

11 December 2024

LGNZ Electoral Reform Working Group
Justice Committee
Parliament Buildings
WELLINGTON 6160

Tēnā koutou

Kāpiti Coast District Council: Submission on the Electoral Reform

Thank you for providing this opportunity to input into the issues paper on electoral reform. The Kāpiti Coast District Council (Council) agrees that it is timely to examine the issues covered by the paper, and note as an opening remark how well the paper presents issues for discussion, and the supporting engagement undertaken to facilitate discussion on this important topic.

In regards to the primary focus of the reform, Council:

- Notes that declining voter engagement is a world-wide issue. With that in mind, it would be valuable for the proposal to set an achievable endpoint for these reforms, and a clear view of what a better electoral system for local government looks like agreed sector-wide, and vigorously and unanimously lobbied to central government.
- While the proposal is comprehensive, Council also notes that the potential for mandatory voting has also not been canvassed and would be supportive of it been included in the proposal, if it could be a potential mechanism to support improved outcomes.

Our more specific feedback on the proposal follows.

Summary

1. Council agrees:
 - New Zealand's local government electoral system could be reformed to better engage local communities in voting for governance representation for their districts
 - That at a time when more traditional ways of communicating with constituencies is becoming problematic, local government, in conjunction with central government and community partners, needs to be innovative in engaging voters and communities:
 - that they may better understand what local government is about, and
 - better understand candidates and their policies to support informed voting.
 - That new and innovative ways need to be explored for the administration of local government elections, in partnership with the Electoral Commission

2. That the local government electoral term should change to four years and elections occur the year prior to the central government elections to maximise opportunities for synergy in planning and investment between local and central government.

The Kāpiti context

3. Voter turnout for the 2022 local body elections for the Kāpiti Coast District Council was 45.1% of eligible voters. District voter turnout has, as a percentage of eligible voters steadily declined in line with national trends, even as the district's population has increased. Turnout has steadily trended downwards from 46.44% in 2019, and 47.92% in 2013.
4. During various discussions on local body elections, our elected members have shared commentary they have received from their constituents around voter participation. Comments include:
 - a. The public not having enough information on who the candidates are and what policies they represent and being unsure about who to vote for in the local body elections.
 - b. The public not wanting to stand for local body vacancies due to not understanding the context and extent of the role or not being able to undertake the role due to personal circumstances (either financial or family related). In this district, this has led to some areas only receiving enough nominations to fill the vacancies, with candidates elected unopposed.
 - c. The public not participating in the democratic process (both decision-making and voting) due to whānau and work commitments and therefore an inability to pay attention to local politics in light of other priorities.
5. These comments echo the points raised in your issues paper, supporting the timeliness of this review.

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

A need to increase civic education:

6. For the community to have a better understanding of local government and the importance of participating in local democratic processes, electing local government representatives and supporting decision-making through engagement, more civic education programmes are required. Council considers that these programmes should be run by either a community-based organisation with the support of, or in partnership with, a central government agency and councils.
7. It would be difficult for councils to fund and resource these programmes under the current financial model that councils operate under, with the cost falling fully on general rates which are already under severe pressure. At present, any civic education activities around democratic participation are relegated to websites and online channels. There is limited budget available to support external groups and organisations to offer civic education-based programmes. Due to this councils often revert to a compliance approach, meeting the minimum standards required under legislation.
8. Council would also support any strengthening of civics education in our schools and curriculum, to better engage our young people and prepare them for more robust involvement in democratic processes, including in local government.

Restricted access and changing media formats:

9. While opportunities exist to offer civic education through volunteer groups and/or increasing content on online platforms and through digital means, the same financial and

resourcing constraints exist at a time of declining options in local news media outlets. This is particularly pernicious in smaller and rural communities, where the local paper is still a source of important information. For example, as of January 2025, Kāpiti will no longer have a community newspaper.

10. Councils, therefore, may need to increase their social media presence including more targeted communication through various channels (such as Instagram, TikTok and Facebook) to remain visible and relevant over coming decades. For the near future, while these channels provide further opportunities for outreach, they provide poor access points for the elderly, economically disadvantaged, and those with disabilities, for whom accessing the modern digital world can be a challenge.
11. With its very high percentage of residents over the age of 65, this is a persistent and increasing problem here in Kāpiti and one Council is looking to address through its age-friendly approach to doing business.

Issue 2: Understanding candidates and their policies

Using community networks to create awareness with the community:

12. For the community to be able to gather information on candidates and their policy positions, councils should consider partnering with community-based organisations to organise 'meet the candidate' sessions and debate forums. Providing this is done through careful arrangements to balance the requirements for political neutrality under the principles of the Local Electoral Act 2001 (LEA) Councils can usefully partner with these organisations to provide civic education by supporting them with resources.
13. In addition, a centralised platform for providing candidate information to voters, as set up for the 2023 central government elections, could also be set up for local body elections. To ensure the political neutrality of councils is maintained, the stewardship of the platform should be provided by a central government body or agency.

Allowing more information in candidate statement to support informed choices:

14. Consideration should also be given to amend the legislative framework to allow for more information to be included in the candidate statements booklet. Currently the information that the Electoral Officer can include in candidate statement booklets is limited to 150 words and does not provide voters with a valuable overview of the candidate's positions or perspectives. There is opportunity here to link these statements to a fuller summary of the candidate's position through using the online portal suggested above.

Using and leveraging sector channels:

15. Sector agencies like Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ) could work with councils to improve their communication campaigns on how to stand for local body public office and what the role entails. Council understands that LGNZ, through its online learning platform, Ākona, are looking to step into this space. Council fully supports this.

Issue 3: Voting methods

Use of flexible and voting options:

16. Using the method of postal delivery as a primary mechanism to deliver local body election material to voters is unsustainable and needs to change. Increased postal charges (100% price increase from NZ Post between 2022 and 2025, with DX expected to follow) have put significant cost pressures on councils just as other costs for running elections are escalating. Postal delivery times are also slowing, and constituents often signal that they have not received voting documents which means special votes have to be issued by staff.

17. Council supports exploring online voting options provided online voting can be delivered without security concerns. However, given the current risks associated with this mechanism and the long lead in time for setting it up, Council would advocate that booth, and in-person voting be considered as voting mechanisms. This would align local body elections with central government elections and leverage the familiarity voters have with the mechanism.
18. While this will not significantly reduce costs, as the costs of setting up and staffing booths are also significant, this familiarity may support more votes being cast and received. Setting up poll booths in easy to access locations (such as malls and community venues) will invite voters through convenience and opportunity, to vote while out taking care of other errands. This may also capture those who in the past have forgotten to cast their vote (i.e. they have completed their voting forms but never posted it), given access to mail collection boxes has diminished over time.
19. However, Council acknowledges that using voter boxes to collect votes may be more resource intensive for councils, at least for the initial collection.
20. Whatever mix of voting options are taken forward, the voting method used for local body elections must be nationally consistent to ensure voters are not confused, especially where they are participating in multiple territorial authority elections. If national consistency cannot be achieved, then the methods used should at least be consistent within regions to ensure regional councils and territorial authorities are using the same method.

Issue 4: Administration and promotion of elections

Limited options for managing local body elections:

21. There are currently only two service providers to manage local body elections in New Zealand: Independent Election Services Limited and ElectionsNZ.com. The competition in the market is low and councils do not have many options when deciding who to partner with. In the past, councils have generally administered elections in-house but due to increased external pressures and the growing number of voters and therefore votes to process, more and more councils have not been able to sustain in-house management of elections. During the pandemic, an additional concern around the safety of community volunteers that have traditionally helped with vote counting, has led to councils' deciding to outsource the management of their elections.
22. Within an environment of increasing complexity around elections and increasing expectations to reverse the voter turnout decline, councils are struggling to retain sufficient in-house expertise, to carry out the electoral administration process. Once the management of elections has been contracted out, it can also be difficult to rebuild in-house expertise considering the special competencies of an electoral officer, especially in governance roles where there is a high staff turnover and recruitment campaigns are not always successful.

Benefits from the use of the Electoral Commission:

23. Further to the above, the LEA stipulates that elections are to be managed independently from the elected body to ensure the process is politically neutral and unbiased. It is Council's view that this can more easily be achieved by either outsourcing the responsibility or by the Electoral Commission taking on the management of local body elections, with the latter option providing the most independence.
24. Consideration should therefore be given to the option where the Electoral Commission takes over the management of local body elections in the same way that that body

manages central government elections. Voters are familiar with central government elections processes, and it is confusing to engage in a different process for local body elections. This option could also streamline promotional and administrative expenditure and ensure all elections are conducted consistently across New Zealand.

25. The Electoral Commission would be able to promote local body elections in a consistent manner using a variation of the “orange guy” promotional material which is well established for central government elections, and voters would recognise the messaging. To ensure a link with councils is in place, the Commission could partner with on-site deputy electoral officers to ensure the local perspective is not lost and additional communications material can be tailored to each council. Currently, council spend on local body elections is about 25% of that spent by the Commission on the national elections. While noting this, using the Electoral Commission as a collective and centralised approach for local body elections should provide efficiencies and reduce overall costs.
26. Considering there are only two service providers, the Electoral Commission would also provide a better business continuity model to current arrangements.

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

Local elections every four years, preceding national election:

27. New Zealand’s local government term is at the shorter end of term-lengths, with comparable OECD nations having at least a four-year term. Council considers introducing a four-year term is the preferable option, especially if the central government term is adjusted to four years, as is being considered. The three-year term does not provide councils with enough time to give effect to their ideas, policies and strategies that representatives have campaigned on, and does not give councillors the time to see the results of the implementation come to fruition. Increasing the term length will lengthen the productivity window, enable better delivery of plans, policies and strategies, and decrease the risk of frequent direction changes while still balancing holding representatives to account.
28. Council supports option one with respect to term length and timing, with central and local government elections held one year apart, preferably with the local government election a year ahead of the central government election. This alignment would provide greater programme stability and increase opportunities for the development and alignment of planning and strategic delivery and partnership between local and central government.
29. With the Infrastructure Commission also consulting on how, as a country, we better align our infrastructure processes and spend, aligning electoral cycles in this way could be a first step-wise system change in achieving this. However, to fully reap any benefits from achieving this alignment, central government would need to run multi-year budgets in the same way that local government is required to. Local government elections occurring first would avoid voter fatigue that can result after the national election.

Support for booth sharing for central and local elections:

30. As noted under Issue 3, this Council supports using the same voting method in both local and central government elections to optimise costs and resource requirements. However, we oppose concurrent voting which could lead to voter fatigue, confusion as to who and what each vote is covering and could lead to local government elections becoming more politicised along party lines. Council sees this as a significant deficit to local democracy. The strength of local democracy is in local representation attuned to local needs and priorities.

Additional benefits in aligning planning processes with election cycles:

31. If electoral terms and timings were to be aligned, there would be a significant opportunity to line up council and central government planning processes in service delivery and capital infrastructure spend. This could facilitate processes like the national, regional and local land transport plans, and may also help to bring resource management planning arrangements together to better support efficiency. Long-term plans, supporting infrastructure, and financial strategies would also need to be aligned. It would also be appropriate to align the Representation Review processes prescribed in legislation with the political term.
32. To address the accountability issues raised, the current measures in place including the ministerial powers to assist and intervene and the council codes of conduct are considered appropriate vehicles to hold councils to account over a longer electoral term. Council supports the establishment of an external body or stewardship agency as proposed through the Review. The Future for Local Government, as an additional appropriate vehicle to ensure elected members are held to account, and ratepayers and residents enjoy effective governance.

Conclusion

33. We thank the Working Group for considering our submission, and look forward to the Working Group's analysis of submissions and draft Position Paper.

Nāku, nā



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