11 September 2023

Mr John Schmidt
Electoral Commissioner
New South Wales Electoral Commission
231 Elizabeth Street
Sydney NSW 2000

By email to:

Dear Commissioner

Re: Technology Assisted Voting Review: Interim Report

Thank you for your letter advising of the completion of the Interim Report of the review into technology assisted voting in New South Wales. I note the incorporation of both internet and other forms of technology assisted voting that have been considered as part of this effort and welcome the expansion.

The Victorian Electoral Commission's comments on the Interim Report are incorporated in the attached submission. Thank you again for the opportunity to examine the review and provide feedback. Should you wish to discuss any aspect in more detail please contact Ben Sutherland, Director, Elections at ben.sutherland@vec.vic.gov.au.

Yours sincerely

Sven Bluemmel
Electoral Commissioner

Submission in response to the Interim Review Paper:

The Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) is supportive of technology assisted voting as an adjunct voting channel for Parliamentary elections. As identified in the Interim Review Paper, the use of these services creates an additional voting channel for the most vulnerable electors in the community. The VEC notes the NSWEC recommendations for additional supporting legislation before internet voting can be further contemplated.

The VEC believes technology assisted voting should equally be explored for local government and fee-for-service elections given the risk of disenfranchisement that the same electors will face in these events. Noting the Interim Report provides a preference to ensure that future expansion is based upon a collaborative approach supported by all electoral management bodies, there is scope to incorporate additional event types within that proposal.

The VEC notes the findings in the Interim Report relevant to participation and believe that the Technology Assisted Voting eligible cohort should be expanded to include interstate and overseas electors. It is imperative that these electors are provided a voting channel which removes the uncertainty of postal services, which will only increase in future elections.

Approach in Victoria:

Currently, the VEC uses operator-assisted telephone assisted voting. Like NSW, this channel is available to a similar class of eligible electors including, those who are blind; have low vision or a motor impairment. For the 2022 State election, the VEC expanded telephone assisted voting to include electors effected by floods and those electors isolating as a result of a positive COVID-19 test.

Early forecasts suggested approximately 30,000 electors would cast their vote through this channel. Accordingly, considerable efforts were deployed to scale up the operations and further increase the stability of technological platform to ensure it could sustain the anticipated traffic. As a result of the expiration of pandemic orders ahead of the election, electors isolating due to COVID-19 were no longer entitled to use this channel.

The total number of electors who cast a vote through the VEC's operator-assisted telephone voting channel was approx. 5,500 electors. The VEC has no visibility as to how many electors who were covid positive after the close of postal voting applications chose to vote if at all.

Disruption and scalability:

The VEC undertook significant business continuity planning to ensure an election failure event could be avoided with a focus on a possible disconnection between the registration and voting activities inherent within the process. Given the simplicity of the process and the data monitoring tools available to the VEC during the operation, alternate call centres were established to accept diverted calls as a failsafe.

While operator-assisted telephone voting has a significant resource overhead when compared to internet voting, it is easily scalable and well established as a process across all electoral commissions. It can be deployed on readily available software at a minimal cost. It is a voting channel able to be scrutinised throughout the event and does not rely on technology in any way to accept the vote other than to take the call (and base call centre telephony which is known to be robust).