

INSIGHTS 2024

Councillor Perspectives on the Council Meeting Process

IMPROVING TRANSPARENCY IN DECISION-MAKING THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

Background

In 2023, over 40 governance leaders spoke about the strategic risks and best practice opportunities within the council meeting process in “The Unrealised Potential of Council Meetings.”

In this report, governance leaders said that the council meeting process is marred by inefficiencies and complexities. Few individuals can execute it end-to-end, leading to single point sensitivity and many other hidden risks and stress for meeting administrators.

Armed with this information, we asked councillors how they feel about council meetings to find out what improvements would support them most in their role.

The future of councillor support requires councils to go beyond just the supply of business papers and agendas, and to consider how councillors support governance more broadly. Councillors require timely access to a wide range of accurate information that supports well-informed debate.

The report serves as a roadmap for councils to unlock the untapped potential of council meetings for councillors, supporting transparent decision making, while respecting constraints on councillor time and resources.

“Council meetings are something [the public] dreaded. That shouldn’t be the case, its where the public should be able to see and hear what good governance is about, where work gets done!” – Councillor, South Australia

About the Survey

40 councillors contributed to this report, either by interview, survey, or both.

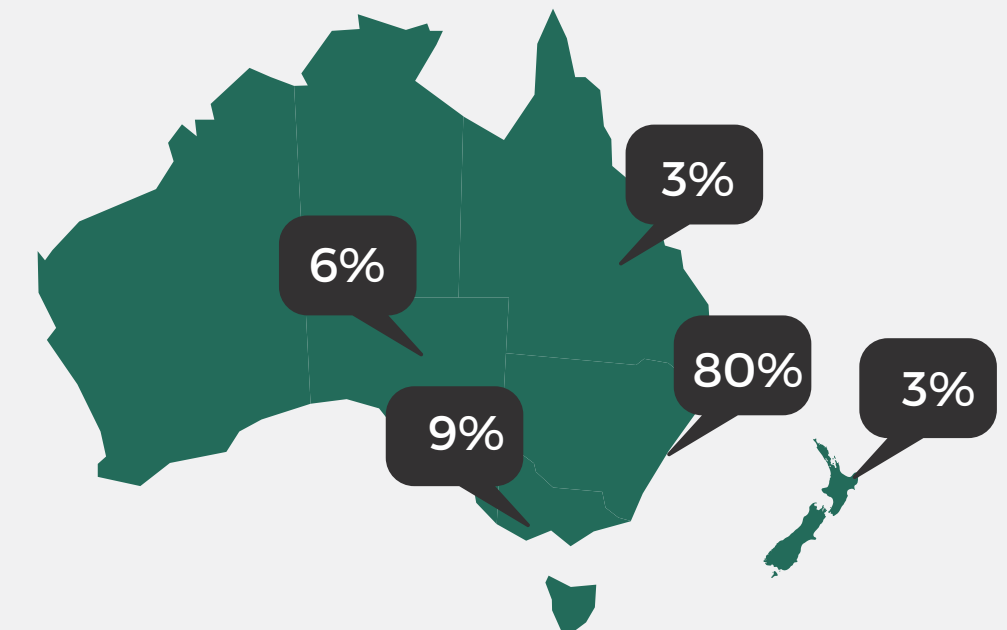
Overall, councillors expressed great appreciation for the role of governance teams and were supportive of their ongoing efforts to support them in their roles. The data uncovered in this report speaks to where councillors believe the greatest impact can be realised from continuous improvement in transparency and technology.

Note: We received feedback on the survey design that we should have incorporated more options for councillors to state their satisfaction with current processes. This feedback will be incorporated into future projects.

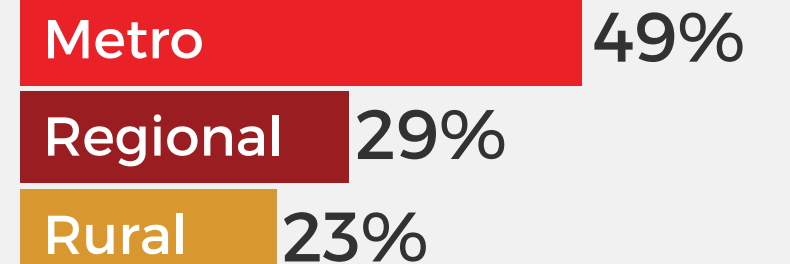
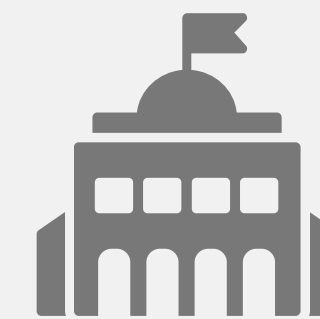
The Respondents



Location



Council Locality



THE CHALLENGES IMPACTING TRANSPARENCY

in Local Government



When it comes to decision making, how transparent do you feel your council is?

7/10

respondents felt that decision making in council meetings was either 'somewhat transparent' or 'not as transparent as I'd like' - *indicating that most felt there was some improvements that could be made in terms of transparency.*





Why do Councillors Feel This Way About Transparency?

1. Political Posturing Prevents Meaningful Debate

The research underscores concern about political motivations and group mentalities hindering meaningful discussions within the council. Councillors have raised worries about some peers bending rules or using emotions to influence decisions and that this prevents open and transparent communication.

2. Evasive, Fearful Responses from Operations Impedes Quality Decision-Making

Participants highlighted the value of governance officers being honest, unbiased, and straightforward in their responses, avoiding overly technical or evasive answers. There is a shared expectation that governance officers and GMs/CEOs should provide direct responses without fear of retribution, ensuring open access to information and equitable treatment for all councillors, regardless of councillor demeanour or influence.

3. Governance is Not Sufficiently Empowered by The System to Challenge It

There was also sentiment that governance is restricted and lacks the power to challenge the system, calling for a more supportive and empowered structure so staff can have more confidence to act without hesitation. This is to ensure respectful, inclusive activity that genuinely facilitates democracy and outcomes for community.

“Councillors will use whatever is at their disposal, governance rules, rudimentary NLP, emotions etc to try and get their way in the chamber. They're not there to favour one person, they're there in the best interests of the municipal district, the minute they don't do it, they're not doing their jobs.” Councillor, Victoria

“Nobody likes an equivocal or wishy-washy answer. I like clear, concise answers even if it upsets the questioner, because certain councillors get grumpy. I'm a nice councillor, I don't get upset. The noisy councillors get the special treatment. That annoys me.” - Councillor, Victoria

“Those that have power who are in that corporate governance role, feel powerless themselves to challenge or to ask those questions, to challenge the system as it is. That's really concerning.” - Councillor, New South Wales

4. Meetings Don't Encourage Inclusive Public Engagement

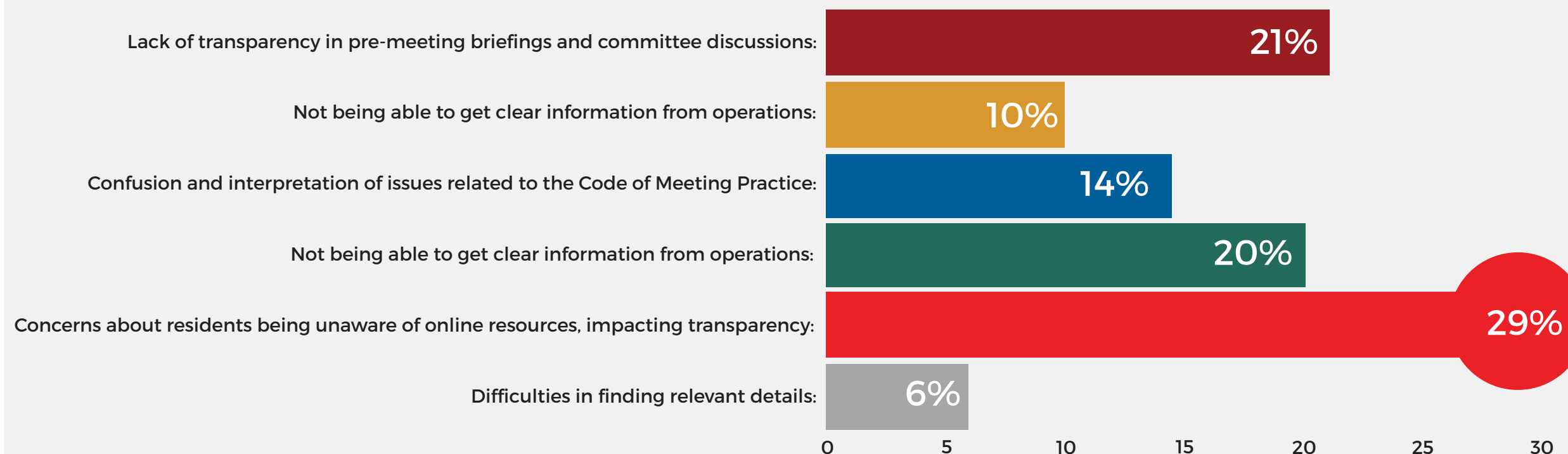
Public access to information emerged as a significant barrier to inclusive civic engagement (29%). Respondents expressed concern that current systems favour insiders, educated individuals and English-speaking individuals, leading to underrepresentation in engagement with council meetings from diverse audiences. Given the increasingly diverse nature of many communities, this was perceived as a significant detractor from transparency efforts.

Respondents reported frustration with available tools for council meetings, emphasising the need for accessible technology that supports digestible presentation of agenda items and discussions, especially for lengthy meetings.

"In the last census, 30% of community the born in China, don't know how council accesses those people. People from CALD (culturally and linguistic diverse) backgrounds are underrepresented in any visible consumption of council material." – Councillor, New South Wales



What are your biggest concerns about transparency in council meetings?



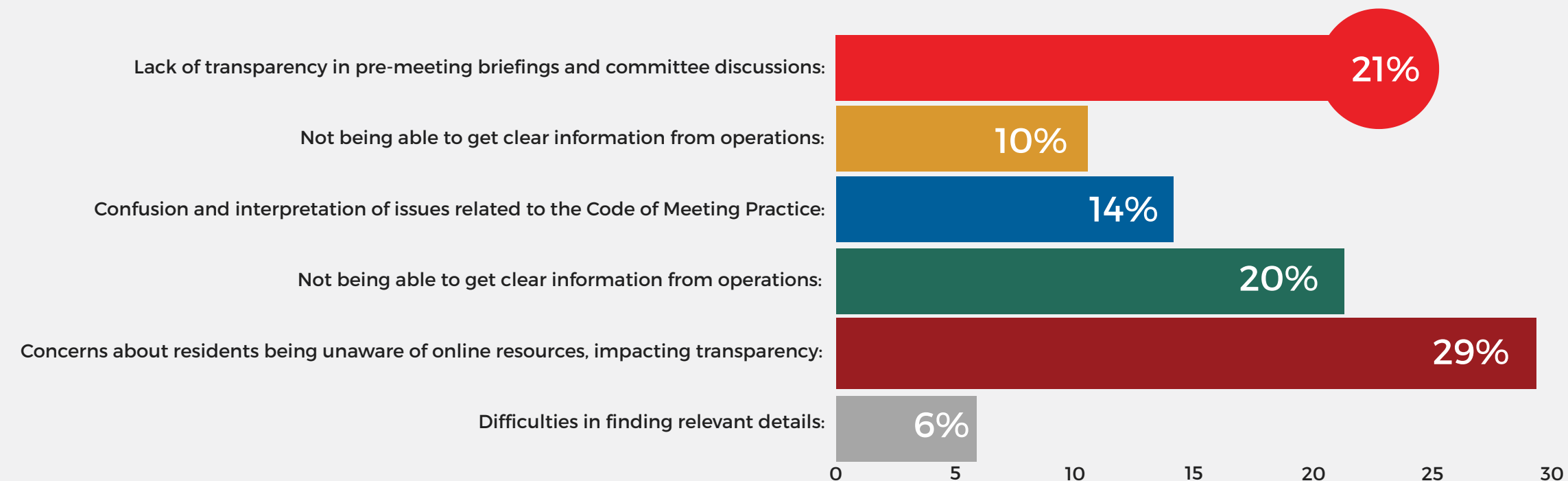
5. Discussion and Debate Behind Closed Doors Antithesis to Transparency

Councillors (21%) also expressed a desire to have more discussions in public rather than private briefings, so the community can understand decisions better. There was concern that with the introduction of video streaming, more debate had shifted to private briefings. Councillors agreed it's important to keep council chambers open to the public, even if it feels intimidating. Councillors felt that decisions should be shared with the public when possible, and confidential matters should be disclosed promptly.

"We need to keep an open window into what local government is doing, if a decision can be made in public, it should be. If it must be made in confidential, it must be made public at the earliest convenience." - Councillor, Victoria



What are your biggest concerns about transparency in council meetings?



A photograph of a meeting room with large windows. Several people are seated around a table. A man in a dark suit and tie is looking towards the camera. Other people are seen from behind or in profile, engaged in discussion. The room is bright and modern.

So, What Does This Mean for Local Government?

Transparent decision-making in local government relies heavily on open access to information, yet numerous councils face challenges in accessing documents such as agendas, minutes, briefing and committee minutes, strategic planning and operational reports, financial documentation, as well as a plethora of other types of information. This impediment becomes pronounced during democratic debates, where access to information is critical for substantive debate and prompt decision-making.

In the absence of timely access to this information, many councils lean heavily on governance teams for concise, non-technical responses to questions. Councillors felt that the quality of information was based on each governance team's level of empowerment, training, background, and skills in navigating complex interpersonal dynamics.

This is where technology emerges as a pivotal solution. By offering fast and easily accessible information, it allows councillors to self-serve details promptly, facilitating informed decision-making. This allows for independence and equal access to information, ensuring decisions are free from the influence of interpersonal or political dynamics. The public stands to gain the same benefits from this approach.

Moving beyond council meetings, true transparency means councillors require access to a "one-stop-shop" experience where information from across council is centralised and visualised in a way that gives councillors accurate insights at their fingertips.

In this next section, we'll explore in greater detail what best practice in technology looks like to ensure councillors get the right information at the right time to support productive, democratic debate and decision-making.

BEST PRACTICE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

for Transparent Local Government



What is the main frustration you have with technology during your council meetings?

71%

of respondents said navigating large documents was the main frustration with technology during council meetings. The closest frustration was reported as poor audio/visual quality of recorded meetings at 19%.

It's difficult to navigate long digital documents:

71%

Regular connectivity issues/dropouts:

5%

The technology is too confusing or complicated:

5%

Poor audio/visual quality:

19%

0 20 40 60 80

"Technology solutions aren't [user] friendly. It's very hard to scroll and flick between different pages and reports, going back and forth, referring to notes made on certain reports. If you have an aged item that has 50 pages, maps and graphs attached. But you want to refer to the written part of the report, you can't do both at the same time." – Councillor, South Australia

1. Digestibility of Large Documents is the Single Biggest Concern for Councillors.

Across four survey questions concerning transparency, decision-making, and technology, the most selected response related to how easy it was to consume information contained in meeting documentation.

Respondents expressed a strong desire for easily digestible presentations of agenda items and discussions, acknowledging the constraints on time and patience in lengthy meetings. Balancing full-time work with council responsibilities means the thorough review of large business papers is even more challenging, further emphasising the need to make information easily digestible. This becomes especially important given the prevalence of late agenda items, which were also noted as a major frustration for councillors.

These sentiments affirm the data uncovered in *The Unrealised Potential of Council Meetings*, that said over half of councils found supporting staff and councillors to navigate large pdfs was the most frustrating aspect of council meetings.

2. "One Stop Shop" Navigation Between Multiple Documents

Standard document management technology was criticised for its lack of user-friendliness, especially when dealing with lengthy items and attachments. The challenge of simultaneously referring to different parts of a report was identified as a notable issue. Internal systems for accessing confidential papers were deemed cumbersome, involving multiple logins and password portals, particularly problematic when switching between systems, especially on mobile devices.



36%



What frustrates you most about Council Meetings?

36% of respondents said that navigating large documents was their biggest frustration in relation to council meetings.



37%



What changes could your council make to improve transparency in decision-making?

37% of respondents said that more easily digestible presentation of agenda items and discussions would be the most impactful change to improve transparency in decision making.



33%



How could technology better support transparency for council meetings?

33% of respondents said technology that enabled an improved ability to manage large documents would support better transparency in council meetings.

3. Self Reliant Access to Meeting Records

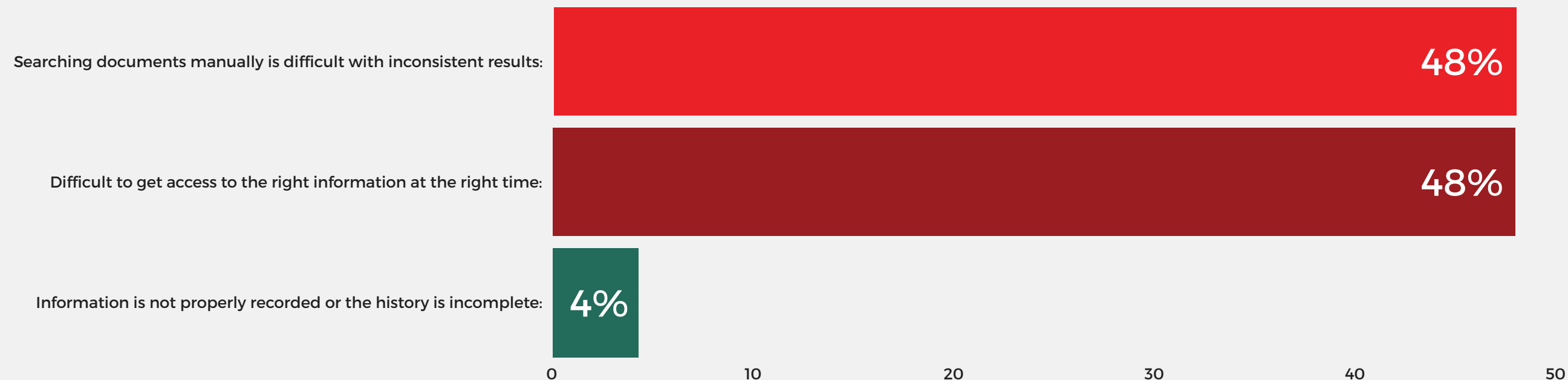
Access to information poses challenges, particularly in finding specific parts of meetings. Frustrations were expressed with systems utilised for managing council minutes, specifically, limitations in notetaking, referencing and searchability of information, indicating the need for improved tools to facilitate more user-friendly and self-reliant access to meeting records, to support supporting decision-making.

When initial report information is insufficient or unclear, councillors make an active effort to seek additional information or clarification from the CEO and Directors. For councils that feel concerned with getting clear and unambiguous information to inform decision making, easy access to records such a minutes, item histories and video of previous debate are critical.

“Trying to find that bit of the meeting can be hard. Minutes can help because it shows the order you still have to jump through meetings to find stuff, but there’s no list of times when matters were dealt with.” – Councillor, New South Wales



When accessing information about past meetings, what frustrates you the most?



4. Easily Searchable Minutes and Video Would Improve Decision Making

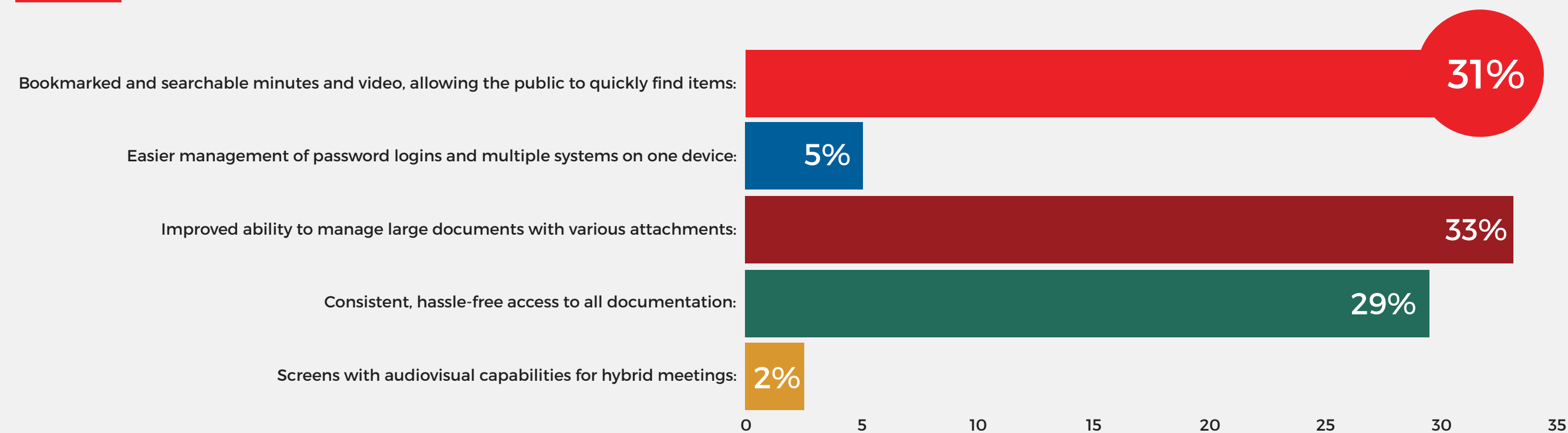
Concerns about post-meeting access to information were raised with councillors recognising the limitations of public engagement in lengthy meetings. Although minutes provide a structured overview, the absence of a time-stamped index for video complicates navigation through recordings, hindering efficient retrieval of information.

Video streaming was viewed as a positive development for increasing transparency in decision making. While not all states have legislated video recording, other transparency recommendations previously dismissed - such as publishing councillors voting records - are now recognised as crucial by integrity agencies like ICAC and there is an expectation video recording will follow suit.

“How video and text are accessed after the event is important. Most people haven't got the patience or time to sit through a long meeting, sometimes it's specific aspects of meeting that are relevant.” Councillor, New South Wales



How could technology better support transparency for your Council Meetings?



Conclusion

When it comes to technology's role in supporting transparent local government, councillors agree with governance teams that the administrative burden of long, undigestible digital documents is a major barrier to effective, efficient council meetings.

While video streaming was noted as a reason for debate moving behind closed doors, councillors expressed a desire for more discussions to happen in public rather than private briefings and committee meetings.

They emphasised the importance of keeping council chambers open and said overcoming intimidation with this level of visibility was critical to facilitate transparency. To do this, individual confidence in decisions is crucial.

The challenges of "information overload" and the diverse backgrounds of councillors and the community highlight the necessity for digital tools that aid the digestion of information.

Councillors desire more self-reliance and a simplified experience of finding and consuming the information they need. This goes far beyond meeting agendas and business papers to a wide range of strategic and operational information sources to be adequately informed and prepared.

This means digestibility of information is just a first step towards best practice; The future is about transforming information into insights, where technology enables better visibility across a complete range of sources and draws the information together to provide data and insights in real-time. This is where true transparency will be realised. Where the quality of debate and decisions skyrockets and council decisions become proactive rather than retrospective.

For councils looking to improve the councillor experience, look for solutions that support simplified navigation of complex documentation, video streaming that integrates with minutes and is easily accessible to all stakeholders and that considers the integration of strategic and operations data. This is the technology that will do the heavy lifting for for governance teams while ensuring higher quality decisions for the benefit of the community.



Better Council Meetings.

Resolve is a web-based agenda and meeting management solution designed to enhance communication, collaboration, participation, and engagement. It is currently used by 29 councils in Australia and New Zealand, with meeting administrators reporting a notable reduction in meeting preparation time, up to 50%.

Automate: Governance professionals can automatically build agendas and view the status of reports, and Councillors are able to access information when they need it.

Reduce Risk: Easy-to-use tools ensure resolutions are recorded accurately, electronic voting is captured error-free, and resolutions can be distributed and then tracked.

Enhance Accessibility: Livestream your meetings to make them instantly accessible, and bookmark videos so the public can view areas of interest that are relevant to them.

Discover More.

We're committed to leading the sector in meeting management technology with Resolve. To understand how Resolve supports councillors and streamlines meeting administration, schedule a discovery session with one of our client success executives.

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