

How does local decision making work in Aotearoa?

Last week we talked about some of the services that our local government organisations provide. They do a lot, right?! And to offer all of those services, there are a lot of decisions to be made. To make sure our communities get fair and democratic decisions, we elect people to make them on our behalf. Every three years, a Mayor (or chairperson for regional councils) and a set number of councillors are elected by the people who live in the city, district, or region that each council represents. And just in case your newsfeed hasn't reminded you lately? This year's the year we get to have our say in who they should be!

It's an important time, because many big decisions that affect the community are made by these elected representatives.

- The biggest decisions must be made by the full council (the mayor/chairperson and all of the councillors). These big decisions include setting rates, borrowing money, adopting a Long Term or Annual Plan, and appointing a Chief Executive.
- Topic-specific decisions are often made in committees, which usually include several councillors. Committees are where important decisions on things like transport, planning policy or climate change are made.
- Suburb-specific decisions may be made by community boards and, like the council, the members of these boards are democratically elected by you. These boards serve a smaller area and often undertake local projects as well as distributing funding for local community groups, social services, and work to improve local areas.

But the elected representatives can't do all the work that is required to keep our local government organisations running. So the council appoints a Chief Executive, who then works with an executive team to manage teams of council employees (often referred to as officers). This wider council team is responsible for delivering on the decisions that councils, committees, and community boards make.

Day to day decisions are made by council officers and managers, who work in many different teams and roles. These council staff run the libraries, issue consents, draft strategies, inspect food premises, maintain our parks, run events, collect waste, manage roading projects, administer community grants, etc. etc.—all the jobs that keep our towns, cities, and regions running. Council staff can answer your questions about regulations and bylaws, respond to reports on maintenance issues, help you understand the different services available, provide information about council amenities, and so much more! (Seriously, so much more! This list barely scratches the surface of what our council teams do.)

Council employees are also responsible for preparing reports that set out the considerations of a decision to be made at a committee or council meeting, and often provide a recommendation of what is the best way forward. These reports are included in council agendas, and council officers will often present the information to the council before elected members have a discussion and make the final decision by voting on a resolution. Every councillor (including the

mayor/chairperson) gets one vote, and a certain number of votes will be required for a resolution to pass. If there is an even number of votes on each side, the mayor/chairperson gets one extra, tie-breaking vote.

The officers' reports include a lot of information and expertise, which is an important part of helping the councillors to make the decisions that are best for local communities. But ultimately, to decide what is best for a community, representatives also need to know what members of the community think and feel. This is where public consultation comes in.

Consultation is a chance for councils to reach out to the community for feedback on new policies, plans and on big changes they make. When there's a consultation about an issue, anyone (even our kids) can make a submission. You can usually do this online by answering a survey or writing why you support or don't support what is being proposed. In some cases, you can choose to present in person to the committee making the decision. Submissions don't have to be detailed or complicated, and are a great way to have your voice heard.

Sometimes, though, the thing that's on your mind is not up for consultation. You'll find contact details for every councillor on your council's website, and getting in touch with your Mayor and councillors can help you raise issues that are important to you - **yes you**. If councillors don't hear from people like us, parents who share concern for our children's future, they often only hear from people who want to keep things as they are thank-you-very-much.

If you're new to the processes, having your say in local government may seem daunting (we'll cover this in more detail over the coming weeks of the campaign, though, so keep an eye out!). And if you've been at it a while, it can start to get tiring. But a robust democracy relies on a variety of people being involved in the decisions that affect them. Our involvement now can ensure a better future for our tamariki in the years and decades to come.