



The Hon Shaun Leane MP

Minister for Local Government  
Minister for Suburban Development  
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Dear Mayor

## **MINISTERIAL STATEMENT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

Congratulations to all the newly elected and re-elected councillors.

Very few people get the opportunity to represent their communities as community leaders at the local government level and it is great to see more diversity on councils than ever before.

The important work that councils have undertaken with their communities and in partnership with the State Government during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has been outstanding.

I look forward to working with the local government sector to deliver for all Victorian communities which includes mayors, councillors, chief executive officers and directors and the over 50,000 council workers, as well as the unions and peak bodies that represent local government and ratepayer interests.

This four-year term of local government will see the sector dealing with challenges never before faced. Being the closest tier of government to the community, councils will have a critical role to play in Victoria's pathway through recovery.

This creates an opportunity for councils to shape the future of their community and to make decisions through engagement with their communities that leave a legacy for generations.

The pandemic has seen a change in the way many Victorians interact with the local services, businesses and recreation opportunities closer to home. Councils are in a great position to build on this connectedness and put in place lasting changes to the way we work, commute and move around our communities.

The work ahead that councils will do with their local communities to support vulnerable Victorians, rebuild local economies and deliver for the community is going to be critical to recovery.

### ***Supporting vulnerable Victorians***

#### *Job creation and community outreach*

Councils are in a position to make a real difference in supporting vulnerable members of the community. When newly formed councils consider the development of their four-year plan, I ask that they seriously consider what they can do to assist their community in both social and economic recovery.

I commend the councils who have stepped up to assist not-for-profits who have been struggling during the pandemic to meet increased demands and manage without many of their volunteers. Councils who have diverted staff who would have otherwise been stood down to assist not-for-profits or to call to check in on vulnerable people should be applauded for the difference they have made to the lives of those living in their municipality. I have heard amazing stories of councils using their empty town halls to operate as distribution centres so that people wouldn't have to go without food or supplies.

Women have been identified as the biggest victims of coronavirus in terms of job losses and economic impacts. Councils are and always have been one of the biggest employers of women, especially in areas like libraries, childcare centres and maternal and child health. As councils develop their four-year plans, I implore you to consider employing even more women in a range of different roles.

The new Local Government Act 2020 requires councils to implement measures to ensure gender equality, diversity and inclusiveness. This is the perfect opportunity for councils to lead the way as the champions of job creation and secure employment for women as we work together towards rebuilding the economy.

#### *A fairer rating system for those experiencing hardship*

In response to the pandemic, councils have had to assess the adequacy of their rating arrangements in supporting those who have been impacted. Many councils have put in place flexible payment plans and interest waivers to help ratepayers who are doing it tough.

This type of early intervention and support is something I would like to see become common practice in councils to assist those experiencing payment difficulty. Far better outcomes are achieved when the council and the ratepayer work together towards finding a solution. Debt recovery practices and court proceedings are costly and often make the outcome worse for all parties involved.

Work is underway through the Rating System Review to implement a fairer rating system, particularly for those experiencing hardship. I look forward to progressing these reforms and working with the sector on how we can improve the system so that those facing difficulty in paying their rates know the options available to them and are provided with dignity, understanding and support.

#### ***Rebuilding local economies***

##### *Partnering with the sector to support recovery*

As part of the recovery, the State Government is investing heavily in infrastructure and is partnering with councils to deliver many of these projects.

Investing in community infrastructure creates local jobs, increases access to facilities and services and improves liveability for communities. Councils have budgeted \$3.53 billion in capital works expenditure this financial year. Through programs funded in the 2020-21 State Budget like the Growing Suburbs Fund, the Living Libraries Infrastructure Fund and the Community Infrastructure Loans Scheme, there are opportunities to increase this investment even further.

### *Supporting local businesses*

State Government and councils have also invested in supporting local businesses throughout the pandemic. The Government's Outdoor Eating and Entertainment Package has provided \$87.5 million to councils and businesses outside of Melbourne's CBD to make outdoor dining safe, practical and a reality this summer. I thank councils for stepping up to support local businesses to expand or set up outdoor dining areas so that businesses can increase their viability and operate safely.

Councils can also assist local businesses to be more resilient through business support programs and support to assist businesses to adapt and move online.

### ***Delivering for the community***

#### *Starting a conversation on cultural change*

It has been a great pleasure for me in past months to hear about the fantastic work that councils have embarked on in supporting their community during a challenging time. Collectively we should feel ownership and celebrate the great things that councils do on a daily basis that enrich many Victorians' lives.

Conversely, we should all take ownership of activities that can damage the reputation across the whole sector. It must be disappointing for the vast majority of the local government sector to read about deplorable behaviour in monitor and commission of inquiry reports that have led to councils being dismissed and administrators appointed. I especially find disturbing the reports of former councillors berating staff members with sexist and racist comments. This is completely unacceptable in any workplace.

I strongly believe that by working together we can improve the culture of the sector overall. Our goal should be to put out a clear message that, as a sector, we won't accept this behaviour. Our shared goal should be that no Victorian councils are dismissed this term.

#### *Building on Local Government Act 2020 reforms to continue to strengthen the sector*

The Local Government Act 2020 features stronger accountability and transparency mechanisms and has a stronger focus on genuine engagement with community on the work of council.

The Act requires councils to change the way they approach consultation to implement a process that involves inviting a more diverse range of informed perspectives and views.

Building community understanding of how councils work enables the community and councils to work together to set policies, plans and programs that best meet the unique needs of each community. It also assists councils to engage with different sections of the community more effectively, including those from CALD and First Nations backgrounds.

It is up to councils what they get out of this work, but I hope that it leads to outcomes that both the council and the community can own.

*Assisting rural councils*

On the theme of working together, I was immensely impressed by the assistance metropolitan councils provided to their rural counterparts in the aftermath of devastating bush fires early this year, providing specialist staff and resources to the councils worst affected. This is a great example of the sector working together.

Smaller rural councils have difficulties at the best of times attracting the professional skills they require to operate effectively. I am keen to work with the sector going forward on opportunities for metropolitan and rural councils to work together to create professional development opportunities for staff working in metropolitan councils to fill skills gaps in regional councils.

I look forward to working with your council to support economic and social recovery.

Yours sincerely



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