

2022 State election

# **Supplementary report on lessons learned from ballot paper shortages**

February 2025



## Acknowledgement of Country

The Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this nation, as the traditional custodians of the lands on which the VEC works and where we conduct our business. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past, present, and emerging. The VEC is committed to honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters and seas and their rich contribution to society.

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# 1. Purpose of this supplementary report

This supplementary report was prepared for the Parliament of Victoria's Electoral Matters Committee (**Committee**) and responds to Volume 2, Recommendation 60 of the report on its inquiry into the conduct of the 2022 State election in relation to ballot paper shortages experienced at the 2022 State election.

To read the Committee's report, first published in July 2024, visit the Committee's website at [parliament.vic.gov.au/emc](https://parliament.vic.gov.au/emc). The Victorian Electoral Commission (**VEC**) formally responded to the Committee's report in November 2024, available at [vec.vic.gov.au/submissions](https://vec.vic.gov.au/submissions).

## 1.1 Structure of this report

This report is structured according to each of the topics raised by the Committee.

Topic	Find it in
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ballot paper management plans for the 2022 State election and why the VEC failed to allocate ballot papers as needed.</li> </ul>	3. Planning for election day (pages 4–5) 4. Printing ballot papers (pages 5–7)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All voting centres which closed during voting hours on election day.</li> </ul>	5.1. Reporting and information about ballot paper shortages (pages 8–9)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All voting centres which ran out of ballot papers on election day.</li> </ul>	Table 2: Ballot paper issues by voting centre (pages 10–11)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The factors which led to voting centres running out of ballot papers and/or closing on election day.</li> </ul>	3. Planning for election day (pages 4–5) 4. Printing ballot papers (pages 5–7)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The internal communication process that resulted in VEC senior officials not knowing about voting centres running out of ballot papers and/or closing on election day in the days and months following the election.</li> </ul>	5.1. Reporting and information about ballot paper shortages (pages 8–9)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The deficiencies in the VEC's processes that led to the VEC posting inaccurate information about what occurred on social media.</li> </ul>	5.2. Communication processes (page 13)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Actions that the VEC will be taking at future elections as a result of these incidents.</li> </ul>	6. Lessons learned and operational improvements (pages 13–15)

## 2. Introduction

Our vision is for all Victorians to be actively participating in their democracy. All our actions and plans are intended to work towards our vision.

At the 2022 State election we operated 1,765 election day voting centres and, in total, 3,828,791 Victorians cast their vote. This was an immense undertaking and one that was conducted fairly, democratically and in compliance with legislative requirements.

However, 18 election day voting centres were affected by ballot paper shortages and 166 voters across 9 election day voting centres were unable to vote as a result of those shortages (see Table 2). This failure is not in line with our vision, it was not acceptable for the VEC or the people of Victoria, and it remains something that we deeply regret and for which we apologise.

This supplementary report concludes a discussion of the ballot paper shortage issue in exploring the most important lessons from this failure, examining the lead up to election day and events on the day itself, articulating the causes for these events, and most importantly linking those causes to the solutions that the VEC has already delivered or is committed to implementing prior to the next State election on 28 November 2026.

## 3. Planning for election day

The first stage to ensure adequate ballot supply is planning and forecasting.

The determination of baseline allocations for early voting and election day voting centres is completed in stages to capture both central and local information and enable our appointed election managers to finalise expected estimates for ballot papers needed at each of the voting locations within their district.

Information is gathered and considered from:

- historical data available for each voting centre from the previous State election
- knowledge about the unavailability of voting centres
- figures from the most recent federal election from the Australian Electoral Commission by voting centre in relation to number of nearby sites, distance to early voting options, and different electoral boundaries which influence the choices voters make about where to vote.

Initial ballot paper estimates are provided to election managers once they are in their local election office and election managers are asked to review them, input any additional local context and, where needed, suggest changes to the estimates and provide the rationale for these suggested changes. The initial estimates and election manager's feedback are then reviewed by the relevant election manager's election support officer based at VEC head office.

We also recommend to election managers that they provide a buffer of 25% of own-district ballot papers above the final expected ballot paper estimate for each voting centre.

In addition, every voting centre must be allocated at least one ‘absent set’. Each absent set contains 10 ballot papers for each of the 88 districts across the State, and one blank set—10 ballot papers for each of Victoria’s 8 Legislative Council regions with attached blank district ballot papers. Larger voting centres and voting centres located in more popular places for out-of-district voting are often allocated more absent sets.

This was especially relevant for the 2022 State election, which was conducted with changed electoral boundaries for almost all districts resulting in over 900,000 electors moving district from the previous election.

Finally, election managers also appoint election liaison officers to travel between voting centres on election day and carry additional ballot paper stock. Election liaison officers usually provide roving support for 4–8 voting centres and are tasked to assist with on-the-day queries from voting centre managers and their staff, provide support to busy voting centres, and provide extra ballot paper stock, if needed. There is no formula for election managers to use for allocation of ballot papers to election liaison officers, as these allocations will depend on the distance from the election office and the number of voting centres supported.

For the 2022 State election, several factors increased the complexity in ballot paper estimates, including:

- increased number of early voting centres, affecting the ability to predict voting levels at locations not used before, and the flow of voters to individual sites
- difficulty and delays securing leases for early voting centres, which meant that initial estimates were completed before the full portfolio of early voting centres was finalised
- uncertainty on the popularity of postal voting in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its flow-on impact to election day voting
- impacts of a major flood emergency that occurred in regional Victoria shortly before the election timeline, and residual issues for displaced electors
- changes to electoral boundaries affecting 910,384 electors
- a decline in the levels of local knowledge, experience and understanding the relationship between individual sites and impact on ballot paper estimates due to over 50% of senior election officials (temporary employees appointed to senior roles in the delivery of a particular election) in the 2022 State election being new to their roles.

## 4. Printing ballot papers

In total, the VEC authorised the production of 10,089,895 ballot papers for the 2022 State election. The print runs were prioritised by the VEC to region and district levels, including consideration of geographical location and anticipated consumption rates.

This can be broken down on a more granular basis:

- The base print, which was designed to meet targets, was 9,335,680 ballot papers staggered from 13 November to 21 November.

- This was supplemented by contingency print runs of 745,215 over the same timeframe.
- Finally, it is important to understand that while the total number of ballot papers printed is relevant, the more important factor given the overall surplus of ballot papers is the allocation of ballot paper stock that is the most specialised—district ballot papers.

Given there are 8 Legislative Council regions and 88 Legislative Assembly districts, demand for district ballot papers is more complex and far more likely to result in low ballot supply. The focus is directed at the accurate printing and allocation of district ballot papers, and the surplus of district ballot papers likely to be relevant for each location (i.e. ballot papers for neighbouring districts), instead of simply considering the total surplus of district ballot papers that may or may not exist at any given location.

Due to logistical constraints and the need to ensure ballot paper movements are easily reconcilable, district ballot papers are packed in three ways:

1. Bulk own-district
2. Bulk neighbouring district (sets of between 100 and 500 for each neighbouring district, based on expected need)
3. Absent sets, which contain 880 ballot papers, with 10 for every district in Victoria.

Ensuring an adequate supply of neighbouring district or absent ballot paper sets can be achieved through increasing the volume of absent sets or neighbouring district sets.

Over the years the VEC has observed that providing a uniform allocation of absent sets to all districts is highly inefficient, resulting in a large quantity of unused stock relating to districts that are further away from the district receiving the allocation. As such, the VEC has moved from printing and supplying large quantities of absent sets towards printing and supplying more neighbouring district sets. This has had the appearance of reducing the overall supply of ballot papers when looking at the headline values for ballot papers printed statewide but has principally only reduced the most irrelevant stock of ballot papers—that of district papers relating to districts that are very far away from the district to which they are delivered.

In 2018, the VEC printed 5,500 absent sets and 0 neighbouring district sets for a total of 4,840,000 ballot papers. In 2022, the VEC printed 3,989 absent sets and 2,482 neighbouring district sets for a total of 4,751,320 ballot papers. While this is a nominal reduction in the total number of ballot papers produced, the ballot papers that were not printed were of the type that were previously underused and resulted in considerable waste. This reduction made significant efficiency gains while not materially increasing the risk of ballot paper shortages.

Driving efficiency gains is critical in the context of rising early voting rates requiring more ballot paper stock to be printed earlier in the election timeline. The VEC has a limited window of 67 hours (of which only 5 are standard business hours) between the completion of the ballot draw and the commencement of the early voting period. In this period, the VEC needs to undertake quality assurance, printing and the initial distribution of ballot papers (approximately 2.7 million in 2022) to supply early voting centres across the state.

The VEC acknowledges and supports the Committee's recommendation that the total number of ballots printed should not contribute to ballot paper shortages.

**Table 1: Timeline of ballot paper printing<sup>1</sup>**

	Initial print Concluded Sunday 13 November (approx. 49 hours run-time)					Bulk print (approx. 6 days run-time)			Additional print Concluded 21 November (approx. 3.5 days run-time)	
	Regional (EVC)	Metro (EVC)	Regional (Postal)	Metro (Postal)	Additional print (contingency)	Regional	Metro	Blank	Regional (contingency)	Metro (contingency)
PVIC	629,000	1,141,000			88,000	1,198,620	3,977,700	203,360	245,500	420,715
PNSW			326,000	588,000		1,272,000				
Subtotals				2,684,000	88,000			6,651,680		666,215

#### Definitions

- PVIC – printing site in Victoria
- PNSW – printing site in New South Wales
- Initial print – ballot papers to be used at early voting centres
- Bulk print – ballot papers to be used for election day and additional stock for early voting centres
- Additional print – contingency printing that is to be used at early voting centres and election day voting centres
- Postal – ballot papers that differ in design from ballot papers used at early voting centres and election day voting centres
- EVC – early voting centre

<sup>1</sup> Please note this was the planned timeline for activity. As a result of mechanical failure at the print site of the VEC's suppliers, a number of these efforts ran over initial projections.

## 5. Events on election day

### 5.1 Reporting and information about ballot paper shortages

This information has been gathered initially through voter information reports, substantiated by conversations directly with relevant election officials, and from data collected by the VEC's Complaints team. Voter information reports are used to record any minor discrepancies on the roll or to record an elector's reason for not voting.

Eighteen election day voting centres ran low or out of either their own-district (10 locations) or out-of-district absent (8 locations) ballot papers requiring additional deliveries. Voter information reports of electors who intended to vote at a voting centre but were unable to do so were received from 9 of these 18 voting centres. In total, voter information reports were lodged in relation to 166 electors across the State who had intended to vote but were unable to do so. The details of the election day voting centres that were affected are provided in Table 2. Data is not collected on the timing of top-up deliveries to election day voting centres.

When running low on ballot paper stock, election day voting centre managers are asked to contact their election manager to arrange delivery of more ballot papers from the closest election liaison officer. If a centre runs out of ballot papers, election day voting centre managers are instructed to provide voters with the option to attend a nearby election day voting centre, wait for the delivery of additional papers from the election liaison officer, or they can complete a voter information report recording the voter's intention to vote.

To prevent future shortfalls, by 2030 the VEC intends to substantially extend electronic roll mark-off from being used only at early voting centres to being used at many election day voting centres, subject to budget constraints. This contrasts with the current system of paper roll mark-off that cannot be monitored independent of staff reports. This will allow consumption of ballot papers at a district level to be monitored in real time, thereby reducing the dependency on election day voting centre managers to notify their election manager or election liaison officer of their site's ballot paper consumption rates. This approach was trialled at the 2023 Narracan District supplementary election and Warrandyte District and Mulgrave District by-elections. The cost to uplift the VEC's services in this regard has been included in the appropriation for the 2026 State election.

Regarding Lowan District, the following sites did not record any voter information reports throughout election day: Concongella (Concongella Primary School), Great Western (Great Western Primary School) and Stawell (Stawell West Primary School). It is important to note that in Lowan District, only Stawell (Stawell Senior Citizens Clubrooms) ran out of ballot papers, resulting in voter information reports being completed and the location closing at 5.20 pm on election day. This was due to an unexpected influx of voters after 5 pm on election day. Table 2 illustrates this. Previous statements asserting that no voting centres closed prior to 6 pm were made based on information available at the time, as the early closure of the voting centre at Stawell (Stawell Senior Citizens Clubrooms) was not reported on the day by the voting centre manager.

None of the remaining 1,764 election day voting centres closed early.

Figure 1 provides a geographical overview of the specific election day voting centres around the town of Stawell that did and did not identify ballot paper supply issues and operated throughout the day on election day.

For completeness, the VEC's investigation into this issue included discussions with the relevant election liaison officer and election day voting centre managers in the area, and confirmed that no other election day voting centres in proximity to the Stawell (Stawell Senior Citizens Clubrooms) closed due to a lack of ballot papers. All neighbouring election day voting centres received additional deliveries in response to specific requests made by their respective voting centre managers throughout the day on election day.

The Rainbow election day voting centre, also in Lowan District, was provided 500 own-district ballot papers, with the site taking 360 votes. Accordingly, there was no shortage of own-district or out-of-district ballot papers for this location. A review of the election liaison officer's election day report and speaking with the election day voting centre manager confirm that additional absent sets were provided to the voting centre throughout the day on election day to respond to out-of-district voting for Mildura District.

Confirmation was provided by the election day voting centre manager in Rainbow that the voting centre closed at 6 pm on election day with a surplus of absent, blank and ordinary ballot papers, indicating that no eligible voter was unable to vote at this site.

**Table 2: Ballot paper issues by voting centre****Election day voting centres that ran low on ballot papers (9 voting centres)**

District	Voting centre	Date reported	Date report processed by VEC HO <sup>2</sup>	Issue reported	Est. number of affected electors
Lowan District	Concongella Primary School	12/12/2022	23/01/2023	Ran low of own district ballot papers only	N/A - additional ballot papers delivered
	Great Western Primary School	12/12/2022	23/01/2023	Ran low of own district ballot papers only	N/A - additional ballot papers delivered
	Stawell West Primary School	12/12/2022	23/01/2023	Ran low of own district ballot papers only	N/A - additional ballot papers delivered
Geelong District	Bannockburn Cultural Centre	26/11/2022	30/01/2023	Ran low of absent Eureka District ballot papers	N/A - additional ballot papers delivered
	Manifold Heights Primary School	26/11/2022	30/01/2023	Ran low of absent Lara District ballot papers	N/A - additional ballot papers delivered
	South Geelong Primary School	26/11/2022	30/01/2023	Ran low of absent South Barwon District ballot papers	N/A - additional ballot papers delivered
Pascoe Vale District	Westbreen Primary School	26/11/2022	23/01/2023	Ran low of absent Broadmeadows District ballot papers	N/A - additional ballot papers delivered
Point Cook District	Altona Meadows Primary School	27/11/2022	23/01/2023	Ran low of own district ballot papers only	N/A - additional ballot papers delivered
	Altona Meadows Community Centre	27/11/2022	23/01/2023	Ran low of own district ballot papers only	N/A - additional ballot papers delivered
<b>TOTAL</b>				<b>Own district 5</b> <b>Absent district 4</b>	

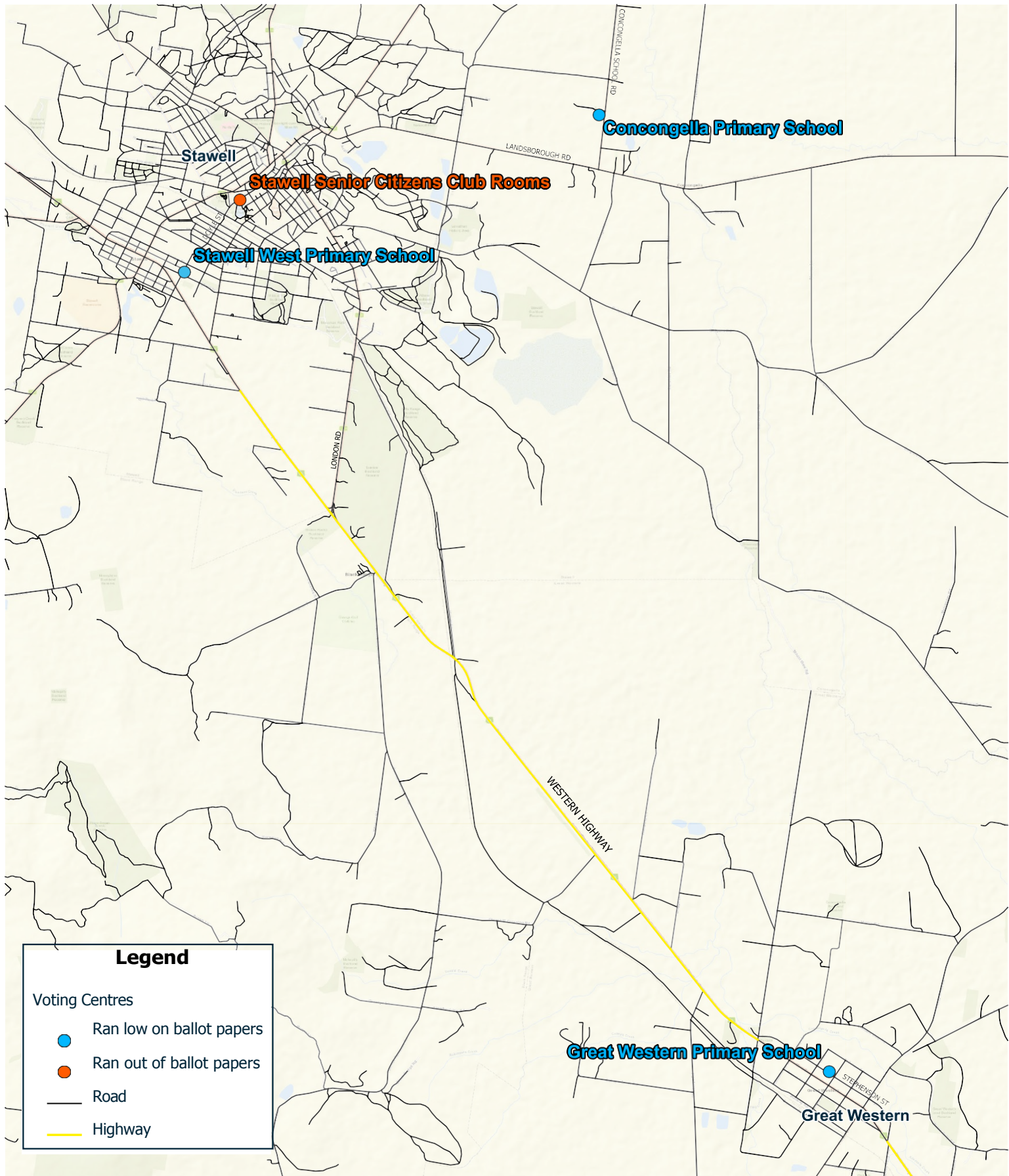
<sup>2</sup> Processing by the VEC's head office (HO) occurs in stages following the return of materials on election night, decommissioning of election offices, and transfer and sorting of sealed parcels from locations across the state through the VEC Warehouse. Each sealed parcel is manually reviewed by VEC staff, including relevant file notes and diary entries. The dates in this column reflects the end of these activities in respect of the individual voting centre.

### Election day voting centres that ran out of ballot papers (9 voting centres)

District	Voting centre	Date reported	Date report processed by VEC HO <sup>3</sup>	Issue reported	Est. number of affected electors
Bass District	Grantville Hall	26/11/2022	23/01/2023	Ran out of own district ballot papers	32
Oakleigh District	Carnegie Primary School	26/11/2022	23/01/2023	Ran out of absent sets just before close of voting	1
Ovens Valley District	Bright Senior Citizens Centre	26/11/2022	23/01/2023	Ran out of own district ballot papers	3
	Porepunkah Primary School	26/11/2022	23/01/2023	Ran out of own district ballot papers	2
	Wandiligong Primary School	26/11/2022	23/01/2023	Ran out of own district ballot papers	21
Ripon District	St Arnaud Senior Citizens Clubrooms	26/11/2022	23/01/2023	Ran out of absent sets just before close of voting	2
Lowan District	Stawell Senior Citizens Clubrooms	12/12/2022	23/01/2023	Ran out of own district ballot papers at 5.20pm	100
St Albans District	Monmia Primary School	26/11/2022	23/01/2023	Ran out of absent sets just before close of voting	4
Tarneit District	Thomas Carr College	26/11/2022	23/01/2023	Ran out of absent sets just before close of voting	1
<b>TOTAL</b>				<b>Own district 5 Absent district 4</b>	166 affected electors

<sup>3</sup> Processing by the VEC's head office (HO) occurs in stages following the return of materials on election night, decommissioning of election offices, and transfer and sorting of sealed parcels from locations across the state through the VEC Warehouse. Each sealed parcel is manually reviewed by VEC staff, including relevant file notes and diary entries. The dates in this column reflects the end of these activities in respect of the individual voting centre.

Figure 1: Voting centres in Stawell area



Map Prepared by:



Data Use:



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## 5.2 Communication processes

During an election, the VEC actively engages with the community on social media as part of our election communications strategy. As such, our social media activity is focused on publishing responses that are accurate, contemporary and relevant.

Specific factual claims—in this case, that certain locations ran out of ballot papers or closed early—are evaluated with the most current information available at that point in time by the communication team. This is constrained by the volume of specific comments received on a wide range of topics and the limited time available.

For the 2022 State election, the VEC operated a social media monitoring roster staffed by a core team of 9 that monitored the VEC's media channels from 8 am to 10 pm 7 days a week, enabling the VEC to respond promptly to all factual election related enquiries received by its channels. At the 2022 State election the VEC received 275,457 mentions on social media, peaking on election day with 70,029 mentions.

The VEC's content approval process for responses to social media claims that represent emerging issues—such as ballot paper shortages—is to ensure maximum accuracy by engaging the relevant subject matter lead at director level who is actively delivering the relevant election activity. Accordingly, social media responses to emerging issues are contingent on the best available information that can be quickly gathered by subject matter leads in order to provide the timely response expected in a social media context. In the case of field activity, this by necessity depends on an escalation chain from voting centre manager up.

The information available to subject matter leads in respect to ballot paper usage on election day relies on verbal updates provided through the operational network. There is no central data source of ballot paper supplies to verify any representations made from the field. It is also important to note that in an election day context, there are critical operational pressures placed on field staff which may limit staff availability to respond to enquiries from the VEC head office.

The expansion of electronic roll mark-off will provide much of this data and allow for a level of forensic analysis to be undertaken prior to responding to any comments on social media relevant to this issue.

## 6. Lessons learned and operational improvements

### 6.1 Ballot paper shortages

#### 6.1.1 Lessons learned

The single most important lesson is that the VEC must always ensure that every eligible voter is able to cast their vote at any time during the election period from any voting centre in Victoria. While the VEC has always strived for this, the changes in how, when and where voters choose to vote means that achieving this is getting more complex and more expensive. In the 2022 State election, this was not achieved.

While the number of voters who were affected was small, every vote counts and every Victorian who is eligible to vote must be able to do so.

There are four more specific lessons which the VEC has taken from the ballot paper shortages in the 2022 State election:

1. There is a need to implement electronic roll mark-off at a wider range of issuing points on election day to provide real-time visibility of ballot papers issued. This will enable identification of concerning trends before they materialise and deployment of additional stock before the existing stock is depleted.
2. There is a need for greater flexibility in printing to enable the VEC to self-serve for smaller, on-demand ballot paper print runs to react efficiently and effectively to trends before they materialise.
3. There is an opportunity for design improvements to the ballot material production process which may allow for more efficient printing in the constrained time period which facilitates a larger reserve stock.
4. There is a need to review and refine our approach to forecasting vote estimates for all future parliamentary elections

### **6.1.2 Operational improvements**

The VEC's commitment to address these lessons was articulated in our response to Recommendation 59 of Volume 2 of the Committee's inquiry into the conduct of the 2022 Victorian State election. More detail follows below.

#### **Electronic roll mark-off**

A key lesson of the ballot paper shortages is the importance of real time centralised oversight of ballot paper consumption at early voting centres and election day voting centres. Reliance on communication from staff, best estimate forecasts and ballot paper stock in surplus of the total number of votes taken at the state or district level has historically been highly effective but in the 2022 State election was shown to be insufficient. This solution of real time monitoring and agile print responses is the VEC's preferred approach to minimising the risk of future ballot paper shortages.

#### **In-house print capability**

The VEC has made a major investment in creating an inhouse print capability. This capability will be operationalised by the 2026 State election and will—if circumstances permit—be validated during local government by-elections in 2025. This capability will expand the range of suppliers who can meet our requirements for volume, accuracy and speed of print tasks that occur in an exceptionally tight election timeline.

The creation of this new channel will allow for greater print throughput of bespoke print runs which will also enable us to be more responsive to situations where supply through established production runs results in delays. Through the centralised oversight provided by electronic roll mark-off, where there are indicators of a risk of ballot paper shortages, the inhouse print capability will allow a timely and accurate response to any identified shortage risks.

## **Ballot material design efficiencies**

The VEC aims to re-design the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council ballot papers so as to provide the most efficient printing operation possible, while remaining compliant with the prescribed form.

Most importantly, the re-designed ballot material will separate the district from the region ballot paper, where historically they have been printed together on a single sheet of paper and separated at a later stage by the VEC at issuing. The historical approach has caused market and technical constraints that limited the number of print suppliers available.

This change will increase the availability of print suppliers, allowing a greater throughput across multiple print sites, more competitive pricing options and reduced risk of critical failures or bottlenecks. In short, it enables the VEC to print more ballot papers in the same amount of time in a more efficient manner. This redesign will better enable the VEC to ensure that the overall volume of ballot papers printed is not a contributing factor to any ballot paper shortages.

## **Forecasting review**

The VEC has engaged our internal auditor to review the existing process of forecasting for future events. This request has been made to support both the Prahran and Werribee District by-elections and all future events including but not limited to State election 2026 and any further District by-elections.

The internal auditor will review the efficacy of the legacy approach to forecasting that was adopted for State election 2022 along with assessing the adequacy of a new approach proposed by the VEC which leverages of both our geospatial team and in house data scientist.

Similar to the approach adopted by VEC relevant to computer code, the VEC intends to have both the forecasting process and output independently validated prior to every major event going forward.

## **6.2 Social media internal communication protocols and processes**

### **6.2.1 Lessons learned**

There is a need to review and improve internal communication processes and protocols from the field to subject matter experts and consequently the VEC's communication team, including the social media core team.

### **6.2.2 Operational improvements**

The VEC's commitment to address this was articulated in our response to Recommendation 35 of Volume 2 of the Committee's inquiry into the conduct of the 2022 Victorian State election.

