

**Public Accounts and Estimates Committee**

**Parliamentary Inquiry into**

**Managing School Infrastructure**

**MAV Response**

**January 2020**

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The MAV is the statutory peak body for local government in Victoria. The MAV would like to acknowledge the contribution of those who provided their comments and advice during this project.

Table of contents

[1. Summary 4](#_Toc29975213)

[2. Introduction 7](#_Toc29975214)

[3. The role of local councils in relation to managing school infrastructure 8](#_Toc29975215)

[4. Response to specific recommendations 10](#_Toc29975216)

[4.1 VAGO Report Recommendation 4 10](#_Toc29975217)

[4.2 VAGO Report Recommendation 5 12](#_Toc29975218)

[4.3 VAGO Report Recommendation 6 12](#_Toc29975219)

# Summary

Schools and integrated school/community facilities form the backbone of local towns and neighbourhoods – whether they are in growth corridors, landlocked metropolitan suburbs, or small rural townships. Many Victorian councils invest in local schools through planning, co-contributions, governance and maintenance arrangements for joint council/school facilities. Councils are ultimately responsible, by statute, for planning and providing services for their community. They are committed to ensuring existing and new school facilities are integrated into planning for the overall wellbeing of their communities and for student achievement, engagement and optimal outcomes. Councils want to maximise state/local government resources for the benefit of local school communities and residents and partner with the Victorian government both early in the school planning cycle and during their own planning processes.

Councils hold valuable information about their local community that can inform school infrastructure planning and delivery. For collaborative master planning to be effective, state/local government planning processes and timelines could be better aligned. This would then require Victorian Government resources to be committed in advance of state budget allocating funds for land acquisition. There is an opportunity to progress a long term aligned and agreed state/local government planning framework. This could accommodate both DET’s twenty year/five-year school priority planning process and councils’ ten year infrastructure planning cycles.

The Victorian Auditor General’s Report, Managing School Infrastructure (AG report), provides important insights into the strengths of the current school planning, implementation and management process. It also offers opportunities for councils and schools to better collaborate when planning for new and established school infrastructure that can build community, strengthen student outcomes and maximise valuable state/local government investment for the benefit of all.

**Key responses:**

**Local government’s role in school planning**

1. Victorian Local Government is a pivotal partner in ensuring that school provision planning, including joint facility planning, is integrated with infrastructure planning frameworks, policies and plans at a local, regional and state level;
2. Councils can provide critical local information and data to inform effective planning for new schools - such as future residential developments, potential school sites, the numbers of new birth notifications and kindergarten enrolment data. In addition, councils prepare longer term strategic plans, such as for recreation and open space, that can inform State planning;
3. Councils have decades of experience in cementing policies and practices to plan, invest in and establish recreational spaces and co- located facilities such as sporting venues, libraries, cultural centres, community centres, early childhood education and care facilities - on or adjacent to school sites;
4. The Kindergarten Expansion Reform provides a new opportunity for a strengthened local/state government school/community planning partnership;
5. The DHHS/DET and local government (represented by MAV) Compact provides a new central and area-based platform for discussions and decisions around planning for early childhood and school infrastructure;

**Forecasting school enrolments**

1. Growth councils have welcomed the increased partnership work with DET through the 2016/2017 school pipeline process, although there are some inconsistencies of approach experienced by some regional councils;
2. Early, formal DET involvement in council planning processes would ensure schools are a key part of any new community, are strategically located and would foster DETs commitment to improving student outcomes. There is an opportunity to progress a long term aligned and agreed state/local government planning framework. This could accommodate both DET’s twenty year/five-year school priority planning process and councils’ ten-year infrastructure planning cycles;
3. The dispersed nature of residential development across municipalities and speed of growth necessitates much earlier land purchases especially in order to ensure land for school sites will be available when needed;
4. Early engagement work with councils and their data, could support pipeline forecasting and testing. It would build local/state government partnership, utilise council planning expertise and assist in better meeting demand for school places, managing peak enrolments and planning future school locations;

**Co-location of school and community facilities**

1. MAV concurs with the AG report that DET demonstrates a policy commitment to exploring possibilities for strategically investing in multi-use, shared and co-located facilities;
2. Even with the Victorian Government recognising the benefit of co-location, the planning and delivery process and timelines for new government schools does not align with local government planning processes. Community infrastructure cannot be effectively integrated under the current model;
3. To realise the local and ongoing benefits of locating schools with community hubs or precincts, DET and local government need to work more closely together to establish an appropriate model for planning and delivering shared facilities and integrated sites;
4. Policy initiatives to enable co location of early childhood/school facilities in rural townships and sharing of recreational spaces would aim to maximise community outcomes with reduced financial commitments for small communities, and create vibrant, integrated community/school partnerships;
5. Councils have expressed confusion and difficulty in finding the appropriate DET person to liaise with on joint use facilities. They are often not clear whether they should liaise with DET Regional Office, VSBA or DET Central Office. DET has a policy commitment of strategically investing in multi-use, shared and co-located facilities and so does local government. Clear communication and negotiation - from the earliest planning, development and implementation phases to the ongoing governance/management phases - would maximise resources, streamline processes and strengthen buy in, commitment and partnership. Allocating a dedicated individual in DET for the planning and delivery of integrated and co-located infrastructure is suggested;
6. Given that councils invest significant funds into joint council/school facilities, the involvement of local government in refining the role of school planning committees and developing overarching Joint Use Agreement arrangements would support better outcomes in the planning, development and implementation of co located facilities.

# Introduction

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) is the peak representative and advocacy body for Victoria's 79 councils. The MAV was formed in 1879 and the *Municipal Association Act* 1907 appointed the MAV the official voice of local government in Victoria.

Today, the MAV is a driving and influential force behind Victoria’s strong and strategically positioned local government sector. Our role is to represent and advocate the interests of local government; raise the sector's profile; ensure its long-term security; facilitate effective networks; support councillors; provide policy and strategic advice; capacity building programs; and insurance services to local government.

In May 2017, the Victorian Auditor-General’s Report No. 253, “Managing School Infrastructure” identified key findings related to strategic asset management planning, asset acquisition planning and managing existing school assets. In December 2019, the MAV was invited to respond to the Parliamentary Inquiry, particularly in relation to:

* The status of the recommendations made by the Auditor-General regarding the management of school infrastructure.
* Effective asset management arrangements for school assets, including maintenance planning.
* Adherence to the Asset Management Accountability Framework.
* Governance arrangements for asset management, including roles and responsibilities.
* Accountability mechanisms for managing school assets.
* Any of the issues highlighted in the Auditor-General’s report.
* Any significant developments since the tabling of the Auditor-General’s report in September 2016.

This document outlines our response to three recommendations that relate to provision planning, decisions for managing changing enrolments and the plan and design of shared facilities. The commentary on these recommendations includes local government experiences on developments since the tabling of and issues raised in the Auditor-General’s (AG) report.

# The role of local councils in relation to managing school infrastructure

Local government enables the economic, social and cultural development of the municipal area it represents, supports individuals and groups, and provides a wide range of services for the wellbeing of the local community. Victorian council’s statutory[[1]](#footnote-2) functions include advocating and promoting proposals which are in the best interests of the local community and planning for and providing services and facilities for the local community.

Planning for schools is not within the direct jurisdiction of local government, however, Victorian councils are intrinsically involved in school planning. Victorian Local Government is a pivotal partner in ensuring that school provision planning and joint facility planning is not undertaken alone but is integrated with council planning frameworks and policies at a local, regional and state level. Councils can provide critical local information and data to inform effective planning for new schools - such as future residential developments, potential school sites, the numbers of new birth notifications[[2]](#footnote-3) and kindergarten enrolment[[3]](#footnote-4) data.

**Building communities**

Councils have decades of experience in cementing policies and practices to plan, invest in and establish recreational spaces and co-located facilities such as sporting venues, libraries, cultural centres, community centres, early childhood education and care facilities - on or adjacent to school sites. These partnership arrangements have been supported by significant state/local government policy work over time including:

* Policies and strategies emphasising the collaboration needed for building communities[[4]](#footnote-5) through school/community infrastructure in growth, regional and established areas[[5]](#footnote-6)
* Investigating the sharing of government and community facilities[[6]](#footnote-7)
* Establishing a 50-year infrastructure plan for Melbourne
* Regional growth plans[[7]](#footnote-8)
* Establishing community joint use agreements with schools[[8]](#footnote-9)
* Developing place-based education plans[[9]](#footnote-10).

Councils undertake strategic and statutory local planning activities such as precinct, structure and social infrastructure planning. Key groups such as the Interface Councils Group produce reports[[10]](#footnote-11) to inform school/community infrastructure planning for the 1.7m residents living in Melbourne’s outer suburbs.

**Kindergarten expansion reform**

From 2022, every three-year old will have access to at least five hours of kindergarten a week, that increases to 15 hours by 2029. To make sure three-year-old children have the infrastructure they need to attend kindergarten, the Victorian Government is working closely with councils to support the building and expanding of almost 1,000 kindergartens across the state. This includes ensuring that kindergartens are located on or next to all new primary schools that open from 2021.

**The Early Years Compact**

​​​A ten year agreement between the Department of Education and Training (DET), the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and local government – represented by the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) - establishes a commitment between state and local government to work together at a senior level, to improve outcomes for young children and their families. It sets strategic priorities enabling joint work on local priorities, such as facility planning. The compact is implemented through place-based local governance arrangements across the 17 DET-DHHS areas. These arrangements build on existing area-based partnerships/networks that are operating successfully. Area-based compact meetings have already provided an important platform for discussions and decisions around planning for early childhood and school infrastructure.

In summary, Victorian Local Government is a pivotal partner in ensuring that school provision planning, including joint facility planning is not undertaken alone but integrated with infrastructure planning frameworks, policies and plans at a local, regional and state level. Councils can provide critical local information and data to inform effective planning for new schools - such as future residential developments, potential school sites, the numbers of new birth notifications and kindergarten enrolment data. Councils have decades of experience in cementing policies and practices to plan, invest in and establish recreational spaces and co- located facilities such as sporting venues, libraries, cultural centres, community centres, early childhood education and care facilities - on or adjacent to school sites. The Kindergarten Expansion Reform provides a new opportunity to strengthen local/state government and school/community planning partnerships, and the Compact provides a new central and area-based platform for discussions and decisions around planning for early childhood and school infrastructure.

# Response to specific recommendations

## VAGO Report Recommendation 4

*“We recommend that Department of Education and Training test the accuracy of its provision planning forecasting over short, medium-and long-term projections to understand its reliability over time.”*

**School forecasting model**

In 2015/2016 DET adopted a new approach that focuses on forecast enrolments rather than proposed sites for future schools. As outlined in the AG report (p24), this provides a more detailed analysis of the twenty-year forecast enrolments in areas smaller than a suburb. Enrolment forecasting could be further improved by incorporating local data such as birth notifications and kindergarten central enrolment data. The Maternal and Child Health Child Information System (jointly administered by DHHS and MAV) records birth notifications, key ages and stages visits, family locality and important mobility patterns in and out of each municipality. Council kindergarten enrolment systems[[11]](#footnote-12) record allocation of kindergarten places and preferences to local kindergartens which in turn feed into school enrolments. This data can provide early indication for school enrolment forecasting and could supplement the current model.

Some growth councils report an historical under-provision of school places and infrastructure, with a significant shortfall of new schools projected by DET. These councils advocate for using an even more sophisticated school population modelling tool, based on actual year level school enrolments in the local area - with frequent adjustment periods, and considering the higher numbers of dwellings and families than Precinct Structure Plans originally predict.

The DET planning model now focuses on forecast enrolments, however, there is still some way to go in order to streamline the processes, consider school locations and set aside land for future community needs. Councils undertake comprehensive precinct/township structure plans for growth that include integrated land use planning in established areas. These plans need to set aside land to be purchased at an affordable price for new/expanded schools, kindergartens, maternal and child health, libraries, community/cultural centres, recreational spaces and so on. School sites are identified as part of this process, however, councils report that it is difficult to engage with DET at the structure planning phase. This makes it hard to secure the retention of an identified school site once the structure plan is implemented. If a new/ expanded school site has not been identified, it is unclear what will happen once the existing school reaches capacity. The dispersed nature and sometimes speed of residential development across the state necessitates early land purchases and/or consolidations to ensure land for future school sites will be available when needed. Councils are in an ideal position to advise/collaborate with DET to determine future sites as councils have information on site readiness, developer intentions and adjacent infrastructure.

**DET School Pipeline process**

The new DET school pipeline includes identifying the priority schools required over the next 20 years to meet the greatest forecast shortfall in school places. A five-year pipeline of priorities is then developed in consultation with councils and recommended to Government. Growth councils have welcomed the increased partnership work with DET through the 2016/2017 school pipeline process. The process has improved collaboration with councils in growth areas, albeit in some cases without the council data or modelling as outlined in the previous section, to inform the priorities. However, some regional councils report inconsistent engagement from DET in the process.

The school pipeline process identifies new school priorities for government consideration. However, it is not clear whether these priorities meet demand, if there are any gaps and how gaps will be addressed. The dispersed nature of residential development across municipalities and speed of growth necessitates much earlier land purchases especially in order to ensure that land for school sites will be available when needed.

Growth area councils have experienced delays in school builds which necessitates students attending interim schools, school overcrowding or travelling long distances. This impacts on student achievement, family work patterns and general community wellbeing. Again, DET linking in with councils' master planning processes early would enhance the school pipeline process. Early engagement work with councils and their data, could support pipeline forecasting and testing. It would build local/state government partnership, utilise council planning expertise and assist in better meeting demand for school places, managing peak enrolments and planning future school locations.

The new school pipeline process has focused to date on new schools in growth areas and has brought together a range of planning partners to enable collaborative planning on the location of future schools. As outlined in the AG report (p27), it is important that this process is considered for all municipalities to enable integration of council and DET planning for schools to be developed where needed across the state. This includes not only planning for new schools but also planning for effective utilisation of existing school facilities in low population areas. Policy initiatives to enable co location of early childhood/school facilities in rural townships and sharing of recreational spaces would aim to cost effectively maximise outcomes for small communities and create vibrant, integrated community/school partnerships.

Early, formal DET involvement in council planning processes would ensure schools are strategically located a key part of any new community and would foster DETs commitment to improving student outcomes. There is an opportunity to progress a long term aligned and agreed state/local government planning framework. This could accommodate both DET’s twenty year/five-year school priority planning process and councils’ ten-year infrastructure planning cycles.

## VAGO Report Recommendation 5

*“We recommend that Department of Education and Training establish guidelines to inform its decisions for managing changing enrolments in established areas – considering school locations, purchasing of land ahead of when it is required, access issues for students and school land.”*

MAV concurs with the AG report (p 28) that DET has effectively used its stock of relocatable buildings to address changing enrolment demand. Councils report that relocatables have been refurbished and reassigned quickly to schools. DET has also supported the provision of relocatable kindergartens in growth areas as part of its commitment to kindergartens on school sites. As outlined in our comments for Recommendation 4, official DET involvement and financial commitment early in council structure planning processes would ensure schools are a key part of any new community, are strategically located and foster DETs commitment to improving student outcomes through the pillar of community engagement in learning.

## VAGO Report Recommendation 6

*“We recommend that Department of Education and Training work with local councils and other partners, particularly in growth areas, to strategically plan and design multi-use, shared and co-located facilities before new schools are funded through state budgets.”*

It is positive to see that DET has a policy commitment to exploring possibilities for strategically investing in multi-use, shared and co-located facilities as outlined in the AG report (p29), with the one main pillar of DET’s “Framework for Improving Student Outcomes” being “Community Engagement in Learning”[[12]](#footnote-13).

School-based community hubs and/or co-located services provide families and children timely access to the services they need, while developing an improved understanding of the school culture and school connectedness. Shared facilities bring other benefits including improving service delivery; expanding the scope of services; encouraging social connectedness within communities; facilitating access to and participation in school/community activities; improving efficiency and better use of land.

**Local/State shared facilities**

There has been extensive planning, building and sharing of school and local government community facilities in Victoria over many decades. These range from occasional use of existing school facilities, ongoing arrangements to co-fund and use new purpose-built facilities and spaces, to the development of large-scale school/community centres. For example, in 2003 Melton City Council led a consortium including the Victorian Government, the Developer and community groups to fund and establish Brookside Learning Centre. The centre includes Mowbray College and Caroline Springs College administration areas, the municipal library, computer science area, performing arts and music complex, community resource rooms, and an early childhood integrated hub. A more recent example is DET’s 2016/2017 “Shared Facilities Fund” which has seen nine councils establish community facilities on school sites across Victoria, including early learning centres, sporting facilities and community hubs.

Councils have expressed support for these partnership opportunities. Councils in growth areas and some regional areas have also appreciated being part of the DET school building pipeline discussions since 2017. However, councils in established areas and some regional areas report little or no improvements in collaboration with DET and perceive a lack of DET engagement or interest in council town planning processes – either for areas of declining population or for new growth suburbs in their municipalities.

Many councils collaborate locally with DET schools to gain community access to recreation facilities outside school hours. Since the 2016 Audit report, some councils have been working with DET and schools to develop proposals for the renewal and/or expansion of integrated education and sporting facilities, which is particularly important in landlocked metropolitan municipalities. Such proposals support the creation of a vibrant sporting and recreation culture contributing to the community’s health and wellbeing. Despite significant master planning, geotechnical work, parking surveys, cost plans and business cases developed by councils with local schools – DET has not provided any overall strategic plan for the renewal or sharing of school recreational facilities.

**Joint Use Agreements**

Councils acknowledge there have been improvements in engagement with DET in the school planning process, however there is still some way to go. Councils have reported difficulties in negotiating Joint Use Agreements (JUA’s) – where they are treated more as a tenant than a co contributor, and where a 15-year lease does not give councils long term security for the significant investment they have made. Although there is a policy framework to guide the agreements, the devolved model of asset management (AG report p 5-13) means that negotiations are left to individual school councils/principals and are dependent on changing priorities, pressures and buy in of the individual school at the time. There is also lack of clarity of the role of the VSBA, DET and school councils/principals as facilities are completed and agreements are negotiated. Given that councils invest significant funds into school facilities, the increased involvement of local government in developing overarching JUA governance arrangements would support better outcomes in the planning, development and implementation of co located facilities.

**Improved Joint Planning**

As outlined in the AG report (pp 39-30), although the Victorian Government recognises the benefit of co-location, the planning and delivery process and timelines for new government schools currently locks councils out of an effective partnership. Master planning for a school site is not normally conducted until the land has been acquired and / or funding has been allocated. This then creates tension as the desire to construct the new school facility as quickly as possible conflicts with the time required to create an integrated facility in partnership with local government. Community infrastructure such as sport and recreation and early years learning facilities cannot be effectively integrated under the current model. The disconnect between government and local government planning and budget processes is a critical issue to be addressed. Failure to do so could potentially have long term negative consequences for community access and student wellbeing. These sites then become a missed opportunity to deliver public value outcomes.

To realise the local and ongoing benefits of locating schools with community hubs or precincts, DET and local government need to work more closely together to establish an appropriate model for planning and delivering shared facilities and integrated sites. Councils consider that the current new school planning committees, established by DET, cover too many new school sites to allow for meaningful feedback and engagement between partners, and the timing of shared information in planning misses the opportunity for effective co-location. Schools planning committees should be more localized, include local government and commence prior to design. Terms of Reference for these committees need to be reviewed and strengthened to enable meaningful and useful partnership outcomes. Establishing a new approach to JUA governance would improve efficiency of ongoing maintenance, amenity developments and opportunities for community use. At a local level, considerations should be given to linkages between councils, school principals, school councils, club committees and other relevant stakeholders in a strengthened governance model.

MAV concurs with the AG report that DET demonstrates a policy commitment to exploring possibilities for strategically investing in multi-use, shared and co-located facilities. However, the planning and delivery process and timelines for new government schools does not align with local government planning processes. Community infrastructure cannot be effectively integrated under the current model. To realise the local and ongoing benefits of locating schools with community hubs or precincts, DET and local government need to work closer together to establish an appropriate model for planning and delivering shared facilities and integrated sites.

This includes developing policy initiatives to enable co location of early childhood/school facilities in rural townships and sharing of recreational spaces would reduce community pressure on small communities and create vibrant, integrated community/school partnerships.

Given that councils invest significant funds into joint council/school facilities, the involvement of local government in refining the role of school planning committees and developing overarching Joint Use Agreement arrangements would support better outcomes in the planning, development and implementation of co located facilities.

**Central communication point for local/state government facilities**

Councils have expressed confusion and difficulty in finding the appropriate DET person to liaise with on joint use facilities. They are often not clear whether they should liaise with DET Regional Office, VSBA or DET Central Office. DET has a policy commitment to strategically investing in multi-use, shared and co-located facilities and so does local government. Clear communication and negotiation - from the earliest planning, development and implementation phases to the ongoing governance/management phases - would maximise resources, streamline processes and strengthen buy in, commitment and partnership. Allocating a dedicated individual in DET for the planning and delivery of integrated and co-located infrastructure is suggested.

1. Victorian Local Government Act 1989, Section 3 functions of council [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Councils have a statutory responsibility to receive and follow up on birth notifications under the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Over 50% of Victorian children are enrolled through council kindergarten central enrolment including all growth councils. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Community engagement in learning, the FISO Model, DET [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. “Planning for greenfield, established and regional areas”, Victorian Planning Authority [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. “Effective Planning for Population Growth”, VAGO, 23 August 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. “Plan Melbourne 2017-2050 and Regional Growth Plans”, DELWP [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. “Hiring, Licensing and Shared Use of School Facilities”, DET [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. “Place Based Education Plans”, DET [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Growing Suburbs Fund Reports, Interface Council Liveability Report , Interface Council Group, Regional Growth Plans Dept Planning [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Central Enrolment is in place for over 50% of kindergarten children in Victoria and is implemented by 48 councils [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. FISO Mode, DET [↑](#footnote-ref-13)