



Taituarā

Local Government Professionals Aotearoa

Submission of Taituarā to the Finance and Expenditure Select Committee regarding the Covid-19 Response (Management Measures) Amendment Bill

What is Taituarā?

Taituarā thanks the Finance and Expenditure Select Committee (the Committee) for the opportunity to submit on the Covid-19 Response (Management Measures) Amendment Bill (the Bill).

Taituarā (formerly the NZ Society of Local Government Managers) is an incorporated society of approximately 930 members¹ drawn from local government Chief Executives, senior managers, and council staff with significant policy or operational responsibilities. We are an apolitical organisation. Our contribution lies in our wealth of knowledge of the local government sector and of the technical, practical, and managerial implications of legislation.

Our vision is:

Professional local government management, leading staff and enabling communities to shape their future.

Our primary role is to help local authorities perform their roles and responsibilities as effectively and efficiently as possible. We have an interest in all aspects of the management of local authorities from the provision of advice to elected members, to the planning and delivery of services, to the less glamorous but equally important supporting activities such as election management and the collection of rates.

We support the Bill in its current form. We would like to expand further on the amendment to the Local Electoral Act.

¹ As of 30 September 2021

We support the amendments to the Local Electoral Act 2001 that clarify powers for the Governor-General to adjourn triennial elections in emergency circumstances. The Bill does this in two ways:

- by clarifying that an epidemic or pandemic is an emergency that may trigger these powers and
- allowing the Governor-General to extend an adjournment for up to six further weeks by issuing a fresh order in council (the Act does not currently allow this).

The principal Act allows adjournment only where the Governor-General and Minister are satisfied that the adverse effects of the emergency deny electors a reasonable opportunity to cast a valid vote, nominate a candidate or be nominated as a candidate.

Being able to cast a valid vote is about much more than the act of voting. Section 4 of the Local Electoral Act establishes the casting of an ***informed*** vote as one of the core principles of local democracy.

We submit that at the higher alert levels equal opportunity to cast an informed vote will be compromised. Campaign activity is not viewed as an essential service. Most public facilities would be closed or open to limited audiences at Covid level 3 and 4 (and possibly at level two), thus limiting campaign meetings, meet the candidates functions etc. Other means of communication such as leaflet drops are prohibited at the higher alert levels. In lockdown, candidates' ability to campaign in person will be limited – even at lower levels people may not be receptive to door-knocking, being handed a leaflet etc. While channels such as the internet are available, these are not available to all (and at a far from uniform standard, as rural voters will tell you).

As elected officials you'll be aware of the processes that support an election (before and after) votes are cast. The processes are a little different for a local authority election in that every local authority currently chooses to conduct a postal election – a situation unlikely to change at the 2022 elections.

Administering an electoral process is also currently not considered an essential service. In the higher alert levels tasks such as processing of votes may be prevented by lockdowns, slowed by meeting social distancing requirements etc. Likewise, while postal services do operate in higher alert levels, there are risks of delays. Some voters may not receive papers in a timely fashion or miss the deadlines as a result.

We commend this clause to the House.