

Why should I care about Local Government?

As a parent, I am a heavy user of council services. I can't imagine rainy days without our local library, sunny days without the park and playground, recycling without household and community rubbish collection. Enjoying Matariki celebrations and Christmas Parades with the whānau, and taking the kids swimming at the local pool. We use the sports fields and community centre every week and rely on safe roading infrastructure to walk to school.

There's so much we love locally, and our votes are important in ensuring our communities continue to receive the services they need. The library, the bus, pools, rubbish collection, roads, sports fields, parks and so much more. Any roads outside of state highways are maintained by councils, and whether you have footpaths, bus lanes or bike paths is down to council decisions. Many people are unaware of the extent to which their local services (or lack of them) are due to local, rather than central, government. The people we elect to our councils can really affect the future of the places we live, work, and play.

Greater investment in infrastructure and services can improve the lives of everyone. Imagine suburbs with new regular, accessible and affordable public transport services to give everyone more choice over how they move around. How awesome would it be to have longer library opening hours so you can pick up some books after work and bigger book budgets so that the most amazing new titles are always on offer? Imagine being able to take your kids on a protected and connected cycleway on the weekend to get to their sports and activities. Or more sports fields kitted out with astroturf so that your kids football isn't cancelled every wet winter weekend. Green spaces to enjoy lunch outside with your friends, accessible, sheltered and friendly for all ages and stages of life.

All of this is possible, but we need people to support it at the decision-making table for it to become a reality. Caring about who represents you in local government is caring about improving your immediate surroundings and how life runs for your community.

Can I vote?

The only requirements for voting in local government elections are:

- you live or own property in the area
- you are over 18.

You don't need to own your own home to vote. If you rent, share a house, live in social housing, or are staying with friends and family, you can vote. One of the reasons renters get such a raw deal is that so many of them don't vote.

You do need to be registered to vote, though, and should have received a pack in the mail confirming your details are correct. If you didn't receive a pack, head to www.vote.nz to check and update your details. Your details need to be up to date by 12th August to receive standard voting papers, but if you've missed the deadline you can still request special voting papers.

How do I know who to vote for?

From September 16, everyone who was enrolled before the deadline will start to receive their voting papers. These papers include a booklet about all the candidates standing for election as well as an explanation about the voting processes. You can also find out more about current councillors and candidates on your local council website. But even with all that information, it can be hard to know who to vote for!

We can't tell you who to vote for. But we can offer some tips from our own experiences and some questions that you may want to consider:

- Which candidates are running for re-election?
For candidates running for re-election, you may be able to think of positive changes they have supported in the past term, or find public information about their voting record.
- What are the local issues that you really care about?
Local government candidates want to engage with their electorates. Find their email address or Facebook profile and ask them for commitments in line with your passions. Keep a record and hold them to it.
- Can you attend a 'meet the candidate' meeting or a debate?
Many community groups will be running events in the lead-up to the elections. Heading along to local events will give you a good idea of what candidates priorities are and whether they are likely to align with your interests. Be bold and ask questions!
- What is their background? How might this impact the decisions they make?
Right now most councils do not reflect the range of people and experiences that make up our wonderful communities. Having councils made up of people with different lived experiences and perspectives leads to more inclusive towns, cities and regions.
- Do you have a friend you can chat to about it?
There can be a lot of information to process in the voting papers and packs. Sometimes talking with a friend or colleague, especially one who knows a bit about the local council, can act as a filter and help you to work out your priorities.

Running for public office is, unfortunately, still a bit of a popularity contest. But we can all have our say on who is at the table, and we can let those people know our priorities and hold them to their promises. There are really hard decisions that need to be made around the council table, but advocating for positive change becomes much easier if councillors hear that the electorate is on their side.

Whether you rent or own your home, are living temporarily or permanently in an area, voting is a crucial way of ensuring we have incoming councillors that are committed to making where we live a better place for everyone.