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Christchurch City Council submission on the Inquiry into the 2025 Local Elections

Introduction

1. Christchurch City Council (the Council) thanks the Justice Committee (the Committee) for the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into the 2025 Local Elections. The Council would like the opportunity to make a presentation to the Committee in support of this submission.
2. The Council supports changes to local electoral legislation to improve public awareness, modernise voting methods, increasing civics education, accessibility and improving central government support and funding for local elections. This is essential to increase participation and turnout in local government elections. The Council has consistently supported these changes in its submissions to previous inquiries however there has been limited progress in implementing the Justice Committee's recommendations.
3. The Council has serious concerns about declining participation and turnout in local government elections. Voter turnout in Christchurch fell to 38% in 2025, down from 43% in 2022, in line with the national decline. The Council is also concerned about the ability of local government to attract candidates. In 2025 ten candidates were elected unopposed, up from four in 2022. These trends undermine local democracy and indicate the need for change to better meet the needs of communities and electors.
4. Without legislative change before 2028, turnout is likely to continue falling and participation barriers – especially for overseas electors and those requiring special votes – will continue. The Council therefore urges the Committee to recommend time-bound reform to enable additional voting methods and strengthen national leadership and funding for local election administration and promotion.
5. Central government should support and resource local government appropriately so councils can attract quality candidates, increase participation and deliver elections that are accessible, fair and representative of the community.

Centralisation and consistency

6. The Council supports an increased role for the Electoral Commission in administering local elections. As a central agency, the Electoral Commission can deliver stronger national consistency, efficiency and high standards while still accommodating local context and needs. This is a practical reform that would improve confidence and capability across the system.

7. Any changes to the administration of local elections should be widely consulted on to ensure a balanced, effective and publicly supported system. The Council acknowledges there may be challenges if voting systems are not implemented consistently across the country.
8. National consistency in voting methods offers advantages. Consistent voting methods make the process easier for electors to understand and reduce confusion. A national approach allows for centralised investment in secure and efficient voting systems, supporting high standards and reliability. This would particularly benefit councils with limited resources and capability.
9. The Council also supports a collaborative model in which the Electoral Commission leads national promotion and councils deliver local engagement. This approach would provide consistent nationwide messaging alongside targeted local outreach, maximising awareness and participation. National promotion should be funded by central government.
10. National investment is essential to engage effectively with all demographics and improve understanding on how local government works, including local elections. This investment should be consistent across New Zealand. Comprehensive civics education, covering the roles and functions of both local and national government, should be introduced into schools, supported by dedicated central government funding. Improving civic literacy is a long-term way to lift participation.

Voting methods

Postal voting

11. Postal voting, as required by the Local Electoral Act 2001 (the Act), is increasingly unsuited and insufficiently reliable as the sole method for conducting local elections. The Council submits that legislation must enable alternative or additional voting methods for future elections to remove avoidable participation barriers and protect the integrity and resilience of the voting process.
12. Providing electors with credible additional or alternative voting options to postal voting is essential to lifting participation and preventing further decline in turnout. Reform must be time-bound and delivered in time for the 2028 triennial elections, including enabling a secure accessible online or electronic voting option supported by appropriate national investment and implementation planning.

Overseas electors

13. Legislative changes increased the voting period for the 2025 elections, from 23 days to 33 days. However, the 33 day voting period still does not allow reliable overseas delivery and return of postal voting documents before voting closes. The absence of alternative voting methods remains a barrier to participation for overseas electors. This group is disadvantaged under the current framework. The Council submits that the legislation must be amended to allow overseas electors to have a realistic opportunity to vote in local elections.
14. For general elections overseas voting starts earlier than the advance voting period and voting documents are available to electors through downloadable voting papers or in-person overseas voting places. The Council submits that modernised local election voting methods must similarly provide multiple practical options for overseas electors to participate.

Unpublished roll electors

15. The Council continues to advocate for change enabling the Electoral Commission to provide electoral officers, service providers and sworn electoral officials with access to the unpublished electoral roll. Requiring

unpublished roll electors to request special voting documents creates an unnecessary barrier to voting. At a minimum, the Electoral Commission must provide clear and complete communication to unpublished roll electors about how and where to obtain special voting documents for local government elections. The current approach represents an avoidable barrier to participation.

16. In response to the specific points raised in the Committee's terms of reference, the Council provides the following comments:

Voting processes

Electoral rolls

17. Electoral Commission statistics indicate that over 26,000 electors in Christchurch enrolled or updated their details between 1 April and the final roll closure 1 August 2025, with a further 8,000 doing so between 1 August and 11 October 2025. The Council elections team did not receive significant reports of electors being removed from rolls without request or moved between rolls. However, a number of electors reported updating their details but still appearing on the final roll at a previous address or not appearing as enrolled.
18. It is unclear what information the Electoral Commission provides to electors who enrol or update their details after the final roll has closed about what they must do to vote in local government elections. While electors receive confirmation of enrolment details updates, many were not clearly informed that they must request special voting documents to vote at their current address. This is a point that can be addressed through clear and consistent messaging.
19. The Council recommends the Electoral Commission provides clear communication to electors who enrol or update their details after the roll has closed, explaining what they must do to vote in local government elections.
20. The Council supports the 2025 amendment to the Electoral Act 1993 allowing the Electoral Commission to update elector address information using data from other government agencies. This is a sensible modern measure that should be implemented and complemented with improved voter communications.

Special votes

21. Information provided to special voters included guidance on ensuring enrolment details were up to date to enable verification. Electoral Commission enrolment and update packs were available at all special voting locations, Council libraries and customer service hubs during the election period. In Christchurch, 82% of returned special votes were allowed, consistent with the last two triennial elections. The primary reason special votes were disallowed in 2025 was that the elector could not be verified on the electoral roll. This further reinforces the need for clearer enrolment and special vote messaging.

Delivery and return of voting documents

22. Acknowledging the Council supports change to postal voting as the sole method of voting in local elections, during the 2025 elections there were no significant reported issues with postal delivery of voting documents.
23. Voting documents in Christchurch elections were delivered by both DX Mail (approximately 66%) and New Zealand Post (approximately 34%). Investigations into elector queries of non-delivery often establish that electors are not appearing on the final electoral roll at the correct address or postal addresses were out of date.

24. In addition to return by post via NZ Post and DX Mail, the Council used orange vote bins for the return of voting documents, with 64 in place during the voting period. Vote bins were located in all Council libraries, customer service hubs and recreation centres, at Christchurch International Airport, the University of Canterbury library and 28 supermarkets. The availability and locations of vote bins were well promoted prior to and throughout the voting period. Approximately 50% of returned votes were delivered to a vote bin. Vote bins in the community improve accessibility and should continue to be used. Their use by neighbouring councils raised awareness across the region.

Dictation voting

25. Telephone dictation voting services for voters who are blind, vision-impaired, or physically unable to mark their voting papers were provided by Council's election service provider electionz.com. Three Christchurch electors used the service in the 2025 elections, which Council officers were advised worked well.
26. Information available on the Council website invited any elector who is not able to complete a postal vote independently due to disability to contact the Elections Team for support. During the voting period there were several requests and instances of electors seeking support from electoral officials to complete voting documents.

Mobile voting

27. The Council did not use mobile voting booths during the 2025 elections. Special voting documents were issued from, and onsite voting was available at, 12 customer service hubs throughout Christchurch and Banks Peninsula, Monday to Friday, with some sites open during the weekend prior to election day and on election day. This represented an increase in locations and available hours from previous years, which was well received by electors.

Electoral integrity

28. No significant increase was observed in queries about electoral integrity, disinformation or misinformation during the 2025 election period. There was an increase in candidates raising concerns about social media content, communications from other candidates and members of the public. Information provided to candidates included guidance on candidate conduct and safety, including online and social media.
29. Council and electoral officials received a number of public queries regarding the requirements, entitlement and qualifications necessary for a person to stand for election to local government.

The role of councils and staff

30. Voting arrangements for Christchurch were discussed and agreed between the independent electoral officer contracted through Council's service provider, electionz.com, the deputy electoral officer and the Council executive election steering group. The Council's customer service hub network was utilised for the issuing of special voting documents and as onsite voting locations.
31. Council and electoral officials use the Code of Good Practice for the Management of Local Authority Elections and Polls and resources published by Taituarā in the planning and delivery of elections. Guidance, software and processes are provided by the electoral officer and election service provider, ensuring a considered and consistent approach where it is appropriate.
32. Council officers work in partnership with the Christchurch based Electoral Commission Engagement Team responsible for supporting enrolment and elections throughout the South Island. This successful partnership

focuses on information sharing, enrolment support and joint attendance at events and presentations. The local engagement team are provided with and share information specific to our elections. This approach could be implemented nationwide.

33. The operational relationship between electoral officers and electoral officials and the Electoral Commission is generally coordinated on a national basis. The Electoral Commission works directly with election service providers on the provision of electoral rolls and validation of special votes.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission. The Council strongly supports legislative change to local elections and recommends the changes are in effect for the 2028 local elections.

The Council is seeking input from the public regarding its 2025 local elections and will in due course provide this to the Committee in support of this submission.

For any clarification on points within this submission please contact Jo Daly, jo.daly@ccc.govt.nz

Ngā mihi



Phil Mauger

MAYOR OF CHRISTCHURCH