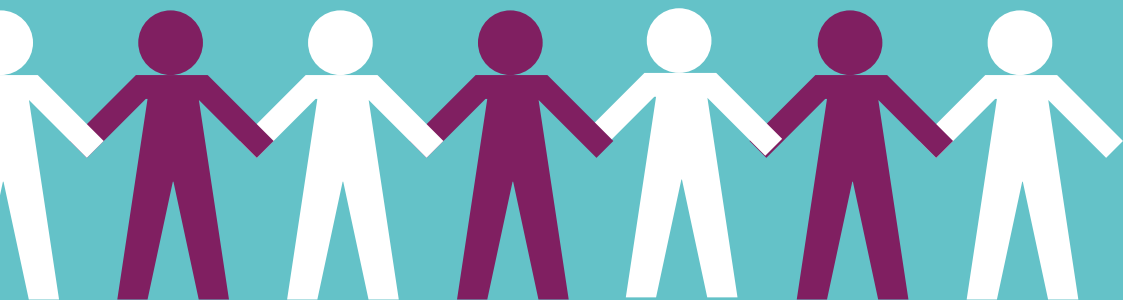# Working Together: State and Local Government Engagement Policy Project

SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESULTS

2018

Government of South Australia

Disclaimer
While every reasonable effort has been made to verify the information in this document, use of the information contained is at your sole risk. It is recommended that you independently verify the information before taking any action.

Contents

Project Overview

For many years, State and Local government have sought to encourage greater and more effective collaboration between the two sectors of government to achieve the best outcomes for the people of South Australia (SA).

The *State and Local Government Engagement Policy Project* was a collaborative endeavour between the Department for Health and Wellbeing (formerly Department for Health and Ageing), Department of Planning, Transport and Infrastructure (both Office for Local Government, and Planning and Development) and the SA Local Government Association (LGA).

The Project aimed to *ensure better communication and cooperation between State government and Local government through the development of guiding principles and a suite of related tools to support officers across both sectors of government.*

To do this, the Project Working Group sought to gain insight into people's experiences and critiques of engagement and cooperation between the two sectors of government, and the current and past processes that have supported or limited engagement. The information was gathered through three different methods.

- An electronic survey of state government and Local government employees described in this report

- 3 case studies of engagement between State Government and Local government were developed, highlighting the learnings to be drawn from those experiences.

- A workshop of 40 State government and Local government representatives reviewed the findings from the survey and the case studies and explored the emerging themes and the strategies.

This report summarises the responses received to the electronic survey. The survey was distributed across state government and Local government staff and received 160 Local government (including LGA) responses and 145 State government responses.

The Project Working Group then analysed the survey responses, the case studies, workshop outcomes, and the *Working Together* and *Better Together* approaches to identify key facilitators and barriers to collaboration across State and Local government, and areas for action. These then formed the basis of a set of partnership principles, and recommendations to support the operationalisation of these principles.

The final project report which summarises the principles and recommendations, as well as the governance, processes and outcomes of the State and Local government Engagement Policy Project is available at www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/healthinallpolicies

State – Local Government Engagement Survey results

Respondent demographics

- 305 respondents completed the survey consisting of 145 staff from State Government and 160 Local government sector staff.

  > 17.9% of State Government respondents were at the executive level and 46.2% from the policy/planning/project officer level. By contrast 35.6% of Local Government respondents were executive level staff and 20.6% were policy/planning/project officer level.

  > A substantially lower proportion of State Government respondents (19.4%) were regionally based compared with Local Government respondents (40.6%).

  > Length of time spent working for either the State Government or Local Government sectors was not substantially different for either group of respondents, with over 50% having spent over five years with their respective sector, and over 25% having spent more than 20 years.

  > There was a good spread of respondents across State Government departments and Local Government regions. The largest number of State Government responses were from the Department of Environment and Water (formerly Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources) (18%), Department for Health and Wellbeing (formerly Department for Health and Ageing) (14%) and the Department of Human Services (formerly Department for Communities and Social Inclusion) (12%). Nearly 50% of Local government respondents were from metropolitan councils with the remaining 50% spread across the various regions and associations.

Department	Position				
	Executive/ senior management	Middle management	Policy/ planning/ project officer	Other	Total
Attorney-General's Department	1	1	1	0	3
Department of Human Services	5	3	9	0	17
Department for Correctional Services	1	0	1	0	2
Department for Health and Wellbeing	2	10	8	0	20
Department for Child Protection	0	2	4	0	6
Department for Education (formerly Department of Education and Child Development)	1	2	7	0	10
Department of Environment and Water	3	11	13	0	27
Department of Planning, Transport and Infrastructure	1	3	1	0	5
Department of Primary Industries and Regions	6	3	5	0	14
Department of State Development (former SA Government department)	1	3	6	0	10
Department of the Premier and Cabinet	0	1	1	0	2
Department of Treasury and Finance	0	5	5	0	11
SA Country Fire Service	2	1	0	0	3
South Australian Police	0	1	0	0	1
Other	3	5	6	1	14
Total	**26**	**51**	**67**	**1**	**145**

State – Local Government Engagement Survey results

| Local Government Region (LGA)	Position				
	Executive/senior management	Middle management	Policy/planning/ project officer	Other	Total
Central Local Gov. Region	8	9	2	0	19
Eyre Peninsula	6	3	1	0	10
Metropolitan	21	38	19	0	78
Murray Mallee	5	5	1	0	11
SA Local Government Association	2	2	3	0	7
Regional Local Government Association	2	2	2	0	6
Outback	1	0	0	0	1
South East	8	3	2	0	13
Southern and Hills	4	7	3	0	14
Not reported	0	0	0	1	1
Total	57	69	33	1	160

Barriers to engagement and collaboration

Respondents were asked to select their top five barriers (from 14 choices) to engaging/ engaging more often with the other government sector.

- The most frequently nominated barrier to engagement and collaboration for both State Government and Local government was not knowing who to contact. The proportion of Local government respondents citing this as a barrier (63%) was significantly higher than for State Government respondents (45%), suggesting that this is a greater issue for Local government employees.

- The second most frequently cited barrier to engagement, also more so by Local government respondents (61%) compared with State Government respondents (39%), was a perceived lack of shared priorities.

- Barriers nominated more frequently by State Government compared with Local government respondents were insufficient resources for engagement (44% of State Government respondents; 31% of Local government respondents), and fear that engagement will produce undeliverable expectations (32% of State Government respondents; 18% of Local government respondents).

- State Government respondents were much more likely to claim that they had not found any barriers to engagement than were Local government respondents (23% versus 7%).

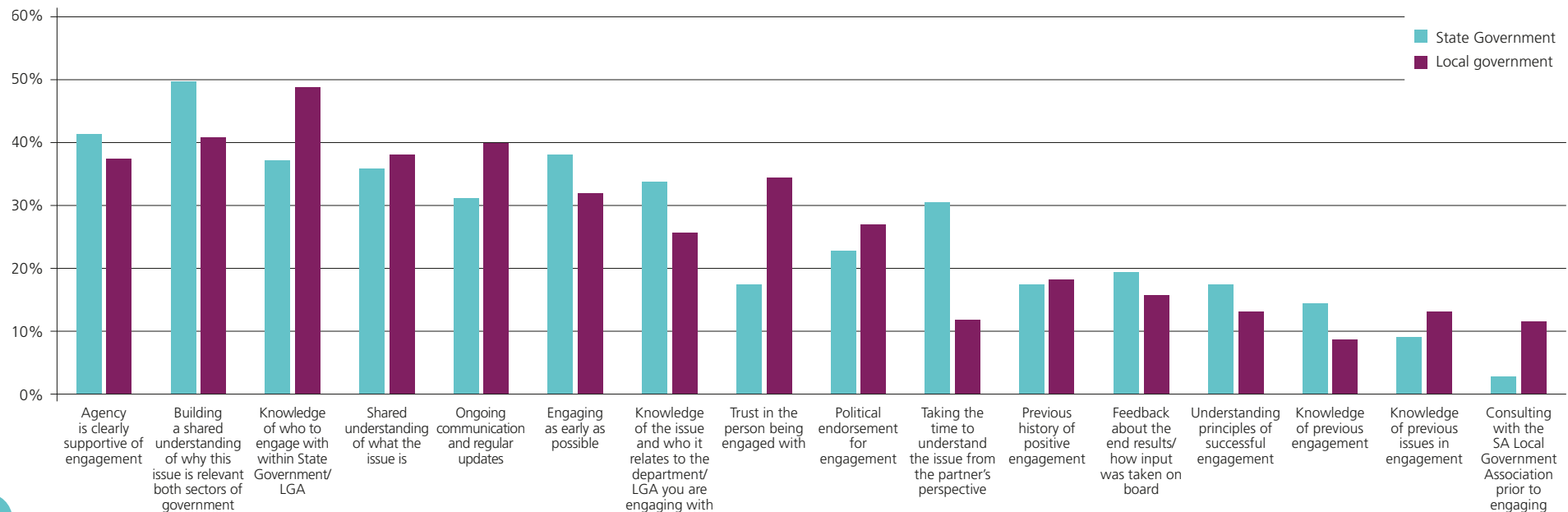**Barriers to successful engagement**
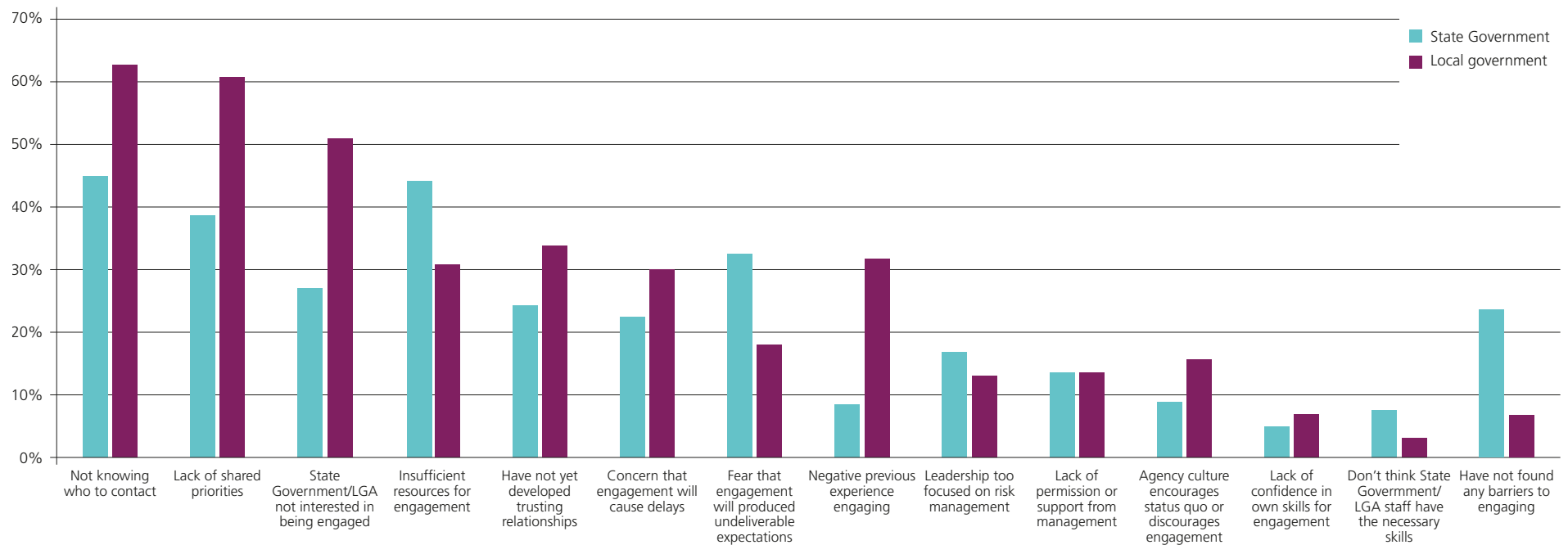
Important factors for successful engagement and collaboration

Respondents were asked to select their top five factors (from 16 choices) for successful engagement with the other sector of government:

- For State Government respondents, the most frequently cited factor was building a shared understanding of why the issue is relevant to both tiers of government (50% of respondents). For Local government respondents, the most commonly cited important factor was knowledge of who to engage with within State Government (49% of respondents).

- Local government respondents were significantly more likely to nominate having trust in the person being engaged as being an important factor to successful engagement (34% versus 17%).

- State Government respondents were much more likely to view taking the time to understand the issue from their partner's perspective as an important factor (30% versus 12%).

- Other factors important to both State and Local government respondents include having an agency which is clearly supportive of engagement (41% of State Government respondents; 36% of Local government respondents), and having a shared understanding of what the issue is (36% of State Government respondents; 38% of Local government respondents).

**Important factors for early engagement**

Previous engagement experiences

Successful engagement

- When asked if they had ever had a very successful experience in engaging with the other sector of government, State Government staff were more likely to report a successful experience with 74% of respondents answering yes compared to 66% of Local government staff.
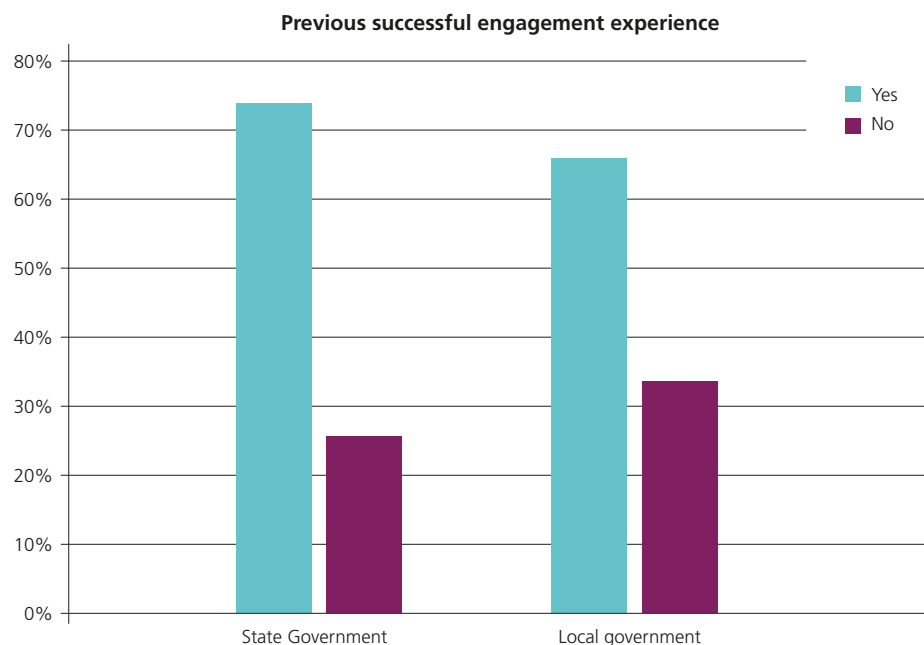
Previous successful engagement experience

Respondents who answered yes to this question were then asked to briefly explain why they thought the experience was successful and what the critical success factors were. Both sectors had similar answers regarding the important factors for successful engagement. Shared goals was the top factor identified with strong interpersonal relationships also being identified by both sectors.

1 **Shared agenda, goals and vision:** Both sectors of government felt that having a shared agenda, shared goals, and a common purpose were the most important factors to successful engagement.

   Where we have shared vision and outcomes for our community, it has been quite simple to collaborate. – State Government staff member

   The political pressures to deliver were the same for both government sectors i.e. the citizens were being impacted by both parties so it was in our shared interests to produce a successful outcome. – State Government staff member

   Because we both wanted the same outcomes, we both engaged with best practice approach and stuck together for the length of the project. – Local government staff member

2 **Relationships:** Strong relationships were identified by both sectors as critical to successful engagement. Being respectful, developing trust, openness, transparency and genuineness were cited as important behaviours in fostering strong relationships. Local government staff, in particular, indicated that it was important for them to be respected, valued and listened to and acknowledged as critical to the wellbeing of their communities.

   In short – respect. Council's opinion is valued, listened to and acted upon whenever possible. As such the respect is mutual. – Local government staff member

   Officers were considerate of Local government's role being the closest to the community it serves. – Local government staff member

   Open conversation, equal status of partnership, understanding of mutual benefit of proposal, ongoing communication and timely completion of tasks and keeping to timelines. – State Government staff member

Previous engagement experiences

3   **Clear roles, responsibilities and governance:** Both sectors recognised the value of establishing a good governance structure with clear roles and responsibilities when undertaking a project together.

There is shared understanding of the outcomes looking to be achieved and supportive governance in place for the engagement to be successful. A formal agreement was in place which enabled both parties to dedicate attention to the issue.
– State Government staff member

Port Pirie TenbyTen Project-SA Health, EPA, Council and Nyrstar all worked together for common community benefit, prepared common strategy and each agency reported each quarter against this strategy. – Local government staff member

4   **Time and resources:** Having the time and resources to undertake meaningful and timely engagement with Local government ranked highly as important from State Government's perspective.

We were given the resources to go and thoroughly float a concept with Local government representatives and they appreciated the engagement and it built knowledge and understanding so was all around a positive experience.
– State Government staff member

Previous engagement experiences

Unsuccessful engagement

- When asked whether they had ever had a poor experience or a failed attempt to engage with the other sector of government, Local government respondents were significantly more likely to report having had an unsuccessful experience with 66% of Local government respondents answering yes compared to 52% of State Government staff.
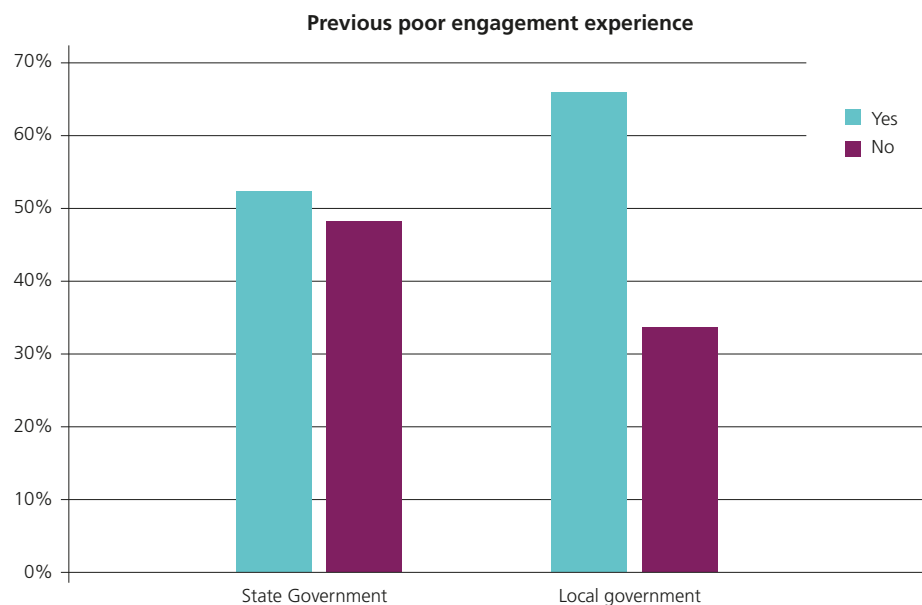
Previous poor engagement experience

Respondents who answered yes to this question were then asked to briefly explain why they thought the engagement had not been successful.

State Government specific

1 **Differing priorities:** The top reason cited by State Government for failure was differing priorities and/or Local government did not agree that it was a priority.

 Often my organisation is concerned with the short term and Local government as often the inheritor of what is delivered is concerned with the long time, especially in regard to costs. – State Government staff member

 Local government failed to engage in consultation because the representative did not consider the policies were relevant to that council. – State Government staff member

2 **Lack of agreement regarding roles and responsibilities:** Another main reason cited by State Government for poor experiences was that that both State and Local government did not agree upon or that there was uncertainty regarding the roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of the two sectors of government. This was both with legislated and non-legislated issues.

 …unable to develop a shared sense of accountability for the problem (seen in the community as a State Government problem to solve). – State government staff member

 There was reluctance from the local council to provide support, such as by enforcement of a regulation. I presume this was because of limited resources and perhaps a belief that it should not be their responsibility to enforce. Sometimes there is confusion over which level of government is responsible for implementing public health strategies. – State Government staff member

Previous engagement experiences

3   **Lack of time and resources** to undertake proper engagement, recognition that often State Government does not engage early enough and not knowing who to engage also featured as reasons for failed attempts.

With more time to identify right people to engage and build relationship I am confident we would find common ground and purpose. Timing of recent engagement did not allow this for the purpose of that point in time engagement. – State Government staff member

Some past experiences have shown that too many decisions made prior to engaging upsets the relationship as they feel that they are just being used to endorse a decision that is already made. – State Government staff member

Local Government specific

1   **Lack of respect:** The biggest reason for poor experience/failed attempts identified by Local government was that State Government were not respectful of Local government and were arrogant in the way they dealt with Local government.

State Government representative was belittling to council and was not willing to see things from both sides. – Local government staff member

They seem to treat Local government as the poor cousin and that they know that we want rather than hearing our concerns and issues. – Local government staff member

State Government did not follow through. They commenced an engagement and involved people and then did not continue. – Local government staff member

2   **Don't understand Local government:** Other significant reason provided by Local government for failure was that State Government did not understand Local government including their work and processes and did not always understand the impacts their decisions have on Local government.

Low levels of understanding by State Government staff about the matters affecting Local government and how Local government works. – Local government staff member

Delays from State Government and then unrealistic timeframes put on Local government that don't enable consultation at council meetings due to meeting cycles or place consultation periods over Christmas breaks! – Local government staff member

3   **Slow response and turn-around time:** Nine respondents commented that State Government had very slow response times and turn-around times, often resulting in engagement not occurring in a timely matter.

Sometimes State Government takes too long to answer a question or get back to you but expect immediate answers from Local government. – Local government staff member

…it takes so long that it either becomes very frustrating or the opportunity is lost. – Local government staff member

Previous engagement experiences

Missed engagement opportunities

- Respondents were asked whether they had ever had an opportunity or need to engage with the other sector of government but did not do so. 26.5% of State Government respondents and 28.5% of Local government respondents stated they had missed or passed up opportunities to engage.

Respondents who answered yes to this question were then asked to briefly explain why they did not collaborate.

Lack of time and resources or running out of time to engage was identified by both sectors to be a significant reason for not engaging. This was a particularly significant issue for State Government with nearly half of State Government respondents indicating that this prevented them from engagement.

We need to engage now, but other project work and planning priorities are preventing that happening. – State Government staff member

Purely due to time/capacity limitations due to the diverseness of my role/portfolio. While there may be opportunities to attend forums and workshops or collaborative partnerships sometimes I just can't stretch my schedule to attend especially if held in Adelaide. – Local government staff member

Previous poor experiences was cited by Local government as a very significant reason why they didn't engage.

Too hard to wait for an answer based on a colleagues' previous experiences. Lack of interest in the past. – Local government staff member

A view that it would have been a total waste of time based on past experience with that team within that agency. – Local government staff member

Additional challenges for regional council respondents

It should be noted that within the qualitative information gained about previous engagement experiences, staff from regional and rural councils often stated that they felt their location negatively impacted on their ability to engage and collaborate effectively with State Government.

Specific challenges included time, distance and costs associated with travelling to metropolitan based engagement opportunities. Inadequate IT and communications technology also made engagement difficult for some councils.

Lack of human resources was also identified as smaller regional councils have far fewer staff, with the limited number of staff taking on a large and varied range of portfolios. Staff felt frustrated when this fact was not recognised by State Government. A number of councils mentioned that they felt less valued by State Government due to their size.

Previous engagement experiences

Frequency of engagement

- The proportion of State Government respondents who had never engaged with Local government was almost twice as high (12.1% versus 6.5%) as it was for Local government respondents.

    > At the same time, the proportion of State Government respondents who reported engaging very often was significantly higher (10.6% versus 6.5%).

    > For both groups, most respondents reported their engagement frequency as 'sometimes' engaging with their counterparts (30.5% for State Government respondents, 40.5% for Local government respondents).

Frequency of engagement


Frequency of initiation when engaging
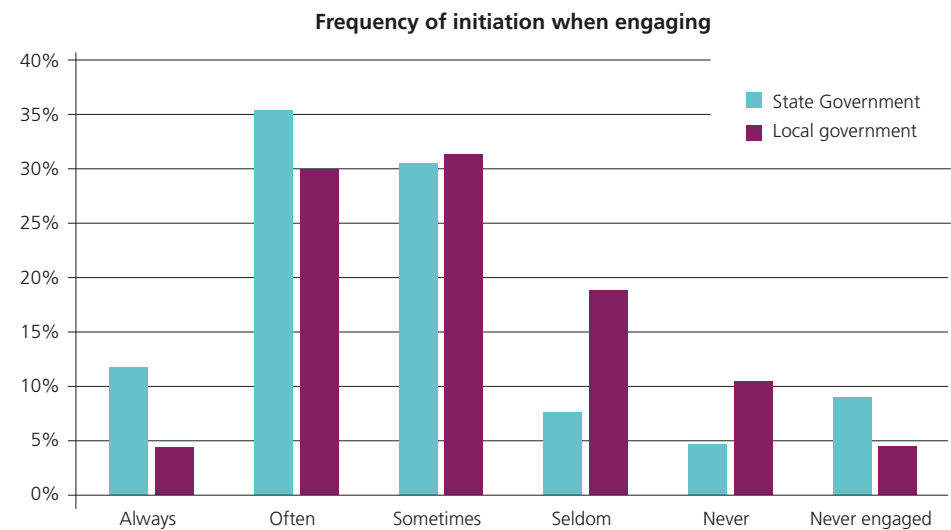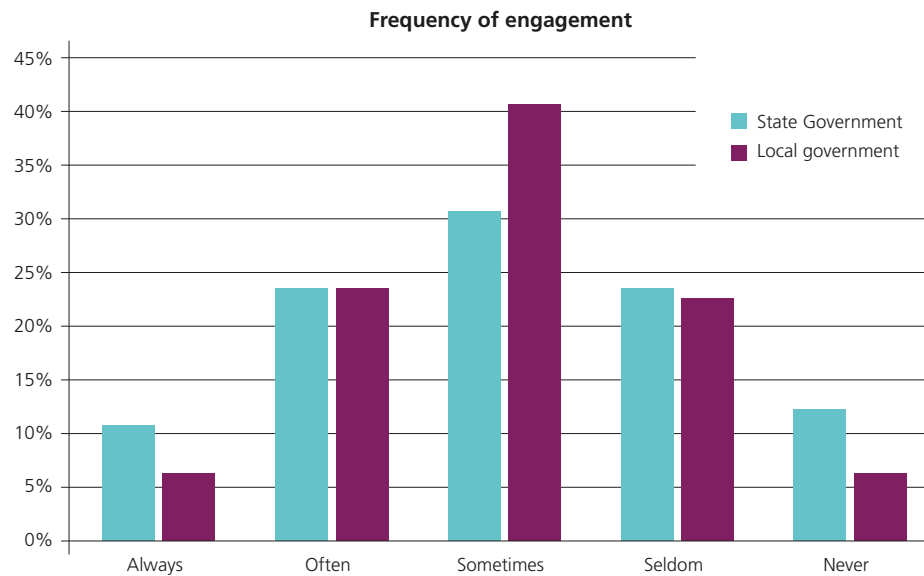
Nature of the Engagement

Primary purpose for engagement

Respondents were asked what their primary purpose was for engaging with the other sector.

- The main reason for engagement among State Government respondents was to deliver programs and services in the community (47%). The next most important purpose was the development of agency/government policy (14%).

- The most common reasons for engagement among Local government respondents were for the delivery of programs and services in the community (29%) and to acquire funding or grants (25%).

Primary purpose for engagement
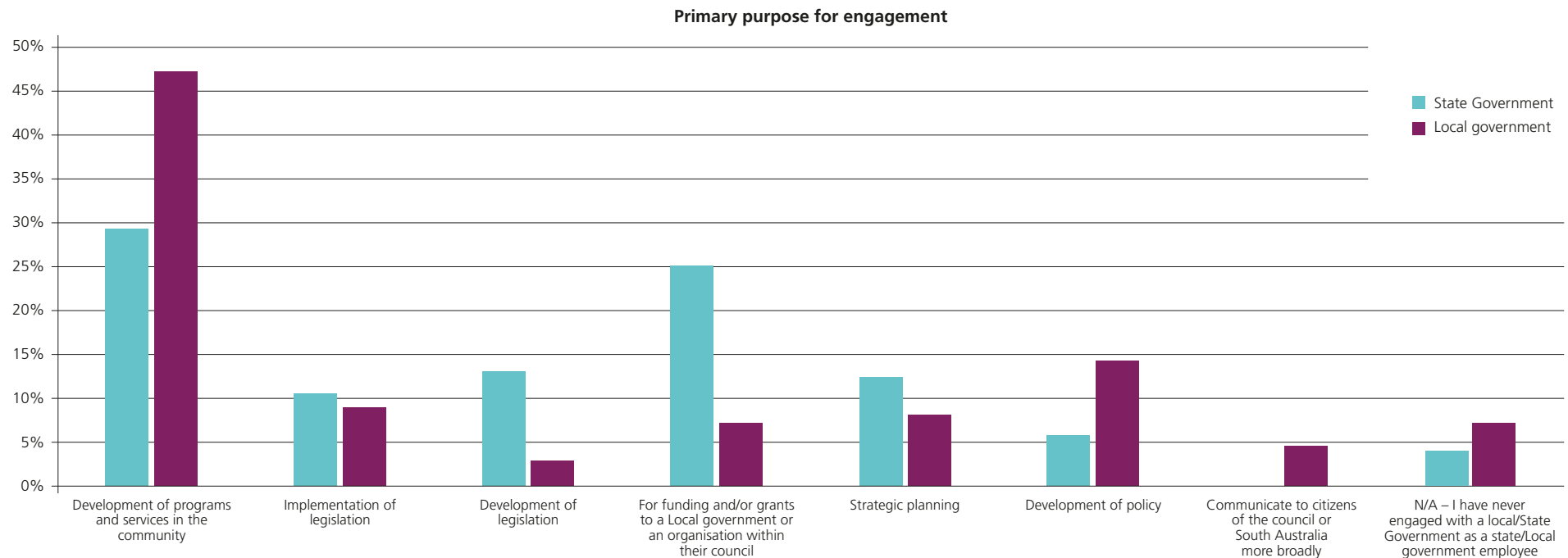
Nature of the Engagement

Why respondents engaged with the other government sector

- The most common reason for engaging cited by both State Government and Local government respondents was to obtain specific advice on an issue (63% of State Government respondents and 71% of Local government respondents).

- Only a small percentage of respondents said they had not engaged with the other.

- Local government respondents were significantly more likely to claim that their reason for engaging was to inform a funding and/or grants decision (56% versus 26%).

- State Government respondents were moderately more likely to claim that their reason for engaging was to help set priorities for their work (46% versus 29%).

- State Government respondents were relatively likely to claim that a principle reason for engaging was to gain insights on their local communities (51%) or to reach Local governments' residents to communicate something to them (38%).

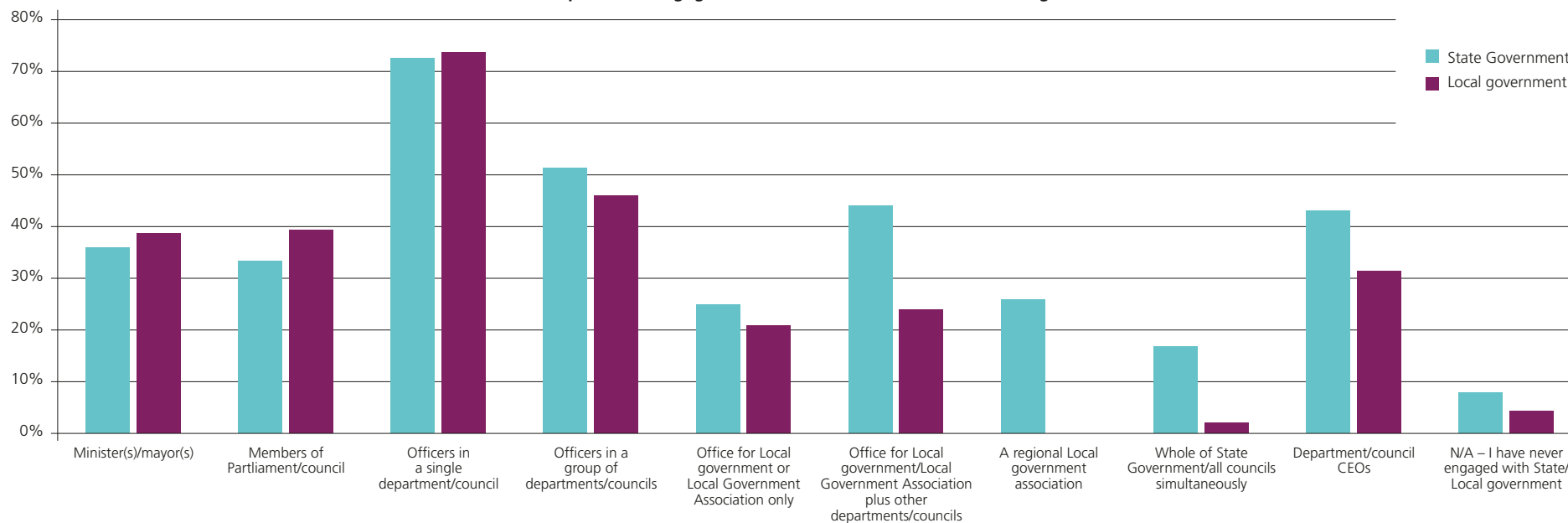**Why respondents engaged with State Government/Local government**
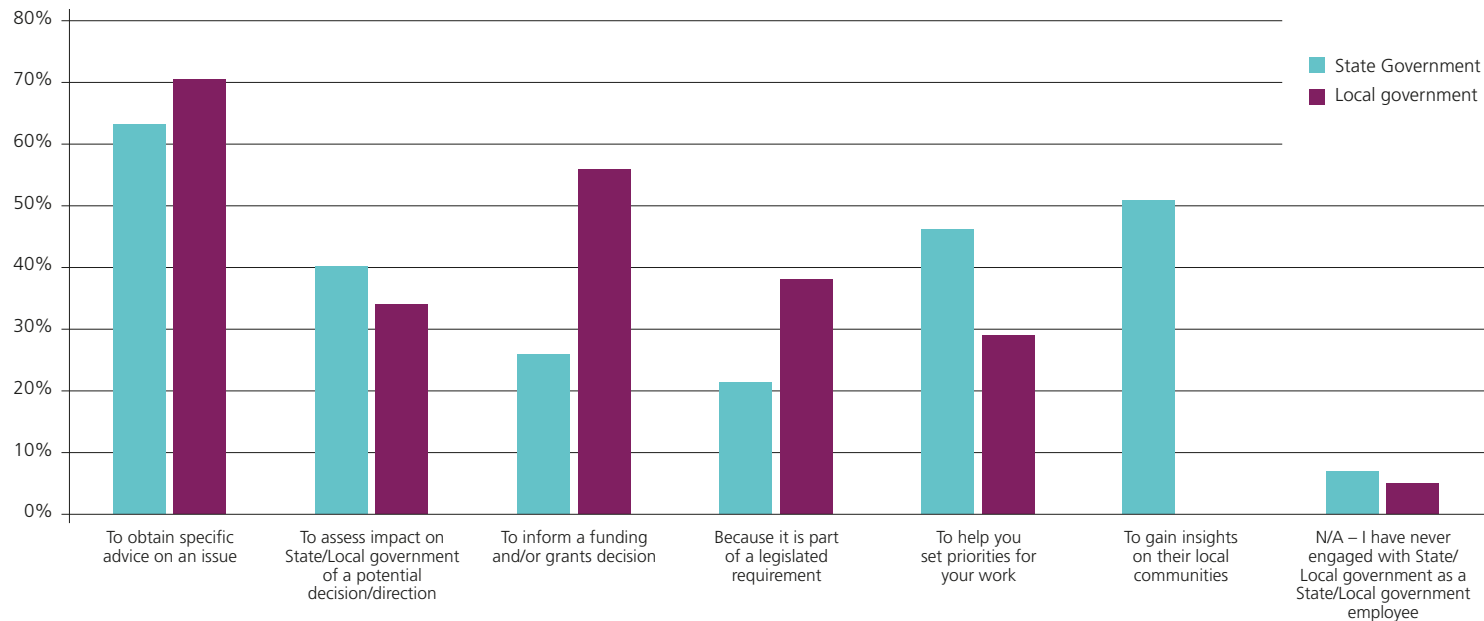
Nature of the Engagement

Who respondents engage with in State Government and Local government

- The most common individual or body individuals from both State Government and Local government reported engaging with was officers in a single department/council.

- State Government respondents were significantly more likely to report engaging with the Local Government Association or Office for Local Government than were Local government respondents. They were also more likely to report engaging with council CEOs than Local government respondents were with State Government chief executives.

- When asked how they would find out who to engage with, the most common responses from both State Government and Local government respondents—comprising over 85% of all responses together—included:
  - > colleagues
  - > contacts from the other level of government
  - > searching for information online—either through the website of the Local Government Association or the relevant department/council website
  - > the Local Government Association
  - > front desk/general enquiries number of the relevant council/department.

- Alternative less common responses included attempting to contact a manager, relying on one's own documented contacts list, and contacting a Regional Development Association (RDA).

**Who respondents engaged with in State Government and Local government**

Nature of the Engagement

How respondents engage with State and Local government

- The most common way respondents from both State and Local government reported engaging with their counterparts was by contacting someone they knew in the relevant department/council.

- State Government respondents were more likely to write to a council CEO or staff member, or contact the LGA, while Local government respondents were more likely to contact the front portal of the relevant department, write to a minister or contact the Office for Local Government.
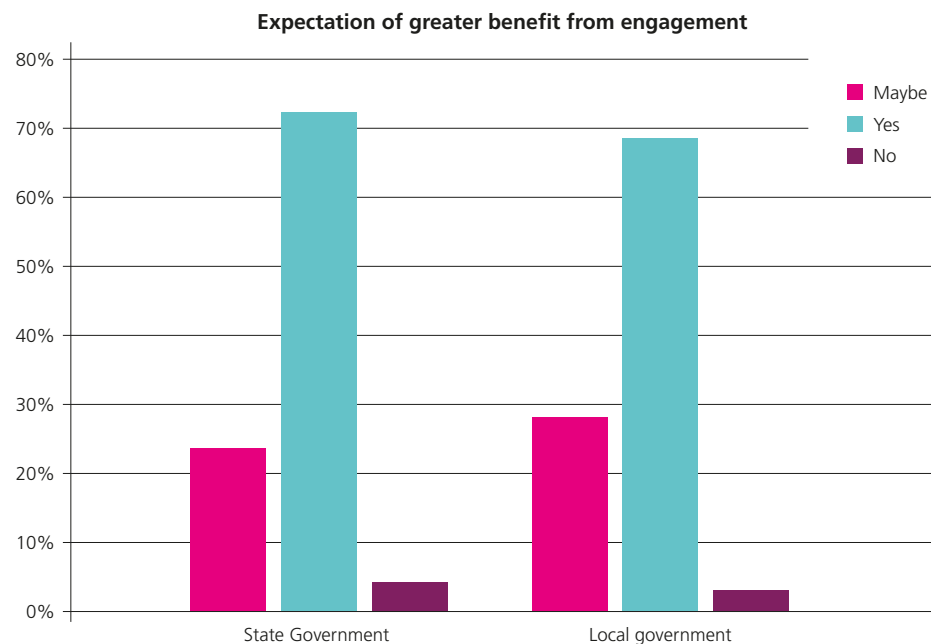
How respondents engaged with State/Local government

Legend:
- State Government
- Local government
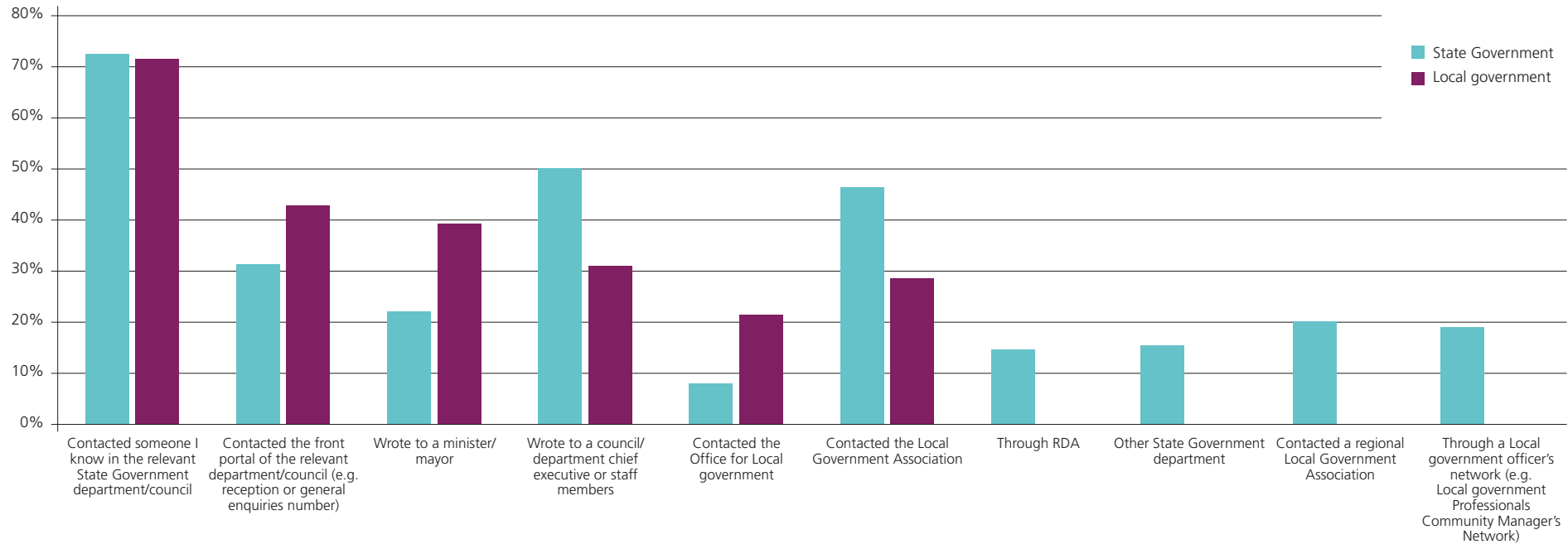
Nature of the Engagement

Benefits from greater engagement

- Around 70% of both State and Local government respondents considered there to be potential benefit in greater engagement between the sectors. Only 4% of State Government, and 3% of Local government respondents felt that there was no potential benefit to be realised.

Expectation of greater benefit from engagement

- When asked what they saw to be the benefits from greater engagement, both State and Local government employees responded with similar themes. These were:
  - > recognise common priorities/develop shared priorities
  - > help employees working at the different levels to better understand the context of the other
  - > share resources (this was particularly the case for Local government respondents who reported more shortages in resources and skills)
  - > improve the outcomes of programs (especially in public health) where coordination across the different levels of government is essential.

Nature of the Engagement

Engagement with the Office of Local Government and the Local Government Association

- State Government respondents were significantly less likely to have had an interaction with the Office of Local Government (30.8% versus 62.4% for Local government respondents).

- The same is true for the Local Government Association, with 93% of Local government respondents having had contact, while only 63% of State Government respondents claimed that they had had contact with the Local Government Association.
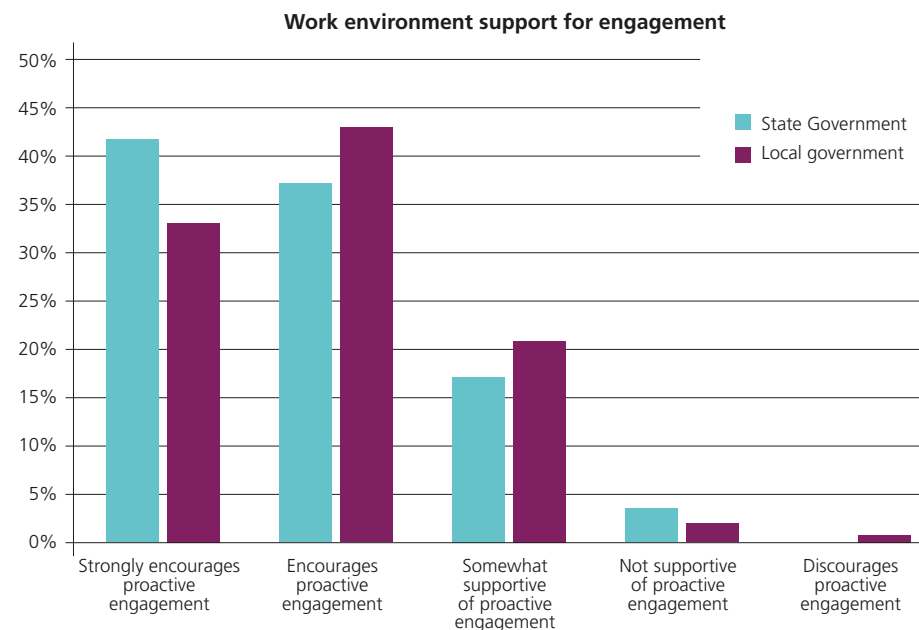
Culture, Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours

Supportive work environment

Permission to engage

- Most respondents from both State and Local government cited that they did not need permission to engage with their counterparts at the other level of government (62% of State Government respondents and 65% of Local government respondents).

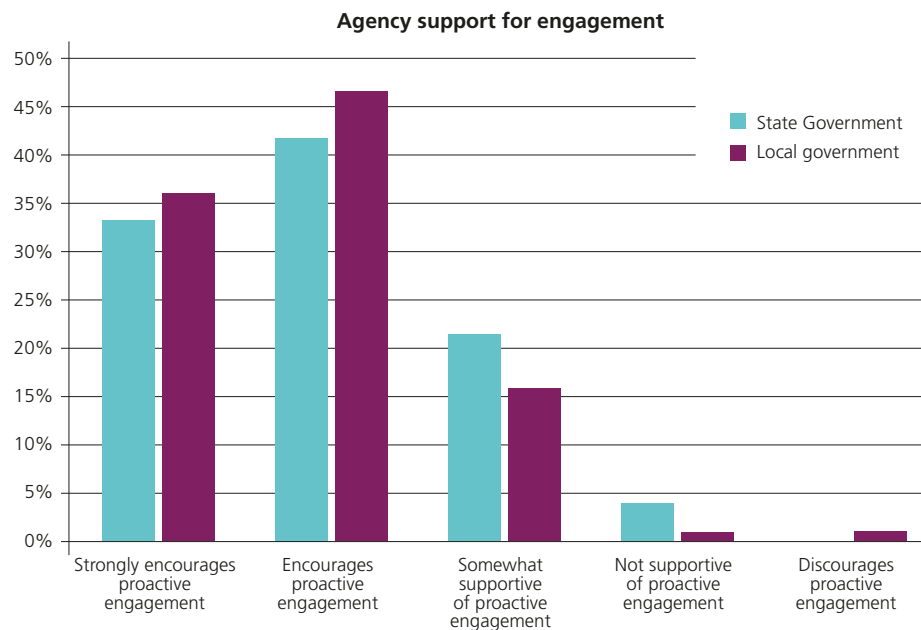### Supportive work environment (immediate team)

- Most State Government respondents (79%) claimed that their work environments either encouraged, or strongly encouraged proactive agreement with Local government

- Only 4% of State Government respondents claimed that their work environment was not supportive of proactive engagement with Local government, while the remaining 17% claimed their work environment was only somewhat supportive.

- Local government respondents (76%) also indicated similar levels of support from their workplace to engage with the State Government sector.

- Only 3% claimed that their work environment discouraged, or was not supportive of engagement, with the remaining 21% claiming that their work environment was somewhat supportive of proactive engagement with State Government.

Work environment support for engagement

Culture, Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours

Supportive work environment (broader council/government agency)

- The results for agency support for engagement were similar to those for work environment support. A majority for both State Government (75%) and Local government (82%) claimed that their agencies either encouraged or strongly encouraged engagement.

- Only 4% of State Government, and 2% of Local government respondents indicated that their agencies either discouraged or were not supportive of engagement with their counterparts.

- The remaining 11% of State Government and 16% of Local government respondents claimed that their workplaces were only somewhat supportive.

Agency support for engagement

Legend:
- State Government
- Local government

X-axis categories: Strongly encourages proactive engagement | Encourages proactive engagement | Somewhat supportive of proactive engagement | Not supportive of proactive engagement | Discourages proactive engagement

Culture, Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours

Critical skills

Respondents were asked to choose what they saw as the top three most critical behaviours and skills to enable collaboration.

- The skills most commonly cited by both State Government and Local government respondents as being critical to successful engagement were interpersonal skills to build and maintain relationships (60% of State Government, and 53% of Local government respondents).

- State Government respondents were more likely to cite being inclusive (40% versus 24%), while Local government respondents were more likely to cite diplomacy and negotiation skills (29% versus 20%).

- The least commonly cited skills included reflective practice, having appropriate technical skills, and being creative and relevant (less than 10% of respondents for each).

Top three skills and behaviours considered critical to collaboration
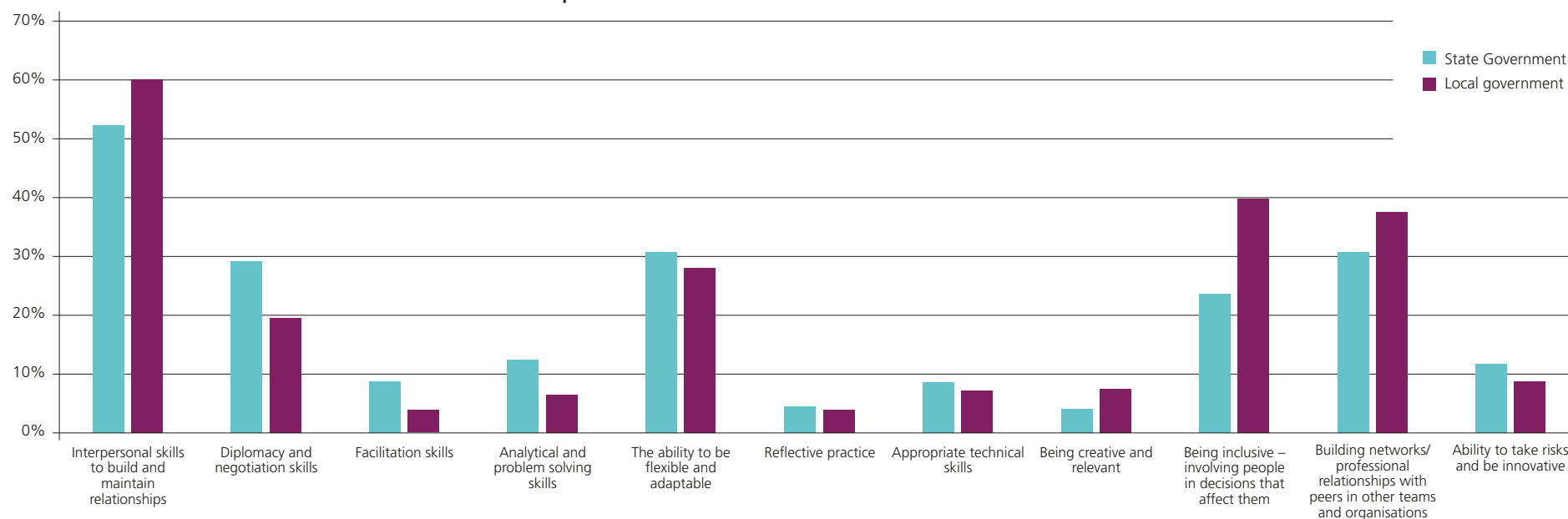
Suggestions for change

- Respondents from both State and Local government were asked to provide any 'small practical changes or big ideas' that would help them engage more effectively with State/Local government.

- The suggestions fell into four areas, providing ideas that would:

  > Ensure greater availability of information intended to speed up the engagement process. These included a cross-government contacts directory, a newsletter presenting key organisational changes, and greater emphasis on ensuring publicly available contact information was kept up to date.

  > Improve the quality and quantity of professional connections between the two bodies of government. These included networking events, cross-government professional development workshops, and frequently emphasising the importance of building relationships first to smooth the path for later engagement.

  > Introduce new structures to aid in cross-government engagement, including liaison officers embedded in State and Local government bodies, and scoping of ways to reduce the distance between decision makers and customers.

  > Influence perceived cultural barriers to engagement. Here attention was drawn to a lack of understanding and recognition of the value of the work done by the alternate body of government, the need to overcome the 'Us vs Them' culture, and a tendency to see engagement as a necessary barrier rather than an activity indispensable for maximising value to the community.

For more information

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