

Rural Councils Victoria

Working for Victoria

program assessment

JULY 2021





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Introduction and project approach





In early 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the globe. Border closures, lockdowns and uncertainty about the future impacted many industries. Federal, state and local governments developed a range of responses to deal with the growing economic crisis and unemployment. In Victoria, the state government announced a \$1.7 billion economic survival and jobs package. One of the initiatives under that package was the \$500 million Working for Victoria program. It was designed to help Victorian job seekers and employers, including those who had been impacted by the pandemic.

Rural councils across Victoria embraced the program and took on many new staff. Staff were hired in a diverse range of roles on six month contracts. The program is credited with bringing many new workers to the local government sector who may not have previously considered councils as a potential place of employment or a career pathway. This has been a huge benefit of the program as some rural councils can struggle to attract and retain qualified staff.

Rural Councils Victoria (RCV) engaged Nous Group to conduct an independent review of the Working for Victoria program in rural councils. The purpose of the review was to understand the benefits of the program and any areas for improvement from both the perspective of councils and participants, and to develop a series of recommendations to assist rural councils in developing workforce attraction strategies in the future.

While the Working for Victoria (WfV) program was not without challenges, overwhelmingly the response from both councils and participants has been positive. What follows is a description of the benefits, the learnings and recommendations for the future.

A note from the Rural Councils Victoria's Chair

Working for Victoria (WfV) has been a hugely successful program. It has benefited individuals, councils and communities. Thank you to everyone who managed, and participated in, the program.

COVID-19 was an unexpected global event of a magnitude that most people did not expect to see in their lifetime. It put councils under great pressure and required an increase in a diverse range of services from cleaning to communication.

The state government was quick to respond to the emerging jobs crisis, announcing the \$500 million Working for Victoria program.

While there were some initial teething problems, councils respected the decisive action taken by the state government. They understood that there would be some initial road bumps when the project had been rolled out so quickly.

Both the state government and local councils worked incredibly hard to ensure WfV was a success. The unprecedented nature of the pandemic meant that project rollout required state and local government to trust each other in the rush to achieve results quickly. This trust and quick action has resulted in a strengthened respect and an enhanced relationship.

WfV provided councils with the capacity to do work that would otherwise not have been possible. This ranged from critical COVID-19 related work through to projects that were not related to the pandemic.

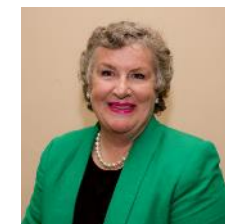
This report is not intended to document all of the positive outcomes of the program. That would be a very lengthy list. Instead, it considers the lessons learned and how the program could be improved if it was to be run again.

The recommendations are designed to help assist councils with their work force strategies moving forward.

It is clear this project achieved significant positive results. This model should become a regular feature of the way state and local government work together to achieve mutual goals.

This report is the product of many people's contribution. We would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the many individuals who generously gave up their time to speak with us and share their experience.

Cr Mary-Ann Brown, RCV Chair



"Moving from a city-based environment where organisations are often goal and profit driven it was refreshing coming into an organisation where you were making a visible difference to the community and contributing to something bigger than a businesses bank account." Participant

"My feedback is 100% positive. It delivered on the outcomes that we wanted. Our last people just finished, and we finished on time and on budget." Council

Some of the projects worked on by WfV participants include:



Transforming an unused train station into a shared working space



Designing a streetscape that reflected the history of the shire



Revitalising outdoor areas by planting trees



"I think the relationship between local and state govt has been improved by WfV. Yes, there was some clunkiness but by and large, the sector is thankful. There was some risk. It required someone to make a bold decision and that is appreciated." Council

"It was great, as government agencies we are all trying to do our bit. We were all in it together at that point." Council

"I have really enjoyed being part of a small but proactive team at council." Participant

Strong engagement with WfV participants, CEOs and HR professionals informed the development of findings and recommendations



The project engaged with a wide variety of people including participants from a variety of roles and council employees at all levels.

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FOCUS GROUPS **WITH**
HUMAN RESOURCES STAFF
TO UNDERSTAND THE PROGRAM +
CURRENT AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

**16**

COUNCILS
REPRESENTED

ALL 6 REGIONS REPRESENTED BY PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

Rural North West Region
Rural North East Region
Rural North Central Region

Rural South Central Region
Rural South West Region
Rural South East Region

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS INCLUDE

Finance
Human Resources
Business Recovery
Community Recovery
Community Development

Project Management
Town Maintenance
Procurement
Data Quality
Administration

19

ONE TO ONE
INTERVIEWS WITH WfV
PARTICIPANTS

AND**7**

INTERVIEWS WITH
CEOs + CEO
REPRESENTATIVES

204

PARTICIPANT SURVEY
RESPONDENTS FROM
23 COUNCILS



SURVEY STATISTICS

45% female / **55%** male

26% identified as culturally diverse

2% identified as Aboriginal or
Torres Strait Islander

6% identified as LGBTIAQ+

5% identified as having a disability
or being neurologically diverse

Executive summary





While not without challenges, council CEOs are clear the Working for Victoria program had tremendous benefit

“

It's been an amazing program...I think it will have a lasting positive legacy.

”

“

Any concerns or criticism of the program is far outweighed by the benefits to the council and the individual.

”

“

It was a good program. It's been an interesting beast but gosh it's been hard to deal with some of it.

”

“

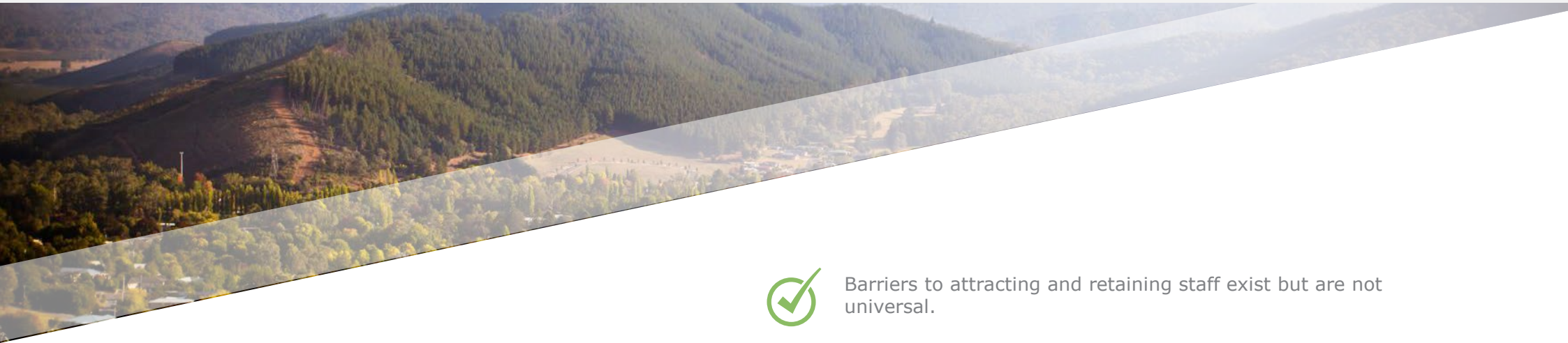
I went from the biggest cynic to the biggest champion... I am very supportive of the result.

”

“

There is no question for me, that was a bloody brilliant program. It was a hard slog, but it was a fantastic program.

”







Findings and Insights

- ✓ Barriers to attracting and retaining staff exist but are not universal.
- ✓ Aspects of the program were challenging for many rural councils.
- ✓ Challenges raised by WfV participants were minor compared to the benefits of the program.
- ✓ The pandemic and the program have created a paradigm shift around flexibility.
- ✓ The program produced a wide range of benefits for councils, their communities and for the participants.
- ✓ The program provides a repeatable pattern for local and state government to work together in the future.



Recommendations

-  **Councils should be strategic in their marketing efforts to change perceptions and increase awareness of potential career pathways in local government**
 - ▶ Councils should focus on promoting the many benefits they can offer.
 - ▶ Councils should explore actively recruiting graduates.
-  **Embracing contemporary ways of working will assist councils fulfil their workforce requirements**
 - ▶ Councils should carefully consider their working from home policies and how this can contribute to the attraction and retention of employees.
 - ▶ Councils should consider utilising short-term contracts for hard to fill, project-specific roles.
 - ▶ Councils should consider remote work for hard to fill technical roles.
 - ▶ Councils should develop sustainable work policies to reduce incidents of burnout.
-  **Councils should take steps to improve the recruitment experience for both applicants and those administering it**
 - ▶ Councils operating without a HR system, should consider the value in joining forces to invest in the appropriate software.
 - ▶ There is scope to improve the application process for applicants.
 - ▶ Councils should ensure they have a diversity policy and actively try to recruit a diverse workforce.
 - ▶ Councils should seek to embrace technology as a way to recruit a greater diversity of people.
-  **The WfV model should be a regular feature of how state and local government work together to achieve mutually desirable outcomes**
 - ▶ Local and state government should identify mutual goals and work together to design programs to achieve them.
 - ▶ Future programs should be co-designed with councils, participants and other relevant stakeholders.

A closer look at **findings and insights**





Barriers to attracting and retaining staff exist but are not universal

While many rural councils struggle with recruitment, this experience is not consistent across all shires.

Some councils, particularly those near larger metro areas, told us that broadly speaking, they do not find attracting quality applicants an issue as they are able to pull from the larger pool of candidates found in neighbouring shires. Some councils are in highly desirable areas and this also helps them attract suitable people. This is in stark contrast to some councils in more remote areas who struggle to attract quality candidates for many roles.

The majority of councils find it challenging to attract people for technical and senior level roles.

Most councils find it challenging to recruit Planners, Environmental Health Officers, Building Surveyors and other technical or senior roles. There are broader, more systemic issues at play here contributing to a lack of people to fill these roles. The recruitment challenge is two-fold. Firstly, the large number of infrastructure projects underway across Victoria has created a competitive market. Secondly, the number of people qualifying for technical roles like Environmental Health Officers is declining, creating workforce challenges for all layers of government.

There is a lack of available rental accommodation in some rural areas.

The lack of available rental accommodation in parts of regional Victoria has been widely documented. It has recently been the subject of a variety of news stories. The exodus of Melbournians out of the city due to COVID-19 has only contributed to this problem, placing more pressure on limited rental stock and driving prices upwards. Unfortunately, this media attention has done nothing to resolve this ongoing problem which creates issues for both councils and employees. Workers feel frustrated when they are not able to secure housing within reasonable proximity to their workplace. Councils lose potentially highly skilled employees to areas with better housing options. **44%** of survey participants that moved to take up their WfV role said that it was difficult to find somewhere to live as there were not many places to rent or buy.



"Attracting staff has been tough here at all levels. It's rare we'd be overrun with 200 applications for a job." Council

"Because we are on a train line and close to rural centres, we don't struggle attracting staff. We struggle to get town planners, engineers, municipal planners. We are almost always a training ground before they go to Melbourne and earn the big bucks." Council



"All councils struggle for the higher roles. If you cannot convince them to move to the shire, they are going to struggle." Council



"There was a shortage of rental accommodation." Participant

"We are a rental area so a third of our workforce lives in the shire and two-thirds live outside of the shire. We have no public transport. If they want to commute, they cannot work there if they don't have a car." Council

"For people who want to move here – they'll get on realestate.com and there is nothing to rent or buy." Council

Negative perceptions can be a barrier to attracting new talent to local government.

There are a range of negative perceptions that contribute towards potential applicants not considering councils as a viable career path. These include:

- ▶ The perception that councils are **less progressive**.
- ▶ The idea that **you need to know someone** to get a foot in the door at a council.
- ▶ There is also a **lack of understanding** of the breadth of work councils do. Councils provide a vast array of services in support of their local communities, with many locals only aware of a fraction of what councils do.
- ▶ **58%** of survey respondents said they were surprised by the breadth of work councils do.

Councils face a range of issues with the recruitment process.

Not all councils have HR software to facilitate the recruitment process. This means processes must be handled manually which increases the labour requirements and the potential for error. Participants who had previously applied for local government roles spoke unfavourably of the difference between applying for a council role compared to one in the private sector. Having to address a long list of key selection criteria can be a deterrent for some applicants.



"I thought the pace of work would be pretty slow and not very advanced in terms of innovation." Participant

"I thought the technology might be outdated and wasn't sure what kind of support I'd receive working from home." Participant

"I'd never considered working for a rural council before. I was a bit oblivious about what a council did." Participant

"I knew it was a big workforce in the building. I was concerned about toxic work environment." Participant

"The odd time I applied I never heard back. In a small town you'd hear it's not what you know, it's who you know. That's changed a lot these days." Participant



"I thought the job would be easy with low pay." Participant

"I thought it would be very bureaucratic." Participant

"The original old school council used to recruit down at the pub. Now that it is merit-based recruitment, we are struggling to get good people". Council

"We still don't have a HR system. We are just transitioning to payroll for our full-time staff. We still use fortnightly time sheets. Imagine trying to administer all of this with no system." Council

"Applying for jobs was quite tedious in the past. Filling out all the selection criteria – it was a nightmare". Participant

The salaries offered by rural councils for professional roles are often not viewed as competitive.

While councils provide a good salary for the outdoor workforce, for professional roles the salaries offered often fall short of those offered by the private sector or metro councils.

While working for rural councils can have many other benefits, such as more affordable housing, the opportunity to make a difference in the community and greater work life balance, these benefits are not always widely understood by potential employees.

Cultural issues can affect councils' ability to attract new talent.

The salaries for outdoor workers are generally well regarded. Several of the HR professionals we engaged with said this can result in a low turnover amongst this cohort which can have a negative impact on culture. While there are obviously many excellent outdoor workers, we did hear a number of reports from outdoor workers about their co-workers behaving poorly or lacking motivation.

Some councils struggle to attract a diverse workforce.

Rural councils can struggle to attract a diverse workforce. Many of the councils we engaged with highlighted the challenge of securing an ethnically diverse workforce given the lack of diversity in some rural areas. The Gender Equality Act 2020 requires councils to develop a Gender Equality Action Plan that considers other forms of disadvantage or discrimination that a person may experience due to characteristics such as race, religion, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity etc. Diverse teams tend to achieve more innovative outcomes because a varied range of experiences fosters new approaches. Councils are at different stages of understanding and acting upon issues of diversity and inclusion.



"At the senior level the salary is so low. People can get good experience from the council but they won't typically get more pay." Council

"I made a conscious decision not to shock people with the money figure so the figure is quite prominent in job ads." Council



"We also have a low turnover in the outdoor team which increases the risk as the staff age. The roles pay well compared to other workers in our area. They do not have the incentive to move on, if they should move on. This leaves a sense of entitlement and a toxic work environment." Council

"I saw people who weren't doing what they should, it wasn't dealt with. It definitely affects morale – people get annoyed at other people for not doing things." Participant



"Gender diversity isn't so bad. The CEO is male, but the next level is 50/50 and then next level is 60/40, and then 65/35. We have lots of female staff, but they aren't necessarily in the leadership position." Council

"Some people don't understand why we have a diversity and inclusion policy. Without diversity recruitment policies, things can be close minded. People hire based on people being similar otherwise." Council

"There are a number of other culturally diverse people in the council, but it is not very diverse." Participant



Aspects of the program were
challenging for many rural
councils

There was a lack of clarity around the program parameters during the early stages of the rollout.

Given the nature of the pandemic, the program was developed and rolled out very quickly. While this speed was crucial to deliver results as fast as possible, it meant that there was some confusion for councils around the parameters and potential benefits of the program. Some councils struggled to get consistent answers during the early stages and others faced pressure to 'go bigger' and to request additional people. There was also some confusion about the types of roles that could be funded through the program. Some councils were strategic in their approach, for instance only hiring for gaps in their COVID response and recovery, while others felt their response was more reactive than strategic.

Councils took a variety of approaches informing who and how they recruited



Councils took on a mix of outdoor and indoor staff depending on their needs and what they understood the funding would cover



Some councils hired HR people to help administer the project and reduce the stress on existing HR staff



Councils took on a mix of roles that included jobs related to COVID-19 and others that were designed to bolster long-term projects

It was easier for councils with more resources to secure funding and manage the program.

The speed and tight deadlines of the initial rollout made the program challenging for smaller councils. Larger, metropolitan councils were better placed to quickly apply for funding than smaller rural councils who had less capacity in their HR teams.

HR teams were also dealing with their current workforces adapting to COVID-19. While there was a willingness and commitment to the program from those administering it at councils, several HR teams felt overloaded. Some HR professionals commented that their workload managing WfV left them feeling burnt out.



"The state government were quite strict in how the roles would create pandemic related benefit – however I think they bent a lot. They never really admitted this, but there was a clear change in approach." Council

"There was some reluctance from the program administrators – they acknowledged people had to support with internal services, but they didn't want many of them." Council

"If you asked us to do it again, we would do it differently. Councils that were resourced were in a better position to put in applications. Initially we thought it was more relevant to outdoor staff. Councils that did well went for ICT and digital transformation roles." Council

"The HR team is very limited. The program seems designed for larger teams." Council

There were a range of issues with Sidekicker that made the recruitment process challenging.

Sidekicker lacked certain functionalities that would have made the recruitment process easier. Sidekicker was not inline with the existing practices of council recruitment or even standard job recruitment platforms like Seek. The fact that Sidekicker did not allow councils to request a CV meant that the recruitment teams often had to search for the information they needed to make hiring decisions and made the process longer for councils.

The categories that potential WfV participants could search under were initially very specific, which made it harder for potential candidates to find roles that were appropriate for them. Additionally, many potential WfV participants did not know there were potential jobs on offer at the local council. Councils pointed to the fact that job seekers had to register and login before they could see available roles unlike other jobs platforms like Seek. They felt this likely reduced the number of applicants.

The State government responded to concerns about the Sidekicker interface and iterated the platform throughout the program. The platform became more user-friendly as the State government adapted it to the needs of the community.

All Working for Victoria employers and participants had to use **Sidekicker**, an online hub, to post employment opportunities and apply for roles.

Strategies councils used to manage Sidekicker

- ▶ Councils changed the area settings of potentially remote jobs so that positions were visible to as wide a pool of potential candidates as possible.
- ▶ Councils advertised WfV positions themselves through the most popular mediums of the council area (local newspaper, Facebook etc.)
- ▶ For those workers that struggled with Sidekicker, HR professionals made themselves personally available to explain roles and application processes. This was a major time-drain for some HR professionals.



"Sidekicker was hard to use, and we were only getting minimal people to apply. We learnt the tricks, like opening to all locations etc., and we were able to attract way more people. Sidekicker support was good. They try to help you as much as they can" Council

"We had 60 positions to fill, most of the roles were outside workers. The applicants were not tech savvy". Council

"We used radio, FaceBook, websites, local agencies, reduced KSC etc. We have now filled most of the FTE but it took a lot of work!" Council

"Recruitment through Sidekicker was difficult. It took a long time to get people involved. People said I want to apply and can't find them. Job seekers couldn't find the link to Sidekicker. It was probably word of mouth in the end. Sidekicker was good once they got in, but some people probably gave up." Council

The burden of inducting and onboarding such a large number of new employees should not be underestimated.

The deadlines for councils were sometimes tight and there was a pressure to recruit, induct and onboard in a short period. This placed an undue burden on smaller councils that sometimes had as few as one staff member in charge of the WfV participants. Some HR professionals felt that it was almost impossible to maintain their usual high standards of onboarding and induction due to the time and resource constraints. It also increased the incidents of burnout amongst HR staff.

Some councils handled these challenges by using the WfV funds to hire a larger group of HR professionals that managed the recruitment, induction, onboarding and off-boarding of all other WfV participants. An added benefit of this strategy was that these WfV HR professionals had intimate understandings of the WfV participant experience and were best placed to manage participant anxieties around timing, Sidekicker etc.

Greater flexibility around contract-lengths would have been better for councils.

Generally, councils would have preferred to have been able to choose how long the contracts were instead of having everyone on six-month contracts.

If the state government required all contracts to be the same length, many councils would have preferred the contracts to be 12-months. It takes time for an employee to get up to speed to reach a high level of productivity. Given the short contract lengths, this meant there was only a small window of time post induction and then settling into the role before participants had to start thinking about their next opportunity.

Some HR professionals mentioned projects being delayed due to WfV participants being offered permanent roles elsewhere. They suspected if the contract length had been longer, participants might not have started to search for other roles until later into their contracts, meaning councils would have had more time to benefit from their skills. The payoff for councils for the burden of recruitment and induction would be higher with longer contract lengths.



"Onboarding was a nightmare. Most of our roles were working from home. Trying to get technology was hard. Trying to train them over WebEx was really challenging. Trying to get the equipment back is also a nightmare." Council

"In a couple of months, we essentially recruited half the entire organisation again." Council

"We totally underestimated the onboarding and recruitment pressure it would create. My HR team is only two and I think they would have said they felt totally overwhelmed by the admin, onboarding, letters. We underestimated and that put significant pressure on that team." Council



"Twelve months would be better than six. We've lost a few good employees in the first four weeks of their contract, because they are continuing to apply for permanent work. Whereas if they had a twelve-month commitment, they may not proactively look for other work until closer to the end of their contract." Council

"Six months is a difficult thing to manage. It takes a few months to get them in, inducted and through that process. Then their time finished pretty quickly." Council

The desire to use technology is high but the lived reality is more challenging.

The WfV program placed extra stress on some council's technological ability, which was sometimes already stretched. Some rural councils have not previously had the resources and finances required to develop their technological capabilities to the degree that they would like. For example, one HR professional noted that timesheets are manually processed which is far behind industry standards. Amid lockdowns where councils had to transition many staff to work online and remotely, WfV meant that digital teams needed to support more workers, who had varying levels of digital competence.

Some councils handled these challenges by using the WfV funds to hire a larger group of IT professionals that managed the digital transformation of the council.

Council CEOs felt pressure to manage community expectations after the additional workforce enabled increased service standards.

During the WfV period, the community came to expect the additional services that having WfV participants could facilitate. For example, some councils reported parks and gardens were better maintained and wait times for services reduced when there were WfV participants. Accordingly, when WfV participants completed their terms, some councils reported community frustration that services were not being maintained at that high level.

Individual councils managed these expectations by flagging to the community the fact that service levels would decline after the WfV period completed and where they could, by rehiring high-performing WfV participants after the program completed.

The reporting requirements for WfV were too onerous for some councils.

While the majority of councils felt the reporting requirements were fair given the funding involved, some of the smaller councils found the requirements far too onerous. Various councils were audited during the program which intensified their workload. Council CEOs did note that the process became easier as the WfV program matured. Some councils used WfV participants to fulfil the council's WfV reporting requirements.

CEOs from the smaller and medium sized councils noted that the ongoing reporting requirements and burden on resources meant it might not be worth them participating in future programs if the state government introduced a requirement for councils to co-fund the positions.



"They needed to embed a new, professional system." Council

"We do have TechOne which manages employees and payroll, but the rest is a manual process." Council



"The group have been able to get a bunch of tasks done that would never have been able to be done otherwise. This created a bit of a rod for our own back because it changed the community's expectations." Council

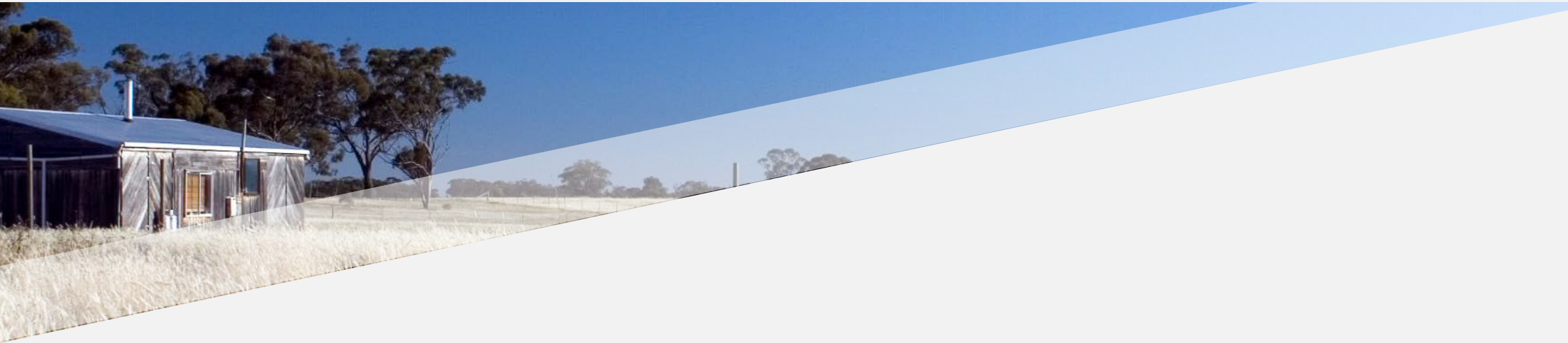
"The other thing that I'm nervous about is that we have set service standards at a new high. Does the community expect us to continue to remove woody weed and maintaining park furniture to that level? We've had discussions that we can't maintain those service standards going forward as we can't afford to employ all those extra people." Council

"Managing expectations of local laws and community was of high consideration. Some of those expectations were tricky. I'm still dealing with that." Council



"The reporting requirements are not that onerous. Reporting each fortnight is fine considering public money is being spent. There hasn't been much movement so I'm not sure the departments got much value from the early reports." Council

"We had an audit. A lot of our staff had finished. I had two directors put in 2 weeks of work. We will still have to do our end of program financial audit. A mid-program audit from a third party was not expected." Council



Challenges raised by WfV participants were minor compared to the benefits of the program

The vast majority of participant experiences were overwhelmingly positive. Most of those that did experience challenges or offer constructive criticism still enjoyed their experience in the WfV program.

Of the barriers that were mentioned, some were structural challenges that were outside the control of the council (i.e., no rental options, physically far from network/family).

The application process was a challenge for some participants.

The WfV participants' critiques of the recruitment process were relatively muted compared to the CEOs and HR managers appraisals of Sidekicker. Several participants praised Sidekicker for facilitating a quicker, less burdensome application process.

Participants experienced some challenges with Sidekicker. Less technologically savvy participants were confused by the platform's layout. Some didn't understand why they did not need to provide a CV. Other participants didn't know which roles they had applied for because they did not receive a confirmation email once they submitted an application. Several participants had difficulty expanding their geographic search radius after initially setting up their profile.

Some participants were frustrated by the lack of clarity in the role for which they applied.

The participants that signed up relatively early in the program's rollout sometimes felt that the councils themselves did not know what they wanted the candidate to contribute and the participant had to help define their own role. Those who felt their roles were poorly defined often also felt like their council's chain of responsibility was unclear and did not know to whom they were supposed to report.

Contract issues were an irritation for some participants.

Several participants were frustrated that they were offered six-month contracts. To manage expectations, many councils made it clear to the participants from the outset that there was no prospect of those contracts being extended. Several participants noted that they felt like they needed to start searching for a new job immediately after starting their WfV position.

46% of WfV participants that responded to the survey noted they accepted a decrease in salary when they took their position; however, **65%** agreed the salary met their expectations for the role. Some participants were frustrated that there was no part time options for the WfV program.



"You would enter in your details. You don't realise how impactful those choices will be for those jobs. You had to call to change your preferences. As someone who applied, I would never have gotten this job if I hadn't gone back and changed my preferences." Participant

"It has been very confusing. I was told in the interview, that I was going to report to one person but then it turned out that I was going to be reporting to someone else who was also brand new. She was also confused around the expectations. The ad said [the role was for] six months and then [in] the interview it was four months and then when they offered [me the role] it was six months again." Participant



"The negative aspect of this experience is that there is an end date. You have to make a choice at some point about when you need to start applying for other jobs. Especially with small councils, you need to hope that some one is going to move on." Participant

Some participants struggled with their council's culture.

Most WfV participants enjoyed their councils' culture. Some participants compared it approvingly with the private sector, noting that they felt more connected with those they worked with when they were at council, despite the fact they were working remotely. Indoor staff in particular were pleased with the culture of their teams.

A minority of participants were discouraged by their council's culture. Most of these complaints were centred around the slower pace of the councils themselves. Some participants that originated in the private sector did not understand the need for the council bureaucracy and were annoyed by the limited budgets of the smaller councils.

Some culturally diverse participants were frustrated that there was so little cultural diversity in the council staff and the local population itself.

A small number of outdoor staff reported incidents of bullying and inappropriate behaviour.

11% of WfV participants that responded to the survey disagreed with the statement 'I always felt safe in every job that I completed in my role.'

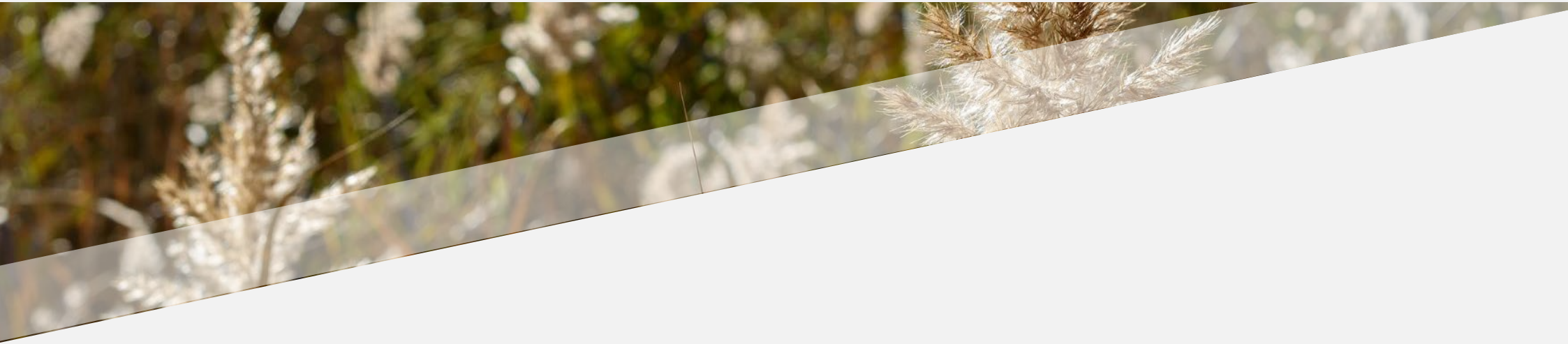


"I don't understand why rural councils don't have a higher percentage of abroad or international staff. In Australia, we have a high diversity, talking about backgrounds. You can't see that reflected in city councils."
Participant

"There was a lack of existing leadership capability in the organisation to manage our extra outdoor crew. WfV staff felt separate to the other workers." Council

"There was definitely a bit of 'we don't need these people' going on, but not overtly -everyone was nice to me."
Participant

"The other guy didn't integrate well. He was left on the curb from the day he started. Me and another guy took him under our wing. We taught him skills and gave him jobs when he was left out. They had that guy going out by himself. Being left alone for the week [is not great] but I'm not a manager." Participant



The pandemic and the program
have created a paradigm shift
around flexibility

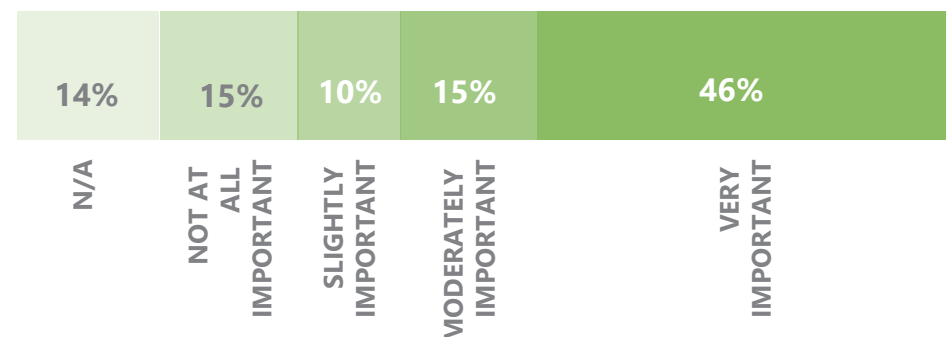
COVID-19 has changed employees' expectations around flexibility.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, most employees with indoor jobs across the public and private sectors expected to work in the office. Only a small minority of employees had the ability to work remotely and fewer still took the opportunity. The pandemic forced most indoor workers to work from home. This experience showed workplaces could still achieve sizable outcomes even when its workforce was remote. Even when concerns over COVID-19 become less prevalent, expectations around remote working are unlikely to revert to pre-pandemic levels. All workplaces, including rural councils, are advised to adapt their practices to the desires of the labor market in order to attract and retain top candidates.

Flexibility is important to many employees.

WfV participants have shown a strong preference for flexible workplaces. Figure 1 indicates how WfV participants value flexible working. Several WfV participants commented that flexible work helped them balance their work responsibilities with their commitment to their families. Participants reported being happier with their work when there was additional flexibility. Even participants from different geographic locations who had done their entire WfV program remotely still felt connected to their shires and workplaces. Participants who lived away from the shire noted that flexible working was their only option considering the lack of rental options in their council's region.

Figure 1: How important is the flexibility to work from home to you?



CEOs have mixed views on flexibility.

CEOs differ on whether flexibility will be offered to staff on an ongoing basis. The opportunity for office workers to work from home during the pandemic has demonstrated that for specific roles, working from home does not decrease productivity; however, CEOs note that extended remote working is not ideal for some teams, reduces incidental collaboration and makes it harder for managers to supervise workers. Most councils are writing remote working policies. When creating these policies, councils should consult rigorously with workers.

Flexibility can help address skills shortages.

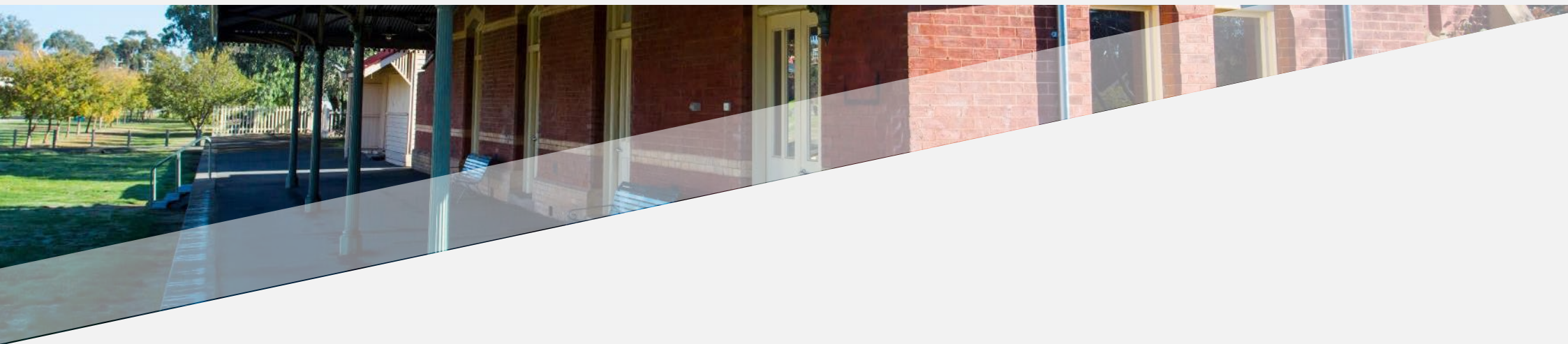
Most rural councils struggle to fill the same, highly technical roles. By offering flexible working, councils can attract a larger pool of candidates especially in roles with short term contracts, where onsite work is not necessary.



"One of the strengths of WfV was the fact was everyone was working from home. One staff member was working from Perth and another was working in Darwin. In normal recruitment, the location was a struggle." Council

"I was really looking forward to going back into the office but it is hard without being able to work from home with my kids." Participant

"I like the mix of working from home and office work but flexibility is key. It's best when businesses and councils give the workers the choice. Flexibility is the future. It worked for me." Participant



The program produced a wide range of benefits for councils, their communities and for the participants

BENEFITS TO COUNCILS AND COMMUNITIES

The project introduced many new people to local government who now consider it a potential career pathway.

52% of survey participants had not applied for a local government job before. **75%** of participants agreed they can see potential career growth in rural councils.

The pandemic meant many people who had previously been employed were seeking new opportunities. The WfV program enabled councils to hire a range of people, some highly skilled, into roles they may not have previously considered or that were not available. While some of them referenced a drop in salary, this was usually accompanied by comments about other benefits, such as the sense of doing good for the community. Many of those people are now keen to pursue a career in local government. This had a variety of benefits for councils, the community and for individuals.

Some WfV participants would not have considered working for a council if they had not been able to work remotely or if the role had not been fixed term.

There are lessons that can be learned from this in terms of potentially hiring highly skilled people with niche skills on fixed term contracts for project-based roles.

While not without some challenges, Sidekicker can be credited with contributing to bringing a wider pool of candidates to rural councils.

Many participants spoke about how easy the application process was, particularly when compared to previous times they had applied for local government roles when they had to spend time addressing key selection criteria. The wider pool of candidates enabled by Sidekicker contributed to a more diverse range of people being hired. The WfV participants brought new skills, ways of working and fresh perspectives.

64% of people said the platform was easy to use. **14%** found it difficult to use.



"Other benefits were fresh ideas into the organisation. We saw it was an opportunity to expose people for working for local government. There is a woman who has always worked in a corporate environment who has moved here now and got a permanent job. She would never have thought of moving here and working for local government. We've got someone with terrific skills." Council

"That relocation of fresh talent and ideas from Melbourne has been really important." Council

"In terms of money, it's not competitive against private sector. But when you achieve a task, you feel much better. There was some magic because the local community is very grateful. You can appreciate they really like what you are doing. In that sense, it's amazing." Participant



"The WfV program was good because we had more of a focus on projects. We were able to attract lots of people because the role was only about one project. This led to people hitting the ground running. We learnt that short term contracts were a good thing for council." Council

"The program attracted some people that we would not have otherwise attracted e.g., due to short term positions." Council

"In the IT space, we recruited for two IT project manager roles, which was great as it helped to deliver several critical projects. These turned over as the talented staff got permanent roles elsewhere, but they injected great technical expertise into the business while they were here." Council



"Sidekicker was a great way to get a big variety of people who were not from the sector." Council

"The application process was user-friendly and less onerous than 'cold' applications where my application would get ignored." Participant

"The use of technology was an interesting way to do it. We got some lessons out of that." Council

"Sidekicker gave us a bigger platform. We are really open to recruiting from further afield as a result of this. I think people are thinking I can live in Geelong and travel up for two days. And that will open up the applicant pool." Council

Some councils took a risk on some people who had less experience than they would normally require and on the whole, this worked out well.

Several HR professionals commented that the quality of candidates was better than they expected. Taking a risk on less experienced candidates gave participants a chance to gain critical work experience and provided council with necessary skills and fresh perspectives.

Many councils were able to keep some WfV participants on in other roles.

Councils have been able to convert some of the WfV participants into permanent roles. This has bought highly skilled people into roles they may not have considered before their experience as part of the program. HR personnel commented that it was valuable being able to 'try before they buy' with potential employees.

Many projects were completed that would not have otherwise been (both COVID related and other).

WfV provided councils with the capacity to do a lot of work that would otherwise not have been done. This ranged from critical COVID-19 related work (communication with the community, business support) through to projects that were not related to the pandemic.

Some of the projects that councils used WfV participants to complete:



Transforming an unused train station into a shared working space



Designing a streetscape that reflected the history of the shire



Revitalising outdoor areas by planting trees



"Sidekicker was good because the people who came through were younger." Council

"I'm a big advocate for taking people with less experience. There were tremendous successes because they had a point to prove. It goes to show you don't always have to tick all the boxes." Council

"We attracted some people with less experience because those positions were not long term, we took on people we wouldn't have otherwise. Those people turned out to be a pleasant surprise." Council

"The program provided an infusion of 'new blood' to council – different perspectives, diversity, enthusiasm and skills." Council



"We had six or seven WfV participants become permanent workers." Council

"13 of those 53 WfV participants are now on council's short term or casual payroll, funded from our own payroll. We've found some amazing people." Council

"Being able to have a good eye on how some of these people work before they come into a [permanent] role has been a real opportunity." Council

"We employed some really good staff with great skills and have been able to keep them in the organisation." Council



"We had extra resources to help out in critical areas – not necessarily directly related to COVID." Council

"The program provided extra resources to teams that were completely under resourced, allowing for the completion of projects that have long been overlooked." Council

"The additional outdoor workers also allowed us to 'catch up' on some outstanding work which had not been done for several years." Council

"We have picnic tables that never get maintained. We had a guy pressure wash them and repaint them. We got tremendous feedback from community." Council

BENEFITS TO INDIVIDUALS

WfV provided employment to many people during a difficult time.

The economic importance of the program can not be underestimated. Many participants expressed gratitude for the government taking decisive action to address unemployment. **57%** of survey participants were made redundant/given too few hours/stood down because of COVID-19. However, the program did not just help those whose work was directly affected by the pandemic. **26%** of people who completed the survey said they were searching for work prior to the pandemic. This highlights that the model could be an effective tool for addressing issues beyond the pandemic.

The vast majority of participants had a very positive experience.

Most participants were very grateful for the opportunity and spoke highly of their experience. There are intangible benefits that cannot be accurately captured by statistics, like the benefit to people's mental health and the sense of community people got from their roles. Many participants talked about enjoying the company of their colleagues which points to a supportive and healthy working environment.

85% of participants enjoyed their time working for council.

92% of participants felt proud of the work they were doing.

88% of participants felt their work was helping the community.

Participants learnt new skills which will help them secure work in the future.

71% of WfV participants agreed that they learned new skills in their roles. These new skills ranged from administrative such as grant writing or computer software expertise, to tickets for operating a chainsaw or traffic management.

71% of participants felt their WfV experience will help them secure another job in the future.

WfV allowed a number of people to transition into an area of expertise that they had studied for but had not previously worked in.

A number of participants were incredibly grateful to the program and council for allowing them to gain experience in their area of study. This real-world experience will assist them in their pursuit of further work.



"The program itself I believe was fantastic. It certainly saved our family from financial ruin." Participant



"It was a much-needed boost to my confidence, made some good friends and a new local professional referee." Participant

"The best aspect was the response of the community, for the work I personally completed." Participant

"Connection during lockdown. I couldn't speak highly enough of the team I was working with. When Melbourne was in hard lockdown – they were an exceptional support. I also enjoyed staying engaged and making a contribution during a difficult time." Participant

"The crew, teams and supervisors were great to work with and alongside." Participant

"I am currently still working for the council, I just really enjoy it and the people are great." Participant

"I felt respected and valued." Participant



"Working for Victoria and the Council gave me the confidence to develop my career." Participant

"I learnt a huge amount and have now built-up valuable experience in local government which will benefit my career and open new opportunities in areas I have always wanted to work in." Participant



"I've been applying for this sort of role for some time and this gave me experience that I can add to my resume and hopefully secure a permanent role." Participant

16% of survey participants said their WfV role was in an area they had studied or trained in that they were not working in prior to the pandemic.



The program provides a repeatable pattern for local and state government to work together in the future.

There are opportunities to use the model to tackle mutual goals but only with the right funding model.

The CEOs we spoke with were eager to ensure the lessons from the WfV project are not lost at its completion. The model has been shown to be effective and there is scope to utilise a similar approach to address mutual goals with the state government.

CEOs and HR teams spoke of balancing the administrative and financial burden of participating in a program like Working for Victoria with the benefit. While the benefit of the WfV program is obvious, the benefit of other programs is not always so clear cut.

The Working for Victoria model could be used to tackle a range of issues in regional areas. In order to have the uptake and support from regional councils it is critical the appropriate financial support is provided.

Small, rural councils do not have the luxury of large budgets. Government programs that offer to compensate only a portion of wages can be problematic as councils often lack the resources to contribute the required amount.

Rural councils also pointed to the fact that they have different pressures and requirements from their urban counterparts. This can manifest in a range of ways from smaller teams and budgets to constraints such as the lack of local rental accommodation.

Please refer to page 37 of the recommendations section for further details.



"There are good opportunities to find alignment between what they want to achieve and what we want to achieve. There are areas like road where you could put resources into it and get good results." Council

"It could have an ongoing role, with some state government funding you can create employment and work in rural areas and get a whole lot of work done." Council

"The trouble is it really comes down to dollars. Rural councils are normally so cash strapped it would be hard for me to find resources to employ 10 people, let alone 43. It's not a relationship issue, it's a money issue." Council

"We would always be able to find jobs for people to do if we have resources. There is a nearly infinite number of things we can do if we have resources." Council

"The sector thinks the government assumes we'll be the delivery arm without them providing funding. This was councils delivering the COVID response but there was at least funding behind it and that was important for the relationship. It's been an important project for funding, but you could slip into old methods of 'you must do this' and there is a lack of funding to deliver it." Council

"With the Jobs Victoria program – I'd be surprised if same level of take-up is the same. It's not fully funded. You can get 20% if the employee is over 50 or female. It feels different and harder. It also feels like it has to be new jobs and I don't have any money for jobs. If it's a \$100K job and I'm getting \$20k for it, I still need to find \$80k. It will be interesting to see how many councils jump into it, particularly if has many audits and red tape. The burden outweighs the advantage. We don't have a hard and fast rule but sometimes we say it's not worth it." Council

"If you are coming up with a program, bring us in early. Metro councils have different priorities and interests but if you involved us in the design we will be able to deliver a lot." Council

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made in the same spirit of learning and improvement which characterised the program's success.



Councils should be strategic in their marketing efforts to change perceptions and increase awareness of potential career pathways in local government.



Council should focus on promoting the many benefits they can offer.

There are many benefits of working for a rural council, but these benefits are not as widely known as they could be. Council should focus on promoting these benefits to highlight why a role in local government at a rural council is a great career choice.

Benefits to highlight include:

- ▶ The opportunity to contribute to your community and to feel like you are making a difference.
- ▶ The breadth of work councils do means there is scope to transition to various areas within the same organisation.
- ▶ The welcoming, supportive environment with many training and development opportunities.
- ▶ Greater work/life balance with the potential for rostered days off (RDOs).
- ▶ Great scope for career progression either internally or with other councils.
- ▶ Many regional shires offer a kind of lifestyle not available in metro areas (natural beauty, less traffic, lower property prices, relaxed pace of life).
- ▶ The flexibility to work from home or remotely.
- ▶ Job security.

These many benefits can actively be promoted in job advertisements, through social media and at council events.



Councils should explore actively recruiting graduates.

WfV allowed a number of participants to gain experience in areas they were qualified in but had not previously worked in. These participants tended to be grateful for the opportunity and experience the program provided.

Many private sector firms actively try to recruit graduates through internships and graduate roles which are promoted through education providers. Students are often invited to attend events where the employer will try to impress upon them the merits of their organisation.

Rural Councils Victoria should investigate the opportunities for a graduate program with the education sector and the state government. This would be beneficial for both councils and graduates as it would provide much needed technical expertise for councils and hard to get real world experience for those starting out in the workforce.



"I do a fair amount of the vocation and planning with the local schools and employment groups. We go and speak about the professions. They also hear about our awesome office staff. I'm tapping into the fact that our talent pool is in the rural council area." Council

Embracing contemporary ways of working will assist councils to fulfil their workforce requirements.



Councils should carefully consider their working from home policies and how this can contribute to the attraction and retention of employees.

As highlighted on page 26, the flexibility to work from home is considered very important by many employees. Offering this flexibility at least some of the time has a range of benefits that include not excluding potentially highly skilled employees who may have carer responsibilities or who live further away and would be happy to commute to the office once a week. While this should be balanced with the need to retain culture, the pandemic has proven that working from home is possible and employees' expectations have shifted.



Councils should consider utilising short-term contracts for hard to fill, project-specific roles.

Certain projects may require technical expertise or niche skills that are hard to secure in some regional locations. By embracing a modernised approach to recruitment and fixed-term, project specific contracts, rural councils may be able attract a higher quality of candidate with those hard-to-find skills. It is important to note this is an important tool that should be utilised when necessary and should not come at the expense of full-time employment.



Council should consider remote work for hard to fill technical roles.

Some technical roles are challenging to fill and do not require a regular on-site presence. Smaller rural councils are in competition with larger metropolitan councils for a limited workforce and some candidates do not want to move rurally.

Councils should consider referencing the opportunity to work remotely and flexibly in job advertisements for these competitive roles. This is especially true when the role is fixed term.



Councils should develop sustainable work policies to reduce incidents of burnout.

Increased workloads during COVID-19 led to members of HR, the executive and others becoming burnt out. Most councils celebrate that their workplaces have more work-life balance than their private sector compatriots however that is not the experience of some. Levels of support can vary widely depending on the manager and council. Councils should develop sustainable work policies to ensure a baseline level of support for all workers.

Councils should take steps to improve the recruitment experience for both applicants and those administering it.



Councils operating without a HR system should consider the value in joining forces to invest in the appropriate software.

In the long term, this would save time and money by allowing greater automation and would ensure the recruitment process can be better managed. This is also likely to contribute to a better recruitment experience for applicants.



Councils should ensure they have a diversity policy and actively try to recruit a diverse workforce.

Without a diversity policy and clear strategies to actively recruit a diverse workforce, progress is unlikely to be made. A diversity policy should include age, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical or mental disability, race, ethnicity, religion, relationship status, pregnancy and family responsibilities. A diverse workforce is a stronger workforce as it is better able to understand the needs of the community.



There is scope to improve the application process for applicants.

For participants used to applying for roles in the private sector, having to address a list of key selection criteria can feel time consuming and cumbersome. There is scope to streamline the application process and reduce the requirement to address selection criteria. A number of participants spoke of feeling disillusioned about applying for roles and not receiving a response. A HR system would reduce the burden of providing a better experience.



Councils should seek to embrace technology as a way to recruit a greater diversity of people.

SideKicker introduced new applicants to councils successfully, while presenting challenges for HR teams trying to administer the recruitment process. In the future councils need to explore technology solutions that can do both well.



"The community isn't very diverse. With this program [WfV], there is quite bit more diversity." Council

The WfV model should be a regular feature of how state and local government work together to achieve mutually desirable outcomes.



Local and state government should identify mutual goals and work together to design programs to achieve them.

The WfV model has been an incredibly successful vehicle for delivering important outcomes for both the state and local government. The premise of the model is a partnership between state government, who provided the funding, and local government, who implemented the program. This model should be a regular feature of how state and local government work together and used as a template for future projects.

There are a range of issues that state and local government could work together to address. These includes the housing availability issues, youth unemployment, population loss, migrant labour attraction.

One of the most pressing issues councils face is the shortage of people with necessary technical skills such as Environmental Health Officers. As a first step, we recommend that councils and the state government form a partnership to identify the skills gap in the labour market for technical roles and work together to create and implement a plan to address it.



Future programs should be co-designed with councils, participants and other relevant stakeholders.

It is important to design with people, rather than for them. Human centred-design is a creative and evidence-based approach to problem-solving and innovation that integrates the needs of people, the possibilities of technology and the requirements for organisational success. This ensures designs are fit for purpose and meet the needs of all parties. Systemic issues around shortages of planners and Environmental Health Officers need a coordinated approach with the government and education providers.

Many valuable lessons have been learned throughout the WfV program. These lessons should inform the development of any future program. For instance, if a similar project is rolled out, councils that first hired additional resources for their HR teams had greater capacity to manage the program. This approach should be encouraged in future programs.

Thank you from
WfV participants



I would like to thank both the Working for Victoria team and also the East Gippsland Shire Council for the great experience gained from new role.

It was such a generous offer and I am so thankful for having done it.

Thank you for providing funding for the job opportunity.

I'm extremely grateful for the opportunities I was able to take during the six months. I absolutely loved it.

Thank you to the Victorian Government for providing me with a job during a pandemic. I am very grateful for the experience.

I am very happy for the opportunity given to me.

Thanks to the State Government for acting quickly and decisively, to install this Working for Victoria program during the pandemic.

The program itself I believe was fantastic. It certainly saved our family from financial ruin.

Thank you WfV for giving me this opportunity. I'm grateful forever. If you truly want a change in life, come to spend some time here. It's a place where I have found peace, better health, [the] ability to reinvent myself and realise life is beautiful.

My experience at MRSC was amazing. I was sad I couldn't stay longer and will always look back on my time there fondly. The skills I picked there helped me get another WfV position with another council, which then led to a job with the State Govt. So, thank you! :)

Thank you for the opportunity to be part of the WfV program. It was a lifesaver. I enjoyed working for Hepburn Shire and appreciate the support and work environment.

I am very grateful to the council for employing me and getting me away from Centrelink payments - so I could breathe again financially. I will look back at some of the value I have gained from working here, in time. It was always going to be a stepping stone, so I hope the path improves soon.

Thank you for this opportunity.

Thank you Hepburn Shire for the opportunity!

Thank you for this opportunity. I am extremely grateful.

Thank you for the opportunity I really enjoyed my time.

Thank you for the opportunity. I want to work for council as it is a great way to contribute to society.

I have gained a full-time position from my working for Vic contract.... Cheers for the opportunity :)



I was grateful for the program, which helped me through the lockdown period. I'm a father of three - so it helped me to manage homeschooling and the isolation. I'm not sure how I would've coped without this program. The team was amazing and I do miss our daily meetings.

I've had a great experience, am grateful for the opportunity and hope my new skills and work ethic will secure me further work within council.

Thanks for the opportunity. It was a good program for older staff like me who are struggling to get a foot in the door but still have a lot to offer the workforce.

I am thankful to have employment during COVID in such a great community and especially doing such an important role.

After losing my job I was very grateful in being able to support Bass Coast for the term of the contract, and to see others in the same boat having a chance to work and contribute with quite a few picking up other jobs as a result.

THANK-YOU for providing the opportunity of employment during hard times without that my partner and I would been financially buggered.

From going to a full-time job to unemployed to suddenly employed by a council was not what I imagined, but I wouldn't change anything looking back. I am incredibly grateful that I was given the opportunity to work for the council and able to get my foot in the door, setting myself up for future opportunities if they present themselves. Working in the council has given me confidence and I have gained extra knowledge of the daily operations within the organisation. It's incredible to see the amount of work each and every employee puts in to keep things moving forward. I am really proud to be apart of something so positive.

I am extremely thankful for the opportunity to work in the role I was offered.

I am very thankful for this opportunity. It has strengthened my skills and knowledge and helped me to get another role with local government. I wish I could have stayed where I was!

Thank you for the opportunity to have been employed through Working for Victoria at MRSC. I have really enjoyed it. It has given me a new focus. Last year was a pretty tough year for many.



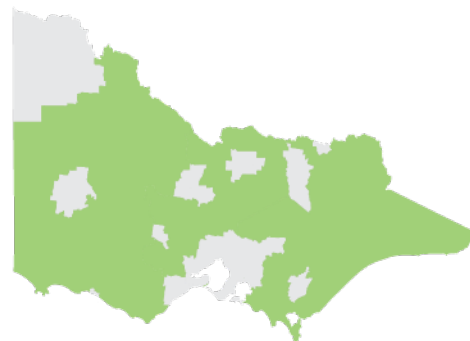


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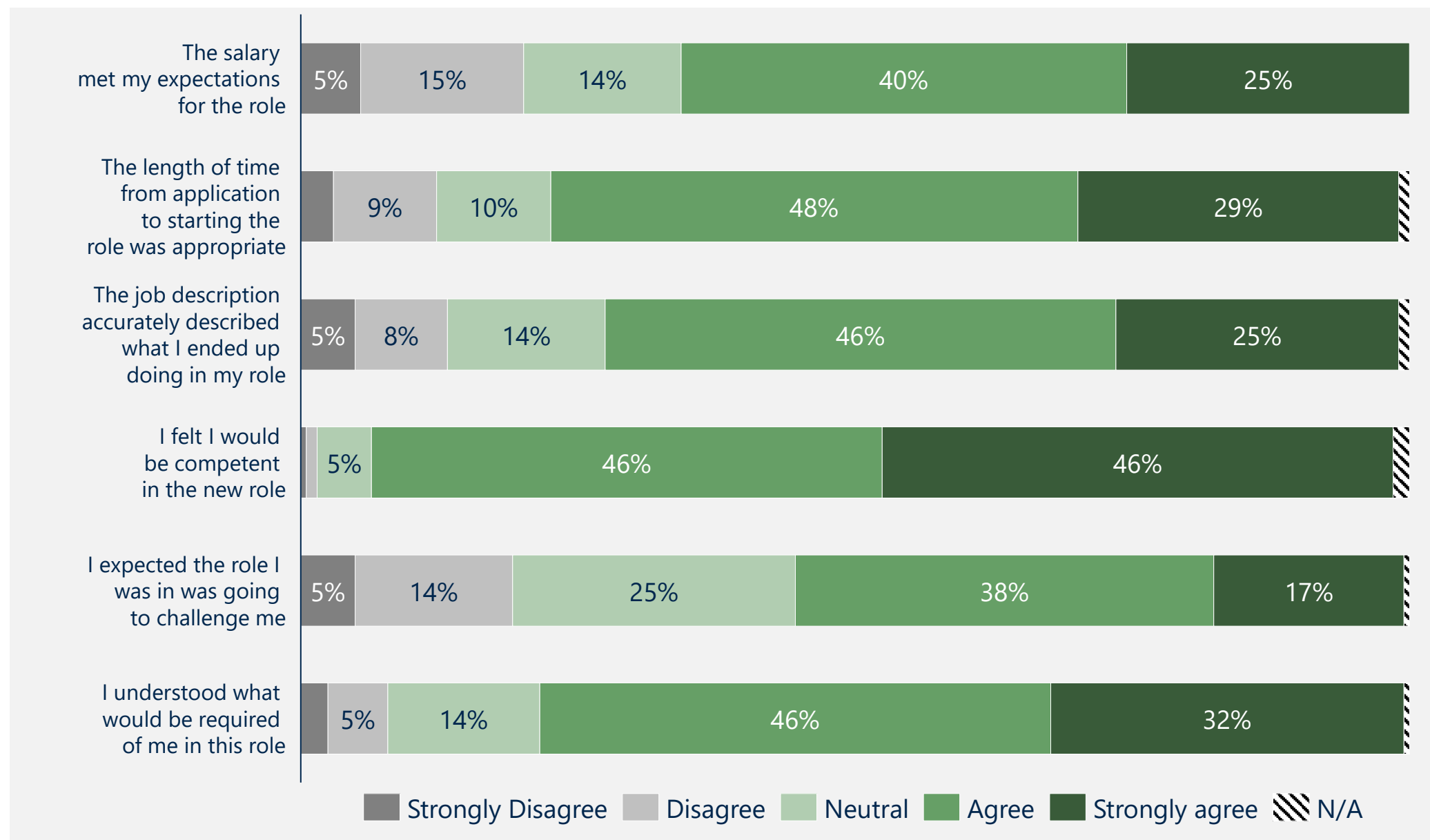
secretariat@ruralcouncilsvictoria.org.au



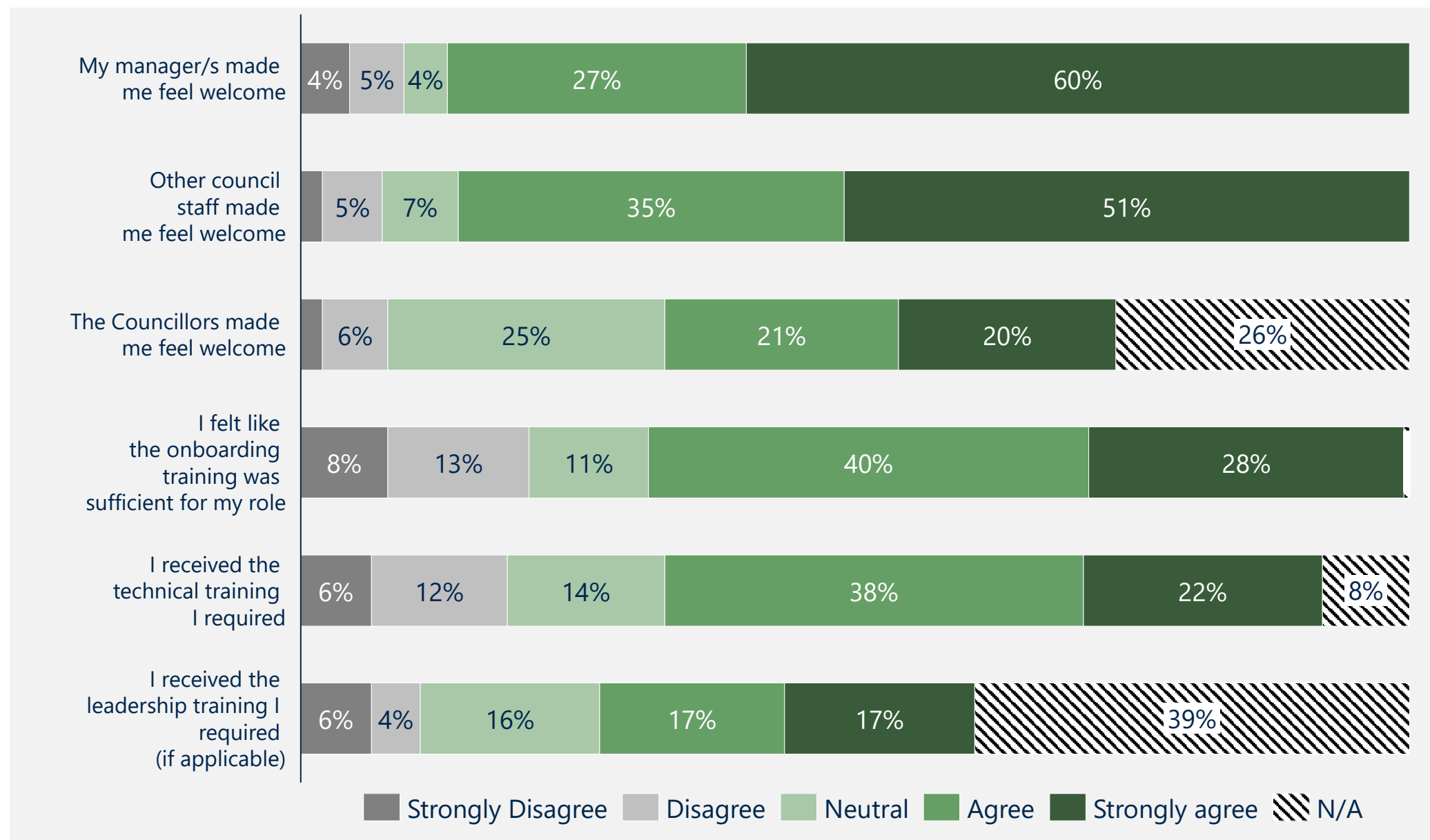
Appendix



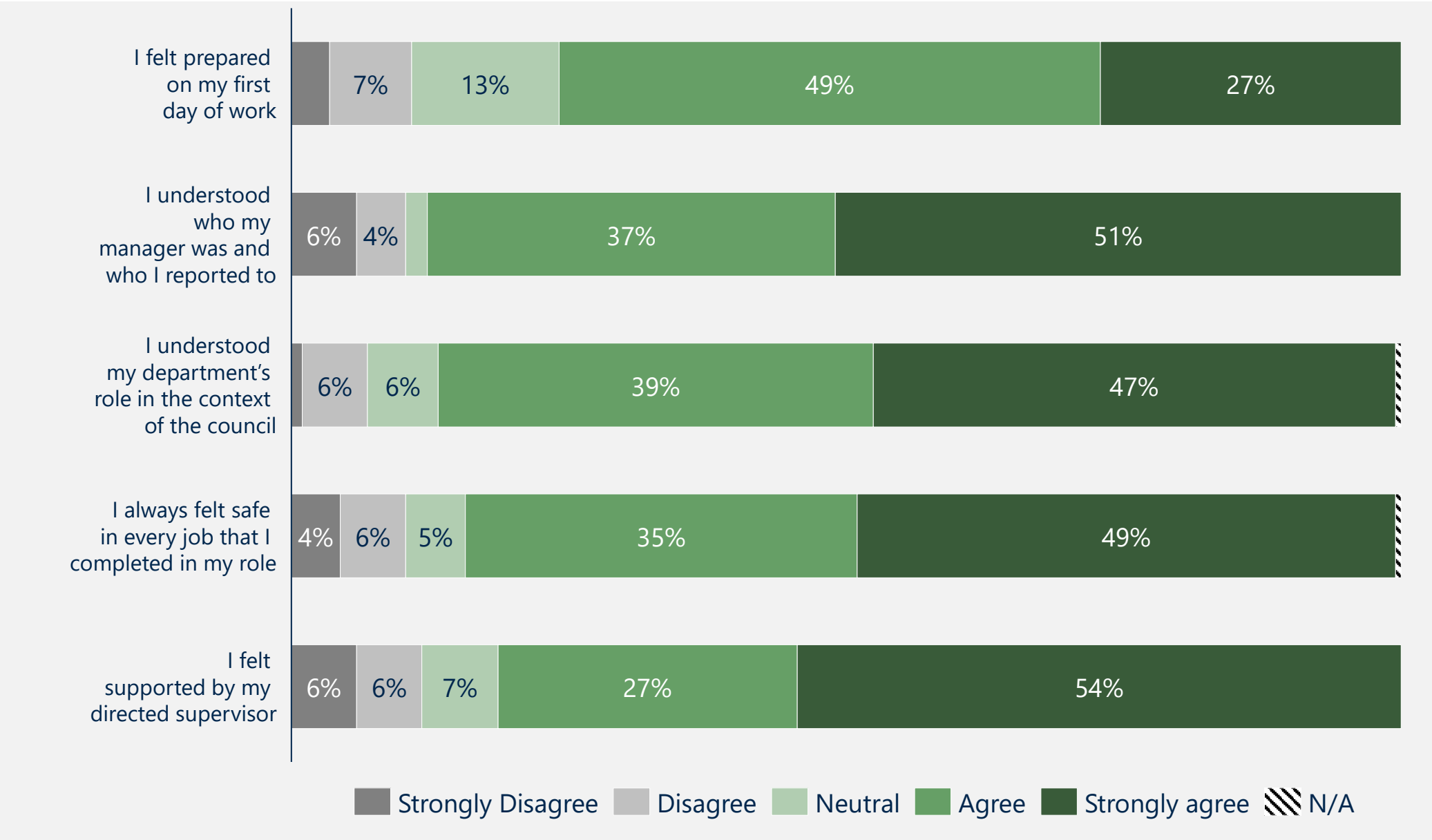
Participants were asked to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statements below:



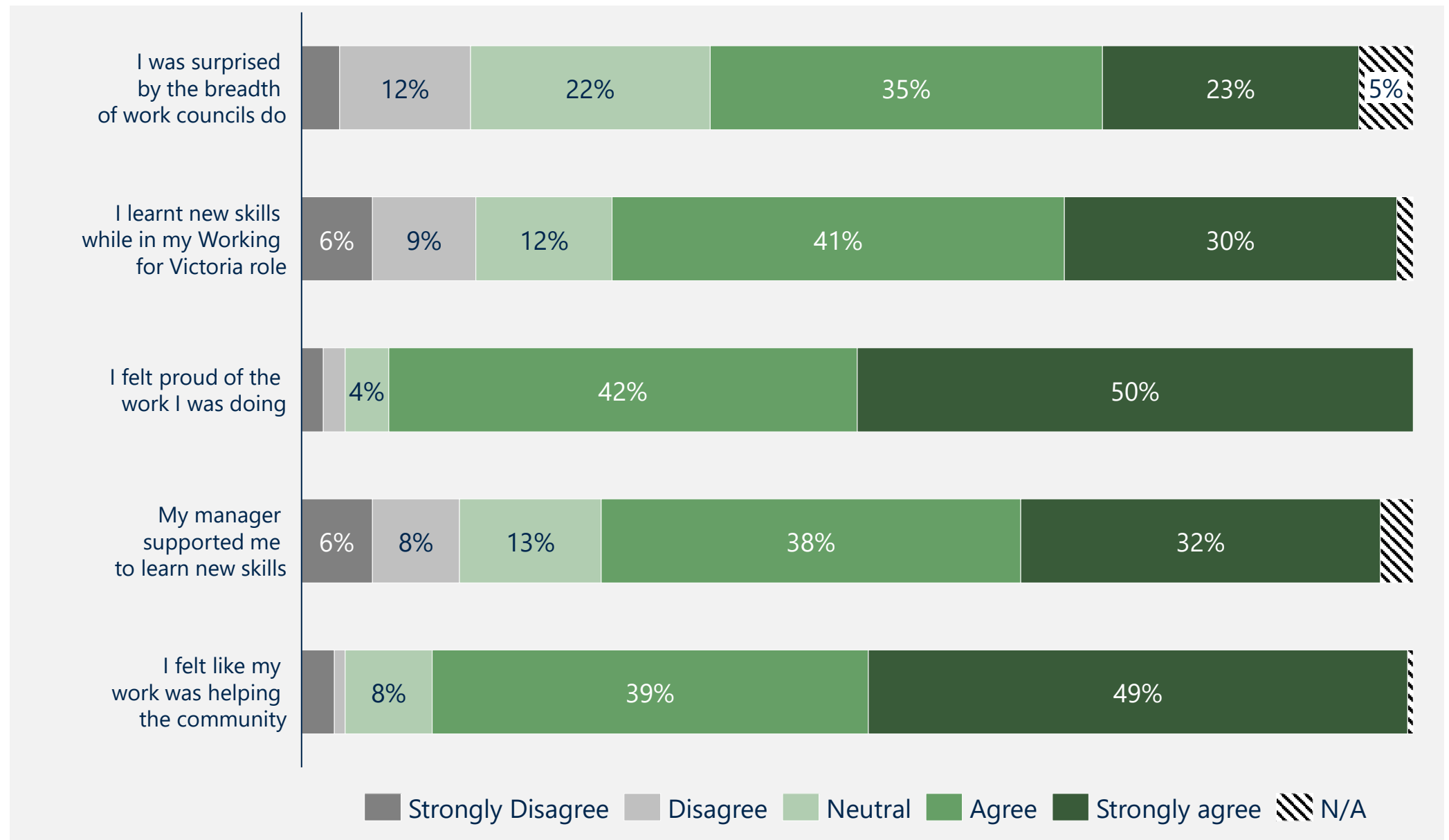
Participants were asked to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statements below:



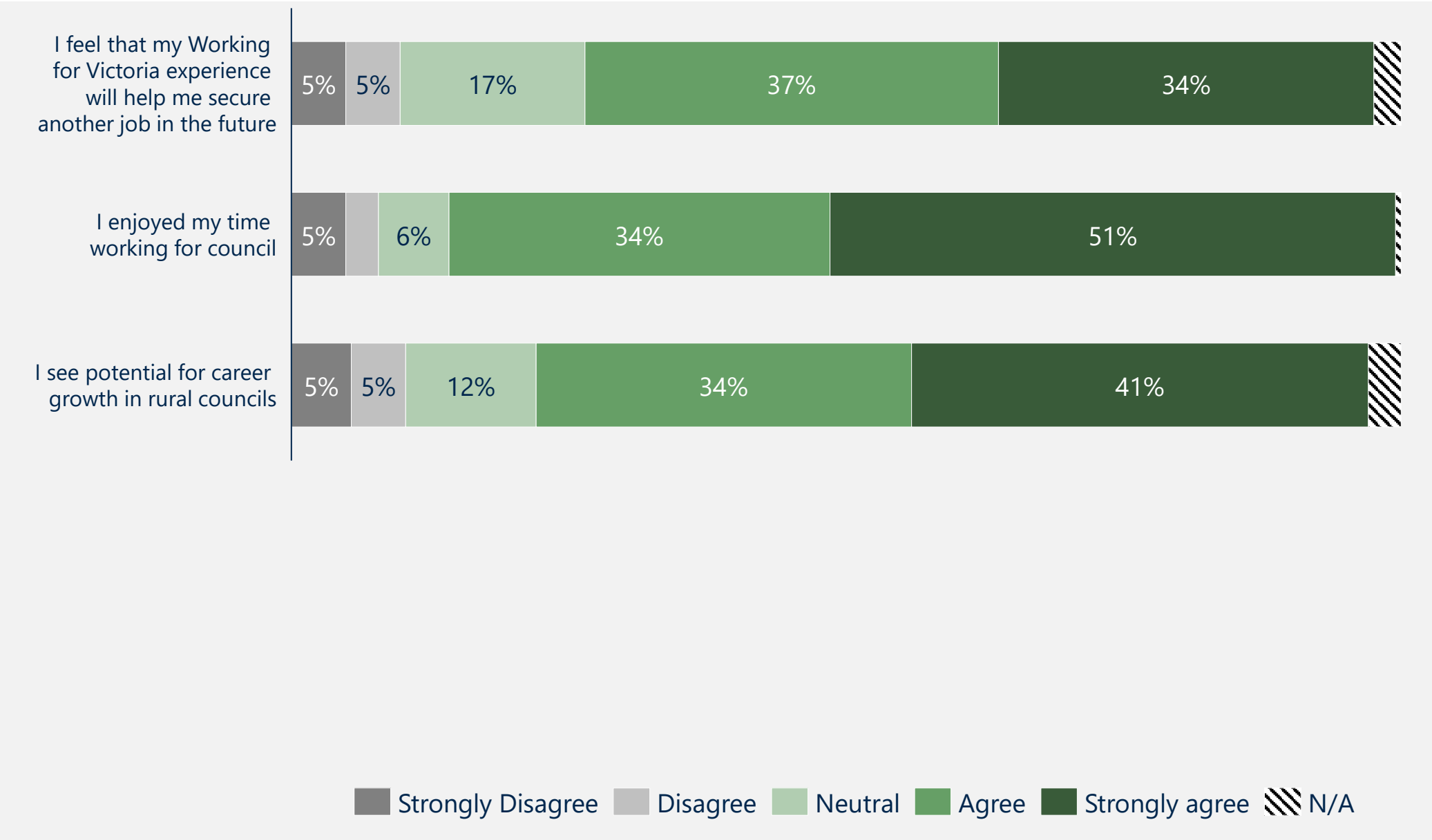
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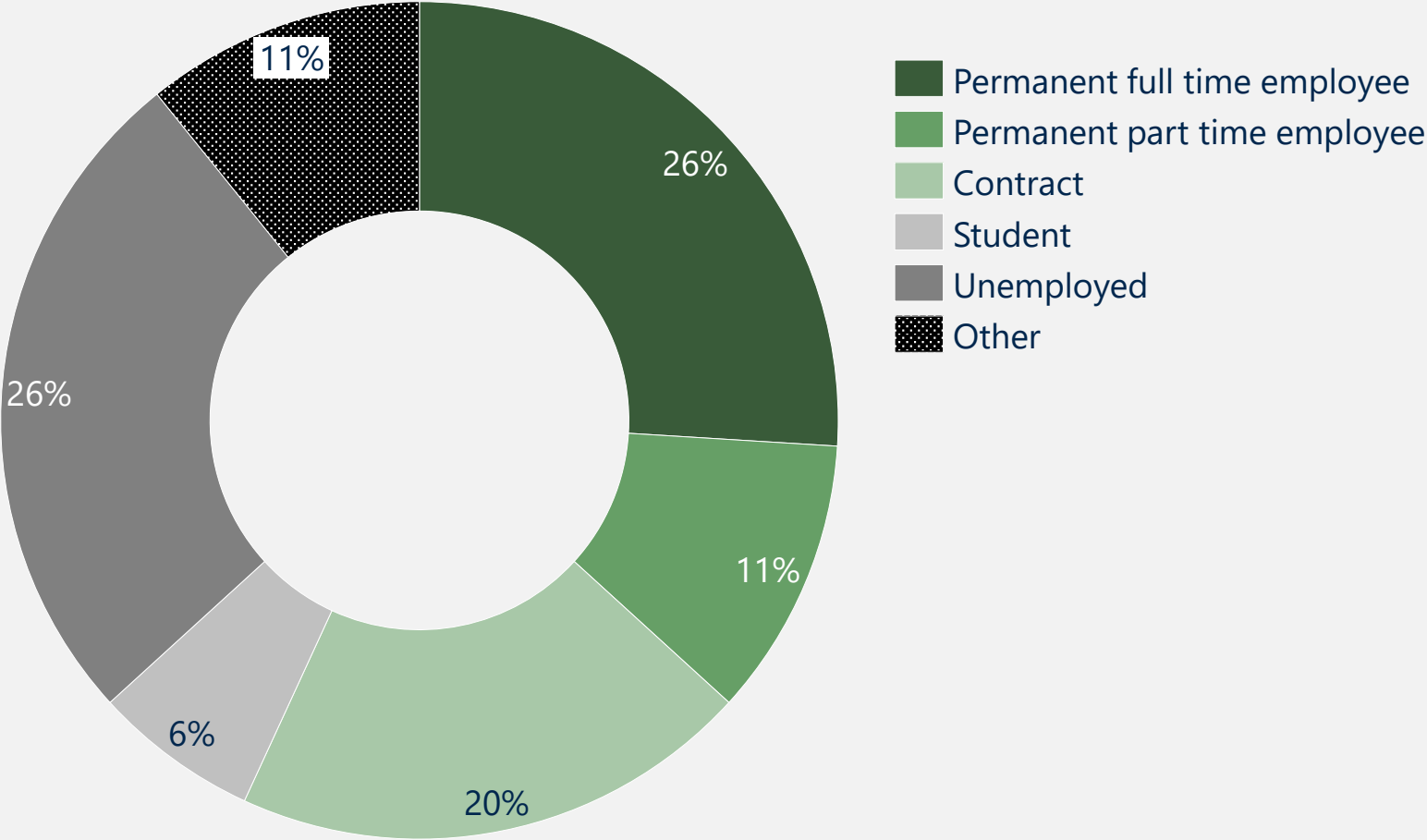
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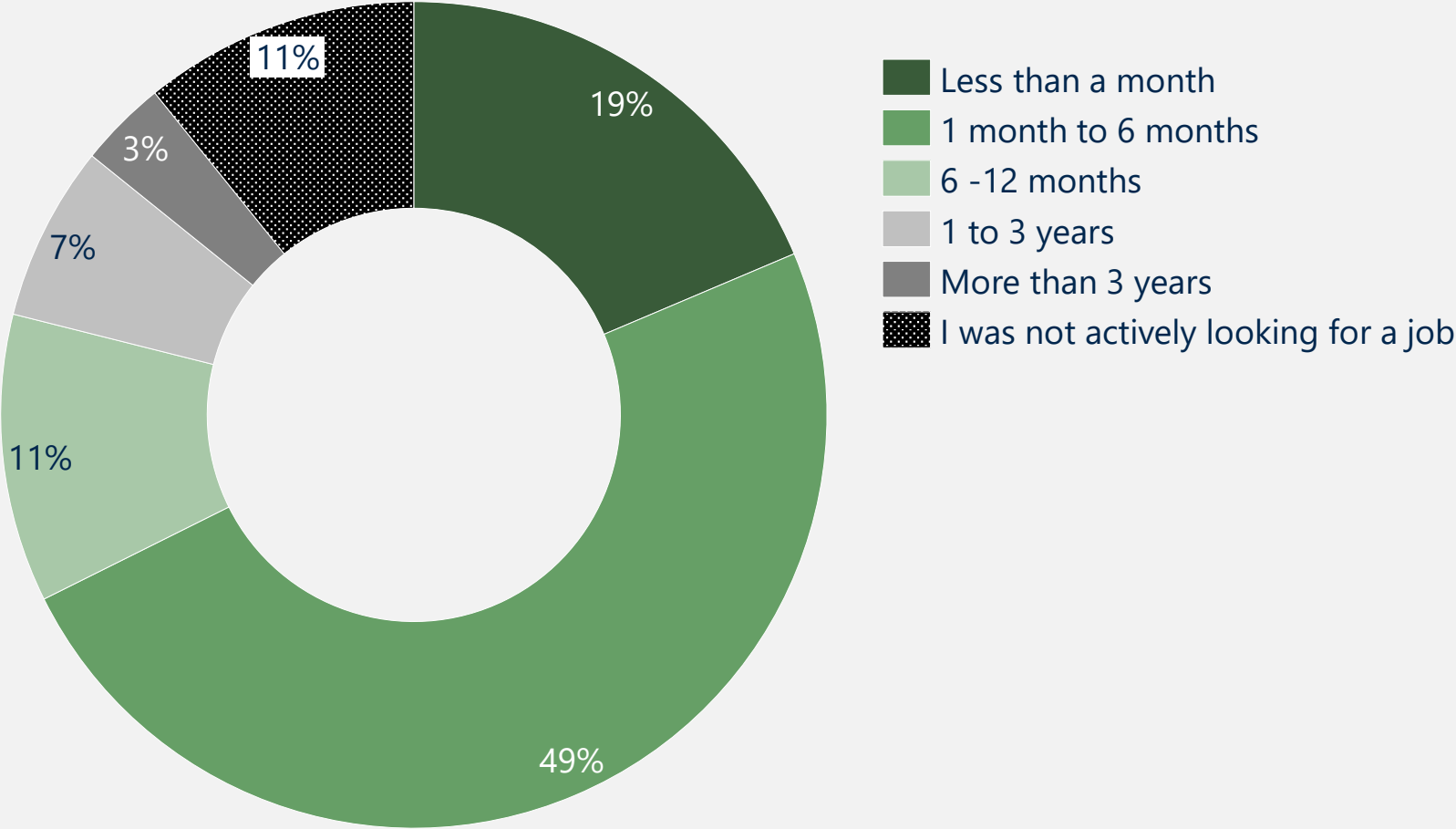
Participants were asked to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statements below:



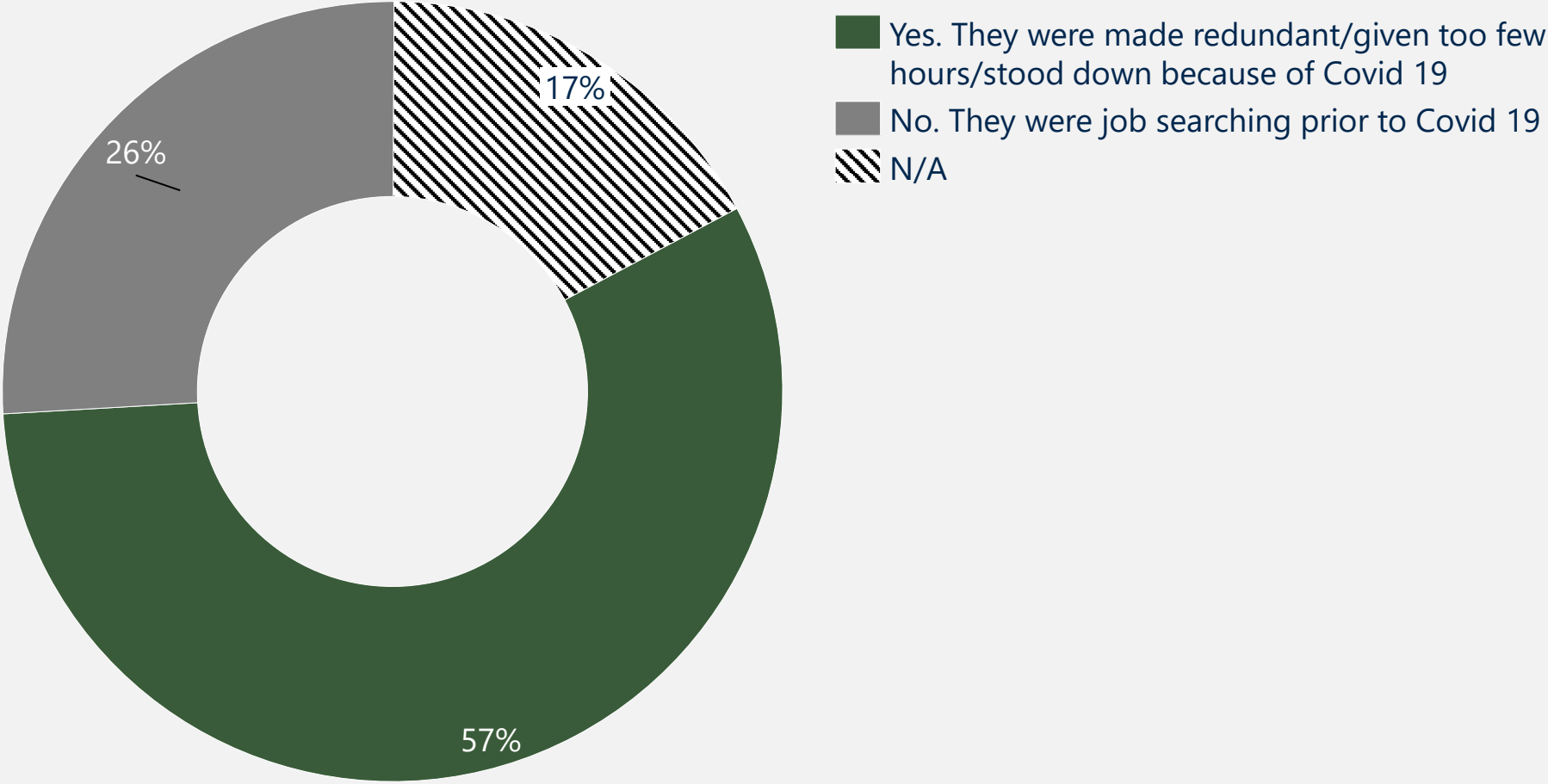
Participants were asked what their work situation was prior to the Covid-19 pandemic



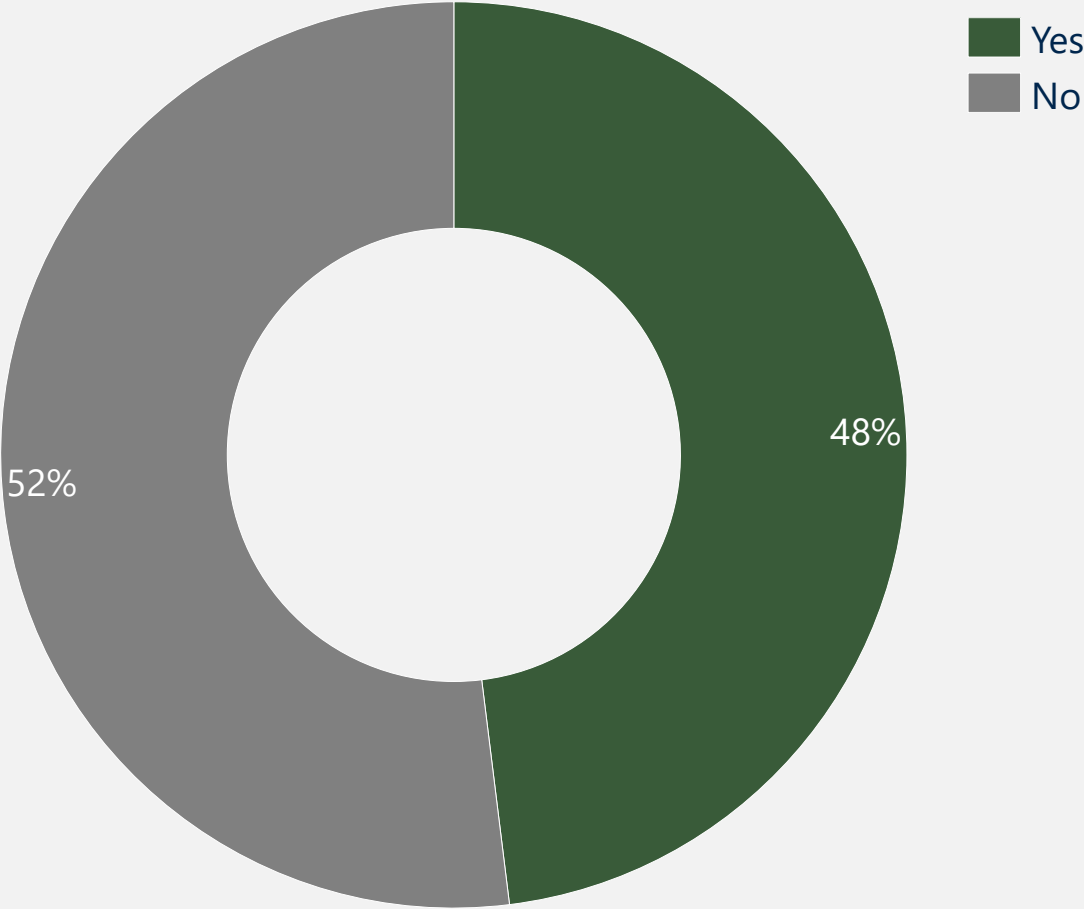
Participants were asked prior to them joining *Working for Victoria*, how long had they been actively job searching



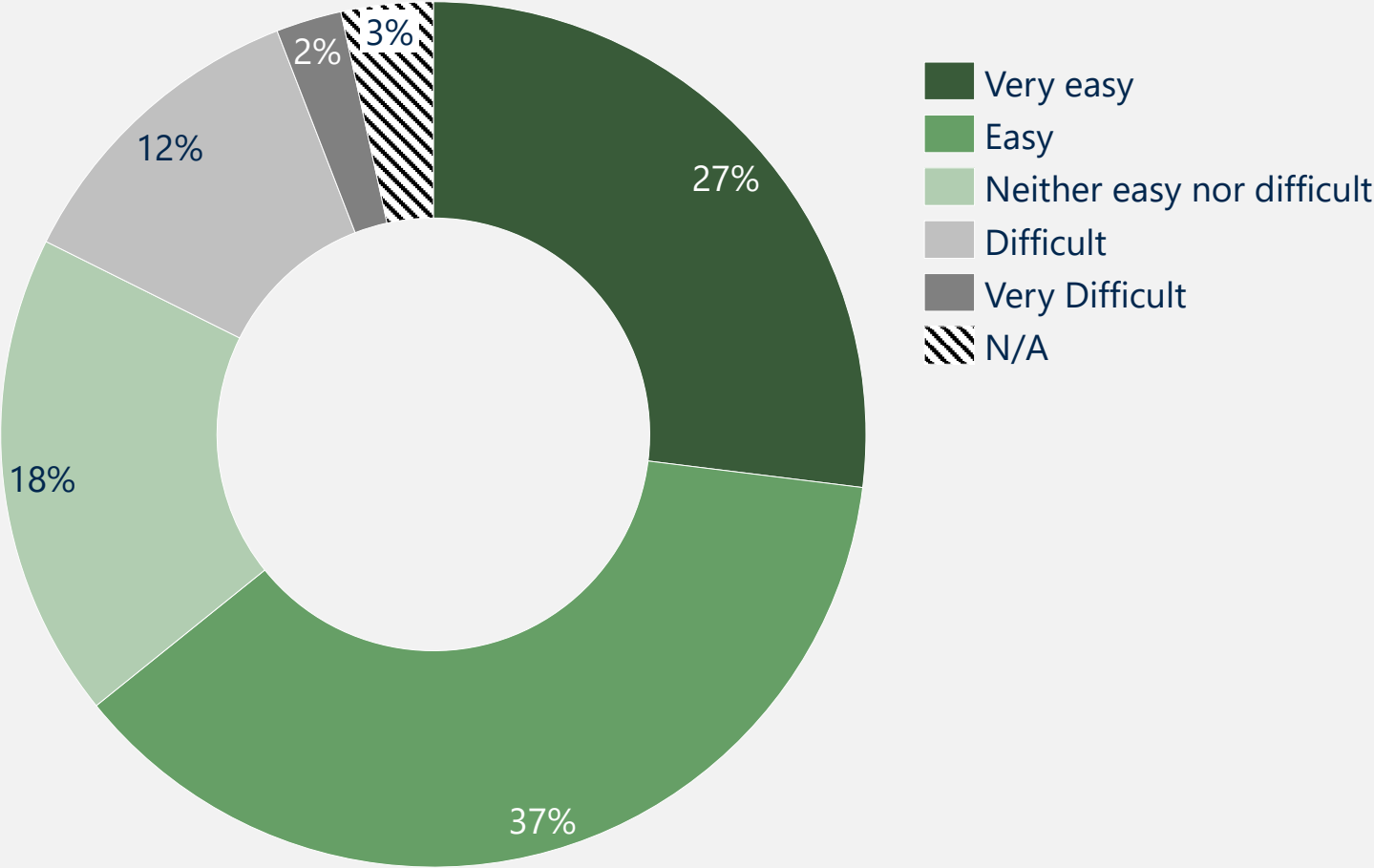
Participants were asked whether Covid-19 played a role in them applying for a *Working for Victoria* role



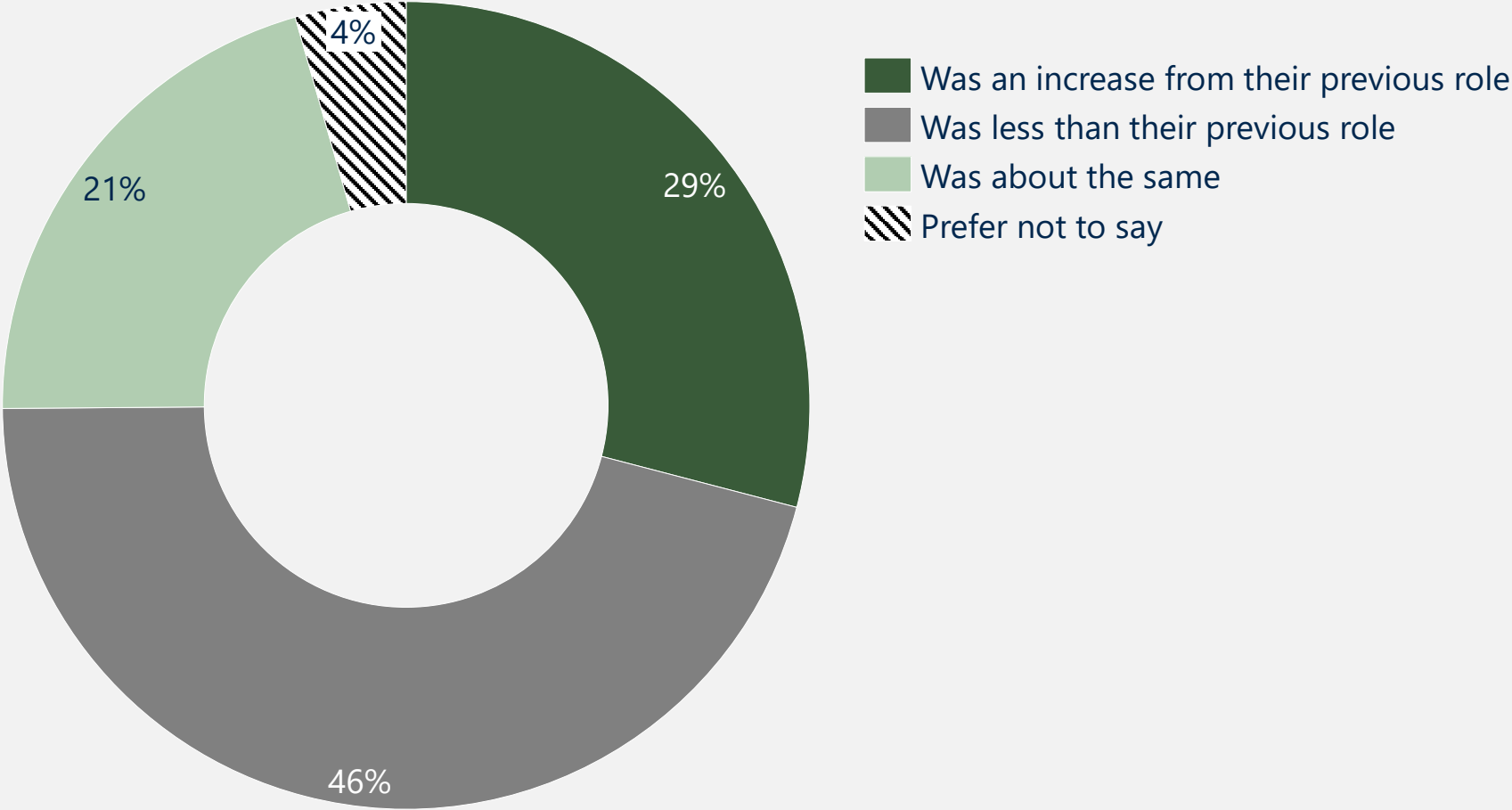
Participants were asked whether they had applied for a role in local government prior to *Working for Victoria*



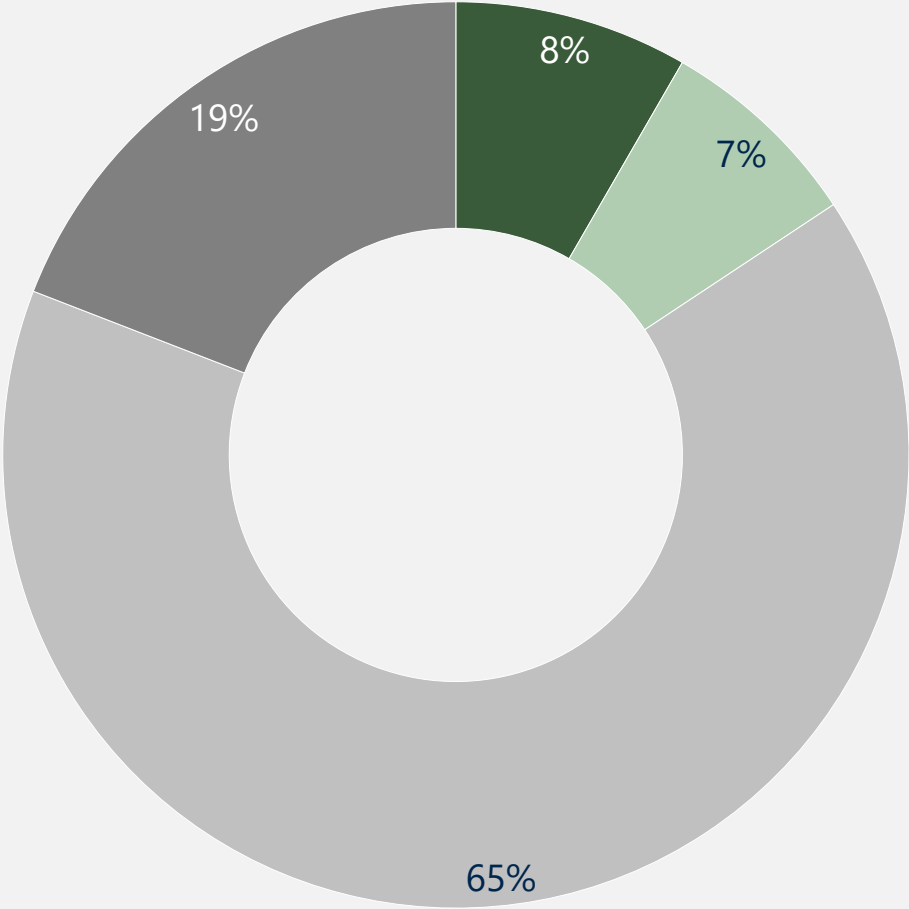
Participants were asked how they found using the Sidekicker platform



Participants were asked whether their salary for *Working for Victoria*...

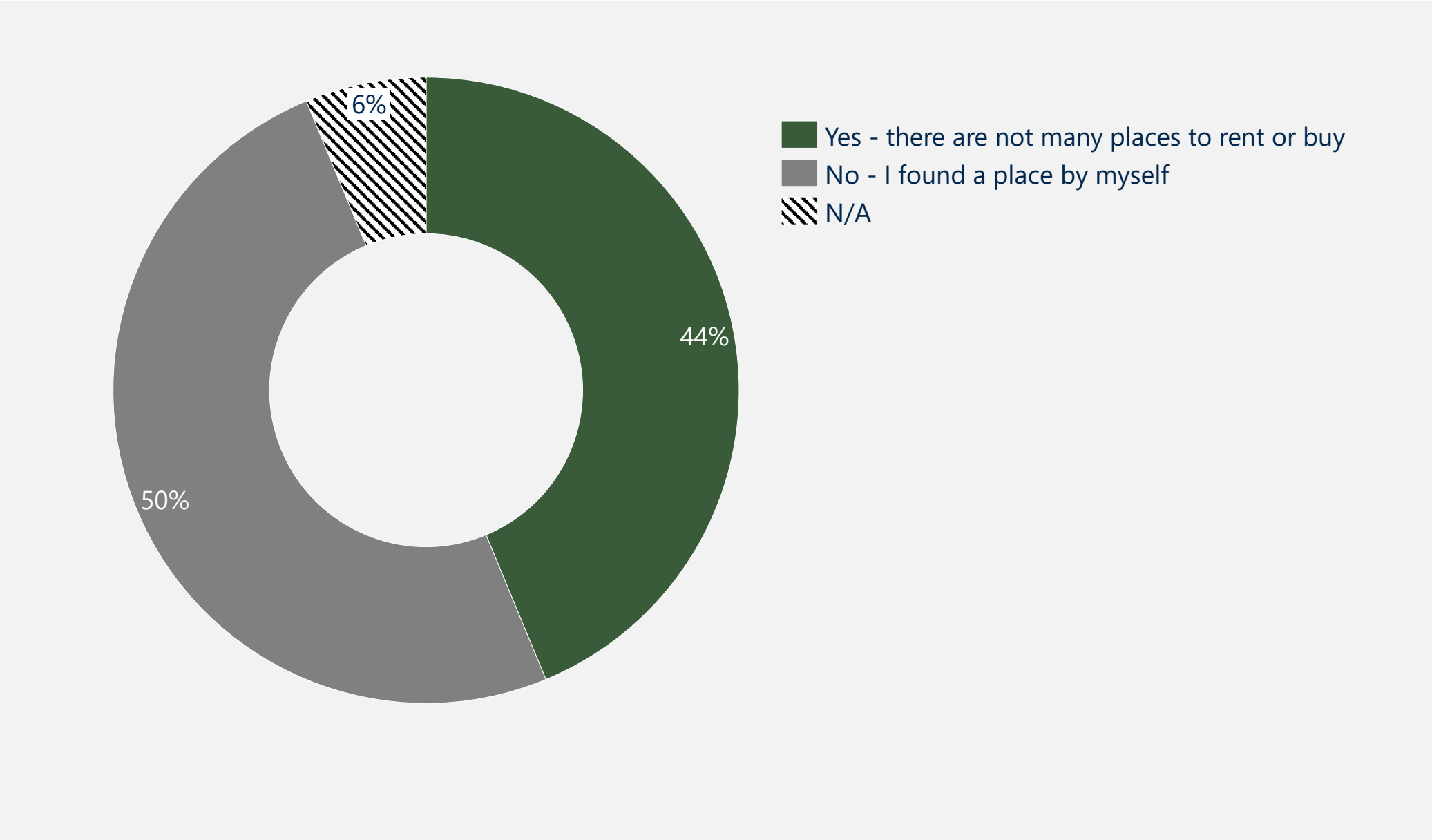


Participants were asked whether they moved regions for the *Working for Victoria* position

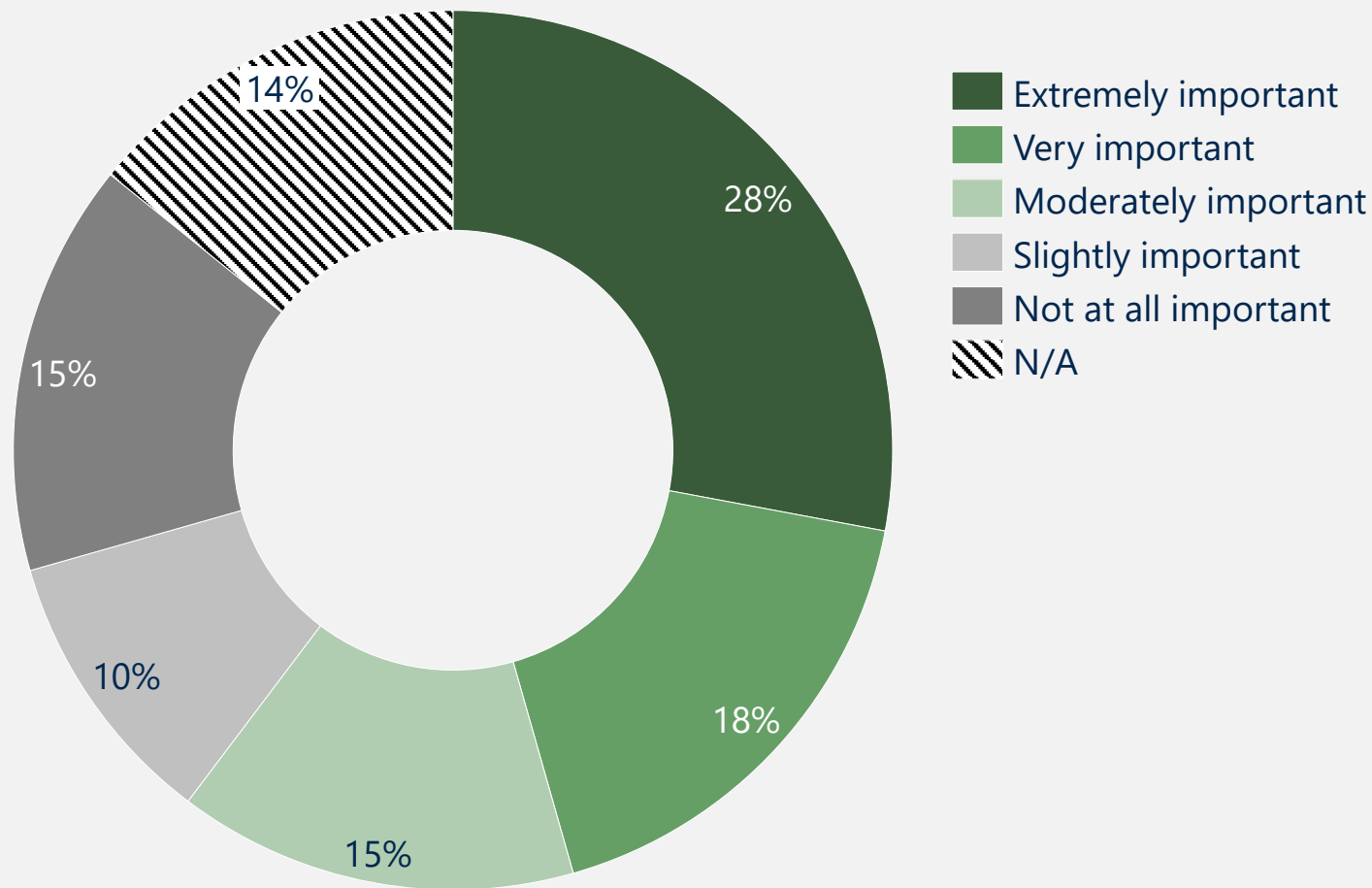


- Yes – it was the only way they could do the role
- Yes – they wanted to move for convenience or so they could get the most of the role
- No – they already lived close enough to the office
- No – they could work remotely

Participants were asked whether it was difficult to find somewhere to live



Participants were asked how important the flexibility to work from home was to them



Participants were asked whether they would consider working for a rural council again in the future

