



Influencing Government Decisions in Victoria

A Guide for Disability
Advocates





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About the Disability Advocacy Resource Unit

The **Disability Advocacy Resource Unit** (DARU) is unique in Australia as a dedicated resource unit funded to work with disability advocates to promote and protect the rights of people with disability.

It develops and distributes resources to keep disability advocates informed and up to date about issues affecting people with disability in Victoria. It organises forums to provide opportunities for a co-ordinated approach to issues of concern, provides professional development opportunities and undertakes capacity building projects.

Introduction

Systemic advocacy is all about making positive change on behalf of the rights and interests of a group of people. It is about identifying a problem that affects a number of people and working strategically to create change to fix that problem for everyone.

Making systemic changes is a lot about power. Who has the power to make changes to laws, policies or providing funding for a program. This **power** usually lies with the Ministers, politicians or executives in government and the executives in government and the private sector. However, it is important to recognise and understand your own power and what you and your organisation can bring to the table.¹

It is also important for disability advocacy organisations to understand who their advocacy efforts should be targeting in government, and who they need to be having conversations with. We then need to take a step back and understand who **influences** these targets.

About this resource

This resource is designed to help disability advocates and disability advocacy organisations understand how the Victorian State government system works and who they key stakeholders and decision-makers we need to influence to create positive and effective change for people with disability.

This resource uses content from DARU's Systemic Advocacy course which you find [here](#).

In this resource, you will find:

- Information on the three levels of government and what they are responsible for
- How to identify who the key decision-makers are in the Victorian State Government
- Information on how the Government makes decisions and the influences and pressures they face
- How a law is made and how community concerns become a law
- Information specific to Victorian Disability Advocates

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¹ The information in this section has been adapted from DARU's Systemic Advocacy Course available [here](#).

Levels of Government

Knowing which level of government is best placed to progress your asks, and who within each jurisdiction has the required responsibility and authority, is essential to your systemic advocacy.

Australia has three levels of government that work together to provide us with the services we need.² Each level of government provides different services to Australians.

The three levels of government and the services they provide are:

- **Commonwealth/Federal/National Government:** Responsible for issues that affect all Australians such as the post.
- **State and territory Governments:** Responsible for issues that affect people in that state or territory such as police and public transport.
- **Local government/councils:** Responsible for issues that affect local communities such as rubbish collection and maintenance of parks.

There are some areas which both the federal parliament and state and territory parliaments can make laws about. These areas include education, health, taxation and environment.

Understanding the Victorian State Parliament³

The Parliament of Victoria consists of two Houses:

1. The Legislative Assembly (lower house) and,
2. The Legislative Council (upper house)

Legislative Assembly

There are 88 Members of the Legislative Assembly. Each Member of Parliament represents an electorate (area) in Victoria. The party (or parties) that hold the majority of seats in the Legislative Assembly forms the Victorian government.

In the Legislative Assembly:

- Members of Legislative Assembly discuss and debate matters of importance.
- State laws are made and amended by debating and voting on bills (draft legislation).
- Members of Parliament scrutinise the work of the government, particularly during question time.

You can find a list of members of the Legislative Assembly on the Victorian Parliament website [here](#).

The Legislative Council

The Legislative Council consists of 40 members. Five members are elected from each of eight regions across Victoria. The Legislative Council has been described as acting as a 'House of Review'. Members of the Legislative Council perform this 'review' function by scrutinising, debating and, on occasions, amending or rejecting legislation which has usually been initiated by the government.

You can find a list of members of the Legislative Council on the Victorian Parliament website [here](#).

Parliamentary Committees

Parliamentary committees are made up of Members of Parliament from different political parties. They investigate a particular issue and report their findings and recommendations to the Parliament.

The work of committees facilitates:

- public debate and awareness of issues
- direct public input into parliamentary and policy processes
- personal contact between parliamentarians and the public
- in-depth investigation of issues to assist with better legislative decisions.

You can read more about Parliamentary Committees [here](#).

2 peo.gov.au. (n.d.). Introducing ... the three levels of government – Parliamentary Education Office. [online] Available at: <https://peo.gov.au/understand-our-parliament/how-parliament-works/three-levels-of-government/introducing-three-levels-of-government>.

3 The information in this section has been adapted from DARU's Systemic Advocacy Course available [here](#).



How decisions are made by the Victorian Government

Who is part of the decision-making process

At a high level, the key decision makers in the Victorian State Government are:

- The **Premier** who sets the overall direction of government **Ministers** who oversee various portfolios
- **Member of Parliament (MPs)** in both houses who vote on laws and hold the Government to account
- **Cabinet** (and Cabinet committees) are where big policy, budget and legislative decisions are made collectively by ministers
- **Premier & Department of Premier & Cabinet** control the government agenda and set strategic priorities across all portfolios
- **Portfolio Ministers & Advisors** develop, oversee and advocate for portfolio specific proposals, projects and policy initiatives
- **Treasurer & Department of Treasury & Finance** wield major influence through funding decisions and budget allocation processes

How a law is made⁴

Ideas for new or changed laws can come from anyone, such as:

- Members of Parliament
- Political parties
- Members of the public
- Lobby groups
- Parliamentary committees
- The media
- The public service and ministerial advisers

Creating a bill

The idea is drafted in a document called a bill.

If the bill is brought by a government minister it is known as a **government bill**. If a bill is brought by a member other than a minister it is known as a **private member's bill**.

The Office of the Chief Parliamentary Counsel drafts the wording for all bills.

Legislative Assembly

Most bills are debated by the Legislative Assembly first. The debate goes through several stages, known as readings.

Often, the Legislative Assembly completes an introduction and first reading, second reading and consideration in detail, followed by a third and final reading before being approved.

Legislative Council

Once approved by the Assembly, the bill is sent to the Legislative Council.

Often, the Legislative Council completes an introduction and first reading, second reading and Committee of the whole, followed by a third and final reading before being approved.

Some bills start in the Council. It does not usually matter where the bill starts, as long as both the Assembly and the Council go through all the reading stages.

The only exception is the yearly budget. Both houses debate the budget, but it only needs to be approved by the Assembly.

Royal Assent

The bill is presented to the Governor of Victoria for royal assent. Royal assent is the final step in the process where the Governor formally approves the bill being passed by both Houses of Parliament.

Once royal assent is received, the bill becomes an Act of Parliament. This means it is a law of Victoria.

The Governor cannot refuse to give royal assent for political or personal reasons.

A new law

When the new law comes into force this is called 'commencement'.

Some laws commence immediately after they have received royal assent.

Other laws do not commence until a date set out in the law or decided later by the Governor, with advice from Ministers.

How community concerns become a law⁵

A community issue is transformed into a law through a structured process of identifying the problem, lobbying representatives, drafting a bill, and passing it through parliament or local council, typically involving public consultation.

4 Parliament of Victoria (2025b). How laws are made | Parliament of Victoria. [online] www.parliament.vic.gov.au. Available at: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/about/how-parliament-works/how-a-law-is-made/>.

5 Local Government. (2018). Local laws. [online] Available at: <https://www.localgovernment.vic.gov.au/strengthening-councils/local-laws>.

Identifying key decision-makers⁶

Understanding who the key decision-makers are will help you start to think strategically about who you need to engage with and influence.

Some important questions to ask yourself when you are thinking about who to engage/influence are:

- Who has the authority to make the decision?
- What do they need to hear?
- Who do they need to hear it from?

A good way to find out what a Member of Parliament cares about and who is interested in your issue is to do a bit of research. You can easily find out a politician's background, their interests and belief systems through their online biographies and speeches in parliament.

TIP: A full list of the members of parliament is available on the [Parliament of Australia website](#), this includes links to their biography and their first speeches.

For the Victorian Government you can visit the [Victorian parliament website](#).

Most of the asks related to disability require governments and public servants on all levels to buy in. They include:

- The Minister responsible for your issue and/or their Parliamentary Secretary (State or Federal)
- Your Local Member of Parliament (State or Federal)
- Your State Senators
- Other Members of Parliament interested in your issue or overseeing inquiries relating to your issue (for example, this could include Members of Parliament with lived experience, or those who are part of a 'Parliamentary Friends' interest group)
- Your local government Mayor or Councillor
- Public servants who oversee your funding (if you receive government funding), or the policy or strategy for your issue, or provide secretariat to committees or reviews.

Keep in mind that:

Your targets are getting advice and are influenced by all kinds of people including fellow colleagues, back benchers, cross benchers, opposition, industry representatives and people with lived experience.

It takes time to build trust and strengthen relationships, especially new ones, so meet with the decision-makers you identify as regularly as appropriate to prepare and plan.

⁶ The information in this section has been adapted from DARU's Systemic Advocacy Course available [here](#).

Identifying key decision-makers

continued

Who's who?⁷

Title	Description
Ministers	<p>Ministers are elected politicians responsible for specific government portfolios who can determine policy direction and advocate for proposals in Cabinet.</p> <p>Ministers are accountable to Parliament, their colleagues and the public for the outcomes in their areas of responsibility.</p> <p>It is important to keep in mind that Ministers are influenced by a range of stakeholders including the Premier, Treasurer, Voters, unions, advocacy and peak bodies, ministerial advisors, public services and Cabinet.</p>
Ministerial Advisors	<p>Ministerial advisors are personally appointed by ministers and work out of the minister's private offices. Ministers rely on advisors to have deep policy knowledge and expertise on a range of policy areas.</p> <p>They have become an integral part of the political landscape and policy decisions may be deferred or delegated to them by the Minister.</p> <p>They are also more likely to have time for detailed stakeholder engagement than Ministers themselves, despite their own heavy workload.</p> <p>It is important to build strong relationships and trust with advisors as this can lead to ongoing influence on policy decisions beyond formal meetings with Ministers.</p> <p>Alongside ministerial advisors, other ministerial staff to be aware of include gatekeepers who manage diary, correspondence and stakeholder access for the Minister and political strategists who provide advice on political risks, alignment with government priorities and strategic positioning.</p>

⁷ The information in this section has been adapted from DARU's Systemic Advocacy Course available [here](#).



Title	Description
<p>Permanent Public Service</p>	<p>Permanent Public Service refers to career professionals who provide continuity and institutional knowledge as governments change hands.</p> <p>Understanding which government departments and which public servants are working on your issue is just as important to know as who the interested parliamentarians might be.</p> <p>There are different roles and positions within the permanent public service which are useful to know and build relationships with.</p> <p>These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior leadership positions such as Secretaries, Deputy Secretaries and Executive Directors who provide oversight and coordinate across government. • Implementation focussed positions who are responsible for transforming decisions into actions through programs, services and funding mechanisms that reach communities. • Policy focussed positions who provide evidence-based policy advice to Ministers and Cabinet. • Cabinet submission focussed roles who prepare formal proposals and legislation that supports the decision <p>Find out which department oversees the policy area and which public servants within the Department are responsible for the policy area.</p> <p>Cabinet submissions – prepares formal proposals and legislation that support the decision-making process with detailed analysis.</p>
<p>The Opposition and Crossbenchers</p>	<p>The opposition and crossbenchers can also be important influencers. One day they may be in power or hold the balance of power in Parliament. Get to know key people in the minor parties, know who the cross benchers are and who sits on different committees.</p> <p>Those in the opposition or on the cross bench may also have more time to meet and can sometimes be good sources of intel.</p>

How advocates can influence decisions

Effective advocacy to Government

Disability advocates influence government by directly engaging in policy development, lodging formal submissions to inquiries, and sharing lived experiences to challenge systemic issues. They act as a “bridging” mechanism to connect individuals with government services like the NDIS, while simultaneously acting as an independent voice to protect rights and lobby for legislative change.⁸

Disability advocates use several key methods to influence government:⁹

- **Submissions to Inquiries:** Advocacy groups write and submit formal reports to government inquiries (e.g., Royal Commissions) and Senate inquiries regarding abuse, neglect, and systemic issues, acting as a crucial source of information regarding on-the-ground experiences.
- **Systemic Advocacy:** They focus on changing laws, policies, and practices rather than just individual cases. This includes attending government working groups, committees, and policy consultation sessions to represent the needs of people with disability.
- **Policy and Legislative Consultation:** Advocates work with departments to review and design government frameworks (e.g., the National Disability Advocacy Framework), ensuring policies are rights-based and person-centered.
- **Lobbying and Representative Activity:** Funded disability representative organisations directly speak with government ministers and agencies, such as the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission, to advocate for reform.
- **Sharing Lived Experience & Stories:** Advocates tell the stories of people with disabilities – including those regarding abuse or discrimination – to demonstrate the real-world impact of policies, pushing for stronger protection measures.
- **Empowering Self-Advocacy:** Advocates run training and capacity-building programs, helping individuals to self-advocate and speak directly to government officials.
- **Independent Advocacy & Appeals:** Advocates help individuals navigate complex systems, including the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT) for NDIS plan reviews, which in turn highlights areas where systems are failing and need government attention

8 The information in this section has been adapted from DARU’s Influencing government: telling the disability advocacy story, available [here](#).

9 The information in this section has been adapted from DARU’s Influencing government: telling the disability advocacy story, available [here](#).

Where advocates can influence¹⁰

Disability advocates influence government primarily through **systemic advocacy**, which involves lobbying for changes to legislation, policy, and practice to improve the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities. They operate by providing advice directly to ministers, participating in working groups, and submitting reports to inquiries.

Examples of where advocates can influence:

- Support people living with disabilities to exercise their **human rights**
- Influence and be a part of **policies and procedures** created for people with disabilities in the community services sector, government and other sectors
- **Support and empower people living with disabilities** to use their right to self-determination, this could be done by working with other organisations or making submissions to government on behalf of or in collaboration with people living with disabilities
- Be part of community groups, working groups and support groups to **listen** to the voices of people living with disabilities

Disability advocates influence government primarily through systemic advocacy, which involves lobbying for changes to legislation, policy, and practice to improve the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities.

¹⁰ The information in this section has been adapted from DARU's *Influencing government: telling the disability advocacy story*, found [here](#).



Additional resources

[VALID – Systemic Advocacy](#)

[DARU – Influencing government: telling the disability advocacy story](#)

[Australian Government – Department of Health, Disability and Ageing: Disability Representative Organisations Program](#)

[Victorian Government – Department of Families, Fairness and Housing: Victorian Disability Advocacy Program \(VDAP\)](#)



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