

Response on the Impact to Migrant Communities: Tasmanian Local Government Electoral Bill Discussion Paper

The Multicultural Council of Tasmania welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Tasmanian Local Government Electoral Bill Discussion Paper. Tasmania's migrant communities are a vital part of our social, economic, and cultural landscape, and it is critical that electoral reforms are designed to support and enhance their participation, not inadvertently restrict it.

Migrant communities often face unique barriers to civic engagement, including language differences, unfamiliarity with electoral processes, and limited access to information about local candidates. Any changes to electoral processes must take these challenges into account and actively promote greater accessibility, representation, and inclusion.

Part I: Future Format of Elections

Under both Scenario A and Scenario B proposed in the discussion paper, it is vital that postal voting and telephone voting remain available as short- and medium-term alternatives until a secure and validated electronic voting system can be implemented.


This flexibility is particularly important for multicultural communities for several reasons:

- Many migrant community members work in industries with flexible or unpredictable rosters, such as aged care, disability support, and hospitality, where weekend shifts are common. Postal and telephone voting options ensure they are not disadvantaged by their work schedules.
- Migrant community members often travel overseas more frequently than the general population, for family or cultural obligations, and require accessible remote voting options.
- Many migrant voters are less familiar with local candidates compared to longer-established residents due to language barriers and limited connection to traditional local networks. Postal voting allows individuals time to read and understand candidate information privately and at their own pace, supporting more informed decision-making.

Preserving these flexible voting options will foster greater confidence and participation from migrant communities during any transition to new voting systems.

Part II: Potential New Directions

Continuing the eligibility of non-citizens to vote in local government elections is strongly supported by the multicultural community. This inclusive approach promotes civic engagement, builds stronger community connections, and nurtures a sense of belonging and shared responsibility for local decision-making. It sends a clear message that all residents, regardless of citizenship status, are valued contributors to the community's future.



However, it is important to note:

- The proposed requirement of a 12-month continuous residency or property ownership to qualify for voting is understandable, but care must be taken to ensure that the administration process is not burdensome, particularly for recent migrants and renters.
- Flexibility and accessibility in proving eligibility must be embedded in the system, along with culturally appropriate education campaigns, to ensure people can understand and comply without unnecessary stress or confusion.
- During the last local council elections, non-residents were eligible to vote; however, there was no accessible information available in English or community languages. As a result, many eligible community members were left out. Many non-citizens only learned at the last minute that they were eligible to vote. **Clear, timely, and multilingual communication is essential to ensure full participation.**
- Flexible voting options and early education could have helped avoid missed votes. Allocating appropriate sustainable resources for this education is necessary.

Additionally:



- While it is important to encourage broad participation in elections, ideally non-citizens with a permanent residents (PR) visa should be eligible to contest local council elections, as they are likely to have settled long-term in the community but not naturalized for personal reasons.
- PR holders living in any LGA can be eligible to contest elections as long as candidates are well connected and committed to the council's work.
- A cap on campaign spending should be introduced to level the playing field, particularly for community members who wish to contest elections but may be deterred by the financial burden.

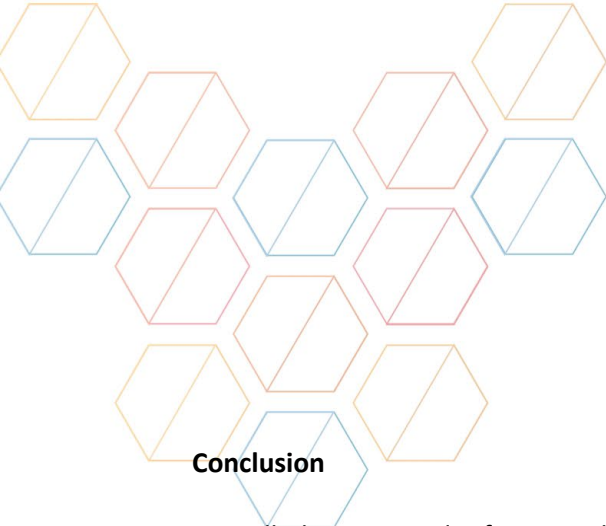
Without careful consideration, strict administrative requirements and costs could unintentionally discourage engagement from new and emerging communities.

Broader Social Campaign – Social Cohesion and Structural Racism

It is imperative that there is a significant media campaign that promotes multicultural Tasmania as the norm, celebrating diversity and inclusion as a strength. This is critical to avoid unnecessary criticism and the potential for racial division, which has a high likelihood of arising if non-citizens continue to have voting rights without proactive community education. Such division is already being fuelled by national and international discourse.

Governments must seriously invest in a sustained, positive media campaign to mitigate this risk and reinforce Tasmania's commitment to being a welcoming and inclusive society.





Conclusion

Overall, the proposed reforms to the Local Government Electoral Bill present an opportunity to strengthen democratic participation across all communities. However, **ensuring flexibility, accessibility, education, and community cohesion must be at the heart of these changes** to avoid marginalising migrant populations.

Tasmania's democracy will only be stronger when it genuinely reflects the full diversity of its people. We strongly encourage the Tasmanian Government to work closely with multicultural organisations, leaders, and communities throughout the reform process to ensure these voices are not only heard but actively shape the outcomes.

Regards

Jade Li
MCOT Chair

