to include measures that address the gap in leadership development through direct funding for programs that are accessible, affordable or free to targeted cohorts, or scholarship programs to support women attending.

The MAV is experienced in delivering a Stand for Council program and, with the support of additional funding in the lead up to the 2024 council elections, would have capacity to develop and deliver a focused campaign to support and encourage diverse women and people of all genders to stand for their local council.

In addition to the above, *Safe and Strong* should look to address structural barriers that affect the retention of women in councillor and leadership roles such as the gender pay gap, prevalence of sexual harassment, access to childcare, other forms of discrimination such as racism or ableism, and policies and practices that negatively impact women. WGAs undertaken as part of councils' Gender Equality Act responsibilities will illuminate areas for improvement, particularly in relation to pipelines for career progression and should be used to inform targeted initiatives.

6. Support for councils to implement the recommendations of the Victorian Auditor General Office's (VAGO) report on sexual harassment in local government

The renewed *Safe and Strong* strategy requires a continued focus on sexual harassment, including in local government, and to take into consideration the recommendations coming from the Ministerial Taskforce on Workplace Sexual Harassment. The MAV CEO is a member of this Taskforce and the recommendations being crafted will be important considerations for the renewed *Safe and Strong* strategy.

While councils have always been committed to meeting their legal obligations in relation to sexual harassment, the *VAGO Sexual Harassment in Local Government Report* (the VAGO Report), released December 2020, has brought this issue into sharp focus. It provides a roadmap of actions that councils can take to ensure a better understanding of the prevalence, better prevention, and better responses to sexual harassment, both at the organisational level and for elected representatives.

There is broad acceptance of the VAGO Report recommendations in the local government sector, and a commitment from the MAV to work with our members, but most resources related to workforce sexual harassment are not nuanced to local government sector requirements, including those of councillors and the intersections of relevant legislation, such as the Gender Equality Act and Local Government Act.

There needs to be greater emphasis and consistency given to incorporating sexual harassment training as part of councillor induction and ongoing professional development, with a focus on education to clarify the pathways available to councillors in the varied situations where they may experience, witness, or receive disclosures of sexual harassment.

The MAV also believes there is an opportunity for the renewed *Safe and Strong* strategy to better understand the growing issue of work-related online harassment and bullying, particularly in the context of COVID-19 and the gendered nature of abuse. There is a need for explicit attention to be given to preventing what is a growing issue in terms of volume and severity of online abuse in the next iteration of *Safe and Strong*.