



Place AU

Planning & Investment Intelligence

METHODOLOGY & DATA STATEMENT

Council Performance Brief

How the Council Performance Brief is built: the government datasets behind every indicator, how peers are chosen, the role of AI, and the limits of the comparison.

DOCUMENT

Methodology & Data
Statement v1.0

ISSUED

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01 Purpose of this statement

This statement sets out how the Council Performance Brief is built: where every figure comes from, how it is calculated, what role artificial intelligence plays, and what the product cannot tell you. It is written so that a councillor, chief executive, director or audit and risk committee can assess the method before relying on the output, and so that any figure in a delivered report can be traced back to a named public source.

Place AU publishes this statement because a report is only as useful as the confidence you can place in it. Where a method involves a judgement, that judgement is named here rather than buried. Where a limit exists, it is stated rather than glossed.

STATUS OF THIS DOCUMENT

This is a methodology statement, not a warranty of outcome and not professional advice. It describes the process Place AU follows. It does not guarantee that any particular decision made in reliance on a report will be correct. Section 09 sets out the limits of the product and Section 10 explains how errors are corrected.

02 What this product is, and what it is not

The Council Performance Brief benchmarks a council against state, metro and named peer councils using indicators the council already reports publicly. Its value is not new data. It is the multi-year trend and the peer comparison that single-year internal reporting tends to smooth over, presented so it can be tabled and quoted without falling over.

WHAT IT IS NOT

- It is not an audit, and it is not a performance review of any officer or employee.
- It is not a composite index or a league table. There is no single score and no rank across all councils.
- It is not a substitute for the council's own statutory reporting.
- It is not legal, governance or financial advice.
- It does not assess or profile any individual.

03 Geography and comparators

The unit of analysis is the local government area. Comparisons are made against three reference sets: the state average, the metropolitan or regional average as appropriate to the council's classification, and a small group of named peer councils.

How peers are selected

Typically three to five comparator councils are named, chosen for genuine similarity on size, geography and profile rather than drawn from a broad anonymised average. Councils are named in the brief rather than anonymised, because an anonymous average cannot be acted on: a gap only becomes useful when the reader can see who is on the other side of it. The selection and the reason for it are stated on the face of the brief and can be adjusted at scoping if the council prefers a different comparator set.

BASES ARE NEVER BLENDED

Where an indicator is reported on different bases across councils, the bases are reported separately rather than combined. Standard and VicSmart planning applications, for example, are never merged into a single figure, because the statutory clocks differ and a blended number would flatter or penalise a council according to its application mix rather than its performance.

04 Data sources

Every figure in a brief is retrieved from one of the sources below. No figure is sourced from a commercial data provider, a proprietary panel, a subscription database or an aggregator, and no figure is estimated by Place AU where a published figure exists.

SOURCE	PUBLISHER	WHAT IT SUPPLIES	LICENCE
Community Satisfaction Survey	Local Government Victoria / JWS Research	Satisfaction index by service area, with participation and sampling error disclosed	Crown copyright, reuse per publisher terms
Planning Permit Activity Reporting System	Department of Transport and Planning (Vic)	Decision volumes, timeliness and outcomes, standard and VicSmart separately	Crown copyright, reuse per publisher terms
Local Government Performance Reporting Framework	Local Government Victoria	Mandatory service, financial and governance indicators	Crown copyright, reuse per publisher terms

SOURCE	PUBLISHER	WHAT IT SUPPLIES	LICENCE
VAGO reports	Victorian Auditor-General's Office	Financial sustainability risk assessment and sector findings	Crown copyright, reuse per publisher terms
Council annual reports and budgets	Individual councils	Headline and adjusted underlying result, rates and grant structure	Crown copyright
ABS Estimated Resident Population	Australian Bureau of Statistics	Population base for per-capita measures	CC BY 4.0
ABS ASGS 2021, Edition 3	Australian Bureau of Statistics	Boundary geometry and council classification	CC BY 4.0

Licence column records the terms under which Place AU reuses the material. Where a publisher applies Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0), attribution is carried in the report source list. Where a dataset is published under other Crown terms, reuse is limited to what those terms permit. Place AU does not reuse any dataset whose terms prohibit commercial reuse.

SOURCES WE DELIBERATELY EXCLUDE

Place AU does not use commercial demographic providers, automated valuation model outputs, proprietary consumer panels, scraped listing data or third-party aggregators. This is a sourcing rule, not a cost decision. It means the analysis is reproducible by anyone with access to the same public datasets, the sources can be named in a public forum without a licensing dispute, and no figure depends on a commercial arrangement that could lapse.

05 How a report is produced

Place AU follows a retrieve-first architecture. Figures are retrieved from source and validated before any narrative is written. This ordering is the single most important control in the system and the reason the product behaves differently from a general purpose AI assistant asked to write a report.

- Cohort defined.** Comparator councils are selected on published classification and the criteria are recorded on the face of the brief.
- Data retrieved.** Each indicator is retrieved for the council and every comparator, across multiple years, from the sources in Section 04.
- Currency established.** Each indicator's reporting period and release date are recorded and shown in a currency table on the first page, so a reader knows how old each figure is before reading the interpretation.
- Positioned.** The council's value is placed within the named set. No rank across all councils is produced.
- Signals identified.** Indicators where the council diverges materially from its cohort, or where its own trend has turned, are promoted to the executive summary.
- Reviewed.** Every figure is checked against its source by a person.
- Narrative written.** Only once the figures are locked does the brief explain what each signal means for councillors and management.

Vintage handling

Every retrieved figure is stamped at runtime with the release or vintage it came from, and that vintage is carried through to the delivered report. Where two figures in a report come from different vintages, both are shown rather than silently harmonised to the newer one.

Failing visibly

If a source cannot be reached or returns an unexpected structure, the pipeline stops and reports the failure. It does not substitute a cached figure, a prior-year figure or an interpolated value. A missing figure appears in the report as missing, with the reason. This is a deliberate trade: an incomplete report is recoverable, a silently stale one is not.

06 Indicators and calculations

Every indicator below is a published measure or a ratio of published measures. Place AU does not construct a composite index or an overall council score, because a single score hides the thing the reader needs, which is where the gap actually sits.

Community satisfaction

Reported as the Community Satisfaction Survey index score for the council, shown as a multi-year series against the metropolitan and state averages and broken down by service area. The brief reports the direction and size of movement across years rather than a single year in isolation. The survey is a sample-based instrument and carries the sampling error stated by its publisher, which is noted where a year-on-year movement is small.

Planning system performance

DECISIONS WITHIN THE STATUTORY PERIOD

share % = (decisions made within 60 statutory days ÷ total decisions in the period) × 100

Sixty days is the statutory period under the Planning and Environment Act 1987 (Vic). The brief reports this share alongside the median and mean days to decision, because the share alone can conceal a long tail. Standard and VicSmart applications are reported separately.

Financial sustainability

The brief reports the headline surplus or deficit and the adjusted underlying result side by side. The adjusted underlying result removes non-recurrent capital grants, developer contributions and other one-off items to show the recurrent position. The two figures can differ substantially, and the gap between them is usually the more informative number.

RATES CONCENTRATION

concentration % = (rates and charges revenue ÷ total revenue) × 100

A measure of revenue dependence on the rates base. Read alongside the rate cap environment, it indicates how much of the council's income is subject to a capped growth rate and how little room exists to absorb a cost shock elsewhere.

GRANT DEPENDENCE

$$\text{dependence \%} = (\text{grant income} \div \text{total revenue}) \times 100$$

Reported with the recurrent and non-recurrent split, because a high grant share driven by a one-off capital grant carries a different risk from a high recurrent share.

Peer benchmarking

Each indicator is reported for the subject council and every named peer on the same definition, the same source and the same period. Where a peer has not reported an indicator for a period, the gap is shown as a gap rather than filled by an average.

Target setting

For each mandatory indicator the brief shows where a target would land at cohort median, at state median and on the council's own trend. The purpose is that a target is adopted with its consequences visible rather than discovered afterwards. Place AU does not recommend a target.

RANKING AND INTERPRETATION

Where the brief ranks management implications by priority, that ranking is an explicit professional judgement by Place AU about which signals warrant attention first. It is labelled as a judgement in the brief and the reasoning is given, so the reader can disagree with the ordering while still relying on the underlying figures.

07 Use of artificial intelligence

AI is used to explain retrieved data in plain English. It is not used to produce, estimate, infer or recall any figure.

What the model does

- Writes the plain-English interpretation of figures that have already been retrieved and validated.
- Structures the narrative into the report's fixed section format.
- Summarises what a validated figure means for the decision the report supports.

What the model does not do

- It does not generate statistics. Every number in a report enters the process before the model is called and is passed to it as validated input.
- It does not recall figures from its training data. The system prompt prohibits this explicitly, and figures are supplied in the request rather than requested from memory.
- It does not select or rank sources. The source list is fixed by the sourcing policy.
- It does not decide anything about an identified individual.

WHY THE ORDERING MATTERS

The common failure mode in AI-written analysis is asking a model to produce numbers. Models are fluent, so invented figures read as confidently as correct ones, and they drift and date without warning. Place AU removes the failure mode rather than managing it: by the time the model is invoked, the figures are already fixed, sourced and vintage-stamped, and the model's only task is explanation. A model that is never asked for a number cannot fabricate one.

Human oversight

Consulting briefs are reviewed by Place AU before delivery. Every figure is checked against its source and every statement of interpretation is read and approved by a person before the brief is issued. Nothing is delivered to a client without that review.

Model and processing

Narrative generation uses the Anthropic Claude API. Geography and order metadata is passed to the API to generate report content, as disclosed in the Place AU privacy policy. Client material is not used to train models. Payment processing is handled by Stripe and Place AU does not store card details. Report delivery uses Resend. Each of these providers operates under its own privacy policy and some process information outside Australia.

Automated decision-making

Place AU reports are decision-support documents about places, not decisions about people. The product does not make, or substantially assist in making, a decision about an identified individual, and it does not assess, score, rank or profile individuals. Reports are produced from aggregate published statistics.

Place AU notes the automated decision-making transparency obligation inserted into the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth) by the Privacy and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2024 (Cth), which commences on 10 December 2026 and requires affected entities to describe in their privacy policy the kinds of personal information used in, and the kinds of decisions made by, qualifying automated decision-making. Place AU maintains its privacy policy against that obligation.

Regulatory context

Australia does not currently have AI-specific legislation. The National AI Plan released in December 2025 confirmed a technology-neutral approach relying on existing law, supported by the National AI Centre's Guidance for AI Adoption and the Australian AI Safety Institute. Place AU's controls are built to the substance of that guidance: accountability is held by a named person, impacts are assessed, the system is tested and monitored, and human control is retained over what is published.

08 Data governance

Sourcing policy

Reports are built exclusively on open government data licensed for commercial reuse. There are no proprietary data dependencies, which means no figure in a report can become unpublishable because a subscription lapsed or a licensor changed its terms.

Traceability

Every figure can be traced to a named, publicly available source. Source and vintage are stated in the report itself, not held separately. A reader with access to the same public datasets can reproduce the figures.

Accuracy over completeness

Where a figure cannot be sourced, it is omitted and the omission is stated. Place AU does not fill a gap with an estimate presented as a fact. A shorter correct report is preferred to a longer one padded with inference.

Conflicting sources

Where two government sources disagree, Place AU verifies against the primary source and states which was adopted and why. Where a primary source is itself ambiguous or a figure is proposed rather than in force, both readings are named and neither is adopted silently.

Suppression

Small-area statistics are sometimes suppressed by the publisher for confidentiality. Where that applies, the report says the figure is suppressed. It is not interpolated, modelled or inferred from a larger geography.

Personal information

Reports are built from aggregate published statistics. They do not contain personal information about identified individuals. Personal information collected from clients is limited to what is needed to scope, deliver and invoice the work, and is handled under the Place AU privacy policy at placeau.com/privacy-policy.

Fitness for a public forum

Every indicator in the brief is one the council already publishes or that a public body publishes about it. Nothing in it is privileged, confidential or obtained other than from a public source, which means the brief can be tabled at a council meeting, quoted in a scrutiny hearing or provided to an audit and risk committee without a disclosure problem.

09 Limitations

- **Nothing here is new data.** Every indicator is one the council already publishes. Nothing is an audit finding and nothing is privileged information.
- **Survey error.** Community satisfaction is sample-based and carries sampling error. Participation is disclosed so the reader can weigh it.
- **Accounting treatment varies.** Financial indicators depend on each council's own accounting treatment, which is not identical across the comparator set.
- **Gaps are shown, not filled.** Where an indicator is not published for a comparator, the gap is named rather than filled by estimate.
- **Position is not performance.** Position within a named cohort is the starting point for the question, not the answer to it. Context that does not appear in a published indicator can explain a gap.
- **Not a review of people.** The brief assesses published organisational indicators. It makes no assessment of any individual officer.
- **Victorian depth.** Coverage depth is the Victorian reporting framework. Interstate councils are taken on request and scoped to the equivalent state framework.

10 Currency, versioning and corrections

Currency

Each Council Performance Brief states the vintage of every figure it uses. A report is a point-in-time document. Government sources are revised and reissued, and a figure correct at the date of issue may be superseded later. The report date on the cover is the date the figures were retrieved.

Corrections

If an error is identified in a delivered report, whether by Place AU or by the client, Place AU will verify it against the primary source and, where the error is confirmed, issue a corrected version at no charge, marked with a revision number and a short note describing what changed. Clients are told when a correction affects a figure they may have already relied on or published.

Methodology changes

This statement is versioned. Where a method changes in a way that would alter a previously reported figure, the change is recorded in the version history and clients who received an affected report within the preceding twelve months are notified.

Raising a question

Questions about any figure, source or calculation described here can be sent to info@placeau.com. Place AU will identify the source and the calculation behind any figure in a delivered report on request.