

## 5.5 METHOD OF VOTING FOR COUNCIL ELECTIONS

Responsible Officer: Jarrod Doake, Chief Operating Officer

### **RECOMMENDATION**

*That the Council resolves that the voting method for the 2020 Council elections will be full postal voting.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Section 41A(2A) of the *Local Government Act 1989* requires that voting at a Council election must be conducted by the same means, whether attendance or postal voting, as the previous elections were conducted, unless the Council has decided, at least 8 months before election day, to change the means of conducting the voting.

### **BACKGROUND**

Council elections are conducted by the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC), as required by the *Local Government Act 1989*.

Monash's 2016 Council elections were conducted by full postal voting.

Should the Council decide to use attendance voting, instead of postal voting, for the 2020 elections, it would have to make that decision by the January 2020 Council meeting, at the latest.

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **POSTAL VOTING**

##### Participation

The use of full postal voting has steadily increased in the sector, with the greater proportion of councils now using this method.

Voter participation in Monash elections has been consistently high – averaging 74 percent, since 1997.

Postal voting statistics for the 2016 elections show that there was a 75.67 percent turnout across the State.

Monash's participation rate for that election was 77.69 percent.

The informal vote across the State, for the 2016 Council elections was 6.06 percent.

### Costs

Postal voting's main costs revolve around printing and postage costs for voters' ballot packs. As the VEC conducts all Victorian local government elections it is able to take advantage of the economies of scale and keep those costs down.

Staff activity is usually concentrated towards the end of and immediately after the voting period has concluded, with the processing of returned ballots.

Where the counting of votes is conducted electronically, this adds to the costs of the election, for the hire of counting facilities and equipment and staff to process the ballot papers.

VEC advice is that postal voting is generally around 15-20 percent less expensive to conduct than attendance voting.

### Voting accessibility

The major benefit to postal voting is that the election comes to the voter, via the ballot pack. Voters have a 2 week window within which to complete their ballot paper and return it in the self-addressed envelope provided.

This method of voting is an important consideration in relation to voters who have mobility issues, who do not have private transport or easy access to public transport, and non-resident voters.

All voters have equal access to the voting process.

Voters are also able to apply for pre-poll voting, which can be conducted via mail.

### Candidate information

This method of voting provides voters with ready access to information to inform their vote and more time to consider their voting preferences as the ballot information is provided to them well in advance of Election Day.

A multi-language leaflet is included in the postal ballot pack as standard for all metropolitan councils using postal voting. It explains, step-by-step, how to vote and also includes telephone interpreter numbers for each language (plus the one general number for any other languages).

All candidates are afforded the opportunity to provide a photo of themselves and a candidate's statement, which is included in the ballot pack that all voters receive.

This provides each candidate, irrespective of the level of resourcing they have available, with the opportunity to reach every voter in the Ward that they're standing in.

Candidates are also able to conduct their own campaign, separate to the candidate's statement.

General

Concerns have been expressed in the past about ballot packs getting lost in the mail, stolen or treated as junk mail. There is no data available regarding these issues. The VEC has well-developed processes to detect fraudulent voting and anecdotal evidence suggests that the incidence of missing ballot packs is very low.

An advantage with postal voting is there is no confusion about the location of polling places, or voters attending a polling place in the wrong Ward.

**ATTENDANCE VOTING**Participation

Statistics from the VEC show that the average voter turnout for the 8 Councils holding elections by attendance voting, in 2012/13, was 63.6 per cent.

VEC statistics for attendance voting participation rates for the 2016 elections are not available.

VEC data collected since 1999, shows a higher level of informal voting for attendance voting than for postal voting.

<b>YEARS</b>	<b>POSTAL</b>	<b>ATTENDANCE</b>
1999-2000	2.93%	7.94%
2000-2001	2.58%	N/A
2001-2002	2.77%	7.44%
2002-2003	3.29%	8.86%
2003-2004	N/A	N/A
2004-2005	3.37%	10.43%
2005-2006	3.64%	9.33%
2006-2007	N/A	N/A
2007-2008	N/A	N/A
2008-2009	3.78%*	9.90%
2009-2010	N/A	N/A
2010-2011	N/A	N/A
2011-2012	N/A	N/A
2012-2013	4.66%*	10.09%

\*excluding City of Melbourne leadership team

Costs

Attendance voting requires the identification and availability of facilities to be used as polling places in each ward, which are suitable in relation to size, location and accessibility.

If a facility to be used is not Council-owned, the cost of hiring it is passed on to the Council.

Up to 30 polling places can be established for an election, depending on requirements.

There are costs associated with equipping, setting up and then dismantling each polling place.

Staff costs are concentrated on Election Day, with polling staff processing voters during the day. Staffing costs for the conduct of ballot count after voting has concluded also needs to be factored in.

This is a more resource intensive method of voting than postal voting, which increases labour costs.

#### Voter accessibility

Voters are required to attend a polling place to cast their vote. Facilities need to have easy access for voters.

The VEC looks for voting centres that provide maximum access for voters and attempts to ensure at least one fully accessible (Independent Wheelchair Accessible - IWA) voting centre is available in each ward.

As with postal voting, voters are able to cast a pre-polling vote, which can be done by mail.

#### Candidate information

Candidates can conduct their own election campaign, as well as hand out approved material outside polling places on Election Day.

There is no uniform distribution of candidate information to all voters, as with postal voting, via the candidate's statement. So, potentially there is less consistent access to information for voters regarding all candidates; those candidates with fewer resources may be able to reach fewer voters than those with greater resources.

#### General

This method of voting is more resource intensive for candidates regarding manning polling booths and early voting centres, and providing scrutineers to monitor the count at individual polling places.

This method gives candidates the opportunity to speak with voters on Election Day and at early voting centres.

One aspect of attendance voting is its familiarity to voters, because it is used for Federal and State elections.

The VEC considers polling places that have been used at State, Federal and previous council elections, and ensures that they are suitably located within each ward.

Voting instructions in 20 languages other than English are displayed in voting compartments at polling places.

A change to attendance voting would necessitate an additional emphasis on the method of voting, to highlight the change in the voting system. This would be necessary to avoid voter confusion and maximise voter participation. Consequently, this would add some costs to the communications campaign for the election.

**CONCLUSION**

Setting aside that this is the method of voting that has been used for elections at Monash since its first in 1997, it is considered that the advantages to postal voting outweigh those of attendance voting. It provides for those voters who have mobility issues, difficulty with transport or are non-resident, to participate in the election.

All voters have equal access to the voting process with postal voting and candidates are also afforded equal opportunity, irrespective of their resources, to reach all voters, via the candidate's statement.

In addition, this method of voting has consistently shown a higher participation rate and a lower informal rate, than attendance voting.

If the Council was to decide to use attendance voting for the 2020 Council elections, it would have to do so by its January 2020 Ordinary Meeting of Council meeting.