



Local electoral reform Issues paper

// Local Government New Zealand's Electoral Reform Working Group

// 2024





Foreword from the Chair of the Working Group

Kia ora Mayors, Chairs, councils, communities and residents

This Issues Paper is about Local Government New Zealand leading a discussion on how we can strengthen the democratic mandate we have to represent communities across New Zealand.

The decline in participation in local elections is an existential threat to local government. It is getting so low that it is a risk to our mandate and is about half the turnout of central government elections. It also compares poorly internationally with local elections in other democracies. We need to identify why people are not voting and find practical changes that will enhance participation.

The most urgent challenge, with most councils conducting their elections by post, is the collapse of what New Zealanders now refer to as “snail mail”. There have been multiple commitments to trial e-voting but none have eventuated and security remains a significant concern. The third alternative is polling booth voting as per general elections. We need to move quickly to find a reliable replacement for postal voting.

An underlying issue we are also concerned with is ensuring New Zealanders understand the role of councils. There are problems with voters knowing who the candidates are and what they stand for. This is exacerbated by the growth of social media and the decline of traditional media.

A further issue is the appropriate term for local government. This discussion is pertinent with the Coalition Government proposing a referendum on central government moving to a four-year term. There is a strong argument for alignment. Three years is unusually short by international standards. The case for councils to move to four years is that it will better enable us to deal with long-term challenges such as infrastructure, housing and climate change.

These challenges over turnout, voting method, information and length of term come at a time when democratic values are being challenged globally. We need to work harder than ever to maintain and build trust in our democratically elected councils.

Changes to our electoral system are difficult. They are rightly subject to a high level of scrutiny as they go to the core of how our communities are governed. For reform to be successful, it requires good research, wide consultation and broad agreement. Our group is working hard and across the political spectrum to try and build a platform for positive change. We welcome your feedback and support on these issues so that together we can strengthen the future of local government in New Zealand.

Nga mihi nui,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Nick Smith'.

Hon Dr Nick Smith, Mayor of Nelson
Chair, LGNZ Electoral Reform Working Group



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Purpose and timeframes for this work

The purpose of the working group

The National Council of Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ) set up the Electoral Reform Working Group to drive LGNZ’s advocacy work around strengthening local government’s democratic mandate, with a particular focus on increasing participation in local body elections.

The working group’s members are:

- // **Mayor Hon Dr Nick Smith**, Nelson City (Chair)
- // **Mayor Campbell Barry**, Hutt City
- // **Councillor Toni Boynton**, Whakatāne District, Co-Chair Te Maruata
- // **Professor Andrew Geddis**, University of Otago
- // **Mayor Susan O’Regan**, Waipā District
- // **Mayor Rehette Stoltz**, Gisborne District

The group can be contacted by emailing electoralreform@lgnz.co.nz

Timeframes

Alongside this issues paper, the working group will produce a draft position paper. Submissions on these papers, alongside targeted engagement with key organisations, will inform the development of a final position paper.

The high-level timeline is:



Scope of this issues paper

This paper sets out the key issues the working group is exploring. The working group is focused on effecting change, so this paper is focused on factors that we can influence and that are likely to gain wide buy-in from local government. For completeness, this paper makes reference to other factors that are important but out of scope because they don’t meet these criteria.

Providing feedback on this issues paper

Consultation on this document closes at **midnight on Sunday 19 January 2025**. You can provide feedback using the feedback form (a pdf and online survey option are available at <https://www.lgnz.co.nz/policy-advocacy/key-issues-for-councils/local-electoral-reform/>) or by emailing electoralreform@lgnz.co.nz.

Background on participation in local elections

History of local elections and electoral reform

The rules governing local elections are set out in the Local Electoral Act 2002 and regulations made under that legislation. This framework has been subject to frequent change, with some 29 amendments to the Act since it was first passed – many of which have an influence over voter participation.

Other reforms, such as the introduction of elected District Health Boards, have also impacted voter turnout.

Timeline of key events

- 1976** Postal voting was introduced by the Local Elections and Polls Act 1976, and first used by some county councils in the 1977 election
- 1989** Local government is reorganised, moving from around 850 local bodies to 86 local authorities
- 1993** Locally elected Area Health Boards are disestablished
- 2001** A review of the 1976 Act is conducted, resulting in its replacement with the Local Electoral Act 2001
District Health Boards are introduced, with half their members elected as part of local elections
- 2002** The option to establish Māori wards and constituencies is introduced for all councils
Councils are given the option to adopt either First Past the Post (FPP) or Single Transferable Vote (STV) as their electoral system
Candidate profile statements and candidate booklets are used for the first time
- 2009** The Local Government Act is amended to make Council Chief Executives responsible for *“facilitating and fostering representative and substantial elector participation in elections and polls held under the Local Electoral Act 2001”*
- 2010** The first election of the amalgamated Auckland Council takes place
- 2011** The Electoral Commission takes over responsibility for the electoral roll, replacing the Chief Registrar of Electors
- 2019** District Health Boards are disestablished
- 2021** The Local Electoral (Māori Wards and Māori Constituencies) Amendment Act is passed, removing the ability to require a binding poll on Māori wards and constituencies
- 2024** The Local Government (Electoral Legislation and Māori Wards and Māori Constituencies) Amendment Act re-introduces the ability to require a binding poll. This legislation also changes election timeframes in response to declining reliability of the postal system.

Participation in local elections

Voter turnout in local authority elections in New Zealand has been in decline for much of the last three decades. However, since 2007 (with the exception of the formation of Auckland Council in 2010), turnout has been stable at between 42 and 44%. This represents a fall in total turnout of approximately 14 percentage points since 1989.

Over the same period, turnout in parliamentary elections has fallen by 6.5%. The current gap between turnout for parliamentary elections and local authority elections is approximately 36%. This gap has grown by 3% since 1992.

Turnout varies significantly between councils, ranging in 2022 from under 30% to over 60%. Turnout tends to be higher in smaller and rural councils than in larger and urban councils. Turnout is also higher in those councils where councillors represent a small number of residents.

When compared to similar countries, voter turnout in New Zealand councils is close to the middle. It's well below countries like Norway, Denmark, and Iceland, where local governments have traditionally had a greater role with more autonomy. However, turnout in local elections is declining even amongst those countries.

Figure 1 Voter turnout in national and local elections 1989 – 2023

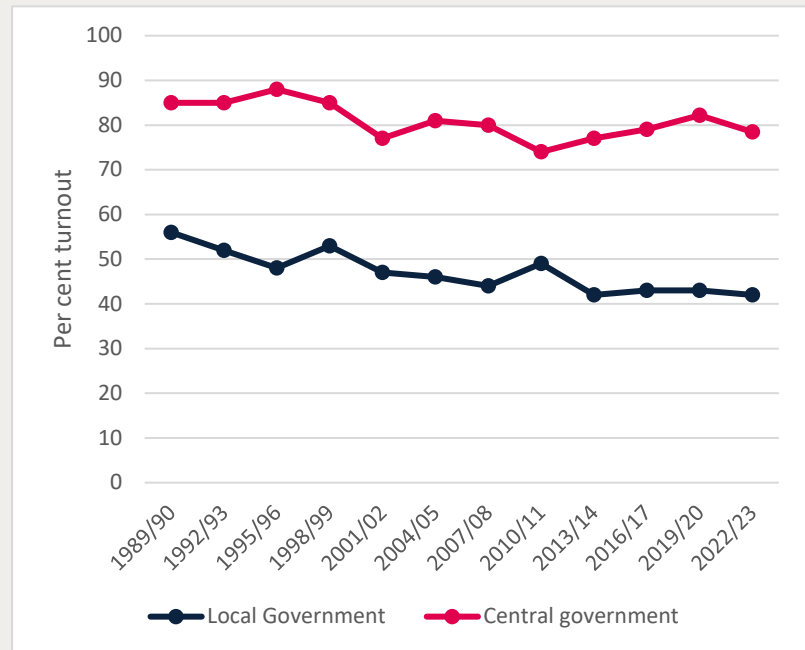


Figure 2 Turnout by council type

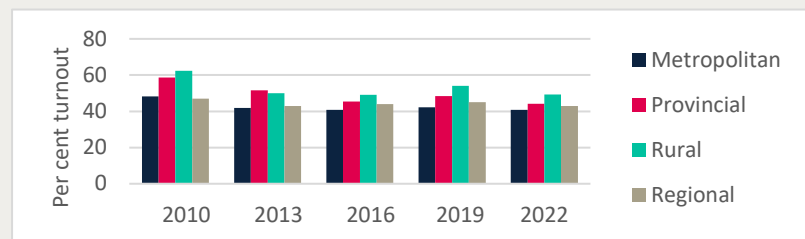
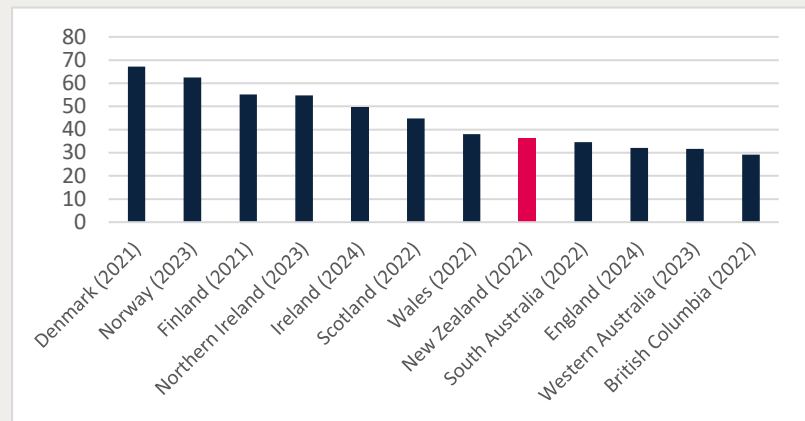


Figure 3 Turnout at last local elections



Who votes?

Post-election surveys suggest that voters in local elections are more likely to be: women than men; older or retired (although the proportion of voters under 45 is increasing while over 45 is gradually decreasing); from the South Island; have lived at the same address for 10 years or more; and European or Pākehā are more likely to vote than those who identify as Māori, who are then more likely to vote than those who identify as Pasifika, with the lowest participation rate being Asian.

Figure 4 Turnout by age

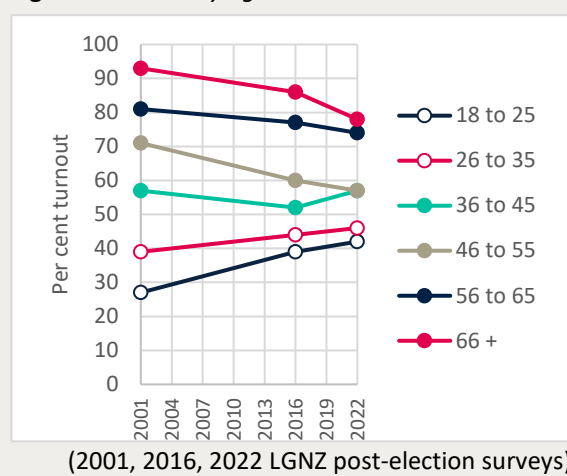
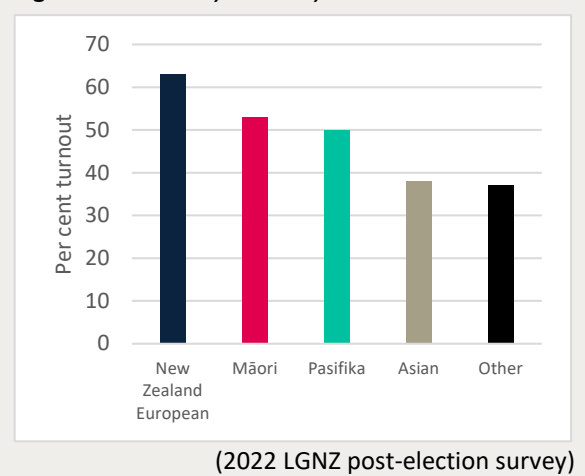


Figure 5 Turnout by ethnicity at the 2022 election



Why people don't vote

The Horizon Research nationwide survey following the 2022 local elections found that the most common reasons for not voting were that people did not know enough about the candidates (31%) and their policies (26%) and could not work out who to vote for (22%). Another 11% of non-voters said that they did not vote because they did not receive voting papers.

The Auckland Council 2022 demographic study on voter turnout noted these possible causes of low turnout:

- Perceived relevance of local government to the everyday life
- Family and work commitments and an inability to pay attention to local politics in light of other life priorities
- Differences in the level of exposure to civics education
- Complexity of the local government system and voting process, along with differences in knowledge about local government across communities
- For some communities, a lack of identification with and ability to see one's identity reflected in the local governance system
- A distrust of and disengagement from the local government system, particularly amongst Māori
- The existence of a social norm of non-voting in some families, neighbourhoods and communities.

Issue 1: The public's understanding of local government and why it's important

The public's lack of understanding of what councils do – and not seeing the work of councils as important – have been repeatedly identified as reasons people don't vote in local elections. Building understanding is therefore one way to increase engagement and participation with councils, including voting in local elections. The rates system can mean ratepayers have greater engagement with councils, compared to other voters.

What do people say would increase turnout?

40% - more information about what councils do

32% - make it easier to engage with your council

(2022 LGNZ post-election survey)

Civics education is about learning your rights and duties as citizens, including democratic processes and how you can interact with government and create change. While it is important to include in compulsory schooling, civics education is broader than this.

The Panel for the Review into the Future for Local Government agreed that civics education would be beneficial for all ages. It also included a recommendation that “local government and councils develop and invest in democratic innovations, including participatory and deliberative democracy processes”, as a means of improving the connection people feel to decisions that impact them, their whānau and community.

Key elements of this issue

Civics education is a key way to build understanding of councils' work and value

Civics education objectives are built into the New Zealand Curriculum in Year 9 and 10 Social Studies. Schools have the flexibility to design their own curriculum within the national framework, including decisions about teaching civics and citizenship. In 2020, the Ministry of Education published a [Civics and Citizenship Education Teaching and Learning Guide](#) to support primary and secondary school teachers, but it is unclear how widely this resource is being used.

While the school curriculum is a key starting point for civics education, community-wide education is also important. This is particularly important for communities that have the lowest voting participation rates.

LGNZ and some councils deliver elements of civics education through initiatives that encourage young people to vote or engage with their local councils. One of these initiatives was [Ngā Pōti ā-Taiohi - Youth Voting 2022 programme](#), run by LGNZ as part of the VOTE 2022 campaign. The programme gave students the opportunity to run their own elections alongside the local body elections, and provided teachers with resources to plan and run an election in their classroom. Auckland Council has also run a [youth voting programme](#), aimed at those in Years 7-10. Many councils also have youth councils, which also foster young people's understanding of what local government does and why it is important.

Options to increase the uptake and effectiveness of civics education

Building on work some councils and organisations already do, delivery of civics education could be strengthened by:

Greater support for delivery of civics in schools

This could see the development and distribution of additional resources, alongside support to help teachers deliver the curriculum. These resources could be developed by a collective of councils or a specific organisation with a stewardship role for local government could be directed and funded to do this.

Strengthened civics education requirements in the New Zealand Curriculum

While some civics education objectives are built into the New Zealand Curriculum (as part of social studies in Years 9 and 10), the next step is including more year groups, with more specific content and a dedicated component focused on local government.

Partnering with community organisations to better engage people who aren't participating

Councils, or organisations with a stewardship role for local government, could work with representatives from communities who are less likely to participate in local government or vote in local government elections. The focus of this engagement could be to understand barriers to participation and voting – and work together on actions to address them.

Councils have an opportunity to better promote their role, work and value

Councils have many touch points with their communities. They also have a range of statutory requirements to inform communities about current and proposed work. This presents many opportunities for councils to demonstrate their value and promote their importance, at the same time as building wider understanding of local government.

Options for better promotion of councils' role, work and value

Nationwide promotion of local government's work and value

This could take many forms and be led by a range of different organisations (or as a joint project by councils). One example is local government week in New South Wales, which is designed to showcase the work councils do in their communities. Local Government NSW provides councils with a digital toolkit that includes key messages, templates, event suggestions, and social media posts, to help them make the most of the week.

Greater use of localism approaches by councils

Councils could commit to undertaking more localism approaches in the ways they engage with, partner with, and devolve to the community. For example, participatory tools, such as participatory budgeting, citizens' assemblies and collaborative community planning.

Enhancing how councils communicate their value

Councils could look at the current ways they communicate their value, and how people engaged with them. This could be supported by more flexible legislation around Long-term Plan consultation documents or annual reports. Councils could also look to programmes like Te

Korowai (formerly CouncilMARK) to support how they communicate their performance to their communities.

Introduce a stewardship function that includes a role of promoting the role of councils

The Panel for the Review into the Future for Local Government recommended the establishment of a new local government stewardship institution, with roles that should include overseeing the health of local democracy. If a new stewardship institution is created, its role could also consist of promoting local government's value, fostering public confidence in councils, and building professionalism in councils.

Decline of local media

Changes to the media landscape, including fewer local media outlets, mean declining coverage of both the work councils do and council decision making. This affects communities' ability to understand and engage in the work of councils. There is also an increasing focus on sensational, negative news stories, as 'clicks' drive revenue for media outlets and social media firms. This negativity can deter people from engaging with local government.

Local Democracy Reporting is one initiative which has sought to address this in part. It acts as a small wire service of local body news managed by Radio New Zealand. Reporters are hosted by newsrooms but funded publicly. It started with eight reporters in 2019, and presently has 16 fulltime roles from Northland to Southland. Their overarching aim is to address local democracy issues – predominantly council reporting, but it can include other areas such as local iwi or health agencies.

Out of scope factors

These factors also contribute to a low interest in, and understanding of, the role and value of local government but are out of direct scope of this work:

- // Growing distrust of, and disillusionment with, government and democratic institutions.
- // The role and scope of local government. Local government overseas with wider responsibilities in education, health, and policing can have higher levels of voting.
- // The number of councils, and their representation arrangements. Generally, smaller councils tend to attract higher voter turnout.

Issue 1 consultation questions

1. What should be done to improve understanding of local government and its value, and who should hold responsibility for this?
2. What should be done, given the decline in local media, to increase visibility of local government work and local elections?

Issue 2: Understanding candidates and their policies

One of the primary reasons that people cite for not voting is they don't know enough about the candidates. Voters receive very little information to help them get to know candidates in local elections and to understand their policy positions. The Report of the Justice Committee on the Inquiry into the 2022 Local Elections (the Select Committee Report) referred to three post-election surveys that identified lack of sufficient information about candidates as one of the main reasons people gave for not voting in the 2022 local elections.

Currently the primary mechanism for providing candidate information is through *candidate profile statements*, which are distributed in a booklet with voting papers. First used at the 2002

local elections, the 150-word statements must be limited to information about the candidate (including any group or organisation the candidate is affiliated with) and their policies and intentions if elected. Electoral Officers may include a disclaimer alongside a candidate profile statement if they are concerned about the accuracy of the statement but are not required to verify or investigate any information in candidate statements.

Other current mechanisms for conveying information about candidates and their political positions include: direct promotion by candidates and tickets (where these exist) through pamphlets, billboards, and advertisements; public meetings organised by candidates, councils, or third parties such as business associations or residents groups; and reporting by media organisations.

The more informed the voting public is on policy issues, the more the public is likely to demand information and clarity from candidates on their policy positions. In turn candidates having clarity on their own policy positions, informed by an understanding of the role they're standing for, contributes to a more informed voting public.

What do people say would increase turnout?

37% - more information about candidates

32% - require candidates to include policy positions in profile statements

19% - more events to get to know the candidates

(2022 LGNZ post-election survey)

Key elements of this issue

There is insufficient information provided to voters on candidates and their positions

With a maximum of 150 words and very little in the way of content requirements, it's challenging for candidate profile statements to provide sufficient information for voters to make informed decisions. Statements are often bland and tend to focus on the background and experience of the candidate, often with little detail about their policy platform.

To bridge this gap, various websites have been established during different election years that have profiled candidates and enabled comparison of their policy positions. These websites have been developed by a range of organisations, from councils to media organisations, advocacy groups, and others (including LGNZ and Taituarā). Because providing information to these websites has been

voluntary, they rely on a meaningful number of candidates participating (for example, by answering policy questions), to make them effective.

Political neutrality in the running of elections is an important touchstone in New Zealand’s democratic tradition, and is essential to maintain trust in election outcomes. This means that although councils facilitate elector participation, there is some caution as to the extent to which councils should be involved with facilitating information about candidates’ (including incumbents’) political positions and views, or in ensuring that this is accurate.

Recent examples of candidate profiling

- **The Policy NZ website** operated during the 2022 local elections and was funded through a mix of commercial sponsorship, advertising and donations, and published in partnership with *The Spinoff*.

Candidates were given the opportunity to provide some basic information about themselves, their top three priorities if elected, and statements on key policy areas.

The website also allowed you to ‘like’ policy statements within a policy area without seeing first who made them – before toggling to see whose positions you agreed with.

During the 2022 campaign, it had 143,000 unique users (as many as 1 in 10 voters), and 1.6 million page views. Average session duration was over six minutes.

- **Tauranga City Council** at their 2024 elections offered all candidates the opportunity to film a 90-second video in which each candidate answered the same set policy questions. These sat alongside the candidate’s statement on the council’s webpage. The majority took up this opportunity, and the videos generated nearly 50,000 views. Turnout for this election remained in line with previous elections, at 39%.

Options to address insufficient information on candidates and their policy positions

A centralised digital platform providing candidate information to voters

One possibility is to move candidate profile statements to a centralised digital platform, sortable by region, city or district, and supplement them with additional information on candidates and their policy positions. This online platform could be a new one, or could build on previous websites. It could also be overseen by a public body such as Taituarā, DIA, LGNZ, the Local Government Commission or the Electoral Commission – particularly if the same public body were to take on a wider stewardship or oversight role for local government elections.

Require candidates to provide an explanation of their policies

If candidate profile statements were moved to a centralised digital platform, it may be worth considering whether there are benefits to requiring candidates to answer standard policy questions and/or explain their key policies – or whether it would be more appropriate to keep this as an optional exercise. Any public body involved would need to be mindful of maintaining political neutrality, particularly when designing candidate questions and any decisions around moderating or editing candidate statements.

The decline in civil organisations and local media

We know the ways in which voters get their information are changing. This is part of a wider shift away from traditional media towards digital and social media.

Civic organisations (such as Rotary, Grey Power, business associations and resident associations) have also previously played an important role in local democracy, through holding ‘meet the candidate’ events, which provide a setting for local citizens to discuss policy issues. However, both the membership and reach of many civic organisations is declining, resulting in fewer third-party hosted ‘meet the candidate’ events.

In a similar vein, as mentioned in issue 1, we’re also seeing a decline in the presence and size of local media, and less funding for ‘public good’ journalism. This has meant less in-depth media coverage of local politics, local decision-making (including reporting on the voting records of current councillors and board members) and local elections.

Where did you get your information about candidates from?

	2004	2022
Radio	27%	14%
Newspapers	67%	22%
Facebook	0%	20%

(2022 LGNZ post-election survey)

The role of candidate campaigning and candidate knowledge

As well as voters receiving information through candidate profile statements, digital platforms, and local organisations and media, candidates also play a role in helping voters understand who they are and what they stand for. Ensuring candidates are well informed about the role of elected members, and about the key issues facing their council, is likely to enhance their ability to develop informed perspectives on a range of policy areas – and to communicate their positions to voters.

The VoteLocal.co.nz website provides information to improve the knowledge of candidates, including a Candidate’s Guide, Inclusive Campaigning Guidelines, and a Guide to Local Government. Some councils have also provided events for prospective candidates to give them an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the role. In some Australian states, there are mandatory candidate training requirements aimed at helping candidates understand the role and responsibilities of being an elected member.

Case study: Queensland’s mandatory candidate training

In Queensland, all local government candidates must complete training about the role and responsibilities of councillors within six months of the election. Mandatory training was a recommendation that came out of the Queensland Crime and Corruption Commission’s ‘Operation Belcarra’ Report (2017).

The mandatory training provides information on obligations as a candidate and councillor, accountability, decision-making and other responsibilities to help ensure councillors and council employees can deliver on the needs of our communities. The training takes approximately 90 minutes. See more at: <https://www.localgovernment.qld.gov.au/for-the-community/so-you-want-to-be-a-councillor>

Out of scope factors

These factors also contribute to ensuring voters have sufficient understanding of candidates and their policy positions but are out of direct scope of this work.

- // Unlike many similar countries, in New Zealand candidates do not generally stand under the banner of a central government party. Party affiliation can give greater clarity to electors about what policies candidates stand for.
- // The nature of representation arrangements (including wards/constituencies and Māori wards). This can reduce the number of candidates a voter needs to choose from, and smaller wards enable greater engagement with voters.
- // How councils report decisions, particularly over how elected members vote on particular issues.

Issue 2 consultation questions

3. How should voters receive better information on candidates and their policy positions and whose role should it be?
4. Is it important to improve candidate knowledge of local government, and if so, how should this be done?

Issue 3: Voting methods

Local elections can be more complicated for voters than parliamentary elections with the number of elected positions and candidates, and (in some cases) a mix of voting systems (i.e. FPP and STV elections).

Currently, the Local Electoral Act 2001 provides for local authorities to use one or more voting methods, and lists postal voting, booth voting and electronic voting. This is subject to the method being explicitly allowed for in regulations, and currently the Local Electoral Regulations 2001 only enables postal voting, booth voting, or a combination of both. All local elections have been conducted by postal voting since 1995.

Postal voting can present a barrier to voting given challenges with reliability and access. This is compounded by the decline of the postal system, which significantly threatens the future viability of postal voting in New Zealand.

The Cabinet Paper on the Government response to the Inquiry on the 2022 Local Elections stated, “Postal voting is becoming increasingly untenable for local elections” and noted that further work needs to be undertaken to ensure future local elections can be delivered. The potential that NZ Post could not meet the statutory timeframes for the 2025 local elections saw the delivery period for voting papers extended. This is a short-term solution given the continuing decline of post.

To counter the reduction of post boxes many councils now provide drop-off points for completed voting papers at supermarkets, malls and libraries. The recent 2024 Tauranga City Council elections had 45 locations drop off locations including major supermarkets. The results were marked: 86% of voting papers were returned via the orange bins, 10% through NZ Post, and 4% through DX Mail.

Figure 6 Number of NZ Post boxes 2010 - 2023

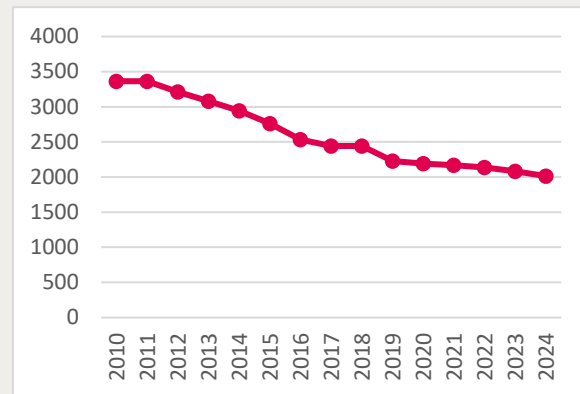


Figure 7 NZ Post mail volumes 2001-2023

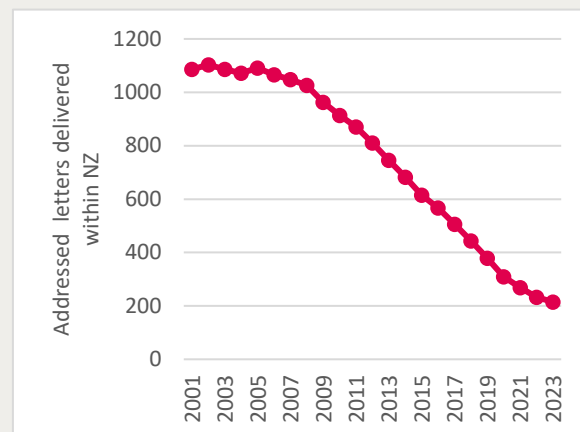
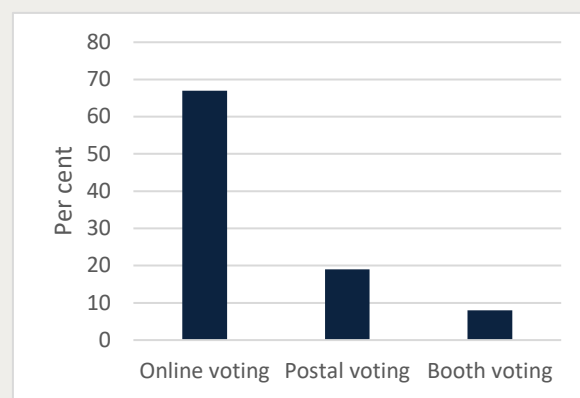


Figure 8 Preferred method of voting (2022 LGNZ post-election survey)



The Panel for the Review into the Future for Local Government stated that the postal voting system “is not adequate for the next 30 years”. It encouraged decision-makers to explore alternative options for distributing and receiving voting papers that are fit-for-purpose and accessible. The Panel specifically suggested exploring electronic and online voting systems, while noting risks associated with online voting would need to be managed to retain the integrity of the voting system.

While online voting is often suggested as a viable alternative to postal voting, all attempts since the mid-1990s to trial it for local elections have been unsuccessful, largely due to security or cost issues. The recent investigation by the NSW Electoral Commission investigated whether internet voting was feasible for the 2027 state and local elections and concluded “there is no sound basis on which to contemplate a large-scale programme [internet voting] in New South Wales in the short term.” This was largely due to concerns about security and voter understanding of the process.

History of online voting in local elections in New Zealand

- 2013** The Online Voting Working Party was established on 4 September 2013 to consider the feasibility of online voting and proposed trialling online voting at the 2016 election
- 2014** In response to the Online Voting Working Party’s report, the Government agreed to work to enable a small number of local authorities to trial online voting in the 2016 local elections
- 2016** The Government decided not to enable a trial of online voting in the 2016 local elections as the trial requirements and the requirements of the Local Electoral Act 2001 could not be met in time.
- 2018** Nine councils (Auckland, Gisborne District, Hamilton City, Marlborough District, Matamata-Piako District, Palmerston North City, Selwyn District, Tauranga City Council and Wellington City) jointly sought to trial online voting at the 2019 election. This did not proceed due to funding and other constraints.
- 2023** The Justice Committee inquiry into the 2022 local elections recommended the Government consider funding a trial of online voting in local elections. Cabinet did not agree with this recommendation, stating “The Government does not consider a trial of online voting as an effective use of public resources and time when there are significant concerns”

The Electoral Commission provided this perspective to the working group:

“The search for online voting solutions that are robust, cost effective and that meet internationally accepted standards around security and voter verification continues and has not reached a point where the move could be taken without putting trust and confidence in the electoral system at risk.”

Andrew Clark, Director General of the Government Communications Security Bureau, offered this view to the working group:

“The GCSB recognises the legitimate democratic interest in online voting and the potential accessibility advantages it may bring. However, a move to online voting would expose our local body elections to greater risk from malicious cyber actors with a range of motivations.

Implementation of online voting for local elections would require significant uplift in cyber security measures across the local government sector to ensure there was sufficient cyber security resilience to protect both local democracy and confidence in our democratic systems.”

Key elements of this issue

Postal system decline means voting methods must be reconsidered

There are three broad options for the voting methods that can be used for local elections, outlined below. Each of these options could be implemented in combination with others or as a single approach. There could be a standard national approach across all councils, or it could be left to individual councils to make their own decisions (as is currently the case). There are strong advantages in having a single system nationwide, in terms of voter understanding and the ability to pool investment.

Options for voting methods

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Postal voting	<p>Relatively inexpensive voting method and relatively straightforward to administer.</p> <p>Convenient for voters because they can vote in their own time in their own home without having to stand in line at a polling booth.</p>	<p>Declining capacity of NZ Post to deliver voting papers within timeframes and fewer post boxes available to receive completed voting papers.</p> <p>Concerns with the integrity of postal voting, specifically the inability to be certain that all voting papers are completed by the correct voter.</p> <p>Requires up-to-date voter registration to receive voting papers.</p>
In-person/booth voting	<p>Not affected by the issues of a declining postal system, or other barriers the postal system creates.</p> <p>Enables booths to be located at key locations for people to promote voting.</p>	<p>Delivery of in-person/booth voting is significantly more expensive than postal voting.</p> <p>Could be inconvenient for voters (who would have to go to a voting location), particularly those in remote areas or who cannot easily travel.</p>
Online voting	<p>Convenient method of voting for most people, which may lead to greater participation.</p>	<p>Particular concerns with the security risks posed by online voting.</p> <p>Significant establishment costs.</p> <p>Creates barriers for those without access or the ability to access the online platform.</p> <p>Cost and disruption if election is declared void due to an irregularity.</p>

Potential enhancements could improve postal voting in the short term

There are other options to improve the current system of postal voting, although these would not address the long-term, significant challenge of a declining postal system.

Options to improve the existing postal system

Delivering voting papers

- Offering the option of emailing voting papers or providing the option of downloading voting papers. This would be similar to overseas voters in parliamentary elections, who can download (and upload) their voting papers. This option could be limited to overseas voters (which the Government has recently agreed to consider, as resources allow) or extended more widely.
- Simplifying the legislative requirements for re-issuing voting papers, so they can be ordinary votes rather than special votes.
- Enable physical locations that can re-issue voting papers to those who have not received their voting papers in the mail (either due to a failure by NZ Post or a change of address).

Receiving completed voting papers

- Offering the ability to upload completed voting papers electronically (again, similar to process for overseas voters in parliamentary elections) or emailing a scan of completed voting papers. As with the electronic delivery of voting papers, this option could be limited to overseas voters, or extended more widely.
- Expanding the number of drop-off points for completed voting papers (for example, at supermarkets, malls and libraries), to make up for the reduced number of post boxes.

Out of scope factors

These factors also contribute to ease or access to voting but are out of direct scope of this work. This is in part because there is not a common view across local government on these issues.

// The voting system used (STV and FPP). This can particularly complicate or confuse when elections on the same voting utilise different systems.

// Lowering the voting age. This could help encourage young people's involvement and interest in local government, noting the participation of younger voters is lower than average participation of all voters. Research has indicated that the earlier people vote, the more likely they are to become regular voters.

Issue 3 consultation questions

5. Given the challenges outlined, what should be the future method (or methods) of voting in local elections, and why?
6. Should the voting method (or methods) be nationally consistent or decided locally, and why?
7. What short-term improvements should be made to the postal voting system, until a permanent solution can be implemented?

Issue 4: Administration and promotion of elections

Local authorities are responsible for administering local elections in their areas. Administration includes conducting elections, preparing voting papers, counting votes, assessing special votes, and responding to information requests from candidates and the public.

Most councils outsource all or part of their role administering elections to private election service providers. Currently these are Independent Election Services Ltd and Electionz.com. This can include outsourcing the role of electoral officer under the Local Electoral Act 2021, and in the 2022 local elections, 70 of the 78 councils did this. While the other councils appointed a staff member to act as electoral officer, most of these contracted a private company to undertake aspects of the administration of the election.

The Local Government Act 2002 was amended in 2009 to explicitly make the promotion of elections a responsibility of council chief executives. This role involves “facilitating and fostering representative and substantial elector participation in elections and polls” s42(2)(da) Local Government Act 2002. Councils tend to have two stages to their promotion activity – stage one encourages people to stand as candidates, and stage two encourages people to vote. The Electoral Commission also undertakes a nationwide enrolment campaign as part of local elections.

Investment in promoting local elections is significantly less than investment by the Electoral Commission in promoting

The roles different organisations play in the administration of local elections

Department of Internal Affairs (DIA): administers electoral legislation, approves format of voting papers, provides a vote-counting computer programme, and provides information and responds to queries.

Local authorities: conduct local elections via the electoral officer role (with functions often contracted out to private companies). Councils also facilitate and foster elector participation (a role given to council chief executives in 2019).

Private election service providers: perform administrative tasks as contracted by local authorities, often including the electoral officer role.

Electoral Commission: maintains the electoral roll (keeps voter details updated), promotes voter enrolment, and assesses some special vote declarations to determine eligibility to vote.

Who invests what in promoting elections?

2022 Local Elections

	Total spend	Per elector
Electoral Commission. (enrolment campaign)	\$1.7m	\$0.43
<i>Example councils</i>		
Auckland Council	\$600,000	\$0.53
Nelson City Council	\$20,000	\$0.51
Tasman District Council	\$23,000	\$0.49
Marlborough District Council	\$11,200	\$0.29
Dunedin City Council	\$45,000	\$0.47

2023 General Election

Electoral Commission (includes enrolment and Māori Electoral Option campaign)	\$11.9m	\$4.13
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participation in national elections. In general elections, political parties also invest significantly in promotion. The parties inside the current parliament declared promotion expenses of over \$15m for the 2023 election. This includes public funding of \$3.5m through the broadcasting allocation. Individual candidates declared a further \$3.45m of local expenditure. While local elections in larger cities, particularly when competitive, can see high levels of declared expenditure, local elections generally see significantly lower campaign spending by candidates.

The Panel for the Review into the Future for Local Government suggested that the administration of local elections should be conducted by the Electoral Commission. It specifically noted the functions it felt the commission should undertake including design and oversight, standard setting, promotional activity, specific initiatives to promote diversity of candidates, determination of the election method, and the conduct of the election process.

The Justice Committee, in their [Inquiry into the 2022 Local Elections](#), also recommended the Government consider making the Electoral Commission responsible for administration of local elections. It suggested that (at a minimum) the Electoral Commission should be responsible for: oversight of local elections; regulation of election service providers; and management of complaint procedures. The Government has agreed to consider this but has indicated it would be a long-term project that would take place only when work programme priorities allow.

Key elements of this issue

Who should administer local elections?

Councils' resource constraints play into decisions about how much is invested in the administration and promotion of local elections. These resource constraints limit how much councils can spend on election promotion in comparison to what is spent on parliamentary elections. They also lead councils to engage private election service providers to provide many of the administrative functions. Discomfort has been expressed about the bulk of local elections being run by private businesses.

The devolved system for local elections can also lead to inconsistency between councils in messaging, and interpretation of legislation and rules. There may be value in creating greater consistencies in the administration and promotion of elections between parliamentary elections and local elections. This could deliver financial efficiencies, more cohesive promotion, and greater voter turnout.

Options for who is responsible for the administration of local elections

These options could stand alone or be combined. For example, some outsourcing combined with either council or electoral commission administration. The organisation charged with electoral administration could also deliver promotion or this function could be separate.

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Councils administer elections in house	<p>Election administration can be better tailored to local circumstances.</p> <p>The running of elections would be subject to all current accountability and oversight processes, e.g. LGOIMA information requests.</p>	<p>Electoral law may be interpreted and applied inconsistently nationally.</p> <p>High costs of technology and equipment to process votes.</p> <p>Level of investment in elections would vary from council to council, based on resource constraints.</p> <p>Many councils would struggle to carry out all the tasks currently performed by private election providers.</p>
Councils outsource election administration to commercial third parties	<p>An ability to tailor election administration to local circumstances, but with the benefits of scale and greater consistency.</p> <p>Lower cost to access equipment and technology.</p>	<p>Electoral law may be interpreted and applied inconsistently nationally.</p> <p>Level of investment in elections would vary from council to council, based on resource constraints.</p> <p>Not all aspects of election administration are subject to all current accountability and oversight processes.</p>
The Electoral Commission administers elections	<p>Access to the Commission's existing knowledge, expertise and resources in election administration as well as increased trust in local elections due to the Commission's reputation.</p> <p>National consistency in local investment and interpretation of the law.</p> <p>Central and local government elections could have a similar look and feel, which may support greater turnout for local elections.</p>	<p>Would require the Commission to have a greater local presence, which could increase costs, potentially requiring council funding.</p> <p>More challenging to understand and meet local needs and preferences.</p> <p>It may be less practical to retain elements of choice provided for in the Act, including voting methods and the voting system.</p>

Who should be responsible for the promotion of local elections?

Promotion of local elections is also impacted by councils' resource constraints. These resource constraints limit how much councils can spend on election promotion in comparison to what is spent on parliamentary elections.

Options for who could be responsible for promoting local elections

Councils (in house)

Councils could continue to be responsible for facilitating and fostering representative and substantial elector participation. The advantage of this is that councils have specific insight into what will engage local voters to participate. The disadvantage is that councils do not have the financial resources to invest substantively in the promotion of their local elections. Investment would likely remain inconsistent across the country, depending on each council's budget, and remain much lower in comparison to the promotion of parliamentary elections.

A national umbrella organisation (either funded by councils or centrally)

A national umbrella organisation could have responsibility for the promotion of all local elections. This could be an expansion of an existing organisation or a new one, and could be funded by councils, by government, or a combination of both. There would be similar advantages to that of the Electoral Commission, that come with centralisation, such as consistency and efficiencies from pooling resources, but it could have a specialist focus on the promotion of local elections. This would enable national consistency of the turnout campaign, and potential combination with other roles such as wider promotion of what local government does and why it is important. In the past Local Government New Zealand and Taituarā have collaborated to support councils to deliver promotional campaigns in elections.

The Electoral Commission

Having the Electoral Commission responsible for the promotion of both national and local elections may result in a greater level of promotional activity and a raised profile for local elections through nationwide coordinated events, and hopefully, greater voter participation. However, it may be difficult for the Electoral Commission to suitably promote individual elections across the country, where knowledge of local issues assists effective voter engagement.

Issue 4 consultation questions

8. Who should administer local elections, and why?
9. Who should be responsible for promoting local elections, and why?

Issue 5: Four-year terms (including transition and implementation)

There is no optimum term length. Term length is a balancing act between maximising the productive period between elections which enables councils to deliver on agreed plans, and elections playing their role as a key accountability mechanism for elected members. Having a large overlap in productive windows between central government and local government can foster greater collaboration and increase joint delivery. It also decreases the impact of changes in direction after elections at either level.

New Zealand’s three-year term for local government is short by international standards. For instance, most OECD nations have a term length of four or more years for their local governments.

The Panel for the Review into the Future for Local Government recommended a move to a four-year term for local government as this would *“improve members’ abilities to make decisions for the long term by providing a longer window to get things done.”* LGNZ members agreed with the report’s recommendation and called for the local government term to shift to four years from the 2025 elections. This echoed a remit adopted at LGNZ’s 2020 AGM.

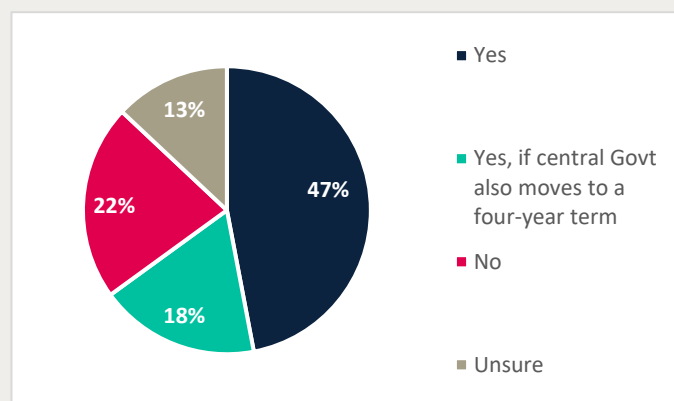
The longstanding practice for constitutional change would suggest a move to four-year terms requires broad support from both the community and across parliament. A poll testing public support for four-year terms was commissioned as part of this work in August 2024. This poll by Curia Market Research Ltd of 1,000 NZ adults aged 18+ found that 47% supported four-year terms, but 65% would support them if central government also had a four-year term.

The Act Coalition agreement requires the Government to introduce the Constitution (Enabling a 4-Year Term) Amendment Bill shortly and support this through its first reading. This presents an opportunity to move to a four-year term for both central and local government.

Local government term lengths for a selection of countries, states or provinces

Three years	New Zealand
Four years	Australia, United Kingdom, Canada (most provinces and territories), Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Switzerland, Netherlands, Spain, United States (many states including New York, California, and Pennsylvania), Japan, South Korea
Five years	Ireland, Germany (all states except Bayern), Italy, Austria
Six years	Germany (Bayern), France

Figure 9 Public views on four-year terms for New Zealand councils



Key elements

Alignment with central government elections

Different term lengths between local and central government would mean key events and processes (e.g. planning and budgeting cycles, and elections) would align differently every term. This makes it highly desirable that if central government moves to a four-year term, local government does too.

Options for aligning local and central government four-year terms

There are three main options for relative timing of elections:

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Option 1: Central government and local government elections one year apart - <i>status quo</i>	Enables an overlap of three years of councils' and central government's terms, reducing the shocks from a change in direction after an election.	The overlapping in preparation time for elections could make it more challenging for a single agency to deliver both central and local elections.
Option 2: Central government and local government elections two years apart	<p>Would give people certainty of when elections would occur as they would be evenly spaced.</p> <p>Local elections would be less likely to be dominated by central government issues.</p> <p>Midterm changes could exert a moderating influence</p>	Potential for significant change in relationships and policy every two years, which could undermine the relationship between central and local government and impact on the ability for joint delivery.
Option 3: Central government and local government elections at the same time (either concurrently or in the same year)	<p>The higher turnout of central elections could result in higher turnout in local elections.</p> <p>Organising elections at the same time, or close together, could reduce costs.</p> <p>Alignment between central government and local government terms would enable four years of stability, which could support increased delivery and partnership.</p>	<p>Local elections could be dominated by central government issues, crowding out focus on important local issues.</p> <p>The parliamentary term is not fixed, so it could be challenging to align all elections to the same date without changes to constitutional arrangements for central government elections.</p> <p>Filling out multiple voting papers could put people off voting in local elections or from voting at.</p>

Transition

We need to consider how local government (and central government) could transition to a four-year term. This will depend on the relative timing chosen and the point at which a decision is made and may mean that a transition involves some longer or shorter interim terms.

Implementation

Current council planning cycles (particularly the LTP) and other legal requirements are currently structured around a three-year term. There are three main options for councils' current recurring requirements: remain on current timeframes (adjusted to fit the new four-year cycle), modify the requirement in some other way, or remove it.

Ideas on transition

We're interested in views on how these (and other) recurring obligations for councils should be adjusted in the implementation of four-year terms.

	Current timings	External inputs/influences
The Long-term Plan	Every three years (with a 10-30-year horizon for key elements)	
The Regional Land Transport Plan	Every six years (with a 10-year horizon)	Government Policy Statement on Land Transport (updated every three years, with a 10-year horizon)
The Regional Public Transport Plan	Must be kept current for at least three years in advance (but not more than 10 years)	Government Policy Statement on Land Transport (updated every three years, with a 10-year horizon)
District Plans and Regional Policy Statements	Review every 10 years	National Direction, RMA amendments
Future Development Strategies	Review every three years, with a full update every six years	NPS-Urban Development, LTP, land use plans
Representation reviews	Every six years (with the option to review every three years)	The Census (every five years)

Accountability

Elections are the key accountability mechanism between elected members and their communities. Other checks and balances on councils and elected members include: Ministerial Powers to Assist and Intervene; codes of conduct; standing orders; and the power and functions of the Ombudsman and the Auditor-General.

Moving to four-year terms reduces how often the community can exercise this accountability mechanism. It is therefore reasonable to consider other accountability mechanisms as part of a move to four-year terms. New or strengthened accountability mechanisms could increase public and central government support for this change. Central government is considering enhanced accountability mechanisms as part of the proposed Constitution (Enabling a 4-Year Term) Amendment Bill.

Options to address accountability

- Retain status quo measures, including ministerial powers to assist and intervene, and the codes of conduct.
- Strengthen status quo measures, including giving the Minister wider or stronger powers to assist and intervene, strengthening codes of conduct and the consequences for breaching them, and giving chairs of meetings stronger powers to maintain order.
- Enable recall elections. These elections are used overseas to remove elected representatives during their term and are triggered by a petition signed by a certain percentage of the electorate.
- Empower an external body or stewardship agency with stronger oversight functions and powers to hold elected members to account e.g. a new Parliamentary Commissioner, or changes to the role of the Ombudsman or Auditor-General.

Issue 5 consultation questions

10. Which of the three timing options, for a four-year term, do you prefer?
11. How should councils' budget and planning cycles be adjusted to a four-year term?
12. Do four-year terms for local councils require increased accountability mechanisms, and if so, which do you support?

Consultation questions

Issue 1: The public's understanding of local government and why it's important

1. What should be done to improve understanding of local government and its value, and who should hold responsibility for this?
2. What should be done, given the decline in local media, to increase visibility of local government work and local elections?

Issue 2: Understanding candidates and their policies

3. How should voters receive better information on candidates and their policy positions and whose role should it be?
4. Is it important to improve candidate knowledge of local government, and if so, how should this be done?

Issue 3: Voting methods

5. Given the challenges outlined, what should be the future voting method (or methods) of voting in local elections, and why?
6. Should the voting method (or methods) be nationally consistent or decided locally, and why?
7. What short-term improvements should be made to the postal voting system, until a permanent solution can be implemented?

Issue 4: Administration and promotion of elections

8. Who should administer local elections, and why?
9. Who should be responsible for promoting local elections, and why?

Issue 5: Four-year terms (including transition and implementation)

10. Which of the three timing options, for a four-year term, do you prefer?
11. How should councils' budget and planning cycles be adjusted to a four-year term?
12. Do four-year terms for local councils require increased accountability mechanisms, and if so, which do you support?

Additional questions

13. Do you have any other ideas or options to improve participation in local elections?

