

Review of Local Government Election Costs

NSW Government Response to IPART Recommendations

The next local council elections will be held on 12 September 2020. Since 2008, council elections have been undertaken on a full cost recovery basis. The NSW Electoral Commission (NSWEC) pays the direct costs of the election and then invoices councils once the elections are completed plus an Election Management Fee to cover the NSWEC's corporate overheads.

The Government has asked the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) to undertake a review of local government election costs for the 2020 elections. IPART has been asked to recommend a costing methodology that minimises the financial burden on councils and ensures local government elections are conducted efficiently and cost effectively.

The Government thanks IPART and all the stakeholders who participated in this process for their work on this review.

IPART's review has demonstrated the need for the Government to meet part of the costs of council elections. In response to IPART's review, the NSW Government is pleased to announce that it intends to fund the NSWEC's core costs in relation to the administration of local government elections, thereby reducing councils' election costs.

Under the new funding model, costs will be assigned as either direct or core costs and allocated to councils or the NSW Government accordingly. The funding model will see costs allocated on the following basis:

- Direct (or marginal) costs are the costs that would not be incurred if an election was not held. These will be recovered from councils on a direct allocation and per elector basis. These include election staffing, venues, ballot paper printing, council-specific advertising and voter information products.
- Core costs are defined as head office costs such as staff payroll, training, election security, project management, drafting of election procedures and policies, core IT system development and maintenance and ongoing voter roll maintenance. These are the costs the NSWEC must incur to maintain its capacity to conduct local government elections. The NSW Government will fund these core costs of \$19.9 million.

The NSW Government's funding contribution will result in an indicative weighted average cost per elector of \$8.21, which will be passed onto councils, compared to a weighted average cost per elector of \$12.72 if no NSW Government contribution was provided. Adoption of the new funding model offers the following benefits:

- it reduces councils' election costs ensuring all councils, regardless of size, can afford to retain an electoral services provider to administer their elections
- it is more efficient, cost effective and cost reflective
- it ensures a more equitable allocation of election costs, eliminating the need for larger councils to cross subsidise smaller councils' elections, and
- it reflects the practice in other jurisdictions where State Governments fund their Electoral Commissions' core operations in relation to local government elections resulting in lower costs per elector compared to NSW.

The Government is committed to further reducing the cost of local government elections.

Amendments were made to the Local Government (General) Regulation 2005 last year to give councils the option of avoiding the cost of by-elections in the first 18 months of councils' terms by filling vacancies by a countback. The option of countbacks will be available to councils following the September 2020 ordinary elections.

To achieve further efficiencies in the administration of council elections, the Government proposes to make amendments to the electoral provisions of the Regulation to modernise and align them with the more contemporary and efficient practices used at State elections. These amendments will be made in time for the September 2020 council elections.

The Government agrees with IPART that electoral service providers should be responsive to the needs of councils in administering their elections and, to accommodate this, amendments will also be made to the Regulation to require the NSWEC and other electoral service providers to exercise their functions as election managers in consultation with councils. To ensure the integrity of council elections, ultimate decision making in relation to the administration of council elections will rest with the election manager.

The Government is committed to identifying further opportunities for reducing councils' election costs and to this end, it will be consulting with the local government sector early next year on extending to all councils the option of conducting their elections by universal postal voting instead of attendance voting from the 2024 election.

Universal postal voting has operated successfully in Victoria for some years. At the 2016 Victorian local government elections, 72 out of 79 (92.7%) councils conducted their elections by universal postal voting. In 2016, universal postal voting elections cost 12.2% less than attendance voting elections and had higher participation rates. Participation rates at council elections using universal postal voting elections was 73.8% compared to 61.5% for attendance voting elections.
