

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Voting Centre Accessibility

Melbourne – Monday 23 March 2026

MEMBERS

Dylan Wight – Chair

Chris Crewther – Deputy Chair

Jacinta Ermacora

David Ettershank

Emma Kealy

Nathan Lambert

Sarah Mansfield

Evan Mulholland

Lee Tarlamis

WITNESSES (*via videoconference*)

Lisa Briggs, Chief Executive Officer, and

Reuben Leigh, Policy Officer, Ngaweeyan Maar-oo.

The CHAIR: I declare open this public hearing for the Electoral Matters Committee's Inquiry into Voting Centre Accessibility. All mobile phones should now be turned to silent.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands each of us is gathered on today and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings.

I am Dylan Wight, the Member for Tarneit and the Chair of the Electoral Matters Committee. The other members with us today, who are all online, are Christopher Crewther, who is the Deputy Chair and the Member for Mornington; Jacinta Ermacora, who is a Member for Western Victoria; Nathan Lambert, the Member for Preston; and Sarah Mansfield, who is also a Member for Western Victoria.

I would like to welcome Lisa Briggs, who is the Chief Executive Officer, and Reuben Leigh, who is the Policy Officer, of Ngaweeyan Maar-o.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, you may not be protected by the same privilege. The committee does not require witnesses to be sworn, but questions must be answered fully, accurately and truthfully. Witnesses found to be giving false or misleading evidence may be in contempt of Parliament and subject to penalty.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and is broadcast live on the Parliament's website. The broadcast includes automated captioning. Members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during hearings, and anything said may be picked up and captioned, even if said quietly. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check as soon as available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

I invite you to give a brief 5-minute overview of your submission, and that will be followed by some questions until roughly 10 o'clock.

Lisa BRIGGS: Thank you. My name is Lisa Briggs. I am a Gunditjmara woman from the Western District of Victoria. I am the CEO of Ngaweeyan Maar-oo. We are the recognised partner with the Victorian government on the oversight, implementation and development of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Reuben LEIGH: Hey there. My name is Reuben. I am the Policy Officer here at Ngaweeyan Maar-oo. Go for it.

Lisa BRIGGS: I will return to you in a second, Reuben. One of the key things that Ngaweeyan Maar-oo has been doing is ensuring that we are putting forward submissions, in particular to ensure that there is greater intersectionality between the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and, foremost, the priority reforms. The priority reforms are 1 to 4, and priority reform 1 looks at partnership and shared decision-making – co-design, so to speak – and even what models of service might look like. Priority reform 2 is around sector strengthening, which is looking at the capability and capacity building of the Aboriginal community controlled sector in Victoria and the traditional owner groups. With priority reform 3, there are three elements to this. It looks at transformation, and it is probably one that we would like to encourage more activity in this space, particularly when it looks at how you culturally embed practice. You may do cultural awareness training, but actually how do you embed cultural standards within practice so that you get the desired outcomes? The other one that is really important is around the elimination of racism and discrimination. I think within the disability space I would be talking to the converted about some of the challenges that we have in there, so again, transformation 3 is really important. The third element is around universal services, and I think there is a debate that needs to be had, because in Aboriginal community controlled speak, what it means is that if an Aboriginal community controlled organisation is doing it better, then you should transfer the whole program over to our sector to fully

implement it. But when it comes to universal services you actually cannot do that, and so what we need to be really thinking about are the intersectionality, the model of care and the standards that we need to have to be able to get the outcomes that we want as part of a shared value and shared outcome.

The last one is priority reform 4, which is around data sovereignty. No work really has been done at the practical level just yet. I think the Department of Government Services have been doing a lot of scoping around this with a lot of the Aboriginal governance forums, but it is yet to be pulled together as a collective, I dare say because I have just had a quick look around what data is actually collected on Aboriginal disability. If we do not have the evidence to match it, then how can we co-design programs and do the intersectionality that I am talking about and make a difference? Thank you, Chair. That is my opening. We are open for questions. Then we will go to you, Reuben.

The CHAIR: Sure. What we might do is go to our Deputy Chair Christopher Crewther, who is online.

Chris CREWOTHER: Firstly, thank you very much for your evidence and time here today. In recommendation 3 in your submission you talk about promoting transparency and continuous improvement. I am just wondering if you can talk to that a little further.

Lisa BRIGGS: I was just looking through the inclusive disability action plan, and I noticed that within one of the chapters, the one on accountability in particular, it does talk about self-determination. In the description of it it talks about self-determination, where we lead it and we co-design it with partners, including the state government, on its full implementation. Then it made a reference to *Korin Korin Balit-Djak*, which is the Aboriginal health and wellbeing action plan that is set for Victoria. But in that plan there is nothing about disability, so again there is a disconnect between how we are actually doing that intersectionality between action plans that have been led around inclusiveness, whether it is disability or others – and we find this very common with a lot of things – and then pushed to the Aboriginal frameworks, but we have not actually gone into the deepness or practicality of what we should collect, who we should be holding accountable and how the co-designing has even been developed as part of the programming. So there is a lot of mismatching along the line, broadly. I think, as I have read also, that there will be a refresh as part of the strategy, which I think is good and timely, because what we would be seeking are the Close the Gap priority reforms in particular, because they are the system levers of change. They have 136 different clauses in them that actually make it much simpler for you to design, by stage, how you might roll out things and account for things.

Chris CREWOTHER: Do you feel there has been a lack of transparency so far, both naturally in the general process of things but also when you have actively tried to seek information?

Lisa BRIGGS: There does seem to be a lack of consultation and the right questioning, I would say, with what it is that we are trying to do. We have got a problem where we have identified that there are gaps within the current framework, particularly around inclusiveness for Aboriginal disability. If we are going to a new framework, what we would like is for the proper consultation to take place with the right questioning and the right types of co-designed modelling, so that then you are actually aligning it to the strategy for everybody, not trying to separate us in another plan that may or may not pick it up.

Chris CREWOTHER: Noting all your recommendations, what do you think is the key, standout thing that you would want to fix if you were to fix one key thing?

Reuben LEIGH: I think it is that co-design element and ensuring there is Aboriginal voice and there are ACCOs and people with lived experience who do understand that intersection being engaged in developing these standards and developing things like what accessible communication and assistance actually looks like. That is the core of it, and that is also the core of priority reform 1 as well, which really does look at that shared decision-making and those formal partnerships which are quite integral to developing things which do work for Aboriginal people who do experience disabilities.

Lisa BRIGGS: If the government in the new refresh was to purely look at priority reform 3 and look at all the elements within that, you would get elements of co-design, you would get elements of making sure that there are cultural principles and standards that are put in place, and then you are also looking at what that intersectionality is so that then you are able ensure that we are doing what we are supposed to be doing to ensure that people experiencing disability or who have disability issues are actually being addressed, because at the moment what I see is very light on.

Reuben LEIGH: And also, just jumping off the back of that, there is such a high proportion of Aboriginal people who do experience disability – much higher than in the mainstream population. So this really is something which is contingent on people having the ability to have their democratic rights to vote. So it is quite significant and it does create distrust and disillusionment in the system if they are unable to have a positive experience while voting and feel like they are able to participate in democracy.

Chris CREWETHER: Thank you very much. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: You are welcome. Chris, you are welcome. I am going to go to Jacinta Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: I am coming here from Gunditjmara country in Warrnambool, Lisa and Reuben. Good to see you again. I have got a funny feeling it is not that long since we have seen each other. This is a really interesting perspective on polling booths particularly. I am very interested in what your submission has said about the intersectionality, which I am hoping is still within the scope, because it is about access and inclusion. Can I just ask as the first question: what do local Aboriginal communities do, say, down in Portland or Warrnambool? Do they have a chat about which booth is the best one to go to? I am just thinking, I know it is really hard for the VEC to choose and find compliant booth locations, but I am thinking, like you were saying about including decision-making with Aboriginal people – sorry it is taking a long time to ask this question – I can imagine inadvertently a booth might be on a massacre site or on a cultural site that has a historic use that is not perhaps consistent with its current use now. How do locals currently cope with that?

Lisa BRIGGS: I just thought I would say that from our last look at the data from the ABS, it is around 90 per cent of our mob now that are voting, which is huge compared to what it was originally. If you take it back a couple of decades, you would be lucky to find 10 per cent. So I think that is a massive swell. Those that have disability issues, that is not counted, so we would not know. That is the first point. The second point is just going back to what you were saying around the booths. I cannot remember, even as an abled person, where there was a sign on even the internet that is large enough for me to go, ‘Oh, that has actually got disability access. That’s great.’ So again, I think there are some things around even just practical visual things of knowing the locations. But given regional Victoria and locations, you are not always going to have those polling booths that are going to be accessible for disability people. But one of the things that we would definitely recommend in putting forward, and this is what we have done through – sorry, not Ngaweeyan Maar-oo but what the First Peoples’ Assembly has done as part of the treaty process is look at the Aboriginal community-controlled sector as polling booths and whether that would be much more engaging and culturally safe as a presence for people to actually go and do part of their voting.

Jacinta ERMACORA: So would you recommend that the Victorian Electoral Commission ought to engage with the First Peoples’ Assembly in adapting their decision-making processes to be inclusive of disability access for Aboriginal people but also just the broader general access and inclusion?

Lisa BRIGGS: A hundred per cent. The First Peoples’ Assembly has been around six or seven years now – going into the seventh year, I think – and they have had a very strong relationship with the electoral commission as part of probity and process, and they do all of that as part of transparency. So I think this is levelling up, really, about how you coordinate with what will be the new Gellung Warl to ensure that these democratic processes and sites are applicable for Aboriginal people.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes, very good. I think that is all I have got for now. I might have a couple more, but I will let others have a turn. Thank you.

Lisa BRIGGS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Jacinta. I will go to Sarah Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Good morning, Lisa and Reuben. I think I have also seen you pretty recently. I am on Wadawurrung country today. Thank you for appearing and for the information you provided; I think it is really, really valuable. I am wondering whether there is more that staff at voting places could do to, I guess, create more culturally safe and inclusive environments, particularly for First Peoples with disabilities.

Lisa BRIGGS: I think it still happens, because I have been out in that part for a while. I know that they do call out for Aboriginal representation to participate as part of the polling booths. But we have got high-

populated areas. I reckon it almost needs to be like a necessity, because you swing into automatic mode of ensuring that a person can safely get into the building and then cast their vote. I am not really sure how you do this, so I would be really interested in your guidance as well – as you are walking up, whether you are walking or you are in a wheelchair going up and you have got all of the parties along the wall handing out all the brochures, what type of cultural safety requirements can you put in there as part of the boundary process? I think it would be ignorant of Ngaweeyan Maar-oo to not put forward that there are issues that could happen given the rise that we are seeing around discrimination and racism, but I am not sure what boundaries you can put in place to ensure that safety. So it is not just about the physical and the person being able to get in there, but it is also about being culturally safe, walking – wheelchair, wherever – coming through as part of that process so that you can actually do what you want to do and be part of democracy.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes, absolutely.

Reuben LEIGH: Jumping off the back of that as well, there are organisations like VACCHO or Rumbalara or the First Peoples Disability Network, who would have a lot of understanding about these needs and the intersectional needs – so really engaging with them. And that co-design element really comes back to it as well, both engaging with the experts and engaging with the organisations. They have a massive list of things which would definitely help the community and help people understand what actually is needed.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. I think that point, Lisa, that you raised is something that has come up in different contexts – voters feeling, for different reasons potentially, intimidated by or having negative experiences from some of the volunteers for different candidates as they come into the booths. Have you heard any stories at all directly of negative experiences?

Lisa BRIGGS: Myself, no, I have not, but I do believe the temperature is rising and it is best to risk mitigate than wait for an incident. It is not just for us, it is really for the safety of everyone, because there are a lot of families that go to polling booths with their children, and you do not want them exposed to particular things. One element that I think, I am not sure how as a whole-of-government process, but for our people in particular one thing that we would be seeking from Gellung Warl is how do we actually embed these cultural standards and principles right across all mechanisms or statutory bodies of Victoria so that we are actually maintaining a level of standard like any other practice, so it gives time to embed all these changes. The other mitigation is working very closely with the ACCOs and the TOs, like I was saying before, where there are already polling booths set up this week and for the next month that already enable that. So it is cost-effective, because it is not going to cost you anything more than what you would do.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. Terrific. All right. Thanks very much. I will hand back to the Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Sarah. We might go to Nathan Lambert for a question or two, please.

Nathan LAMBERT: Thank you, Chair. Thanks, Lisa. Thanks, Reuben. I definitely think some good points in there with respect to the data, and also, as you were just saying, Lisa, with respect to rising temperatures, as you described it. The VEC currently has an electoral access advisory group and an Aboriginal advisory group, as I understand it, and those bodies have provided input to their – they have a disability education and engagement plan, not the most detailed of plans, if you look through it, but certainly one with good intentions and one that I suppose then links to the actual way they implement accessibility at polling booths. I am just interested, looking at that – they have a formal structure there. Do you know, in terms of the way that Aboriginal advisory group works in particular, does that link with ACCOs? Does it link with any existing First Nations –

Lisa BRIGGS: Not that I am aware of, Nathan, at all. I have been part of the ACCO sector for a long time, and I would say no. The majority of the time what would happen would be that fly-in fly-out consultation process where this is happening near election time, ‘We want to rally up the troops to try and get more people to come in as part of the polling booths.’ But again, I think as we have grown to maturity, and we have got more of our people now voting, it just seems that through the First People’s Assembly process and their voting, it is showing us another way of actually looking at it, where again the booths are set within our organisations where the majority of people come, to provide that cultural safety standard. If you have electoral roll people there that are Aboriginal, it is a bonus, but if you do not, it is okay for them too because we are multiservice as part of it. But again, it always comes down to the induction.

When you are inducted in these things, generally it is short-term induction turnaround but you are actually not given the experience to put it into practice. I think they are some of the tricky gaps. I also think when you are looking at cultural safety standards or cultural process, it is misinterpretation. There is no interpreters' guide for anyone who knows nothing about us or our sector – what to actually do. So there are little layers of work that are missing that are just purely sometimes from oversight, not deliberate, but again time pressure, you have got to have the right people. But that engagement, I would definitely be recommending, when Gellung Warl is set up and the treaty process is now in place, that there is a really strong relationship with them because they will be leading and are already leading the way in terms of how to get better voter turnout, but also how they may be thinking about how to make it better for disability.

Nathan LAMBERT: They are good points that you would input into these processes, but perhaps just coming back to the way they have set up their formal partnerships at the moment. Do you feel there is a gap there? Do you think it is deficient? How exactly would you change it?

Lisa BRIGGS: I think one of the things under the treaty measure, my understanding is treaty also has the power in appointments. Guiding a lot of these institutions about the right appointments, with the right expertise, to ensure that it infiltrates the way that you want to as part of design is an important thing. So all this refresh stuff is really timely.

Nathan LAMBERT: Yes. I am slightly conscious of the scope of the inquiry. There is a lot we could discuss in this place, I suppose, coming –

The CHAIR: Fire away. You will be right.

Nathan LAMBERT: Coming back to our specific scope, I suppose, just following up on Chris's question: the VEC, we know, has a lot that it thinks about in terms of accessibility. Is there anything specific there that you think is a real shortcoming as it stands and that you would like to build into the minimum standards that you call for in your submission?

Lisa BRIGGS: You would think – and I am hoping I am going to answer your question correctly – that there would be someone that is experiencing disability on there, as number one. The make-up and compilation of the group would be essential to ensure that it covers everyone's needs: gender, disability, youth that can vote – all the right areas – so that you are actually looking at how you are going to be represented and covering the things that need to happen as part of the process but then also ensuring that the recommendations fit the brief. Again, without the right representation, you do become excluded, not included.

Nathan LAMBERT: Totally. Perhaps if I can, Chair, just in the time I have got left, go to a more general question. You have touched on the First Peoples' Assembly. Do you think there are lessons there for us to learn with regard to the conduct of elections generally by the VEC?

Lisa BRIGGS: Yes. I think it would be worthwhile speaking to the electoral commission and who is actually facilitating this process. Gavin Ryan is one of the leads from the electoral commission. He has done the majority of the oversight of all of them, and I am sure that he is able to provide lessons learned that would help as part of this process.

Nathan LAMBERT: Great. I think there will probably be a few follow-up questions we have, from you appearing here today, for the VEC. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thanks, Nathan. We might go back to Jacinta Ermacora to see if we can get maybe one more quick question out, please.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Sure. Awesome line of questioning, Nathan. I just wondered whether there should be consideration of mobile booths or some of the different types of booths that the VEC has had historically for different communities. Should that be a part of the consideration?

Lisa BRIGGS: I think that is a great consideration. Going back to Nathan's question, you have to have regional reps. Regional reps must be on that committee. In metro you get cloned. I do think those mobile polling booths would be beneficial. For instance, if I was in Shepparton and I knew we were having an election around game day at the Rumbalara footy club, I would definitely have a polling booth at that club because you

know everybody, not just our people but also the other team and the other club's people, will be there. It is more about capturing the audience and maximising the polls. I do think that is a factor that we have not thought of.

Jacinta ERMACORA: For instance, a mobile booth that might go to one of the ACCOs or one of the centres that you are using for the First Peoples' Assembly could be another way to consider as well.

Lisa BRIGGS: Can I just add with that: when I think about Bung Yarnda – Lake Tyers – I think it is 30 k's from Lakes Entrance; I am not 100 per cent sure how far. But it can be difficult for Aboriginal people that are actually living on reserves. We have got two: we have got Framlingham mission and Bung Yarnda. Even considering a mobile booth would be important to go out there so that they can participate through that. Because again, our people do experience high poverty levels and further disadvantage than most. With petrol prices at the moment it is almost like the banana scenario where you have paid off your house – petrol is going to be the same thing. We have got to be a bit more innovative again on how we are actually engaging the reach to get people to participate in the democratic process, so I do believe even those remote considerations will be important.

Reuben LEIGH: And that already exists as well. You look at the NT and remote communities in South Australia, in the APY region, and you have got remote booths coming out to community.

Jacinta ERMACORA: I know we are out of time now –

The CHAIR: We are, yes.

Jacinta ERMACORA: but 90 per cent of voting is an awesome figure, Lisa and Reuben. What about those that are not enrolled? Is there a process there that can assist with –

Lisa BRIGGS: There is definitely more campaigning that needs to occur. Even those that are turning 18 – getting them to enrol as part of that. Again, this is where I believe working with the electoral commission to actually increase voter participation would be really, really important, because that is what we are trying to do even through the treaty process. We have noticed that there has been an influx as part of that, so there are really good lessons learned on how to actually do that.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Lisa and Reuben. We are unfortunately out of time. Thank you very much for appearing today. If there is anything else that you would like to submit to the inquiry, please do so via email.

Witnesses withdrew.