

Our ref: R24/0049; SUB-760

16 August 2024

Endorsed by the LGNSW Board
on 06 September 2024

**Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament House**

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Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into proposals to increase voter engagement, participation and confidence

Thank you for the opportunity to make a brief submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into proposals to increase voter engagement, participation and confidence.

Local Government NSW (LGNSW) is the peak body for local government in New South Wales, representing all 128 general purpose councils as well as related entities. LGNSW facilitates the development of an effective community-based system of local government in the state.

This submission is informed by the policy positions of LGNSW. Please note this submission is provided as a draft, pending endorsement by the LGNSW Board. The Committee is asked to consider this current version. If there are any changes following Board endorsement these will be separately provided to the Committee.

Comment

Local government is elected to shape, serve, support and give voice to communities, to whom they are democratically accountable. It is the position of LGNSW that the NSW and Australian governments should respect local government as an equal sphere of government and must not seek to impose decisions on local government that fundamentally affect the ability of democratically elected councillors to reflect the views of their communities on local government matters.

Local government elections should be conducted in a manner as similar as possible to State elections to make democratic participation similar for voters and to support



voter turnout. This must include avoiding any moves to introduce universal postal voting for local government, which risks disenfranchising voters through discouraging voter participation and diminishing the status of local government.

The previous round of local government elections (2021) unfortunately saw four uncontested elections in NSW, where no election was held due to the number of candidates being lower or equal to the number of vacancies. In these instances, the candidates are declared elected without a vote. In many cases, the workload, administrative and regulatory requirements and low remuneration for local government councillors in NSW mean that a career as a councillor is not feasible. The effects of this are being most urgently experienced in smaller, rural councils.

To attract a diverse array of talented candidates for election, LGNSW continues to call for the local government sector to be able to offer conditions and compensation comparable to that available from the work activities mayors and councillors forgo in order to serve on councils.

LGNSW has also called for the NSW and Australian Governments to implement measures such as information sessions, published materials (in multiple languages) and training programs to increase the diversity of candidates standing for elections and electors' knowledge and awareness of the electoral process.

Disappointingly, recent years have seen an alarming trend of extremism and disruption targeting all levels of government, including councils. As the closest level of government to the community, councils greatly value their role in giving voice to their residents' aspirations and holding events and meetings that are accessible and available to all members of the community. However, a number of councillors have raised concerns about the requirement for an address at which they can be contacted to be printed on their electoral material, noting that this presents a risk to their safety and the safety of their family or colleagues. In line with resolution of the 2023 LGNSW Annual Conference, LGNSW would encourage the NSW Government to review this requirement and consider whether other methods of contact (such as an email address) could be more appropriate, and may indeed encourage a wider range of candidates to stand for election at all levels of government.

Past resolutions of LGNSW Annual Conferences

Resolutions of LGNSW Annual Conferences in past years that are relevant to the terms of reference for this inquiry include the following.

- **R15/2023 – Albury City Council – Requirement for candidate/councillor address on electoral material**

That Local Government NSW calls on the NSW Electoral Commission (NSWEC) to review the requirements for candidates standing for election to include their personal address on electoral material as their only valid contact option, in an endeavour to assist with ensuring the safety of candidates and ultimately Councillors.

- **X6/2023 – Bega Valley Shire Council – Role of councils and election information**

That Local Government NSW:

1. Works with the State and Federal Government, including the Office of Local Government and the NSW and Australian Electoral commissions, to undertake a broad education campaign on an ongoing basis to increase the community awareness and understanding of:
 - a. the role and responsibilities of each level of government
 - b. the election processes for each level of government including details on what a ballot paper looks like, how above and below the line voting works, and how preferential voting works
 - c. the role of Councillors
2. Prioritises efforts to increase understanding on the above matters, particularly in the lead up to the 2023 Local Government elections.

- **R44/2022 – Kempsey Shire Council – What is your council's role and what is your opportunity**

That Local Government NSW works with the State and Federal Governments, including the NSW Office of Local Government and the NSW and Australian Electoral Commissions, to undertake a multimedia education program on an ongoing basis, particularly in the lead up to the 2024 Local Government Elections, to increase the community members awareness and understanding of:

1. Understanding the role and responsibilities of:
 - a. Local Government
 - b. State Government
 - c. Federal Government
2. Understanding the election processes for:
 - a. Local Government

- b. State Government
- c. Federal Government
3. Including:
 - a. What does a ballot paper look like
 - b. What is voting above the line and how does it work
 - c. What is voting below the line and how does it work
 - d. What is preferential voting and how does it work
4. The role of Councillors:
 - a. Who are they?
 - b. Why are they running?
 - c. Can they make Decisions for the whole community?
5. Why it is important to make a valid vote - Every vote counts

- **R43/2022 - Willoughby City Council - Better election materials**

That Local Government NSW advocates to the NSW Electoral Commission, the Chair of the State Parliament Standing Committee on Electoral Matters and the Minister for Local Government requesting their assistance in ensuring that:

1. NSW Electoral Commission information for voters is visible inside and outside all polling places and online for the State General Election, expected in March 2023 and any subsequent Local Government Election where the NSW Electoral Commission is engaged by a Council to run that Local Government Election.
2. that this information is published online and at voting places in English and in the other major languages spoken by NSW voters as recorded in the most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics Census (i.e. 1% or more of the population in that LGA).
3. the specific polling booths that have non-English speaking officials and at what times they are available to speak with voters is also clearly available online and at voting places.

- **R16/2020 – Georges River Council – Protecting local democracy at the 2021 local government elections**

That Local Government NSW:

- (a) Calls for the NSW Government to protect local democracy by ensuring councils and communities retain choice in their method of voting to encourage more people to participate in the electoral process.

- (b) Calls for the NSW Government to ensure local government elections are conducted in a manner as similar as possible to State elections to make democratic participation simple for voters and support voter turnout.
- (c) Opposes the introduction of universal postal voting which risks disenfranchising voters through discouraging voter participation and diminishing the status of local government.
- (d) Calls for the NSW Government to fund any increase in the costs of local government elections beyond the rate peg imposed on councils.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a brief submission to this inquiry. For further information please email policy@lgnsw.org.au.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D Thomas'.

Damian Thomas
Director Advocacy