

ONLINE VOTING TRIAL – FINAL DECISION AS TO PARTICIPATION

Department: Civic

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The Dunedin City Council has expressed its interest in participating in the online voting trial proposed for the 2016 local elections. An indication has now been given of the final costs and on the functional requirements for the trial that had proved of concern to many of the local authorities that had considered participating. This report seeks the Council's final decision as to whether it now wishes to confirm its participation in the trial given the likely cost of \$165,000.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Council:

- a) **Decides** whether it wishes to continue to participate in the online voting trial, noting that the estimate of the likely additional cost is \$165,000.

BACKGROUND

2. The Local Electoral Act 2001 and the Local Electoral Regulations 2001 together provide the framework for the running of elections. Currently, under that framework, local authorities all choose to carry out their elections by postal voting.
3. In recent years, local authorities have requested that online voting be allowed as a voting method for local elections. Online voting refers to the form of voting where an elector is able to vote using the internet remotely and unsupervised by officials, on the voter's own device. The technology to allow this to happen has been available for some time. In the past voters have often asked whether they can cast their votes online in accordance with many other services now available electronically.
4. The adoption of online voting is likely to have a number of advantages including assisting to engage sectors of the population that traditionally have not participated, making voting faster and easier for electors, reducing the number of informal votes and voting errors, improving the voting process for those with disabilities and allowing easier participation by those overseas during the election period.

DISCUSSION

5. In December 2014, the Government agreed in principle to trialling online voting alongside postal voting, as long as local government had demonstrated that voting technology could be used in a way that meets the requirements of the Act and security expectations. Earlier this year the Government released a framework to enable a limited number of territorial authorities to trial online voting in local elections in 2016. If the trial is successful, all local authorities would be required to provide on-line voting from the 2019 Local Elections.
6. A meeting was held with interested local authorities in June 2015 to discuss the functional requirements for the proposed trial that had been released by the

government. At that meeting a number of the requirements were considered to cause cost and/or logistical difficulties by those wishing to be involved. Since the June meeting a group has been seeking a change in the functional requirements that an online voting system must comply with.

7. These matters were considered by the Council at its meeting of 29 June 2015, where the following resolution was passed:

It was moved (Wilson/MacTavish):

"That the Council:

- a) **Confirms its continued interest in being part of the online voting trial.**
 - b) **Notes the provisos relating to costs of participation and the requirements for participation and the ability to withdraw at a later date if necessary."**
8. There were three key provisions that local authorities sought to either amend or remove in the functional requirements. Of these, two of the changes have been made. However, the issue whereby an elector must have their ID and access code by two separate transactions remains and this requirement adds cost to any online voting process.
9. Further, the government requires that participating local authorities fund the trial themselves. Advice has been received from the Council's elections service provider, electionz.com, that the estimated costs of participation in the trial would cost Dunedin \$165,000 in total. This cost may be able to be shared with the Otago Regional Council and Southern District Health Board under the election cost allocation formula although, at this stage those discussions have not been held.
10. If the Southern District Health Board and the Otago Regional Council both agree to sharing the costs then the Council's share of the additional cost would be approximately \$90,000 (based on the cost allocation formula).
11. The timelines for the remainder of the process are:
- Councils now need to confirm their intention to participate in the online voting trial.
 - The Cabinet decision on which councils will be permitted to be part of the trial is likely to be made in late September 2015.
 - The Cabinet decision on whether or not a trial will proceed is expected to be made in early December 2015.
12. Thirteen councils initially expressed interest in being involved in the trial: Christchurch City, Dunedin City, Hamilton City, Horowhenua District, Marlborough District, Masterton District, Matamata-Piako District, Palmerston North City, Porirua City, Rotorua Lakes Council, Selwyn District, Wellington City and Whanganui District.
13. At the time of preparing this report, Selwyn District, Masterton District, Rotorua Lakes Council, Matamata-Piako District, Whanganui District, Palmerston North City, Porirua City and Wellington City have all confirmed their participation in the trial.
14. Hamilton City Council, Horowhenua District Council and Christchurch City Council have decided that they no longer wish to participate in the trial. Marlborough is in the process of considering its participation with Dunedin being the last potential participant to make a decision.

15. The government will make the final selection of trial participants and is likely to be looking for a mix of local authorities of different sizes, rural/urban, territorial/unitary and FPP/STV voting systems.

OPTIONS

16. Given that the requirements for participation have now been confirmed, and the costs of participation more clearly determined, Council has the opportunity to consider if it wishes to continue to participate or withdraw from the trial.

Option One – Indicate Continued Interest in Participating in the Online Voting Trial

17. The Council could indicate its continued interest in participating in the online trial noting that participation is not guaranteed and the government will make the final selection of trial participants.

Advantages (if Dunedin chosen as a participating Council)

- Ability to be at the forefront of trialling a new means of democratic participation.
- Possible increase in voter turnout if voters embrace the opportunity to participate.
- Potential opportunity to engage sectors of the population that traditionally have not participated.
- Faster and easier voting for electors.
- Reduction in the number of informal votes and voting errors.
- Improvement in the voting process for those with disabilities.
- Easier participation for those overseas during the election period.

Disadvantages (if Dunedin chosen as a participating Council)

- Increased cost for the 2016 election (estimated to be between \$90,000 and \$165,000). This cost is currently unbudgeted and will need to be provided for in the 2016/17 elections budget).
- Additional work required to provide assurances to meet government requirements for participating councils.

Option Two – Decide to withdraw from the Online Voting Trial

18. The Council could choose to withdraw from the trial. This would mean business as usual for the 2016 election.

Advantages

- No additional unbudgeted costs for the 2016 election.
- No additional assurances required.
- Ability to take advantage of the lessons learned from the trial when online voting is finally introduced for all councils.

Disadvantages

- Any advantages identified for participation will take another election cycle to realise.

NEXT STEPS

19. The Council will need to make a decision on whether or not it wishes to participate and that decision will then be conveyed to Local Government New Zealand/Department of

Internal Affairs. Cabinet will then make the final decision on participants have been selected for the trial before the end of 2015.

Signatories

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SUMMARY OF CONSIDERATIONS

Fit with purpose of Local Government

This decision enables democratic local decision making and action by, and on behalf of communities, by providing an alternative means of exercising the right to vote.

Fit with strategic framework

	Contributes	Detracts	Not applicable
Social Wellbeing Strategy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Economic Development Strategy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Environment Strategy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Arts and Culture Strategy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
3 Waters Strategy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Spatial Plan	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Integrated Transport Strategy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Parks and Recreation Strategy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Other strategic projects/policies/plans	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

The introduction of online voting potentially encourages greater engagement with democratic processes.

Māori Impact Statement

There are no known impacts for tangata whenua.

Sustainability

There are no implications for sustainability.

LTP/ Annual Plan/ Financial Strategy/ Infrastructure Strategy

There will be additional costs associated with the online voting trial (between \$90,000 - \$165,000 subject to possible cost sharing with the Otago Regional Council and/or the Southern District Health Board) in addition to the budget for the 2016 election.

Financial considerations

See above.

Significance

This decision has a low assessment for significance.

Engagement - external

The Otago Regional Council and Southern District Health Board (who may share the costs of the election) have been advised that the Dunedin City Council is interested in participating in the trial.

Engagement – internal

There has been no internal engagement.

Risks: Legal/ Health and Safety etc.

Our elections service provider, electionz.com, has been working with Deloitte as its security advisor to mitigate any security risks and will provide assurances to participants in the trial.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Community Boards

Elections for Community Boards would be included in the trial.