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Transport, Regional Development,  
Communications and the Arts  
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Attention: Director, Postal Policy - Communications Services and Consumer Division

## **Postal Services Modernisation Consultation - Submission by the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC)**

### **About the VEC**

The VEC is an independent statutory authority established under Victoria's *Electoral Act 2002*. The VEC's responsibilities include: the conduct of State, local government, and fee-for service elections; maintenance of the Victorian register of electors; administration of a number of regulatory functions; and supporting Victorians to engage in their democracy.

The VEC is a member of the Electoral Council of Australia and New Zealand (ECANZ) and notes and supports the submission from ECANZ to this consultation process. This submission does not duplicate matters raised in the ECANZ submission but provides further detail on the Victorian context.

The VEC is dependent on the services of Australia Post to meet its statutory obligations and requires ongoing reliable, timely, efficient and cost-effective letter services to maintain confidence in Victoria's electoral system.

### **Statutory elections in Victoria**

Victorian State elections take place every 4 years with the next State election due in November 2026. State elections are conducted by attendance voting with electors being offered a range of voting channels, including the ability to attend a voting centre in-person or to vote by post.

Local government general elections for Victoria's 79 local councils are held every 4 years with the next round of local government elections due in October 2024. Local government elections are conducted by a single voting system (either attendance voting or postal voting) as determined by the Minister. The 2020 local government elections were conducted by postal voting. The VEC passes election costs back to local councils on a cost recovery basis with postage costs forming a significant part of overall costs.

Between major rounds of general elections, the VEC also conducts by-elections to fill any vacancies that arise during the term of a Parliament or local council.

Enrolling and voting in Victorian State elections is compulsory for all eligible electors and from October 2024, voting will also be compulsory for all enrolled voters at local government elections.

As such, the VEC makes enrolling and voting services as accessible as possible through a range of channels including the post.

### **Local Government postal elections**

It is anticipated that elections for Victoria's 79 local councils in October 2024 will involve over 4.5 million voters taking part in over 250 individual ward elections.

Local government elections are conducted by the VEC under the *Local Government Act 2020*, the *City of Melbourne Act 2001* and associated regulations. For postal elections the VEC is required to post or deliver a ballot pack containing voting materials to every enrolled voter at least 15 days before the last day of voting. The VEC uses Australia Post's priority paid mail services for elections. Ballot packs are tailored to each individual election and are mailed out over 3 days with a requirement that no more than 35% are mailed on any one day.

In 2024, this may relate to just under 1.5 million ballot packs being lodged with Australia Post on each of three consecutive days. There is then a 15 day window for ballot packs to reach each voter, for the voter to consider and complete their ballot material, and to post their completed ballot paper back to the VEC. A further 5 working days is allowed for ballot material to reach the VEC for inclusion in counting process. Ballot papers that do not reach the VEC within the legislated timeframe are excluded from the count.

Regulations also require the VEC to send a replacement ballot pack to an elector who claims they lost, spoiled or did not receive their ballot pack. At the 2020 elections, there were 87,781 replacement ballot pack requests. These requests are often received in the last week of voting placing greater pressure on the postal system to ensure that completed replacement ballot papers reach the VEC by the deadline for inclusion in the count.

Strong relationships and coordination are required between the VEC, printers, mailhouses and Australia Post to ensure the accuracy of ballot pack preparation, dispatch, return and tracking within very tight legislative timelines. Any errors or delays have the potential to disenfranchise voters and compromise election outcomes.

### **State elections**

The VEC provides postal voting services to electors during State elections. Postal voting is usually taken up by those who have difficulty attending a voting centre or are away from their place of residence during an election. At the 2022 State election, postal votes comprised 10.6% (404,850) of the total votes counted - a 3% increase in the use of postal voting compared to the previous State election in 2018. This is contrary to the decline in the use of Australia Post letter services more generally.

Time pressures also apply to postal voting at State elections. Electors may apply for a postal vote until 6pm on the Wednesday before election day. To have their vote included in the count, the elector must receive, complete and post or deliver their postal ballot back to the VEC by 6pm on election day. Any postal ballots received by the VEC after 6pm on the Friday after election day, are also excluded from the count despite being posted by the elector within the required timeframe. Accordingly, any time delays in postal services have the potential to disenfranchise electors.

### **Other services reliant on Australia Post letter services**

VEC responsibilities also include:

- communicating with electors about new enrolments, enrolment updates, existing enrolments, request for enrolment histories and completing audit activities on the register of electors. These

activities can comprise hundreds of thousands of outbound letters each year, depending on time in the electoral cycle.

- ensuring electors are engaged and aware of Victoria's democratic processes and events. The VEC uses wide ranging and diverse channels to achieve this objective which includes various mailouts to Victorian households and electors in the lead up to major electoral events or activities.
- the administration of regulatory functions. These activities comprise legal processes where correspondence is mostly required to be sent by post and where immovable deadlines apply for response. For example, following the 2020 local government elections, the VEC mailed just over 354,000 Apparent Failure to Vote Notices where recipients have 28 days to reply.
- registration of political parties. The application process relies on a mailout to current members confirming their support for the application of the Party to be registered. This equates to approximately 20,000 letters a year and is an essential part of the democratic process.

## **Conclusion**

The VEC continues to streamline and digitise its processes where it can, but the replacement of postal voting channels is not a valid option for most elections given the relevant regulatory frameworks and the compulsory nature of participation in these events. Any refinement to the operating model of Australia Post must ensure current technology supporting this service is maintained and in particular, ballot paper tracking technology which is critical to the integrity of the electoral process.

The VEC is also keen to see letter services supporting electoral activities considered in conjunction with other anticipated improvements and modernisation programs within Australia Post. For example, the opportunity to leverage technology innovations in parcel tracking for ballot paper tracking would support a commitment to the essential service that elections provide.

Victorians will continue to require daily mail dispatch during major electoral events, and all electors will continue to need easy access to postal facilities to return completed electoral material. Given the timing and scale of Victoria's major electoral events are known in advance, it is hoped that letter services offered by Australia Post could be aligned to meet these requirements similar to other recognised surge periods i.e. Christmas.

In summary, the provision of reliable, efficient, timely and cost-effective letter services remains critical to the delivery of quality electoral services and continued public confidence in electoral outcomes.