

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Ms Sue Lang

Organisation Name: Victorian Electoral Commission

Your position or role: Director Communication and Engagement

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Drag the statements below to reorder them. In order of priority, please rank the themes you believe are most important for this inquiry into homelessness to consider::

Public housing, Services, Rough sleeping, Mental health, Family violence, Indigenous people, Housing affordability, Employment

What best describes your interest in our Inquiry? (select all that apply) :

Public sector body

Are there any additional themes we should consider?

YOUR SUBMISSION

Submission:

Do you have any additional comments or suggestions?:

FILE ATTACHMENTS

File1: [5e70581411237-Victorian Electoral Commission Submission for Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria - March 2020.pdf](#)

File2:

File3:

Signature:

Sue Lang

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Submission to: Legal and Social Issues Committee,
Parliament of Victoria

Submission from: Victorian Electoral Commission

Submission due date: March 2020

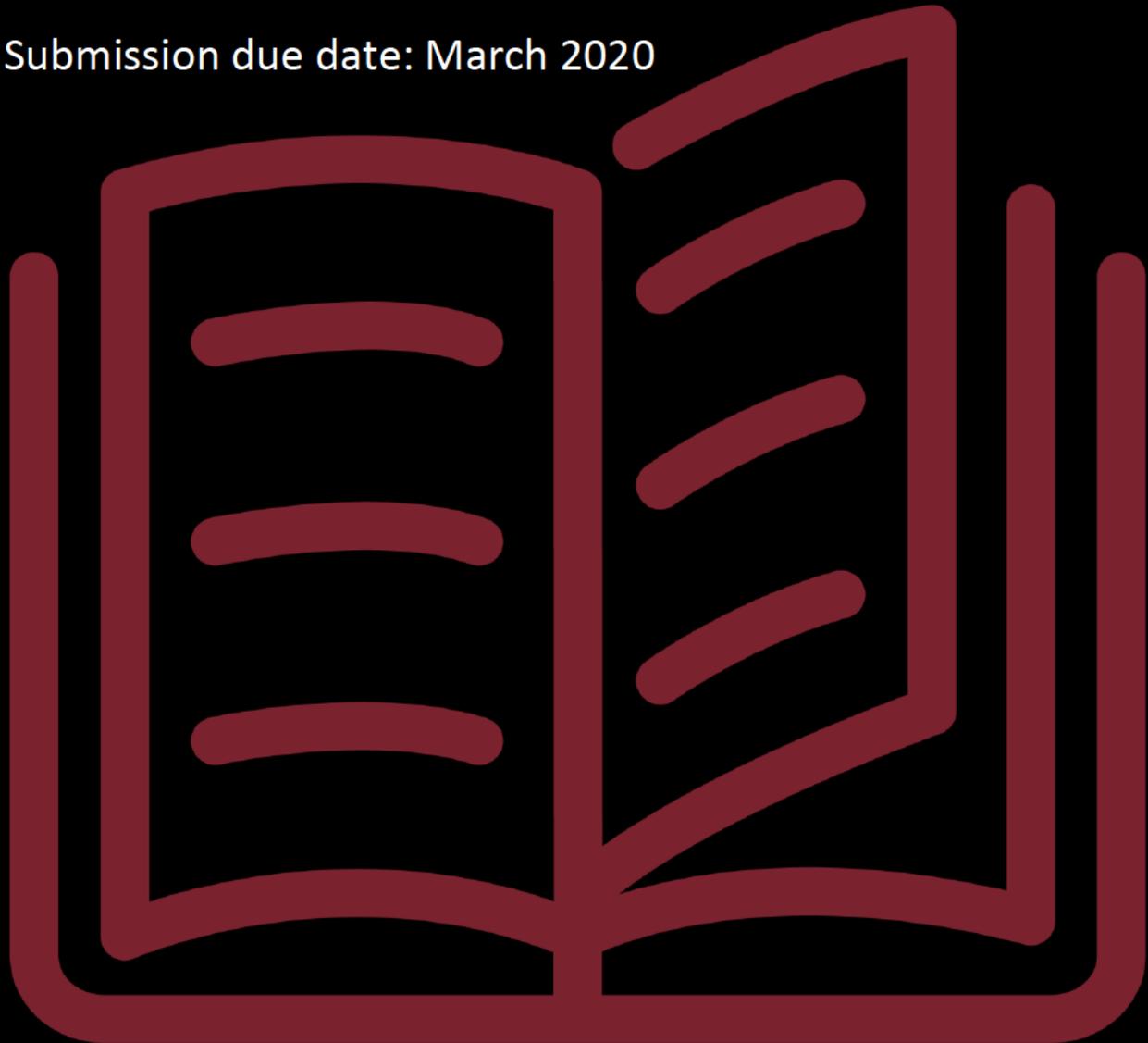


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Terms of Inquiry

The Terms of Reference for this Inquiry are to:

1. provide an independent analysis of the changing scale and nature of homelessness across Victoria;
2. investigate the many social, economic and policy factors that impact on homelessness; and
3. identify policies and practices from all levels of government that have a bearing on delivering services to the homeless.

Introduction

The Victorian Electoral Commission (**VEC**) is the administrative agency through which the Electoral Commissioner's legislative obligations are exercised. The VEC is an independent agency, operating under the auspices of the Department of Premier and Cabinet, within the portfolio of the Special Minister of State. The VEC is not subject to the direction or control of the Minister in respect of the performance of its responsibilities and functions and the exercise of its powers.

The VEC's primary responsibilities under the *Electoral Act 2002* are:

- conducting parliamentary, local government, and certain statutory elections
- maintaining the register of Victorian electors
- implementing electoral representation reviews of local councils and providing administrative and technical support to the Electoral Boundaries Commission
- promoting public awareness and understanding of electoral issues

- administering Victoria's political funding and donation disclosure and reporting obligations.

Alongside its main responsibility to ensure that Victorian elections are conducted fairly, the VEC also has a statutory responsibility pursuant to s8 of the *Electoral Act 2002* "to promote public awareness of electoral matters that are in the general public interest by means of the conduct of education and information programs".

The Commission also acknowledges that electoral participation is not equal for all Victorian communities and individuals and its vision is 'All Victorians actively participating in their democracy'.

The VEC welcomes the opportunity to submit to the Victorian Parliament's Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Homelessness (**Inquiry**). This submission examines the franchise of people experiencing homelessness and highlights the VEC's initiatives in this area.

Terms of Inquiry 2: The Social, Economic and Policy Factors that Impact on Homelessness

The VEC is concerned about homelessness due to the close link between homelessness and the associated challenges of electoral participation. The United Nations Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights (**OHCHR**) has drawn a direct link between homelessness, poverty and the right to vote, stating:

Lack of political rights is both a cause and a consequence of poverty. Socially and politically excluded people are more likely to become poor, and the poor are more vulnerable to social exclusion and political marginalization...Active participation in political decision-making processes plays a role in expanding political freedoms and empowering people, which in turn contributes towards combating social exclusion and political marginalization.¹

It is vital that people experiencing homelessness can share in the experience of participative democracy by exercising their right to vote. Participation in the democratic process is both empowering and socially inclusive.

People experiencing homelessness face several barriers to participating in the electoral process. It is understandable that voting may not be a high priority given the issues involved in being homeless. These can include lacking safety and security, being disconnected from one's support and social network and finding it extremely difficult to participate in the community, including in employment. However, democratic participation can help a person become connected with mainstream society, reconnect with the community, and have their voice and

concerns heard through their choice of issues and political representation.

Given the complex social needs with which many people experiencing homelessness contend, their exclusion from political participation is deeply structural. Homelessness is not a category that exists in isolation but intersects with a broad range of other indicators e.g. disability, mental health, youth, family violence and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations. Therefore, lower political participation by those experiencing homelessness exacerbates the disenfranchisement of some of the most vulnerable people in Victoria.

Numerous policies and practices from all levels of government impact the democratic participation of people experiencing homelessness. It is important to note that inclusive voting processes and compulsory voting alone cannot compensate for exclusionary social policies. There is an important relationship between other forms of engagement with government and the motivation of people experiencing homelessness to enrol and vote. Issues related to welfare and other government policies e.g. NDIS, Newstart and other Centrelink services, are relevant in gaining trust and increasing the political participation of people experiencing homelessness.

Adequate supply of housing remains an enduring issue across Australia and internationally. With the increasing number of people experiencing homelessness, there is also an increased need to provide more engagement opportunities to ensure all electors can participate in the democratic process.

¹ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Draft Guidelines: A Human Rights Approach to Poverty Reduction Strategies (2002) p.48

Terms of Inquiry 3: Policies and Practices from all Levels of Government that have a Bearing on Delivering Services to the Homeless

The VEC has a dedicated Education and Inclusion Team and within that, a Community Specialist – Out of Home position, a role responsible for ensuring VEC services are inclusive and address the needs of people experiencing homelessness.

Several initiatives have been developed by the VEC to increase participation of people experiencing homelessness in Victoria's democracy. These include:

- enrolment outreach sessions at homelessness services where VEC staff members assist service users with checking enrolment and/or enrolling using the 'no fixed address' enrolment form (which ensures they won't be fined if they don't vote in an election)
- a Democracy Ambassador outreach program, which employs individuals representing various cohorts - including lived experience of homelessness - to go out and work within homelessness services to run education sessions
- capacity building sessions for homelessness support workers
- development and distribution of resources specifically aimed at people experiencing homelessness – including fact sheets in relation to no-fixed-address enrolment and the receipt of fines
- improved training for electoral staff in relation to understanding the issues faced by people experiencing homelessness

- provision of mobile voting/assisted voting services at homelessness services
- the establishment of a Homelessness Advisory Group, including representatives of homelessness agencies, as well as consumers
- automatic waiving of fines for those enrolled as 'no fixed address' as a result of homelessness.

The VEC is committed to ensuring the electoral franchise of people experiencing homelessness. Often barriers are wide-ranging but can also be due to administrative processes; in these cases the VEC can, and will, make relevant suggestions for change.

For example, in its *Report to Parliament on the 2018 State Election*, the VEC specifically recommended:

- an amendment to Section 23(3)(c) of the Electoral Act 2002 to allow authorised officials determined by the VEC to nominate their business address instead of their enrolled address when witnessing enrolment forms. This change would enable a support worker or electoral official who is on the Commonwealth Electoral Roll or Victorian Register of Electors to confirm the identity of the applicant with their name and business address only

- Part 6A of the *Electoral Act 2002* be amended to extend the provision of electronic assisted voting to include further classes of electors with limited voting options. One of these groups was people experiencing homelessness. The VEC maintains that this group is an important class of elector for inclusion for electronic voting due to the fact that research indicates that 95 per cent of people experiencing homelessness do have mobile phones².

These recommendations have not yet been considered by Parliament.

The VEC will also continue to work in partnership with its Commonwealth colleagues, to identify and address barriers to enrolling and voting for those communities typically under-represented in the electoral system.

Conclusion

The VEC encourages the Committee to consider any and all barriers to democratic participation in Victoria. The Commission acknowledges the complexity of homelessness and is committed to providing targeted services to enhance electoral participation of people experiencing this situation in Victoria.

The VEC appreciates the opportunity to respond to this Inquiry via this submission and is available to provide any further information which may be useful.

² Mobile phones and the Internet in the lives of Homeless Australians Research Findings Summary, August 2014 Justine Humphry, Research Fellow, Department of Media and Communications University of Sydney

<https://accan.org.au/files/Grants/homelessandconnected/FindingsSummary-web.pdf>

VEC Contacts



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The VEC acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land.

