



{ Improving transparency and meeting management in local councils

How to choose the right solution for governance & meeting management for your council

Meet the author - **Steve Jones**

With an extensive background in local government spanning over 20 years, I have worked in and led governance teams in the UK and Australia, most recently as Governance Coordinator for a council in Victoria. I have extensive knowledge of local government operations, legislative requirements, governance practices and council meeting management. After leaving the public sector, I joined Civica and became Governance Presales Consultant, championing Modern.Gov, our governance and meeting management solution. In my role at Civica, I have combined my passion for governance by using technology to facilitate change and improve the transparency and accountability of council decision-making. My experience enables me to truly understand the challenges of managing and working within a governance environment.



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Introduction

Inspiration:

During my time working for councils, I frequently encountered the challenge of finding a suitable platform that could not only assist governance officers but also streamline processes for others, while at the same time, supporting the council to promote democracy by improving both transparency and opportunities for citizens to engage in the decision-making process.

Managing the governance processes for council and committee meetings is challenging. It involves dealing with a variety of stakeholders who all have different and competing needs, advising on decision-making processes that can be complex and sometimes difficult to understand, publishing complete documentation in advance of meetings, and for decisions to be properly recorded and the necessary actions communicated.

Governance officers therefore have a vital role to play in how councils conduct their business, while ensuring both the opportunities to engage and level of transparency citizens have come to expect in recent years.

These constant challenges coupled with my interest in technology led me to move into a role where I could help develop solutions to improve the working experience of local government, administrators and leaders, IT staff, the public and decision makers.

With over twenty years of experience in local government in the UK and in Australia, I am now working in the technology space and would like to share my insights into how an effective governance and meeting management system can enhance your administration, transparency, reporting, communication, leading to a more streamlined, transparent experience for all your stakeholders.



The importance of transparency and accountability

Concerns over Federal and State government decision making are becoming front-page news and attracting greater media scrutiny, with examples ranging from ministerial appointments to 'pork barrelling' in the allocation of funding. People are asking questions about process, public awareness of information, and the accountability of decision makers. Local Government has even higher scrutiny due to the close relationship and direct impact on the communities they serve.

At its core, transparency is about being open, accountable, and honest. It builds trust and engagement in democracy and is fundamental to good governance. Citizens should be able to see how and why decisions are made, and councils should be aware of the need to explain and be accountable for the decisions they make.

The mere suggestion of a lack of transparency and accountability has negative implications for all levels of government in Australia, because it damages trust in our democratic institutions.

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Transparency in government—at the national and local levels—is becoming an essential expectation in the modern world. If its citizens are to maintain trust in government, gain some understanding of its inner workings, and sustain a continued belief that government is serving their needs effectively, it is important that governments seek to maintain a high degree of transparency.

Fostering Transparency in Local Government,
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What are some of the challenges councils face when looking to improve transparency?

- Councils face various challenges when seeking to enhance transparency.
- Insufficient resources, including staff and technology, can hinder the effective implementation of transparency measures. Additionally, resistance to change may arise among council members or staff who are unwilling to embrace increased transparency or modify established processes.
- Decision-making within councils is often complex, involving multiple stakeholders, and ensuring transparency throughout the process can be challenging, particularly when considering decisions made by staff members acting under delegation.
- Furthermore, the limited public interest in council affairs poses a hurdle in generating demand for greater transparency, as the public may not actively engage with the council or be aware of its efforts.
- Balancing the need for transparency with safeguarding individual privacy, especially when handling sensitive information, presents another complexity. Moreover, the absence of clear guidelines and standards for transparency, and the lack of uniformity amongst states, size of councils or regions make it difficult in determining the necessary actions to enhance transparency.



How City of Sydney is making Local Government More Open and Accountable

The City of Sydney Council provides diverse services that make it vital for its community to have access to a wide variety of information. However, the council still faces several challenges in meeting the principles of transparency and being open and accountable to the public.

Addressing the challenges for transparency

To address these challenges, the City of Sydney has adopted a code of meeting practice that is based on the Model Code of Meeting Practice developed by the Office of Local Government, New South Wales (NSW). The code standardises the meeting procedures for councils in NSW and aims to improve transparency and accountability in local government. The council also realised that to improve transparency and accountability to the community, they would need to undergo digital transformation. To achieve this, the council implemented Civica's Modern.Gov software to manage their business processes.

Next Step to Engage with the public

The council is taking proactive steps to improve transparency and public engagement. As part of this effort, they plan to expand the information provided in individual councillor profiles, with a special focus on using the functionality of Modern.Gov to include conflicts of interest disclosed at meetings.

Erin Cashman, Manager OCEO, City of Sydney Council, highlights that the staff are working diligently behind the scenes to set up an ePetition facility. Overall, the council is focused on utilizing the best digital tools to become more accessible and responsive to the community they serve.



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The implementation of this new technology has helped to make the process clearer for staff and councillors. It has also enabled us to go back and check that internal processes have been followed and internal approvals are taken to ensure that council decisions are published on our website and live streamed, and recordings of meetings are also available to members of the public.

Erin Cashman, Manager OCEO
City of Sydney Council.

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What can councils do to make it easier for their communities to access information about council meetings and decisions?

To facilitate community access to information about council meetings and decisions, councils can implement several measures



Timely publication of agendas and supporting documents:

Councils should make agendas and accompanying documents available to the public at least five days before the meeting. They can also consider giving advance notice of the business to be considered at forthcoming meetings. This allows community members to review the materials, prepare questions or comments, and engage meaningfully in the discussions.



Live-streaming and recording of meetings:

Councils can live-stream their meetings, enabling individuals who cannot attend in person to watch the proceedings remotely. Additionally, providing recordings of meetings on the council's website allows community members to catch up on the discussions at their convenience.



Clear and accessible information:

It is crucial for councils to present information in a clear and easily understandable manner. They should ensure that relevant documents and reports are readily accessible, and that people can access individual reports and attachments without having to navigate the entire agenda document. Using a solution with an app is helping to close the gap between the council and their constituents.



Utilise technology platforms:

Councils can leverage technology platforms like Modern.Gov to automatically organise and present meeting information and keep community members informed and engaged by notifying them about upcoming meetings, the publication of an agenda, or important decisions to be made. This simplifies the process for community members to access documents and stay informed about council activities.



Encourage public participation:

Councils should actively encourage public participation by providing opportunities for community members to ask questions, make comments, and provide feedback. This can be done through public forums, online portals, or designated time slots during council meetings.

Yarra Ranges: Transparency bridges Council and Citizens gap

The council aims to be transparent in its local governance, and this is reflected in its efforts to inform and involve all residents, regardless of their location within the municipality.

Paperless and straightforward solution

As one of Victoria's largest local councils, implementing Civica's meeting management system has provided significant benefits to all residents across the municipality. It has helped everybody in the community to access council meetings and opened meeting papers to a larger audience.

Sarah Candeland, Governance Coordinator, Yarra Ranges Council, stresses that the council has recognised that not everyone can attend in person, hence, the council implemented various ways for people to engage with our meetings. They can ask questions, submit contributions, and even present petitions in person or online, as our meetings are now live-streamed.

Mobile access for governance

The council has adopted the use of the Modern.Gov's mobile app, which gathered positive feedback. It has allowed our ratepayers to subscribe to individual committees and receive information directly on their phones, even in remote locations with limited internet coverage. This ensures that individuals can stay updated and receive notifications on their phones.

Next Step to improve transparency

The Yarra Ranges Council is committed to transparency and responsiveness to the people they serve. They are looking to implement measures such as publishing details of conflicts of interest disclosed at meetings under each councillor profile, and facilitating ePetitions submitted by the community.

They are also considering publishing their schedule of forthcoming business on the website so that residents can better understand when major plans and budgets will be released. These efforts will continue to serve the best interests of all residents.



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Due to the semi-rural and urban nature of many areas in our municipality, internet coverage is sometimes limited, which is an issue. Consequently, there is still a demand for paper copies of our agendas. However, with Modern.Gov, we are now able to provide an itemised list of agenda items, allowing people to access specific information instead of having to download hundreds of pages of agendas and minutes. Additionally, we ensure sufficient time for accessing the documents by publishing them approximately seven days in advance.

Sarah Candeland, Governance Coordinator,
Yarra Ranges Council

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How can technology help councils to be more transparent?

We want to simplify and automate processes. We want to make things easier for our employees, and our councillors. But what about our citizens?

We know that technology can simplify the creation of documents for meetings, but automating the publication and notification process means that with the click of a button, you can:

- create web pages and publish documents to these
- secure confidential reports
- notify people on distribution lists that information is now available for them to view; and
- improve the user experience for citizens by displaying documents in a more customer-friendly way

The way information is presented to the community is something all councils should consider. Instead of an agenda document that can run into hundreds of pages, technology makes it easy for people to see individual reports and attachments without a member of staff having to break the agenda into separate files and publish these. But, where technology really starts to come into its own, is by giving councils the ability to:

- publish details of forthcoming decisions to be taken at meetings, or even by council officers under delegation
- promote self-service and enable people to subscribe to issues they are interested in
- automatically notify members of the community about newly published content that specifically matches their interests
- enable people to register that an issue is important to them, without having to wait to be consulted, and to post links to this on social media

- cross-link information automatically, to allow much easier navigation than it is practical to set up manually
- enable citizens to generate, submit and sign petitions electronically and for all signatories to be notified by email of the outcome of the petition they signed
- display councillor specific information in individual online profiles, such as
 - attendance at meetings
 - disclosures of conflicts of interest made at meetings
 - voting records
 - declarations of gifts & hospitality, and
 - training attended

As a meeting administrator, we can use technology to make our lives simpler, but we can also use it to facilitate a better understanding of democracy, improve accountability, and encourage citizens to get involved with the decision-making process.

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The purpose of any digitally enabled council must be to provide better services for citizens and the best systems for staff to understand local communities and respond quickly

Jeff Hewitt (June 2022) Can you imagine a future with no physical council offices?

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City of Adelaide enhances transparency and accountability

Technology support to governance teams

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Technology provides us with tools to efficiently support the work we do, and support the decision-making processes for the council, and it also allows us to engage with the public and be more transparent.

Anita Inglis, Governance Adviser, City of Adelaide

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After adopting Civica's Modern.Gov, the City Council now has a purpose-built solution. The software has streamlined processes, automating all tasks that were previously done manually.

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Now creating agendas is simpler, fully automated, and more efficient. Reports are easily broken down and assembled into a single document. Once published, items are separated on the website for easy public viewing.

Anita Inglis, Governance Adviser, City of Adelaide

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In essence, the software consolidates numerous manual steps into efficient automated workflows. With a push of a button, Modern.Gov transforms cumbersome processes into lean, transparent governance.

Empowering teams with Mobile access

The Modern.Gov mobile app provides council members with an easy-to-use and accessible solution. They are notified through the app when new documents are ready, giving them convenient on-the-go access. The app has particularly benefited members reviewing large agendas by resolving previous access issues. They can now easily view lengthy agenda documents on their mobile.

The app also allows subscribers to receive push notifications as soon as new items are published. This keeps the community up-to-date and informed about council decisions in real-time.

The ultimate solution for transparency

In the past, scheduling and calendar management for council activities had a manual process that led to delays before information appeared on the council website. Now with Modern.Gov, the staff can simply enter information into the system and it's instantly available to the public.

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The next step in improving transparency is getting Modern.Gov's council member profiles up and running. These profiles will publish meeting attendance, conflict of interest and details of any gifts or benefits received.

Anita Inglis, Governance Adviser, City of Adelaide

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Fully utilising Civica's Modern.Gov capabilities represents an important step in the council's digital transformation. Once fully operational, the council believes the system has the potential to usher in a new era of transparency and improve its relationship with its citizens.





Delivering better outcomes with a technology solution

The complete paperless solution for governance & meeting management

Many organisations, particularly those with an obligation to report and explain decisions, face significant challenges in co-ordinating meetings and documents. From what was shared by Erin from City of Sydney, Sarah from Yarra Ranges and Anita from City of Adelaide, there are many challenges to transparency and good governance.

Papers for committee meetings often run to hundreds of pages, with agendas frequently changing at the last minute. The administrative burden is considerable, while paper use adds millions of printed pages each year. Having a comprehensive paperless governance and meeting management solution delivers streamlined co-ordination of meetings and documents.

With a solution like Modern.Gov, you can:

- drive the paperless agenda,
- shrink your organisation's carbon footprint,
- achieve tangible cost savings,
- reduce the time and effort required to report and explain decisions.

If you are interested to learn more about Civica Modern.Gov solution, the leading solution in transparency and meeting management, let's have a chat.





Conclusion

When I left the public sector to join a technology company it was my ambition to make a difference by applying my inside knowledge of local government to council meeting management technology. I'm passionate about what I do and now work every day to improve functionality and user experience for those in a council environment. My mission is to ensure local government are set up for success and have the right technology to make them transparent both today and in the future.

To find out more about Modern.Gov or Civica local government solutions, **book a discovery call with me** and the Civica team where we can discuss your challenges and how we can support the smooth operations of your council meetings.



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