

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

Sven Bluemmel, Electoral Commissioner,

Ben Sutherland, Assistant Commissioner, Event Strategy and Delivery, and

Melea Tarabay, Chief Communications Officer, Victorian Electoral Commission.

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 paying 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 the issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings.

I am Dylan Wight, the Member for Tarneit and the committee Chair. I have also got the Deputy Chair and Member for Mornington Christopher Crewther; Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria; Nathan Lambert, Member for Preston; and Sarah Mansfield, who is also a Member for Western Victoria.

Just for committee members online and their benefit, in front of us we have obviously got representatives from the Victorian Electoral Commission. We have got the Electoral Commissioner Sven Bluemmel, we have got the director of Event Strategy and Delivery Ben Sutherland, and also Chief Communications Officer Melea Tarabay.

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, those comments 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 automatic captioning. Members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during hearings and that 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.

Maybe we will start with a 5-minute statement from the witnesses and then we can get into some questioning until about a quarter past 3.

Sven BLUEMMEL: Thank you, Chair, Deputy Chair and members of the committee. The VEC commends you for undertaking this important inquiry. This inquiry is a positive initiative for a parliamentary committee to genuinely listen to those Victorians who experience additional barriers when they go to vote in our elections. Of course my staff and I are listening too, and by working together, engaging with the community and identifying and deploying effective solutions, we can help all Victorians to be able to vote safely and securely. The VEC vision is all Victorians actively participating in their democracy. This is why I join my predecessors in calling for greater access to suitable public facilities at voting centres across our state to ensure access for all, no matter any one person's ability or mobility.

The commission will operate some 1700 voting centres on election day in November, and the majority of these will use public facilities. We value our partnerships with community groups, landlords and property managers, local councils, schools and state government agencies. Through joint efforts, accessibility standards at voting centres have consistently lifted over recent elections. It is also why the commission has recommended amending section 67 of the *Electoral Act* to include an appropriate mechanism to require suitable, publicly funded venues to be available for use as early voting centres. The section is currently limited to just election day voting centres, and with more Victorians choosing to vote before election day than ever before, community venues are often more familiar, more flexible and, importantly, more accessible than the locations available for lease through the commercial leasing market. Of course it is these benefits that mean community venues are in such high demand for non-election users too.

In terms of our existing work, the commission's *Disability Education and Engagement Plan* was launched last year, following close collaboration with Victoria's disability community, support agencies and our electoral access advisory group. The plan guides how we support access and inclusion for people with disability across the electoral lifecycle. It will be reviewed and updated next year when we can include insights from this inquiry, as well as lessons learned from the general election in November.

For all voting locations at every election, we undertake a detailed accessibility assessment and publish the ratings and specific barriers to independent wheelchair accessibility on our voting centre locator. The audit has been developed in accordance with accessibility standards. This publicly available information is intended to inform and empower all voters to make their plan to go and vote based on their own accessibility needs.

For those who cannot access an in-person voting centre, the *Electoral Act* provides for voters who are blind, have low vision or live with a motor impairment to access electronic-assisted voting delivered through the commission's telephone-assisted voting service. This service is a scalable voting option and requires the voter simply to have access to a telephone connection. I raise this again as a viable alternative voting channel for those who need it, which is a substantially larger cohort than those who are currently permitted to use it.

To close, I note that the right and opportunity to vote is protected at every level of our legal system. Australia signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2007, and accessible voting centres are fundamental for ensuring every eligible voter can vote without discrimination under federal and state law, including the *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act* and the *Disability Act*. It is a crucial factor we always take into account when appointing voting locations under the *Electoral Act*. My gratitude goes to the committee as well as to all those who made submissions to this inquiry for your leadership on this important subject. When every Victorian can actively participate in their democracy, we will all be better for it. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We will go to some questions. I am going to start with Deputy Chair Chris Crewther.

Chris CREWTER: Firstly, thank you for your evidence and your hard work, as always, and your time today as well. We heard before from Carers Victoria, I believe it was, regarding potential improvements that could be made within voting centres, particularly key voting centres. One example was perhaps play facilities. It might be, say, a separate room that could be allocated for children who are being cared for to use, whether or not they have a disability. Also for people being cared for as well, they might have, say, a separate room in a voting facility where someone could support and monitor them during those times. Are they things that the VEC could cater for, or better cater for, in multiple voting centres in upcoming elections?

Sven BLUEMEL: Thank you, Deputy Chair. We look at those sorts of things broadly. Specifically in terms of, say, a room to play and care and so forth, that is difficult to achieve with what the market can provide. But looking specifically at carers, one example I would highlight in terms of what we are doing in this space is that we are undertaking, for the first time, a whole-of-state, low-sensory mobile voting effort, which will happen on the first Tuesday in the early voting period. And one of the big things we are doing there that is a bit different to previously is that in our communications for that and in our setting up for that service, we are really expressly taking into account the needs of carers. So, for example, it might be a parent who is neurodiverse. They, or a carer of a neurodiverse voter, should be able to bring their child with them to vote, for example. So that is sort of the broad way we do that. One of the things that has changed quite substantially or has been refined, I should say, in our approach, which has come directly from our conversations with our various reference groups and access groups, is the role of carers. We cannot divorce the needs of carers from the needs of voters, and that is something we are taking into account. I know that does not go exactly to the specific examples you have given of, say, a play area. It may well be that where we can select certain voting centres in community groups and so forth, those areas might be available, which would make the location more attractive. But as you can imagine, when we have to go to the commercial market for many of these centres, particularly the early voting centres where the majority happens, it can be difficult.

Chris CREWTER: You talked about the low-sensory voting centre, and we have the example in the ACT of what they have done there. Do you see such centres being rolled out, say, as a once-off trial or a once-off location, or could it be rolled out across all 88 seats, or might it be rolled out to have one in every region or major region? And the other aspect is the use of the term 'low sensory' was raised – perhaps there could be a

better terminology. Instead of calling it a 'low-sensory voting centre', maybe it could be an 'enhanced voting centre' or something like that.

Sven BLUEMMEL: Yes, on the first point, I am very pleased to say that we are in fact going to have a low-sensory mobile voting facility in every one of our 88 districts. That is very exciting for us. We are very pleased about that. And in fact low-sensory voting is something that we can trace very, very directly back to what our reference groups have asked us to do. There is a really direct through line there, and we want to see many more of those. It is not just us doing what we think the community wants, it is the community telling us, 'Hey, this is what we want,' and then us doing it. You mentioned the ACT, and it is actually really gratifying in that regard that the ACT has adopted an approach to low-sensory voting which we pioneered some three years ago in, I think it was, Warrandyte, in the by-election. We are always happy to share that with other jurisdictions, and we are really gratified that places like the ACT have seen the value in that as well.

Chris CREWETHER: What about the terminology of such centres?

Sven BLUEMMEL: Yes, I think the terminology seems to have been welcomed by the groups that raised it with us, if I am correct. I know you were just putting that out there as an example, but if we had wording along the lines of 'enhanced voting centres' or something like that, might people who do not have neurodiverse needs think, 'Oh well, this is an even better thing than what I would normally go to'? And then everyone goes to that centre, which would clearly cause some capacity issues for those who genuinely need it. So we will certainly take that on board, but I think at the moment the input that we have had is that that is a meaningful term from those members of the community that we are trying to assist more in this regard. But we will have a look at that.

Chris CREWETHER: One more question if I have got time, Chair.

The CHAIR: You have got ages, yes.

Chris CREWETHER: One of the issues raised before was about rolling out mobile voting in each prison. Do you see any issues or logistical issues in terms of rolling such a program out?

Sven BLUEMMEL: Yes. I might ask Mr Sutherland to talk about the logistics of that a little bit more. But certainly conceptually and for me as the Commissioner, something we are really conscious of is that of course in Victoria people who are serving less than five years have a right to vote just like everyone else, so therefore we need to meet them where they are and we need to make sure that it is accessible and approachable. We certainly do that. In fact I myself have visited prisons and talked to prisoners as part of an enrolment effort, for example. We do a lot of communication in that regard to make sure that people who have that right to vote are aware of it and know exactly how to exercise it. You were asking a little bit more about the logistics. Certainly what I can speak to from my visits to prisons in Victoria and indeed other jurisdictions is that, yes of course, especially in the higher security prisons, there are logistical challenges and with very, very good reason in terms of security, in terms of safety and so forth. We take all of those into account.

Chris CREWETHER: Thank you.

Sven BLUEMMEL: Is that sufficient?

Chris CREWETHER: Yes.

Sven BLUEMMEL: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: We might go to Nathan Lambert now.

Nathan LAMBERT: Thank you, Chair. I will pick straight up on some of the questions that the Deputy Chair was asking about the low-sensory voting, because as you have probably picked up, it really has emerged as a theme both in the submissions and from the witnesses that we have heard from today. You may have picked up that, to the Deputy Chair's point, certainly the low-sensory components of it are very welcome with respect to lighting and sound and space for voters, but clearly there is also a very positive perception of the staff. I believe the staff undertake some additional training and that there are some changes to the way that they interact with voters as part of that trial, and that has also been very well received. Sven, you mentioned that there is an expansion coming of that – I think you said to every electorate?

Sven BLUEMMEL: That is correct.

Nathan LAMBERT: We share your excitement given how positively that has been received. I am interested in your thinking about two things. Perhaps you can just set out for the benefit of all of us just a reminder about when and where the trials have been conducted so far because, as you know, it has only been in the by-elections, so some of us have not actually had a chance to see this up close – so when and where they have been conducted so far and then what your thinking has been with respect to expanding the time they are available, the days they are available or the locations they are available.

Sven BLUEMMEL: Yes. Thank you, Member. We are very excited about extending it to all 88 districts. We first trialled it at the Warrandyte by-election, which was 2023 if I recall correctly. That was our very first attempt and I think really the first substantial trial in Australia along these lines. From a qualitative perspective, it had very, very great feedback. One hundred per cent of people who used it told us that they would want to use it again if it were offered. It is pretty rare for us to get 100 per cent approval on anything, so that was really, really encouraging. We knew we were onto something. We did it during the normal early voting period in Warrandyte. During the early voting period we set aside – I think it might have been a 2-hour block or something along those lines – a part of a day for low-sensory voting. We had some challenges with that about clarity, about how we deal with campaigners and so forth, but we learned from that. And then we did an amended trial for last year's Prahran and Werribee by-elections that were early in 2025. In both of those we had what we called dedicated mobile voting for low-sensory needs. And again, we received very, very good feedback from that. In terms of how it is going to work for us, we are going to have this on the Tuesday, the first Tuesday of the early voting period. I think that is 11 days before election day. It will be a mobile voting effort, and one of the reasons we are doing that is it allows us to sort of have a very specific environment and control the environment a little bit better, rather than trying to refit a standard early voting centre to it. It will only be on that day, though. It will be from 10 am to 4 pm on that day, on the Tuesday, and yes, as I said, we are going to have it across all 88 districts.

Nathan LAMBERT: Where exactly is someone going then?

Sven BLUEMMEL: Yes, it varies. We are currently identifying and targeting those locations, and in doing that we are relying quite heavily on the community that we have worked with to bring low-sensory voting into being, because they often have much better insight than we would about what locations might be suitable. They might be community facilities that people with neurodiverse needs or who are neurodiverse and have low-sensory needs in this case, or benefits, would be familiar with or would be comfortable with. We try and get that information from them where we can.

Nathan LAMBERT: In effect then, for those of us who sometimes think about mobile voting in a different sense where you are going from location to location, just to be clear here, you are just suggesting you would pick a place in the electorate that was a good and suitable location and effectively set up for the day as a polling place or for whatever period you choose. Is that right?

Sven BLUEMMEL: That is correct. In this case it will be that one day – you know, 10 am to 4 pm on the Tuesday, which is the day before broad early voting opens on the Wednesday, which is 10 days before election day. But yes, that is correct. In some ways it is actually quite similar to how we do other mobile voting centres where we go to care facilities, hospitals, prisons and so on, but here it is just with a particular focus on low-sensory environments.

Nathan LAMBERT: Thank you. And then you mentioned campaigners. What has been the experience so far with campaigners at these low-sensory trials?

Sven BLUEMMEL: One of the things we had firstly, say, with Warrandyte, where one of our early voting centres had some low-sensory voting hours – what we had there is we obviously encouraged campaigners to respect the needs of people who are neurodiverse and would benefit from a low-sensory voting environment, such as, you know, leaving how-to-vote cards at a table where people can pick them up, rather than handing them out directly and those sorts of things. It was mixed. But as I said, it was the first time we ever tried that, and since then we have refined the model a bit accordingly. I might ask Mr Sutherland to expand on that a little bit.

Ben SUTHERLAND: The low-sensory mobile voting is delivered through community centres, as the commissioner has articulated, but note of course the difference between that and early voting, wherein which we designate the entrance to the facility, not necessarily being where we would take the vote itself. What I mean there is that it might very well be within a room within a community centre that electors who identify as neurodivergent might frequent, and that is where we would set up, so to speak, the issuing point. Campaigners of course have the 6-metre rule applied to the designated entrance of the facility overall, as distinct from in the room where the low-sensory voting is taking place.

Nathan LAMBERT: So that is the way it was done at Prahran and Werribee. Did campaigners turn up and campaign at that mobile low-sensory trial?

Ben SUTHERLAND: I believe there was some attendance, yes.

Nathan LAMBERT: Does the VEC have a view on whether campaigners should be encouraged to behave in a certain way or restricted in a certain way in order to achieve the objectives of the low-sensory voting option?

Sven BLUEMMEL: Yes, there are certainly types of behaviours that we would certainly encourage and there are others that we would perhaps discourage. But to me, it is probably then mostly an issue of awareness. I mean, one of the things about, say, neurodiversity – it is not solely about neurodiversity but it is one example of it – is that it may be a hidden aspect of a person's self. It is not something that someone can necessarily see. One of the things that we are doing a lot of – and Ms Tarabay's team is doing a lot of this particularly – is making sure that we are getting information out there to the community about what it means to have a hidden disability, for example, so we are part of the Sunflower initiative, which is part of raising awareness of hidden disability. Certainly it may simply be that some campaigners are not aware of how certain behaviours are perceived, often negatively, by people who are neurodivergent. For us, we see that heavily as an educative effort. In terms of our enforcement powers at voting centres themselves, which would include this, as the committee knows because we have raised it a few times before, our powers are quite limited, and they are more of a sledgehammer than a scalpel, so having a bit more finesse there would be good in terms of the legislation.

The CHAIR: Can I expand on that slightly. I am sure you will have no public view on whether campaigners should be outright banned from low-sensory voting centres or not. But hypothetically, if they were, what would be the commission's view on its capacity and willingness to have a really clearly set out, very identifiable part of either inside or just outside of the booth as a place for registered how-to-vote cards? You could have a situation where somebody is walking in and it is very clearly defined – Greens, Labor, Liberal, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah – so somebody has the capacity to take the material that they want without being hounded by people on the way in. We can talk about education, awareness et cetera, et cetera and we could talk about the behaviour of some campaigners until we go red in the face. Prior to you coming in to provide evidence I think it has been a pretty clear theme around some of that behaviour of campaigners at these low-sensory centres.

Sven BLUEMMEL: For us the guiding principle is always that we will run the election in accordance with the legislation that is passed by Parliament, so if the Parliament were to change the law in that way or in a different way, we will faithfully and independently administer that. What we can certainly do through inquiries such as this is provide you, as the committee, with input into what we are able to do, what we are not able to do, what our experience is in terms of what we are hearing from voters, from campaigners and so on. The other thing I would also say, though, is that campaigners, just like scrutineers and others, let alone candidates themselves, are an absolutely integral part of our electoral system. I always come back to this for scrutineering, especially when I am talking to people from overseas where that might not be a factor of their electoral systems. That involvement provides us in Victoria with such robustness of oversight that I am always very careful to acknowledge the role of, in that case, scrutineers, but also campaigners in this. So it is a fine line, is what I am saying.

The CHAIR: Sure. Nathan, do you have anything else?

Nathan LAMBERT: I think we have got a bit of extra time here, Chair, so if you are okay, I would rather put my question to the same topic. Sven, just coming to the question of eligibility, listening to your comments, I got the impression – by no means a bad thing – that this initiative has been driven by feedback from members of the neurodivergent community and very well received. Is that the way you primarily see it?

Sven BLUEMMEL: This in particular, do you mean, or just our general approach to meeting the needs of the community when it comes to running elections? I am happy to expand on the broader point, if you like.

Nathan LAMBERT: Sorry, let me add a bit more to make that clearer. I suppose a thing that you would have heard come through from some of the witnesses and indeed the submissions to this particular inquiry on accessibility has been the benefits of that trial for voters with dementia, visually impaired voters and voters being supported by carers and so forth. It does seem that the trial has resonated with a wider audience. I am just wondering if that is something that you are also seeing and whether you are now thinking about these trials as catering towards that larger audience.

Sven BLUEMMEL: Thank you for the clarification. Yes, I think everything you have put there is consistent with what we are seeing in the sense that, yes, it has sort of been quite broadly very well received, including by people who may not specifically identify as a sort of targeted cohort for whom we are running this service. At the moment we are obviously expanding it quite enormously, from initially one by-election, then two simultaneous by-elections and now to 88 lower house elections – well, the upper house as well but of course geographically through 88 districts. In terms of whether that can be sort of more broadly applied, it would then speak to: is there a broader wish for the voting experience to be a bit calmer or a bit more low-key – in some cases, hopefully not too many – a bit more respectful. I think there is certainly an appetite for that. We have not deliberately phrased this offering as being that broader offering, because we want to make sure that we are primarily meeting the needs of people who are neurodiverse and have a very strong preference for a low-sensory voting environment. We do not want to dilute that. We are not going to be turning away people who may wish to use it, but we will be encouraging those to be very much targeted to people with neurodiverse needs.

Nathan LAMBERT: So I would be right. You would have no plans to enforce eligibility, if you like. Presumably any Victorian voter could turn up and make use of this low-sensory option.

Sven BLUEMMEL: At the core, yes, that is correct. We are not going to turn people away. We are not in the business of turning people away. What we will do though to ensure that the low-sensory option is available to those who most need it is we are going to be targeting our communications at those cohorts, their peak bodies and so on, so that we make a really deliberate effort on that. I might ask Ms Tarabay to expand on that a little bit in terms of what we have got in mind.

Melea TARABAY: Thanks, Commissioner. We will use our Electoral Access Advisory Group, which we meet three times a year with, to use their networks to communicate this wider. We will also do general media and I guess communications around the accessibility options for voting in Victoria come November. But the low-sensory mobile voting will be particularly targeted.

Nathan LAMBERT: Thank you. Chair, I am conscious of other people's time, so I am happy to come back later.

The CHAIR: Why don't we get some questions from Sarah and Jacinta, and then we might be able to come back around. Sarah, we might go to you next, if that is okay.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sure. Thanks again for appearing. You would have heard the evidence presented today, but a common theme across a few of the groups was accessibility to some of the mobile voting that does go out to specific locations and the need for there to potentially be – when you consider things like residential aged care facilities – more than one opportunity. I appreciate that that would potentially require additional resources, additional staffing. How feasible do you think something like that is – being able to visit residential aged care facilities and other places where the mobile centre goes out to on more than one occasion during the voting period?

Sven BLUEMMEL: Yes. Thank you, Member. I will ask Mr Sutherland to expand on that in a moment, but as a headline one of the things that we are actually doing this time is we are increasing our mobile voting footprint quite substantially from over the last election. That would sort of bring it back to where it was before COVID. The last state election was obviously in 2022, when there were restrictions in place, and we had to cut back our mobile voting footprint quite substantially. We are now coming back to pre-COVID levels, which itself is, relative to 2022, a huge uplift. In terms of being able to visit places multiple times – I will ask Mr Sutherland to expand – for us it is simply a question of how much we have time and resources to do

completely, frankly. Obviously we try and target where we can service the most voters within the resources available to us.

Ben SUTHERLAND: Thank you. Fundamentally, the VEC takes a proactive approach to mobile voting in which we contact those identified sites six months in advance of the election and then gradually towards the delivery of the event in and of itself. One of the things that we are alert to, however, is it is not just our staffing and resources that mobile voting impacts, it is also those of the facility in and of itself. With that we also keep at the forefront of our mind the benefit of having lived experience representatives from the community. When we are talking about some of those targeted outreach efforts, such as prisons et cetera, in expanding that footprint we need to keep in mind the need to also have that conduit between us, as the VEC, and the elector in and of themselves. One of the matters I will just mention is we will be expanding our democracy ambassador program significantly for this election, where we will have a democracy ambassador in every district go out to community and talk to the different voting channels that are available to electors in the 2026 state election.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you for that. Another bit of feedback that we have received through this inquiry obviously relates to the training and awareness of VEC staff at different voting sites, including mobile centres but also at polling stations. Just being mindful of the expansion of early voting and the need for potentially a lot more staff at the upcoming election, how are you going to manage some of those additional training requirements to ensure that all staff – there is a lot they are going to have to be across, not just in terms of the technicalities of voting but also all the different accessibility requirements for different voters.

Sven BLUEMMEL: It is a very good point. A key point that I would start my response with is to say it is going to take over 25,000 people to run this election. It is not just our VEC permanent staff. What you I think would have seen from the materials that we provided to the committee before the session is they give just a small glimpse into how much training effort actually goes into training those 27,000 people. Those people have different roles, different levels of seniority, different breadths of responsibility, different periods of engagement and so on, which is why we have so many different training and instructional products. But as you can see from the materials and especially where we have highlighted it, there is a lot of material in there that goes to accessibility but also to awareness of how to identify someone who might have special needs, who might have a hidden disability or who might be infirm and would have difficulty queuing and those sorts of things. So we do give our field a lot of guidance on that, and a fair bit of that guidance also highlights to them what is within their ability and their judgement to say, ‘Well, okay, I might actually go out and help that person. I might bring that person to the front of the queue so that they don’t have to sit there in a difficult position,’ for example. We do a lot of those sorts of things. That is one part of the answer.

Then the other part of the answer, which is also covered both in our submission and in the materials, is that it goes to the venue selection effort. We are in the big phase of that right now. We have already selected and secured quite a lot of venues for November, particularly early voting centres, but beyond that as well. We are just making sure that we select the venues that are most able to be accessible and to minimise the amount of intervention that an individual staff member may have to do to help someone overcome a barrier. Ideally of course the barrier would not be there. The other thing we have got to bear in mind with venue selection is, certainly for voting day centres or election day voting centres, we have access to that property essentially for one day out of every four years. For the remainder of the time it is the relevant school, council, private sector – whatever it might be – community group. What we are hoping is that clearly we can find more venues that are suitable as those owners of those venues also keep uplifting accessibility across the board. I hope that answers your question.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes, it does. Thank you. I guess one of the other bits of feedback was around not just the established physical design of the venue but the things that you do in terms of signage and other communication methods at the venue that can also provide information that signals accessibility options for people to say ‘You can ask for assistance if you need it’ or to make it clear that there are additional entrances or more accessible entrances, opportunities to sit and all of those sorts of things a bit more proactively, rather than relying on either someone to ask for that assistance, in and of themselves, when they might not be aware that they can, or relying on staff to reach out when they may be busy or not see the need for different reasons. Are there things like that that you feel you could be improving on?

Sven BLUEMMEL: We always look to see where we can improve further, and certainly signage is an example. We put a lot of effort into clear, accessible wayfinding, and as you say, a good example of that is if

there are several entrances or several ways to navigate a particular path that you need to navigate in order to exercise your right to vote. We want to have very clear wayfinding. It should not be reliant on people reading detailed documents or anything like that. It has got to be simple. It has got to be accessible and non-threatening. In fact we have worked very closely with our electoral accessibility advisory group, which is a group that my colleague Melea, her team and I engage with frequently, and we have already mentioned them a few times today. Signage is another example of what we do there. Again, we are not saying 'Well, this signage is clear to a VEC employee who has been doing this for five years' but 'It's clear to someone who is coming there for the first time to vote, who may not be comfortable navigating officialdom and all of those sorts of things'. That is really important to us.

Just another one on, say, things like queuing and the ease of queuing and keeping queues as short as possible. One of our biggest changes for November is we are deploying at scale our electronic roll mark-off approach, which means that when you come to vote, rather than having your name crossed off a paper roll with a ruler and a pencil, you will be met with someone with a laptop who has access to the relevant systems, who can then mark you off like that. We are doing a lot of testing of that at the moment and rolling that out ahead of November, and part of the benefit of that will be better management of queues, queues moving faster and all of those sorts of things. Again, the more of that we can do, the more accessible the whole experience becomes.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We will go to Jacinta for our next few questions.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you. Thanks for your already deep consideration of these issues. I just want to firstly ask about when assistance is provided to someone in a polling booth to vote, whether that is the assistant filling out the ballot paper or some other form of assistance. How do you ensure that that assistance is actually independent?

Sven BLUEMEL: Thank you, Member. I will ask Mr Sutherland to go into some of the detail of that, but at a top level you are quite right. In terms of assistance, one of the issues that, sadly, is a growing problem is the issue of coercive control over people and so on. That is clearly something we are aware of. We do try wherever possible of course to have VEC staff or election day staff able to assist where possible. I am not talking specifically about filling in the ballot for someone who requires assistance, but there are certain things we do in that regard. Before I hand over to Mr Sutherland, I will also just say that one of the things that we have recommended in the past of course is the expansion of telephone-assisted voting, especially for those who might otherwise find it difficult to vote without assistance but who do not currently meet the eligibility criteria for telephone-assisted voting. All they need, if they are allowed to do it, is a phone, and that is it. So they can go somewhere where they feel safe, they can call us up and they can cast their vote. There are of course safeguards all around that, and they are described in our submission and elsewhere on the VEC website. But those are the sorts of things we look at.

Ben SUTHERLAND: Specifically in regard to the franchise being made available to an individual at a voting centre without a carer, the Act prescribes, in the first instance, that we would, as an election official, assist the voter to cast their ballot under the presence of a scrutineer. If a scrutineer is not available, an additional election official would oversee that process.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Would that be a partisan scrutineer? Obviously –

Ben SUTHERLAND: Sorry to cut you off, but to note your comment – I believe the VEC has made a recommendation in the past to remove that requirement of a scrutineer from that particular provision within the Act.

Sven BLUEMEL: Yes. If I can clarify, Member, the recommendation is recommendation number 2, which is that the Act should include a provision that a voter may not appoint a person to assist them to vote if that person is a scrutineer.

Jacinta ERMACORA: I was going to ask about that. But why wouldn't you use a member of the Victorian Electoral Commission staff to check, for instance, a third-party witness to make sure?

Sven BLUEMMEL: That is certainly something that we are able to do, but what we have suggested – at the moment a person may nominate someone who may accompany them to the compartment and complete a ballot paper according to their instructions, in the presence of a scrutineer. So we are saying there is the voter, there is their assistant, if you will, and then there is the scrutineer who can scrutinise that process. What we are saying is that the assistant should not be a scrutineer.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes. Okay. So it should not be a scrutineer who is on duty at the time?

Sven BLUEMMEL: Well, the details of that would probably need to be worked out, but I would imagine that that would be a starting position. But again, that is a policy question of how far should that be made independent. So yes, the detail of that would need to be worked through.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Because the role of a scrutineer really is at the end of the day, or when counting starts, versus sometimes the same individuals might have caring roles or just even be community people who are also helpful.

Sven BLUEMMEL: Sure. Yes. I should clarify there, though, that while the most obvious and visible part of the scrutineer's role is during the counting process, it is not actually entirely limited to that. This is another example where if you look at the whole lifecycle of a vote – being issued, being completed, being cast, being checked, being counted, being rechecked and so forth – all of that is part of the lifecycle, and most of those parts have a scrutineering part to them.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes. With recommendation 3 in your submission, the possibility of extending campaign exclusion zones – I guess this is partly what has been asked before – you compensate by providing independently provided accessible how-to-vote material, either inside the booth or elsewhere.

Sven BLUEMMEL: Sorry, I am not quite following the question. My apologies.

Jacinta ERMACORA: All right, I will just get recommendation 3.

Sven BLUEMMEL: I have got the recommendation here if you would like me to read it out?

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes.

Sven BLUEMMEL: 'We reiterate our support for the committee's previous recommendation to amend the *Electoral Act* to provide the VEC with the ability to apply an extended campaigning exclusion zone at specified voting centres and for specified times so that we can provide dedicated periods of low sensory voting. This would strengthen the existing' –

Jacinta ERMACORA: I guess what I am asking is if you extend the campaign-free zone, that makes it more likely that they will not receive how-to-vote cards.

Sven BLUEMMEL: Oh, I see – I understand the question now.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Therefore will you just be categorical about it and independently provide – you know, there was discussion from previous witnesses about simplified and easily accessible versions of how-to-vote cards and even policy material. Would you provide that as an alternative?

Sven BLUEMMEL: We have certainly trialled some of those things in our earlier trials of low-sensory voting, where we would have a table off to the side where all the parties and independent candidates could leave their how-to-vote cards as well. Then the individuals could come past and make their own selection should they wish, and some people may not wish to take a how-to-vote card at all, as is currently the case as well. So yes, we would use a similar process. I might ask Mr Sutherland to expand on how that is currently done, but in the folder that you have got we have got some materials on that as well.

Ben SUTHERLAND: I would reference two examples, the first being COVID drive-through mobile voting that we used in 2022, whereby we provided electors a QR code that they were able to scan that gave them access to the how-to-vote cards for the respective district that they were attending to vote in. Then separately, the process that we follow normally for mobile voting is that the mobile voting manager effectively, along with

the ballot papers, carries a folder of all the printed how-to-vote cards to provide them to the elector upon request.

Jacinta ERMACORA: That sounds really interesting, because not everybody has up-to-date digital capability, whether that is the equipment, like a phone. Not everybody has a modern mobile phone and also not everybody is capable of accessing that kind of thing. So that sounds good. With the mobile voting booths, there were also some previous witnesses talking about them. For instance, the First Peoples' Assembly – the voting booths that they used for their elections I believe the VEC or the AEC was involved in.

Sven BLUEMMEL: No, that was run independently by the First Peoples' Assembly.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Right.

Sven BLUEMMEL: There was certainly some exchange of information and, you know, we were able to consult with them on some practicalities that we have learned that they might find of interest and so forth. But no, we did not actually play a role in the election itself.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Going back to the mobile polling booths, are you considering I guess visiting Aboriginal organisations or similar locations that the First Peoples' Assembly used as a tool to include marginalised communities?

Sven BLUEMMEL: We certainly want to include First Nations peoples, and we recognise that, depending on situation and given history, there can be additional and substantial additional barriers there that we are hoping to overcome. In terms of the mobile voting effort, we are including not necessarily what you mentioned there in terms of facilities as such but certainly in terms of First Nations communities that we are trying to reach. I might ask Mr Sutherland to expand on that a little bit, but before I do, the other thing that we do is through our overall engagement with priority groups, which includes First Nations Victorians, Ms Tarabay and her team do a lot of outreach in that regard as well to make sure they have access to what they need. But I might start with the practicalities of mobile voting.

Ben SUTHERLAND: In the review of the sites that have been used from previous events, we look to reflect voter expectations in the first instance, and one of the most recent footprints that we would be looking to would be of course the referendum that was run by the AEC relevant to the mobile voting that they undertook. I will defer back to Ms Tarabay to the benefit of having a lived experience democracy ambassador as part of that mobile voting team so as to get the best participation in that context. However, our view is to of course identify those sites, contact them and provide them the opportunity of having a mobile voting team where appropriate to do so.

Sven BLUEMMEL: I might just introduce that as well. It was in 2023 that we launched what we call *Ngabun-Bambunj*, which is our first Aboriginal engagement plan. It is all available on our website and in hard copy as well. It is something that we put a lot of effort into with our community groups and with our reference groups as well to make sure that we identify particular barriers that we have in that space. It has been an area of big priority for us.

Melea TARABAY: We also have a First Nations team within the VEC, and they will go out for mobile voting and support the community to vote and also provide information sessions prior to that vote so they can understand what is going to happen.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Do you also consult on location of your mainstream booths?

Sven BLUEMMEL: I will ask Mr Sutherland to expand on that.

Ben SUTHERLAND: Yes. A part of the contact that we make with those sites that we would normally attend is confirming whether or not they are still appropriate for mobile voting or whether or not there is a preferred location. I think low-sensory voting is a good example of where the community has identified that there are venues within community-facilitated sites that are best suited for that type of outreach. And separately, as Ms Tarabay talks about, our First Nations team are critical in ensuring that we are culturally sensitive when we attend these sites and participate in the voting process.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Terrific. Thank you. I will let others who have got some follow-up questions have a bit of time to do that. Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Is there anyone with follow-up questions? I know, Nathan, you said you had at least one more. Chris, you have usually got more questions.

Chris CREWETHER: You go, Nathan.

Nathan LAMBERT: I have just got a question. I might just return to the low-sensory voting question. I am just wondering if that were to be expanded – let us just imagine it were done not only on the first Tuesday but on two more days throughout the early voting period – would that require any additional funding or legislative change to implement?

Sven BLUEMMEL: For us, the main thing there is to make sure that we have the ability. I think the short answer is no, in terms of a legislation change, but we agree with the committee's position that we would want to make sure that we can do mobile voting before we start general early voting. In terms of doing it for longer, in terms of resources, yes, that becomes an issue for us because, I mean, our staffing profile is obviously stretched very, very thin – well, not very thin, but it is stretched – during the entire early voting process and of course on election day and beyond. To fit in additional days of low-sensory voting would come at a resource cost, yes.

Nathan LAMBERT: I mean, if hypothetically we did not have ordinary early voting but just had that voting on the day, that would presumably address some of those resourcing questions because you then free up resources to attend to that low-sensory option?

Sven BLUEMMEL: It can vary because there are so many moving parts during the election period, both in early voting and basically in the writ-to-writ period. There are a lot of very, very tight timelines, and as we have always said, we have got the tightest timeline in all of Australia, which causes us additional problems and indeed cost. But even things like, you know, if we change something, you know, shortening the early voting period, for example, that actually has flow-on effects that might use additional resources down the track in terms of how we plan the count, how we centralise counting, how we do the upper house count and all of those sorts of things. All of these things are connected. It is not so much like squeezing a balloon; it is a bit more like a spider web where you tug on one thing and then all the other nodes move a little bit. That is sort of what it is like to run a large complex election as we do. So there is no straightforward answer to that in terms of: 'Well, if we did that, that would free up money for that.' There may be, but it would need to be carefully considered because of all of the interdependencies on the timeframe.

Nathan LAMBERT: All right. We might not tug on the spider's web then right now, given constraints of time. Chair, I am happy to throw to Chris.

The CHAIR: Chris, you have got a question as well? I think we have got time for one more.

Chris CREWETHER: It was just a bit more regarding takeaway voting in New Zealand, about taking a ballot paper away and returning it. I am just wondering if you could elaborate further on that and your viewpoints on that type of voting.

Sven BLUEMMEL: Honestly, it is not something we have particularly turned our minds to, because it is currently not allowed really under the legislation. We are not aware of a particular drive towards that, so it is not something we have particularly studied. Some of the other ways of voting, for example, postal voting, I guess you could argue is a form of that. Of course if you are a postal voter, you receive your ballot pack in the mail, and then you complete it at home or wherever you happen to be, and you send it back. I guess that is a form of that that we already have. We work closely with New Zealand as well as all of the other commissions in Australia to exchange ideas to assist each other where we can. One of the big differences with New Zealand of course is there is no compulsory voting, so there is always – like there is here – an effort to increase turnout and participation as much as humanly possible. But the dynamics of what you do there is somewhat changed depending on whether one is in a compulsory or non-compulsory jurisdiction. The other thing also is that, with local government, that is a postal voting environment and there is the ability to request an early vote as well. So it is not the same thing as New Zealand, but it has some of the similar dynamics in terms of having the ballot paper, taking it away with you somewhere or it being sent to you, completing it and returning it.

Chris CREWETHER: Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Great, thank you. We are bang on time, so I might leave it there. Thank you very much for the submission and for appearing. If there is anything else that you have to contribute to the inquiry, feel free to send it through. If there are any questions that we have got, we will flick them through as well.

Committee adjourned.