

INQUIRY INTO LOCAL GOVERNMENT AMENDMENT (ELECTIONS) BILL 2025

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NSW Legislative Council Inquiry: Local Government Amendment (Elections) Bill 2025

Personal Submission – Ally Dench – Councillor and Resident, Wollondilly

My recognition and commitment:

In the spirit of reconciliation, I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. I pay my respect to Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

I thank the NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on State Development for undertaking this important inquiry into the Local Government Amendment (Elections) Bill 2025 and welcome the opportunity to provide a submission on the proposed reforms.

I am a Councillor with Wollondilly Shire Council and a long-standing resident of Western Sydney, with more than 30 years' experience across government and community sectors. My professional and lived experience has given me deep insight into the challenges facing local government and the communities it serves, particularly those experiencing disadvantage and underrepresentation.

Local government is the level of government closest to the people. The decisions made in relation to this Bill will have a lasting impact on community trust, participation, and representation at the grassroots level. I am contributing to this inquiry because I believe that fair and inclusive elections are the foundation of a healthy democracy and that no one should be excluded from the process due to geography, transport disadvantage, disability, language, or lack of resources.

The most vulnerable voices in our communities are often the ones most at risk of being left out of electoral processes. By strengthening collaboration between councils, the NSW Electoral Commission, and community partners and by preserving local flexibility and fairness in election delivery we can ensure that local democracy remains accessible, transparent, and responsive to all.

This submission is grounded in practical experience and reflects concerns raised by residents and candidates alike. The key areas I ask the Committee to consider include:

- The need for structured collaboration between councils and the NSW Electoral Commission on voter engagement strategies;
- A balanced approach to the pre-poll voting period that protects voter access and candidate equity;
- The implications of removing local choice in election service provision;
- The impacts of proposed casual vacancy rules on community representation;
- And the importance of tailored solutions for rural and transport-disadvantaged communities.

I would welcome the opportunity to speak further in relation to the changes to election administration, casual vacancy processes, and voter engagement and can be contacted at

1. Introduction:

While the Local Government Amendment (Elections) Bill 2025 proposes several reasonable measures aimed at improving election administration and efficiency, it is essential that these changes also preserve the core democratic principle of ensuring fair and equal voter participation. Centralising election administration under the NSW Electoral Commissioner offers potential benefits in terms of consistency and standardisation, but it is critical that these reforms do not inadvertently exclude certain groups, particularly those in rural or transport-disadvantaged areas or restrict councils' capacity to respond to their own communities' needs.

The balance between efficiency and democratic participation should be at the forefront of these reforms. While streamlining election processes may improve administrative efficiency, we must ensure that all voters, regardless of their geographical location or personal circumstances, have fair access to the voting process. This means ensuring that local knowledge, flexibility and community engagement remain integral to the election process, including through meaningful collaboration between councils and the NSWEC, and the retention of options that allow councils to tailor service delivery when appropriate.

Moreover, proposals like filling casual vacancies with candidates from the same political group may improve stability, but it risks disregarding shifts in public sentiment or the evolving will of the electorate. It's important that election results reflect what the community wants and that people continue to trust the process.

Ultimately, the success of these reforms hinges on their ability to improve election administration while safeguarding the principles of accessibility, inclusivity, and representation. Efficiency must never come at the expense of democratic participation¹. A truly effective electoral system is one that is streamlined, accessible, responsive to local context and reflective of the diverse communities it serves.

2. Centralisation of Election Administration and the Need for Local Collaboration

The *Local Government Amendment (Elections) Bill 2025* proposes that all local council elections be administered exclusively by the NSW Electoral Commissioner, removing the current option for councils to engage alternative electoral service providers². While centralisation may improve consistency, standardisation, and reduce costs, it also risks undermining local responsiveness, flexibility, and community trust if not balanced with meaningful local collaboration.

The NSW Electoral Commission has successfully administered local government elections for many years and is widely regarded as a trusted, independent provider. Its integrity, professionalism, and deep understanding of the local government context are rightly valued by both councils and the broader community. This experience and trust should remain central to election delivery in NSW.

¹ Borge, L.E., Falch, T. & Tovmo, P. Public sector efficiency: the roles of political and budgetary institutions, fiscal capacity, and democratic participation. *Public Choice* **136**, 475–495 (2008). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-008-9309-7>

²<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/Hansard/Pages/HansardResult.aspx#/docid/'HANSARD-1323879322-154216'>

However, even the most trusted institutions benefit from a degree of competitive tension, not to undermine their role, but to encourage continued innovation, responsiveness, and service improvement. By removing councils' ability to engage alternative electoral service providers, the Bill would effectively create a mandated monopoly in the administration of local elections³. While this may streamline procurement and reduce short-term uncertainty, it could reduce incentives for adaptation and responsiveness over time, particularly in diverse or rapidly growing LGAs.

Retaining a regulated option for councils to consider alternative providers with robust accreditation standards and transparency requirements would not diminish the NSWEC's role. Rather, it would act as a safeguard to ensure local choice, protect against complacency, and support tailored approaches where justified. Such flexibility would preserve councils' ability to respond to community-specific needs while maintaining the Commission's central leadership role in electoral delivery.

To maintain electoral integrity within a centralised model, two levers are essential:

- Structured collaboration between the NSWEC and councils, ensuring elections remain community-connected and inclusive; and
- Retention of choice, including the ability to consider alternative providers supported by an accreditation framework to uphold electoral standards.

Together, these mechanisms help preserve local voice and adaptability within a system designed for efficiency. Without them, centralisation risks becoming disconnected from the communities it serves.

Local government is the tier of government closest to the community, and elections are most effective when they remain visibly connected to place. Councils are uniquely positioned to engage their residents through local knowledge, trusted networks, and an ability to reach under-represented groups.

The Bill introduces a new requirement for the NSW Electoral Commission (NSWEC) to consult councils in the lead-up to elections. However, this consultation is primarily focused on logistics and operational planning, not on broader collaboration in areas such as voter outreach or education. There remains no statutory requirement for the NSWEC to formally partner with councils in designing or delivering voter engagement strategies.

While Section 10(2)(e) of the NSW Electoral Act 2017 obliges the Commission to "promote public awareness of electoral matters... by means of education and information programs," this does not extend to structured collaboration with councils. The absence of such a partnership risks missing opportunities to tailor voter engagement efforts to local needs particularly in rural, regional, and transport-disadvantaged communities.

A more structured, statewide collaboration between the NSWEC and councils could significantly enhance the reach, relevance, and impact of voter education initiatives.

³ <https://lgnsw.org.au/Public/Public/News/President-Message/2025/PM061025.aspx>

Councils are well placed to adapt messaging and delivery methods to suit their communities whether that means addressing low digital literacy, limited transport options, or high numbers of first-time voters. Formalising this relationship would help ensure voter engagement is not only consistent across NSW, but also locally responsive and inclusive

While it is important that the NSW Electoral Commission maintain its independence and impartiality in administering elections, there is no conflict in its collaboration with local councils on non-partisan voter engagement. In fact, such collaboration aligns with the Commission's statutory obligation to promote electoral awareness and strengthens the integrity and accessibility of the electoral process.

Strengthening collaboration with the NSW Department of Education would also support long-term voter engagement. The recent *Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters* report, *"Proposals to increase voter engagement, participation and confidence,"*⁴ highlights the importance of civic education in increasing participation. Aligning NSWEC voter education efforts with school-based civic learning and leveraging initiatives like Local Government Week (coordinated by LGNSW)⁵, would build more consistent, lifelong voter awareness. Currently, Local Government Week is voluntary and the content and scope of programs vary across LGAs. A statewide framework that links civic education to election cycles, with support from councils and schools, would provide young voters with more meaningful and sustained engagement. Councils could also support the rollout of school-based activities, youth-led outreach, or mock elections that align with election cycles, making democracy more tangible at a local level.

In parallel, the Bill proposes removing the ability for councils to engage alternative electoral service providers. While uptake of this option has been limited, with only two councils using non-NSWEC providers in the 2021 and 2024 elections⁶, this trend reflects broader market and structural challenges, including lack of market competition, legal risk concerns, and limited internal council resourcing. It does not suggest an absence of interest in local flexibility.

Even if rarely used, retaining the option for councils to engage alternative providers encourages innovation, performance, and adaptability in the system. This position is supported by the NSW Parliament Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, which encourages local flexibility and responsiveness in electoral delivery⁷.

Rather than removing this option, the Bill could instead promote confidence and quality through the development of a formal accreditation framework. Such a framework would

⁴ NSW Parliament Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *Proposals to increase voter engagement, participation and confidence*, Report 1/58, June 2025. Available at: <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/tp/files/191201/Report%20%20Proposals%20to%20increase%20voter%20engagement,%20participation%20and%20confidence.pdf>

⁵ https://lgnsw.org.au/Public/Public/Events/Local_Government_Week.aspx

⁶ New South Wales, Legislative Assembly, Parliamentary Debates, 4 June 2025, pp 30-33 (Ron Hoenig, Minister for Local Government).

⁷ NSW Parliament Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *Proposals to increase voter engagement, participation and confidence*, Report 1/58, June 2025. Available at: <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/tp/files/191201/Report%20%20Proposals%20to%20increase%20voter%20engagement,%20participation%20and%20confidence.pdf>

outline minimum operational standards, integrity safeguards, and compliance mechanisms for third-party providers delivering council elections, in turn giving councils confidence to consider alternatives while maintaining the trust and transparency expected in a democratic system. Rather than removing the option entirely, reform efforts could focus on improving governance, oversight, and public confidence in alternative delivery models.

The NSW Electoral Commission's *Strategic Plan 2021–2024* already highlights goals such as trust, independence, and evidence-based improvements to electoral services⁸. The next strategic plan, due shortly, offers a timely opportunity to explore such a framework, which could help ensure integrity, transparency, and public confidence in any future use of alternative providers.

Accreditation frameworks used by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC)⁹, Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC)¹⁰ and internationally by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission¹¹ and ISO standards¹², demonstrate that robust oversight can support electoral integrity while enabling innovation and choice. Adopting a similar accreditation approach in NSW would not only safeguard democratic standards but could also encourage future competition and innovation in the electoral services market particularly for councils seeking tailored solutions that meet local needs.

Although new market entrants may not appear immediately, establishing an accreditation system would provide clarity and a future pathway for providers, enabling councils to make informed decisions with confidence and accountability.

Recommendation:

To ensure elections remain inclusive, accessible, and community-connected under a centralised model, the Bill should be amended to:

- Mandate structured collaboration between the NSWEC and local councils in the development of localised voter engagement strategies;
- Align voter engagement strategies with civic education efforts through a formal partnership between the NSWEC, local councils, and the NSW Department of Education;
- Leverage and strengthen existing civic education initiatives, such as Local Government Week, by linking them to local electoral engagement campaigns and aligning messaging across councils, schools, and the NSWEC
- Retain the legislative option for councils to engage alternative electoral providers, supported by an accreditation framework and integrity safeguards

⁸ <https://elections.nsw.gov.au/getmedia/dab19826-2a7c-4a18-bca1-4b9e6cc9063c/strategic-plan-2021-2024.pdf>

⁹ https://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/business-with-us.htm - Accessed July 2025.

¹⁰ <https://www.vec.vic.gov.au/work-with-us/procurement#how-we-buy> – Accessed July 2025

¹¹ <https://www.eac.gov/voting-equipment/certified-voting-systems> - Accessed July 2025

¹² <https://www.iso.org/standard/75288.html> - Accessed July 2025

- Develop a framework for monitoring and evaluating voter participation across LGAs to inform and improve local engagement over time.

These changes would help ensure that elections are not only efficient but also accessible, community-informed, democratically robust, and strengthen the democratic legitimacy of local government.

3. Reduced Pre-Poll Period

In addition to concerns about centralisation, the Bill's proposed reduction of the pre-poll voting period warrants close scrutiny due to its impact on candidate equity and voter access. While the Minister for Local Government has argued that shortening the pre-poll period to 5 days reduces campaign strain for independents, this does not reflect the practical experience of many community-based candidates. A compressed period can actually intensify pressure on independents to be present at multiple locations within a tighter timeframe favouring better-resourced political parties who can rotate volunteers and staff across booths. While independents are indeed expected to fund their campaigns and participate in the election process like any other candidate, the resource disparity between independents and political parties remains a significant barrier to fair competition.

Rather than levelling the playing field, a shorter pre-poll period may exacerbate the very inequities it seeks to solve. A more balanced approach is to retain a longer pre-poll window while introducing reforms that support equitable access for all candidates. This includes better booth scheduling, coordinated volunteer support, and enhanced voter education campaigns.

There has been a noticeable increase in the number of independent candidates running for office across various levels of government, driven by a desire for greater representation and accountability. For instance, in the 2021 NSW Local Government elections, independents were successful in securing seats across many councils in NSW¹³. While the NSW Electoral Commission data confirms a growing presence, qualitative analyses suggest that many of these candidates were driven by a commitment to address local issues they felt were neglected by major parties^{14 15 16 17}. This shift is reflective of a broader trend in Australian politics, where there has been a growing demand for independent representation at both the state and federal levels¹⁸.

However, many strong candidates are excluded from contesting due to limited access to campaign resources. Unlike major political parties, independents cannot rely on party infrastructure, fundraising networks, or paid campaigners particularly during pre-poll, which

¹³ <https://pastvtr.elections.nsw.gov.au/LG2101/results>

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/sep/14/nsw-council-elections-renewables-wind-farms>

¹⁵ <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8805110/bill-browne-rise-of-independents-a-shift-in-australian-politics/>

¹⁶ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-04-24/election-data-rise-independents-major-party-drift/105144918>

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/sep/17/nsw-local-government-elections-ntwnfb>

¹⁸ Hendriks, C. M., & Reid, R. (2023). Citizen-Led Democratic Change: How Australia's Community Independents Movement Is Reshaping Representative Democracy. *Political Studies*, 72(4), 1609-1631. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217231219393> (Original work published 2024)

often requires extensive presence at multiple sites. This situation leads to a loss of diverse voices in our governance systems, as potential candidates with local knowledge and a genuine desire to serve their communities find themselves disenfranchised by the system. The pre-poll voting period and its associated costs only exacerbate this issue for independents, who do not have the financial support to mobilise resources in the same way larger political parties can.

Recommendation:

While I recognise that independents, like political parties, should fund their campaigns, the electoral system must ensure fair access for all candidates, regardless of their resources. I recommend retaining a 7-day pre-poll voting period as a balanced, evidence-informed approach, but make it more accessible and manageable for all candidates by improving the accessibility and efficiency of the existing pre-poll system in a way that levels the playing field, such as:

- Provide targeted support for independents, including volunteer coordination, training, and affordable outreach materials,
- Improve access for voters by expanding mobile polling units and optimising the location and hours of pre-poll booths;
- Strengthen voter education campaigns to reduce confusion and increase awareness of voting options.

While it's essential that independent candidates are expected to fund their campaigns and operate within the same framework as political parties, the current resource imbalance makes it difficult for independents to effectively compete. By improving the equity and accessibility of the pre-poll process, the electoral system can better reflect the diversity of candidates and voters across NSW, while preserving the democratic principle of fair competition.

4. Voter Access and Participation

The proposed reduction of the pre-poll voting period to just five days is part of the Bill's broader effort to streamline the electoral process and reduce costs. While these goals are understandable, such changes risk creating unintended barriers to participation, particularly for voters facing logistical, personal, or geographical challenges.

Pre-poll voting plays a critical role in improving accessibility for those who cannot vote on election day due to work schedules, caring responsibilities, health issues, or distance. Reducing the pre-poll period could disproportionately impact these voters, who may struggle to vote within a more constrained timeframe.

For residents in rural, remote, or transport-disadvantaged areas, accessing polling stations is already a challenge. A shortened pre-poll window, combined with limited booth availability, risks further disenfranchising these voters and exacerbating inequities in turnout.

These challenges are supported by evidence. A 2025 study by Martínez i Coma and Smith found that early voting patterns in Australia are influenced not just by timeframes, but also

by polling place density, levels of political competition, and voter demographics such as age¹⁹. This suggests that reforms to pre-poll voting must consider the broader ecosystem, not only the length of the voting period, but also accessibility, education, and community-specific barriers.

In support of a measured approach, research published in *The Conversation* has also highlighted the downsides of overly long early voting periods, arguing that prolonged pre-poll windows may reduce democratic engagement by weakening the shared civic experience of election day and diminishing campaign responsiveness²⁰. A 7-day period strikes a sensible balance as it avoids the risks associated with both truncated access and drawn-out pre-polling, while still supporting participation for those who need flexibility.

It recognises that different communities have different needs and that equitable participation requires more than just procedural simplicity.

Recommendation:

To ensure equitable access and uphold the integrity of the voting process, I recommend:

- Retaining a 7-day pre-poll voting period as a balanced, evidence-informed approach;
- Establishing more mobile polling stations in rural and remote communities;
- Enhancing the location and hours of operation of pre-poll voting stations;
- Implementing targeted education campaigns to raise awareness of pre-poll options;
- Exploring the expansion of postal voting and the future potential for secure online voting.

This approach ensures that electoral reforms are not only efficient, but also inclusive, responsive, and reflective of the diverse realities of voters across NSW.

5. Filling of Casual Vacancies

The Local Government Amendment (Elections) Bill 2025 proposes significant changes to the way casual vacancies are filled, particularly for councillors elected as part of a group. Under the Bill, where a vacating councillor was part of a group on the ballot, their replacement will be the next-highest-ranked unelected candidate from that group. If no such candidate is available or willing, or if the departing councillor was ungrouped, a by-election will be held, in line with current practice²¹.

While this aims to reduce cost and disruption, the implications for independent candidates and small community-based groups require closer examination.

Independent groups are often formed for practical reasons, such as being “above the line” on the ballot, rather than due to a shared platform or ideology.

¹⁹ Martínez i Coma, F., & Smith, R. (2025). *Correlates of Early Voting*. *Government and Opposition*, 60(1), 1–18.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2023.12>

²⁰ <https://theconversation.com/three-weeks-of-early-voting-has-a-significant-effect-on-democracy-heres-why-115909> - Accessed July 2025

²¹ New South Wales, Legislative Assembly, Parliamentary Debates, 4 June 2025, pp 30-33 (Ron Hoenig, Minister for Local Government).

Independent groups typically lack internal party infrastructure, formal succession planning, or mechanisms to maintain group cohesion over time. Members may share values but not policy positions, and many run on the strength of personal reputation or local advocacy rather than political alignment.

Requiring a replacement to come from within the original group assumes continuity that may not exist. Over the course of a four-year term, life circumstances and community priorities can change. The assumption that the next person on an independent group ticket remains willing, available, or reflective of current community expectations is not always valid.

Political parties have formal structures to vet, endorse, and manage candidate alignment throughout the term. Independent groups do not. This structural difference means that a countback replacement from a party is likely to remain consistent with party policy, whereas a replacement from an informal independent group may no longer represent the group's values or the community's.

Recommendation:

To protect the democratic integrity of local representation, the Bill should allow greater flexibility in how vacancies are filled, particularly when:

- There is no willing or appropriate replacement within the original group;
- The departing councillor belonged to an informal independent group;
- The community's needs or expectations have shifted since the election.

In such cases, councils should have the option to pursue:

- Community consultation or expressions of interest;
- A transparent nomination and selection process, overseen by the NSW Electoral Commission;
- A by-election, where no other fair or representative option exists.

Maintaining flexibility acknowledges the unique challenges faced by independent groups and recognises that representation is not static. A fair and accountable process must reflect the dynamic nature of community expectations, not just ballot order.

Independents derive legitimacy through community trust, not party alignment. In fact, recent national research indicates that voter trust in local representation is shaped by candidates' responsiveness, visibility, and perceived alignment with evolving community concerns.^{22 23}

²² Hendriks, C. M., & Reid, R. (2023). Citizen-Led Democratic Change: How Australia's Community Independents Movement Is Reshaping Representative Democracy. *Political Studies*, 72(4), 1609-1631. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217231219393> (Original work published 2024)

²³ Chou, Mark, Busbridge, Rachel and Rutledge-Prior, Serrin. (2023). *The changing role of local government in Australia : National survey findings* Melbourne, Victoria: Research Centre for Social and Political Change, Australian Catholic University. <https://doi.org/10.24268/acu.8yqz3>

Recent national research from the Australian Catholic University underscores the strong public expectation that local governments remain responsive to evolving community needs. According to *The Changing Role of Local Government in Australia* (Chou & Busbridge, 2023), over 90% of Australians believe that councils should advocate for their communities, reflect local values, and actively shape local identity and culture. This aligns with growing public sentiment that local representatives, particularly independents, must be attuned and adaptable to the shifting concerns of their communities, rather than tied to fixed party lines or long-standing political platforms. Such findings reinforce the importance of local representation that is flexible, responsive, and grounded in current community sentiment²⁴.

6. Voter Engagement and Trust in Local Democracy

Building on concerns raised in Section 2 regarding the centralisation of election administration, this section highlights the risks of voter disengagement and declining trust, and proposes strategies to strengthen participation and confidence in the democratic process.

One of the most significant risks associated with the proposed electoral reforms is the potential for increased voter disengagement and a decline in public trust in the local government electoral system. The combination of a reduced pre-poll voting period, the centralisation of election administration, and a more rigid system for filling casual vacancies could lead communities to feel that local elections are becoming less responsive to their needs.

Local government is the level of government closest to the people. When elections lose their local character or become procedurally driven rather than people-centred, community trust can falter. This risk is heightened when:

- Election processes are removed from local oversight, particularly in regional or rural areas;
- Fewer opportunities exist to vote, due to reduced pre-poll options and polling locations;
- Casual Vacancies are filled without community input, especially when group-based replacements no longer reflect the community's expectations.

In areas such as Wollondilly, where transport disadvantage limits access to polling places, voter turnout is already impacted by structural barriers. Without targeted engagement, reforms may worsen existing inequities.

The 2024 NSW local government elections illustrate the consequences of weak voter engagement and administrative oversights. For example, informal votes in Shoalhaven rose from approximately 1,900 in 2021 to over 4,500 in 2024, while Wollongong saw an increase

²⁴ Hendriks, C. M., & Reid, R. (2023). Citizen-Led Democratic Change: How Australia's Community Independents Movement Is Reshaping Representative Democracy. *Political Studies*, 72(4), 1609-1631. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217231219393> (Original work published 2024)

from 3,200 to over 8,000 informal ballots. In Campbelltown, informal votes accounted for a staggering 22% of total votes, with over 15,000 ballots excluded. These incidents were linked to last-minute candidate withdrawals and poor communication, underscoring the importance of clarity, outreach, and trust in the system.

Additionally, growing reliance on absentee and early voting reinforces the need for accessible, flexible options backed by robust education. Without clear and consistent communication, even well-intentioned changes may lead to confusion or disengagement.

Recommendation:

To maintain public confidence and democratic legitimacy, the Bill should include the following measures:

a) Strengthen collaboration between the NSW Electoral Commission and local councils:

Leverage councils' trusted networks and local knowledge to co-design tailored engagement strategies, particularly for:

- Young first-time voters,
- People with disabilities,
- People from culturally and linguistically diverse communities,
- Residents in rural and remote areas.

b) Expand voter education efforts:

Provide the NSWEC with adequate resources and a mandate to deliver targeted awareness campaigns, both online and in person, that clearly explain:

- Voting options (pre-poll, postal, election day),
- Changes to the electoral system,
- Candidate nomination and replacement processes.

c) Ensure flexible, accessible voting options:

Preserve choice and convenience through:

- Adequate numbers of pre-poll locations,
- Consideration of extended hours for working voters,
- Mobile polling units in rural and transport-disadvantaged areas.

d) Promote transparency in candidate replacement:

Where by-elections are not held, ensure transparent and accessible public communication on how and why replacements are made to protect legitimacy.

Maintaining trust and engagement must be a core objective of electoral reform. Local elections must not only be efficient but also democratic, inclusive, and locally meaningful.

Strengthening collaboration, expanding voter education, and preserving voting flexibility will help uphold public confidence in the fairness and integrity of the local electoral process²⁵.

These recommendations are supported by research from the NSW Electoral Commission²⁶ and Australian Electoral Commission²⁷ showing lower turnout in transport-disadvantaged and low-engagement areas. Broader findings from the Grattan Institute and ANZSOG similarly emphasise the importance of transparency and community connection in strengthening trust in democratic institutions^{28 29}.

7. Impact on Smaller and Rural Councils

While larger metropolitan councils may benefit from a centralised and standardised election process, smaller and rural councils often face distinct challenges that require a more tailored approach³⁰. These councils tend to have closer connections to their communities, operate with leaner resources, and rely more heavily on local relationships and context-sensitive practices to support voter engagement and election delivery.

Imposing a one-size-fits-all model may unintentionally strain these councils both financially and operationally and result in electoral processes that feel disconnected from local expectations and needs. Additionally, without dedicated support, smaller councils may struggle to meet the same administrative or reporting demands as larger, better-resourced councils.

A uniform electoral approach may:

- Increase administrative complexity or workload for smaller councils;
- Lead to higher per-voter costs without equivalent benefit;
- Undermine locally appropriate engagement practices, especially in areas with strong community identity;
- Create a sense of detachment from the electoral process if decisions are seen as centralised and externally imposed.

Recommendation:

To ensure equity across all LGAs, the Bill should include tailored provisions for smaller and rural councils, including:

²⁵ NSW Parliament Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *Proposals to increase voter engagement, participation and confidence*, Report 1/58, June 2025. Available at: <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/tp/files/191201/Report%20%20Proposals%20to%20increase%20voter%20engagement,%20participation%20and%20confidence.pdf>

²⁶ NSW Electoral Commission. (2022). *2021 NSW Local Government Elections – Independent Research Report*. <https://www.elections.nsw.gov.au/getmedia/973f7ede-95dc-4ad8-8e7f-ecd63c36fd67/2021-local-government-elections-independent-research-report.pdf>

²⁷ Australian Electoral Commission. (2016). *Voter Turnout: Research and Issues Paper*. Australian Government. https://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/research/files/voter-turnout-2016.pdf

²⁸ <https://www.grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/902-a-crisis-of-trust.pdf>

²⁹ <https://anzsog.edu.au/research-insights-and-resources/research/reimagining-how-governments-can-build-trust/#> - Accessed July 2025

³⁰ SBS News. (2022). *Why Australia's voter turnout has been declining for almost a decade*. <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/why-australias-voter-turnout-has-been-declining-for-almost-a-decade/mqe9mx4i8>

- Flexibility in collaboration models between councils and the NSWEC;
- Options for locally-driven voter engagement support;
- Consideration of cost-sharing mechanisms or subsidies to offset disproportionate financial burdens;
- Recognition of local logistical challenges, such as fewer polling venues, transport disadvantage, and staffing limitations.

This recommendation aligns with longstanding advocacy by Local Government NSW (LGNSW) and the Office of Local Government (OLG), both of which have consistently supported more tailored, context-sensitive approaches for small and rural councils in areas such as codes of conduct, financial reporting, and performance monitoring^{31 32}. Recognising the diversity of local government is essential to ensuring that reforms are effective, inclusive, and sustainable.

By acknowledging the diversity of council contexts, the Bill can ensure that all communities regardless of size or location are able to participate in a system that is not only efficient, but also locally responsive and fair.

8. Transport Disadvantage in Wollondilly Shire

Wollondilly Shire is one of the most public transport disadvantaged areas in New South Wales^{33 34}, which presents a significant challenge to voter participation. A substantial portion of the population, particularly in the metropolitan rural areas across Wollondilly, face difficulties accessing polling stations due to limited or non-existent public transport options³⁵. Transport disadvantage in Wollondilly makes it particularly difficult for voters to attend polling stations, especially for those without private transport, such as young people, the elderly, or individuals with disabilities.

Recommendation:

A centralised election system through the NSWEC could help address transport barriers by providing more mobile polling units, particularly in Local Government areas such as Wollondilly. Additionally, collaboration with local transport services should be strengthened

³¹ Local Government NSW (LGNSW)

In its submissions and policy advocacy, LGNSW has consistently emphasised the need for flexibility in regulatory approaches and recognition of council diversity especially for smaller and rural councils. For example:

“A one-size-fits-all approach fails to recognise the diversity in capacity, location, resources and communities served by NSW councils. Local government reform must be flexible, risk-based and fit-for-purpose.”

— LGNSW Submission on the Draft Integrated Planning and Reporting Guidelines (2022)

Source: LGNSW Submission – IPR Guidelines

³² NSW Office of Local Government (OLG)

The OLG itself recognises diversity in council capacity and the importance of tailored support. For example, in the OLG's *Promoting Better Practice Review* program:

“There is no single model of good governance that suits all councils. The approach must be tailored to local circumstances and community expectations.”

— OLG – *Promoting Better Practice Framework*

Source: OLG Promoting Better Practice

³³ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-02-05/south-western-sydney-transport-inequality-young-people/103414778>

³⁴ <https://centralnews.com.au/2025/02/26/stuck-in-the-dilly-sydneys-most-disconnected-community/>

³⁵ As a note: Wollondilly is only a 15 minute drive away from the new Western Sydney International Airport.

to ensure voters can access polling places more easily. Where transport assistance is arranged, it should be sourced through neutral, non-partisan providers to maintain public confidence in the fairness of the electoral process and avoid perceptions of political influence.

Ensuring that early voting options are extended or made more accessible in transport-disadvantaged areas could also improve participation, particularly for those without access to private vehicles, including young people, older residents, and people with disability.

9. Conclusion

The proposed changes in the Local Government Amendment (Elections) Bill 2025 have the potential to streamline elections and make them more accessible, but they also present challenges that must be carefully considered. It is crucial that the reforms do not diminish the democratic principles of local government, particularly regarding voter engagement, casual vacancy processes, and the representation of local communities.

I respectfully urge the committee to consider these concerns and to explore options that will balance the need for streamlined elections with the need for inclusive, fair, and community-driven processes. In particular, attention must be given to ensuring that voters in transport-disadvantaged areas like Wollondilly are not further excluded from the electoral process. Furthermore, the Bill should ensure stronger collaboration between the NSW Electoral Commission and local councils to create more community-centric, accessible elections for all voters.

I thank you for your consideration of this submission and welcome any further opportunity to work collaboratively with the Standing Committee on State Development

Sincerely

Ally Dench