

1 February 2023

Justice Committee Secretariat  
Justice Committee  
Parliament Buildings  
Wellington

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Tēnā koe,

### **DUNEDIN CITY COUNCIL SUBMISSION: INQUIRY INTO THE 2022 LOCAL ELECTIONS**

1. The Dunedin City Council (DCC) appreciates the opportunity to submit on the Justice Committee's Inquiry into the 2022 Local Election (the Inquiry).
2. The DCC has made observations and recommendations in response to the Inquiry, which are detailed in this submission.

### **Voter Turnout in Ōtepoti Dunedin has remained stable**

3. 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.<sup>1</sup>
4. 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.
5. The DCC notes that councils have extensive knowledge of their communities and can promote the local elections effectively. However, central government have greater resources to promote the election.

### **Any change in voter age should be complemented by investment in civics education**

6. Were Parliament to amend the voting age, the DCC recommends improving civics education in secondary school to ensure young people have the institutional knowledge and confidence to meaningfully contribute to decision-making processes and to vote in local elections.
7. Ōtepoti Dunedin has a substantial youth population.<sup>2</sup> Youth turnout is consistently low across central and local elections. Research has shown that a perceived lack of good quality political

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<sup>1</sup> [Dunedin City Council - E1 Local Government \(localcouncils.govt.nz\)](https://www.localcouncils.govt.nz/)

<sup>2</sup> The 2018 Census found the youth population of voting age in Dunedin (18-24) was 20,883 which represents 16.5% of Ōtepoti Dunedin's population.

information negatively impacts young people's decision to vote. Civics education can improve access to information for young people.<sup>3</sup>

#### **The DCC's experience with private contractors is mixed**

8. The DCC contracted the role of Electoral Officer to provider electionz.com for the 2022 local election. All requirements were complied with.
9. The DCC retained many functions in-house including promotion of the election, the provision of special voting, and the role of Deputy Electoral Officer.
10. To assist in encouraging voter turnout, the DCC provided voting in person for special votes at its main office for the voting period, and in libraries within the DCC network and at Otago University and Otago Polytechnic on specific days over the voting period. The DCC provided secure voting bins at libraries, DCC service centres, Otago University, Otago Polytechnic, and supermarkets throughout the city for people to drop their completed votes off rather than returning them by post.

#### **Postal voting is not as reliable as it has historically been**

11. 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 has historically been, especially to younger voters.
12. Councils may provide booth voting for the provision of special votes. However, ballot booth voting for ordinary votes alongside postal voting presents challenges, as electoral staff would be required to produce duplicate voting papers. It is cost prohibitive for many Councils to offer expanded booth voting.
13. 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.

#### **Centralisation of all local election functions is not plausible**

14. The DCC submitted against the centralisation of local elections during the inquiry into the 2019 local elections. The DCC retains this position.
15. The DCC supports specific local election administration functions remaining with local government. However, the DCC acknowledges there are functions that may be best managed by a central authority. This could produce efficiency gains through economy of scale and greater standardisation.
16. The DCC reiterates that local government's extensive knowledge of their communities can be an advantage when promoting participation in elections.
17. The DCC notes that there are aspects of the local election process where ongoing local government involvement is required. The 78 Councils in New Zealand have different representation arrangements. Councillors or board members may be elected at large or through

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<sup>3</sup> Whitfield, K. D. M. (2021). Local government and youth voter turnout: Obstacles and solutions for Aotearoa New Zealand (Thesis, Doctor of Business Administration). University of Otago. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/12096>

wards, Community Boards, and Māori wards. Taituarā noted in their submission to this committee that there can be over 100 combinations of voting documents in one local authority. The issuing of special voting papers, therefore, would be logistically challenging for any central authority to deliver effectively.

18. If centralisation of responsibility is to happen, the DCC believes that collaboration between local and central government will be essential.

#### **Improvement can be achieved through technical amendments and standardisation**

19. The DCC notes that greater standardisation, cost savings, and smoother processes can be achieved through amendment of local electoral legislation.
20. The DCC submits that the electoral system should be set centrally, through the regulation making power established by s139(1)(b) of the Local Electoral Act 2001. The DCC uses Single Transferrable Vote (STV) as the electoral system for Ōtepoti Dunedin's election. Research supports the view that STV promotes greater diversity of elected representatives. The DCC prefers the universal adoption of STV as an electoral system for local elections in New Zealand, as this will provide uniformity across elections.
21. The DCC supports the amending of the Local Electoral Regulations 2001 to ensure that candidates' names on ballot papers is set by random ordering. This will provide greater consistency of practice across Councils and reduce the impact of ordering effects. International literature has established a small impact on the outcome of elections by the ordering of candidates' names on ballot papers.
22. The DCC supports legislative amendment that would enable the electronic transmission of special voting papers while voters are overseas. This amendment would bring local electoral practice in line with general elections as per the Electoral Regulations 1996.
23. The DCC supports enabling Electoral Officers and other sworn staff to access the unpublished roll. The current settings act as a barrier to those on the unpublished roll voting in local elections as it relies on those voters contacting the relevant Electoral Officer. Personal safety for those on the electoral roll remains a priority. The consequences for a sworn staff member's breach of the Local Electoral Act 2001 include a fine of up to \$2000 in addition to potential employment consequences.

#### **Conclusion**

24. The DCC thanks you for the opportunity to submit on the Justice Committee's Inquiry into the 2022 Local Election. 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.
25. The DCC would welcome the opportunity to speak to this submission.

Yours faithfully,



Jules Radich  
Mayor of Dunedin