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Teena koutou katoa,

Submission from Waikato District Council on Inquiry into the 2025 Local Elections

Introduction

Waikato District Council (Council) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Inquiry into the 2025 Local Elections Terms of Reference.

Council is firmly committed to strengthening democratic participation and ensuring that local government elections foster strong community confidence in the system of local democracy. Council supports initiatives that not only improve voter engagement but also help communities better understand the value, relevance, and everyday impact of local government in their lives. By enhancing public awareness and trust in the electoral process, we can encourage broader participation in local democracy.

We understand the Inquiry will examine the law and administrative procedures for the conduct of the 2025 Local Elections, including matters outlined in the Terms of Reference (TOR). Council's submission outlines several areas that we believe would materially improve the electoral system, based on our experience in the 2025 local elections and previous electoral cycles. If these matters are not currently reflected in the TOR, Council recommends the scope of the Inquiry be expanded to ensure they are adequately considered.

Improving Voter Roll Accuracy and Oversight

During the 2025 local elections, we observed a notable number of voters who believed they had been removed from the roll or incorrectly transferred, resulting in their special votes being disallowed. Roll accuracy is the foundation of voter confidence. When voters cannot rely on the integrity of the roll, they cannot trust the outcome of the election. For this reason, Council supports the improvements to local election processes that include stronger scrutiny, clearer accountability, and more proactive maintenance of voter rolls by the Electoral Commission.

Participation and Special Voting Challenges

Council acknowledges that participation in local government elections has been declining over several election cycles; this is both a national and local issue. In response, Council implemented a range of initiatives in 2025 to broaden access to voting, including additional rural ballot box locations and drive-through voting options. While these initiatives increased the number of votes cast from the previous election, overall turnout did not meet our expectations.

Special votes were a particular concern during the 2025 elections, with a high number ultimately being disallowed. The primary reasons for this were missing declaration forms, instances where voters appeared to have been removed from the electoral roll, and delays in the Electoral Commission processing newly submitted enrolment forms, despite these being lodged within the required legislative timeframe.

Council sees value in exploring mechanisms that would enable overseas voters to participate during the election period, aligning local election processes more closely with the provisions currently available for national elections.

Voting Methods and Postal Delivery Challenges

Council considers that the current postal voting system remains restrictive, particularly for rural communities with inconsistent mail services. It also notes that a previous booth-only voting trial undertaken by another council demonstrated the risks of limiting voting methods, with voter turnout falling from around 80% to below 30%.

In light of these challenges, Council supports a mixed delivery and return system, including electronic and online voting options, to enhance accessibility and promote equitable participation.

Use of Telephone Dictation Voting

Council recognises the challenges that our community with accessibility needs such as blind, vision-impaired, and physically disabled residents experience, and notes the value of alternative participation methods. While telephone dictation voting is not widely used locally, Council supports broader adoption and promotion of accessible provisions where feasible.

Continued use of mobile voting booths

Council strongly supports the continued use of mobile voting stations, which provide essential face-to-face engagement, improve access, and increase collaboration with our neighbouring councils. We are aware that some of our rural communities' travel over an hour to cast their special votes. Council considers there is value in developing a more consistent national approach to ensure rural voices are not disadvantaged in the electoral system.

Electoral Integrity (including disinformation and misinformation)

Council considers that inconsistent communication across councils contributes to public confusion and increases the risk of misinformation and disinformation. Council supports a national communications campaign with consistent messaging and shared tools, such as design templates, for councils to use. However, Council notes that previous attempts at national campaigns offering this support have been prohibitively expensive, forcing councils to rely on inhouse resources instead. Communities' engagement in local democracy delivers a national benefit, and councils should not be financially disadvantaged for supporting that benefit.

Relationships between Councils and Electoral Agencies responsible for conducting voting

Council is currently limited to two independent contractors for the provision of election services nationwide. Although the working relationship with Independent Election Services is generally positive, Council has identified areas for improvement and will raise these directly with the provider. This restricted provider market limits innovation, responsiveness, and service quality.

Concerns regarding the transfer of responsibility to the Electoral Commission

Council acknowledges the 2025 Local Government NZ's Electoral Reform Working Group (ERWG) recommendation to transfer responsibility for running local elections to the Electoral Commission. Council considers that significant improvements required, to the accuracy and service performance of the electoral rolls, before any additional responsibilities are considered.

Council is concerned that shifting local election delivery to the Electoral Commission would increase overall costs while still requiring councils to recruit local electoral officials to ensure local representation. This would leave key operational pressures largely unchanged. Centralising responsibility also risks further eroding localism, which is fundamental to the integrity of local government processes.

Council strongly recommends that any changes to the transfer of responsibilities be developed in partnership with the local government sector. This will help ensure clear and effective roles for both the Electoral Commission and local authorities, and importantly, support improved service delivery at an affordable cost.

Council supports efforts to improve voter roll accuracy, strengthen election delivery processes, and clarify agency roles as these steps are essential to restoring public confidence in election integrity. However, Council considers that a fully nationally delivered model would

risk undermining the local responsiveness and community connection that are fundamental to effective local government elections.

Pre-election Reports and Candidate Information

The legislation requires councils to prepare a pre-election report and to produce candidate information booklets. However, the pre-election report largely duplicates information already available in existing documents such as the Annual Report, Long-Term Plan, and the Annual Plan, creating unnecessary duplication, workload, and cost. Council considers it more efficient to draw on existing publicly available information rather than produce a standalone report.

While candidate booklets will always be needed, there is an opportunity to improve the quality and clarity of candidate information to ensure communities are better informed about the people, policies, and positions they are voting for.

Council recognises that some locally specific information, such as campaign expenditure limits and election signage rules must be provided. This information could be provided through the Electoral Commission website, with links to each council's website, reducing duplication while ensuring statutory obligations are met.

Conclusion

Council firmly believes that by continuing to strengthen existing processes and modernising voting systems, we can improve participation and confidence in local government elections.

We look forward to continued dialogue and partnership in this important matter.

Further information

Should the Justice Committee require clarification on the submission or any additional information, please contact Gaylene Kanawa, Democracy Manager/Electoral Officer at Gaylene.Kanawa@waikatodc.govt.nz.

Ngāa mihi,



Aksel Bech
Mayor

Council Approval and Reference

This submission was approved by the Submission Forum on 27 February 2026