Active Citizen Guide

A guide to getting involved in the 2024 Victorian Local Government Elections

MAV
MUNICIPAL ASSOCIATION OF VICTORIA

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we live. We recognise their connection to land, waters, and culture, and pay our respects to their Elders past and present.

Alternative Media Publications
Special arrangements can be made for this publication to be provided in large print or an alternative media format. If you need this service, please contact us on 03 9667 5555 or inquiries@mav.asn.au.

Foreword

From Municipal Association of Victoria
CEO Kelly Grigsby

As we approach the upcoming Victorian Local Government elections, it is more important than ever to be informed and engaged in our democratic processes.

This guide is designed to help you navigate key election dates, understand how to get involved, and make your voice heard.

From understanding the skills and attributes of a successful councillor to organising community meetings on issues that matter most to you, this resource provides practical steps and valuable insights. Our democracy thrives when citizens actively participate and advocate for their beliefs and values.

By taking the time to get involved, you can help shape the future of your community. We encourage you to use this guide to stay informed, get involved, and make a difference. Thank you for your commitment to being an active participant in our democratic process.

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Kelly Grigsby

About this guide

This guide has been prepared by the MAV with the aim of inspiring active local democracy. It does so by encouraging productive participation in the local government elections by both candidates and citizens alike.

This guide covers:

How Councils work

Your Council's electoral structure

Skills and attributes of a successful councillor

Getting to know your candidate

Volunteer with a campaign

Engaging with your candidates

Engaging in your community

For those looking to stand for election you will find more detailed information in the *Citizen to Councillor: A guide to becoming a local government councillor in Victoria*.

Shaping our future - About the MAV

Helping local councils build a resilient and sustainable Victoria.

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) is a membership association and peak body for Victoria's local government sector, formed in 1879 and officially recognised by the Municipal Association Act 1907 as the voice of local government.

The MAV offers councils a one-stop shop of services and support to help them serve their communities. We advocate for local government interests, initiate projects and services across a broad range of areas, and support the development, adoption and implementation of evidence-based research and policy.

Our **purpose** is to mobilise action that supports Victorian councils to create cities, regions, and towns that are thriving, resilient and inclusive communities.

Our **vision** is to be a nation-leading thought leader, partner and resource hub for the Victorian local government sector in strategic foresight, policy and research, leadership and governance, service design and advocacy impact.

Enhancing local government leadership is a core element of our purpose and vision. We provide a range of sector services tailored to this goal, including professional development and leadership programs, governance advisory services, and sector networking events. Our offerings are designed to assist new and returning councillors, helping them to build their knowledge and skills, with the aim to empower councillors to excel in their roles.

One of the 10 enabling priorities in the MAV's 2024-2027 Strategic Plan 'Shaping our future' is to amplify the importance of **active local democracy**.

We are committed to working with local government and other levels of government to ensure the local policies reflect the needs and preferences of the local communities. We know effective local democracy can facilitate public participation, improve service delivery, strengthen communities, and improve development outcomes. Supporting our Strategic Plan 2024-2027 is an annual plan which identifies activities we will undertake to support active local democracy.

To read more about the MAV, our Strategic Plan, priorities and annual plan activities, refer to
www.mav.asn.au

Local democracy thrives when we have diversity

Victoria has an incredible diversity of cultures, with more than 200 countries of origin, over 290 languages and dialects spoken, and 314 ancestries represented.

Councils play a key role in celebrating and supporting community members with migrant, refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds, and lead by example in being welcoming, inclusive and fostering social cohesion.

Local democracy greatly benefits from councillors who bring a range of backgrounds and experiences - cultural, gender, and age diversity. This inclusive representation reflects the richness of our communities, not just currently, but also for future generations.

Diverse council representation fosters a tapestry of voices and perspectives, leading to more effective decision-making. This collaborative approach ensures outcomes that are more inclusive and equitable in the delivery of local services and infrastructure.

By embracing diversity in local government, we do more than just strengthen democracy - we empower our communities to innovate and thrive.

Every voice deserves to be heard, and every perspective valued. Let's work together to ensure councils truly reflect the richness and diversity of the communities they serve.

2024 — 2027

The Municipal Association of Victoria Strategic Plan

SHAPING OUR FUTURE

Helping local councils build a resilient & sustainable Victoria

How Councils work

Councils are area-based representative governments with a legislative and electoral mandate to manage local issues and plan for the community needs.

Each council comprises two essential parts – the Council, which is the governing body responsible for setting the strategic direction and making high-level decisions, and a separate administrative arm staffed by council officers responsible for the day-to-day operations, delivering services and providing executive support to the Council.

Councillors collectively comprise the governing body of the Council and are elected for a four-year term. Overall, the role of councillors is to take part in the decision-making of council, inform the direction of council through the development of key strategic documents, and to represent the interests of the whole community.

The default setting for councils' electoral structures under the *Local Government Act 2020* is for councils to have multiple single-councillor wards. However, rural shires can be structured to elect all councillors to an unsubdivided (no wards) structure, or as several wards each electing an equal number of councillors per ward (for example, three wards, each electing three councillors) or single-councillor wards.

To establish the council's electoral structure (wards or unsubdivided) and the number of councillors for each council, Electoral Representation Advisory Panels conducts electoral representation reviews and provides recommendations to the Minister of Local Government. Any changes to electoral structures and councillor numbers will be determined by the Minister prior to each four-year election cycle.

For more information about local council elections visit vec.vic.gov.au and electoral structure and ward boundary reviews visit localgovernment.vic.gov.au

Voters are strongly encouraged to acquaint themselves with the official information published on the VEC website regarding their own council's electoral structure arrangements. This includes whether the council is divided into wards or unsubdivided, boundary maps, councillor numbers, and more.

Throughout the electoral process, the VEC plays a crucial role in administering council elections, ensuring election processes are conducted fairly and transparently in accordance with legislation.

The Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) is the official source for all matters pertaining to the conduct of council elections. The VEC's website, vec.vic.gov.au, offers a comprehensive range of information on council elections. This includes up-to-date details on election timelines, key dates, voter eligibility and enrolment, as well as candidate eligibility and nomination requirements. Furthermore, the VEC website will provide updated information on all eligible candidates standing for election at each council following the close of nominations.

Following the close of voting, it also facilitates the declaration of the polls and publishes each council's election results.

Mark these dates in your calendar to stay informed and engaged in the upcoming election process!

Key Candidate Dates

Close of roll	Wednesday, 7 August (4pm)
Candidate Nominations open	Monday, 9 September
Candidate Nominations close	Tuesday, 17 September (12 noon)
Deadline to submit candidate statements	Tuesday, 17 September (12 noon)
Ballot draw	Wednesday, 18 September (10am)
Mail out of ballot packs	Tuesday, 7 October
Close of voting	Friday, 25 October (6pm)
All results finalised	By Friday, 15 November

Your Council's electoral structure

Skills and attributes of a successful councillor

Being a councillor can be a challenging experience. It requires balancing competing demands and exercising judgement about important and complex matters. It also requires being able to work well with others and use a broad range of skills and competencies.

The skills and attributes of a successful councillor include:

Community-driven	Dedicated to serving the whole of community interests.
Quality decision maker	Considers diverse perspectives, weighs up all relevant information, and the longer-term consequences to achieve the most beneficial outcomes.
Strategic thinker	Possesses the ability to envision future needs, analyse current challenges, and formulate sustainable plans that will influence the long-term success of the council and community.
Leader and team player	Able to inspire, guide, and collaborate with others to achieve a shared vision and outcomes, with an emphasis on strategic priorities and a strong commitment to teamwork for the benefit of the community.
Effective communicator	Capable of communicating effectively, actively listening, embracing diverse voices and opinions, and advocating on behalf of the community
High ethical integrity and behaviour	Honest, fair, and trustworthy, taking ownership and responsibility for actions. Does not misrepresent for personal or others' gain. Understands and models the Council's values and behaviours, and working respectfully with fellow councillors, council staff, and others, valuing their respective roles.
Political acumen	An understanding of the respective roles of governments and an ability to make informed decisions within a political context.
Relationship builder	Builds productive relationships and support within the Council, the community, and other organisations in order to create and deliver on the community's vision and achieve outcomes.
Conflict resolution skills	Ability to understand diverse opinions, facilitate open dialogue, to resolve issues and find mutually beneficial solutions.

How to do decide who to vote for?

It's important to think about who you might vote for in advance - don't wait until the close of voting. First, find out which candidates are standing in your area, and especially in your Ward.

Once you know who is standing, do your research and decide who you're supporting. Some candidates will be standing as independents, and others will be standing for political parties. Most will have information available online, and some will also post leaflets through your letterbox - or even knock on your door to meet you - closer to the election.
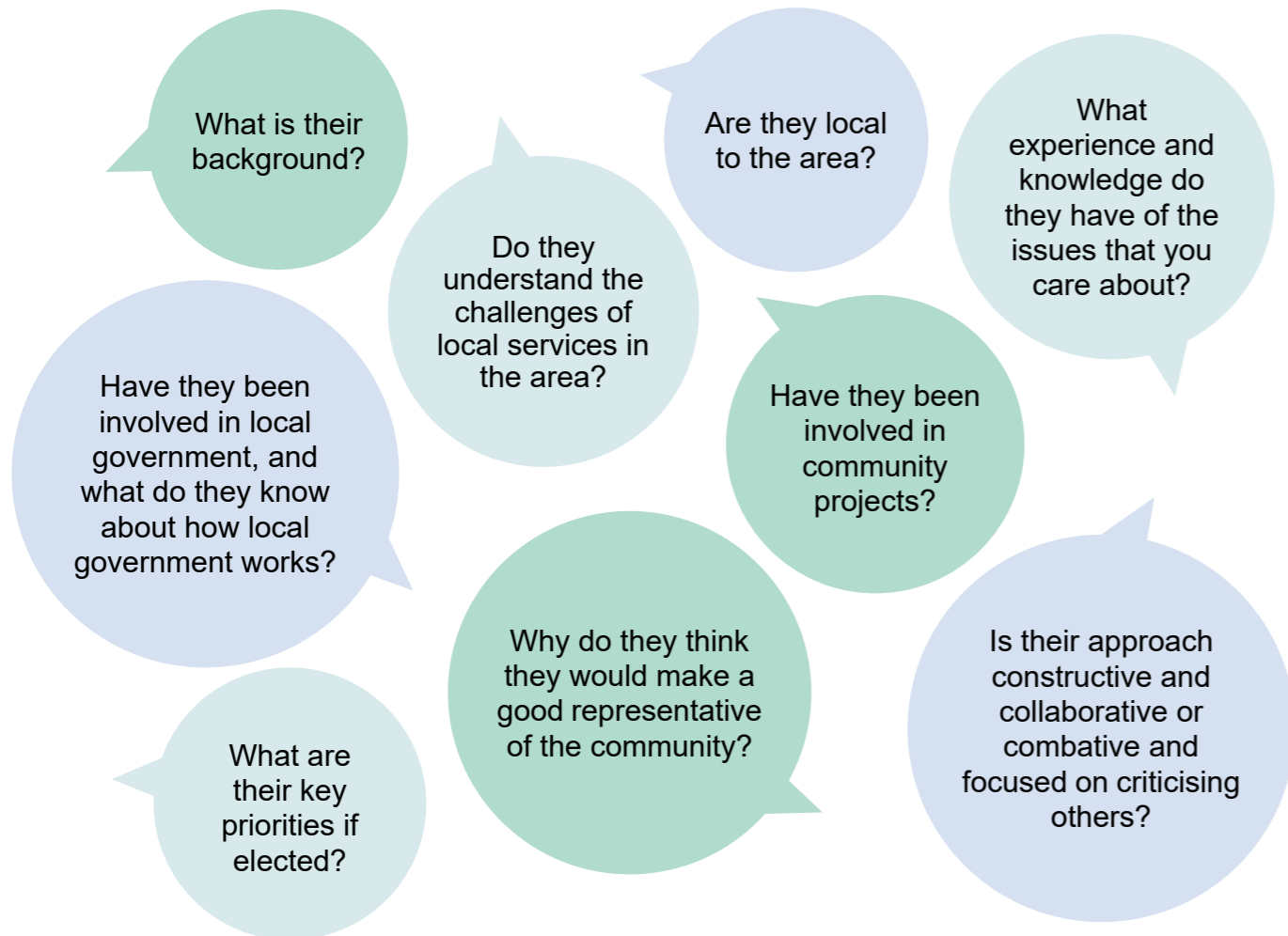
How do I get to know my candidates?

Candidates for local government elections can lodge a statement to be included in the ballot pack sent to voters and are also asked to complete a candidate questionnaire.

Both the statement and the questionnaire responses are published on the Victorian Electoral Commission Website. The candidate questionnaire gives voters background information on each candidate. This information allows voters to compare each candidate's experience.

Getting to know your candidate

You might want to research or ask candidates

What is their background?

Are they local to the area?

What experience and knowledge do they have of the issues that you care about?

Do they understand the challenges of local services in the area?

Have they been involved in local government, and what do they know about how local government works?

Have they been involved in community projects?

Why do they think they would make a good representative of the community?

Is their approach constructive and collaborative or combative and focused on criticising others?

What are their key priorities if elected?

CANDIDATE CHECKLIST

○ Have you researched which candidates are running in your area?

_____

○ Which candidates are going to be on your ballot?

_____

○ Who is going to get your vote?

_____

How can I help a candidate?

Volunteer

Volunteering on an election candidate's campaign is a great way to immerse yourself in a dynamic environment with others who are also striving to get your chosen candidate elected. It provides a valuable opportunity to learn more about the democratic process and the experience of standing for election.

Why Volunteer?

All candidates rely on a team of volunteers to support their election campaigns. You do not need to be a member of a political party to volunteer, making it accessible to anyone interested in contributing.

Steps to start volunteering:

Identify candidates	Research who the candidates are in your area and decide which candidate you would like to support.
Get in touch	Contact the candidate directly to inquire about volunteer opportunities and offer your help and ask how you can contribute to their campaign.
Highlight your skills	Inform the candidate about your skills and how you can assist. For example: If you excel in social media, let them know or if you are good at crafting policy responses, tell them!

Volunteer with a campaign

Tip: Understand the jargon

Local government often uses jargon or abbreviations. Don't hesitate to ask for clarifications if you encounter unfamiliar terms.

Volunteering on a campaign not only helps a candidate but also enriches your understanding of the political process and enhances your own skills.

VOLUNTEER CHECKLIST

- Have you researched which candidates are running in your area?

- Is there a specific individual you would like to volunteer with?

- Which campaign volunteer opportunities appeal to you?

- Have you emailed your chosen candidate to ask how you can get involved?

- Have you inquired about how you can be of the most help to the candidate?

Engaging with your candidates

How can I engage with candidates on what matters to me?

Meet your candidates

Meeting with candidates to share the issues that matter to you is one of the most powerful actions you can take. You can start this process anytime from when a candidate is first announced.

Here's how:

Identify and contact candidates	Once you know who the candidates are, send them an email, reach out to arrange a meeting or have a conversation.
Prepare for the meeting	Research their views and interests (e.g., through their social media) to tailor your conversation.
Follow up	Send a thank-you email after the meeting. Follow up post-election with either commiserations or congratulations and arrange another meeting.
Build relationships	Develop ongoing relationships with councillors, especially those who represent your ward or area. Regular communication helps them understand the issues you care about and can influence their stance on key decisions.
Follow councillor social media	Many councillors are active on social media, where they share updates, seek feedback, and discuss local matters. Engaging with them on these platforms allows you to stay informed and contribute to discussions in real time.
Monitor and hold them accountable	After the election, track their progress on the issue. Attend council meetings, engage with media, or use social media to remind them of their pledge. Collaborate with other community groups or local advocates to put your views.

Tip: Engage with candidates

from the very beginning by sharing the issues that matter to you. Find out what they care about—roads, services, the environment, community programs—and frame your communications to show how their priorities intersect with yours.This early contact can build trust and understanding, making your voice heard long before the election.

ENGAGEMENT CHECKLIST

○ Have you researched the candidate?

○ Have you contacted the candidate to set up a meeting?

○ Have you prepared key points of what you will say?

○ Have you familiarised yourself with the council's decision-making processes?

○ Have you found out what community meetings are on in your area and prepared questions to ask?
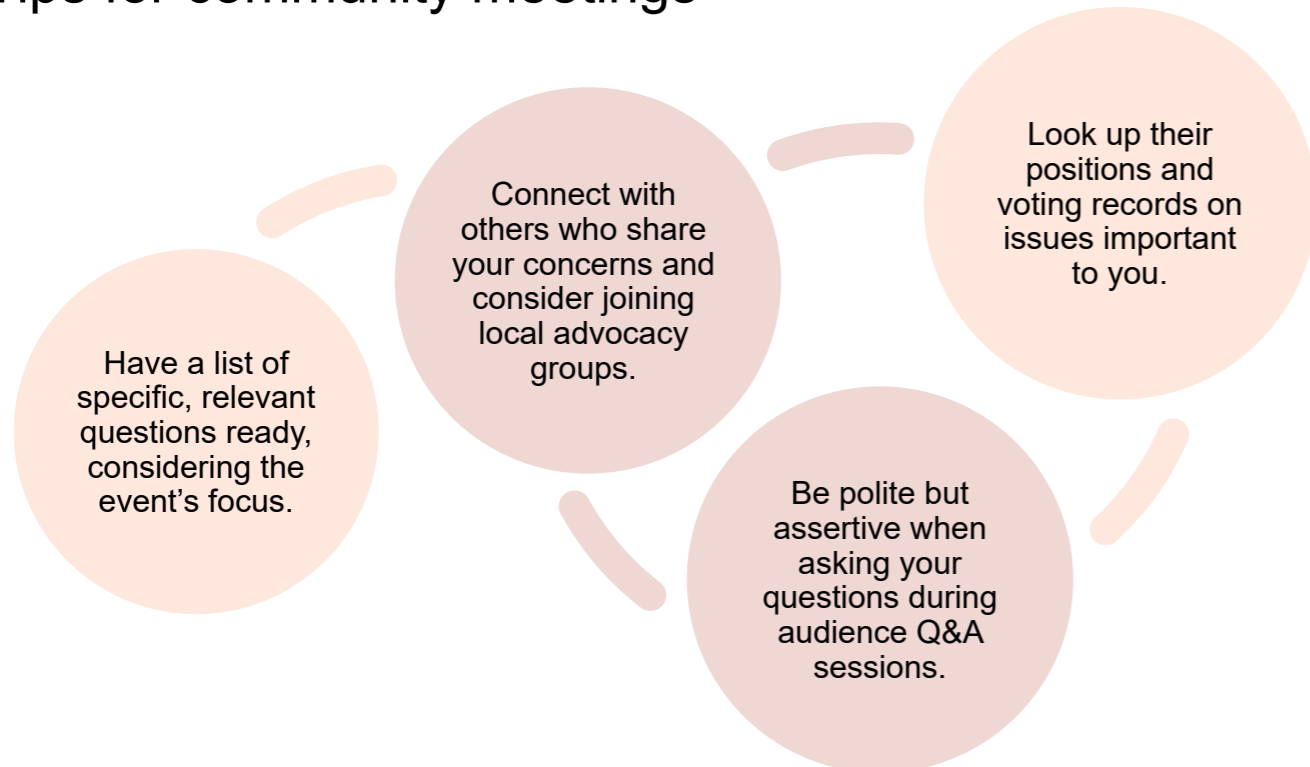
Engaging in your community

How do I organise a community meeting?

Organising a community meeting allows you to set a broad theme and focus the discussion on the issues that matter most to your group.

Get a team	**Gather helpers**
	Identify who in your group can help organise the event. While initial planning can be done by one or two people, having a small team to help promote and manage the event is beneficial.
	Consider co-organising with another group with similar aims to spread the workload and increase turnout.

Set a date	**Advance planning**
	Candidates are busy leading up to elections, so plan with as much notice as possible.
	Start planning early, aiming for at least four weeks' notice to candidates and audience members.

Pick a venue	**In-person events**
	Ensure the venue is accessible. Consider factors like cost, capacity, location, public transport, refreshments, and audio-visual equipment.
	Have a sound system with a handheld microphone for audience questions.

Online events	Choose a suitable platform and spend time setting up and familiarising yourself with the event settings.
	Obtain permission from candidates and notify attendees if recording the event and conduct a practice run to ensure smooth management.

Invite candidates	**Political impartiality**
	Invite all candidates in your area, checking the VEC website for updates and follow up by email or phone if you don't receive replies.
	If your group has specific policy interests, mention these in your email and attach relevant documents to help candidates prepare.

Plan the running order

Event duration

Community meetings should be 1-2 hours long, depending on whether it's online or in person. There is no fixed format, but ensure the public hears from candidates and has ample time for questions and responses.

Get the word out

Invite networks Candidates are busy leading up to elections, so plan with as much notice as possible. Start planning early, aiming for at least four weeks' notice to candidates and audience members.

Social Media Create and share an image with key details (time, date, location) on social media and use tools like Canva to make visually appealing promotional images.

Leaflets Print leaflets to distribute in cafes, community centres, local notice boards, or bus stops and hand out leaflets at busy locations to spread the word.

By organising a community meeting, you can ensure the issues important to your group are discussed, engage with the community, and build relationships with candidates.

Tips for community meetings

Connect with others who share your concerns and consider joining local advocacy groups.

Look up their positions and voting records on issues important to you.

Have a list of specific, relevant questions ready, considering the event's focus.

Be polite but assertive when asking your questions during audience Q&A sessions.

What steps can you take to engage with your community?

Identify community groups	Review which community groups you, your family, and friends are involved in and check the council website for a list of community groups as a reference.

Understand the goals of these groups and identify their leaders or key influencers and if you know these leaders, reach out to ask about the issues most important to them and their group. |
| **Engage on social media** | **Local Facebook groups**

Join Facebook groups run by and for your local community, such as discussion spaces and buy-sell-swap pages and use these platforms to gauge community sentiment and connect. |
| **Stay informed about local happenings** | **Community events and news**

Attend community meetings to stay updated on local events, issues, and developments and read local news sources regularly.

Engage directly with community members to understand their concerns. |
| **Network and build relationships** | **Community networking**

Volunteer for a community group and network with community members, leaders, and organisations. Building strong relationships is crucial for effective community leadership. |
| **Communicate through local media** | **Letters to local papers**

Write letters to local newspapers sharing your insights and opinions on community issues. This raises awareness and engages the community in meaningful and respectful discussions. |

Active citizenship

Participate in council activities

Attend council meetings

Find out when your council meetings take place, these are available on your council website: Read the meeting agenda, which are publicly available before each meeting and ask council questions on council business that is meaningful to you.

Attend council meetings in your area to get involved in the decision-making process and consider attending meetings in neighbouring areas to gain a broader perspective.

Watch a council meeting online.

Advocate for civic education

Empowerment workshops

Promote and advocate for workshops that help community members understand local governance and democracy.

These educational opportunities enhance civic engagement.

Join local community groups

Active participation

Participate and familiarise yourself with community engagement and consultation initiatives offered by your council.

Learn from experienced leaders

Conversations with councillors

Talk to current or past councillors to gain insights from their experiences.

Their knowledge can be invaluable for understanding the role of local government responsibilities and local issues.

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