



- 2.3 **Who votes?** Automatic enrolment and application enrolment
- 2.3.1 Voter eligibility is based on the premise that both residents, who live in the municipality and use council services, and ratepayers (many who do not necessarily reside there) who use and fund those services, should all be able to have a say in their local council's electoral representation. Both voters on the state roll (living in the municipality) and non-resident ratepaying owners (living outside the municipality) are automatically enrolled. The remaining categories of voters – business occupiers, corporation nominees and resident owners not on the state roll – must apply to be enrolled on the CEO's List.
- 2.3.2 The Registrar prepares a Voters Roll for each municipal election comprising: the VEC's list of residents on the State Register of Electors (known as the State Roll) & the Council CEO's list of ratepayers that are not on the State Roll (known as the CEO's list). **Appendix 1** provides further detail on voter eligibility in Council elections.
- 2.3.3 The certified voters' roll for the 2016 Port Phillip City Council general election included 90,188 enrolled voters.
- 2.4 The average state-wide voter turnout for postal elections was 73.75% and for attendance elections was 61.49%. The highest turnout in Victoria in 2016 was for Warrnambool City Council's election with 83.20% and the lowest turnout was for Port Phillip City Council's elections at 48.60%.
- 2.5 Section 4 of this report provides further information on voter participation and other details of the 2016 Local Government elections to assist Councillors in their analysis of voting options.

3. RECOMMENDATION

- 3.1 That Council determines which method of voting (postal or attendance) will be used at the 2020 general election on 24 October 2020.

4. KEY POINTS/ISSUES

4.1 How each voting method works

- 4.1.1 Attendance Elections
- a) Eligible voters receive an "EasyVote letter" from the VEC, advising who is required to vote, who doesn't have to vote, when, where and how to vote and a list of candidates for their ward.
 - b) Postal voting by application is available for approximately 4 weeks prior to Election Day. Postal voting packs are sent to all 'general postal voters' who have registered to vote by post and anyone who has specifically applied for a postal vote.
 - c) Early voting is available at the election office for approximately 4 weeks prior to election day. Additional early voting centres may be opened across the municipality during peak periods of early voting.



- d) Candidates can register how-to-vote cards for distribution within 400 metres of a voting centre during early voting, or during voting hours on election day.

4.1.2 Postal Elections

- a) Eligible voters receive a ballot pack containing candidate statements, a ballot paper, a postal vote declaration envelope and instructions on how to vote correctly, and a notice of how and when the ballot paper must be returned. Declaration envelopes containing completed ballot papers must be returned and received by the returning officer by 6.00pm on the day before election day.
- b) Candidates can submit a candidate statement of up to 200 words along with a photograph for the VEC to include in the ballot pack mailed to voters. Candidate statements are published and printed exactly as submitted with no corrections to grammar or spelling by the VEC.

Prior to the 2016 elections, the State Government disallowed the regulation allowing candidates to include their indication of preferences in the ballot pack mailed to voters. This produced an increase in candidates using their statement as a tool to indicate their preferences to voters. The VEC received a number of complaints from candidates contesting postal elections regarding the inclusion by some candidates of preference information in their 200-word personal statement. The complainants suggested that this was contrary to the decision by the Government to disallow the Regulations which removed the provision for candidates to lodge indications of preferences at postal elections.

4.1.3 Candidate Questionnaires

Prior to the 2016 elections, the Regulations introduced a candidate questionnaire which included a set of prescribed questions that each candidate was invited to respond to. The completed questionnaires were accessible to voters on the VEC website and available in election offices. The questionnaire sought information from candidates relating to their experience and training applicable to the role of a councillor and whether they were endorsed by a registered political party. Candidates for both postal and attendance elections were invited to complete the questionnaire.

4.1.4 Compulsory voting

Voting in council elections is compulsory for voters on the state roll who have not reached the age of 70. It is not compulsory for anyone aged 70 years and over.

The VEC undertakes compulsory voting enforcement and is obliged to send notices to enrolled voters who appear not to have voted. If a person fails to vote without an adequate reason, they may be fined. The fine for not voting is currently \$83.00. This amount is indexed at the beginning of every financial year.



4.2 A summary of the primary differences – Postal vs Attendance

These differences are explored in detail in the paragraphs below.

Participation

- In general, postal voting has a higher participation rate that has been increasing at each election, compared with attendance voting.
- Postal voting has a lower informal vote than attendance voting.
- Postal voting has a higher number of non-resident owners and 70+ voters taking part in elections.

Accessibility

- Postal voting provides an automatic convenient system for people with accessibility issues and absentee voters to exercise their civic right. While this is possible through attendance voting, it requires people to opt-in to this option.

Costs

- The average cost per voter is \$7.60 (excluding GST) for attendance elections and \$6.68 (excluding GST) for postal elections.
- Clause 4.8 of this report sets out the cost estimates provided by the VEC for both a postal election and an attendance election. The differences equate to a saving to Council of \$117,320 if the election is conducted via postal voting.
- At the last election, Council received \$618,985 from the VEC through the collection of infringement notices issued to 14,143 people who were enrolled but did not vote.
- The participation rates for a postal election in the City of Port Phillip cannot be forward predicted as there is no historical data to use as an estimate, however, the postal cost estimate provided by the VEC has been prepared using the state-wide average participation rate of 73%. It is difficult to determine the change in compulsory voting revenue that may come as a result of changed participation rates in a postal election, and any affect this would have on the overall election budget over the next couple of years.

2016 Election statistics

4.3 Whole of council enrolment

- Voters enrolled through the State Roll: 67,617
- Voters enrolled through the CEO's (Application) List: 22,571
- **Total: 90,188**

4.4 Voter Turnout

Voter turnout is measured as the number of formal and informal votes counted as a percentage of voters on the roll.

A vote is classified as informal when the voter does not complete the ballot paper in accordance with instructions or if their voting intention cannot be determined. Votes



classified as informal cannot be admitted to a count. The informality rate has continually increased over the last three general elections and the rate for attendance elections continues to be higher than that for postal elections.

As a percentage of the total enrolment for the election, the number of ballot papers counted (formal and informal) for the City of Port Phillip was **48.6%**. This is compared with an average turnout of 61.60% for all attendance elections across the State at the 2016 local government elections. Port Phillip recorded a turnout of 49.47% at its general election in October 2012.

4.4.1 Voter Turnout – City of Port Phillip

Enrolment category	CoPP Participation (total ballot papers counted)	Statewide attendance participation
Voters enrolled through State Roll	61.07%	70.14%
• aged 18 to 69 years old on election day	62.07%	72.85%
• aged 70 years and over on election day	52.85%	53.05%
Voters enrolled through CEO List (application)	11.69%	13.53%
Council total	48.72%	61.06%

4.4.2 Across the State, turnout has increased for postal elections however has decreased for attendance elections compared with 2012 turnout figures. See **Appendix 3**.

4.5 Voter Participation by Enrolment Category (state-wide)

Analysis of voter participation for the different enrolment categories shows that participation is higher in both postal and attendance elections across the State for voters who are enrolled on the State Roll, for which voting is compulsory (77.17%) compared to voters enrolled on the CEO List (49.09%), where voting is not compulsory. Participation for CEO List voters drops state-wide to 13.5% for attendance elections. Participation for voters aged 70 years or older is higher for postal elections than for attendance elections.

4.6 How City of Port Phillip voted

4.6.1 **Postal Votes:** The Returning Officer received in total 7,350 returned pre-poll postal votes, accounting for **17%** of voters across the City accessed postal voting.

4.6.2 **Early Votes:** An early voting centre was available at the election office from 21 September until the close of early voting on 21 October 2016. An additional early voting centre was open from 10 October 2016 at the St Kilda Town Hall. The Returning Officer issued 12,696 early votes, accounting for **29%** of voters across the City who accessed early voting.

4.6.3 **Election day voting:** The Returning Officer appointed 14 voting centres for the election, which were open from 8.00 am to 6.00 pm on election day, 22 October 2016. **54%** of voter turnout occurred on Election Day.

4.6.4 Lower turnout considerations in City of Port Phillip

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There are two factors in the City that may align with the lower participation of voters.

- 25% of voters on the roll don't have to vote as they are non-residents / company nominees, this is 12% on average in other Councils
- The City of Port Phillip has a higher than average % of renters compared to other municipalities. At the last election, 5.7% of voters on the State Electoral Roll were still enrolled in Port Phillip but were no longer living in the municipality and had not updated their enrolment details.

Analysis of voting trends across the Government's *Local Government Electoral Review – Discussion paper September 2013*, determines that higher numbers of renters includes higher proportions of young renters, absentee ratepayers and highly itinerant voters, who are more likely to be disengaged from the democratic process. Additionally, the turnout of voters over the age of 70 (for whom voting is not compulsory) is significantly lower at all attendance elections than it is at postal elections.

- 4.7 **Appendix 2** provides voter turnout statistics across comparable metropolitan Councils (No. of vacancies, No. of voters).



4.8 COSTS

The VEC has delivered to councils an indicative cost of services to provide visibility of the budgetary impact for the conduct of local government elections. The cost estimate provided by the VEC for the conduct of the 2020 General Election is as follows:

Attendance Election Costs		Postal Election Costs	
Voter Information Campaign, Returning Officer Costs, Preference Distributions, Voting Centre Costs, Early Voting Centres, List of Non-Voters, Administrative Costs	\$583,309	Voter Information Campaign, Returning Officer Costs, Scrutiny and Count of Ballot Papers, Ballot Material Production, List of Non-Voters, Administrative Costs	\$468,434
Compulsory Voting Enforcement Costs	\$237,713	Compulsory Voting Enforcement Costs	\$235,268
VEC Staff Costs, Mail Processing, Postage, Printing, Scanning and Stationery, Prosecution in the Magistrates' Court		VEC Staff Costs, Mail Processing, Postage, Printing, Scanning and Stationery, Prosecution in the Magistrates' Court	
ESTIMATED ELECTION COSTS	\$821,022	ESTIMATED ELECTION COSTS	\$703,702
Estimated recovery of costs through compulsory voting enforcement (over 3 years)	\$618,985	Estimated recovery of costs through compulsory voting enforcement (over 3 years)	\$Not Available at this time
Total estimated election costs after recovery of compulsory voting	\$202,037	Total estimated election costs after recovery of compulsory voting	\$Not Available at this time

The VEC has provided that based on the estimates prepared for each council, the average cost per voter is \$7.60(excluding GST) for attendance elections and \$6.68 (excluding GST) for postal elections. The VEC has advised that based on its costing activity so far, attendance and postal elections have increased in cost by 20.2% and 21.17%, respectively, since the 2016 local government elections. The most significant cost increases relate to staff, advertising and postage. Postage rates have increased from 0.87¢ per item in 2016 to \$1 .06 per item from 1 January 2020. Australia Post price increases have impacted on the average cost of attendance elections only slightly less than for postal elections.



5. CONSULTATION AND STAKEHOLDERS

- 5.1 Councillors have had preliminary discussions on this topic at their weekly councillor only time.
- 5.2 Council officers are working with the VEC to finalise the parameters of the Election Service Plan.

6. LEGAL AND RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Council's previous election was held using attendance voting. Under the legislation, if Council wishes to change its method of voting it must do so by Council resolution by 23 February 2020. If Council does not carry a resolution to change its voting method then it automatically remains as attendance voting.
- 6.2 If the **Local Government Bill 2019** currently before Parliament is passed unchanged, and the voting provisions are effective immediately, the decision of which method of voting to use is redundant and this report will be withdrawn.

7. FINANCIAL IMPACT

- 7.1 Based on the cost analysis provided by the Victorian Electoral Commission, a change to postal voting would result in a \$117,320 reduction in direct costs to administer the election. However, the full financial impact of postal voting is unknown at this stage, as it is not clear what the potential recovery of costs would be through the enforcement of compulsory voting in this option.
- 7.2 The VEC has advised that it will continue to apply a marginal cost recovery model where all direct costs are recovered. These costs include personnel and associated on-costs, stationery and material, equipment, mail processes, advertising and communications, printing, rent and utilities, insurances, IT infrastructure, and licences that are costed to the election. The VEC's cost recovery model only includes those head office/administrative costs associated with contractors that are specifically employed for the local government election program.

8. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

- 8.1 There are no environmental implications arising from the recommendations of this report.

9. COMMUNITY IMPACT

- 9.1 The VEC has set its performance targets for the 2020 election, including to provide a high-quality election service and work to provide every voter with a quality and convenient service in which to exercise their democratic rights.
- 9.2 The 2020 local government elections will be Victoria's largest single election program. Over 4.2 million enrolled voters and upwards of 2,000 candidates will participate in nearly 300 individual elections.
- 9.3 In response to lower turnout rates, the VEC has expanded its Statewide advertising and communication strategy. Voter engagement through the proposed VoterAlert messaging service will also likely have a positive impact on voter participation. The VEC is also delivering a pilot program to engage younger voters who are over-represented in low voter turnout figures.



10. ALIGNMENT TO COUNCIL PLAN AND COUNCIL POLICY

- 10.1 Openly reviewing the decision on the method of voting at the 2020 General Election delivers on Direction 6 of the Council Plan (Our Commitment to You), by providing a transparent and good governance approach to decision making.

11. IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

11.1 TIMELINE

Attachment 2 includes the detailed election timelines for both Postal and Attendance elections.

11.2 COMMUNICATION

The Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) is now by law the sole statutory provider for all Victorian Council elections. The VEC will deliver a voter information campaign developed to meet statutory requirements, increase voters' awareness of their rights and obligations, maximise voter turnout and minimise the informal vote.

12. OFFICER DIRECT OR INDIRECT INTEREST

- 12.1 No officers involved in the preparation of this report have any direct or indirect interest in the matter.

TRIM FILE NO: F20/1
ATTACHMENTS
1. Appendices 1-3
2. 2020 Election Timelines