

01/11/2023

Justice Committee Secretariat
Justice Committee
Parliament Buildings
Wellington

By email: justice.submissions@parliament.govt.nz

Tēnā koe

DUNEDIN CITY COUNCIL SUBMISSION: ELECTORAL (LOWERING VOTING AGE FOR LOCAL ELECTIONS AND POLLS) LEGISLATION BILL

1. The Dunedin City Council (DCC) appreciates the opportunity to submit to the Justice Committee on the Electoral (Lowering Voting Age for Local Elections and Polls) Legislation Bill.

The Ōtepoti Dunedin Context

2. The DCC delivered the 2022 Local Election with a voter turnout of 49.6 percent including special votes. Ōtepoti Dunedin has seen a steady increase in turnout during local elections since 2016.
3. Ōtepoti Dunedin has a substantial youth population. 9.07% % of its population were aged between 15-19 years of age and 5.51% were aged between 10-14 years of age, as at June 2022.
4. Ōtepoti Dunedin has an engaged Youth Council, comprised of representatives from local schools. It advocates for the issues that are important for 12-17 year olds in the city, and works closely with the DCC's Community Development team.
5. The Ōtepoti Youth Vision was developed with the input of youth and youth-friendly organisations, and launched in 2019. Working in partnership with the Dunedin Youth Council and Youth Action Committee, the DCC is the umbrella organisation for the Vision, which states: "In Ōtepoti (Dunedin) young people are valued, accepted and empowered to lead fulfilled lives, and wellbeing is nurtured".
6. Lowering the age of participation in local elections (voting, and the ability to stand for Council and Community Boards) to 16 years aligns with Dunedin's Social Wellbeing Strategy 2013-2023, which seeks to ensure that all Dunedin residents are valued citizens with a role to play in the city.

Supporting Young People to Participate in Democracy

7. In its submission to the Future for Local Government Review in February 2022, the DCC expressed its support for the recommendation to lower the voting age to 16 years of age.
8. Were Parliament to amend the voting age, the DCC recommends improving civics education in schools to ensure young people have the institutional knowledge and confidence to meaningfully contribute to decision-making processes and to participate in local democracy.
9. The DCC has actively encouraged voting by young people in local elections, including operating ballot booths at Otago University and Otago Polytechnic during the 2022 local elections. This enabled voters to cast special votes on the spot, or drop off completed voting papers in person rather than by post.
10. The DCC actively engaged in the communications campaign for the 2022 local authority elections which focused on under-represented people, including young people.
11. The DCC supports the inclusion of the Māori Electoral Option in the Bill to encourage Māori youth to vote. The DCC submitted in support of the Māori Electoral Option in July 2022.
12. The DCC supports initiatives that reduce barriers to participation in local democracy. This includes continued collaboration between central and local government in promoting participation in local elections.
13. The DCC notes that councils have extensive knowledge of their communities and can promote the local elections effectively. However, central government has greater resources to promote the election.
14. The DCC notes that if the voting age is lowered to 16 years, it will mean engagement with an increased pool of potential voters, particularly during the local election period. The DCC seeks clarification on whether these activities will be funded and managed by central government, or if there is an expectation that it will be the responsibility of local authorities, and if so, will additional funding be provided for this.

Alternative Methods of Voting

15. For the 2022 local elections, the DCC relied on NZ Post for the posting of voting papers to registered voters. The DCC received anecdotal evidence that the postal system was not as reliable or accessible as it had historically been, especially to younger voters.
16. The DCC recommends that government explore the provision of alternative and secure voting methods for local elections, such as ballot booth locations or online voting. Alternative methods of voting must be appropriately resourced.
17. The DCC seeks clarification on the availability of funds to implement and manage any additional voting methods at a local level.

Conclusion

18. The DCC thanks you for the opportunity to submit on the Electoral (Lowering Voting Age for Local Elections and Polls) Legislation Bill.

19. The DCC welcomes a collaborative approach between central and local government to address issues associated with voter participation, civic engagement, and the operation of local elections.

20. The DCC would welcome the opportunity to speak to this submission.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'J. Radich', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jules Radich

Mayor of Dunedin