

# Local Government Elections 2022

Consultation report



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# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
Consultation Methodology	5
<b>Findings</b>	<b>6</b>
What worked well with the recent local government election?	6
What could be improved in future local government elections?	8
Preferred voting method for future local government elections	12
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>14</b>

# Introduction

The 2022 local government elections occurred during September and October 2022. These were the first compulsory local government elections in Tasmania's history.

To allow for compulsory voting, the Local Government Amendment (Elections) Bill 2022 was passed by Cabinet on 26 April 2022, giving effect to policy recommendations from the local government legislative review to amend the *Local Government Act 1993*.

The draft Bill was introduced in May 2022 and passed through both houses of parliament in June 2022.

It was important to implement compulsory voting in time for the 2022 local government elections, as a further opportunity to realise its democratic benefits would not be available for some years. Further, it was important that the Bill progressed in the 2022 Budget session, as sufficient time was needed to implement the successful public information campaign to ensure the community was aware of this new responsibility.

The success of the government's decision to proceed with compulsory voting in 2022 is evident by the very positive turnout and engagement from voters.

Tasmania now has a unique opportunity to reflect and look for ways to improve election processes going forward. This report reflects a high level of satisfaction with the recent local government elections across multiple stakeholders. There is, however, recognition that there is still room for improvement.

# Consultation Methodology

The Tasmanian Government sought input from community members and the local government sector on their experience with the introduction of compulsory voting after the 2022 local government election.

An online survey was made available to the public. The survey was open from 7 December 2022 to 30 January 2023 and was hosted on the Department of Premier and Cabinets (DPAC) website ([dpac.tas.gov.au](http://dpac.tas.gov.au)). The survey received responses from 82 participants.

Councils were invited to provide written submissions. Eight councils provided written submissions.

Other written submissions were received from the Local Government Association of Tasmania (LGAT), Planning Matters Alliance Tasmania and Meg Webb MLC.

The content in this report has been compiled from the various responses.

# Findings

## What worked well with the recent local government election?

The consultation process sought feedback on what worked well with the recent local government elections. Common themes included:

### **Participation rates**

There was broad recognition that the introduction of compulsory voting resulted in increased participation and recognition of the role of local government.

The introduction of fines was noted as a likely reason for the increased number of participants. Some survey participants shared their appreciation that compulsory voting in Local Government elections made it consistent with State and Federal elections.

Councils noted that compulsory voting created more interest in the election and prompted more voters to have their say.

“The voter participation rate of 84.79 per cent was influenced by the compulsory requirement which contrasts with the participation rate of the 2018 Local Government election rate of 58.72 per cent.”

### **Postal voting method**

Feedback received suggested that the postal voting method worked well.

The postal voting method was reportedly easy, logistically, for the general public and provided more time to make an informed decision on who to vote for.

### **Campaigns, advertising, communication and engagement**

Effective public information campaigns helped to increase community awareness and participation in the local government elections.

Many survey participants reported that successful media and advertising campaigns resulted in a healthy number of candidates running for council, leading to a wide choice for voters.

Furthermore, survey participants indicated that clear forms and information booklets made voting easy.

Many councils stated that clear communication and support was provided by the Tasmanian Electoral Commission (TEC), but many suggested that some improvements are needed.

“Overall, it seemed [to] run well with open lines of communication being provided by the Tasmanian Electoral Commission and regional returning officer to council officers.”

LGAT welcomed the Tasmanian Government’s collaboration with the campaign ‘Take a seat at the table’.

“The campaign was very successful in both increasing the number and diversity of candidates and increasing the awareness of the elections across the community. The campaign, along with compulsory voting, contributed to positive changes in the diversity of age and gender.”

### **Diversity of candidates running**

Participants noted that, anecdotally, the 2022 elections saw an increased diversity of candidates, making reference to an increased number of women and age diverse candidates.

“The drive for diversity in local government was excellent to see and really grows the faith in democratic institutions.”

### **Training and development**

The success of the local government elections was aided by the delivery of training and development materials for candidates.

Survey participants and council submissions welcomed the introduction of election training for candidates running in the election, and indicated that bulletins and the online portal/resource for council employees were also beneficial.

The education of school students was cited as important. The TEC currently provides school education kits, however this feedback will be considered.

# What could be improved in future local government elections?

The consultation process sought feedback on what didn't work well, and subsequently what could be improved with Tasmania's local government elections. Common themes included:

## **Voting Methods**

Although the postal method of voting was deemed effective, there was a strong indication that consideration of a broader range of possible voting methods would be favourable.

For example, it was suggested that a hybrid voting system such as online and/or postal voting, as well as a single election day, might improve access, fairness, and cost efficiencies.

Respondents suggested that providing multiple voting methods could:

- increase participation rates to cater to all community members, including those with visual impairments and/or a disability;
- improve accessibility by providing multiple options for community members in regional areas, especially those from other Local Government Areas (LGAs), interstate and/or overseas travellers;
- support the provision of focussed resources to support all community members to participate;
- deliver cost efficiencies for TEC and council resources.

Some participants noted that a longer election timeframe might help community members to make informed decisions when they vote.

## **Absentee voting options**

There is a clear sense that the arrangements for people to vote while interstate or overseas could be improved in future local government elections.

Various responses indicated that alternative methods should be explored for people who are unable to vote, due to being absent. Suggestions such as postal voting from interstate, and pre-poll voting were included in feedback. It should be noted that the existing voting system allows for this to an extent. Feedback also indicated that clearer processes and communication on absentee voting options would be beneficial in future local government elections.

## **Assisted voting services**

Similar to absentee voting, the feedback received suggests that effort needs to go into ensuring an equitable voting system for all community members, including ensuring that those requiring assisted services can take part in the elections and make informed decisions.

Participants suggested that the postal voting system created barriers for people with a disability, low levels of literacy, visual impairments, and the elderly. Concerns were raised about the accessibility of electoral materials for vision-impaired and print disabled electors.

In addition to suggested changes to the voting method itself, contributors indicated that information around assisted services should be communicated efficiently. While there were efforts to address this during the recent elections, there was a sense from respondents that improvements could be made in this area. This includes building on efforts to provide clear election materials and communications in accessible formats.

## **Election communications and advertising campaigns**

As discussed earlier, many participants appreciated a strong advertising campaign in the lead up to the elections. General feedback also indicated, however, that future campaigns could be more intensive, and there could be stricter guidelines, especially around candidate campaigns.

Several submissions argued that there should be enforced restrictions prohibiting candidate advertising being branded or associated with political parties.

Some council responses suggested development of a set of guidelines relating to the use of social media during election campaigns and that the Model Code of Conduct could be amended to include Candidates. Another council suggested amending the Act to allow Tasmanian Electoral Commission specific powers to issue infringement notices if the Code of Conduct is breached.

It is noted that there are significant complexities and potential unforeseen outcomes for the running of elections associated with some of these suggestions.

It was noted that an increase in public education and engagement campaigns would be beneficial for future local government elections.

## **Voting and administrative Processes**

Feedback collected suggests that there are improvements that could be made to the voting and electoral administrative processes for voters. Some of these include:

- enabling easier methods to update constituent address details in their council areas;
- providing clearer instructions regarding voter rights within municipalities where people own multiple properties, or lease property for business purposes;
- providing clearer information about consequences if people fail to vote i.e. fines;
- simplifying the voting process, potentially by decreasing the number of candidates to choose from;
- having less ballots, for example through having the mayor and deputy mayor on the same ballot paper; and
- Increasing council operating hours and timeframes across the election period to improve accessibility and participation.

Improvement to voting processes for the benefit of councils were also noted, including:

- increasing education and processes for council staff, including to enable better assistance of members of the public enrolled in other LGAs;
- improvements to postal voting policy and processes to reduce confusion;
- reviewing and reforming the preferencing requirements for the number of councillors required to sit at each council table; and
- reviewing the General Manager's Roll system to make it centralised within the TEC.

## **Capability, resources and council administration**

Councils stated that greater voter participation presented new challenges for the election process and council resourcing.

“Far greater support [is required] for local councils to provide for those voting at council offices particularly in the last days of the voting period.”

Overall, there was an intensive demand on council's customer service teams throughout this period, in comparison to previous elections. This required more resources to manage enquiries over the counter. Further, some councils reportedly incurred a higher cost to administer and support the election process. Some participants expressed an interest in knowing how future elections will be funded, because of this increase in required resourcing and finances.

Survey responses and council submissions identified the importance of communication between the TEC and the councils, including in relation to resourcing support from the TEC.

## **Candidate community engagement and information**

Feedback received suggests that the public would benefit from more extensive information on their candidates, enabling them to make informed decisions on who they are voting for and the issues they represent.

Some survey participants proposed increased opportunities for the community to engage with candidates and the introduction of compulsory public forums for running council members to attend and engage with the public to hear what they have to offer.

Many responses said improvements to the booklets which contained candidate statements would greatly assist the community in who and how to vote.

## **Calibre of, and requirements for, Candidates**

Multiple entities wrote about the need to improve the calibre of candidates running for election and representing their communities.

Both survey and council submissions provided similar recommendations to improve the calibre of candidates representing councils in their LGA including introducing mandatory training, education, and clearance checks.

Suggestions from survey participants also included:

- regulating the terms permitted for elected councillors;
- implementing the mandatory declaration of a candidate's political party and business affiliations;
- introducing a fee for candidates who wish to be elected;
- imposing a fine for candidates who do not deliver on what they represent;
- enhancing information about local policy to improve performance and communication; and
- increasing decision making capacity for candidates to express their freedom of political communication.

Proposals within council submissions also included:

- improving the process for individuals to nominate to be an elected member; and
- having DPAC work with industry experts to require candidates in local government elections to be Australian Citizens, and subsequently have the *Local Government Act 1993* updated to reflect this change.

# Preferred voting method for future local government elections

As seen in Figure 1 and discussed earlier, flexibility in voting methods is preferred. It has been suggested that an ability to vote by post, as well as having a ballot box system, would create greater opportunity for all members of community to fully participate in the democratic process of voting. A key message is that the positive aspects of postal voting should be retained as far as possible in any transition towards a ballot box voting system.

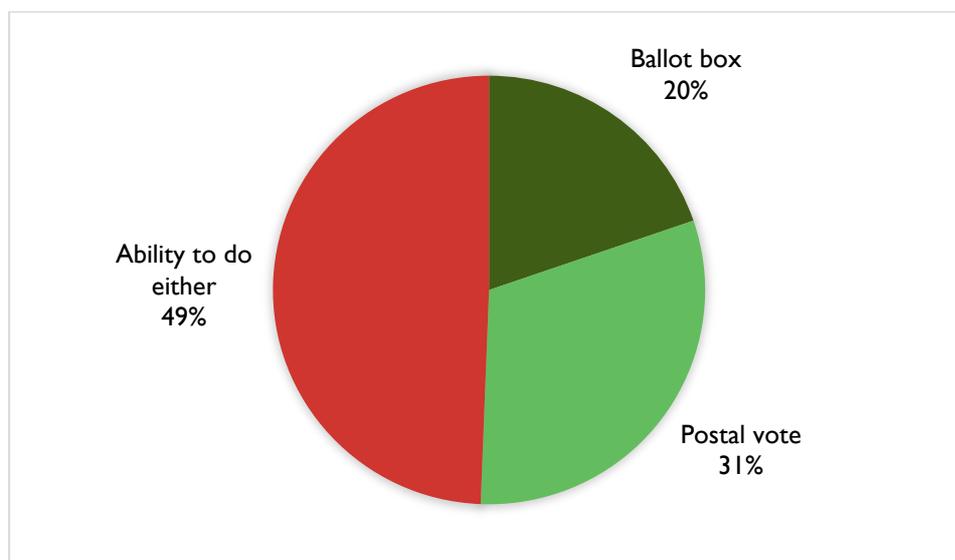


Figure 1: Survey response preferred voting methods

## Ballot Box

Feedback supporting a single-day ballot box system notes that:

- it would emphasise the importance of the local government elections;
- it would be consistent with other jurisdictions, would be easier to remember and would be more time effective;
- it would be a more secure voting method, with reduced risk of ballot papers going missing;
- it would be more inclusive to all members of the community, and increase social engagement; and
- there were multiple mentions of the benefits of an election sausage sizzle.

## **Postal Vote**

Feedback supporting a postal method of voting indicated some belief that in these recent elections:

- it was convenient, provided more time to make considered and informed decisions on who to vote for, and provided adequate time to read through candidate statements to understand their policies; and
- in some ways it was more private than ballot box voting; and
- it was more affordable for the state and councils than a single election day.

# Conclusion

The consultation process provided an opportunity for the Tasmanian Government to receive feedback from community members and the local government sector about the recent 2022 local government elections. This report provides a high-level overview of some of the themes uncovered through this process, notably positive components of the elections, but also areas that could be improved in future local government elections.

Work is underway to deliver modernised and fit-for-purpose legislation to manage local government elections in Tasmania well in advance of the next scheduled 2026 elections. This will be achieved through the implementation of local government legislative reforms through a future Local Government elections Bill and work being progressed by the Future of Local Government Review.



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