



## **WORKING WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT TOOLKIT:**

### **A resource for reconciliation supporters to work with local government in progressing reconciliation**

Local councils are essential in progressing reconciliation as they are the closest level of government to the community and can lead and influence positive change in their communities.

This toolkit was developed from messages presented and discussed at the Victorian Reconciliation Network Forum held at MAYSAR on August 18, 2018. The forum focussed on how local reconciliation groups and individual reconciliation supporters can work with local government to progress reconciliation.

### **Engaging with Council Processes**

- Engage with both elected councillors and council officers
- Council officers can help start programs or shift priorities if they are supportive of the cause
- You can ask questions of councillors at council meetings. Each council uses different processes - some allow you to turn up and ask a question, some require prior submission of questions
  - You can get a documented response of the answer as well. If a question is taken on notice the answer will be provided in written form. Some Council meetings are also streamed online so there should be an accessible video record.
- Councillors receive most of their information at briefing sessions. There are more briefing sessions than council meetings. If you are able to get on the agenda of a council meeting, you may be invited to give a briefing (summary of your key messages/asks).
  - It is normal to be given only 20-30 minutes on the agenda - no-one is given much time.
  - Aim for 3 or so key messages that councillors will remember - not a list of facts and figures.
  - Be specific about what you want. Tangible and deliverable is what councillors like: "We want x venue on y day". This doesn't have to be a one-off and you can progress goals each time you meet/brief.
- When councils debate motions (e.g. Jan 26) they may invite oral submissions from the gallery. This is an opportunity to speak in support of (or against) the motion. It is worth being prepared in advance and also to bring along a few allies – Aboriginal community members have great impact.
- The Council often works out a budget for four years at the very start of the term, so it's important to start lobbying from day one. Getting funding in place early in a term is much easier than trying to find the money half-way through one.

### **Effective Ways to Share Your Message with Council**

- To have influence, email or phone your councillors. Many will meet with you face-to-face and this direct contact is the best way to build a relationship.
- Councillors get huge volumes of email and it is very easy for emails to get missed. Ask for a face-to-face meeting or informal coffee with your Ward councillor to talk about your ideas/concerns
- Face to face meetings help to build long-term relationships:
  - Talk about your personal story rather than speaking for others - this is universally influential.

- Non-Aboriginal people should seek to invite local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to attend the meeting with them, and ensure they are part of developing the approach and key asks for council. Non-Aboriginal people can still do the bulk of the work while providing opportunities for local Aboriginal people to engage.
- Share other people’s stories and anecdotes - always with permission
- Emails/Letters
  - The most powerful emails/letters come from those personally affected by an issue. This was seen at a local council during the debate around January 26, where those personally affected by the date change were more persuasive than those not.
  - Personalised emails/letters are much more effective than duplicate letter campaigns
- Councillors can and do change their mind on an issue over time if they are provided information to better understand the issue – so it is worth developing and maintaining strong relationships
- It can be unhelpful if councillors are pushed into making a decision without fully understanding the issue/context.

### Examples of Engaging Local Councils

- Invite councillors along to your LRG meetings to build relationships and let them see your work firsthand.
- Advocate for Council to employ Indigenous staff
  - Employing and retaining Indigenous staff, both in a dedicated Liaison role and also across the workforce, is key for the success of any council in reconciliation. It builds relationships between Council and the community and drives and informs/influences policy, helping to embed reconciliation in the organisation.
  - It is key, however, to be aware of the ‘cultural load’ experienced by Indigenous staff working in councils. There needs to be adequate support for these employees and a ‘culturally safe’ work environment. See [report from Learning Circle on Cultural Safety](#) for information and resources to share with council.
  - At one council that employed an Aboriginal Liaison role, there was a 12 month period where the role was vacant, and during this time the local Indigenous community felt they weren’t being heard, resulting in a need to rebuild relationships and reestablish momentum.
- In Whittlesea the Local Reconciliation Group is co-convened by the Mayor and a local Aboriginal community leader. The Mayor and a Councillor attend every LRG meeting. Any unanswered questions are given a response at the next meeting - meaning there is accountability.
- Reconciliation Action Plans (RAP) aren’t the only approach Councils can take, but they do give clear steps and make certain measures reportable and more achievable. A good Council RAP needs direct and regular engagement with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations, and an ongoing process that ensures momentum and accountability. See [RecVic research report on RAPs in local government](#) for more information.
  - Port Phillip’s 2nd RAP implemented quarterly meetings between all Councillors and the Boon Wurrung Foundation. This built relationships through direct contact.
  - Within the Port Phillip RAP, lots of great initiatives and programs have taken place and many have involved the Port Phillip Citizens for Reconciliation.
  - In Bass Coast Shire there is an annual event during NAIDOC week for Aboriginal artists. The great thing about this event is the many of the artists are beginning to take a leadership role and the event is organising itself/becoming self-sufficient.

## Other Key Tips & Resources

- If a council isn't receptive to your ideas, it may not be helpful to force it. If this is the case, continue pursuing regular meetings and building your relationship by providing relevant information and context on the issue.
- Local residents are more likely to influence Council as opposed to people living outside the municipality; and living in the specific ward of the councillor you're contacting is even better.
- It's important to recognise the efforts of individuals and local businesses in the community that support reconciliation.
- [Maggolee](#) is a comprehensive online resource as a resource for local councils to work more closely with Aboriginal communities:
  - It includes information on policy, programs and protocols, key organisations and contacts, local demographic data, latest news and events related to reconciliation.
  - We encourage local governments to access and utilise the Maggolee website, which celebrates good practice in Victorian local government Aboriginal engagement and reconciliation and aims to bring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, local communities and the councils that serve them together.
  - Share it and promote it to your local council, with as many staff, departments and councillors as possible!
- The [HART Awards \(Helping Achieve Reconciliation Together\)](#) recognise initiatives by local governments and community organisations that are advancing reconciliation in Victoria. Reconciliation Victoria and the Victorian Local Governance Association have worked in partnership to present the awards since 2014. You can tell your local council about the amazing work of HART Awards Local Government Finalists...it may just inspire your local council to take the next step in progressing reconciliation!
- The [Victorian Aboriginal Local Government Action Plan](#) contains some useful case-studies of good practice and a set of guiding principles. This Plan is going to be refreshed to reflect the Victorian Government's commitment to self-determination.
- Find out more about Reconciliation Victoria's work with local government on our [website](#)

