VLGA
Victorian
Local Governance
Association

Welcoming
Cities

REPRESENT:

A handbook for culturally diverse Victorians considering running for local government

July 2022

The Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA) and Welcoming Cities acknowledge and pay respects to the traditional custodians and ancestors of this country, and the continuation of their cultural, spiritual and ceremonial practices.

We respectfully acknowledge the past and present Traditional Owners of the land, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and respect their culture and identity, which has been a continuum with the land and sea for generations.

We have a role to play in achieving a just Australia in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' rights as First Peoples are recognised and respected.

Cover photo: Cr Seema Abdullah, Greater Shepparton City Council. Credit: Liz Arcus, Liz Arcus Photography

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About the VLGA

The Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA) is an independent peak body for councils and councillors. We support, facilitate and provide opportunities for councillor networking, professional development and information exchange. We actively engage with key policymakers and broader stakeholders to inform, influence and lead the conversations that determine the priorities for the local government sector. In the lead-up to each council election cycle, we provide training to equip candidates with the information and tools they need to run a successful campaign and prioritise good governance should they be elected.

We're always here to help. Don't hesitate to get in touch if you feel that you need support throughout the campaign. Stay in the loop with our events and training by signing up to our newsletter. Although the VLGA is based in metropolitan Melbourne, we run regular training in rural and regional Victoria – let us know if there is a program you would like to see us deliver in your area.

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About Welcoming Cities

Welcoming Cities, a leading initiative of Welcoming Australia, supports local councils, and their communities, to become more welcoming and inclusive. We are a national network of cities, shires, towns and municipalities who are committed to an Australia where people of all backgrounds have equal opportunity to belong, contribute and thrive. Welcoming Cities recognises that, of all tiers of government, local councils are best placed to understand the complexity and diversity of their communities and facilitate a whole-of-community approach.

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Foreword

When considering local government in Victoria, and the participation of culturally diverse people in its decision-making processes, there are two thoughts that come to mind:

"Local government is the level of government that is closest to the people,"
and
"You can't be what you can't see."

Local government is the level of government that is closest to the people and, as such, should be the most reflective of the diverse needs, aspirations, and realities of communities. This extends to the council chamber, where there is growing demand for councillors who look like the communities they represent and serve.

Out of the almost 700 councillors in Victoria, there is a small but growing group of councillors from culturally diverse backgrounds, elected by their fellow residents and community members.

In this handbook, we have invited culturally diverse councillors from across Victoria to share their stories with you – so that you may 'see' their stories of success – their challenges, highlights and helpful tips that will encourage you in your journey to local government.

We have also provided information on some of the key considerations to keep in mind if you are thinking about running for local government.

The VLGA believes that it is critical to encourage Victorians from a diversity of backgrounds, experiences and abilities to run for council. We celebrate the richness that comes with cultural and linguistic diversity and the better decision-making, improved adaptive capacity and social cohesion that arise from broader representation and enfranchisement.

We look forward to supporting you on your journey.

Kathryn Arndt
Chief Executive Officer
Victorian Local Governance Association

Cr Denise Massoud
President
Victorian Local Governance Association

Introduction

If you are considering running for council, this handbook is for you. Its aim is to help people from culturally diverse backgrounds to understand what it takes to be elected to council and what it takes to be a council member. This handbook will support you as you decide whether to run for council and assist you if you do decide to take the journey.

Interviews with some elected representatives from culturally diverse backgrounds are included at the back of this handbook. These interviews showcase some of Victoria's diverse councillors who have paved the way for improving representation in government decision-making. We hope these stories help you understand the role of a councillor and encourage you to follow in their footsteps.

If you decide to be a council candidate, this handbook will give you a basic understanding of how to run an election campaign. It will also help clarify your motivations and strengths. Being a council member is a big undertaking. If you are elected, you will be taking on a complex role that requires you to deal with crucial and demanding tasks. While this might be challenging, you will learn new skills and you will also be helping the community in a valuable way.

Good luck on your journey!

The **ten most culturally diverse** local government areas in Victoria are Greater Dandenong 60%, Brimbank 58%, Hume 42%, Whittlesea 41%, Monash 37%, Wyndham 37%, Melton 37%, Manningham 36%, Moreland 35%, and Maribyrnong 34%.

Why representation matters

Victoria is home to one of the world's most culturally diverse societies and is among Australia's fastest-growing and most diverse states. Victorians come from more than 200 countries, speak 260 languages, and follow 135 faiths. In 2016, just under 50% of Victorians were born overseas or had at least one parent who was born overseas. Around 26% of Victorians speak a language other than English at home (Victorian Government, 2018).

If local government is meant to be the level of government closest to the people, we should see the diversity of the community reflected in the council chamber. This representation will lead to better leadership and decision-making to create stronger councils and better outcomes for local communities.

Section 1
About council and councillors

There are 79 councils in Victoria, representing over 6.5 million people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

Councils are made up of two parts: the elected representatives (councillors) and administration (council staff). Council staff are mainly responsible for the running of the organisation and the delivery of council services and functions. Councillors instead focus on high level decision-making and adopting a strategic view of the future the council wishes to achieve for its community. As a councillor, you don't need to be across all of the detail.

All councils have between five and twelve councillors, elected by the people who live, or own a property or business, in the area. Services provided by each council can differ depending on its financial resources and the needs of its community.

The main types of activities that councils are responsible for are:

- Providing leadership and good governance for their communities.
- Developing and maintaining community infrastructure (roads, bridges, drains, halls, libraries, recreation facilities, parks and gardens).
- Planning for future growth and development.
- Enforcing state and local laws relating to such matters as land use, environmental protection, public health, traffic and parking and animal management.
- Providing a diverse range of property, economic, human, recreational, health & cultural services.
- Strengthening the health and wellbeing of all community members – this includes tackling the health impacts of climate change and preventing family violence.
- Supporting the diverse needs of the community and progressing reconciliation and better outcomes for First Nations people.
- Emergency management and response.

Local government in Victoria is run according to the Victorian *Local Government Act 2020* provisions and any subsequent revisions or amendments. Although it's not necessary to read through the entire piece of legislation, having a grasp of the key concepts covered in the Act will help prepare you to run. It is good to understand the roles and powers of local councils before committing or taking a stand on issues.

Who can be a councillor?

Almost all Australian citizens enrolled for state and federal elections in the municipality or on the council voter roll are eligible to stand for council. The voter roll closes 57 days or about eight weeks before election day. You don't need to live or be enrolled in the ward you are seeking to represent, but you must be enrolled as a voter in the municipality itself as a resident or taxpayer.

The Local Government Act disqualifies some people from standing. For example, an undischarged bankrupt, a particular convicted criminal, or a member, or an employee of a member of state or federal parliament. Seek advice from the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) if you have any questions.

Cr Jasmine Hill visits a kindergarten

Councillor tasks and time commitment

The most important thing about being a councillor is connecting with and being a voice for the community. In doing that, councillors perform various tasks, including attending regular council meetings, community events and functions. The legislation dictates a minimum number of council meetings that councillors must attend, but after that, it's up to the individual to determine how much time they spend on council matters. Sitting councillors have said they spend an average of 20-25 hours per week on council matters. It all depends on what you can do – and what you want to achieve.

What you will need to do

Councillors must be prepared to participate in meetings, ensuring they have read relevant council briefs prior to the meeting. On some topics you might be required to consult the community and do additional research.

Councillors also offer opinions and ideas and listen to others constructively. It is important to act in a way that helps build a positive, well-functioning council. Being fully present as a council member requires paying attention to all aspects of community life and understanding how community issues and government processes connect.

As a council member, you will not be implementing the events, projects or policies; that will be up to council staff. You will be ensuring the right decisions are being made for the community.

There are three key aspects of the councillor role:

- Decision-making
- Contributing to strategic planning
- Representing community

EXAMPLE BREAKDOWN OF WEEKLY TIME COMMITMENT

		Hours
●	Council meetings	3
●	Councillor briefings/ councillor workshops	2
● ●	Committee meetings	2
●	Reading	4
●	Meeting residents and community groups	2
●	Meeting with state and federal MPs	1
●	Community events	2
●	Council events	2
●	Reviewing/replying to correspondence	3
●	Social media	2
	Networking and professional development	2
	Total	**25**

This may vary from week to week, or according to your priorities and existing commitments.

Cr Shane Sali (right) talks to a voter

Allowance

Councillors receive a taxable allowance, determined by the council, within parameters set by the state government, so the role of a councillor is like a part-time job. Allowances range from around $24,000–$54,000 (Victorian Independent Remuneration Tribunal, 2021) depending on the size of the council. Mayors and deputy mayors receive more. These roles are often undertaken while juggling family, community, and other paid work responsibilities.

You don't need to be an expert

The *Local Government Act 2020* requires all councillors to undertake mandatory induction training on many important topics within six months of being elected. This training will be organised by your council for all councillors. It will cover many of the aspects that you need to know. Topics such as land use planning, interacting with the media, and even meeting procedures are things that you can learn on the job.

After the induction training, your council should continue to offer opportunities for professional development, to learn more about issues that you are interested in. The VLGA provides regular opportunities to learn about important topics facing the local government sector, in a range of different formats.

What kind of skills are desirable?

We are all the experts of our own lives and have unique skills and experience that are valuable for informing government decision-making. Even if you don't have political experience, it is still likely that your life and work experience will prove valuable in your campaign and role as councillor.

When running a campaign, it is important to identify what unique skills and experience you have and how this will best help your local community. Communities have a good understanding of the needs of their local area, and they will vote for candidates with the skills and experience to address their issues. Read the councillor interviews in this handbook and notice the individual skillsets that helped them get elected. Below is a quote from Cr Seema Abdullah who acknowledged that her professional experience along with her experience of living in different parts of the world was an important part of her campaign.

"I used my social media strongly during the campaign. This allowed me to build my brand and people started to see me as a professional, educated, and empowered woman; someone who has lived around the world and is at ease interacting with other communities; and someone that can bring professional skills and qualifications to the table and use them to make a difference in the community."

Cr Seema Abdullah

Section 2
Considerations before you run

What kind of challenges will you face?

Before considering running for council, consider some challenges you may experience. This will help you decide if it is what you want to do. Some of the difficulties councillors disclosed in the interviews include:

- Time pressures. Set your own boundaries. Being invited to two or three events in a day doesn't mean you have to go to all of them.
- Negative campaigning. Although not common, sometimes candidates speak negatively or spread misinformation about other candidates.
- Media. Sometimes personal lives can become public.
- The political environment. The political environment can be challenging especially for people with little experience.

What makes a good councillor?

Is a good councillor one who is consistently re-elected? One who is always in the local paper? Or one who gets things done and has a reputation in the community for being willing to listen? Suppose you have experience with any kind of community group or with running your own business. In that case, chances are, you have the skills to be a councillor.

Have you ever gathered your neighbours to sign a petition on an issue that affects your street, or have you brought a group of concerned parents together to lobby the school council? In that case, you're more than halfway there. If there is something (or things) that you care about, if you want to make a difference in your community, and if you have the willingness to listen and fight for change (however incremental) – you will make a good councillor.

Once you are on council, you will be representing your whole ward, not just your street, club or community.

Why run for council?

Clearly understand your reasons for wanting to be a council member before becoming a candidate. You might:

- Have a desire to improve the quality of community life. Perhaps you are very well acquainted with the communities and citizens and the issues that need attention. Working as a councillor can be a logical next step because it is a role that allows you to create quality programs and services, which will improve the overall standard of living within the community.

Cr Shane Sali (left) talks to a group in Shepparton

- Feel that government should be fair, open, and accountable, and you want to contribute to creating and maintaining such a government.

- Possess good skills and experience to contribute. Perhaps you have a strong background in finance, business, or management. Maybe you are a great communicator and mediator.

If you are genuinely interested in government process and community wellbeing, you may want to learn everything you can about how it all works and what can be done to become more empowered through the system. This can be a great motivator and give you the passion needed to do a great job.

Running for council can give you the opportunity to:

- Influence outcomes on issues that you believe in.
- Contribute to policy and programs that impact the local community.
- Meet people from other places and from all walks of life.
- Work on exciting and diverse local issues.
- Learn more about your community through an interesting and diverse workload.
- Develop a range of policy, negotiation, and procedural skills.

Ideas and questions to get you started

Answering some questions will help you understand whether this is the right path for you. Here are some ideas and questions to consider.

KNOW YOUR COUNCIL

- What council area do you live in?
- What ward do you live in? Would you run in this ward, or is there another one in which you have more connections to leverage?
- Who are your current councillors? What do they stand for, and how does this align with your own values? What have they done that you do and don't agree with?
- Do you think the council represents people from the same cultural background as yourself?
- Have you looked at your council's website and social media pages? Note some issues and initiatives (or improvements) in your municipality. The council's 'vision' or strategic plan is a great starting point.
- Have you considered attending a council meeting, watching the live stream online, or looking through some meeting agendas and meeting minutes?
- Have you researched the different council committees that you could join?

COMMUNITY GROUPS

- Take stock of community groups you, your family and your friends are involved in. The council website should list several community groups that may be a good checklist.
- What are these community groups aiming to achieve in the community? How does council support them in doing this at present, and how might council better help them to do this in the future?
- Who are the leaders (office-bearers or key influencers) in these community groups? If you know them, consider reaching out to let these leaders know you are considering running. Ask them which issues are most important to them or their group.
- Look up groups on social media that are run by and for your local community, such as community discussion groups and pages. They are a great way to gauge community sentiment and engage with other community members.

WARDS

Many LGAs are divided into wards. On council, you will be representing your ward, but also thinking of the entire council.

- Make a list of the suburbs in your ward. The Victorian Electoral Commission website will help with this.

Cr Otha Akoch (second from left) and his family

- Make a list of key landmarks or community hubs in your ward – shopping centres, schools, kindergartens, sporting grounds/ clubs – high traffic areas where the community comes together.
- Can you think of at least three significant issues facing the ward? If not, time to do some research with friends and neighbours. They don't need to be time-sensitive, pressing issues – they can be something that many people care about, like access to children's services, aged care or the local pool.

YOUR FAMILY

- Chat with your family about running for council. Are they supportive? Do they understand the challenges?
- Do you have caring responsibilities at the moment? How might you accommodate them during the campaign and while you are on council? Keep in mind that councils do provide childcare arrangements for councillors while they are performing official business, but it is always helpful to have a support network of family and friends.
- Is your family willing to be in the spotlight with you as a public figure? If not, how will you protect them from unwanted scrutiny?
- Will your family form an active part of your campaign? Consider whether you want to include images of them in your campaign.

YOUR REASONS

- What is your number one reason for wanting to run? Is it wanting to make a general difference, or are there more specific issues you want to improve? Make a list of ten things you would like to achieve. Now identify which of your values these are connected to.
- Think about your past interactions with elected representatives (councillors, state and federal MPs). What issues did you approach them with, and what response did you receive? What can you take from those interactions to improve your own style of advocacy and representation?
- What traits do you possess that you think would make you a good councillor?
- What will you do differently? Identify one reason why people should vote for you.
- How will being a councillor benefit you? What will you learn and achieve that will make it worthwhile (for you, your family and your constituents)?
- What are you willing to sacrifice to be a successful councillor?

Not ready to be a councillor?

There are many ways you can still be involved in decision-making without running for council. Some ideas include:

- Joining a committee or advisory group of council.
- Joining a local community group.
- Providing input when councils ask for feedback. They listen!
- Joining a school council.
- Starting a petition to make change in your community and presenting it to council.

Section 3
Running for council

How to run

Once you have decided that running for local government is right for you and your family, it's time to make it happen. This section includes information about how to make the most of your opportunity and what approach you might take.

Cr Thuy Dang taking part in a Respect Victoria campaign

Developing your platform

Once you have taken stock of the issues facing your community, the next step is to decide which topics you will focus on throughout your campaign. Although it is essential to listen and absorb the problems that residents might raise with you, you are not expected to be an expert on every issue. More importantly, you are entitled to take a different position. **Focus on the things you feel passionate about and run with them**. Find out all you can about these issues – not just the concerns themselves, but their history of advocacy and action, who the key players are, and what has and hasn't worked so far.

YOUR VALUES

When it comes to the political sphere, we can view our personal values in two particular ways:

a) values that inform our passions or policy interests, such as **fairness**, **equality**, **diversity**

b) values that inform how we behave, such as **tolerance**, **conscientiousness**, **logic**.

Select five values for each category, and use these to think about how you might communicate your values to voters:

achievement / authenticity / authority / autonomy / balance / boldness / challenge / citizenship / community / compassion / competency / conscientiousness / consistency / contribution / cooperation / creativity / curiosity / determination / diversity / empathy / equality / experience / fairness / family / foresight / generosity / growth / happiness / honesty / humour / inclusion / integrity / intuition / justice / kindness / knowledge / leadership / learning / logic / loyalty / openness / optimism / **pragmatism** / **principles** / proactivity / **progress** / reason / recognition / reliability / reputation / resilience / respect / responsibility / security / stability / status / success / tolerance / trustworthiness / wisdom

Example

I am passionate about representation in government and social justice and want to see council deliver for everyone in our community, particularly those who are most vulnerable. I am **principled**, **progressive**, and **pragmatic**, and if elected, will work with my fellow councillors and council officers to achieve the best possible outcomes for our municipality.

Cr Seema Abdullah's 2016 election flyer

From there, you can develop your platform. Think of practical, achievable actions you can implement throughout your campaign or if you are elected. As a candidate, your job is to listen to the community, advocate for the positions and views you believe in, and remain open, transparent and honest.

- Don't make promises you can't keep. Once you're on council, change will require the support of other councillors, and some things you would like to change may not even be part of the responsibilities of local government.
- Don't make statements or promises about how you will vote on specific decisions – this is considered 'apprehended bias' and may compromise the decisions that you make later.
- If you're a political party member, be mindful of policy platforms or rules that you may be expected to adhere to – the last thing you want to do is backtrack on your stated position because you weren't aware that your party had a different one.

Community networks

No matter how good you are at campaigning, you can't personally speak to every voter in your ward, but you need to be able to get your ideas out there into the community. People need to know who you are and what you stand for. Then they can choose to vote for you. Your networks and the community groups you are involved with can help ensure your name is heard around your area. When meeting people for the first time, they may recognise your name even if they don't know your face. You may not be able to knock on every door and speak to every resident, but you can at least aim to talk to the 'influencers' in your community – the people that others listen to.

ACTIONS

What is your position on the issues?

Do you have one? Or do you still need to find out more? Has your position on this issue changed over time, and can you explain the reasons behind your position changing?

What have you done so far?

What is your history of advocacy on this issue? Can you demonstrate your commitment to achieving change through actions that you have taken? Do you have other experiences that are relevant to the point that demonstrate your courage of conviction?

What will you do throughout the campaign?

What can you do to link your previous actions to your candidacy? Can you take additional steps to leverage your increased profile as a candidate? Are there actions you can take that can form part of your community activation strategy (for example, petitions, street stalls, issues-based doorknocking)? Do you need to find out more about the issue or hear other points of view? Can you schedule meetings with key players to listen to their perspectives and outline your plan for change?

What will you do once you are on council?

What steps will you take on this issue once you are elected? Remember that to achieve change, you must work with council officers and other councillors and follow council processes. Will your commitment be to resolve the issue, or is it safer for you to commit to prioritising the investigation of the issue once on council, working collaboratively to achieve the best possible outcome?

Strategies for getting elected

The interviews in this handbook identify a range of strategies that the councillors used in their campaigns. A quick summary:

- Don't run your campaign on issues that focus on a subset of the community, such as a particular cultural group. Instead, run your campaign on issues that affect everybody.
- Speak to people you know and trust to see if they think you would make a good councillor. Ask for their feedback.
- Think about volunteering in the community and joining a leadership group to help expand your networks.
- Reach out to current and past councillors you respect and ask them to mentor you.
- Do your homework when running. For example, you should learn about preferences and how the voting system works.
- Know the local issues.
- If you are thinking about running in 2024, you need to start building your network and credentials now.
- Start following state politics to understand important issues to campaign on.
- Never lose sight of your values during the campaign. Your values become your compass under challenging times.
- Do your homework before making the announcement to run. This is important, so you're not trying to catch up, and you're ready to respond to media and comments from the community.

Political parties

For many candidates, running for council is part of the natural progression of their political activism. Becoming an active member in a political party can offer practice in many skills you may need as a candidate and as a councillor – local leadership, partnerships, communication skills, political understanding, governance, meeting procedures, and so on. However, running for local government as a political party member can be complicated and involve several different considerations. Political parties have their own rules that govern their members when it comes to local government elections. Here are a few things to consider:

- Does your political party endorse or support candidates for local government?
- Are you bound by rules that require you to endorse members of your party ahead of other candidates?
- Does this still apply if you are not endorsed or supported?
- Do you have the numbers to win a preselection process if required?
- What will happen if you are unhappy with the other candidates that your party selects?
- What will you do if you are not endorsed or supported but still want to run?
- What kind of message does your political party membership send voters (rightly or wrongly)?
- Will your membership, support or endorsement translate into support (in-kind or material) for your campaign?
- Being upfront and honest about any party affiliation you may have is an important part of good governance and transparency, even if you are not an endorsed candidate.

Your campaign team

Running for council is too big to do alone. You will need a team. Campaign teams can come in many shapes and sizes, formal and informal, but you must have a team around you to provide support when you need it. You need to be out there meeting voters, not stamping envelopes. The people you choose to be part of the campaign team will be necessary to your election. As well as being loyal to you and committed to your success and your vision, they need to be people who can quickly pick up particular skills, such as publicity and fundraising. If you have people with some experience with previous campaigns, that's an added bonus. Use their knowledge and their skills. Campaign team roles include:

- Campaign manager
- Treasurer / fundraising.
- Communications
- Community organising and outreach.

CAMPAIGN MANAGER

Your campaign manager might be an organised friend or family member, someone with experience in political campaigns, or even a former or retiring councillor. Most importantly, your campaign manager needs to be someone you trust and can work with collaboratively. You might be looking for someone with political awareness, someone who is excellent at proofreading, or someone who is terrific at organising events. They don't have to be able to do everything, but they should be able to take the reins when there is something else you need to do.

Once you have put your team together, make sure you maintain regular contact with them. Your team should have a clear idea of what you need them to do and that you appreciate their help. Remember, you are only as good as your team – and you need them in order to get elected.

OTHER CAMPAIGN ROLES

There is no hard and fast rule about how large or small your team should be. You should build your team around the skills they bring to the table. For example, someone good at event planning might be an ideal fundraising or events coordinator. Someone with experience managing a public Facebook or Twitter page might be a terrific social media manager. It may also be helpful to have someone on your team who can assist you by contacting community groups and businesses on your behalf.

Budget

You don't need a huge amount of money to be a successful candidate, but you may need to spend on things such as a website, professional photography and printing your materials. Think about what you can source through your community, friends, family and volunteers and what you need to pay for. A campaign budget will vary for each campaign. It could depend on where you are standing and how many other candidates are running. **You will still need a budget, no matter how much or how little you think the campaign will cost.** You may want to assign a specific person in your campaign team the responsibility of fundraising or managing the campaign budget. This is particularly helpful when it comes to sourcing funding, so that your time can be used for campaigning and so that you can ensure you are meeting your reporting requirements set out by the Local Government Act.

In the lead up to the local government elections, the VLGA runs workshops for candidates, with advice on budgets, timelines and campaign infrastructure.

SAMPLE BUDGET

Campaign costs	$
Nomination fee	$250
Photoshoot at a discounted rate	$300
Brochures (x500) including design	$500
A2 posters (x15) including laminating	$300
A3 posters (x 20) including laminating	$110
Zip ties	$5
Website design	Donation
Facebook advertising	$400
Prepaid SIM + initial credit (using old phone)	$15
Snacks for volunteers	$50
Pizza night for volunteers	$150
Total	**$2,080**

Election candidates are required under Victorian law to submit a 'campaign donation return' form within 40 days of the election. A campaign donation return is a record of donations or gifts (including in-kind support) given to a candidate during the campaign period.

Any donations of money, in-kind support or services that are worth $500 or more must be declared on the form.

It is important that you keep a record of any donations that you receive throughout your campaign.

All candidates must submit the campaign donation return form – even if you were not elected or did not receive donations during your campaign.

Keep in mind that, once submitted, this form becomes publicly available and can be viewed by members of the public.

For more information about campaign donation returns, visit the Local Government Inspectorate (LGI) website.

FUNDRAISING

When it comes to funding your campaign, you should not be expected to cover all of the costs on your own. Although it can be awkward to ask family and friends (let alone strangers!) for money, there are many creative ways candidates have been able to fund their campaigns.

This might include asking for micro-donations (small donations between $5 and $50), discounted services (such as photography or website design) or holding social events that bring your community together and build your supporter base while raising funds for your campaign.

Other ways to raise funds include:

- A bake sale, or food stall.
- A garage sale – great opportunity to speak to your neighbours!
- Trivia night – ask for donated prizes and sell tickets.
- Raffles – ask for donated prizes.
- Supper club – if you like to cook, invite some friends over for dinner in return for a donation to your campaign.
- A barbecue, cocktail party, afternoon tea or movie night – sell tickets.

Cr Philip Le Liu gives a speech in Chinatown, in the City of Melbourne

Communication

Nothing beats one-on-one communication or organic community engagement, but ultimately you want to reach as many voters as possible. This is where mass forms of communication are incredibly effective. You want to get your name, face and message out there so that voters will think, "I know her – I like what she stands for" when they see your name on the ballot paper.

Some commonly used forms of communication include:

- Local newspaper/s (is there one for culturally diverse communities?).
- Local radio (this is particularly effective in regional/rural areas, and some stations are targeted to particular communities).
- Direct or unaddressed mail (these have very different costs and levels of effectiveness).
- Public speeches or appearances.
- Social media – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram.

Make sure that any media you have to pay for (i.e. advertisements) are targeted to your community. There is no use paying exorbitant amounts of money for a statewide publication that only a handful of voters in your ward will read.

Always ask yourself, "Where do people in my community get their information?" If you know that the local paper hasn't been delivered in your neighbourhood for years, why would you advertise in it? Or if it is delivered but immediately tossed in the recycling bin, why waste your money? But if you know there is a publication – even if it is a small community newsletter – that most people read cover to cover then get in touch with the publishers and place a small ad.

THINK ABOUT HOW YOU CAN GET FREE, ORGANIC EXPOSURE

If you have an interesting perspective or a compelling story on any local issue, put it in a media release and send it to the local journalist. Include quotes that get your message across in a concise and effective manner. Tell the story, including key facts. You want to make it as appealing a proposition as possible – the less work the journalist has to do, the more likely they will publish your story.

Social media is a (mostly) free, effective way to communicate your message. It is a great way to communicate directly with voters – but you need to find ways to target your community rather than only posting on the internet. The best way to do this is with content that is interesting to a local audience and geographically grounded. For example, write about visiting local cafés, restaurants, parks and sporting groups and tag them in your posts. Post articles relevant to local people and issues that users are likely to share. This expands your audience.

TRADITIONAL MEDIA

Contact your local newspapers, such as *The Leader, Star Weekly, Weekly Review,* and other regional newspapers. Also target any newspapers that speak to your diverse community. You should be able to find a contact email address and/or phone number online. Introduce yourself as a candidate. If you can organise coffee with the local reporter, make sure you come prepared with issues you want to speak about, in line with your key messaging.

Cr Thuy Dang speaks as part of her role as the Deputy Mayor of Brimbank City Council

Some other points to consider include:

- Nothing is ever off the record – don't speak ill of other candidates or say things you wouldn't want to be published.
- Positively frame your messages – "I want to change this," rather than "This is bad."
- Be succinct.
- Know all of the details about your issue or subject.
- Don't be afraid to say, "I will get back to you on that."
- Journalists always have a deadline to meet. If you miss a call and don't get back to them that day, you will probably miss out on being in the article.
- If a journalist rings and wants a comment, ask them to send the question in an email – this will give you time to understand what it is they want and what you want to get across.
- Consider that social media allows you to speak directly and in more detail to the community – a Facebook video can complement an article.

DIRECT VOTER CONTACT – STREET STALLS

A street stall is a great way to increase visibility and speak to voters about their concerns. They are less challenging than doorknocking, but they still take some getting used to. The following are some ideas and tips:

- Set up outside the local shops, near school pick-up or drop-off, or anywhere else there is regular foot traffic.
- Make sure you check council regulations – you may need a permit – and if you are set up outside a business, ask them for permission before you begin.
- Have a sign and a small card table on which you can put materials. Alternatively, you can put together (or purchase) an 'A-frame' sign with your corflute on both sides.

PETITIONS

A useful tactic to have in your stall is a petition. Choose a local issue you can lobby on, and print out a few pages of a petition. It is easy to look online for suitable formats. Think about who you want to petition – it might be the current council or your state member of parliament. This way, you have an easy 'call to action', and it is a great way to get phone numbers and email addresses.

Cr Trung Luu with members of the community protesting in Brimbank

CANDIDATE STATEMENT

Your statement of up to 300 words is sent to all voters with their ballot. This should state why you're running and why people should vote for you, and include:

- A brief outline of your policies, proposals, and party affiliations (if any).
- Your reasons for standing for council and what sets you apart.
- An overview of your goals if elected.
- Personal or community experiences as examples of what you believe in.
- Information about connection with your area: how long you've lived there, community or business involvement.

This is the pitch that the majority of voters will see. Present and arrange your statement to attract the attention of voters.

- Use plain English and avoid using slang, lingo or colloquialisms. Ask someone you trust.
- Where possible, mention specific problems you want to try and address in your area, but don't make promises you can't keep.
- Try to persuade voters that your presence on council will make their voices heard.
- Emphasise your accessibility, skills, and pride in making your area a great place to live and visit.
- You will need to include a good quality photo that appears well in black and white (this is how it will be printed). Smile and make sure voters can clearly see what you look like.
- Ensure your authentic voice comes through – balance a professional tone with your heartfelt sentiments.
- Make sure the statement does not contain spelling or formatting errors. Then, ask a supporter to proofread it.
- If you plan to mention other people by name (in reference to them, or citing an endorsement from them), you must have written approval from that person for it to be included in your candidate statement. This also applies for any 'how-to-vote' or preferencing suggestions, which may be included in the text of your candidate statement, but contribute towards your word count of 300 words.
- Double-check and meet all VEC requirements about electoral material, including format and word limit for candidate statements in postal voting elections. There are very detailed guidelines on formatting and what content is allowed in the candidate handbook that the VEC will make available closer to the time of nomination.

"My campaign had the theme of 'Bringing Back Melbourne' and was focused on supporting people such as business owners, residents, and students."

Cr Philip Le Liu
City of Melbourne

This is an example of a candidate statement, used by Cr Joseph Haweil (Hume City Council) at the last local government elections in 2020.

As a returning councillor, his statement focuses on his achievements in the last term of council. As a new candidate, you may choose to focus your statement on your vision for the community. You may also want to outline previous experience and involvement in community life that combine to make you a great candidate.

HAWEIL, Joseph

With the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic being felt by Hume residents, experienced leadership and a record of delivering for the community have never been more important.

As your local Councillor over the last 4 years, I have delivered the construction of indented parking in 25 narrow streets (with another 34 streets on the way); been the most anti-infringements Councillor in Victoria by making a First Time Infringement a waiver ground, slashing 11 parking fine categories from $83 to $33 and delivering a record reduction in the number of fines issued; battled the powerful pokies industry to permanently cap the number of pokies in Hume; delivered the $6 million duplication of Roxburgh Park Drive; and advocated for CCTV to protect our parks, sporting facilities and community spaces from crime and vandalism. I know however that there is much more that needs to be done.

Our community has demonstrated great resilience during the pandemic. Local jobs for local people and business support will be my top priorities during the recovery. I'll ensure Council delivers $443 million for 500 projects including new and upgraded community facilities, preschools, roads, footpaths, walking and cycling paths, reserves, parks and playgrounds. I'll also create a new financial grants program to help local businesses (including home-based businesses and sole traders) with recovery costs. I'll continue fighting to secure the duplication of Mickleham, Somerton and Donnybrook Roads, duplicate Aitken Boulevard, fast-track infrastructure and services for the Craigieburn, Mickleham and Kalkallo growth areas, increase services for our seniors and youth and always support capping rate rises.

To vote for me, please place number 1 next to my name on your ballot paper and remember to number every box to ensure your vote is valid.

VLGA
Victorian
Local Governance
Association
Welcoming
Cities

Section 4
A councillor's life

Interviews with diverse Victorian councillors on how they navigate the world of local government

Cr Greg James
Greater Shepparton City Council

You're a proud Yorta Yorta man and the first Indigenous person elected to local government in Shepparton. Can you talk a little about your family history?

I grew up in Shepparton and I'm one of three children in my immediate family. My grandparents were absolute champions. My grandmother did a lot of work with homeless people. Mum used to say that on any given day she'd come home from school and there would be a person from overseas eating at the kitchen table. That helpful legacy went on to her children and throughout the family. That became the ethos of my family – helping out other people in disadvantaged situations.

My great grandfather was a remarkable man. He was a Mauritius man and studied to be a surgeon. He met up with my great grandmother who was a full-blooded Aboriginal person. He was a missionary man – a preacher and a teacher. The community he taught weren't allowed to speak their own language and he could only teach for two hours a day, but he defied the missionary rules and taught by candlelight. He helped people like William Cooper and Douglas Nicholls learn how to read and write, but also how to lead and write. He taught them how to be leaders and stand up for their rights as First Nations people. They went on to be leaders in politics and changed policy not just for Aboriginal people but for people around the world. That legacy was also ingrained in my DNA – to continue that work, to be political, but to be graceful about it.

And your parents?

My mother was one of 14 children – obviously there was a little bit of chaos in that household. They were living in a tiny commission house, fighting to survive. My biological father wasn't around when I was growing up. He was a non-Indigenous person. He had been going out with my mother for three and a half years and then I came along and my father didn't want to have anything to do with that. So, there was a little bit of racism on his side. It was fine while he was going out with the young black attractive young girl, but getting pregnant and being accepted into his family – well no, that wasn't going to happen. So, I was raised by my uncles and my mum, and I felt very lucky because even though I didn't have a father, I had eight or nine uncles who were a great support to me.

What did you do after school?

After school I wanted to experience a different life outside of Shepparton, so I was very fortunate to be able to go up to remote communities in Tropical North Queensland. It gave me a chance to go and look at different lifestyles and other cultures and how they operate. It opened my eyes. I now use that experience as a motivator for kids here in Shepparton to be grateful for what they have got.

I've always been involved in sport. I went on the 1988 Aboriginal cricket tour of England which was a re-enactment of the 1868 tour. I've been very fortunate with these opportunities, but you create your own opportunities and you grasp every moment. I seize every opportunity and use it to the best of my advantage.

What led you to run for local government in Shepparton?

When I was in Melbourne I managed the Koori Education Unit and I was approached by the Labor Party to be an Indigenous advisor. This was the late 80s, early 90s. I had strong connections with Trades Hall in Melbourne and was a keen Labor supporter. I was also working for the Education Union at the time, so I had a bit of a unionism and political background. So, I always had an interest and the motivation to become a politician at some stage. I was fortunate enough to be approached by a consortium of Elders who explained that their

vision was to have an Aboriginal person on local council. They asked if I would consider standing at the 2020 elections. I'm still honoured by that. I thought, "Yeah, why not? Our council hasn't had an Indigenous person on it in the last 140 years, since its existence." I thought, "It is time we had a person in our community put their hand up." I looked around Australia and saw that there has been a shift. A number of councils are changing the date of Australia Day and doing lots of positive programs.

Q What kind of election campaign did you run?

I felt very confident because I had been endorsed by the Elders, which was very encouraging and very powerful. I went with a full-blown campaign and was successful. I knew I wasn't going to get over the line with just the Aboriginal vote. I needed to get the general community so I couched my campaign not on red, yellow and black issues, I couched it on what every other candidate does. That's roads, rates and rubbish plus affordable housing, our river systems, and a number of other things like free parking. It's not just about me standing as an Aboriginal person, though of course I'll fight for Aboriginal rights. It's about me standing as any other candidate would.

Q Do you think you would have made it if you hadn't broadened the issues?

I often ask myself that and I still don't know. If I'd run on Indigenous issues at the time, like the problems in America – George Floyd and racism – I'd think, "Is our community ready for this?" I could have run solely on Indigenous issues, and we have a lot of passionate community members, but I wasn't real confident that I would get the support. There were a lot of fence sitters. I ran my campaign around the issues of Shepparton and the broader region. I didn't tear away from the fact that I am Aboriginal.

Q How do you see non-councillors in the community striving for change? Where does other leadership come from?

We haven't had any local government leadership before so we've been leading in other ways for some time. We, as an Aboriginal community, will do what we can to provide leadership on things like racism in schools. We have key leaders who can work with local government to work out how to make change. We have an Aboriginal football club, which includes netball, which has been one of the leaders regarding reconciliation. This is a club who provides leadership. It's a model of reconciliation that works well with people throwing the colour card away and focusing on community and sport.

Q What advice do you have for someone wanting to run for local government?

I feel like I've opened a door so I talk to young Indigenous leaders. I say, "Put your hand up. I want you to come on the journey." I've invited four young leaders to council to shadow me, to sit in on my briefings, to come with me so that they can see what I do from a council point of view. An Aboriginal person is the best example of culture that anyone could ever want. We bring to the government a real-life perspective of the traditional – walking, living, breathing culture. We are the keeper of the oldest living culture and our position is paramount to our position in government whether it's local, state or federal. It's absolutely essential to promote that to our people, to our mob. We just need to promote opportunities and we'll see some remarkable changes. It's a changing of the guard, a changing of the mindset.

Cr Joseph Haweil
Hume City Council

Your family migrated to Australia from Iraq. What was your childhood like?

I had a great childhood. I have one brother but a very large number of cousins – about 25 first cousins. I have lost count. My favourite childhood memory is spending time with my cousins. We were like siblings in some ways. Both my parents worked full time so much of my upbringing was with my paternal grandmother who lived five minutes away. Her place was a melting pot, or welcome zone, for all my cousins and family.

What were you doing before you became involved in local government?

My day job has been with the federal government since I finished university. I've worked in policy areas and government administration. I'm still a public servant in my day job and continue to do that since I was elected at council.

You've been a councillor at Hume since 2016 and the Mayor for some of that time. Why did you decide to run for local council?

I come from a family that has historically been very involved with local community. My family has been involved with church and Sunday school as well as helping refugees and migrants settle into the community. Being actively involved from a very young age and having a family that was prominent in the community helped. You can't get elected if you don't know people. So, I had a bit of a leg-up in that way.

What else helped you get elected?

I focused my campaign on issues that galvanised the whole community. At a micro level I was annoyed about council's policy regarding narrower streets and parking infringements. I ran a bit of a campaign on that initially. Since being elected we have worked slowly to address some of that, so it has been successful. I am interested in the service philosophy of an organisation and how it treats its residents. I was by no means a 'one issue' candidate and there is a whole range of issues that I am passionate about, but sometimes it takes one issue to galvanise people.

Can you talk about the Hume community?

Hume is in Melbourne's outer northern suburbs. About 40% of our municipality is born overseas. There are people from over 100 different countries speaking different languages and many different faiths practised in the community. It is a great place to live.

I have lived most of my life in the north-western suburbs. Hume has faced real challenges for many years because it has done the heavy lifting on things like refugee re-settlement. I would also say it is a battler city full of wonderful, amazing people that really work hard to make ends meet every day. Hume is also an economic powerhouse and contributes a huge amount to Victoria's economy and gross regional production.

Why do you think people from multicultural backgrounds don't often run for local government?

I was the first person of Assyrian ancestry to be elected to public office in Victoria. Historically, the Assyrian community has not been actively involved with politics because we come from a background living under a dictatorship where political activity threatened your life. So there is a lot of hesitation in that regard. But I think there is a thirst in the community for real representation. People who can speak the language, people who are recognisable.

What changes have you seen since being represented in the community?

Having people like me that can speak the language of the community means that I can be an ambassador at council for programs and activities. I feel that the role of a councillor is a

bit of a conduit to connect the community to a whole range of opportunities that are available to them that they otherwise would not know about. So you get greater participation from different cultural groups and better social outcomes for the community. I see the Assyrian community far more engaged in all of council's programs and activities since my election.

Q What's it like to be on council and what do you do?

I love being a councillor and I loved being the Mayor last year. There are very few industries where you can do the breadth and depth of work that you do as a councillor. You could start the morning attending an audit and risk committee meeting, then mid-morning you may attend a morning tea for International Women's Day. In the afternoon you may attend a meeting with a billion-dollar corporation about land planning matters or a new estate or precinct structure plan.

You may chair a council meeting in the evening or go to a state government function where you advocate for your community. You may also fit in a meeting with a minister to push for local roads or infrastructure activities. Very few jobs give you this variety and the real opportunity to make a difference.

Q What do you wish you had known about local government before you ran?

No one tells you how exhausting it is. In a metro area, a growth area and a diverse area, we must work very hard because the number of enquiries that come in is significant. It is important to set your own boundaries. Just because you have two or three events booked for the day doesn't mean you have to go to all of them. It is important not to allow yourself to burn out and this is what I wish people had told me. You can't just say yes to everybody all the time.

Q What advice do you have for people wanting to run for local government?

Do your homework about what you are seeking to achieve. Networking is very important. Find people that will introduce you to their networks as it helps create relationships across communities. Mentorship is also important. Reach out to successful leaders for advice and mentorship and absorb what people are saying. Don't go in thinking you know everything, and learn to ask for and listen to good advice. If you are from a culturally diverse background, don't tie your efforts to one community. Work with that community as a base to support your efforts and they'll always be behind you, but you need to appeal electorally across communities and constituencies otherwise you will probably not be elected.

"Very few jobs give you this variety and the real opportunity to make a difference."

Cr Joseph Haweil
Hume City Council

Cr Nicky Luo
City of Monash

Q You've been a councillor since 2020 and have worked in health promotion and mental health. Can you talk a little about yourself?

I came to Australia with my family when I was 15. I had no English whatsoever, so I had to learn everything from scratch. I started language school and then started high school in Year Ten. Still English is one thing that I struggle with, but I went through language school and made a lot of friends who grew up speaking English which helped me a lot. Then I went to uni and did nursing and health promotions. I extended my studies with a Masters in Clinical Family Therapy. I've been working as mental health clinician for over 16 years, and I'm really interested in mental health, mainly child and adolescent.

Q When and how did you become interested in politics?

I got interested in politics when I was about 20. I'd just finished high school. It was introduced to me by a family friend. It was really eye opening for me. I went to a lot of functions, did a lot of volunteer work. Back then my English wasn't as good as now and it made it difficult to understand the whole process, so I put it aside and continued to study and work, then married and had kids. When I finished my Masters, I got more involved in community work and as my passion is in mental health, I said, "You know what, I can bring more awareness to mental health in the community." There is little understanding of mental health in the Chinese community, so I wanted to make change and to increase that awareness, reduce the stigma.

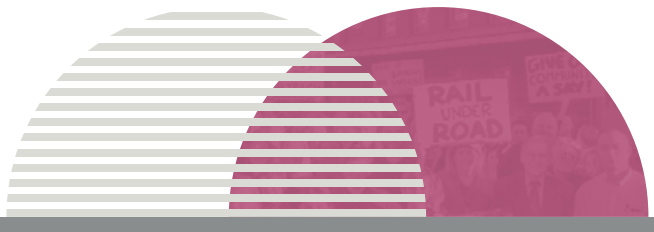
I met the (then) Mayor from Monash Council, Cr Paul Klisaris, and I asked him how to do it. In 2020 the elections came up and Paul said I should go for it – that more awareness of mental health could be my platform. If I had not known anyone – if I'd just put my hand up and said, "Okay I'm going to do it," I wouldn't know anything. I asked questions and found instructions.

Q You talked about the Mayor helping you along the way. How important is it to have a role model, or mentor to guide people along the way?

It was tremendous how much help he brought to me. Seeing what he does and giving me feedback, guidance and reassurance. It can shape your confidence and who you are as a councillor. It's like you're walking into water not knowing how deep it is, but by having someone tell you what the level is, you can figure it out from there.

Q Some people might think they have to be part of a political party to run for council. What brought you to the Labor Party and do you think you could have done it as an Independent?

I've always been in the Labor Party anyway. I didn't run as an endorsed member, and I can't speak for all councils, but at Monash we all act with independent minds – we're all individuals. Local council is different to federal or state. We are the closest to community, to grass roots, to daily living needs. I don't think politics has influenced too much of our decision-making.



Q How do you engage with the Monash community?

Given my cultural background, I definitely have the advantage of meeting my own cultural communities. But with other communities, I engage by going to events. I introduce myself. Make sure I know who they are. I talk to them.

Q What do you wish you'd known before you ran for local government?

I would have liked to have known the structures and the culture a bit more. All councils have a different culture. For example, some councils can only communicate with officers via the CEO – you don't communicate directly to the officers. I also wish I'd understood the core responsibility. Even though we had intensive orientations, it didn't give me a clear understanding of what it's all about.

Q And what in your words is the core responsibility of a councillor?

We are a communication bridge between community and officers. To some extent an advocate. We promote a safe, respectful, inclusive, and welcoming environment to our community. We're also proactive in promoting environmental and social development, connecting council and constituents.

Q What, if anything, has changed in you since you've been a councillor?

My confidence. It's definitely an important change. I'm clearer about the things I want to do. After three or four months I thought, "Why am I here? I don't feel like I'm able to do anything. What is my worth?" But now I think that this is what I want to do. I want to make changes and I understand my ability to do that. It might not happen straight away, but the process is there.

"Given my cultural background, I definitely have the advantage of meeting my own cultural communities."

Cr Nicky Luo
City of Monash

Cr Shane Sali
Greater Shepparton City Council

Can you talk a little about yourself?

I was born and bred in Shepparton, Victoria. I'm a third-generation Albanian migrant. My grandfather migrated to Shepparton in 1928. I love it here and am very biased. This is the best regional town in Australia. One of my favourite childhood memories was walking with my father through the CBD streets and seeing everyone coming out of the shops to say hi. I love living in a community-orientated place and plan to live here my whole life. I married a girl from Shepparton with Albanian background, and we have three beautiful kids.

What were you doing before you became a councillor?

When I finished school, I was working at the Telstra business centre as an account manager. This gave me an opportunity to be involved in a business and build a strong network. I then joined my family business. My family owns independent women retail stores that have been established for a long time. I wanted to get strong business skills from my father who is my idol. I wanted to work with him and build skills and networks and learn what it takes to run a successful business.

At the same time, I was a member of a council committee called Shepparton Show Me. This was the marketing body of Greater Shepparton Council. We were responsible for a large amount of funds and promoting Shepparton to attract visitors and businesses to the area. In 2020 Covid restrictions hit, and businesses went into hibernation. I was looking for new opportunities and it was good timing for me to focus on running for council.

What inspired you to run for council?

I was enticed by the opportunity to make bigger and better decisions for the community on a broader scale. Initially I was determined to go off community feedback. In early 2020 I spent a few months speaking to a wide range of community groups, business leaders and multicultural groups and no one told me I shouldn't run. This gave me more motivation and confidence to pursue something that was supported by the broader community. There was also a sense of need for a new energy at council and this also inspired me to run.

What's the Shepparton community like?

Shepparton has been an anchor for a lot of multicultural communities. So many cultures call this place home, and I don't think there is a place like this in Australia. You can't create this environment unless the foundations have been put in place to support migration and diversity over many years. The Albanians, the Greeks and Italians were good at co-mingling with the broader community. The Albanian community has a strong relationship with the Indigenous community because they both have a sense of respect and acknowledgement towards their Elders. Just like the Indigenous community, the Albanian community call our Elders Aunty and Uncle even if we're not related.

What do you like most about being on council?

I love sitting around with eight other councillors that have a sense of love and connection to the region and want to see it prosper. So the conversations are positive. I love leaving council briefings after we've spent all day talking about making the region a better place. When you work as a collective group it is hard to individualise your personal legacy.

However, I am focused and energised to achieve a better future for my three young kids. When they're twenty, I hope someone tells them that their dad had good foresight and made something special happen to help their generation.

Q What were some of the strategies that helped you get elected?

I come from a relatively well-known family that is involved in local business. So when I announced that I was going to run, my family's reputation helped to break the ice when having conversations with people. Having these conversations was an important part of my campaign. It helped me connect with people and build support.

I also did my homework before making the announcement to run. This is important so you're not trying to catch up and you're ready to respond to media and comments from the community. I was fortunate that my brother is the owner of a signage company. There were times that I had to tell him to stop printing signs because I had run out of fences. Everyone has got their edge and my edge was being able to promote my brand and get the community to engage with who I am. I also had a website which is important. If you are uploading social media posts about who you are and what you stand for, it is good to provide a link to a website so people can get more details.

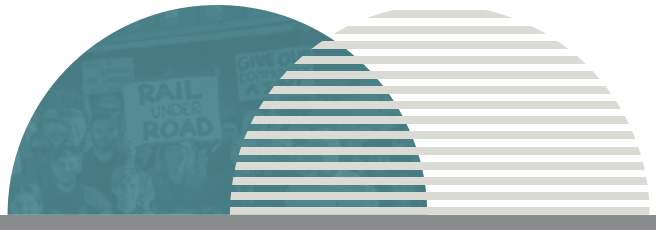
Being real is good advice. I just approached it as I love this region and I guarantee that I will give it 100%. I think people felt comfortable knowing that we had been here a long time and heavily invested with business. I went to school here, I'm working here, I'm married with three young kids, you can talk to me on the streets. How don't I have this place in my best interest?

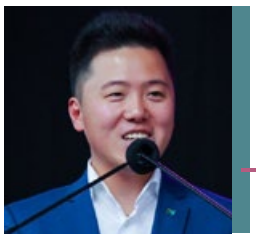
Q What are you most proud of?

The amount of phone calls and interest I've had from business wanting to expand their footprint locally or move to this area is something I am proud of. Our long-term investment and business growth for our region is probably at an all-time high. I'm really interested in business investment, creating jobs, and growing our local economy. This is what contributes to the long-term health and wellbeing of the community.

"I love leaving council briefings after we've spent all day talking about making the region a better place."

Cr Shane Sali
Greater Shepparton City Council





Cr Philip Le Liu
City of Melbourne

Q You embarked on a career across multiple industries before being involved in local government. What led you to this point in your life?

Ever since I migrated here in 1991, I always wanted to give back and contribute to the community for the opportunities this country has given me. After working in the corporate world for many years, I wanted something more rewarding and fulfilling, so when the opportunity presented itself to be involved in local government, I took a chance and never looked back. I never actually wanted to be a politician but rather a public servant instead.

Q Where did your sense of community come from?

Probably during high school and university. I was recently visiting my high school, St Mary's College (formerly CBC St Kilda), and we were talking about this. I am very appreciative of the Australian school curriculum that builds an early awareness of social justice and contributing to society. I never took an interest in politics; I was never an SRC captain or prefect, so my motivation was more about thinking there is more to life and there must be ways to give back. I was fortunate enough to have family that supported me to take that path. In the Chinese community it is less common to talk about charity and philanthropy. So I think my Australian upbringing and environment is what gave me a sense of giving back to community.

Q Can you talk a little about the community that make up the City of Melbourne?

The people around here are so diverse. In a day you can talk to workers, students, business owners, residents, visitors and many others. Melbourne has a large portion of residents (myself included) and the majority of them are international students. Their contributions are what make Melbourne what it is today. Many residents are downsizers who really love the vibrancy of the city. They can go out and see a world class concert and walk home afterwards. Melbourne is one of the two big engines that drive Australia's economy.

Q What's it like to be on council?

It's an honour and privilege. I am able to make an impact in my few short years that others probably will never be able to do in their lifetime. We are mere custodians in a long history of great people who have served on council and the staff who have worked here. We act like a board of directors: the Lord Mayor is the Chair, and it is our job to represent people in terms of decision-making. Every Tuesday is council day where we have forums and talk about emerging issues, and on Tuesday night we usually vote. In a nutshell it is my job to ensure I make the best decision for the people of Melbourne and for the future of Melbourne. And that involves meeting a lot of constituents, residents, business owners and making decisions that range from rubbish problems to approving a billion-dollar development that's going to change the skyline. So my role is varied but we mostly just listen, think and come with ideas and principles that we hold to. This is where we aim to be very collegial and try to come to the best solution for Melbourne.

Q You were elected again in 2020 after serving on council since 2016. What helped?

I was at the right place at the right time. In 2016, I am very grateful to former Councillor Ken Ong OAM who was retiring and gave me the chance to succeed him at council and also former Lord Mayor John So AO who gave me great advice when I started. Both are great champions of getting more Asian Australians into leadership positions, and while Ken gave me the start I needed, the rest was up to me.

Q What was the theme of your campaign?

The 2020 election was a difficult election because we were experiencing Covid-19 lockdown restrictions and it was hard to network. My campaign had the theme of 'Bringing Back Melbourne' and was focused on supporting people such as business owners, residents, and students. It was also unique in a sense that it was the first campaign where an 'influencer' approach was used with great success.

Q What advice do you have for others who are interested in running?

Do your homework when running. You should learn about preferences and how the voting system works. A lot of people have good intentions to put their hand up and run but it doesn't usually work that way unless you are very well known. You should really know the local issues and you need to get in early. If you are thinking about running in 2024 you essentially need to start now to build that network and credentials. You should also ask yourself why you're wanting to run for council. You need to know what you want to achieve and what difference you want to make. There's also a lot of support from state government now for people wanting to run, especially people from diverse backgrounds. I would also say that it is important to not box yourself into representing a particular community.

Obviously, I have a very strong connection to the Chinese Australian community but that doesn't mean I put them as priority. It is important to treat all groups equally.

Q What are you most proud of?

I am very proud of ALL the work I have done but particularly supporting international students and migrant business owners. When I first started, international students were not as a big focus but now it is at the forefront of the majority of thinking we do. In the CBD, a lot of businesses owners in the city have a Chinese or migrant background and I am proud of helping these communities, whether it be translating or guiding them and helping them run a business that brings life and colour to the city. As a recognition for the work I have done on council, I was very grateful to be recognised in 2019 as one of the '40 under 40 most influential Asian Australians' and the winner of the Public/ Government Sector category.

Q Is there anything else you think important to mention?

As someone who was a member of a political party (ex-Liberal), it is more important to work with your fellow councillors than putting your political allegiance first. It is good to have robust debates and sticking to your values and beliefs but for the sake of the community, people should be willing to compromise so that all views can be incorporated. Also take the time to understand council, people and the processes. I spent a good 1-2 years immersing myself in everything at council, and though I am still learning, it made my job much easier going forward.

Cr Richard Lim
City of Greater Dandenong

You escaped the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. Can you explain what your childhood was like?

I was born in Cambodia. I was a very adventurous child in primary school and enjoyed hunting and fishing, which gave me the survival skills I needed to survive throughout the Pol Pot regime. Much of my younger days were extremely tough and fraught with danger and adversity as a result of the four years of genocide that saw the loss of over 1.2 million people, some of which were my own family. My family and I risked our lives time and time again to escape Cambodia, determined to start a bright new future. Upon arriving in Australia, I had no choice but to work and study with very little rest in order to achieve this dream. My days consisted of working full-time in a factory at night, studying during the day, and working in fruit farms on the weekend. Australia had given us a fresh start and I was determined to not miss that opportunity.

You've been a councillor since 2020. What was your journey like?

I understand that the diverse communities in our city need help because a substantial amount of residents are migrants who suffer from language and cultural barriers. To help my fellow migrants and refugees gain that understanding and assimilate into the country to reach their full potential is my passion. When I was young, I formed the Cambodian Youth Association to help people like myself connect back with their education and to the new world around them, offering free tutorials in subjects like maths, physics, biology and chemistry. Many members became qualified to work in professional fields outside of factories and farms. Throughout that journey I believed that one day I will serve in the local government because I see people like myself who would love to contribute to their community but might lack understanding. So, after becoming a pharmacist, where I already worked extremely closely with the multicultural community, I'm now a councillor for the Springvale Central ward. Our City of Greater Dandenong is very diverse with about 140 languages spoken. Naturally, with this comes many barriers and a lack of understanding in some areas, particularly public and individual health, and one of my many goals is to help eliminate those barriers as much as possible.

What advice do you have for people looking to run for local government?

My advice would be, please join the council. The most important thing is that you can have a voice for your community. A first-generation migrant like me, we can have a bit of an inferiority complex. We think we can't be a part of the council, but I try to encourage people to not worry about their cultural barriers and go for it. As long as you are driven and willing to commit yourself to your community, you can still be in the council or meet councillors face to face to talk. Passion and willpower are the keys to being a councillor, and if you show your potential to be the voice for your community they will support you.

I understand that sometimes people feel like there's discrimination. I keep telling them that, despite being in Australia for 40 odd years, I still face discrimination each and every day. Racial and cultural discrimination, as well as many other forms, will not go away until you push through it, show the world what you can do and make them change their mind. Don't let other people's opinions stop you from achieving your successes.

What do you now understand about council that you didn't before?

Before I joined, I didn't understand why the council took so long to do things, and why it seemed like no one was willing to care for our community. Being in council, you start to see that there are a lot of rules and regulations, feasibility studies, community consultations. You need to be extremely thorough in order to understand what people want. Now I understand very clearly what the council is all about.

How close are you to the community you represent?

I represent multicultural communities. For me, it's not just Cambodian, I represent every single person who voices their thoughts and ideas to me, no matter what background they are from. You must speak with them very closely, or else they will think you will do nothing. To encourage the community to be involved, you have to take them seriously. I make sure I reply to them, sit down with them for as long as they need and walk with them to see their issues. I believe in communication. Whatever the community says, if you can't fulfil the requirement, you try to explain why not. I try to explain a lot about the problems – about the footpaths, pedestrian crossings, and why it's taking so long. They understand but sometimes you have to talk to the right council officer and ask more questions.

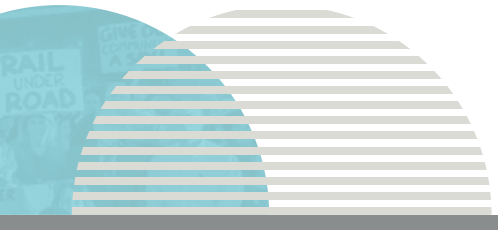
What are your hopes and plans for the Springvale, and Greater Dandenong, community?

I have a long wish list to help Springvale. Springvale is like a diamond, but we haven't polished it yet. In the last 30 years, I've witnessed the influx of people from other suburbs to Springvale. They love the shopping because everything is very cheap, very fresh. It feels like home – especially for people from all over Asia.

The food might even taste better than in their original country. The meat is tender, the fish is fresher, there are so many things I'm trying to promote about Springvale very heavily. It's very lively and has great potential to become a tourist attraction. I want a multicultural museum that talks about First Nations history right through to now. I want younger generations to have a place where they can find out about their ancestors. That's my vision. That's on my wish list. There's so much more I could tell you!

"You need to be extremely thorough in order to understand what people want."

Cr Richard Lim
City of Greater Dandenong



Cr Seema Abdullah

Greater Shepparton City Council

Q Can you talk a little about yourself?

I grew up in Pakistan in its capital, Islamabad. My father, a university professor and a prolific bilingual author, despite constraints of limited income, invested in the education of his two daughters and a son and was equally supported by my mother, a homemaker, teacher and author. After declining an offer to study engineering, I opted to do a Bachelor of Mathematics and Statistics followed by a Masters in Business Administration from a leading university in Pakistan with a merit scholarship. In 1991, I started my formal career in a government organisation as a computer programmer; I unknowingly joined the small league of women in IT in a male-dominated IT sector in that era. In 1994 I went to London as a Chevening scholar that I earned through a tough competitive process to pursue a Master of Information Systems from the renowned London School of Economics (LSE).

Since childhood, I found my parents highly inclusive, progressive and liberal on issues of race, culture, women's empowerment, etc. Later my alma mater (Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad) enhanced my multiculturalism within me. LSE made me a global citizen, and I started building my soul tribe from there. In 1997, I returned home, got married, headed to Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, with my husband. There I worked as a systems analyst/IT project manager while raising a family and recognising newer faces of diversity and workplace inequalities.

In 2004 we chose Australia and settled in Melbourne, with uncertain career pathways, two young children in tow and no social support. We (my husband, a surgeon and an avid reader and traveller) jointly took this decision. Yes, there were challenges. Who said it would be easy? Finding the first job is always tricky in a new place. It took me months to get my first job offer in Melbourne. With hard work and perseverance, I managed to get my career back on track and was contented socially, professionally and personally. I was working as a senior consultant for IBM when in 2008, my husband found a good work opportunity in Shepparton. I decided to abandon my much-loved career track in Melbourne to get the family together and joined my husband in Shepparton with my kids in 2009. We have lived here ever since.

Q What were you doing in Shepparton before you got elected?

In Shepparton, I worked as the Health Informatics Unit project manager for the University of Melbourne until 2014, when I decided to pull back from my career and focus on my children, who had just started senior schooling years. Even though I resigned from work, I still longed for something more mentally stimulating and productive, so I decided to enrol in a council-run community leadership program. This decision was a game changer for me to enter the world of community development.

As an empath, I instantly connected with Shepparton's diversity and associated with many community members with diverse backgrounds and perspectives yet matching passion for the community. I chose not only to step out of my comfort zone but to take others alongside me. The program enabled me to spread out my community networks. Subsequently, I joined the Greater Shepparton Women's Charter Advisory Committee. In 2016, in the lead-up to the local government elections, the Committee arranged information sessions for women and boosted them to stand for council. One day, it occurred to me that I was cheering other women to stand up when maybe I should stand up myself. I had already built some networks, and the people around me supported me in pursuing this idea. So, I put my hand up, ran a successful campaign with extraordinary teamwork and was elected.

My story remains unfinished without mentioning those who ran my campaign. This includes, first and foremost, my campaign manager (my dear friend Terri Cowley whom I had known through the Charter). Many other mainstream and multicultural community members also believed in me and supported me in a big way.

Q Can you talk a little about the Shepparton community?

The community is welcoming, warm, and friendly. Shepparton has a long history of migration. Our Shepparton community celebrates multiculturalism. The community and council leadership collaborate to provide the best outcomes for our community and communities. The diversity of our community reflected in our social and cultural landscape is promising. However, the impact of migration on the most vulnerable (women/girls/LGBTIQA+/disabled/differently-abled) remains unnoticed, deliberately and/or unintentionally. The community needs to be approached with an intersectionality lens.

Q What do you think helped you get elected to council?

I was always a people person. If I have to pinpoint one single factor, I believe it would be that I broke down the 'us and them' lines, and the community saw me as one of them. Within me, they saw hope, a chance of upward mobility. I never lost sight of my values during the campaign. This is important for getting elected. Our values become our compass under challenging times, especially as a councillor when we must make difficult decisions. My values during the campaign were respect for other people and their opinion, positivity and optimism.

A tip for those considering running for council is to have mentors. Do not be afraid to look for mentors and ask for help. Running for the council was such a new world for me. No one in my family has ever been in politics. It was vital to find that mentor support early in my campaign that helped me guide and stay focused and positive, among other things.

Q What are you most proud of?

I am happy and humbled that I am the first Pakistani born, first-generation migrant-Muslim woman from a middle-class family who became a councillor, Mayor and Deputy Mayor in Greater Shepparton. This is perhaps also the first in the whole state of Victoria (and in Australia).

I am happy to have demonstrated that I have broken many glass ceilings and overcome barriers to inspire other immigrants that joining Australian politics is indeed doable and relevant.

It's an honour to be part of a council that declared a climate emergency in 2020. When this matter came to council for voting, we had equal votes, and as Mayor, I had to use my casting vote. I used my Mayoral casting vote in support of declaring a climate emergency. At the time, many people thought this was not within the remit of the council. However, this decision has been crucial for council in providing the leadership and strategic direction in undertaking more work to ensure we move towards zero carbon by 2030 and bring the community along with us.

The positive image of council built in my two terms as a councillor also makes me gratified about this role. If communities see me as representing their voice and the one who worked with them, I take these as indicators of trust and success.

Cr Thuy Dang
Brimbank City Council

What was your childhood like?

I was born in the middle of Vietnam and came to South Australia on a refugee visa from Hong Kong with my parents and seven siblings in 1980. When I arrived in South Australia, I couldn't understand or speak English at all. I was put in Year Ten and I struggled with all the subjects except mathematics. I felt so lonely and stressed as I couldn't make friends or communicate with anybody at the school. The only communication that I could do was to go to the library in my free time and try to draw which was stuck in my mind.

What were you doing before you got involved in local government?

I was a software engineer. I chose to study maths and computer science because I was still struggling with English when I completed high school. I almost gave up several times, but I kept going because of the sacrifices my parents made. My parents always remind us that we are very lucky to settle in Australia. The best way to show our love to them is to become a good citizen and work hard to pay back to Australia.

What inspired you to become involved in local government?

When I moved to Brimbank in 2009, I volunteered in a variety of projects and helped organise the Lunar New Year festival. My career as a software engineer inspired my passion for helping people, especially senior people with technology illiteracy, to build up their confidence and knowledge. Most of Australia's migrant and refugee women are experiencing disadvantage and disengagement. Technology can help them overcome these issues.

My proudest achievement was establishing the Australian Vietnamese Arts group which I ran for more than ten years before handing it over. This group is still going and growing stronger – connecting the community via culture and arts. The more involved I got in the community, the more I saw the potential of the community.

What is the Brimbank community like?

Brimbank is thriving and vibrant with a mix of multicultural communities. It has reaped the benefits from a diverse range of ideas, opinions and lifestyles that can lead to a stronger community and economy.

What's it like to be on council and what do you mainly do?

It is great to be on council. We have a good team of councillors focused on community first regardless of whether they agree or disagree on the debates. My portfolio is art and culture, and this is what I enjoy most. This involves a lot of interacting with the community at events and festivals.

I have so many opportunities to engage with the leaders of different communities. I have chances to represent the community when I am involved in decision-making and to contribute to the strategic direction of the council through the council plan. I have also learnt so much about the community and the issues they face every day.

What helped you get elected?

I was lucky enough to have lots of support from friends. Some of these have had experience as councillors before, so they guided me step by step through the campaign. And before the campaign we had to do the local government candidate training, which helped me understand more about the responsibilities of councillors and what to do in my campaign.

What has changed since you started? And why is that significant?

I was elected as Deputy Mayor in 2021, a role which acts as the second leader in creating and implementing the community's value, vision and strategic direction. The change is really significant for me to deliver the community's interest and needs into the council planning, development and performance.

What advice do you have for others thinking about running?

Most of the successful candidates have been involved in the community. The community knows them, and they have a lot of experience knowing how to work with the community and how to get community support. It is also good to speak to former councillors when running a campaign. There are a lot of challenges when you run for local council, but if you care about your community and want to make a positive difference to your community, it's never too late to dream high and make your dream come true.

"The more involved I got in the community, the more I saw the potential of the community."

Cr Thuy Dang
Brimbank City Council

Cr Trung Luu
Brimbank City Council

Q Can you tell me about the Brimbank community, and how you as a councillor work with the people?

Brimbank has about 24-27% of its residents with a linkage to Vietnamese heritage. I found that when working or interacting with this large cohort, the majority of the time I seem to convert and rely on my second language. I engage with them through sport, community groups and through the RSL (people who served in the Vietnamese and Australian army). The Vietnamese Community Association has a lot of events and I get a lot of invitations and socialise on a regular basis.

I work as a police officer, and have a community role with the Vietnamese community in the City of Yarra. Word gets passed on within the Vietnamese community at large; they all seem to interlink with each other.

Q What made you decide to run for local government?

Growing up, I didn't think too much about politics. Police officers are meant to be apolitical. I grew up in the eastern part of Melbourne and moved to Brimbank because of the housing affordability issue about 20 years ago. Since I moved here, I noticed a difference between the east and the west, particularly with the services and the quality of life. I'm not the sort of person who likes to complain and whinge and whine about things, so I decided that if you want to change something, you put your hand up. This side of town is a very Labor dominant side and it's not as easy, as an Independent, to get in. It took me a few times – three runs – to get elected. I just wanted to have more of a balance between the living standards between east and west.

Q That must have been quite the journey – running twice before getting in. What made you keep up the momentum?

You can say I'm stubborn. If I set my mind to something, I'll get it done.

Q What is your advice for someone looking to get into local government, or for people who want to have a say?

I actually believe you need to be in the seat for people to listen to you. You can protest and whine, but people only listen when you have a seat in the box. My advice is to know the area, know the competition, know the people you are up against and try to interact with that group, or cohort. Be true to your values.

Q What do you think, if anything, is stopping people from diverse backgrounds from running?

The opportunity is not well known. People know about the state and federal levels, but you don't know much about the local level. People know it's there but you don't know what it actually does. You know it's about roads and rubbish. Council needs to share more information about their role – how their role influences and impacts the communities. The political side can be quite confronting to some people. It can be discouraging as well. You won't be able to find out about that in a pamphlet. It's something you need to seek out, or experience for yourself.

Q What was your childhood like?

I came here when I was about six as a boat refugee – we arrived in '79 in Sydney after six months in the refugee camp in Malaysia. We moved around quite a bit when Dad was trying to find work. Then we settled down in Box Hill, Melbourne. It was good but society back then was different – it was more like you find your own feet, whereas now there's a lot more awareness and support.

"…know the area, know the competition, know the people you are up against…"

Cr Trung Luu
Brimbank City Council

I grew up and observed a lot of racism, but that's all part of life being in a different culture and a different country. You develop resilience or thick skin. But personality wise I got on with everyone, so I didn't have much of a bad childhood. I played a lot of sport – cricket, athletics and soccer. Looking at things now, it's all multiculturalism, whereas when I was at school, there were only two or three other students of Asian background. Basically, the terms used at the time, if you are old enough to remember, were Asians, Wogs and Skips. But now it's very multicultural no matter where you are from.

Q **You serve as both a police officer and a councillor. How do those two roles work together, or as opposed to each other?**

As a police officer, you're always serving your community. You're always speaking, liaising, dealing with people. You can understand more of what people want and deal with people who have issues. So, with council I'm providing the same thing, but instead of being on the ground all the time, now I'm also in the background planning and providing services. It's a good back and forth. In council you can have more influence on a greater scale on service delivery and future development of the municipality. What we do now will benefit people down the track.

Cr Jasmine Hill
Wyndham City

Q Can you talk a little bit about yourself?

I was born and raised in Malaysia. I migrated to Wyndham a decade ago. I live and work locally as a secondary school teacher. I have a background in science and did a PhD in electrical and electronic engineering in the UK, where I met my wonderful Australian husband. I am passionate about education and community work. Volunteering and the church have always been part of me since I was little.

Q What about your journey into local government?

My journey to local government came from living in Melbourne's west and volunteering with women's organisation and helping people with language barriers to live in the community. My husband called me 'super volunteer' at one stage. Then I started to be involved with council by joining advisory groups and portfolio committees. I also helped set up community groups and ran many community events over the years. I never thought I wanted to get involved in politics because I don't like politics. But when you started to get involved in the local community you see the needs (and sometimes frustration) and you want to make a change.

Q What is it like to live in the Wyndham community?

The Wyndham community is very multicultural: it is made up of 162 nationalities. New residents move here often because it is more affordable. Wyndham is a great place to live because you have the beaches, parks, rural landscape, the river, and animals but it's also a busy city. This reminds me of my home country which is multicultural and welcoming. When people are new to a place, they are keen to make connections and to make an effort. It's an area that is still developing and fast growing, and this makes it possible to influence the outcomes and create a better future.

It will take time to get the necessary infrastructure but I'm very hopeful for the west and this area.

Q What it like being on council?

As a new councillor there is so much to learn and it's such a privilege to be able to represent our residents and to solve problems. Coming from a research background, I love to analyse, to think critically and to solve problems.

I'm also a people person and one of the best things is attending events, getting to know people and be there for them.

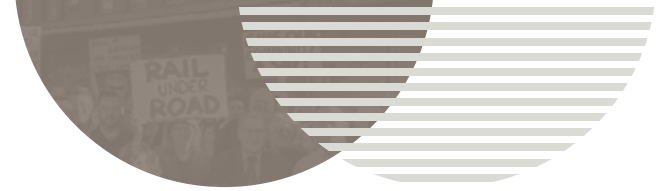
I also enjoy learning and working with council officers. At council I have access to information and data-based evidence to support the best decisions for the community. There will be differences of opinion occasionally, but most decisions that we make are evidence-based.

Q Can you provide an example of this?

Recently, we tried to advocate for an indoor sport facility in Point Cook. This suburb alone has 70,000 people and we only have one main indoor sport centre in Werribee. Combined with bad traffic, it can take a very long time for people to travel. This still an ongoing process and through the consultation we get very positive feedback to build one. We're also advocating for more aquatic centres to support the population of 300,000, as we currently only have one main aquatic centre.

Q What are some of the challenges in local government?

The political environment can be challenging. You need to focus on your goals and not get distracted by the political noise and learn how to negotiate and work in a team. The media might pick up controversial topics about council because that's often the perspective that makes an exciting story. The scarcity of adequate resources available to growth councils can put pressure on councils and its organisation.



Q **Do you have any advice for people wanting to run for local government?**

Be true to yourself. Stand for who you are, your passion and your values. Do not be afraid to say NO.

We need more women representing communities in Victoria, especially women from a culturally diverse background.

We also need more people with technical skills running to ensure council represents a diverse range of skills and expertise.

I would encourage people to reach out to your local councillors and most people are very willing to share their experience. It's also important to watch some council meetings so you know what it entails and volunteer or at least make connections with the local community groups.

Be prepared to sacrifice some of your privacy as a public figure when you get elected.

Maintaining a work-life balance is also very important.

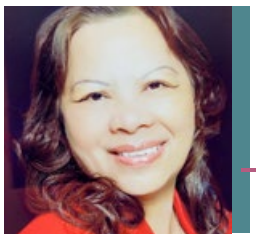
Q **What changes are you most proud of?**

There are so many. As a council, we regularly review and refresh our strategies and policies to ensure they reflect the current needs of our community. We stand for what is right and make sensible and good decisions on behalf of the community. Since being elected to this office, I have attended hundreds of community events, given many speeches and meetings with residents. It's such an honour to be representing the voice of the community.

We managed to receive funding for another 17 new kindergartens. We advocate for local schools and we now have eight new schools in the pipeline including a special school in the next couple of years, which is a massive success. Our city received the Learning City award by UNESCO which is an accumulation of many years' work of the City and its residents' passion for learning. We also improved library service accessibility by applying different models across the municipality and filling in all the gaps, and widely providing learning opportunities. As a strong advocate of active transport in council, we also managed to increase the funding from $1 million to $4 million in the last budget in response to the community's needs post-pandemic.

"We need more women representing communities in Victoria, especially women from a culturally diverse background."

Cr Jasmine Hill
Wyndham City



Cr Cuc Lam
Maribyrnong City Council

Q You're serving a third term on one of the most diverse councils in Victoria and you've also been the Mayor. Can you talk a little about your background?

I was born in a village in South Vietnam about 60 km from Saigon. My father passed away when I was a baby and I lived with my mum until I finished private school. During the war I was really scared of the fighting between the Communist Party and the Vietnamese Republic Government. So I requested that my mother send me to Saigon to study and I lived with my sister all the way through university. I came to Australia as a refugee in 1978 and lived in the west of Melbourne near Highpoint and I've been in the west ever since.

Q What were you doing before you joined local government?

I love to volunteer. When I was growing up in Vietnam, I volunteered with the Vietnamese Red Cross as a Youth Ambassador. We helped people that were suffering with flood damage or during the war when people were losing their homes. We would help them with material on the weekends.

In Australia I am currently a public servant for more than 30 years. I also volunteered with several organisations for many years including Western English Language School, North West Migrant Resource Centre, and Footscray Community Legal Centre. Currently, I am on the board for the Joan Kirner Children's Hospital. I'm a community advisor for Western Health Hospital, and an advisor for a Vietnamese dancing group named Au Co. I am also a Justice of the Peace.

Q Why did you decide to run for Maribyrnong City Council?

Before being at council I was involved in the community as a volunteer. I built strong relationships with people from the refugee, migrant and multicultural community and learnt about their lack of knowledge about local government services. So I went into local government to be the voice for the local community. I believe in social justice, and I love to help. This is my nature.

Q What is it like to be on the council and what do you do?

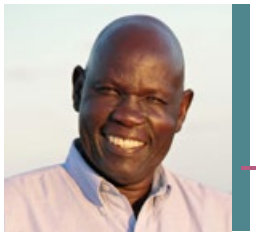
I have been at council for eight years and I was the Mayor in 2017 and 2018. It is very busy work. The Mayor has a very big responsibility, but I enjoy it. My main goal is to work harmoniously with everyone. We come from different cultural backgrounds, different political backgrounds and we work together to achieve one thing for the residents. At the end of the day, we are here for the same reason. We are not here for the money because everybody has a job. We are here to make a difference and improve lives.

Q What would you say to others who might be considering running for local government?

Put your hand up and have a go. Believe that you can do that, and no one can stop you. I thought to myself, "I have three children and I'm a grandmother," and this helped motivate me and make me determined. I also think because of my upbringing and growing up in a poor village, I have a very strong will. I think that motivation and determination is very important and if you want to achieve something you can.

Q If someone didn't want to run for local government, how could they still have a say in how things are run?

They can be involved on a council advisory group. There are different advisory groups depending on your interest. There is the multicultural advisory group, the youth advisory group and the sport advisory group. Find one that suits you and have a say.



Cr Otha Thon Akoch
Warrnambool City Council

You came to Australia from South Sudan. What impact did that experience have on you?

The impact was definitely huge. Going to the unknown is more than an adventure. Uncertainty was the order of the day and fear of the unknown was dominant. The most impact like many other refugees was, and still is, being divided between two countries – the country of origin and the country of adoption. The childhood memories, family and friends will always remain a trauma for the rest of my life. I was optimistic and ready for the challenge.

Your campaign poster displayed the word, 'Integrity'. What does that mean to you?

Integrity means to me honesty with strong moral principles and transparency that will drive good based strong culture within council by maintaining the strict policies and procedures required for professional governance.

What inspired you to run for local government?

My love to this country that I was able to call home, the people, the Warrnambool community that welcomed me and regarded me as one of their own. I was eager to give back to the whole community of Warrnambool by representing them on the council.

What is the community you work with like?

The host community is like a white paper until you write on it something good or bad. The Warrnambool community was and still is welcoming, but I have to meet them in the middle – it is give and take. Have respect and you will be respected. We as refugees have to participate and fully integrate into the wider community. I personally refused to be divided into two countries because I don't have two lives to live on this planet.

You have a particular focus on the young people in the community. Can you talk about that?

Young people are the inheritance and they are the flag bearer and they need to be well prepared. There are a lot of issues of mental health among the youth, especially in the emerging cultural and linguistically diverse communities. It may need a holistic approach to tackle these problems and create pathways for employment opportunities.

What is the most important thing for a councillor to know?

The most important thing is be equipped with knowledge of governance in general and the Local Government Act in particular. Liaise with fellow candidates. Last but not least, be prepared like a soldier.

Can you elaborate on that?

A soldier is the one who gives his life for his country. Public life is all about sacrifices and when I said be prepared like a soldier, I mean be ready to give back to the country you love with all you have.

"The community welcomed me and regarded me as one of their own."

Cr Otha Thon Akoch
Warrnambool City Council

Cr Jasmine Nguyen
Brimbank City Council

Q You're the youngest ever Mayor of Brimbank, and the first with Vietnamese heritage. Congratulations. How important is that for the community?

It's really fantastic. Brimbank is one of the most multicultural communities in Australia, and we have over 160 languages spoken. Over two-thirds were born overseas. Brimbank is the place where a lot of migrants and refugees tend to settle and we have a very welcoming community. The fact that we haven't had our first Vietnamese Australian Mayor until now is actually a bit of a surprise to me. I was born and raised in the area. I think it's quite rare also to see the Mayor and the Deputy Mayor being people of colour – like both of them. It's already a bit of a rarity to see people of colour as councillors, but to see them as both the Mayor and the Deputy – I think that's fantastic.

Q Can you talk about your journey to local government? Why did you want to run?

This is my first time on local council and I'd never really thought about running, but I had a friend who I met through a Deloitte leadership program, created by the first-generation Vietnamese Australians because they noticed there was a gap between first generations and second generations in terms of being connected to their ancestral heritage. There are some second-generation Vietnamese Australians who are more in tune with their culture than others. For example, being able to speak Vietnamese, understanding what the cultural days of significance are. Even though Vietnamese Australians have settled in Australia for over 45 years now, we're not that well represented in leadership in terms of the political field, the media and so on. When my friend said she was going to run for council I said I would support her, but then I had another friend who said, "Why haven't you considered running?" I looked at Brimbank Council and I thought, no one's under 30 here and there are not that many people of colour despite being a very multicultural community.

I also had a lot of friends who lost their jobs, who were uncertain about their future because they were still studying. I really feel that young people are the hardest hit of the pandemic. We have a lot of people in our community who aren't able to work from home – they work in factories, or hospitality, retail. There are many people who are disadvantaged, so when I put all these things together, I ran for council because I wanted better outcomes for young people from multicultural communities and to help us bounce back from the pandemic.

Q Were there any obstacles you came up against?

I feel like some people are more established than others, in terms of the community they are part of. When you come from a migrant or refugee background, you don't always have those established networks compared to the person who has been in Australia for generations. I was lucky to have the support of my cultural community, in terms of spreading the word, and volunteers distributing my fliers.

I did receive some comments around, why would you vote for someone who is un-Australian, but it's so stupid. I was also having a bit of imposter syndrome because of my age. But that's another reason why a lot of young people aren't on council – they just don't see it in themselves. They feel like they're not ready. But it's so important that there are young councillors. There needs to be a voice for them. Yes, you have older people who say they can talk on behalf of them, but obviously as a young councillor, you're more in touch with the experiences of young people. And as a young person of colour you have to navigate things a lot more. For example, your parents will rely on you for translation, for access to things.

Q You mentioned the gap between first and second generations. How did your family support you, especially as they may have a different view on how governments are run?

The irony is not lost on me about the fact that my parents escaped Vietnam because of the political environment. Because they were in South Vietnam, their futures were limited – they had to escape. Now, the fact that I'm elected in a democracy, they were very apprehensive at first. They want security for me, but nevertheless, they helped out, distributed fliers. I think my mum was just mostly worried. So when I became the Mayor, my mum was like, "Do not leave your job."

Q So, did you leave your job?

Yes, but I don't think she knows that I left my full-time job because I wanted to serve the community. It's my 'Mayoral Gap Year.'

Q What advice do you have for someone running?

You have your own unique experiences, like your age, your cultural heritage, your work and educational experience. We need diversity in council because you have that difference in experience and perspectives. It's better for us when we're making decisions that affect the community, because the community is so multifaceted. So, don't discount yourself because you're different from others. Your point of difference is an advantage – embrace it! I embrace the fact that I'm young, I'm a woman, I'm a person of colour. Now people go, "That's fantastic! You're not the stock standard politician." It's a breath of fresh air that we need on council when so many councillors are pale, male, white and stale.

Also, you think the campaign is hard, just wait until you get onto council. It's even more crazy. You have to know what you stand for.

"Your point of difference is an advantage – embrace it!"

Cr Jasmine Nguyen
Brimbank City Council

Further reading

Your Campaign Toolkit
– A candidate guide to the 2020 local government elections. VLGA, 2020

vlga.org.au/resources/local-government-elections-candidate-toolkit

Local Government Act 2020

legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/local-government-act-2020/011

VEC Candidate Handbook 2020

vlga.org.au/resources/vec-candidate-handbook-2020

Notes

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REPRESENT:
A handbook for culturally diverse Victorians considering running for local government

July 2022

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