

**Submission
No 28**

**PROPOSALS TO INCREASE VOTER ENGAGEMENT, PARTICIPATION AND
CONFIDENCE**

Organisation: City of Newcastle

Date Received: 19 August 2024

14 August 2024

ATT The Hon. Peter Thomas Primrose, MLC
Chairperson
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Via Parliament NSW online submission portal only

Dear The Hon. Peter Primrose

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS - PROPOSALS TO INCREASE VOTER ENGAGEMENT, PARTICIPATION AND CONFIDENCE

I refer to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters' (the **Committee**) inquiry into the 'Proposal to increase voter engagement, participation and confidence' (the **Proposal**).

City of Newcastle (CN) provides the following submission outlining our comments on the Proposal, for the Committee's consideration:

In relation to *increasing voter confidence*:

1. Electoral funding *should not* be permitted to be derived from any Council funds; and
2. That appropriate controls be implemented to mitigate the risk of this occurring.

Action on this issue supports appropriate governance and transparency around the true source of electoral donations and prevents public money from being used for political purposes.

This could be achieved by:

- Prohibiting people or organisations in receipt of council funds from making political donations; and
- Prohibiting candidates from accepting donations from people/organisations who are recipients of Council funds.

These comments have arisen following the results of a 2018 review on CN's Special Business Rate program. It was found that an entity in receipt of CN's special (business) rate levy funds made electoral donations to political candidates running in CN's 2021 local government election. This has been reported to the NSW Electoral Commission (NSWEC).

Since this review was undertaken, CN has made various improvements to the program to manage the risk to CN, however the risk still exists beyond our local government area.

CN believes that change should be made to mitigate this risk across NSW and enhance confidence in the integrity of electoral processes, the electoral system and governance of electoral funding.

In relation to increasing *voter engagement and participation*:

1. Accessibility issues need to be addressed; and
2. Notes its opposition to cost shifting by the NSW Government onto ratepayers to uplift accessibility on current CN or other venues.

This is consistent with advocacy from LGNSW and other organisations.

There is currently a lack of accessible venues in Newcastle Local Government Area (LGA) for use during pre-polling and polling activities. NSWEC has often insisted on a CBD venue location, despite the geographic diversity of the LGA, the lack of accessible CN venues and the availability of office space elsewhere in the city. The age of many vacant CBD venues exacerbates accessibility issues. CN believes that funding support should be provided by the NSW Government to ensure accessibility issues are effectively and consistently addressed across NSW.

Should you require any further information on this matter please contact Emily Kolatchew, Executive Manager Legal and Governance via email [REDACTED]

Yours faithfully

[REDACTED]

David Clarke
ACTING CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER