



Australian Citizenship Ceremonies Code

Submission by the
Victorian Local Governance Association



The Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed changes to the Australian Citizenship Ceremonies Code (the Code). The VLGA is an independent peak body that supports councils and councillors in effective local governance. The VLGA offers a range of services and resources for councils.

The VLGA recognises the importance of citizenship and the vital service provided by councils on behalf of the Australian Government in their conferral of citizenship to new Australians.

Upon receipt of the proposed changes to the Code from the Department of Home Affairs, the VLGA surveyed its member councils to gauge their current practices in relation to conduct of citizenship ceremonies and to seek their feedback on the proposed changes. (Please see Appendix A for a copy of the survey questions.) The VLGA received 22 responses to the survey, representing 50% of its membership and 28% of all 79 councils in Victoria.

Below is a summary of the responses:

- 11 respondents (councils) identified as metropolitan or outer metropolitan Melbourne and 11 respondents identified as regional or rural Victoria
- On average, these 22 councils held 5 citizenship ceremonies last year (or in a typical calendar year). However, responses ranged from 2 ceremonies in a small rural shire council to 12 ceremonies for a large metropolitan council.
- The average number of conferees per ceremony also varied significantly between councils. For rural shire councils, each ceremony typically involved fewer than 5 conferees (one council reported 1). For metropolitan councils, that number is typically over 100 (one council reported 200).
- Most councils, regardless of their location, reported no notable difference in the number of conferees on dates such as Australia Day (January 26). However, 3-4 councils stated that they may have on average 20 extra conferees on such significant dates.
- Most councils reported 1-3 members of parliament (both State and Federal) attending citizenship ceremonies, although 4-5 councils reported they typically do not have any MPs in attendance. Most councils reported increased attendance by MPs on significant days such as Australian Day (January 26).
- None of the 22 councils received any direct financial assistance from the Federal government to host citizenship ceremonies. Council contributions towards these ceremonies ranged from a few hundred dollars for rural councils to several thousand dollars for metropolitan councils. (One council reported an annual budget allocation of \$65,000 for citizenship ceremonies.) The cost for councils to host ceremonies on special days increased significantly due to staffing costs and some councils offering extra services such as entertainment and welcome to country.
- All councils agreed with the principle that *“Citizenship ceremonies must be non-commercial, apolitical, bipartisan and secular. They must not be used as forums for political, partisan or religious expression, for the distribution of political materials or the sale of souvenirs.”*
- 21 out of the 22 respondents stated that they currently hold citizenship ceremonies on Australia Day. The council that does not hold ceremonies on January 26 has not done so for the past 20 years and holds it on January 25 for *“logistical and operational reasons and so as not to detract or compete with other community events being run within the municipality on Australia Day.”*

The VLGA is an independent organisation that supports councils and councillors in good governance

Suite G06, 60 Leicester Street, Carlton VIC 3053 | W: www.vlga.org.au | E: vlga@vlga.org.au | P: 03 9349 7999

- Most councils do not currently hold citizenship ceremonies on Citizenship Day (September 17). Councils that do host ceremonies on this date only do so if it does not clash with council meeting dates or other council events.
- The proposed change to the Code to require councils to hold citizenship ceremonies on Australia Day drew a range of responses, including:
 - *No. Although we always have citizenship ceremonies as part of our Australia Day process, we do get feedback from some people that they would rather not do their ceremony then - we generally get several hundred people to that day and some people feel intimidated by it and/or want to be part of a smaller, more intimate ceremony involving mostly family and friends. It is a wonderful part of our Australia Day process however mandating this may not always mean the most enjoyable experience for our new citizens.*
 - *Yes, however being a regional council, we sometimes don't receive a pledge list for Australia Day because we don't have many applicants.*
 - *Yes, and we have not had any concerns raised by our Indigenous representatives.*
 - *No - Often demand does not allow for this, and due to the large number of separate communities we have, our ability to offer a local ceremony in a person's own community may not be able to be maintained.*
 - *Council should hold Citizenship ceremonies on Australia Day however each council has different circumstances which may prevent them from holding one even if they wanted to. So there should be flexibility and not made mandatory.*
- The proposed change to the Code to require councils to hold citizenship ceremonies on Citizenship Day drew a firmer response – mostly “No”. However, of the 4 councils that agreed with this proposal, comments were made to the effect that it would only be practicable if the Citizenship Day ceremony did not clash with council business and did not fall on a weekend, due to the financial implications for councils.
- Responses were mixed from councils that currently schedule their citizenship ceremonies to avoid parliamentary sitting dates (Yes = 12, No = 10). Most councils engage with their local MPs to ascertain their availability (Yes = 16, No = 6), and all but one council provide a list of ceremony dates to their local MPs.
- 15 councils (68%) opposed the requirement that citizenship ceremonies must be scheduled outside parliamentary sitting days. 14 councils (64%) opposed the requirement for councils to engage with their local MPs to ascertain their availability and only 4 councils (18%) opposed the requirement for councils to provide a list of ceremony dates to their local MPs. Reasons for opposing these requirements include:
 - *... if this is supposed to be non-political etc we should not have to be trying to fit in around the sitting dates of politicians as councils have many functions to fit in as well. We have always provided our dates to the local politicians and liaise with them as we get near each ceremony to ascertain if they will be attending or not - often not knowing until almost the day.*
 - *There are potential consequences for the Code effectively building the timing of the conduct of ceremonies around MPs. How many need to be available for a ceremony to be held? How many need to be Federal and how many State? What happens to the waiting list if ceremonies aren't held because MPs have got other/better things to do?*

- *It would be logistically challenging to coordinate the availability of multiple Fed and State members with Council.*
- *Our ceremonies are demand driven, primarily by the needs and availability of the conferees and their families and Council.*
- Only 2 councils (9%) currently have a recommended dress code for conferees, and 18 councils (82%) are opposed to the suggestion of a recommended dress code. Most councils observed that they do not have any problems with this issue and that conferees almost always come dressed in neat casual attire, including their national/cultural outfits suited to the occasion. Some councils also commented that a recommended dress code may represent a financial impost on conferees depending on how the dress code is written and interpreted.
- Councils were given an opportunity to make any concluding remarks at the end of the survey. Their comments include:
 - *We feel very strongly that these ceremonies should be special for the new citizens and their families and we try to be responsive in our timing and to offer a range in the size of events that they can be a part of to best meet their personal preferences.*
 - *We put a lot of resources into making these good events at cost to our ratepayers not the Federal Government so we should still have the flexibility to manage them - and some funding would be well received.*
 - *AEC liaising should be done from the Department. From a council's perspective all the documents should be sent to one location. Easier for council ceremony staff to do this as leading up to the ceremony takes a chunk of time out of the everyday role.*
 - *Current arrangements in our Shire work well, are appropriate to the number of ceremonies held and are flexible to allow participants to be a citizen in their own local community. Council does not wish to see this choice removed when no issues have been experienced.*
 - *We make every effort to abide by the code, with a focus on ensuring our community enjoying the ceremonies. It is our view that the current approach is relevant to our community and is respected by all who attend. The increased demands set out in the new code do not, in our view, add to this.*
 - *More funding assistance with running ceremonies on behalf of the government would be helpful.*

As stated by the Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs, the Hon David Coleman MP, the “vast majority of councils already hold citizenship ceremonies on Australia Day”. However, the assertion by the Minister that “Australia Day is by far the most popular day of the year for people to attend a citizenship ceremony” is not supported by the survey responses.

As demonstrated by the responses above, Victorian councils have carried out their obligations under the current Code, often at considerable expense to ratepayers, to meet the needs of their local municipalities in conducting citizenship ceremonies. While there is some support for the proposal requiring councils to conduct citizenship ceremonies on Australia Day, the operational costs to councils (and therefore to their ratepayers) and logistical challenges, particularly for rural shire councils with small populations and large geographical coverage, means a mandated requirement cannot be realistically met.



There is very little support for the proposal requiring councils to conduct ceremonies on Citizenship Day, as well as the requirement for councils to host ceremonies to avoid parliamentary sitting days, as council meetings and other events often make these two requirements unrealistic. Similarly, councils are opposed to a recommended dress code for conferees as this issue has not been identified as a concern.

Given the feedback from councils, the VLGA makes the following recommendations:

1. That the dates for hosting citizenship ceremonies remain at the discretion of each council, noting the current requirements outlined in the Code and local community expectations.
2. That recommendations for a dress code for ceremonies remain at the discretion of each council, noting that this has not been an issue of concern for councils.
3. That consideration be given by the Australian Government to the provision of direct financial assistance to councils conducting citizenship ceremonies, noting the financial impost these ceremonies have on local communities.

Appendix A

Survey - Australian Citizenship Ceremony Code

1. What is the name of your council? *(Please note that all results of this survey will be de-identified and will remain anonymous - this is so that we can ensure that the survey results are representative)*. _____
2. How would you describe your council?
 - Metropolitan
 - Interface/outer metropolitan
 - Regional
 - Rural
3. How many citizenship ceremonies did your council hold in the last calendar year? (or in a typical calendar year)
4. On average, how many conferees/participants does each ceremony typically involve?
5. If this number changes significantly for special dates/occasions (e.g. January 26 Australia Day), please state a typical number for those dates/occasions
6. On average, how many Federal MPs (including Senators) and State MPs (both houses) attend/used to attend your citizenship ceremonies?
7. If these numbers change significantly for special dates/occasions (e.g. January 26 Australia Day), please state typical numbers for those dates/occasions
8. Does your council receive any DIRECT financial contribution towards citizenship ceremonies? *(Note: direct contribution is specific for ceremonies only and does not include un-tied grants/funding)*
9. Does your council provide the following at a typical citizenship ceremony? *(tick all that apply)*
 - Welcome to country by local Indigenous elder
 - Gifts
 - Entertainment
 - Catering
 - Other _____
10. Are any of these features only provided on specific dates or occasions? *(Please specify what is provided and when/if it differs)* _____
11. On average, what financial contribution does your council make towards a typical citizenship ceremony, inclusive of venue hire, staff time and other resources? _____
12. On average, what financial contribution does your council make towards a citizenship ceremony on a special dates/occasions (e.g. January 26 Australia Day), inclusive of venue hire, staff time and other resources? _____

13. Do you agree with the following principle outlined the Code? “Citizenship ceremonies must be non-commercial, apolitical, bipartisan and secular. They must not be used as forums for political, partisan or religious expression, for the distribution of political materials or the sale of souvenirs.”
Yes/no and (optional) comment
14. Does your council currently hold citizenship ceremonies on January 26 Australia Day?
Yes/no and (optional) comment
15. Do you agree with the proposed change to the Code that councils MUST hold citizenship ceremony on January 26 Australia Day?
Yes/no and (optional) comment
16. Does your council currently hold citizenship ceremonies on September 17 Citizenship Day?
Yes/no and (optional) comment
17. Do you agree with the proposed change to the Code that councils MUST hold citizenship ceremony on September 17 Citizenship Day?
Yes/no and (optional) comment
18. Does your council currently: Avoid citizenship ceremonies on federal and/or state parliamentary sitting days
- Yes
 - No
19. Does your council currently: Engage with relevant federal and state elected members to ascertain their availability
- Yes
 - No
20. Does your council currently: Provide ceremony dates to the offices of federal and state elected representatives
- Yes
 - No
21. Further details/comments (regarding Q18, 19 and 20) _____
22. Do you agree with the proposed changes to the Code that councils MUST: Avoid citizenship ceremonies on federal and/or state parliamentary sitting days
- Yes
 - No
23. Do you agree with the proposed changes to the Code that councils MUST: Engage with relevant federal and state elected members to ascertain their availability
- Yes
 - No



24. Do you agree with the proposed changes to the Code that councils MUST: Provide ceremony dates to the offices of federal and state elected representative
- Yes
 - No
25. Further details/comments (regarding Q22, 23 and 24) _____
26. Does your council have a recommended dress code/standard for citizenship ceremonies?
- Yes
 - No
- Further details/comments _____
27. Do you agree with the proposed change to the Code that councils should set appropriate dress code/standard for citizenship ceremonies?
- Yes
 - No
- Further details/comments _____
28. Any other comments you wish to make regarding citizenship ceremonies conducted by your council?