

REFRESHING OUR GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY

Final positions and recommendations

Local Government New Zealand's Electoral Reform Working Group

//

July 2025



From the President of LGNZ >

Voter turnout in the October 2022 local government elections was just 40%. What will it be in 2025? With postal delivery decreasing and post boxes disappearing, voting by mail feels increasingly anachronistic. Councils' mandate is at risk and we must act now to change the system.

This decline in postal voting is just one of the factors explored by LGNZ's Electoral Reform Working Group in this report. Mayor Nick Smith and his colleagues have investigated why people are disengaging from local government and what we can do about it, from civics education to how elections are run and four-year terms. Everything recommended in this report has been driven by engagement with the public, councils and central government. I want to thank the working group for their outstanding work and to strongly back their recommendations.

Every day, councils make decisions that impact people's lives. From local roads, drinking water and wastewater systems, parks and public transport, rubbish and recycling to swimming pools and libraries. It's easy to take these services for granted. For people to wonder what they get for their rates without seeing how councils shape their life every day. We need those people to have their say and to vote, so that councils deliver what communities want. Delivering what 40% want isn't enough.

LGNZ will be advocating hard for this report's recommendations, which already have strong support. We will work to shift that support into action, for the 2028 elections. You can help. Start conversations that will mobilise people. Talk to Ministers, MPs and officials. Help the public understand why tomorrow is too late for change if we want a healthy local democracy.

Ngā mihi nui,



Sam Broughton

Mayor of Selwyn | Te Koromatua o Waikirikiri
President, Local Government New Zealand

From the Chair of the Working Group >

The time is right for a shakeup in how we run local elections. Our voting system is tired and outdated. Participation rates have dropped so low they are a risk to our mandate to speak on behalf of our communities. Media are more fragmented and communities more polarised. Liberal democratic values are being challenged globally. We need to reassert the importance of local democracy and update the system, so it works better for New Zealand.

With councils conducting their elections by post, the most urgent issue is the collapse in mail volumes and services. New Zealanders now refer to post as “snail mail” and many, particularly young people, do not use it at all. The multiple commitments by governments and councils to trial e-voting over the past two decades have not been fulfilled because the security risks proved too high. We concur with officials’ advice to the Government that there is no reasonable prospect of the security problems of e-voting being overcome in the foreseeable future. The only viable option left is polling-booth voting, a system we know works well given the high rate of participation in New Zealand parliamentary elections.

The current system for promoting voting in local elections is flawed. It is ineffective and inefficient having 78 councils run their own campaigns. Councils spend a fraction of the per-voter amount spent by the Electoral Commission during parliamentary elections and this contributes to the turnout in local elections being about half that of parliamentary elections. We want to recruit the Electoral Commission and its Orange Man and Dog to the task of encouraging people to vote in local elections with a consistent, nationwide campaign.

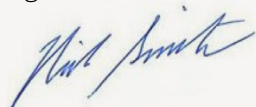
We also think it is time for the Electoral Commission to take over from councils the administration of local elections. The more that is the same for national and local elections, the easier it is for voters to engage. It is a logical progression from the last significant change, when the Commission took over from councils keeping their own separate electoral rolls. The current situation, where most councils contract out their election management to two private companies, is very unusual internationally. The Electoral Commission has the independence and security to best protect the integrity of our local elections into the future.

There are many other important recommendations in this report, such as advocating for the term of councils to be extended to four years, improving the community’s understanding of the role of local government, strengthening local democracy reporting, increasing information about candidates and reforming accountability of elected members between elections.

I acknowledge the strong input of all members of the working group and the support we have received from LGNZ’s President, Chief Executive and National Council. We particularly wish to thank Simon Randall, Policy Director from LGNZ, and Cherie Sivignon, from Nelson City Council, for their advice and research.

Changes to our electoral law are difficult. They are rightly subject to a high level of scrutiny as they go to the core of how our communities are governed. This final position paper is the result of a three-stage engagement process that has included the public and many government and community organisations as well as councils. Our hope is that through this work we have sown the seeds for the Government to reform the grassroots of our democracy.

Ngā mihi nui,



Hon Dr Nick Smith

Mayor of Nelson | Te Koromatua o Whakatū
Chair, LGNZ Electoral Reform Working Group



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The LGNZ Electoral Reform Working Group >

The purpose of the working group

The National Council of Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ) set up the Electoral Reform Working Group in early 2024 to drive LGNZ's advocacy work around strengthening local government's democratic mandate, with a particular focus on increasing participation in local body elections.

Over the next year, the working group carried out widespread engagement with councils, MPs, key organisations and other interested groups and individuals. Its issues paper and draft position paper were released for public consultation, which has informed this final position paper.

This paper sets out the working group's final positions and recommendations on the challenges and opportunities facing the local electoral system. The working group focused on effecting change, which saw it concentrate on factors open to influence and likely to gain wide buy-in from local government.

Membership of the working group

The working group's members were:



Mayor Hon Dr Nick Smith,
NELSON CITY (CHAIR)



Mayor Campbell Barry,
HUTT CITY (DEPUTY CHAIR)



Councillor Toni Boynton,
WHAKATĀNE DISTRICT, CO-CHAIR
TE MARUATA



Professor Andrew Geddis,
UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO



Mayor Susan O'Regan,
WAIPĀ DISTRICT



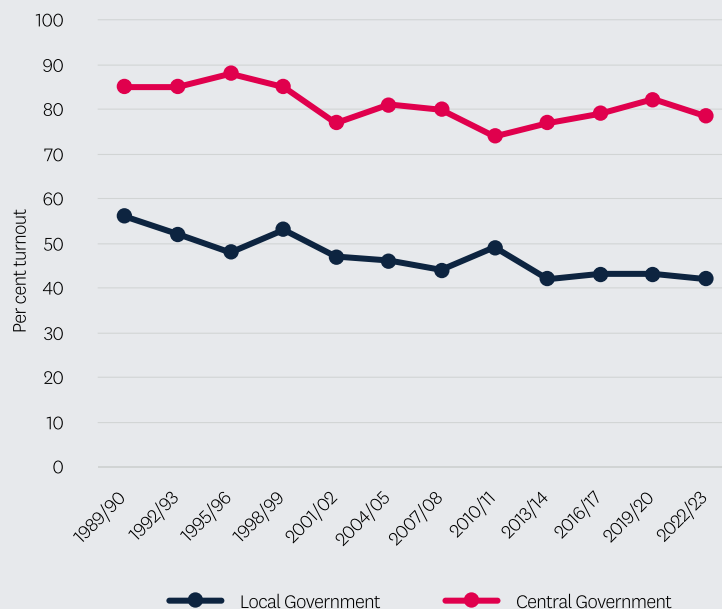
Mayor Rehette Stoltz,
GISBORNE DISTRICT

Background on participation in local elections >

Voter turnout in local authority elections in New Zealand has been trending down for the past three decades. However, since 2007 (with the exception of the formation of Auckland Council in 2010), turnout has been stable at between 42 and 44%. This represents a fall in total turnout of approximately 14 percentage points since 1989.

Over the same period, turnout in parliamentary elections has fallen by 6.5 percentage points. The current gap between turnout for parliamentary elections and local authority elections is approximately 36 percentage points. This gap has grown by three percentage points since 1992.

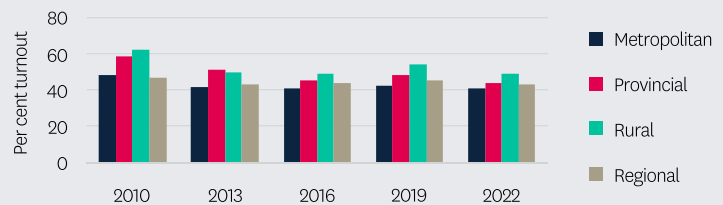
FIGURE 1 VOTER TURNOUT IN NATIONAL AND LOCAL ELECTIONS 1989-2023





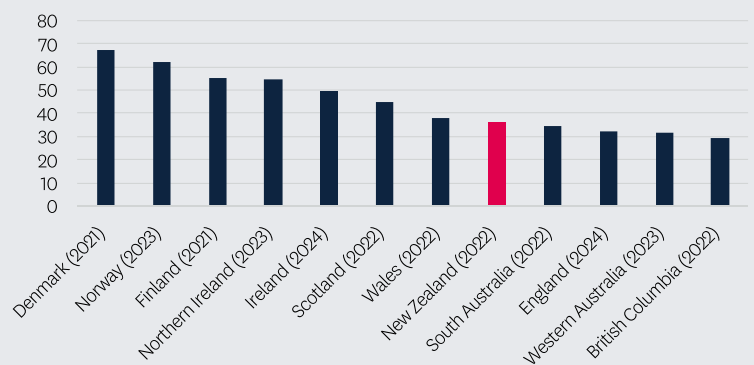
Turnout varies significantly between councils, ranging in 2022 from under 30% to over 60%. Turnout tends to be higher in smaller and rural councils than larger and urban councils. Turnout is also higher in those councils where councillors represent a small number of residents.

FIGURE 2 TURNOUT BY COUNCIL TYPE



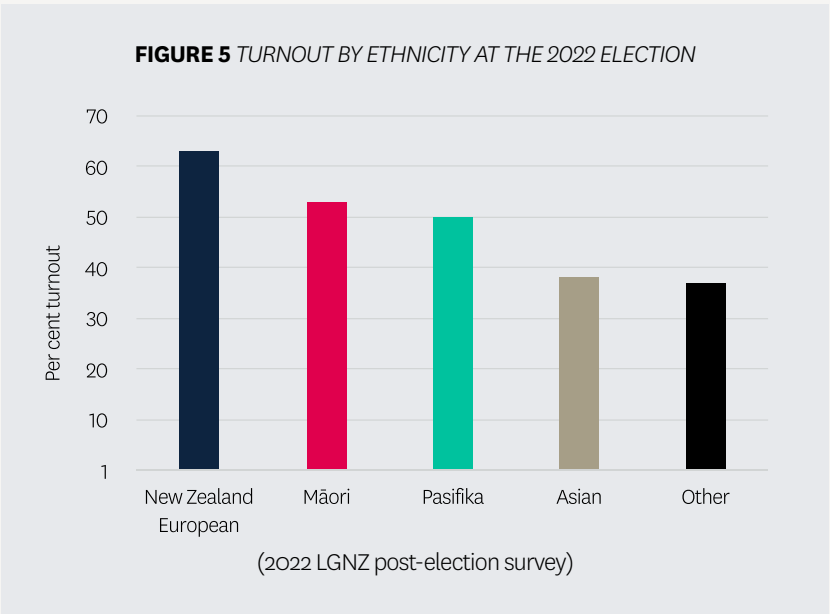
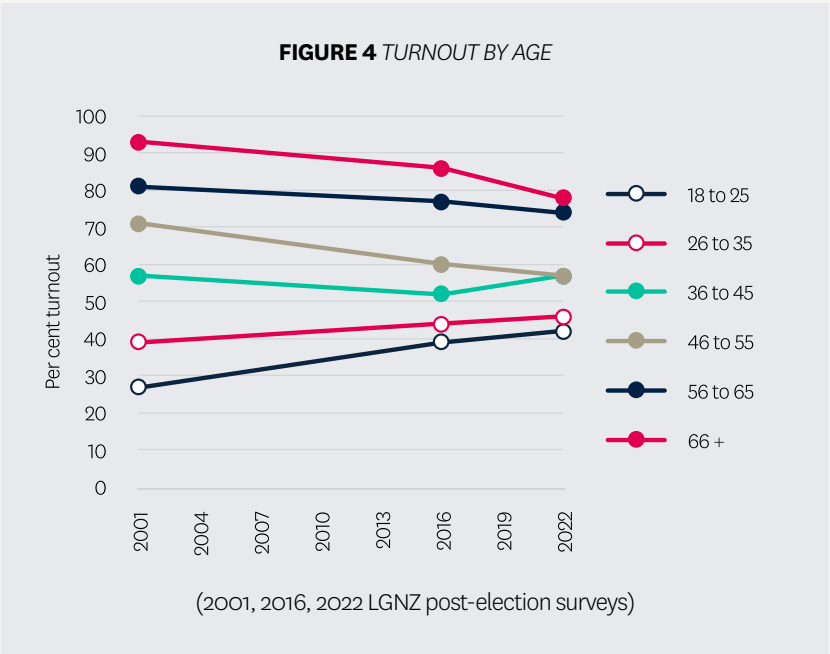
When compared to similar countries, voter turnout in New Zealand councils is close to the middle. It's well below countries like Norway, Denmark, and Iceland, where local governments have traditionally had a greater role with more autonomy. However, turnout in local elections is declining even in those countries.

FIGURE 3 TURNOUT AT LAST LOCAL ELECTIONS



Who votes?

Post-election surveys suggest that voters in local elections are more likely to be: women than men; older or retired (although the proportion of voters under 45 is increasing while over 45 is gradually decreasing); from the South Island; have lived at the same address for 10 years or more. European or Pākehā are more likely to vote than those who identify as Māori, who are then more likely to vote than those who identify as Pasifika, with the lowest participation rate being people who identify as Asian.



Why people don't vote

The Horizon Research nationwide survey following the 2022 local elections found that the most common reasons for not voting were that people did not know enough about the candidates (31%) and their policies (26%) and could not work out who to vote for (22%). Another 11% of non-voters said that they did not vote because they did not receive voting papers.

Auckland Council's 2022 demographic study on turnout noted several possible causes of not voting:

- > Perceived relevance of local government to everyday life
- > Family and work commitments and an inability to pay attention to local politics in light of other life priorities
- > Differences in the level of exposure to civics education
- > Complexity of the local government system and voting process, along with differences in knowledge about local government across communities
- > For some communities, a lack of identification with and ability to see one's identity reflected in the local governance system
- > A distrust of and disengagement from the local government system, particularly amongst Māori
- > The existence of a social norm of non-voting in some families, neighbourhoods and communities.

ISSUE 1:

The public's understanding of local government and why it's important >

Supporting and promoting active citizenship

The civics education that's part of compulsory education needs to better support an understanding of how local government works, what it does, and why it is important. While the curriculum currently enables this to be taught, practical steps need to be taken to strengthen and improve its delivery. In particular, resources that enable learners and their teachers to support civics education need to be higher quality and more accessible. The Department of Internal Affairs has a role in ensuring this, and should work with key partners to develop, distribute and maintain practical resources that support practical learning. They should also regularly measure and report on the public's understanding of local government. Ensuring that enrolment of 17- and 18-year-olds occurs at school is an important complement to civics education.

There is a need to better support civics education for people outside of compulsory education. There are many organisations supporting target demographics such as new migrants and Māori. Better quality and more accessible resources would also benefit them.

For civics education to be effective, councils need to keep providing engaging, real opportunities for young people to participate and be heard in order to promote active citizenship. Recognising this engagement through NCEA credits could incentivise it.

Recommendation

/01:

The Local Government Act 2002 should be amended to require the Secretary for Local Government to support public understanding of how local government works and how it affects people's lives.

Recommendation

/02:

Councils should expand on their work to engage with schools to demonstrate how local government works, including how young people can be involved and expand on opportunities for young people to participate and be heard in decisions that affect them.

How councils communicate their value

Every day, councils engage with communities on a wide range of issues. These interactions present opportunities to communicate councils' wider value to communities. While all councils take some advantage of this, more could be done. Engagement is most effective when councils also focus on performance improvement and transparency.

The Local Government Act's current processes for engagement and accountability, particularly the consultation requirements for the Long-term Plan and other significant decisions, are prescriptive and cumbersome, and can present a barrier to good-quality engagement that fits the unique needs and preferences of communities. The Government's work on performance reporting presents an opportunity to improve this aspect of the Local Government Act.

If communities see themselves more in councils' decisions, they are more likely to appreciate councils' value. This approach also aligns with localism, and many councils employ localism approaches in the ways they engage with communities, such as with participatory decision making. Community boards generally have a higher turnout, which could demonstrate the impact of localism. Some of these approaches, and examples of councils employing them, are described in LGNZ's Localism: A practical guide (<https://www.localism.nz/localism-guide/>).

A national focal point could support and amplify local work to communicate the value councils offer communities.

Recommendation

/03:

Central government should work with local government to reform the prescriptive Local Government Act consultation requirements on how councils plan and engage to give councils more flexibility to support best-practice engagement with and accountability to communities.

Recommendation

/04:

Councils should maximise all of their current opportunities to communicate what they do and its value, and expand their use of localism approaches.

Recommendation

/05:

LGNZ, together with the Minister of Local Government, the Department of Internal Affairs and councils should create an annual Local Government Week where councils showcase what they do, where their investment goes, and why local government matters.

Addressing the decline of local media

The traditional model of journalism is caving under pressure. Print advertising has shifted online and away from mainstream media businesses, gutting revenue. This has driven decline in local media, which presents a threat to local democracy. While central government funding is no panacea, investment in the Local Democracy Reporting scheme has ensured those communities receive local government news. Local media could be supported in a range of ways, including initiatives that encourage other local media providers to start up or that directly support existing local media providers.

Recommendation

/06:

The Government should retain the Local Democracy Reporting scheme, and improve on it by:

- > Extending coverage to areas where commercial media companies no longer cover local government; and
- > Committing to a three-year funding cycle to attract and retain capable staff and unlock private co-investment.



ISSUE 2:

Understanding candidates and their policies >

Information on candidates

Voters need to be provided with better information on who is standing for election, what they stand for, and what they hope to achieve if elected. There are challenges in moderating such information while maintaining neutrality, so outside of current prohibitions on objectionable or defamatory language it should be the role of voters, supported by media and public interest organisations, to test these statements.

Neutral third parties, such as policy.nz, have played an important role in supplying candidate information to voters. However, it can be challenging to obtain candidate contact information, photographs, and biographies from electoral officers, and this challenge should be resolved. Protecting the privacy of candidate contact information is understandable given recent safety concerns for candidates, but should not prevent this information from being shared with reputable organisations for a clear election-related purpose.

While a political endorsement may help voters understand a candidate's views, candidates should not be required to state current or previous political affiliations.

Recommendation

/07:

Councils, or the Electoral Commission if it becomes the administrator of local elections, should be required by the Local Electoral Act to provide and maintain a website (directly or by contracting to a third party) that would give every candidate the opportunity to provide (as part of the nomination process):

- > A 150-word biography and current photograph (as per the current candidate booklet);
- > Answers to four standard questions on policy views and priorities (with a 600-word limit across all answers). These questions must be set by a neutral body such as the Electoral Commission or in primary legislation; and
- > Links to candidate websites.

It would be useful if this website allowed for candidates to also provide a short video statement. A suggested maximum length is three minutes, and the video should be subtitled so it is accessible for hearing-impaired people.

Submissions from candidates should not be moderated, with the exception of objectionable or defamatory statements.

Recommendation

/08:

As a transition step to recommendation 7:

- > For elections before the introduction of the website, council electoral officers should be encouraged to provide candidate-supplied information to neutral third-party websites for the purposes of supporting better understanding of candidates; and
- > The Local Electoral Act should retain provision for the printed booklet with a 150-word candidate statement as long as required for the transition step to the website.

Decline of civic organisations and local media

The implications of local media decline have been covered earlier in this paper under issue one.

In-person or online ‘meet the candidate’ events help voters understand more about candidates. While some organisations organise these events to promote a specific viewpoint, politically neutral events are preferable if the objective is informed decision making by voters. The decline of neutral events needs to be addressed.

Recommendation

/09:

Councils should continue, or give consideration to, supporting ‘meet the candidate’ events, either by directly running them or by funding politically neutral organisations to do so, in order to provide the public with at least one opportunity to meet the candidates.

Candidate knowledge

Candidates who understand the office they are standing for can better communicate their positions on key issues and what they would achieve if elected. Training for candidates shouldn’t be compulsory, as it is in some places overseas, but it should be much more accessible and utilised by candidates. Councils and organisations such as LGNZ offer training, resources, and information sessions before elections. LGNZ’s “[pre-elected learning](#)” is particularly useful as it is freely available and broadly accessible.

Supporting candidates

Disabled candidates can face barriers to standing in local elections, and this should be addressed by central government in the same way as for central government elections.

There should not be state funding of candidates in local elections. However, local democracy in New Zealand would benefit from more private and philanthropic support for candidates from underrepresented groups. Initiatives like this exist in overseas democracies.

Candidates in Māori wards and constituencies face specific challenges from candidate spending limits based on population that do not take into account geographic area. A Māori ward or constituency could cover the area of several general wards or constituencies. Campaigning to dispersed populations is more expensive, effectively giving these candidates a lower spending limit than general ward or constituency candidates.

Recommendation

/10:

The Government should extend the Election Access Fund to candidates for local elections to address barriers faced by disabled people who want to stand.

Recommendation

/11:

The Government should address the anomaly faced by candidates in Māori wards and constituencies by reviewing part 5, subpart 2, of the Local Electoral Act, which is related to candidate expenditure limits.

ISSUE 3:

Voting methods >

Future method of voting

Given the challenges with the postal system, local elections should switch to a different voting method in the short-to-medium term (i.e. at the 2028 or 2031 elections). This method should be nationally consistent.

Given the significant concerns about online voting, local elections should instead use in-person voting. This should be as close an experience as possible to parliamentary elections. This means that there would be a two-week timeframe in which to vote with polling booths in venues where people frequently visit such as supermarkets and malls. There would be a simpler system of electronic voting from overseas, and appropriate accommodations for disabled voters.

This will be more expensive than postal voting. How this should be addressed is detailed in issue 4.

Recommendation

/12:

Move to a nationally consistent system of in-person voting for all local elections in 2028 that is as similar as possible to parliamentary elections over a two-week timeframe in which to vote, with polling booths in venues where people frequently visit.



Short-term improvements

In 2025, councils should continue their important work to support participation, particularly by investing appropriately in promoting standing and voting, and in offering alternative drop-off points such as 'orange bins' at supermarkets and drive-through drop-off points. 86% of voters used council alternatives to post boxes in the 2024 Tauranga City Council elections. Central government, through the Department of Internal Affairs, previously contributed financially to these initiatives.

If the 2028 elections do not shift away from postal voting, then there should be legislative changes that make it easier for people to vote from overseas, and to have voting papers reissued if they do not arrive.

Recommendation

/13:

Until a change in voting system is made, councils should continue to expand availability of alternative ballot drop-off points such as 'orange bins' at supermarkets and drive-through drop-off points, and central government should be encouraged to contribute to this financially.

Recommendation

/14:

The Local Electoral Act should be amended to enable overseas voters to use the same electronic voting approach as central government elections, and make it easier for voters to have voting papers reissued if they do not arrive.

ISSUE 4:

Administration and promotion of
elections >

Who is responsible

The Electoral Commission should administer and promote local elections. This would enable consistent investment across communities and use of the same branding to promote voting in both central and local elections (the 'orange man'). This would also benefit central government elections because the Commission would run elections more frequently, enabling their staff to have more recent experience delivering elections. Ideally the Electoral Commission would take up this role for the 2028 election. However, the transition could occur in stages with the Electoral Commission initially taking oversight of local elections, promotion, the candidate information website, regulation of electoral providers and management of complaint procedures.

To support delivery of this new role, the Electoral Commission Board would need to be required to collectively possess the appropriate skills, understanding and experience. At the same time, the Independent Electoral Review's recommendation that the Minister of Justice should be required to ensure that the board collectively has skills, experience and expertise in te Tiriti/the Treaty, te ao Māori, and tikanga Māori should be implemented in order to improve Māori electoral participation.

The Electoral Commission should also be required in legislation to consult with councils on significant decisions and as part of key processes. Determining councils' representation arrangements should remain locally decided, with the Local Government Commission retaining its oversight role.

Recommendation

/15:

The Government should amend the Electoral Act and Local Electoral Act to put the Electoral Commission in charge of administering and promoting local elections. This new role should come with the following requirements:

- > At least one member of the board of the Electoral Commission should possess knowledge and experience of local government and local elections;
- > The board should expand to at least five members; and (like similar appointments) Local Government New Zealand should be consulted by the Minister prior to this appointment;
- > The Electoral Commission should be required to engage with councils on key decisions and processes on the running of local elections; and
- > Local elections should utilise the same branding as central government elections, including the 'orange man'.

How should this be funded

In-person voting, as outlined in recommendation 12, will generate higher election costs than the present postal election system.

It would be unrealistic to expect central government to fund the total costs of local elections. This new role for the Electoral Commission should be funded by a levy on councils that recovers a proportion of the costs. This levy should be set in a transparent way that includes engagement with councils, and early enough so the levies can be considered at the appropriate time in the Annual Plan process. Given the national importance of thriving democratic institutions, and some communities' lack of ability to pay, central government should also invest in the running of local elections.

Recommendation

/16:

Funding for the Electoral Commission's new role should be covered in part by central government and in part by imposing a levy on councils. This levy should be set by Cabinet via secondary legislation and require consultation with local government.



ISSUE 5:

Four-year terms (including transition and implementation) >

Local government and central government should move to four-year electoral terms, and the upcoming referendum should cover both. Such a significant constitutional change should be decided by electors. If both parliament and local government don't make this change in parallel, then their elections would be out of sync. This means excluding local government from a shift to four-year parliamentary terms would be destabilising and confusing.

Relative timings of central and local elections

When moving to four-year terms for both central and local government, the respective elections should not be concurrent nor occur in the same year. Elections in the same year or at the same time would create administrative challenges (especially if the Electoral Commission was responsible for both). This would also risk important local issues being overshadowed by national issues.

The preferred option is for the respective elections to be spaced evenly (i.e. local and central elections should be two years apart from each other). This gives people an understandable pattern of elections, and spaces the elections so the Electoral Commission has time to deliver both. However, spacing elections a year apart, followed by a three-year gap, also has merit, given this maximises the productive period local and central governments have to work together.

Currently the maximum term of Parliament is set by the Constitution Act 1986 at three years from the day fixed for the return of the writs issued for the last election. This means central elections are at most about three years and two months apart. However, elections can be called at any time before this deadline. Early or snap elections would cause central and local elections to temporarily come out of alignment, and it could take many parliamentary terms before this timing would be reestablished. This challenge should be addressed by the legislation that implements a four-year term for central government.

Local elections are currently on fixed dates set in the Local Electoral Act. This should continue, but the date should be adjusted slightly for the 2028 elections and beyond to ensure the voting period avoids school holidays.

The transition to a four-year term for local government should start in 2028. Having one or two three-year terms for local government after 2028 may be required to achieve the desired spacing of local and central elections.

Recommendation**/17:**

Subject to a successful national referendum, local government and central government should move to a four-year term with elections evenly spaced apart, preferably two years apart.

Recommendation**/18:**

Section 10 of the Local Electoral Act should be amended so that the fixed election day avoids school holidays.

Relative timings of key policy processes and decisions

As part of the transition to a four-year term, key planning and accountability processes should move from a three-year cycle to a four-year cycle. This would mean, withstanding wider changes to the present system, a Long-term Plan would be developed every four years, with another Annual Plan being required in year four. Representation reviews should be required at least every eight years.

The Land Transport Management Act poses challenges in terms of the relative timings of key decisions and documents. This could be partially addressed by a four-year term with even spacing. However, this challenge should be specifically examined as part of implementing and transitioning to four-year terms for local and central government.

Recommendation**/19:**

Local government legislation should be amended as part of a transition to four-year terms to move key planning, accountability, and representation processes from a three-year cycle to a four-year cycle. These include the Long-term Plan, Regional Land Transport Plans, Regional Public Transport Plans, and Representation Reviews.

Enhanced accountability

A move to four-year terms should come with enhanced accountability because the key accountability measure of elections will apply less frequently.

Individual elected members' accountability generally sits with the Code of Conduct. The current Code of Conduct process has a limited number of sanctions, and applying these sanctions often requires the support of a majority of elected members.

Further, currently Code of Conduct processes are often used inappropriately or for conflict that could be better addressed by a range of interventions before they escalate. Conflict or Code of Conduct issues should be triaged and while several organisations provide support in managing challenges, there would be significant benefits from a more formally established dispute resolution service. This service would support professional standards, provide alternative resolution pathways and early intervention to avoid escalation where possible. These are the hallmarks of modern conflict resolution systems where issues should be resolved as close to the source of the conflict as possible. Comprehensive training and support, and embedding the set of professional standards are essential for this approach.

Where, however, an issue does require escalation, the Code of Conduct process should be strengthened by introducing stronger penalties for significant breaches. While councils would retain a role around resolving and addressing most Code of Conduct complaints, investigations and application of penalties for significant breaches should sit independently from the council and the government. Given its expertise and composition (which could be strengthened if need be to meet this extended brief), this role should be fulfilled by the Local Government Commission. This would be similar to the power of the Auditor-General to prosecute elected members for breaches of the Local Authorities (Members' Interests) Act 1968, which, if successful, automatically removes them from office. Alongside this, members can also be removed from office by ceasing to be registered or able to be registered as an elector, or by being convicted of an offence punishable by a term of imprisonment of two years or more. Removal of an elected member from office is a significant sanction and should have a high bar applied, with appropriate due process, and be subject to strong checks. These thresholds need to be carefully defined and reviewed over time. To carry out this enlarged role, particularly around investigating significant breaches of a Code of Conduct, the Local Government Commission will require increased funding from central government.

The current powers of the Minister to assist and intervene are not relevant here because they relate to councils as a whole rather than individual elected members, so act as a different accountability mechanism from elections. Recall elections are not supported. These can be very expensive, disruptive and, where they are in place, tend to be highly politicised, which would negatively affect how elected members carry out their roles.

Recommendation

/20:

The Local Government Act should be amended to strengthen the Code of Conduct process by:

- > Requiring the Local Government Commission to, in consultation with councils, develop and maintain a standard Code of Conduct that all councils would be required to adopt and adhere to;
- > Empowering the Local Government Commission to investigate complaints relating to significant breaches;
- > Implementing increased penalties for breaches, including suspension or fines, and empowering the Local Government Commission to apply these when it determines a significant breach by an elected member, with the penalty being proportionate to the breach and based on principles in the legislation;
- > The Local Government Commission should also have the power to remove a member of local government for serious breaches. This recommendation must be made unanimously by the members of the Local Government Commission and endorsed by the Minister of Local Government, with no resulting prohibition from standing in a by-election or any subsequent election; and
- > Central government should invest in an independent dispute resolution service for local elected members to triage issues, and where possible pre-empt costly escalation.

Recommendations >

Issue 1: The public's understanding of local government and why it's important

Recommendation 1: The Local Government Act 2002 should be amended to require the Secretary for Local Government to support public understanding of how local government works and how it affects people's lives.

Recommendation 2: Councils should expand on their work to engage with schools to demonstrate how local government works, including how young people can be involved and expand on opportunities for young people to participate and be heard in decisions that affect them.

Recommendation 3: Central government should work with local government to reform the prescriptive Local Government Act consultation requirements on how councils plan and engage to give councils more flexibility to support best-practice engagement with and accountability to communities.

Recommendation 4: Councils should maximise all of their current opportunities to communicate what they do and its value, and expand their use of localism approaches.

Recommendation 5: LGNZ, together with the Minister of Local Government, the Department of Internal Affairs and councils should create an annual Local Government Week where councils showcase what they do, where their investment goes, and why local government matters.

Recommendation 6: The Government should retain the Local Democracy Reporting scheme, and improve on it by:

- > Extending coverage to areas where commercial media companies no longer cover local government; and
- > Committing to a three-year funding cycle to attract and retain capable staff and unlock private co-investment.

Issue 2: Understanding candidates and their policies

Recommendation 7: Councils, or the Electoral Commission if it becomes the administrator of local elections, should be required by the Local Electoral Act to provide and maintain a website (directly or by contracting to a third party) that would give every candidate the opportunity to provide (as part of the nomination process):

- > A 150-word biography and current photograph (as per the current candidate booklet);
- > Answers to four standard questions on policy views and priorities (with a 600-word limit across all answers). These questions must be set by a neutral body such as the Electoral Commission or in primary legislation; and
- > Links to candidate websites.

It would be useful if this website allowed for candidates to also provide a short video statement. A suggested maximum length is three minutes, and the video should be subtitled so it is accessible for hearing-impaired people.

Submissions from candidates should not be moderated, with the exception of objectional or defamatory statements.

Recommendation 8: As a transition step to recommendation 7:

- > For elections before the introduction of the website, council electoral officers should be encouraged to provide candidate-supplied information to neutral third-party websites for the purposes of supporting better understanding of candidates; and
- > The Local Electoral Act should retain provision for the printed booklet with a 150-word candidate statement, with the need for this to be reviewed after two elections following the introduction of the website.

Recommendation 9: Councils should continue, or give consideration to, supporting ‘meet the candidate’ events, either by directly running them or by funding politically neutral organisations to do so, in order to provide the public with at least one opportunity to meet the candidates.

Recommendation 10: The Government should extend the Election Access Fund to candidates for local elections to address barriers faced by disabled people who want to stand.

Recommendation 11: Government should address the anomaly faced by candidates in Māori wards and constituencies by reviewing part 5, subpart 2, of the Local Electoral Act, which is related to candidate expenditure limits.

Issue 3: Voting methods

Recommendation 12: Move to a nationally consistent system of in-person voting for all local elections in 2028 that is as similar as possible to parliamentary elections over a two-week timeframe in which to vote, with polling booths in venues where people frequently visit.

Recommendation 13: Until a change in the voting system is made, councils should continue to expand availability of alternative ballot drop-off points such as 'orange bins' at supermarkets and drive-through drop-off points, and central government should be encouraged to contribute to this financially.

Recommendation 14: The Local Electoral Act should be amended to enable overseas voters to use the same electronic voting approach as central government elections, and make it easier for voters to have voting papers reissued if they do not arrive.

Issue 4: Administration and promotion of elections

Recommendation 15: The Government should amend the Electoral Act and Local Electoral Act to put the Electoral Commission in charge of administering and promoting local elections. This new role should come with the following requirements:

- > At least one member of the board of the Electoral Commission should possess knowledge and experience of local government and local elections;
- > The board should expand to at least five members; and (like similar appointments) Local Government New Zealand should be consulted by the Minister prior to this appointment;
- > The Electoral Commission should be required to engage with councils on key decisions and processes on the running of local elections; and
- > Local elections should utilise the same branding as central government elections, including the 'orange man'.

Recommendation 16: Funding for the Electoral Commission's new role should be covered in part by central government and in part by imposing a levy on councils. This levy should be set by Cabinet via secondary legislation and require consultation with local government.

Issue 5: Four-year terms (including transition and implementation)

Recommendation 17: Subject to a successful national referendum, local government and central government should move to a four-year term with elections evenly spaced apart, preferably two years apart.

Recommendation 18: Section 10 of the Local Electoral Act should be amended so that the fixed election day avoids school holidays.

Recommendation 19: Local government legislation should be amended as part of a transition to four-year terms to move key planning, accountability, and representation processes from a three-year cycle to a four-year cycle. These include the Long-term Plans, Regional Land Transport Plans, Regional Public Transport Plans, and Representation Reviews.

Recommendation 20: The Local Government Act should be amended to strengthen the Code of Conduct process by:

- > Requiring the Local Government Commission to, in consultation with councils, develop and maintain a standard Code of Conduct that all councils would be required to adopt and adhere to;
- > Empowering the Local Government Commission to investigate complaints relating to significant breaches;
- > Implementing increased penalties for breaches, including suspension or fines, and empowering the Local Government Commission to apply these when it determines a significant breach by an elected member, with the penalty being proportionate to the breach and based on principles in the legislation;
- > The Local Government Commission should also have the power to remove a member of local government for serious breaches. This recommendation must be made unanimously by the members of the Local Government Commission and endorsed by the Minister of Local Government, with no resulting prohibition from standing in a by-election or any subsequent election; and
- > Central government should invest in an independent dispute resolution service for local elected members to triage issues, and where possible pre-empt costly escalation.

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