

14 February 2023

Committee Secretariat
Justice Committee
Parliament Buildings
WELLINGTON 6143

Dear Sir/Madam

Submission from the Manawatū District Council on the Inquiry into the 2022 Local Elections

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the Justice Committee’s Inquiry into the 2022 Local Elections.

Low Voter Turnout

The Manawatū District Council believes that increased localisation of decision-making will increase voter turnout. LGNZ’s discussion document titled “Reinvigorating local democracy: The case for localising power and decision-making to councils and communities” (July 2019) notes that “the more decentralised a country is, the more citizens are interested in local elections and the more they vote.” The current reform trend of greater centralisation and narrowing of local authority functions may be a contributing factor to declining voter turnout.

COVID-19 has likely impacted the rate of voter participation due to increasing isolation; both between individuals and between local authorities and residents. Voting has traditionally been a social activity and this may have been impacted by the pandemic and restrictions imposed in response to the pandemic.

Voting System

The Manawatū District Council does not support the Single Transferable Voting system (STV), as detailed in sections 5A and 5B of the Local Electoral Act 2001 (LEA 2001). STV is confusing for voters to understand and does not provide greater representation than First Past the Post (FPP) in the context of local elections.

Most local authorities do not receive a large amount of candidates and see lower voter turnout (compared to national elections). One of the issues compounding this is the general confusion from the public on what local government does, what its purpose is, and what value there is in voting. The STV voting system contributes to this confusion and is counter-productive to attempts to increase voter participation.

The Manawatū District Council supports the status quo, with local authorities having the power under the LEA 2001 to adopt either FPP or STV.

Civics Education

The Manawatū District Council believes that civics education should be subject to further research and would be a valuable addition to New Zealand’s educational curriculums within schools. Civics education should also be made available to adults, and should cover both national and local elections.

There are concerns around the ability of educational institutions to provide civics education in an impartial manner. With this in mind, civics education should be subject to wide-scale research and any future curriculums should be developed in consultation with the Ministry of Education and political actors (e.g., political parties and local authorities) in order to ensure that there is a general acceptance of their integrity before they are implemented.

Civics education could also contribute to reversing the alarming growth of anti-democratic sentiment within New Zealand. The last two years have seen illegitimate challenges to our system of governance, both towards central government and local authorities. Some incidents of note include the Wellington riot that followed the protest on Parliament grounds in February 2022, threats towards local officials leading up the 2022 local elections, and acts of violence towards Council staff.

The Manawatū District Council supports recommendations 4 and 5 made within Taituarā’s draft submission, as below:

Recommendations: Civics Education

That the Justice Committee

- 4. agree that New Zealand undertake foundational research in the state of civic awareness and knowledge both in school-level students and in adults**
- 5. agree that the Government conduct an inquiry into the role of civics education in the curriculum and effective teaching and learning of civic education.**

Voter Age

The Manawatū District Council is generally opposed to the lowering of the voter age for local elections. Any lowering of the voting age for national and local elections should be preceded by the implementation of comprehensive civics education. The whole community would benefit from civics education and there is a general lack of understanding of local authority roles and responsibilities.

Additionally, any lowering of the voter age should be tested first for national elections, before consideration is given to local elections.

The Manawatū District Council does not wish to be heard in support of this submission.

Please feel free to contact our Principal Governance Adviser (Ash.Garstang@mdc.govt.nz) if you have any questions or concerns about this submission.

Yours sincerely

[Helens signature]