

MAV Submission to the Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion



June 2026

The voice for
local government

Climate volatility, social fragmentation, digital disruption and rising costs are reshaping the way we live, work, and connect. Local government is where these global challenges turn into local responses – strengthening trust and resilience through the places, services and experiences people rely on every day.

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) is the legislated peak body for local government in Victoria, advocating for all 79 councils across the state.

MAV works closely with councils, state and federal governments and global experts across industry and academia to deliver services and solutions grounded in local knowledge and community needs across metropolitan, rural and regional Victoria.

MAV offers sector-specific, not-for-profit procurement and insurance services, a local government innovation lab and statewide annual learning, convening programs designed to support Victorian local government to meet the challenges of a fast-changing future.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we live. We recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture and pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

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Table of contents

1. Introduction, scope and background	3
1.1 Introduction.....	3
1.2 Executive Summary.....	3
1.3 Scope and focus of this submission	4
1.4 The role of local government	4
1.5 The role of the MAV.....	5
1.6 Resolutions of the May 2026 State Council	5
2. Drivers of antisemitism and erosion of social cohesion	7
2.1 Expanding impact of disinformation ecologies	7
2.2 Decreased social connection	8
2.3 Declining trust.....	9
2.4 Disrupted democracy.....	9
3. Challenges in responding to antisemitism and the erosion of social cohesion....	11
3.1 Erosion of trust and participation in democratic processes.....	11
3.2 Fragmented responses across jurisdictions and levels of government.....	11
3.3 Financial pressure on local government.....	12
3.4 Rapidly evolving context requiring new leadership skills	12
4. Recommendations – MAV and Victorian Councils	13
a. MAV support for submissions from Victorian Councils	14
5. Conclusion.....	17
6. Appendix 1: Relevant MAV initiatives.....	18
Local innovation in disinformation response: Lessons for countering (violent) extremism	18
Information Manipulation and Harassment of Local Leaders	19
STAND.....	20
3.5 Belonging Matters.....	22
City Leaders Program	22
6. Appendix 2: Detailed recommendations.....	24

1. Introduction, scope and background

1.1 Introduction

The MAV acknowledges the importance of the Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion and the seriousness of the task before it.

The 2025 Mapping Social Cohesion Report, released by the [Scanlon Foundation Research Institute in October 2025](#), reports that while Australian social cohesion remains resilient, it is facing significant pressure, with the belief that "diversity makes Australia stronger" dropping to 67%, down from 78% in 2023.

The [Australian Human Rights Commission's \(AHRC's\) Seen & Heard](#) project found that Australia's Jewish, Muslim, Palestinian, Arab and Israeli communities have all suffered, and continue to suffer, increased pain and distress caused by racism over the past three years.

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) recognises the urgency of addressing these concerning indicators and makes this submission as the statutory peak body for local government in Victoria, representing all 79 councils playing a vital role in protecting the safety and cohesion of our communities.

1.2 Executive Summary

Antisemitism must be addressed directly and seriously as a specific and serious form of hatred with direct impacts on Jewish Australians.

It must also be understood within a systemic context of disinformation, social disconnection, and declining trust. These conditions weaken social cohesion, heighten susceptibility to polarising and identity-based narratives, and enable harassment, discrimination and violence at the local level.

This Submission highlights some of the many complex and interrelated drivers of antisemitism and erosion of social cohesion, including:

- Expanding impact of disinformation ecologies
- Decreased social connection
- Declining trust
- Disrupted democracy

This Submission identifies some of the challenges in addressing antisemitism and erosion of social cohesion, including:

- Threats to participation in democratic processes
- Fragmented responses across jurisdictions and levels of government
- Financial pressure on local government
- Rapidly evolving context requiring new leadership skills

This Submission makes four key recommendations, including:	
Recommendation 1	Fund practical, scalable local programs
Recommendation 2	Formalise channels for cross-jurisdiction and intergovernmental coordination
Recommendation 3	Strengthen governance and contemporary leadership skills for a rapidly changing context
Recommendation 4	Address environmental drivers – disinformation, declining trust, media, civics and digital literacy.

This Submission also supports submissions made by Victorian councils including: City of Melbourne, City of Port Philip and City of Glen Eira.

1.3 Scope and focus of this submission

MAV acknowledges the Royal Commission's Interim Report on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion, particularly its emphasis on improved coordination, preparedness and effective implementation across institutions. MAV's submission highlights the role of local government in translating these priorities into practical action at the local level. This reflects the role of local government as part of the coordination and implementation solution, supporting effective responses on the ground.

In this submission, MAV focuses particularly on paragraph (a)(ii) of the *Terms of Reference*, concerning opportunities to enhance the responses of governments to antisemitism, including best practice approaches to de-radicalisation and strengthening social cohesion, and on paragraph (d), concerning recommendations arising from the inquiry that would contribute to strengthening social cohesion in Australia and countering the spread of ideologically and religiously motivated extremism.

1.4 The role of local government

Local government is an essential partner to communities and other levels of government in combatting antisemitism and the erosion of social cohesion.

Global conflict, online disinformation, algorithmic amplification, economic insecurity and declining trust converge locally in public meetings, community events, schools, libraries, neighbourhoods and online forums connected to local issues.

Local governments are often the "first mile" of democracy and early witnesses to how global conflicts, polarising narratives and online manipulation affect communities, public meetings, local media, libraries, neighbourhoods and civic processes.

The matters outlined by the Commission require action from councils to make a practical contribution as trusted civic institutions, place-based convenors, and stewards of the local relationships, spaces and services that shape belonging, participation and community confidence.

1.5 The role of the MAV

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) is the legislated peak body for local government in Victoria, amplifying the voice of all 79 councils through a single influential voice.

Representing communities across the state, MAV works with the sector to develop solutions grounded in local knowledge and community needs across metropolitan, rural and regional Victoria.

MAV works closely with councils, state and federal governments and global experts across industry and academia to deliver services and solutions grounded in local knowledge and community needs across metropolitan, rural and regional Victoria.

MAV offers sector-specific, not-for-profit procurement and insurance services, a local government innovation lab and statewide annual learning, convening programs designed to support Victorian local government to meet the challenges of a fast-changing future.

In relation to this Submission, MAV's role is to enable and amplify the impact of local solutions by partnering with councils to build capability, support local leadership, and translate insight into coordinated, scalable impact.

This includes work already underway through Disrupting Disinformation Ecologies, Information Manipulation and Harassment of Local Leaders, STAND, Belonging Matters and City Leaders programs. See Appendix 1 on page 18 for details of each of these initiatives.

1.6 Resolutions of the May 2026 State Council

The MAV State Council is a forum where Victoria's 79 councils come together to shape the future of local government. Through their elected MAV delegates, each council contributes to important decisions that guide the strategic direction of the MAV, influence sector-wide priorities, and ensures the voice of communities across the state are heard.

Meeting twice a year, State Council plays a key role in strengthening local government by enabling collaboration, informed debate, and democratic decision-making. It provides an opportunity for councils to raise issues, propose solutions, and work collectively toward stronger, more responsive local governance for all Victorians.

At the May 2026 State Council, the following resolution to strengthening council-led social cohesion and responses to antisemitism and other forms religious intolerance was made:

All levels of government working collaboratively to combat racism, antisemitism and intolerance towards other religious identities and belief, hatred and bigotry, and to promote social cohesion:

- Establish a dedicated funding stream, resourcing, and partnership framework to support local governments to lead social cohesion initiatives and prevent and respond to racially, or religiously malicious incidents.
- Facilitate strong collaboration between councils, state agencies, and community organisations.

Speaking in support of the resolution, the City of Port Phillip said: “As the closest tier of government to community, councils are uniquely placed to convene local partners, deliver prevention and education, and coordinate rapid responses. We will have the greatest impact when we’re well-resourced and working together.”

2. Drivers of antisemitism and erosion of social cohesion

There are several interrelated drivers of antisemitism and erosion of social cohesion. These include:

- Expanding impact of disinformation ecologies
- Decreased social connection
- Declining trust
- Disrupted democracy

2.1 Expanding impact of disinformation ecologies

In local communities, disinformation not only drives polarisation and hate, it also makes the depiction of reality increasingly difficult as ‘deepfake’ digital forgeries are used to falsify or misrepresent events, as was seen in the wake of the devastating Bondi terrorist attack.¹

As explained in the recent report [Global survey of local innovation in disinformation response: Lessons for countering \(violent\) extremism](#): ‘Disinformation ecologies consist of false narratives, the platforms enabling them and the often organised and interconnected actors using them. These manipulate societal faultlines, exacerbating and manufacturing prejudice and grievance which creates fertile ground for radicalisation and extremism. These ecologies are bastioned by the economic incentives of online ‘click bait’ and algorithmic-driven engagement on social media. This has rapidly become an era-defining global challenge.’²

The recent MAV research as part of Disrupting Disinformation Ecologies in collaboration with Australian National University, Victoria University, University of Glasgow, German Marshall Fund of the United States and Dare to be Grey, reported migrants and culturally diverse communities were targets of disinformation in 51 per cent of localities, while religious groups were reported as targets in around 30 per cent. In Australian cases, racial, ethnic and/or class divisions were identified as being fuelled by disinformation in 50 per cent of cases.

The evidence also shows that current institutional responses are not equipped to meet the scale and speed of these challenges. Only 19 per cent of organisations have formal policies, procedures or disinformation strategies. Only 5 per cent of city or local governments consider their response strong. Evaluation is also limited, with 51 per cent having not evaluated responses.

This is not only an issue of harmful content or isolated hateful behaviour. It is a compounded systems challenge involving the information environment, social connection and institutional capacity.

Disinformation ecologies combine false narratives, enabling platforms and organised actors that exploit social fault lines, intensify grievance and create conditions in which polarisation, hate and extremism can grow.

The harms are real-world harms, not only online harms. The evidence identifies links between disinformation and religiously motivated extremism, far-right extremism, anti-government extremism and gender-based extremism. Around one third of respondents reported disinformation-fuelled violence.

These dynamics inform this submission's view that antisemitism must be addressed as a specific and serious form of hatred, while also recognising the broader information environment that enables prejudice, scapegoating and grievance to spread.

2.2 Decreased social connection

As explained in the [Information Manipulation and Harassment of Local Leaders: Impacts and Implications](#) report published earlier this year by the MAV in partnership with German Marshall Fund and ANU: "Current polarisation of communities is occurring at a time of rising inequality, greater information siloing, and rising inequality. It also occurs within the context of an epidemic of loneliness, global housing crises, and climate-induced and economic migration. Community divisions are heightened along multiple fault lines, including legacy sentiment regarding government responses to the COVID 19 pandemic, and current conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine.

"These provide fertile grounds for grievance narratives, with traditionally marginalised groups particularly targeted: migrants, women, LGBTIQ+, and religious and cultural minorities. This in turn threatens social cohesion – the collective bonds, trust and belonging that hold communities together."

Another recently released MAV report, [Belonging Matters](#), provides an evidence-based case for treating social connection as core civic and preventative infrastructure, not a "nice to have".

The report argues that social cohesion is not built through policy statements, national strategies or security responses alone. It is built or eroded in neighbourhoods, streets, schools, sporting clubs, libraries, community centres and the everyday interactions that determine whether people experience Australia as a country where they belong. Connection to community is the foundation on which cohesion rests, while its absence is the ground in which antisemitism, racism and extremism can take root.

Currently nearly a quarter of Victorian adults experience loneliness, with severely lonely individuals 4.6 times more likely to have depression and 4.1 times more likely to have social anxiety. This scale of disconnection highlights a significant threat to social fabric and health, exposing social fault lines, reducing trust and increasing vulnerability to polarisation.

Belonging Matters argues that strong, connected neighbourhoods are among the most powerful protections a society has against mental ill-health, suicide, distress, hatred and extremism alike.

2.3 Declining trust

Australia is confronting a significant decline in public trust and social cohesion. The 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer reveals that Australia's overall Trust Index has fallen to 49, placing it among the least trusting nations globally. Over 60% of Australians report moderate to high levels of grievance, with only 17% believing that future generations will be better off.

As explained in the Information Manipulation and Harassment of Local Leaders: Impacts and Implications report: Further compounding these issues are a lack of media and digital literacy across communities. In Australia, a 2024 nation-wide study found that 42% of adults reported they were not confident to check if information found online is true, and over 80% of respondents agreed that media literacy is needed at all ages^[1]. Likewise, digital literacy has failed to keep pace with the rapidly expanding world of digital tools available across communities^[2].

In a world where more and more of our interactions are online, Councils can and should play a pivotal role in safeguarding trust, leading community conversations about the risks of mis- and disinformation, promoting credible information sources, and guiding good data stewardship to strengthen democratic resilience.

As the closest level of government to the people, councils are well placed to address these challenges but they often lack adequate skills, resources and training to implement the robust community engagement strategies required to deliver on what our communities expect.

Funding and support are needed to develop tools that will empower councils to develop programs that improve access to trusted information and help communities navigate disinformation and polarising digital environments.

Without deliberate and sustained efforts in these areas, trust will continue to decline, further eroding leadership necessary to build social cohesion and combat antisemitism.

2.4 Disrupted democracy

There are a number of documented examples in Victoria where council decision-making processes, meetings or community engagement activities have been disrupted by highly polarised activism.

Some of these incidents have involved anti-Semitic behaviour or concerns about community safety, while others relate more broadly to political extremism and organised movements

In recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of Council meetings that have been disrupted by groups opposing liberal democracy. In 2023 alone, 15 councils reported disruptions to their proceedings from one such group. In a particularly disruptive incident in the City of Monash angry protesters besieged council chambers, confronting council representatives and resulting in police being called.

These kinds of disruptions discourage active participation in democracy and provide a clear demonstration of the impact of the erosion of social cohesion on public safety and the ability of local governments to lead safe and respectful democratic debate.

3. Challenges in responding to antisemitism and the erosion of social cohesion

There are several limiting factors in addressing antisemitism and erosion of social cohesion. These include:

- Erosion of trust and participation in democratic processes
- Fragmented responses across jurisdictions and levels of government
- Financial pressure on local government
- Rapidly evolving context requiring new leadership skills

3.1 Erosion of trust and participation in democratic processes

The Disrupting Disinformation Ecologies research underlines the impact of disinformation and harassment on local democracy, with more than a third of survey respondents reporting threats to local elected representatives or board members.

When local leaders are harassed into withdrawal or self-censorship, communities lose trusted channels for difficult conversations across difference, including conversations about antisemitism, racism, extremism and social cohesion.

The same research identifies community engagement and formal public participation processes were disrupted in 81 per cent of cases, trust and organisational reputation impacted in 78 per cent, and staff safety was affected in 74 per cent.

These conditions can lead municipal leaders to withdraw from debate, self-censor and reduce participation, in turn reducing diversity of leadership and representation.

3.2 Fragmented responses across jurisdictions and levels of government

Greater coordination in responding to growing global challenges and rising community expectations is needed across all levels of government, with recognition that local government is best placed to represent nuanced community experience, and to implement locally-contextualised response. One example of a structural barrier was expressed in the Australian National Security College *National Community Consultation Report* (2026), noting that ‘the security clearance gap ... excludes local authorities from classified conversations at the moments when local knowledge matters most.’³ The report goes on to note many times the critical role that local government, and localised responses, have in protecting and promoting Australia’s national security and social cohesion.

Tackling antisemitism and strengthening social cohesion requires a whole-of-system response in which local government is recognised, resourced and supported as a core democratic institution.

Councils understand their communities best and are uniquely positioned to deliver nuanced, locally appropriate responses, drawing on their knowledge of local leadership and community dynamics to identify emerging issues and respond early and effectively.

With the right partnerships, capability and investment, councils can play a critical role in preventing and reducing the conditions in which antisemitism, polarisation and ideologically or religiously motivated extremism can take hold, while strengthening the everyday democratic fabric that keeps communities safe, cohesive and resilient.

Councils are frontline responders with demonstrated capability, but require coordinated national support, investment and system-level responses to effectively prevent and address antisemitism and strengthen social cohesion.

3.3 Financial pressure on local government

The Victorian local government sector is under unprecedented strain, asked to do more by other levels of government and communities, with less certainty and mounting financial pressure. Without systemic reform the sector will continue to decline, community resilience, safety and social cohesion will erode and inequities will deepen.

The [Future is Local: Financial Sustainability Report](#) highlights that Councils manage more than \$140 billion in assets and hold the trust of millions of Victorians, yet structural financial constraints, infrastructure stress, and social fragmentation threaten their ability to deliver essential services.

Economic modelling shows that targeted investment in local government reform could return benefits at least four times greater than cost.

3.4 Rapidly evolving context requiring new leadership skills

Local leaders are now on the front line of Australia's most complex challenges, from social cohesion, housing and infrastructure to climate adaptation, emergency management and the rise of misinformation, yet the capability pathways available to them have not kept pace with the scale, complexity and scrutiny of the role.

Across many democracies, the practical centre of gravity for public leadership is shifting to be more local, as communities increasingly look to councils and mayors for visible problem-solving and delivery, but formal powers, leadership training pathways and resources have not grown at the same rate.

Better equipped local leaders, stronger democratic institutions and improved community confidence in councils' capacity to lead through social tension, misinformation and community conflict – but it will take deliberate action to build the leadership capabilities we need to support safe and cohesive communities into the future.

4. Recommendations – MAV and Victorian Councils

Councils already foster belonging, participation and inclusive governance but councils cannot meet the scale and speed of these challenges at the local level without coordinated national and state support, dedicated investment and stronger mechanisms for collaboration across governments, sectors and communities.

MAV therefore recommends the following actions to strengthen social cohesion, counter antisemitism and other forms of identity-based hatred, improve information integrity, and support local democratic resilience.

Recommendation 1: Fund practical, scalable local programs

- **Establish a “Local Issues, Local Solutions” Active Local Democracy Fund** | A council-delivered fund supporting place-based programs that strengthen participation, local democracy, social cohesion and community resilience to disinformation.
- **Scale practical tools for alternative narratives and local cohesion-building initiatives** | Expand training, tools and peer learning to help councils develop constructive alternative narratives that strengthen belonging and trust.

Recommendation 2: Formalise channels for cross-jurisdiction and intergovernmental coordination

- **Create a formal local government mechanism to inform regulatory and policy responses** | A structured mechanism for local government to provide evidence and advice into relevant regulatory, platform, safety and policy responses.
- **Strengthen multi-sector and multi-level collaboration on social cohesion and information integrity** | Develop mechanisms for structured collaboration across governments, civil society, academia and communities to coordinate responses and build capability.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen governance and contemporary leadership skills for a rapidly changing context

- **Support the City Leaders Program as democratic resilience infrastructure** | Support a non-partisan capability program to strengthen governance, ethical leadership and system navigation for local government leaders tasked with building and maintaining social cohesion in an era of polycrisis.
- **Support development and rollout of a rapid response mechanism for local disinformation, harassment and community tension** | Fund an on-demand specialist support

mechanism for local authorities facing active or anticipated disinformation and digital threats to social cohesion.

Recommendation 4: Address environmental drivers: disinformation, declining trust, media, civics and digital literacy.

- **Fund dedicated local government capability to respond to disinformation and harmful narratives** | Dedicated funding, staffing, training and tools to help councils identify and respond to disinformation and harmful narratives impacting community wellbeing and social cohesion.
- **Invest in local media, digital literacy and civic information initiatives** | Support local initiatives that improve access to trusted information and help communities navigate disinformation and polarising digital environments.

a. MAV support for submissions from Victorian Councils

Several of Councils from the sector who have experienced antisemitic attacks in Victoria, including City of Melbourne, Glen Eira and Port Phillip. Their submissions translate MAV's systemic view into lived experience on the ground and showcase the nuanced responses required by each council in support of the community they know best.

City of Melbourne Submission

The City of Melbourne's submission reinforces and evidences MAV's systemic framing at the local level. As a municipality with one of Australia's largest Jewish communities, it provides clear, quantified evidence that antisemitism is experienced as a lived, place-based harm affecting safety, wellbeing and participation in civic life.

Since October 2023, the City of Melbourne has recorded 320 antisemitism-related enquiries and removed more than 1,020 instances of antisemitic graffiti, within more than 3,000 offensive graffiti reports, alongside broader declines in perceptions of safety, tolerance of diversity and community connection.

The City of Melbourne identifies related drivers including online hate, misinformation and disinformation, polarised public discourse, global events, cost-of-living pressures, housing stress, social isolation, inequality and declining trust.

The MAV supports the City of Melbourne's recommendations, including: calls for national leadership and coordination, dedicated and sustained funding for local government, place-based prevention, improved reporting frameworks and whole-of-government anti-racism approaches.

City of Port Phillip Submission

The City of Port Phillip is home to a large and highly visible Jewish community, one of the largest in Victoria. At the 2021 Census, 3,408 residents identified Judaism as their religion, representing 3.3 per cent of the local population, compared with 0.9 per cent across Greater Melbourne.

The City's submission is grounded in the local and lived experiences of people who live, work and visit our municipality. It reflects the growing impact of antisemitism on people's sense of safety, dignity and belonging in everyday public life.

The submission draws on demographic data, community engagement, Council records, the crisis management response to the terror attack on the Adass Israel Synagogue in 2024 and statewide reporting to illustrate how rising antisemitism undermines people's confidence to move through our city, visit public spaces, and practice and show their faith openly. It highlights changes in behaviour being driven by fear, anxiety and distress.

MAV supports the City of Port Phillip's recommendations which have been developed in partnership with the City of Glen Eira and call for coordinated action across all levels of government, including improved data, sustained prevention and education, culturally appropriate wellbeing supports, and locally delivered support and safety responses grounded in lived experience.

Glen Eira City Council Submission

Glen Eira City Council's submission provides a local government perspective on antisemitism and social cohesion, grounded in direct community experience and place-based practice.

It outlines how antisemitism is experienced locally, the impacts on community safety and participation, and practical, preventative responses within our role, while also calling on other levels of government to take appropriate action within their responsibilities.

Glen Eira is home to one of Australia's largest and most established Jewish communities and has long been recognised as a place where people of many cultures, faiths and backgrounds live and participate together.

As the submission states: "[Glen Eira's] experience highlights that antisemitism is driven by a combination of direct behaviours and broader systemic factors, including misinformation, global and national events experienced locally, limited understanding of Jewish identity and history, and increasing social polarisation. These drivers extend well beyond the influence of any single organisation or level of government and require coordinated, preventative and long-term action across Australian, Victorian and local governments.

"We are calling for national prioritisation of these issues and a nationally led framework that provides leadership, consistency and sustained funding. National leadership must be matched by coordinated State and local action, recognising that effective prevention and response must occur across multiple community settings and institutions."

- **Glen Eira City Council**

MAV supports the City of Glen Eira's recommendations which have been developed in partnership with the City of Port Phillip, and call for coordinated action across all levels of government.

5. Conclusion

Antisemitism must be addressed directly and seriously as a specific form of hatred that affects the safety, wellbeing and participation of Jewish Australians.

The drivers and challenges outlined in this submission demonstrate that antisemitism is being amplified within a broader set of pressures weakening social cohesion, including disinformation, declining trust, loneliness, social disconnection, polarisation and fragmented institutional responses.

These pressures do not remain abstract or confined to online environments. They are experienced locally in public places, neighbourhoods, community events, council chambers, libraries, local media and online forums connected to local issues.

The contributing factors are interrelated. Disinformation ecologies exploit social fault lines and amplify grievance against religious, cultural and other identity groups. Loneliness and social disconnection weaken the relationships that support belonging, trust and resilience. Harassment and intimidation of local leaders and communities reduce participation and narrow the space for respectful democratic debate. At the same time, current institutional responses remain fragmented, under-resourced and insufficiently connected to local experience.

For these reasons, responses to antisemitism and social cohesion must extend beyond incident response alone. They must include sustained prevention, early intervention, capability building and recovery.

Local government has a critical role in this system because councils are trusted, place-based institutions with deep knowledge of their communities and responsibility for many of the local spaces, services and relationships through which belonging is built.

However, councils cannot meet the scale and speed of these challenges without coordinated national and state support, dedicated investment and stronger mechanisms for collaboration across governments, sectors and communities.

6. Appendix 1: Relevant MAV initiatives

MAV invests in a range of initiatives designed to combat the conditions that enable antisemitism and erode social cohesion.

The following details several of these initiatives, highlighting key learnings and the relationship between current responses and the recommendations we are making in this submission.

Initiatives detailed in this section include:

1. [Local innovation in disinformation response: Lessons for countering \(violent\) extremism](#)
2. [Information Manipulation and Harassment of Local Leaders](#)
3. STAND
4. [Belonging Matters](#)
5. City Leaders Program

Local innovation in disinformation response: Lessons for countering (violent) extremism

What is it?

[Local innovation in disinformation response: Lessons for countering \(violent\) extremism](#) is the first in a series of three policy briefs as part of the Disrupting Disinformation Ecologies project being delivered in collaboration with Victoria University, University of Glasgow, German Marshall Fund of the United States and Dare to be Grey.

Disinformation “ecologies” are combinations of false narratives, enabling platforms and organised actors that exploit social fault lines, intensify grievance and create conditions in which polarisation, hate and extremism can grow. Drawing on 121 survey responses across local government, academia, civil society and other sectors, the project provides a global evidence base on how disinformation is being experienced and addressed at the city and local level.

Why is it relevant?

Disinformation is no longer only a national security or platform governance issue, it is affecting local democratic participation, community safety, wellbeing of public leaders, trust in institutions and social cohesion.

This work seeks to understand the impacts of, and responses to, disinformation at city or local level, and to derive learnings and recommendations for disrupting disinformation ecologies that drive violence and extremism.

It informs this submission’s view that antisemitism must be addressed as a specific and serious form of hatred, while also recognising the broader information environment that enables prejudice, scapegoating and grievance to spread.

What did MAV learn?

Disinformation is a social cohesion issue, not only a communications issue, affecting trust, participation, safety and belonging.

The survey found that religious groups were reported as targets of disinformation in 30 per cent of localities, while migrants and culturally diverse communities were targeted in 51 per cent.

There were also observed links between disinformation and religiously motivated extremism (59 per cent), far-right extremism (76 per cent), anti-government or conspiracy-driven extremism (68 per cent) and gender-based extremism (57 per cent).

The evidence also shows that current institutional responses are not equipped to meet the scale and speed of these challenges. Only 19 per cent of organisations have formal policies, procedures or disinformation strategies. Only 5 per cent of city or local governments consider their response strong. Evaluation is also limited, with 51 per cent having not evaluated responses.

What is needed next?

Councils see local impacts early but cannot respond effectively alone, especially where narratives move across jurisdictions and platforms.

MAV is using this evidence to argue for stronger local capability, better cross-sector coordination and recognition of councils as core partners in prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.

Effective action requires sustained capability across an anticipatory, active and recovery continuum, not short-term crisis response.

Information Manipulation and Harassment of Local Leaders

What is it?

[Information Manipulation and Harassment of Local Leaders](#) examines the growing use of targeted disinformation, intimidation and harassment against local elected representatives and municipal leaders.

The report was released through the Resilient Democracy Data and Research Network, a network of Australian researchers, civil society leaders and government agencies.

It shows that abuse is increasingly enabled by social media, AI-generated content, deepfakes, doxing, trolling, astroturfing and the malicious use of governance processes.

These behaviours are not simply personal attacks, they erode institutional trust, distort public debate, discourage participation, silence diverse voices and weaken the capacity of local government to govern effectively.

Why is it relevant?

This report shows how global information manipulation and hostility are experienced locally, in council chambers, public meetings, community debates, online forums and local elections.

When local leaders are harassed into withdrawal or self-censorship, communities lose trusted channels for difficult conversations across difference, including conversations about antisemitism, racism, extremism and social cohesion.

What did MAV learn?

The report finds that harassment of councillors and other local leaders is increasingly enabled by digital platforms and new technologies, including social media amplification, bot networks and AI-generated and manipulated content such as deepfake imagery, audio and video.

These capabilities significantly increase both the volume and reach of harmful content, placing new and ongoing pressures on those serving in public office.

Harassment and disinformation are social cohesion risks, weakening trust, participation, safety and the conditions for respectful democratic debate.

Local leaders and councils often face these harms early and directly, but current legal, regulatory and organisational supports are fragmented and inadequate.

Disproportionate targeting of women and underrepresented groups threatens leadership diversity and narrows the perspectives available in local decision-making.

What is needed next?

The research finds that existing regulatory and legal protections are often inadequate, difficult to navigate, or too slow to respond to the immediate needs of those being targeted.

The report recommends a holistic response model that addresses not only individual incidents, but also the broader social, political and technological drivers enabling information manipulation and harassment.

MAV will use the report's findings and recommendations to inform its ongoing advocacy to ensure councils can help create safe and cohesive communities and safe council workplaces.

STAND

What is it?

The STAND project (Strengthening Towns' Activation for New Narratives on Diversity) is a European Union-funded initiative led by Istituto Cooperazione Economia Internazionale in Italy, with technical partners Diversit in Spain and Rede Portuguesa das Cidades Interculturais in Portugal.

Underway in Europe for more than 12 months, it equips local governments with practical skills and tools to identify, understand and dismantle harmful narratives, and to replace them with constructive, inclusive narratives that strengthen belonging, trust and community cohesion.

It helps councils respond to divisive narratives affecting their communities, including racism, anti-migrant sentiment, religious intolerance, misogyny and discrimination against LGBTIQ+ communities and marginalised or underrepresented groups. In

doing so, it provides councils with practical capability to strengthen social cohesion and reduce the local conditions in which extremist views can gain traction.

Why is it relevant?

Polarising narratives in Australia increasingly target cultural and religious diversity, migration and First Nations communities. The [Disinformation in the City Response Playbook](#), produced by the Melbourne Centre for Cities at the University of Melbourne, identifies these as among the key themes through which disinformation and division affect local governments.

The STAND project responds to the way these narratives can generate coordinated media campaigns, online abuse, threats and harassment directed at elected representatives, staff and targeted communities.

The project informs the MAV's response to the issues outlined in this submission as a practical, place-based response to the conditions that weaken social cohesion and enable ideologically and religiously motivated extremism to spread.

What MAV has learned

The model is practical and transferable, giving local government a structured way to respond to divisive narratives in partnership with the communities most affected by them.

Building on the capability of local government staff to respond in ways that do not amplify harmful messages enables them to promote constructive, locally grounded narratives that support shared values and community confidence.

There is value in the international Community of Practice that supports mutual learning across jurisdictions, enabling councils to test approaches, share challenges and draw on emerging evidence about what works in addressing divisive narratives at the local level.

Alternative narratives are more effective than counter-narratives in strengthening social cohesion, as they are positive, inclusive and forward-looking, and build shared understanding around belonging, fairness and civic values without centering harmful messages.

Structured support, including training, tools, peer learning and international collaboration, strengthens councils' ability to reach those susceptible to divisive narratives and build local resilience to manipulation, scapegoating and hate.

What is needed next?

The MAV is delivering the STAND project to nine Victorian councils, supporting them to apply and adapt this work in local settings.

It will also produce a publicly available toolkit on alternative narratives for local governments, and at its conclusion ICEI and its partners will develop a public guide on new narratives on diversity.

Sharing the toolkit with Victorian councils, will help embed lessons from the project into ongoing local policy and practice.

3.5 Belonging Matters

What is it?

[Belonging Matters](#) is a MAV report that draws on expert technical papers from Victoria University's Dr Stephen Carbone and Professor Rosemary Calder, consolidating evidence on social connection, mental health, wellbeing and cohesion. It provides an evidence-based case for treating social connection as core civic and preventative infrastructure, not a "nice-to-have".

The central proposition of the report is that social cohesion is not built through policy statements, national strategies or security responses alone. It is built or eroded in neighbourhoods, streets, schools, sporting clubs, libraries, community centres and the everyday interactions that determine whether people experience Australia as a country where they belong.

Why is it relevant?

This submission argues that antisemitism must be addressed directly and seriously, while also recognising the broader conditions in which hatred, polarisation and extremism can take hold with declining trust, misinformation, social fragmentation, economic insecurity and weakened civic participation.

[Belonging Matters](#) strengthens that argument by showing that belonging is a protective factor and disconnection is a risk factor.

The Report finds that strong, connected neighbourhoods are among the most powerful protections a society has against mental ill-health, suicide, distress, hatred and extremism alike. Where loneliness, exclusion and disconnection intensify, so too do the conditions for grievance, polarisation, recruitment to extremist ideologies and hostility between communities.

What MAV has learned?

Connection to community is the foundation on which cohesion rests, its absence is the ground in which antisemitism, racism and extremism can take root. Social disconnection and the scale of the loneliness challenge is one which requires focus, with nearly a quarter of Victorian adults, experiencing loneliness. Councils are often first to see fragmentation and best placed to intervene early.

Fragmented, short-term funding limits preventative, place-based responses.

What is needed next?

MAV continues to advocate for the recommendations contained in *Belonging Matters*, which centre around whole-of-government, place-based prevention through local government, including a Community Cohesion Action Fund, better alignment of fragmented funding streams and renewed investment in community infrastructure.

City Leaders Program

What is it?

The City Leaders Program is a purpose-built, non-partisan leadership initiative developed by the MAV to equip mayors, councillors and, in future, senior local

government executives with the practical skills needed to govern in an increasingly complex and pressured environment.

The MAV has developed the City Leaders Program as part of its broader capability-building role for Victorian local government, drawing on its sector-wide legitimacy, deep knowledge of council realities and partnership with UCL's Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose through the Public Sector Capabilities Index. Launching through the City Leaders Masterclass Series in 2026, this Program is designed to test applied, peer-led and experiential approaches to municipal leadership development.

The Program focuses on: ethical leadership, stewardship, system navigation and intergovernmental coordination, expert-led learning, peer networks and applied practice.

Why is it relevant?

This submission draws on the program as a practical, systems-strengthening response to rising complexity, social fragmentation, misinformation, institutional distrust and the growing gap between community expectations and local capacity. This Submission argues for the need to support stronger local leadership, democratic resilience, social cohesion, community safety and place-based problem-solving.

What have MAV learned?

- Strong local leadership is a practical protective factor for democratic trust, community confidence and social cohesion.
- Councils need structured capability development to govern well under conditions of rising complexity, misinformation and institutional pressure.
- Sector-wide programs led by the MAV can translate local experience, expert evidence and peer learning into scalable leadership development across Victoria.

What is needed next?

Insights, participant feedback and evaluation from the series will inform a staged three-year pilot intended to build reach and impact over time through multiple cohorts, stronger cross-council networks and a scalable model for municipal leadership development across Victoria and beyond.

This Submission recommends support for the City Leaders Program as a nonpartisan initiative that actively equips local leaders to lead and navigate complexity in the compounding polycrisis environment

6. Appendix 2: Detailed recommendations

Recommendation 1: Fund practical, scalable local programs			
Recommendation	What is it?	Why it is included	Expected impact
Establish a “Local Issues, Local Solutions” Active Local Democracy Fund	A council-delivered fund supporting place-based programs that strengthen participation, local democracy, social cohesion and community resilience to disinformation.	This recommendation recognises that councils are the “first mile” of democracy and are where community trust, participation and cohesion are built and tested in daily life. It provides a practical mechanism for councils to respond to polarisation, misinformation and declining trust.	Stronger local democratic participation, improved trust between councils and communities, greater community resilience to disinformation, and more constructive local responses to social tension before issues escalate.
Scale practical tools for alternative narratives and local cohesion-building	Expand access to training, tools and peer learning that help councils identify harmful narratives and develop constructive alternative narratives grounded in belonging, fairness, shared civic values and local community strengths. This should include support for councils to work with affected communities, avoid amplifying harmful messages and strengthen inclusive local narratives.	The recommendation aligns with the submission’s identification of harmful narratives as one way antisemitism, racism, anti-migrant sentiment, religious intolerance, misogyny and other forms of prejudice are normalised and spread. STAND provides a practical, place-based method for responding to divisive narratives without centring or amplifying the harmful message itself, while strengthening positive, locally grounded narratives that support belonging and trust.	Greater local capability to respond to divisive narratives, stronger shared civic identity, improved confidence in local government responses, more constructive engagement with communities affected by hate and division, and improved prevention of polarisation, scapegoating and social fragmentation at the local level.
Recommendation 2: Formalise channels for cross-jurisdiction and intergovernmental coordination			
Create a formal local government mechanism to inform regulatory and policy responses	Work collectively across cities through peak bodies and city networks to advocate for enhanced sector-wide protections. Including a multi-level mechanism for enhanced responsiveness to targeted disinformation and harassment used by elected representatives and candidates.	The recommendation aligns with the submission’s identification of a gap between where harms are experienced (locally) and where many relevant powers sit, including regulation, platform accountability, law enforcement and national policy settings. It reflects the need for local government insight to be built into these responses.	Better alignment between local experience and national or state policy, stronger protections for communities and local leaders, clearer escalation pathways, and more effective regulation and enforcement informed by local realities.
Strengthen multi-sector and multi-level collaboration on social cohesion and information integrity	Local government is impacted by societal and global trends. Effective response thus includes structured multi-level, multi-sector and multi-city efforts to ensure coordination, alignment, and knowledge sharing. Support innovative pilots at the local level. Provide structured opportunities to learn from and contribute to international best practice.	The recommendation aligns with the local government sector’s submissions identifying fragmented responses as a core system weakness. Councils cannot address antisemitism, disinformation, declining trust and social fragmentation alone, particularly where harmful narratives move across platforms, communities and jurisdictions.	Better coordination, reduced duplication, faster sharing of effective practice, stronger support for councils with limited capacity, and improved alignment between local, state, national and international responses.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen governance and contemporary leadership skills for a rapidly changing context

Support the City Leaders Program as democratic resilience infrastructure	The City Leaders Program is a nonpartisan initiative that actively equips local leaders to lead and navigate complexity in the compounding polycrisis environment. It also strengthens cohesion through applied learning, peer networks and practical governance capability-building.	This recommendation responds to the assertion that councils are the “first mile” of democracy and that local leaders are increasingly required to navigate misinformation, polarisation, harassment and declining trust. Strong local leadership is therefore a practical protective factor for democratic resilience and social cohesion.	Better equipped local leaders, stronger democratic institutions and improved community confidence in councils’ capacity to lead through social tension, misinformation and community conflict.
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Establish a rapid response mechanism for local disinformation, harassment and community tension	Support development of centralised Rapid Response Mechanisms for disinformation that can be accessed by local governments and other key local public authorities in each state and territory during active or anticipated disinformation events, targeted harassment, threats, community tension or heightened risk to cohesion.	The recommendation aligns with the submission’s emphasis that harms associated with disinformation are not confined to online spaces. They can manifest locally through harassment, intimidation, threats, community tension and violence, and councils often see these issues early but lack access to specialist support when issues escalate quickly.	More timely and coordinated responses to emerging incidents, reduced harm to targeted communities and local leaders, improved recovery after local tension, and stronger links between councils and relevant state or national agencies.
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Recommendation 4: Address environmental drivers – disinformation, declining trust, media, civics and digital literacy.

Fund dedicated local government capability to respond to disinformation and harmful narratives	Build capabilities to assist Local Governments, to effectively respond to disinformation. Provide tailored learning and tools for local government authorities to building knowledge, systems and structures for effective response, including anticipatory and preventative capabilities.	This recommendation aligns with the submission’s assertion that disinformation is a key amplifier of antisemitism, prejudice, grievance and polarisation. The evidence shows that local government is affected through disrupted engagement, reduced trust, safety concerns and limited current response capability.	Practical local capability to prevent escalation, respond consistently and support communities targeted by harmful narratives. It would reduce reliance on ad hoc responses and strengthen councils’ role in prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.
Invest in local media, digital literacy and civic information initiatives	Working with media and adjacent organisations, to address both the provision of, and ability to navigate, quality information – especially in local areas known to be ‘news deserts’. Includes establishment of a local media taskforce and developing media and digital literacy initiatives with key sectors in communities.	The recommendation aligns with the submission’s identification of digital environments and information manipulation as accelerants of division, distrust and identity-based prejudice. Strengthening local information integrity and literacy directly addresses the conditions in which antisemitic, racist and extremist narratives can spread.	More resilient communities, improved access to trusted local information, reduced susceptibility to harmful narratives, and stronger foundations for informed and respectful civic participation.

MAV would be pleased to provide clarification on any information in this submission. For further information, please contact MAV CEO Office at ceooffice@mav.asn.au.

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