5. VOTER TURNOUT AT CHRISTCHURCH CITY ELECTIONS

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The purpose of this report is to respond to a resolution adopted by the Annual Plan Subcommittee requesting me to report to the Strategy and Finance Committee on an Annual Plan submission made by Mr Yani Johanson relating to voter turnout and voter education.

MR JOHANSON'S PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY SUBMISSION

The following is the relevant extract from Mr Johanson's Annual Plan submissions:

"I believe that voter turnout and participation is a fundamental form of public accountability. It is also imperative that there is an ongoing form of education with the introduction of the new Local Government Act. I also believe that as part of the stated objective: "To encourage effective public participation in local government" that the Council needs to be more proactive in increasing voter turnout. As such I would like to see the City Council set social performance indicators as follows:

a. *"That a long term target of 99% voter participation and turnout is set"*
b. *"That the Council supports and funds an ongoing education and awareness campaign on the role of local government and the community"*
c. *"That short term steps are established to progressively increased voter turnout by 10% per election until the long term goal is reached"."*

VOTER TURNOUT IN CHRISTCHURCH CITY ELECTIONS

The following schedule shows the percentage of electors who voted at the five triennial Christchurch City elections held between 1989 and 2001:

	1989	1992	1995	1998	2001
Electors on Rolls	200,915	208,533	215,621	223,832	227,793
Voters	121,680	105,982	107,450	116,511	110,068
Percentage Voted	60.56%	50.82%	49.83%	52.05%	48.32%

The percentage of electors who vote varies considerably between wards. For instance, at the 2001 elections only 35% of the electors in the Hagley Ward voted, compared with 56% of the electors in the Waimairi Ward.

GENERAL TRENDS IN TURNOUT THROUGHOUT NEW ZEALAND

As the following schedule indicates, the turnout at the 2001 local authority elections was the lowest since 1989 for all but Regional Council elections, where it was the second-lowest since 1989:

Overall Average Voter Turnout, 1989-2001

Type of elected body	1989	1992	1995	1998	2001
Regional councils	56%	52%	48%	53%	49%
District Health Boards	-	-	-	-	50%
Territorial authorities:					
- City Councils	52%	48%	49%	51%	45%
- City Mayors	50%	48%	49%	51%	45%
- District Councils	67%	61%	59%	61%	57%
- District Mayors	67%	61%	59%	59%	56%
Community boards	54%	49%	50%	50%	46%

Of all elections in 2001, turnout was highest for District Council elections. This is a reflection of the higher turnout typical of the more rural makeup of District Councils. City Council Mayoral elections by comparison had the lowest turnout of all elections in 2001.

Voter turnout in 2001 continued to be highest amongst smaller councils and in South Island councils, compared to larger and North Island councils. For City Councils, the smaller and South Island councils had a majority turnout, while amongst large City Councils and North Island City Councils fewer than half of eligible electors voted in 2001.

Territorial authorities (City and District Councils) remain the element of local government with which the public interact most closely. Following the 2001 elections, the Department of Internal Affairs therefore examined average voter turnout within contested wards in territorial authority elections to establish whether any particular factors were associated with high or low election turnout. The Department's research indicated that the following factors were particularly relevant:

Was there a Mayoral contest?

All cities except Porirua and Invercargill had a mayoral contest. Seven districts also did not have mayoral elections (Kaipara, Rodney, Otorohanga, Stratford, Tararua, Grey and Southland). All of these councils had a medium-high voter turnout, with the exception of Porirua. It appears that lack of a mayoral contest did not greatly influence voter turnout in these authorities.

Was there a local contest for Community Boards?

There was no clear association between the existence of a community board and high turnout.

However, many local authorities with community boards experienced a lower than average turnout, compared with authorities with no community boards.

Was there a large number of candidates?

The number of candidates was related to the levels of voter turnout. There was most often a high turnout in areas where fewer candidates were standing, while low turnout occurred mainly in authorities where there were more candidates.

Number of electors

Similar to authorities with fewer candidates per position, authorities with fewer electors per council member were strongly associated with higher turnouts. As might be expected, authorities with a small number of electors per council member also tended to have a higher turnout than those with a large number of electors. This pattern was obvious both in the 1998 and 2001 elections.

This pattern could be due to several reasons. Candidates with smaller electorates may find it easier to make themselves known to voters, or more voters may already know them. Other factors could be that rural or smaller electorates are more interested/involved in local government, or maintain a greater sense of 'civic duty'.

ELECTORAL OFFICER'S COMMENTS ON TARGETS PROPOSED BY MR JOHANSON

The progressive decline in elector participation in local, state and parliamentary (federal) elections is a continuing and seemingly intractable trend throughout the western world. Several steps have been taken to try and identify ways of arresting this trend in the case of Christchurch City elections, including:

● The commissioning of a report by Mr Alan McRobie, a political analyst and independent electoral consultant.

   As might be expected, Mr McRobie's report disclosed (inter alia) that young people are much less likely to vote than older persons. A copy of Mr McRobie's report will be tabled.

● A visit to the UK by the Christchurch City Electoral Officer (in company with the Auckland City Electoral Officer) to assess the effectiveness of some electronic and other voting initiatives put in place for the English local government elections held on Thursday 2 May 2002. These initiatives were initiated and funded by central government, in an endeavour to arrest or reverse the steadily declining turnout.

A copy of our comprehensive report to the Society of Local Government Managers assessing the effectiveness of these initiatives will be tabled at the meeting. The report can also be accessed electronically via http://www.localgovt.co.nz/ServicesForCouncils/ResourceLibrary/CorporateServices/Elections

The results of the English experiments were interesting, in that while there was a small increase in turnout in those areas where electronic voting was employed, in areas where polling stations were abandoned in favour of postal voting, turnout reached 60%, compared with the national average of 35%. Postal voting has been employed for New Zealand local government elections for well over a decade, and in this respect we are thus well ahead of UK and American jurisdictions, where postal voting is rare.

The Christchurch Electoral Officer is a member of the Society of Local Government Managers (SOLGM) Electoral Officers' Working Party, which is also looking at ways of increasing turnout at future elections, including the introduction of electronic voting via the internet.

The only possible way of achieving 99% voter participation is to make voting compulsory, with fines being automatically imposed for those electors who fail to vote. Compulsory voting applies in Australia for local, state and federal elections, where a turnout of approximately 98% is achieved. However, this creates some associated problems with what is known as the *"donkey vote"* where disinterested electors who would not otherwise vote simply vote for those candidates at the top of each voting paper.

EDUCATION AND AWARENESS CAMPAIGN ON THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE COMMUNITY

This Council's Communications Team (with my assistance, as Electoral Officer) is currently in the process of developing a "political awareness in schools" programme, designed to educate students on the activities and operation of the Christchurch City Council. This programme is being developed as a free democracy and citizenship teacher resource for Christchurch schools. Within the teacher resource there will be a mock election activity that could be run by teachers in schools in 2004, to coincide with the real 2004 Christchurch City elections, when candidates will be invited to visit participating schools in the course of their election campaigns, to encourage students' later participation in Christchurch City elections as adult electors, and to encourage their parents to vote.

The programme is designed to raise awareness of the political process among children and youth through each participating school's curriculum, in a fun and interactive way. Copies of the draft resource pack will be provided at the meeting.

CONCLUSION

The civic resource programme will provide teachers with a free and effective means of raising their pupils' awareness of the Council's activities, and the political process.

CHAIR'S COMMENTS

I appreciate Yani Johanson raising the issue of voter turnout at local government elections. We need to encourage greater participation by eligible voters. But, it is difficult to know what new initiatives could be employed at this stage beyond current consideration of the introduction of electronic voting and education programmes in schools. We have increased in recent years our communication with residents through City Scene and other publications. Community Boards through their closer liaison with residents' groups also have an important role in encouraging greater participation in voter turnout and a programme involving Community Boards and residents' groups, many of whom have their own newsletters, could be considered.

While my recommendation is to receive the information only, the issue can be further revisited by the Committee and Council as new initiatives become available.

**Chair's
Recommendation:**   That the information be received.