

28 April 2025

Infrastructure New Zealand Submission on Local Government New Zealand's Local Electoral Reform Draft Position Paper.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Infrastructure New Zealand (INZ) welcomes the opportunity to submit to Local Government New Zealand's (LGNZ) Local Electoral Reform Draft Position Paper.
- 1.2 INZ is New Zealand's membership organisation for the infrastructure sector. We promote best practice in national infrastructure development through research, advocacy and public and private sector collaboration. Our members come from diverse sectors across New Zealand and include infrastructure service providers, investors and operators.

2. General Remarks

- 2.1 INZ welcomes this initiative by LGNZ, led by Hon Nick Smith as Chair of the working group, to progress discussions around local government electoral reform. We note that the previous recommendations around electoral changes from the Future for Local Government Review Panel have been rejected by the Government. INZ supports this work by the local government sector to drive electoral changes which address the key issues experienced and reflect the priorities of local authorities.
- 2.2 INZ supports reforming the local government electoral system to strengthen local government's democratic mandate and community engagement in local government decision-making. INZ recommends improving council engagement with schools, strengthening community communication, and adopting best-practice approaches to increase accountability and participation. INZ also specifically supports draft recommendations 2,3,4,12,13,14,15,19.
- 2.3 We strongly support a transition to four-year electoral terms for local government (alongside a transition to a four-year parliamentary term), with elections held two years

apart from general elections. This alignment will provide both central and local governments more time to implement policy reform, assist councils to improve long-term planning and ensure better collaboration across the two tiers of government. Importantly, it will also ensure local government election issues are not overshadowed by national elections.

- 2.4 Furthermore, there needs to be greater alignment between central and local government voting processes, supporting a move from outdated postal voting to a nationally consistent, in-person voting system as used for general elections. INZ agrees that this would improve engagement and voter participation. Until these changes are made, councils should expand alternative ballot drop-off points and allow overseas voters to use the same methods as in national elections.
- 2.5 INZ believes community engagement in local elections should go beyond voter turnout and should aim to restore the authority of elected councillors by increasing their accountability and connection to their communities.
- 2.6 As part of a transition to a four-year electoral term, INZ supports the required legislative changes to ensure that key local government planning and accountability processes move to a four-year cycle.
- 2.7 We are being targeted in our comments and addressing proposals based on the broader infrastructure sector's interests. We are also members of the Local Government Business Forum, but these comments and recommendations are our own.

3. Increasing Voter Turn Out for Local Government.

- 3.1 INZ supports developing the local government system to deliver enhanced community wellbeing outcomes. To establish this system better, there needs to be greater community engagement with local government throughout the election process and term.
- 3.2 As discussed in the draft position paper, voter turnout at local elections has declined to around 40% on average across New Zealand, only around half the average turnout of national polls.
- 3.3 We agree with capturing opportunities for community voices to be strengthened through Local Government and for people to be engaged in decisions that impact their local areas.

- 3.4 INZ sees community engagement in the local government electoral system as being about more than voter turnout. We are concerned at the erosion of influence and authority of elected councillors over recent electoral cycles in favour of unelected officials. We believe that by engaging better with voters and ensuring greater responsibility and accountability to their communities, the electoral process can help to re-empower elected councillors.
- 3.5 In LGNZ's Local Electoral Reform Draft Position Paper, public understanding of what councils do was identified as a key reason why people don't vote in local elections. INZ agrees with recommendation 2 to increase council engagement within schools to demonstrate how local government works and the opportunities for young people to participate and be heard in decisions that affect them.
- 3.6 INZ supports recommendation 3, which advocates for increased communication between local government and their respective communities. This should enable councils to adopt best-practice approaches that strengthen accountability and deliver more effective community engagement.
- 3.7 We also support recommendation 4, which states that councils should leverage their existing communication processes to demonstrate the value of their work. We also support the broader adoption of localism approaches, ensuring that communities are meaningfully represented in decision-making and can see their voices reflected in outcomes.

Changing in Voting Methods can be a Positive for Voting Turn Out

- 3.8 Postal voting is becoming outdated in our digital age, and lacks relevancy for younger voters, who are less likely to use or check physical mail. Furthermore, many households, especially in urban areas or apartment blocks, lack standard letterboxes, reducing accessibility.
- 3.9 INZ supports recommendation 12, for a nationally consistent system of in-person voting for all local elections that is like parliamentary elections. Moreover, until digital security and voter authorisation are addressed, legitimate concerns over online voting will remain. We agree that there are significant benefits of to having the voting experience like that of national elections.
- 3.10 Until such changes are implemented, councils should broaden the use of alternative ballot drop-off locations, and overseas voters should be enabled to vote using the same methods available in national elections (Recommendations 13 and 14, respectively).

4. Local Government Four-Year Term

- 4.1 We agree with LGNZ's position in the Local Electoral Reform Draft Position Paper that advocates for transitioning local government to four-year electoral terms, with elections staggered two years apart from general elections. INZ agrees that this would enhance councils' ability to implement long-term strategies and improve collaboration across tiers of government.
- 4.2 There needs to be alignment and consistency across the two tiers of government, and the same issues that apply to central government about the necessary time to carry out reforms also apply to local authorities.
- 4.3 Furthermore, we support the recommendation that central and local government elections be spaced two years apart to avoid creating administrative challenges and heightening the risk of critical local issues being overshadowed by national ones.
- 4.4 INZ supports draft recommendation 15 that the relevant legislation be amended to place the Electoral Commission in charge of administering and promoting local elections. This would reduce what is a significant burden on local councils, particularly small ones, and assist with alignment with general election processes.
- 4.5 We also support draft 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. We think these documents should maintain their current ten-year outlook timeframe which supports a long-term infrastructure pipeline.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 INZ welcomes a public debate on Local Government electoral reform. There has been a significant decline in voter turnout in local government elections, to around 40% on average across the country. Enhancing the local government electoral system is essential to strengthening councils and councillors' democratic legitimacy and accountability. It also plays a critical role in enabling voters to shape the direction of their councils and hold them accountable.
- 5.2 INZ broadly supports the Review's draft report and looks forward to seeing LGNZ's final recommendations and report, which is planned to be launched at the Superlocal conference in July.

5.3 INZ thanks Local Government New Zealand for the opportunity to submit the Local Electoral Reform Draft Position Paper.

Yours sincerely,



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