

13 May 2024

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Via email: em@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Members,

Inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia

Bega Valley Shire Council appreciates the opportunity to provide this submission to the Joint Standing Committee into civics education, engagement and participation in Australia. Local Government plays a very important role in society and the role of Councils and local government elected officials, particularly in the lead up to an election can often be unclear to the community.

Informed residents are essential for effective democracy. When people understand the functions and responsibilities of different levels of government they are better equipped to make informed decisions about their representatives and policies. Informed residents are also able to hold their representatives accountable and are more likely to be engaged in decision making that leads to a stronger sense of community.

Bega Valley Shire Council recently submitted a motion to the Local Government NSW 2023 conference requesting that LGNSW work with state and federal government including the Office of Local Government and the NSW and Australian Electoral commissions, to undertake ongoing education campaigns to increase community awareness and understanding of:

- a) The role and responsibilities of each level of government.
- b) The election processes for each level of government including details on what a ballot paper looks like, how above and below the line voting works, and how preferential voting works.
- c) The role of Councillors.

It is hoped that a federally funded broad education campaign will help to clarify confusion and ensure a healthy and functioning democracy. We need people to not just be registered to vote and turn up on poll day, but to take an active and informed interest in civic matters.

Council also supports improvements in formalised civics education throughout Australia to help improve the functioning of local democracies. We need a diverse range of community members who want to stand as candidates in local government elections. We also need an engaged community who understand how all three levels of government work and the role they can play in guiding the work of their local Council. Much has been written on the need to build trust in government at all levels. The foundation for that trust starts with knowledge and understanding of the structures and processes that support government and democracy. When trust improves, managing the risk of legitimacy of information is reduced and community becomes self-governing to some degree. Therefore, we support the use of technology to increase participation by improving education, communication and engagement with diverse and remote

communities. We recommend that government fund technology initiatives in local government to improve access and citizen participation. Bega Valley Shire Council has a digital strategy that is slow to implement due to competing priorities and limited income to allocate to what could be considered 'intangible' outputs.

Council would also like the committee to consider the increasing costs that Councils are required to accommodate in conducting Local Government elections and the impact this has on civics participation in Australia. Council engages the NSW Electoral Commission and the costs for the election have continued to increase beyond the permitted rates increase. This cost escalation adds to the financial sustainability challenges of Council, a factor that impacts our capacity to proactively engage with the community and likely deters potential Councillor candidates. In seeking to reduce election costs we encourage all levels of government to consider expanding online voting initiatives. Cost savings could be diverted to increasing the prescribed Councillor and Mayoral allowance. At this time, the payments do not reflect the responsibilities and time required to hold such an important position. The small allowance limits the attraction of potential candidates to stand as councillor or Mayor. With support from the education system becoming a democratically elected representative or working in public administration should be seen as a professional career path.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission. Council invites the committee to visit the Bega Valley and would be open to hosting a regionally focussed public hearing so you can receive feedback directly from our Council, elected officials and community on the challenges we face and improvements that can be made in ensuring all Australians are actively participating in their local communities.

Regards,



Iliada Bolton

Director of Business and Governance