



Reform 1: Electoral matters – Voter franchise

RCV supports the proposal to bring the voters roll in line with state electoral rolls on the basis that current and future property based eligibility voters will continue to retain a right to vote.

Given non-residents will be required to opt-in under the proposed changes, RCV would welcome a Victorian Government funded campaign advising non-resident rate payers of the change in legislation and the actions they must take to be re-enrolled to vote in municipal elections.

RCV notes there will be insufficient time between when the legislation is proposed to pass and the 2020 elections for voters to understand the impact of the changes. To that end, we suggest the simplified franchise initiative should be delayed until 2024.

Reform 2: Electoral Structures

RCV supports mechanisms that improve increased Local Government accountability and transparency.

Major differences between metropolitan and rural councils include:

- Lower population densities
- Larger electoral boundaries
- Unevenly distributed populations
- Higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage amongst rural residents translating to far greater reliance on council services.

RCV notes the *Local Government Reform Bill Paper* commits to rural councils not being required to move to single member wards.

RCV strongly opposes the same the standardised electoral structure for metropolitan councils being applied to rural councils.

RCV requests that provisions be made in the Bill that requires the Minister to take into account the unique characteristics of rural communities, and allows a range of electoral structures that best serves the interests of specific rural communities.

The Victorian Electoral Commission has played an impartial and much respected role in conducting representation reviews across Local Government. RCV requests that beyond 2020, the VEC continue to serve as the sole pre-eminent reviewer of local government electoral structures.



Reform 3: Training

RCV supports increased training opportunities for candidates and elected councillors.

Candidates

RCV supports candidate training in the form of an information briefing and on the basis that:

- the compulsory requirement only extends to candidates not currently serving as a councillor
- the session only requires participation, not assessment in any form
- candidates can access the information session in neighbouring councils or online via Skype or similar platforms,
- the briefing topics cover legal responsibilities for candidates, the election process and the role and powers of elected councillors,
- the content is designed and provided to each CEO in the form of a Powerpoint presentation, and
- other than officer time, any additional costs to council will be funded by the Victorian Government.

Elected Councillors

RCV supports increased councillor training on the basis that:

- the content is designed and provided to each CEO in the form of a Powerpoint presentation
- training is tailored for both new councillors and returning councillors
- other than officer time, any additional costs to council will be funded by the Victorian Government.

Reform 4: Donation Reform

RCV supports the proposed reforms.

Reform 5: Improved Conduct

RCV supports the introduction of standards of conduct to guide each council in the development of their own Code of Conduct.

RCV welcomes the opportunity to participate in the consultation process to develop standards of conduct.



RCV gives in-principle support to a more efficient and timely internal process of arbitration with sufficient flexibility to deal with a range of complaints.

However, RCV notes this proposed reform has considerable detail yet to become available, and will provide further feedback when this is published.

Reform 6: Community Accountability

The proposal to establish a Commission of Inquiry if 25% of municipal voters sign a petition is not supported by RCV.

While 25% may represent a high bar for metropolitan councils, for many rural councils the actual number of signatures is much smaller.

RCV believes this is problematic given the Reform Bill Discussion Paper does not provide any guidance or place an onus on petition applicants to provide evidence (as opposed to 'reasons') that a breach of governance may have occurred.

There exists the very real prospect that a politically motivated VEC authorised petition could be circulated with the intent to cause reputational damage to a Council or Councillor rather than genuinely seeking to establish a Commission of Inquiry.

RCV requests further discussions with the Minister to identify a more suitable mechanism to provide rural communities increased accountability from their councils.

Timeline

RCV notes the proposed staged implementation of the proposed reforms and requests that RCV be consulted throughout the planning process to ensure that rural councils and communities are not negatively impacted during, or beyond, the implementation phase.