



16 April 2025

Electoral Reform Working Group
Local Government New Zealand

By email: electoralreform@lgnz.co.nz

Tēnā Koe,

Rangitikei District Council feedback on the Local Electoral Reform Draft Position Paper

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Local Electoral Reform Draft Position Paper. We have provided our feedback following the format of the recommendations in the report.

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

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 impacts people's lives.

Council is supportive of requiring the Secretary for Local Government to support public understanding of how local government works and how it impacts people's lives. We note that one of the difficulties we face is that candidates do not understand the roles and responsibilities of being an elected member.

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.

Council supports offering education to schools to inform young people on how local government works. However, we note the challenges of school education are vast and that this should be an offer rather than a legislative requirement.

3. Central government should work with local government to reform Local Government Act requirements on how councils plan and engage to ensure this achieves best-practice engagement with and accountability to communities.

Council supports a joint approach with Central government. We note the shared role and common purpose of servicing New Zealanders.

4. Councils should fully capitalise on all their current processes to communicate what they do and its value, and expand their use of localism approaches so that communities see themselves in the decisions made.

Council supports continuing to expand communication of our role. We note that there is already great work being undertaken in this space by our organisation and others in the sector.

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.

Council supports the concept of joint promotion of an annual Local Government Week. Timing of the week would be important with consideration given to timing in relation to elections and long term planning processes.

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.*

Council would like to see as extensive reporting as possible, however, Council should not be the sole funder.

Issue 2: Understanding candidates and their policies

7. 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 (as per the current candidate booklet);*
- *Answers to four or five standard questions on policy views and priorities (with a 500-word limit across all answers). These questions could 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.*

Council agrees that it would be useful to have a website, but suggests this should be a centralised platform. We note 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. It is important that submissions from candidates should not be moderated, with the exception of objectionable or defamatory statements.

It would be useful to have answers to 4-5 standard questions. Which neutral body would make those questions would need to be considered.

8. As a transition step to recommendation 7:

- *For elections before the introduction 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 being reviewed after two elections after the introductions of the website.*

Council supports this 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.

Council believes meet the candidate events are important, but Council’s role should be limited to publicising the events. It is important that Council remains politically neutral and independent throughout the elections period and holding these sessions creates a high risk of unintentional bias.

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.

Council supports this 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 concerns candidate expenditure limits.

Council supports this recommendation.

Issue 3: Voting methods

12. Move to a nationally consistent system of in-person voting for all local elections 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. Preferably by the 2028 local elections or the 2031 local elections at the latest.

Council supports the move to in-person voting, noting that this needs to be a duration of two weeks. We suggest this move should be nationally funded in the same way central government elections are funded.

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 government should be encouraged to contribute to this financially.

Council supports this recommendation.

14. If we do not shift away from postal voting in 2028, then 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.

Council has concerns about the security risks associated with electronic voting, therefore we do not support this recommendation. We also note the potential inequity providing this option to overseas voters where there are other sectors that may also benefit from online voting as an option.

Issue 4: Administration and promotion of elections

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'*

Council supports this 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.

Council does not support this recommendation and suggests Government should pay as the principal funder.

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

17. Local government and central government should move to a four-year term with elections spaced two years apart.

Council supports this recommendation.

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

Council supports this 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.

Council supports this recommendation.

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

- *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*

Council supports changes to the code of conduct. We wish to highlight the need for councillors to be actively engaged with their communities, for example we would not support the situation where a councillor is overseas for a long period of time and engaging in meetings online.

We support the introduction of an independent dispute resolution serviced for local elected members to triage issues and generally support the Local Government Commission being provided with greater powers.

Ngā mihi



Andy Watson
Mayor of the Rangitikei