

Local Government Elections 2020

COVIDSafe Election Plan

Version 3.0

8 October 2020



Version history

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0.1	EPORTAL002-135288600-69	19/06/2020	Draft
1.0	EPORTAL002-135288600-71	17/08/2020	Reflects 17 August 2020 COVID-19 environment.
2.0	EPORTAL002-135288600-260	16/09/2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Updates to COVID-19 arrangements including temperature checks and COVID-19 Marshalls ▪ Update to Section 10 ▪ Update to Section 11 ▪ Minor wording updates throughout
3.0	EPORTAL002-135288600-306	08/10/2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Applicability of the VEC COVIDSafe Election Plan to cover associated by-elections ▪ Changes regarding 24-hour quarantine of ballot papers ▪ Reinstatement of counter service in regional Victoria ▪ Further detail on scrutineers and the count process ▪ Further detail on amendments to the Regulations on 29 September 2020

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1. Introduction and purpose

Local government elections will be held across Victoria during October 2020 in the environment of the COVID-19 pandemic. The elections will be conducted entirely by postal voting. The Victorian Electoral Commission (**VEC**) is the statutory election service provider for these elections, principally under the *Local Government Act 2020 (LG Act)*.

The VEC has established and implemented an [election service plan](#). The VEC has adjusted that plan for the COVID-19 environment to ensure the safety of all participants in the election process and to meet workplace health and safety obligations. The VEC COVIDSafe Election Plan will also apply to all by-elections conducted as a consequence of the 2020 local government elections, acknowledging that these are far smaller and less complex operations.

The purpose of this document is to outline the actions the VEC is taking to deliver safe and compliant local government elections. This document also forms part of the VEC's overarching workplace COVIDSafe plan. The VEC's planning is fully compliant with the Workplace Directions and Permitted Worker and Childcare Permit Scheme Directions laid out by the public Health Commander on 13 September 2020.

The VEC recognises it is operating in a dynamic environment as it moves towards the October elections. This plan will be updated as necessary, or stakeholders will be informed of necessary changes through alternative channels.

2. Context

COVID-19 is a respiratory illness caused by a new form of coronavirus. The virus is highly contagious and can be spread by people who are infected but asymptomatic. On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency and has since declared it to be a pandemic.

In order to manage the spread of the virus, Australian governments implemented a series of responses, including social distancing and hygiene requirements, limits on gathering sizes, mobility restrictions, closures for some businesses, testing, quarantine and reporting requirements.

The Victorian Government's initial State of Emergency, declared on 16 March 2020, imposed a number of restrictions on the population including a 'Stay at Home order', effectively limiting Victorians to four reasons for leaving their home: work or study (if unable to do so remotely), shopping for essentials, exercise and care-giving. These restrictions were relaxed somewhat in late May 2020 but strengthened again for metropolitan Melbourne and Mitchell Shire in late July. In early August 2020, the mandatory wearing of masks was introduced across Victoria, Stage 4 restrictions came into operation for metropolitan Melbourne, and Stage 3 restrictions were imposed for the rest of Victoria. Stage 4 further restricted the movement of people and imposed new requirements for some businesses. On 16 September, regional Victoria moved to Step 3 of the Government's coronavirus reopening road map (defined by DHHS Area Directions (no 8) due to the very low case numbers being observed in regional areas. Metropolitan Melbourne remains at Step 2 of the Victorian Government's reopening road map. The wearing of masks remains mandatory across all Victoria.

The situation remains dynamic, and the VEC continues to actively monitor conditions and restrictions.

3. Election program overview

Victoria's 2020 local government elections (**LG2020**) constitute the largest single election program to date in Victoria, involving elections for 76 of Victoria's 79 local councils. Around 4.6 million enrolled voters and more than 2,000 candidates are expected to participate in just under 300 discrete elections. The uniform method of voting has been determined by the Minister for Local Government to be universal postal voting for all participating councils. Planning for the elections commenced in early 2019.

The general elections for Casey City Council, Whittlesea City Council and South Gippsland Shire Council have been deferred to future years following the dismissals of these councils.

4. Concept of operations

The VEC adopts an operational model where 76 election offices are established across the State – one in each local council area. Office accommodation is either sourced commercially by the VEC or provided by councils, sometimes in their own premises where suitable space is available. The VEC provides all necessary resources for election offices, including a technology suite allowing access to election management and payroll systems.

An Election Manager is appointed by the Electoral Commissioner for each of the 76 local council elections, with full responsibility for the conduct of each election. One or more assistant election managers (or Office Assistants of a senior level) are appointed to support election managers. Personnel in these roles are trained by the VEC.

Election managers recruit and appoint election casuals to support the management of the election within their local council area, which includes nomination and candidate statement processing, telephone enquiries, mail processing, counter service, and counting activities. Election management teams have access to system and procedural support via a Help Desk and a team of election support officers located at the VEC's head office at 530 Collins Street, Melbourne. The VEC also appoints a team of client liaison officers who manage the VEC's relationships with client councils.

Election offices open to the public on Wednesday 16 September, the day before candidate nominations open. The nomination period extends for three-and-a-half days, closing at 12 noon on Tuesday 22 September 2020. The Local Government (Electoral) Regulations 2020 (**Regulations**), require candidates to sign the declaration on their nomination form in the presence of the relevant Election Manager. With the exception of the Melbourne City Council elections, candidates have until 12 noon on Wednesday 23 September 2020 to lodge their statements and photographs with the Election Manager if they choose, for inclusion in the ballot material. Note: a number of deadlines for the Melbourne City Council elections continue until Monday 28 September 2020.

Ballot pack production is a highly coordinated activity involving VEC officers, large scale printing operations, a mail house and Australia Post to ensure ballot packs are prepared and dispatched to voters within a 13-day window. VEC staff oversee operations at print and mail house locations.

The VEC operates a local telephone enquiry service in each election office, with an overflow call centre at the VEC's head office to pick up calls when local staff are fully occupied.

Completed ballot material is returned by voters to the relevant election offices where teams of election staff receipt, reconcile, scan and batch material. The largest election will employ around 40 staff in the election office at the peak of this activity.

Voting closes at 6 pm on Friday 23 October 2020. The Regulations provide an extended period (five working days) for receiving returned ballot material through the post, effectively allowing returns until 12 noon on Friday 30 October 2020 (see Section 11(c) on page 20). Ballot material returned after the close of voting will only be admitted if it can be determined that the material was signed by the voter prior to the close of voting. While some extraction activities can take place following the close of voting, a full reconciliation of returns and the actual counting program cannot be completed until after this extended period. The largest election generally involves 180 staff extracting ballot material from ballot paper envelopes. Staff numbers and counting arrangements cannot be finalised until after the close of nominations when the number of candidates is known.

Manual counts are conducted within the relevant local council area to determine results for single-councillor wards¹. Computer counting is used to determine results for multi-councillor wards, unsubdivided councils and both the Melbourne City Council Leadership Team and Councillor elections. Computer counts will take place within election offices and at hired facilities including three centralised computer count centres established by the VEC across the state. While the largest computer count can involve up to 60 data entry operators at any one time, some computer count venues could run multiple consecutive shifts involving around 180 data entry operators in one venue over a 24-hour period. Election Managers publicly declare the results of their elections locally.

Election timeline:

July	Physical access to 76 election office venues for utilities connections – a mix of council and commercial premises
August	Delivery and installation of resources and technology at election offices
Friday 28 August	Close of roll – at 4 pm
Wednesday 16 September	Election offices open to the public
Thursday 17 – Tuesday 22 September	Nomination period, closing at 12 noon on 22 September
23 September	Last date for lodgement of candidate statements, photos and questionnaires (by 12 noon)
Tuesday 6 – Thursday 8 October	Mailout of ballot packs to around 4.6 million voters
Friday 23 October	Close of voting – 6 pm
Saturday 24 October	Extraction and counting activities commence
Friday 30 October	Close of extended period for the receipt of postal votes – 12 noon
Monday 26 October – Friday 13 November	Counting continues and declarations take place
February 2021	Non-voter follow-up commences

¹ Where single-councillor ward elections have more than 10 candidates, computer counting may apply.

5. Principles

The VEC is committed to providing a safe and healthy environment for work, in accordance with the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* (Vic) and Government directions whilst under the declared state of emergency.

The LG2020 program involves a wide spectrum of participants, including:

- VEC staff and election casuals
- the public
- voters
- community groups
- candidates
- candidate support workers
- scrutineers
- key local council stakeholders
- community groups
- vendors.

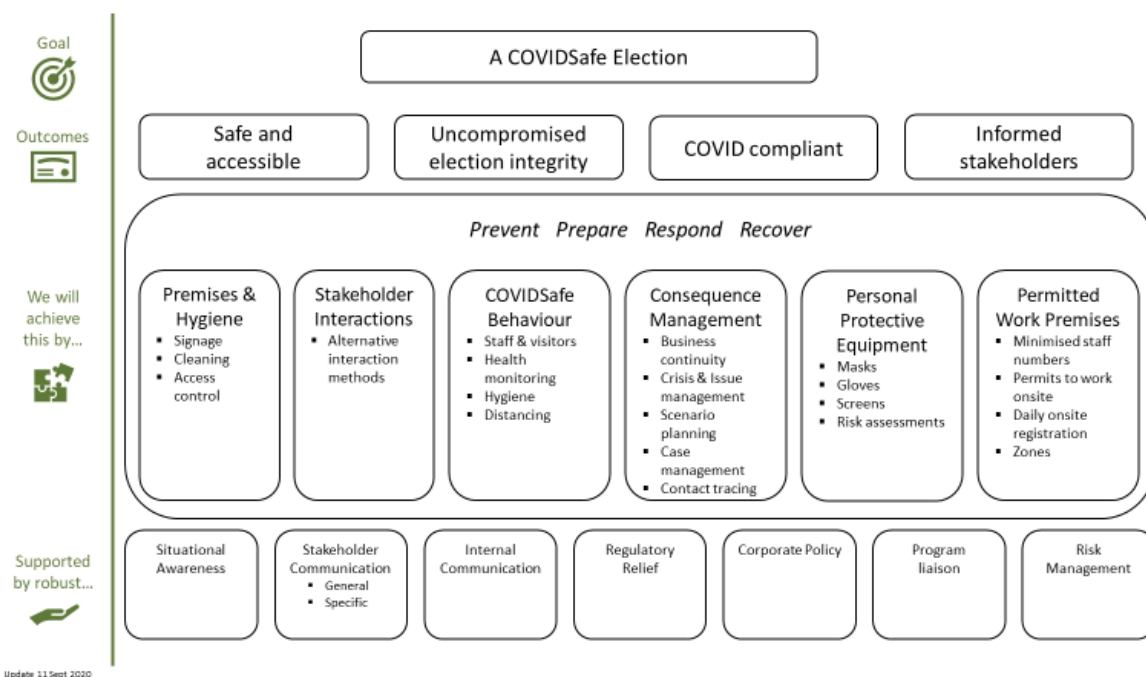
The VEC has considered the impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic on the conduct of the LG2020 program and continues to monitor carefully. This VEC COVIDSafe election plan outlines actions the VEC is taking to minimise the impact of COVID-19 on community and election participant safety, and election operations and integrity.

The VEC will ensure that the conduct of the LG2020 program:

- is safe and accessible for all participants
- complies with the relevant provisions of the LG Act and Regulations
- reassures candidates and voters of the integrity of the election and its results
- enables the successful management of the consequences of a COVID-19 outbreak

and

- complies with all State and Commonwealth directions to minimise or stop the spread of the disease.



The early planning undertaken by the VEC was based on the application of COVID-19 guidance from Safe Work Australia, the Victorian Chief Health Officer and others as of 31 May 2020, regardless of any subsequent relaxation of restrictions. This approach ensured the measures initially put in place could withstand further restrictions imposed in the future. Stage 4 restrictions have now been applied across metropolitan Melbourne election operations.

Key requirements include:

- a minimum density quotient of 4 square metres per person for all venues and workplaces
- work practices to allow a distance of 1.5 metres between staff and participants
- a limit of 15 minutes on all face-to-face interactions and 2 hours on all close interactions
- the ability to identify, trace and contact anybody who has had contact with a person confirmed or suspected to have COVID-19.

6. Reference group

To assist with the VEC’s response to COVID-19, a reference group was established. The group consists of the Electoral Commissioner and external representatives from Local Government Victoria, the Department of Premier and Cabinet, the Department of Health and Human Services, and a consultant with expertise in large program risk management. The group provides advice and subject matter expertise to the VEC in the implementation of this

COVIDSafe election plan and, thereby, assists the VEC to achieve its statutory electoral responsibilities, contracted obligations to client councils, and employer obligations.

The group is:

- analysing how the VEC's election practices conform to the relevant State health directions and national COVIDSafe workplace practices, and recommending improvements
- contributing to VEC analysis of and response to any arising COVID-19 related business continuity or issue management matter
- contributing to the development of VEC communications relating to the building of public confidence in the election process during COVID-19
- considering any other referred matter related to COVID-19 with an election, safety or public confidence impact.

The reference group operates from June 2020 to November 2020, unless extended.

7. Election venues

The elections are managed across a range of venues. The following describes the different election venues, the type of activities conducted and the interactions that take place at each.

a) VEC head office – 530 Collins Street, Melbourne

The VEC head office is the central location for ongoing VEC staff and project teams involved in the conduct of the elections. Stakeholders do not need to physically attend head office for any services specifically related to the elections. Reception services are provided by appointment only.

Apart from reception services by appointment, interactions at head office are between VEC staff only.

The head office has four discrete work zones, with strong measures in place to minimise movement of people across these zones and relevant health and hygiene measures in place for those staff required to work across the zones.

b) VEC warehouse – Melbourne Airport

The VEC operates a warehouse at the Melbourne Airport Business Park with four ongoing staff supplemented with casual staff that increases total staff to 11 before and during elections. The warehouse is responsible for preparing materials and equipment for VEC venues – including the 76 election offices and counting venues away from the election office – and manages logistical arrangements, including courier contractors. Equipment is cleaned prior to packaging for VEC venues, then again on return.

The warehouse also operates as an alternative location to 530 Collins Street, if required for business continuity purposes. Zones have been established in the warehouse, consistent with the measures in place in VEC head office, to minimise staff movement.

Interactions with staff at the warehouse are with couriers only – social distancing, hygiene procedures and PPE requirements apply at all times.

c) Election offices

The VEC acquires office space for the conduct of elections within each local council. Office space is either owned or acquired by a council or acquired commercially by the VEC for this purpose.

Furniture, materials and equipment were delivered and installed in election offices during August 2020. This included a suite of VEC-branded cardboard furniture, office chairs, steel cabinets and computer hardware as well as other resources for the conduct of the elections.

The activities that take place within each office include:

- the receipt of deliveries from couriers and IT contractors
- the receipt and processing of nominations, candidate statements and candidate questionnaires
- telephone enquiry services
- staff appointments and onboarding
- some counter services
- ballot material issuing
- processing of returned ballot material
- ballot paper extraction
- counting activities.

Election office staff can be involved in any of the above activities, including accessing VEC systems via computer workstations.

The number of staff at each venue varies considerably across office sites, depending on the size of the election and the stage in the election timeline.

The VEC has considered venue sizes and staff estimates, given COVID-19 social distancing requirements, and extra space has been acquired where necessary. Additional shifts with reduced staff numbers may also be applied to meet occupancy limits and social distancing requirements.

Staff at election offices may interact with candidates, members of the public, scrutineers and couriers.

d) Counting venues

Where there is insufficient space at election office venues to complete activities after the close of voting – such as ballot paper extraction from envelopes, manual counting and computer counting – the VEC will acquire additional space. These activities often require large numbers of staff and candidates can appoint scrutineers to oversee the activities.

Ballot paper extraction and manual counts usually involve teams of around eight staff, seated two per table and led by a team leader, overseen by scrutineers. The VEC will reduce team sizes and apply a lower maximum number of scrutineers per candidate, where necessary, to ensure occupancy limits and social distancing requirements are maintained. The VEC notes that reducing team sizes for some processes will prolong counting and delay results.

Computer counts involve sometimes large teams of data entry operators, supervised by team leaders, keying preferences from ballot papers into the VEC's computer count application. The VEC will manage the number of data entry operators present at any one time to ensure it meets occupancy limits and social distancing requirements. This may also prolong counting and delay results.

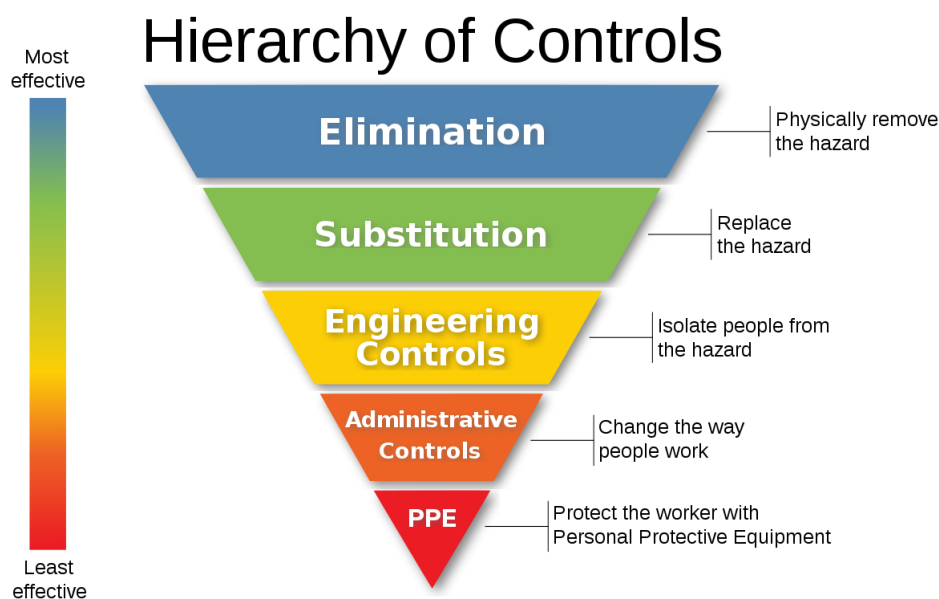
Interactions with staff at counting venues are restricted to other VEC staff, couriers and scrutineers, and all participants will be directed to comply with the VEC's physical distancing, hygiene and PPE requirements.

e) Service provider locations

VEC staff also attend service provider locations, where permitted by the provider, to oversee the printing of ballot material and production of ballot packs. Some of these activities occur in the lead up to the opening of nominations and will continue through to the close of nominations and the mailout of ballot material. The VEC will ensure COVIDSafe arrangements apply at these venues and will comply with each provider's COVIDSafe plan.

8. COVIDSafe arrangements at election venues

The VEC takes the 'hierarchy of controls' approach to reducing workplace risk.



The following arrangements will apply at all election venues before and during the conduct of the LG2020 elections.

a) Premises and hygiene

- A density quotient of 4 metres squared and physical distancing of 1.5 metres applies to all locations, including each location's workstations, meeting rooms and public and reception areas. Access control, including queue management, will be put in place as necessary to enforce maximum occupancy levels.
- VEC head office is split into discrete COVIDSafe zones, with strong measures in place to minimise the movement of people across these zones and further reduce the risk of infection spread.
- Signage is posted at entrances, arrival points and rooms to reinforce social distancing and good hygiene practice.
- Directional signage supports the flow of workforce and visitor foot traffic within the premises.
- Comprehensive and ongoing daily cleaning and disinfection schedules apply at each location, with additional cleaning measures in place for specific tasks or activities, as identified by risk assessment. Cardboard furniture has additional plastic covering in counter service areas to prevent surface contamination.
- Staff work at allocated workstations as much as possible. Where moving between workstations is unavoidable, workstations are cleaned before and after use by each staff member.
- External party access to office areas is restricted to essential business and limited in duration to reduce instances of close contact.
- A staff and visitor log is maintained at each location (including at each election office) to assist with contact tracing and is a mandatory prerequisite for visits that exceed 15 minutes.
- Temperature checking of all staff, contractors and visitors is taking place at the entrances to all VEC premises (including election offices). This commenced in mid-September.
- COVID-19 premises and hygiene tasks are managed by additional specific staff resources to ensure standards are maintained throughout the election program or election offices will engage with specific suppliers to undertake these tasks.
- The VEC is complying with all additional COVIDSafe measures put in place by shared tenants or the premises landlord and in accordance with government directions.

b) Stakeholder interactions

- All staff and visitors to VEC sites must register their attendance via the onsite attendance and/or visitor register to support contact tracing.

- Where possible, face-to-face meetings are avoided except where required by legislation, or for low-risk activities, including receipt of candidate nominations at election offices and over-the-counter replacement or unenrolled vote services in regional areas. Voting interactions at election offices are considered low risk due to the short contact time involved and the implementation of COVIDSafe procedures.
- Alternative interaction methods, such as videoconferencing, teleconferencing, pre-recorded video or audio briefings, ‘train the trainer’, provision of education packs or supplementary written materials are being employed.
- Videoconferencing is via Microsoft Teams or WebEx only. Zoom videoconferencing is only used where VEC requirements cannot be met by Teams or WebEx and following a satisfactory security risk assessment.
- Where face-to-face interactions cannot be avoided or are required by legislation:
 - interaction times will be kept to a minimum
 - the density quotient of 4 metres squared and physical distancing of 1.5 metres will apply
 - hand sanitiser or accessible handwashing facilities are available and must be utilised by all attendees
 - masks must be worn
 - signage at relevant venues advises people entering the venue to be conscious of their health and to return home if they are feeling unwell. Meetings can be rescheduled if necessary.

c) Staff and visitor attendance and behaviour

- All staff register their attendance at work when arriving at their specified location each day through online registers that track historical attendances.
- All visitors to VEC premises, or attendees at VEC events or meetings, must register their attendance unless they attend the premises briefly (i.e. for a period of less than 15 minutes). For example, a brief visit may be required to deliver goods, collect paperwork drop off ballot material or ask a brief question.
- All staff, contractors and visitors at VEC premises must have their temperature checked on arrival. Staff, contractors and visitors with increased temperature or any symptoms indicating they could be unwell will not be admitted to VEC premises.
- All staff, contractors and visitors at VEC premises must adhere to COVIDSafe social distancing, the rules regarding movement between COVIDSafe zones, and the maximum occupancy signage displayed at entrances to venues, meeting rooms or work areas.
- All staff must contact HR or their manager immediately if they feel unwell, so they can be supported to leave the facility safely and subsequent cleaning and contact tracing can be undertaken.

- To minimise the risk of exposure to COVID-19, all staff and visitors must practice good hygiene by:
 - wearing a face mask at all times, where mandated by the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services
 - regularly cleaning their hands with soap and water or hand sanitiser
 - wiping down and disinfecting hard surfaces in common areas after each use
 - covering their nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, and disposing of used tissues immediately
 - coughing or sneezing into their upper sleeve or elbow
 - avoiding close contact with anyone displaying cold- or flu-like symptoms
 - seeking advice from a healthcare professional and staying away from the workplace and other public spaces if they are feeling unwell
 - following directional signs, where placed.
- The VEC has published staff guidelines for safe travel to and from work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional guidelines have been provided to election office staff.
- When staff travel by vehicle in the conduct of VEC business, maximum occupancy will align with Government directions, travel distances will be kept to a minimum, and face masks must be worn at all times where staff must travel together.

d) Consequence management

- The VEC has a robust and tested Business Continuity Plan and Issues and Crisis Management Plan in place.
- The VEC Business Continuity Plan makes specific reference to, and plans for the consequences of, a COVID-19 outbreak on VEC premises.
- Contact tracing protocols are in place if needed.
- Detailed response protocols are in place to manage a COVID-19 positive case at any VEC premises.

e) Use of personal protective equipment

- The VEC will continue to utilise social distancing, cleaning, good hygiene practices, staff training and the minimisation of face-to-face interactions as the key preventative measures against COVID-19.
- The Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) mandated the use of face masks in metropolitan Melbourne and in Mitchell Shire from 23 July 2020, then expanded the requirement to all of Victoria on 3 August 2020. The VEC requires staff and visitors to wear a mask in all VEC premises, in all locations, as mandated by Government direction. Masks are available for staff and visitor use at VEC venues.

- Personal protective equipment (PPE) will be used where mandated by the Victorian Government. PPE is not a substitute for effective social distancing and appropriate hygiene protocols.
- Based on current advice from the Commonwealth Department of Health that gloves can increase the risk of spreading germs, the VEC does not require election staff to wear gloves unless they are undertaking particular identified processes, such as handling cash or cleaning. Gloves are available for staff where required.
- The interaction time between election staff and the public is generally short – usually less than 15 minutes with exception of during interview with nominating candidates. Because of this, the VEC will not install screens between staff and the public but will ensure the required distance between customers and staff members is maintained. The VEC will register any visitor who attends for more than 15 minutes.
- The VEC continues to monitor and assess all types of face-to-face interactions and operational processes for elevated COVID-19 risk and will take additional steps to minimise transmission risk, if required and reasonably practicable.

f) Permitted work premises

The VEC is complying fully with the requirements of the DHHS Permitted Worker Scheme.

9. Communication plan

The VEC is undertaking a suite of marketing and communication activities across multiple channels to raise awareness of, and encourage participation in, the elections.

In addition to factual key messages and essential election information, the VEC is also communicating with the general public and other stakeholders (such as councils, candidates, the media and other election participants) about this COVIDSafe election plan. These communications aim to reassure stakeholders of the safety of the elections, manage expectations about service delivery (such as the impact on vote counting and results availability), and affirm the integrity of the election conduct and results.

Key communication channels for this information include the VEC website; VEC social media platforms; media resources; advertising products; and community information and publications.

10. Impact on election services and VEC response

The following sections summarise the impact that COVID-19 restrictions will have on specific election services. The services covered are those where person-to-person interactions between election staff and other election participants have previously been required.

a) Engagement and education

The VEC would normally conduct a comprehensive outreach program in the lead up to a round of local government general elections. This work is, in the main, delivered by the VEC's

team of Democracy Ambassadors and is focused on priority communities who are traditionally under-represented in elections, including CALD communities, people with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, people experiencing homelessness, and young people. The program normally involves face-to-face education and voting support within the respective communities.

With the advent of COVID-19, the VEC has redesigned its program to provide alternative services that do not involve face-to-face contact. The key messages include that elections are being conducted by post in October; how to enrol and vote; that voting is compulsory for residents on the State roll and that non-Australian citizens who pay rates can apply to council to enrol and vote.

The five alternative pilot projects being implemented are described in the table below.

Target community	Alternative pilot projects
People with disabilities	Easy English tutorial resources and online education sessions for people in supported accommodation.
People experiencing homelessness	Print media 'myth busting' campaign and material distribution.
Aboriginal communities	Social media posts on the importance of electoral engagement, including videos featuring Aboriginal Elders.
CALD communities	In-language social media posts on enrolling and voting produced by Democracy Ambassadors.
Young people	A youth pilot co-design project with engagement with young people conducted remotely using online platforms.

The VEC continues to distribute its monthly e-newsletter called *Be Heard!*, which provides information about education and inclusion work within the community. Consultation with the VEC's advisory groups has continued, albeit virtually, to ensure that community advice is incorporated into LG2020 projects. This advice ensures that the VEC identifies electoral engagement strategies that are appropriate to the audience, e.g. culturally appropriate, accessible and targeted.

b) Enrolment

COVID-19 has not generally impacted enrolment services. State-enrolled electors can enrol or update their enrolment online via the VEC website. Electors who need to apply to councils to be enrolled on the council's CEO List will be directed to their council's website in the first instance or advised to contact the council by phone. Applications must be in writing (email is acceptable), comply with the Regulations, and be delivered to the council before the close of roll at 4 pm on 28 August 2020.

The VEC notes that many councils have temporarily closed their in-person customer service operations. The VEC continues to work with council election and roll contacts to ensure that councils are aware of their obligation to provide enrolment information.

c) Election staff training

Election managers and assistant election managers would usually complete an integrated program comprised of online, home study, and face-to-face training activities in preparation for their roles. In response to COVID-19, the VEC redesigned its program to deliver all activities online with the exception of a two day in office training program for election management teams. The in-office system-based activities prior to the opening of nominations ensured the standard occupancy limits, social distancing and hygiene arrangements applied.

Other election casuals appointed to support the conduct of the elections will be trained by their line manager, on the job at the relevant VEC venue. Some election casual roles will involve completion of additional online activities before the role commences.

d) Candidate activities

Candidate information sessions

The VEC encourages intending candidates to attend a candidate information session prior to the conduct of the election. At least one session per council has previously been conducted face-to-face by the Election Manager and covers the election timeline, candidate eligibility and other rules relevant to candidates, including any changes to legislation. The sessions are usually around an hour in duration and attendance varies significantly between councils. In 2020, the VEC is providing a recorded information session, streamed from the VEC website, complemented by one or more state-wide interactive candidate seminars based on the information session video. No local in-person sessions are being conducted. This arrangement also allows prospective candidates to review the session at a time of their choosing and is more accessible to those who would normally be unable to attend an in-person session.

Nomination processes

Candidates are required to nominate in person with the Election Manager between 9 am on Thursday 17 September and 12 noon on Tuesday 22 September 2020. The Regulations ordinarily require that candidates sign their nomination form in the presence of the Election Manager at the time of lodging their notice of candidature or nomination form (as relevant). Candidates are also ordinarily required to lodge a nomination fee of \$250 by cash or by a cheque drawn on an authorised deposit-taking institution with the Election Manager at the time of lodging their notice of candidature or nomination form (as relevant). The VEC is anticipating more than 2,000 candidates may nominate for the elections, and historically a large percentage of these are lodged on the last two days of the nomination period. The largest number of candidates for one council election in 2016 was 41.

In accordance with temporary regulatory relief inserted into the City of Melbourne (Electoral) Regulations 2012 and the Regulations, special arrangements are available to candidates who are prevented from attending an election office because of a public health direction made under the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008*. For more information, see the section on the VEC's response to the legislative constraints later in this document.

Candidates may also lodge a statement and photo with the Election Manager for inclusion in the ballot material sent to voters. In addition, they may lodge their responses to a candidate questionnaire containing prescribed questions. This information is published on the VEC's website to assist voters in choosing who to vote for. While the deadline for lodgement of these materials is 12 noon on the day after the close of nominations, many candidates choose to

lodge these materials at the same time as their nomination. Candidates may email these additional materials to the Election Manager; they are not required to be lodged in person.

The VEC provides candidates with access to its online Candidate Helper application, which allows candidates to create and edit their nomination material (including their nomination form) online. When printed, the forms include a barcode that the Election Manager will scan at the time of nomination to capture data from the forms directly into VEC systems. Use of the Candidate Helper app significantly reduces the time candidates must spend in the election office to complete their nomination, and also streamlines quality assurance processes because data entry is not required.

For LG2020, candidates must make an appointment with the appropriate Election Manager to lodge their nomination in person in order to allow the VEC to manage occupancy limits and social distancing requirements. As most candidates are still required to attend the election office, they must comply with all visitor registration, social distancing and hygiene requirements. Procedures are being developed to manage the safe transfer of paperwork and money between candidates and the Election Manager. It is expected that the nomination process will take around 30 minutes. Where the process is expected to exceed 30 minutes, candidates may be asked to wait outside the election office while checks are completed. All candidates will be encouraged to use Candidate Helper to ensure that election office attendance and processing times are minimised.

e) The ballot draw

Each Election Manager conducts a draw for each election to determine the order that candidate names (or groups for the Melbourne City Council election of Councillors) will appear on the ballot paper (Regulation 48). Multiple draws are conducted where there are multiple wards within a council. These have historically been public events for transparency purposes and are conducted in each election office as soon as practicable on the day that nominations close. Ballot draws are conducted electronically using the VEC's election management system and usually projected within the election office so that the process and result can be observed.

For the LG2020 elections, the public will not be permitted to attend election offices to view ballot draws. The VEC will arrange for an independent observer to attend each draw who can confirm that the draw was conducted according to procedures. The VEC will publish the result of each ballot draw on the VEC website as soon as possible after its completion.

f) Liaison with councils

The VEC has a dedicated team of client liaison officers (CLOs) with responsibility for managing individual election service level agreements with each council. Each council is usually visited by their allocated VEC CLO for the planning and management of individual election service agreements. Previously, meetings would occur face-to-face at council premises. For LG2020, the meetings occurred via video conferencing with two CLOs conducting the meeting.

g) Voter enquiries

Election Managers provide a local telephone enquiry service from their office during the election period. The local service ensures enquiries are managed by those familiar with the local election, who can respond consistently under the supervision of the Election Manager. An overflow call centre at the VEC's head office caters to situations where local enquiry officers are fully occupied. The overflow service responds to general questions but arranges for local operators to call the customer back if the enquiry is specific to a particular election.

Voters may attend their local election office to drop off completed ballot material. Specific quick drop off facilities will be in place for voters. They will be guided by signage and election staff to ensure the occupancy limits, social distancing and hygiene requirements are met. Such transactions are expected to be short, without the need to register the name and contact number of the voter for tracing purposes. Completed ballot material delivered by hand will be quarantined for 24 hours before election staff begin any processing. Service counters in election offices will ensure that 1.5 metres is maintained between attendees and election officials.

h) In-person voting

In elections conducted by universal postal voting, voters receive their ballot material in the mail, complete it, and return it by post.

Voters may attend an election office to vote in person if they will be away from their contact address during the voting period and wish to request a special early vote prior to the general mailout of ballot packs. Such requests will be managed by appointment. The number of voters requesting special early votes in person is historically small.

Previously, the VEC also provided the opportunity for voters to attend an election office to complete a replacement vote if the voter claims they did not receive their ballot material, had lost or spoilt it. A counter service was also offered to those voters who claimed to be entitled to vote but their name could not be found on the voters' roll. This service was offered in addition to the option of providing voters with replacement or unenrolled ballot material via the post.

With the ongoing reduction of active COVID-19 cases across regional Victoria (as defined by the DHHS Area Directions (No 8) which came into force at 11.59 pm on 13 September 2020), the VEC will allow voters in regional Victoria only (47 councils) to access unenrolled or replacement vote services over the counter at election offices. The change was endorsed by the Electoral Commissioner on 1 October 2020.

Due to the current Stay at Home Directions (Restricted Areas) (No 17) currently in force across Greater Metropolitan Melbourne, the VEC will not at this time provide an over-the-counter replacement or unenrolled vote service for election offices in this area. Voters in Greater Metropolitan Melbourne (29 councils) will be advised to request replacement or unenrolled ballot material by phone, which will be sent to them by post.

i) Extraction and counting activities

After the close of voting, ballot paper extraction from returned envelopes and counting activities takes place at either election offices or other dedicated VEC venues established for these purposes. All election staff involved in the extraction and counting activities will be briefed regularly on the VEC's registration, social distancing and hygiene requirements prior to commencing their appointment.

Candidates can appoint scrutineers to oversee extraction and counting activities and can have one scrutineer present at each extraction and counting activity for each election official involved in the activity (Regulations 31[7] and 64[1]). If candidates choose to have more than one scrutineer present at any venue at any one time, the ability to maintain occupancy limits and social distancing requirements will be seriously impacted. The management of scrutineers is covered in the next section.

The extraction of ballot papers from returned envelopes is a large-scale operation for larger councils. This activity involves teams of election officials under the supervision of a team leader, systematically opening envelopes, removing declaration flaps, and extracting ballot papers from the envelopes. A team works around trestle tables with dedicated team members moving between letter opening machines and note-counting machines. There can be several teams working in one space.

For LG2020, depending on the size of the location available for these activities the VEC will reduce extraction team sizes and ensure adequate space between tables and teams to maintain social distancing requirements (where space within the venues for these activities allows the relevant space and distance requirements to be met team sizes may be maintained). Tables and machines will be cleaned between activities.

Counting activities will commence during the week following the close of voting once extractions have been completed. Once the extended period for the return of postal ballots has expired on Friday 30 October 2020, counting activities will be finalised. Counts may be conducted manually or by computer.

Manual counts involve teams of election officials, under the supervision of a team leader, sorting ballot papers according to the first preference indicated on each ballot paper and informal ballot papers. Again, dedicated team members will move between sorting tables and note counting machines during this exercise. Once all ballot papers for an election have been sorted to first preferences, a preference distribution may be required.

For each unsubdivided council or ward election this exercise involves a team of election officials under the supervision of a team leader and a scribe working around a sorting table with dedicated staff accessing a note counting machine as required.

For LG2020, the VEC may, depending on space allocated to the extraction and count, reduce manual count team sizes and ensure adequate space between tables and teams to maintain social distancing requirements. Tables and machines will be cleaned between activities. These measures will impact the speed of counting and, ultimately, the reporting of results. The VEC is considering additional staff and splitting shifts to help with the risk of delay to normal business operations and timeframes.

Computer counts involve teams of data operators, under the supervision of a team leader, entering preferences from ballot papers into the VEC's computer count application.

Up to 47 computer count venues will be established to support the computerised count of votes for some councils. Some venues will be in election offices, some will be in hired premises such as TAFEs or universities and three centralised venues will be located at Melbourne Showgrounds, Geelong Showgrounds and Sandown Park. The largest venue will be at the Melbourne Showgrounds, where it is estimated that 150 staff will attend during peak times, split across two buildings. The venues will be open from 8 am until 8 pm each day and will operate for approximately 10 days. Additional kits and guidance will be provided to site

managers to ensure consistent signage, registration, occupancy limits, social distancing and hygiene arrangements are established at each venue. Specific staff will be appointed to monitor and enforce these activities.

For LG2020, the VEC will reduce data entry team sizes to ensure adequate space between operators to maintain occupancy limits and social distancing requirements. Data entry workstations and keyboards will be cleaned between operators and tables containing ballot paper batches will be cleaned between shifts and at the end of each day.

The impact of COVID-19-related requirements on all extraction and counting processes may significantly extend the time period for completing these activities in comparison to previous elections. The VEC will keep stakeholders informed as these activities progress during the election period. It is expected that the requirement for social distancing during counting activities will delay results, by at least one week, to Friday 13 November.

j) Scrutineers

As noted in the previous section, candidates may appoint scrutineers to oversee a number of activities during the election period. The Regulations ordinarily allow candidates to have one scrutineer present for each election official involved in the activity being observed (Regulations 31[7] and 64[1]). However, regulatory relief has been inserted into the Regulations to allow election managers to determine a lower maximum number of scrutineers for each candidate in any activity. The VEC has established guidelines on how the regulatory relief will be administered. For more information, see the section on the VEC's response to the legislative constraints later in this document.

Teams of election officials involved in extraction, manual counting and computer counting activities can range in size from around four to 30 or more. The number of candidates contesting elections in 2016 ranged from two to 41 so, ordinarily, large numbers of scrutineers can be appointed to observe these activities for any election.

The key activities that scrutineers observe are the extraction of ballot papers from envelopes, manual counts and computer counts.

During the extraction processes, ballot paper preferences on ballot papers are not visible, so scrutineers observe the general process being undertaken in the room and are not near election officials.

During manual counting processes, scrutineers observe the sorting of ballot papers by officials according to the preferences shown on them. This usually involves scrutineers being in close proximity to officials so that they can observe the preferences indicated on each ballot paper.

During the data entry of ballot papers for computer counts, the data entry of preferences from ballot papers occurs quickly and is a difficult process for scrutineers to observe in real-time. For computer counts, the VEC allows scrutineers to nominate particular batches to audit. This involves an election official reviewing ballot paper preferences in that batch by cross referencing a report showing the preferences captured in the system against the actual ballot papers, under the observation of scrutineers. This process can happen away from the data entry operators so social distancing requirements can be more easily enforced.

The remaining issue in relation to scrutineer management in the COVID-19 environment is that, while there is no specific requirement within the legislation that scrutineers must be able to observe preferences on all ballot papers, there will be an expectation that some visibility of

preferences on ballot papers is necessary for scrutineers to perform their role. This presents a challenge in the context of 1.5 metre social distancing requirements, but COVIDSafe protocols will continue to take precedence for the safety of all participants.

k) Election declarations

Each Election Manager is required to publicly declare the result of their election(s) as soon as practicable once the result is finalised. This usually takes place in the election office (or a location nominated by the council) and can be attended by all candidates and their supporters. The VEC will advise stakeholders of the form these declarations will take, which will be dependent on health and safety requirements at the time.

Declarations will take place later than for previous elections given the impact of COVID-19 arrangements on extraction and counting timelines. It is anticipated that all declarations will not be completed until at least Friday 13 November 2020.

11. Legislative constraints

To assist the VEC's COVIDSafe arrangements, the State Government inserted temporary regulations to relieve certain obligations that did not align with State and Commonwealth Government directions to minimise or stop the spread of COVID-19.

a) Nomination arrangements

Regulation 20(4) of the City of Melbourne (Electoral) Regulations 2020 and Regulation 24(4) of the Regulations require prospective candidates to sign the declaration on their notice of candidature or nomination form (as applicable) in the presence of the relevant Election Manager. Similarly, a candidate's nomination fee must ordinarily be paid by cash or by a cheque drawn on an authorised deposit-taking institution, which implies a physical handover of the payment.

On 1 September 2020, the Governor in Council made amendment regulations to allow the VEC to determine an appropriate method for eligible candidates to lodge their notice of candidature or nomination form (as applicable) and pay their nomination fee electronically. These amendment regulations commenced the day after they were made and are limited to a prescribed period until 26 April 2021.

On 9 September 2020, the Electoral Commissioner published a determination establishing a framework for prospective candidates who are prevented from attending the election office by reason of a public health direction made under the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008* in respect to COVID-19 to lodge their notice of candidature or nomination form (as applicable) by email and pay their nomination fee by electronic funds transfer. The Electoral Commissioner also determined that it was appropriate to extend the criteria for eligibility to include anyone who is immunosuppressed, immunocompromised or currently experiencing symptoms that indicate they are unwell (such as those consistent with COVID-19).

b) Scrutineering arrangements

Regulations 31(7) and 64(1) of the Regulations 2020 ordinarily permit candidates to appoint one scrutineer for each election official involved in an activity. As the VEC identifies the venues and staffing requirements well in advance of candidates appointing their scrutineers,

the VEC was unable to ensure social distancing and other COVIDSafe protocols would be able to be observed in all venues.

On 1 September 2020, the Governor in Council made amendment regulations to allow the Election Manager to determine the maximum number of scrutineers that may be present for any activity at any one time. These amendment regulations commenced the day after they were made and are limited to a prescribed period until 26 April 2021.

The VEC has established guidelines to assess the safe limits for scrutineers for each location. The guidelines recognise the important role that scrutineers play in representing candidates' interests during certain election processes. Any determination will be consistently applied for each election, to ensure each candidate has the same entitlement to scrutineers as any other candidate in the same election. It is still up to candidates to determine their number of scrutineers, up to the limit established by the Regulations or the lower limit determined by the Election Manager for each activity.

The guidelines will be shared with candidates, and Election Managers will communicate the scrutineer entitlement for the extraction and counting activities as soon as possible after local determinations have been made.

c) Clarified savings provisions

During detailed contingency planning, the VEC identified concerns about the performance of the postal system leading into the elections. To cater for possible delays in the delivery of postal votes, technical changes were made to the Regulations to clarify the provisions that allow the deadlines for close of voting and postal vote receipt to be extended, if necessary.

The Governor in Council made these technical changes 29 September 2020, which clarified existing provisions in regulations 57 and 60 of the Regulations. To avoid the possibility of confusion caused by these changes, the VEC briefed all relevant stakeholders. At the time this version of the VEC's COVIDSafe Election Plan was prepared, the provisions had not been activated. The VEC continues to liaise closely with Australia Post.

