

OFFICIAL

During this Council's term of government, we have faced many challenges.

As a group of first-time Councillors, it has been a huge learning curve.

This is why our first Mayor Cr Chris Raeburn asked the minister to appoint a monitor.

Ms Janet Dore was appointed to provide us with support and education to do our job.

We needed to comprehend our roles as councillors, a shift from being community activists to becoming advocates for the community, to understand how to work with Council Officers and to ensure an unwavering pursuit of good governance.

During the first year of our term, we achieved many wonderful outcomes and I want to take the opportunity to touch on some of these.

- A four-year Council Plan with community at the heart
- Best practice Deliberative Engagement with community
- Initiation of a Streetscape Revitalisation project across the municipality
- Signing the MoU with the Taungurung Land and Waters Council
- Opening the Rockies Bridge over the Seven Creeks
- Progressing the Nagambie foreshore project
- The Violet Town Landfill Rehabilitation
- Flying the Rainbow Flag for IHDAHOBIT Day

But – as I'm sure many understand – the true test of a team is when things get tough.

And, as a Council we have been challenged by many issues.

We've grappled with how to manage a tight budget with many competing priorities.

We've worked to understand when it is appropriate for community to have input into a decision and when it is not.

We've learnt to listen to community feedback, even if it is not what we want to hear, and we've learnt to listen to stakeholder feedback even when it may not be how the community wants us to proceed.

We've examined all the services we provide as a council and made tough choices to discontinue certain activities and services, so we are better aligned with our core business and corporate responsibilities.

Despite the many challenges, we were still making many good decisions to ensure the long-term sustainability of the Shire and achieve our Council Plan.

However, our greatest challenge remained the one of councillors comprehending and understanding their role, the role of the CEO and Council Officers and the importance of governance and following the Local Government Act 2020 and our policies, plans, charters and codes we adopted and signed up to.

These challenges are where we really started to become undone.

We were experiencing multiple code of conduct breaches and regular unacceptable behaviour towards each other, the CEO, and the Council Officers.

OFFICIAL

It has been awful.

A lack of trust between Councillors, a lack of trust between Councillors and officers. Nobody wanted to come to work on Tuesdays when we were all in the Chamber.

I have almost resigned many times. It is only because of my continued support network that I have stayed in the position.

It is all our responsibilities to understand and uphold the Local Government Act and the many policies, plans, charters, and strategies that are a part of Strathbogie Shire Council.

The most important of these, I believe, is the Strathbogie Shire Councillor Code of Conduct. It is a document which has very clear standards of conduct, as are prescribed under the Local Government Act.

The failure to uphold these standards of conducts led to a disrespectful and unsafe workplace.

After following available avenues through the Code of Conduct processes, I asked the Minister for Local Government for help because the Strathbogie Shire Council Chamber was not a safe workplace.

People did not feel they could speak up for fear of retribution. Officers' advice was not being respected, listened to, or followed.

I knew this was unacceptable.

We had been here before, prior to Ms Janet Dore's appointment, and in my opinion, there was insufficient change and commitment from Councillors in understanding their roles and committing to the standards of behaviour we had signed up to.

The Minister appointed Municipal Monitor Peter Stevenson with clear terms of reference to see if we had learnt from Municipal Monitor Janet Dore and were performing our roles as expected and legislated.

Municipal Monitor Peter Stevenson's report clearly states that we were not doing so.

Personally, I am incredibly proud of today's decision by the Minister.

I know you might ask why? We were all just suspended.

Well, I am proud because of my advocacy in achieving this decision which has been strong and brave.

Sitting back and doing nothing or in fact resigning would have been much easier, but I am not willing to compromise on workplace safety.

I am committed to creating a respectful decision-making environment and if that means we need to lose our democratically elected members in order to achieve this, I am okay with that.

Everyone deserves better. Our community deserves better. Our CEO deserves better. Strathbogie Shire Council Officers deserve better. My fellow Councillors deserve better.

We may be elected by the people, but we must be committed to performing our governing

OFFICIAL

roles with respect, courtesy, and kindness.

We must be committed to learning our roles and understanding the complexity of Local Government.

Local Government is not like State or Federal Government. We don't work with a government and an opposition.

We are all, Councillors, the CEO and Officers, part of the one team working to achieve the Council Plan as created in consultation with the community we are here to serve.

Strathbogie Shire is not alone in its challenges. As a sector Local Government is struggling right across the State and the Country.

There is unfortunately a sense of entitlement that some elected members bring to the role which simply doesn't suit a modern workplace.

Monitors have been appointed to more than 10 Victorian Councils.

How many more are struggling through the same issues at Strathbogie, but not speaking up.

So, while you may see the personal implications for me as being negative. I see them as positive.

I am a young female Mayor who's not willing to put up with a disrespectful and unsafe workplace.

I am brave enough to say that poor behaviour is not okay and to do something about it.

I hope you can see this outcome as positive, not negative.

I am grateful for the support of my colleagues through this.

I'm not sure what's next – but my dedication to this community will not change.

- **Laura Binks**