



# ENGAGING LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Councils look after a wide range of community infrastructure including roads, bridges, drains, libraries, recreation facilities, parks and gardens. Councils also look after footpaths, public toilets, seating, lighting, shade and street trees as part of the assets they manage.

Along with the many services they provide (it's much more than roads, rates and rubbish!) councils also work to make neighbourhoods more liveable. For example, many councils have programs to build stronger communities, support the development of public and street art, run local festivals and other events.

## 1. Streets and roads

Councils are responsible for constructing and maintaining local roads, monitoring the standard of local roads, and undertaking repairs. This can be costly, so they sometimes have to prioritise road construction and maintenance projects.

The Roads Management Act requires councils to have a road management plan covering all the roads they are responsible for. These plans include a list (or Register) of all the council's roads. The plans will also describe how a council will inspect, maintain and repair the public roads for which it is responsible, to meet community expectations.

Your council's road management plan will contain clues about scheduled maintenance and repair schedules. The plan will be based on the underlying values of the council in respect to the importance of roads, road share, prioritisation of mode (e.g. walking) so you may wish to influence the plan if you want to change council priorities.

Under the Roads Management Act, a road includes the whole road width from property line to property line, so this includes all the footpath, kerb, verge, nature strip, drains etc. So although we identify a road as the tarmac bit, it really is much more than that, this is why the Roads Management Act is important.

**#Tip:** *It is helpful to remember that no council ever has sufficient resources to build and maintain a perfect network.*



## 1. Streets and roads (cont.)

Councils have powers to discontinue roads, deviate roads, alter road levels or widths, rename roads and erect signs.

They also have traffic powers, including powers to restrict the use of roads in some circumstances, determine speed limits, issue special parking permits, remove abandoned vehicles and place or remove barriers on roads.

## 2. Other council responsibilities

Councils may adopt local laws to protect public health, safety, or amenity in a municipality. They are designed to ensure that the actions of an individual or group do not have a negative or undesirable impact on the rest of the community.

Other important things you should know about councils:

- What's covered in local laws may vary from one municipality to another.
- A council must advertise any local law that it intends to make, and must consider any public submissions it receives about the local law before implementing it. Councils must make copies of all local laws available for people to read or buy at the council offices.
  - eg. For example, as part of a Community Amenity Local Law, a council may make it a requirement that no tree, plant, sign or other object is located in a way that interferes with pedestrian or car traffic. The council can require a landowner to fix the problem and can also impose a fine.
- Apart from roads, councils also manage footpaths, public toilets, seating, lighting, shade and street trees and so on.
- You may also find it helpful to look at some other council documents such as their Municipal Strategic Statement, Corporate Plan and Municipal Public Health Plan. All councils must update their Municipal Strategic Statement (MSS) every three years.
- The MSS is a short strategic policy statement that outlines the main planning, land use and development objectives for the municipality. The MSS must link with related strategies (e.g. the corporate plan) and actions. The MSS enables community involvement in its ongoing review.

All councils have websites and some have good A-Z indexes on their home page. It can be a good idea to search the contents, particularly for things like walking, liveability, sustainable transport, public transport, sustainability, community design, health and well being, public space etc (unfortunately different documents may have different names in each council).

## 4. Local councillors

The local councillor is the person your neighbourhood elected to represent you at council.

This person is likely to have a strong interest in local issues, and will at least want to hear about what you are doing to make your neighbourhood more walk-friendly. They might also be willing to support you, including:

- Writing a letter of endorsement for your work, which you can then show to other groups or people to improve your credibility.
- Telling you about funding or grants that you might be able to apply for.
- Publicly supporting your work, by appearing at your meetings and events or agreeing to be interviewed by local media.
- Advocating at council for changes to policies, funding or laws that would help you.

Before you get in touch with your local councillor, it's worth doing some research. Find out:

- Whether your local councillor is affiliated with any party or group within council.
- What council's policy is on the issue you're interested in – such as traffic management, environmental sustainability, or improving community connections.
- What council is currently doing or funding in your local area – or what they've promised to do and haven't yet started!

You are more likely to be successful in your approach to your local councillor if you can:

- Demonstrate that there is broad community support for what you're trying to do, or that it would significantly benefit the community.
- Align your cause with their stated policy (or, to be cynical, use their rhetoric to make your case).

To get in touch with your local councillor, you can:

- Send an email or letter with some information about your group – your local council's website will have contact details for councillors (follow the link from the Local Government Victoria website).
- Call the council offices and ask how you can make an appointment to see your local councillor.
- Check if your council's monthly meetings are open to the public – and if they are, see if there is a public question time which you could use to introduce your group.
- Invite them to one of your meetings or events by phone, letter or email, or putting put together a 'walking tour' of the places that you most want to change, and inviting them to join you.

## 5. Local council committees

Most local councils will have a range of committees, made up of small groups of councillors, who look at all aspects of a small number of issues. These committees mean that council keeps an eye on what's being done and decided, without every councillor needing to know every last detail of every activity.

The focus of various committees, and their names, will vary from council to council, but could include committees that look at:

- The environment;
- Local laws;
- Council finances and budgets;
- Planning and development;
- Recreation;
- Community.

It is well worth having a look at your council's list of committees, and their terms of reference (if they're easily available – many are published on council websites). If the minutes of committee's meetings are published, you might be able to:

- See what projects or policies the committee is currently focusing on.
- Work out whether you think the committee might be interested in what you're doing, or even willing to support you.
- Link your work with the work of the committee – so that you can let the councillors know how you can help them help their communities.

Again, the broader your support base, or the more community benefit you believe you can deliver, the more likely you are to get support.

You should only contact one councillor on the committee at a time – such as the Chairperson, or your local councillor - by phone, email or letter.

As well as providing some information about your group, you can ask them how their committee works and whether it might be interested in receiving a written submission or proposal from you, or if it could invite you to come and present to a committee meeting.

If you don't get a response from the first committee member you contact, try a different member.