
Project title: Increase Participation in Democratic Processes
Strategy area: Governance

1. The Proposal

The focus of the project is to:

- review the opportunities identified from the findings and recommendations of the Justice and Electoral Committee's inquiry into the 2004 local authority elections
- identify, develop and implement options to increase voter participation in local authority elections
- support initiatives that will result in a simpler and more effective election process
- develop in partnership with Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ) and other agencies, civics education initiatives.

2. Strategic Fit

The project delivers on Priority 23 and has strategic fit with the following priorities:

- Priority 13 The Council will improve civic decision-making, transparency and public involvement; and
- Priority 15 The Council will improve communication with communities.

3. Relationship to Existing Activities

The Council has, for at least the last three local authority elections, run its own general mainstream advertising and public awareness campaigns in an effort to increase voter turnout. The 2004 campaign had the following four main objectives:

- maintain public awareness
- increase voter participation in general and in all target areas
- support the other messages from LGNZ, the Electoral Enrolment Centre and the Department of Internal Affairs on issues such as enrolling, diversity in candidates standing and STV education
- have intensive media coverage during the election.

Council officers have also been members of a National Communications Co-ordination Committee (co-ordinated by LGNZ) for the last two elections. The objectives of the agencies represented on this committee have been to encourage people to:

- enrol
- stand as candidates
- educate voters on the STV electoral system
- raise awareness and encourage electors to vote.

A sum of \$100,000 was budgeted for our advertising and public awareness campaigns in 2004. A similar sum has been budgeted for in 2007/08, 2010/11 and 2013/14.

The Council introduced a civic schools initiative in 2001 to support Level 5 Social Studies (3rd and 4th form students) which was expanded into all schools in the Wellington City area in 2002. The objective of the resource is to promote awareness of what local government does, how it affects people's lives and to encourage students and their families to take part in local government by participating in the consultation process and voting in local government elections. The resource was modified and used during the lead up to the 2004 election to help raise awareness of the role of the Council amongst the ethnic community with the aim of increasing the ethnic vote. In 2004, as part of our efforts to ensure school children had access to up-to-date information on the role and functions of local government, Council purchased copies of the Decisionmaker Guide to Local Government resource and distributed it free to schools in the area. It is not planned to update the current civic schools publication, but instead to contribute to an LGNZ civics initiative (see below).

4. Project Outline

4.1 Voter awareness and turnout

As a result of its inquiry into the 2004 local authority election the Justice and Electoral Committee has recommended that Government fund:

- a single electoral agency to be responsible for improving voter turnout and awareness in general and local elections.
- a single agency to be responsible for education and information on all electoral systems in New Zealand.

Both these recommendations were supported by the Council in the submissions it made to the inquiry in February 2005.

A range of other recommendations have been made by the Committee in an effort to encourage a higher voter turnout. These recommendations include the following:

- Options for alternative polling-day facilities should be explored (for example, polling booths in supermarkets for dropping off completed voting documents).
- The voting period be limited to 2 weeks to allow a more concentrated advertising campaign to focus people on their responsibility to participate in the democratic process.
- There should be special arrangements for the early dispatch of voting documents to electors with overseas postal addresses.
- Polls should close at 5pm on polling day (rather than 12 noon as is currently the case).
- Polling day should be moved to the third Saturday in October to avoid coinciding with the school holidays and Labour Day weekend.
- Candidate profile statements should be set out clearly with an easily readable typeface
- Candidate profile statements should be published as soon as practical following the close of nominations.

- Work be undertaken to identify ways to improve the quality of voting documents and that guidance be provided to electoral officers in this area.
- There should be a clearer distinction between FFP and STV issues where both systems are used on combined voting documents.
- There should be dedicated phone contact and independent election staff to assist with the voting process.
- Where a local authority has a significant population of non-English speaking groups, the electoral officer should be encouraged to provide information with the voting documents in those languages.

Most of these recommendations were supported by the Council in its submission to the inquiry. Many of the recommendations are already followed by Wellington City and work on others (e.g. improvements to the quality of voting documents and issues around combined voting documents) is already in hand. The Government's decision on the Committee's recommendations is expected in February 2006.

No matter what the Government's decision is the Council still accepts that it has an important role to not only raise awareness but to actively encourage a greater turnout. Money has been budgeted for this purpose in the 2007/08, 2010/11 and 2013/14 financial years respectively. Council will continue to work with relevant agencies (e.g. DIA, LGNZ) to encourage the adoption and implementation of those Inquiry recommendations we support. The cost of doing this will be met from existing budgets.

4.2 Civics Education

The Committee also recommended (by majority) that the Ministry of Education be encouraged to strengthen the place of citizenship education in the curriculum and make more teaching resources available for this purpose.

Councillors will be aware that the Wellington City Council has been actively involved in promoting its own civics in schools initiative over the last 3-4 years. The Council has also been working closely with LGNZ to develop and further strengthen the work they are doing in the area of civics education. A recent meeting of interested parties (including representatives from LGNZ, the Electoral Commission, the Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington College of Education and a number of local authorities) was held to discuss how best to progress this matter, whether or not the Government accepts the Committee's recommendation. The Council also supported this initiative in its submission to the Justice and Electoral Committee.

It is too soon to say what the outcome of this recommendation will be and, if agreed to, who will be responsible for funding it. If it transpires that individual councils are required to contribute towards the implementation of this initiative, any ongoing costs involved in this project will be absorbed within existing budgets.

5. Conclusion

Although not legally required to, the Council has by its past actions acknowledged that it has a responsibility to try and increase the voter turnout and to ensure that the voting process is as simple and user friendly as possible. It has also been involved in promoting civics education in secondary schools throughout Wellington City over the last few years.

It is not clear yet whether the Government will adopt all or any of the recommendations contained in the Justice and Electoral Committee's report.

If the Committee's recommendations are adopted Council will ensure that its work in this regard is dovetailed and is supportive of the work undertaken by whichever government agencies are tasked with the responsibility of carrying out these functions.