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Local Government Awareness of Child Safe Standards

Comparison Report 2022-2024

August 2024





Acknowledgement of Country

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More information

Office of Local Government

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Executive Summary

This report provides a comparison of two surveys conducted by the Office of Local Government (OLG) with councils across NSW, firstly in September 2022 and repeated in April 2024. Councils were asked to rate their progress in embedding the 10 Child Safe Standards (the Standards) adopted by the NSW Government into organisational culture and policies.

The Standards were created as a result of the Royal Commission into Institutionalised Violence Against Children and are intended to increase the safety of children. Children interact with councils in NSW through direct services such as child care centres, outside school hours programs, libraries, swimming pools and indirectly through encounters with staff and services of a broad nature. Councils also employ young people in their services and often provide valuable training through cadetships and apprenticeships.

Across the two surveys OLG has received feedback from 99 of our state's 128 councils. Councils have also been engaged through the peer led Local Government Child Safe Forum, held annually in September, through Joint Organisations and staff working groups, as well as direct enquiries.

The findings show that awareness of the Standards has increased across the sector and many councils are actively working on culture change initiatives. Awareness of the Standards has increased from 77% in 2022 to 92% in 2024.

The survey was open to all staff and elected members to complete, with no restriction on participation numbers per organisation in order to measure awareness at different levels. The survey was completed by 205 participants in 2022 and 101 in 2024. Respondents were asked to identify their role within councils. The majority of participants, 53% in 2022 and 62% in 2024, identified themselves as being supervisors/team leaders/managers in comparison to employees, 32% in 2022 and 22% in 2024, and executives, 13.5% in 2022 and 16% in 2024.

Over the past two years there has been an increase in awareness of training being received by council staff, from 49.5% in 2022 to 64.3% in 2024. The survey asks participants how their council is addressing *Standard 10: Policies and procedures document how the organisation is child safe*. Results demonstrate an increase in awareness of documentation between the 2022 survey when 44% answered yes and the 2024 survey when 77% of respondents answered yes they were aware of documentation.

Participants were asked which of the 10 Standards were the most challenging to implement and why. The themes and incidence are largely consistent across the two survey periods, showing two key challenges namely:

- the scale of culture change (87 responses in 2022 and 34 in 2024),
- effectively engaging children (40 responses in 2022 and 51 in 2024).

Respondents consistently cite the challenges of creating awareness and buy-in across such large, diverse workplaces especially with many workers feeling children are not part of their responsibility at work.

The perception of difficulty in implementing the standards was lower on 9 out of 10 standards. There was a significant increase in the perception of difficulty for *Standard 2: Children participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously* (19.5% in 2022 to 50% in 2024) amongst respondents to that question. How to engage children and young people may be an opportunity for learning and development for council staff.

The survey results show an increase in participants' confidence in their organisation's ability to implement the standards, increasing from 78% agreeing or strongly agreeing in 2022 to 86% in 2024.

Background

The Children's Guardian Act 2019 (the Act) aims to protect children by seeking to embed the Child Safe Standards as the primary framework guiding child safe practice in organisations throughout NSW. The Act requires OLG, as a prescribed agency, to develop and publish a Child Safe Action plan describing how OLG will work to promote awareness of the Standards across local government and how we will build the capability of local government to implement the Standards to ultimately improve the safety of children in NSW.

Prior to preparing a Child Safe Action Plan, OLG conducted engagement across the sector during 2022, to gauge current levels of awareness, preparedness and request feedback on types of support desired.

Two key activities were undertaken:

- OLG attended the Child Safe Standards: A Local Government Perspective Forum hosted by Cumberland City Council on 5 September 2022.
- OLG conducted a survey from 15 September to 7 October 2022 distributed to all councils in NSW.

During April 2024, OLG again asked councils to complete the survey to provide comparative data on their ongoing implementation of the standards.

The survey was based on an instrument developed by the Office of the Children’s Guardian and adapted with permission.

The Survey precis included the following notes to participants:

- The survey asks respondents to identify their council to ensure a representative sample of councils have participated.
- OLG staff may contact councils to ask additional questions or offer support based on responses received.
- Reporting of data from the survey will not identify any council or respondent.
- Unidentified data may be shared with the Office of the Children’s Guardian.

Participants were asked:

- Do you give consent to the Office of Local Government to analyse, publish and use the unidentified, combined data when preparing and evaluating their Child Safe Action Plan?
- Do you give consent to the Office of Local Government to share the unidentified, combined data with the Office of the Children’s Guardian?

All 101 completed surveys answered Yes to these questions.

There was no limit to how many surveys could be completed by each council. Most councils had between 1 and 6 survey responses. A small number of councils had higher participation rates as below:

2022	2024
City of Coffs Harbour N=12	Camden Council N=7
City of Canterbury-Bankstown N=16	City of Sydney Council N=8
City of Canada Bay N=9	Randwick City Council N=9
Tamworth Regional Council N=37	

Note: As the purpose of the survey was to test awareness levels and awareness varies even across each council, data has not been adjusted to account for the larger number of respondents, however where possible the number of councils responding has been reported rather than participants.

Not all participants answered all questions. Multiple answers were allowed to all questions.

Due to rounding, some totals may not equal 100%.

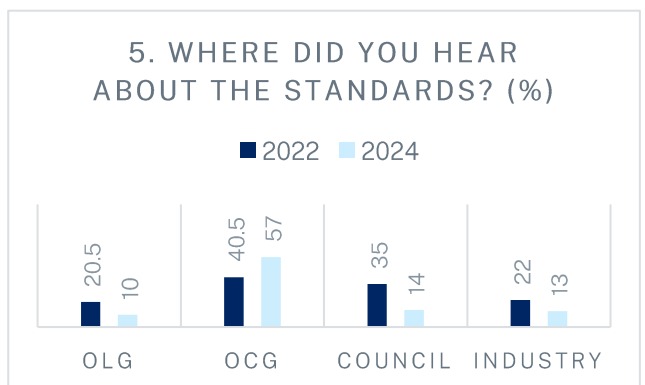
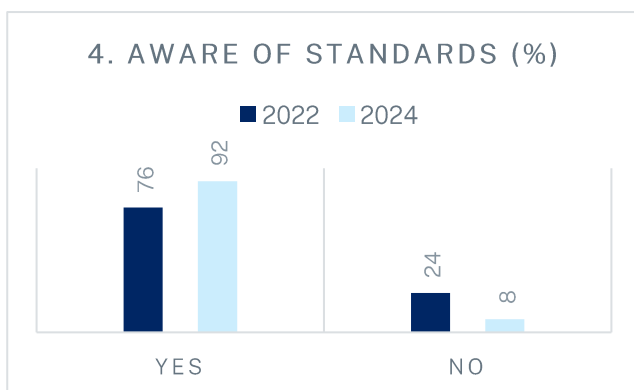
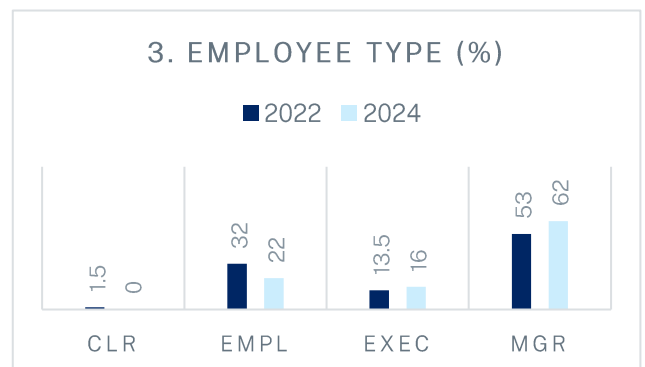
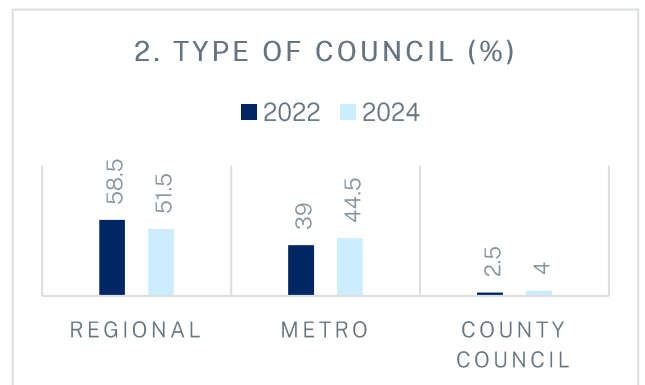
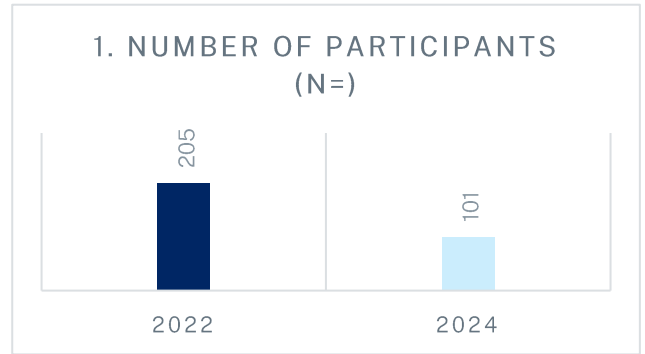
Who were the participants?

In 2022, 205 participants from 83 councils completed the survey, with a close to 60/40% split between Regional (58.5%) and Metropolitan (39%). Half the participants were managers or team leaders (53%) and 76% of respondents had heard about the Standards prior to completing the survey (Figures 1, 2, 3, 4).

In 2024, 101 participants from 64 councils completed the survey, with a slightly higher percentage being from Metropolitan (44%) councils. Awareness of the standards was significantly higher in 2024 (92%) than 2022 (76%). More managers participated in the survey (62%) (Figures 1, 2, 3, 4).

Over the past two years there has been a change in where participants heard about the Standards, with 57% reporting the Office of the Children’s Guardian as the main source of information (Figure 5).

NB Some participants nominated more than one source, and some did not answer.



How are councils implementing the Standards?

Implementation of the Standards and creating cultural change can be measured by rates of training for staff and documentation of the Standards in policies and procedures.

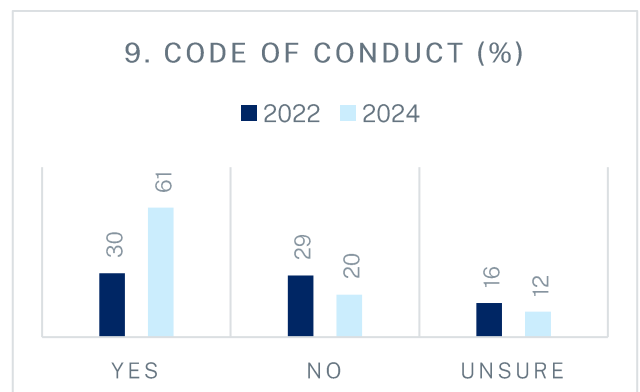
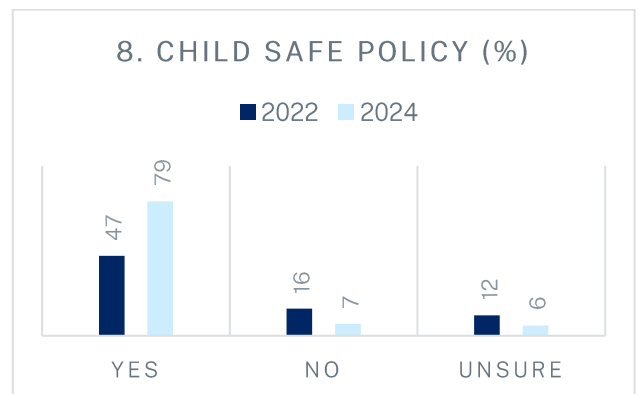
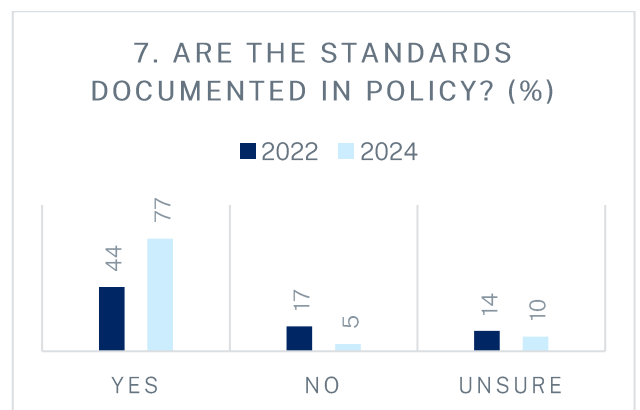
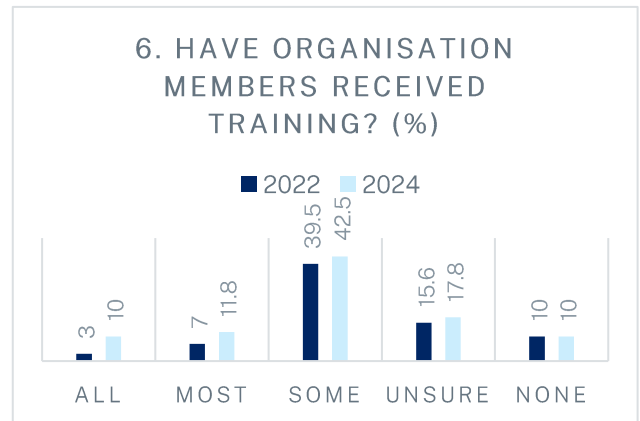
Over the past two years there has been a significant increase in awareness of training being received by council staff, jumping from 49.5% in 2022 to 64.3% in 2024 (Figure 6).

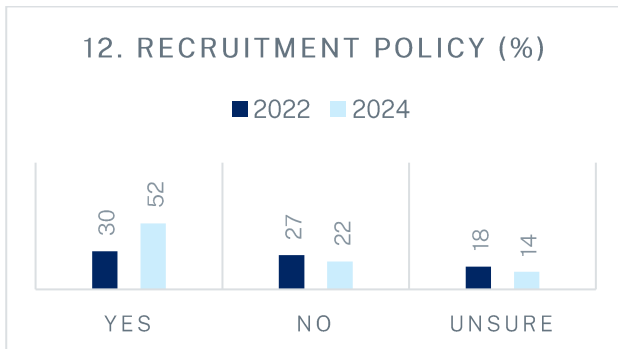
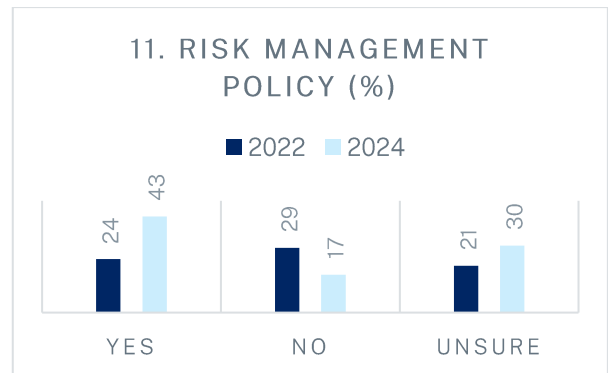
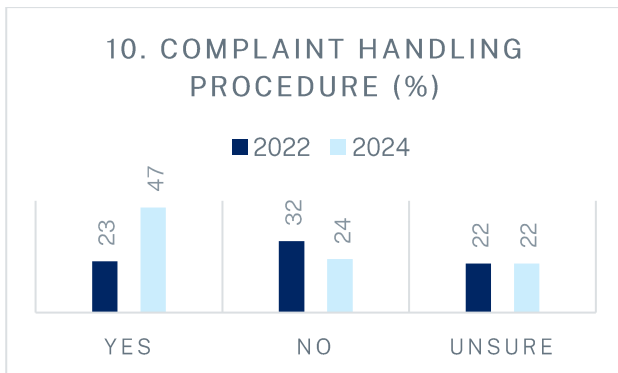
The survey asks participants how their council is addressing *Standard 10: Policies and procedures document how the organisation is child safe*. There was an increase in awareness of documentation between the 2022 survey (44% registered yes) and the 2024 survey where 77% of respondents answered yes (Figure 7).

The survey asked participants if they are aware of their council having the following key policies:

- Child Safe Policy – 32% increase (Figure 8)
- Code of Conduct – 31% increase (Figure 9)
- Complaint Handling Procedure – 24% increase (Figure 10)
- Risk Management Policy – 19% increase (Figure 11)
- Recruitment Policy – 22% increase (Figure 12).

NB not all participants answered these questions.





Key challenges councils are facing in implementation

Participants were asked which of the 10 Child Safe Standards they felt were the most challenging for councils to implement. Participants were able to choose up to 3 Standards although not all did.

The following Standards were identified (Figure 14) as the most challenging to implement:

Standard 2: Children participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously being a challenge for councils to implement (significantly increased from 19.5% in 2022 to 50% in 2024).

Standard 1: Child safety is embedded in organisational leadership, governance and culture (decreased from 42% in 2022, but still the second highest rank at 34% in 2024),

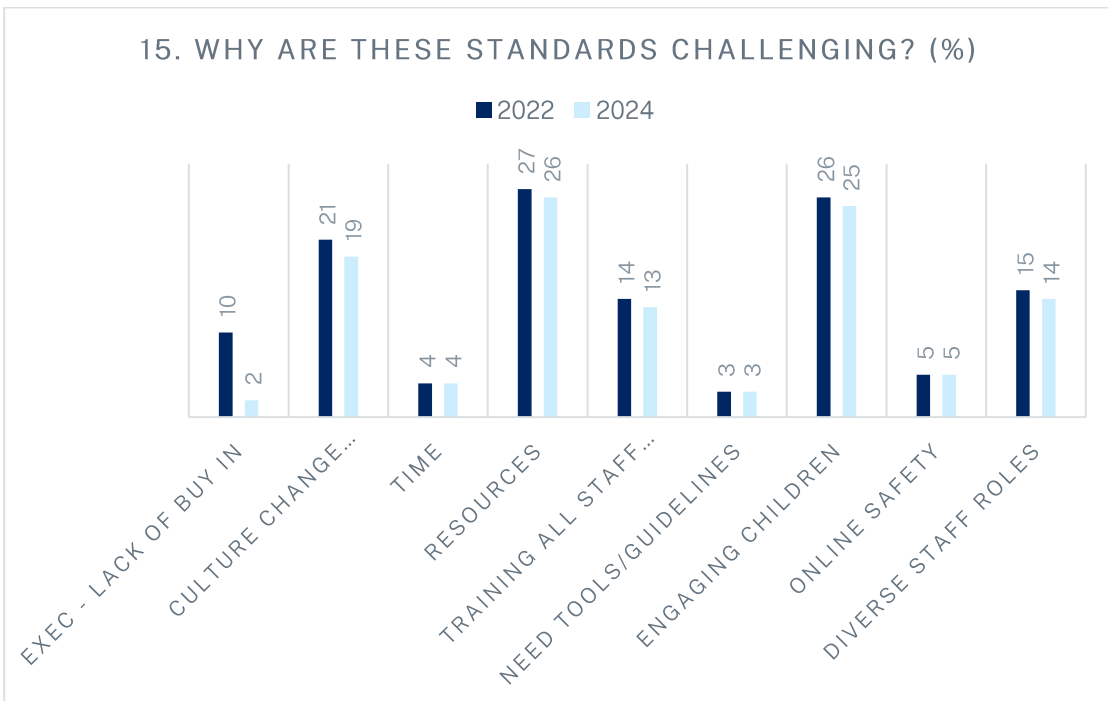
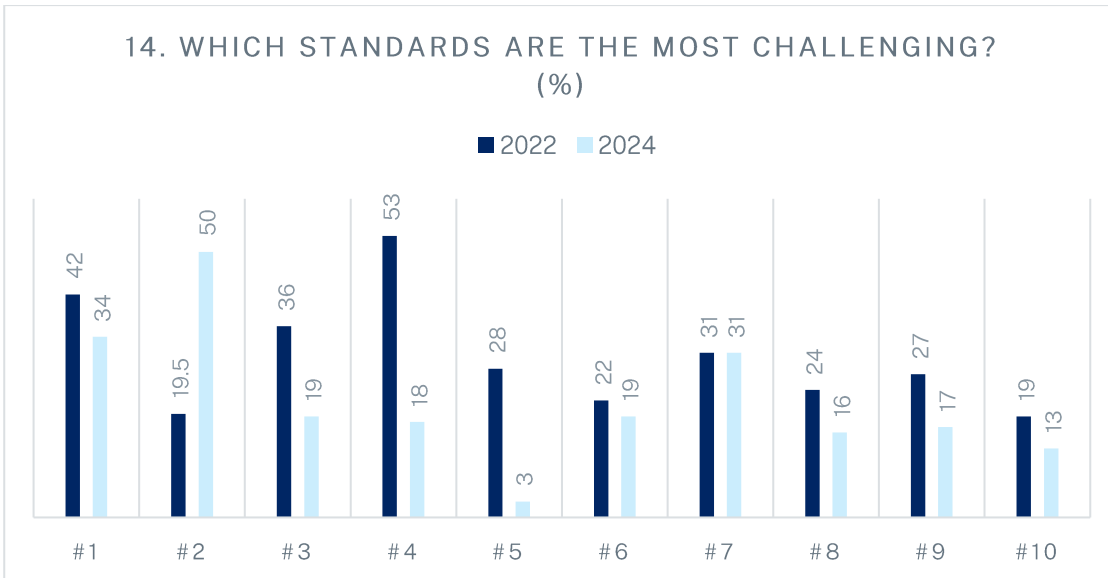
Standard 7: Staff are equipped with the knowledge, skills and awareness to keep children safe through continual education and training (remaining steady at 31% in 2022 and 2024).

Participants were asked why they felt these standards were the most challenging to implement. The themes and incidence are largely consistent across the two survey periods: the scale of culture change, lack of resources and difficulty in engaging children. The only significant change is a decrease in the number of times “Lack of executive leadership buy in” was cited (10%-2%) (Figure 15).

Participants were asked three questions about their confidence in their organisation’s ability to implement the standards. The results across both surveys were largely consistent but with some increase in confidence:

1. I am confident that my organisation can implement the standards (Figure 16)
Strongly agree and agree 2022 = 78%; 2024 = 86%
2. I think that the standards are appropriate/relevant to my organisation (Figure 17)
Strongly agree and agree 2022 = 83%; 2024 = 89%
3. I think that implementing the standards is achievable for my organisation (Figure 18)
Strongly agree and agree 2022 = 80%; 2024 = 89%

The 10 Child Safe Standards (FIGURE 13)
1. Child safety is embedded in organisational leadership, governance and culture
2. Children participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously
3. Families and communities are informed and involved.
4. Equity is upheld and diverse needs are taken into account
5. People working with children are suitable and supported
6. Processes to respond to complaints of child abuse are child focussed
7. Staff are equipped with the knowledge, skills and awareness to keep children safe through continual education and training
8. Physical and online environments minimise the opportunities for abuse to occur
9. Implementation of Child Safe Standards is continuously reviewed and improved
10. Policies and procedures document how the organisation is child safe.



Note to Figure 14 and 15: percentages have been calculated to allow comparison between 2022 and 2024. Due to the option to provide multiple responses and the mixed number of responses given by participants to each question, the numbers are not of statistical accuracy but do demonstrate a change in views across the time period.

