



Council of Social Service of New South Wales

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18 April 2008

Mr Colin Berry
Electoral Commissioner
NSW Electoral Commission
Level 25, 201 Kent Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Mr Berry,

Re: Equal Access to Democracy Plan for September 2008 Local Government Elections

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback to the NSW Electoral Commission in advance of the 2008 Local Government Elections. Along with Disability peak organisations, NCOSS has appreciated the genuine involvement with the Commission regarding its Equal Access to Democracy Plans. NCOSS acknowledges NSWEC for undertaking this important work.

ABOUT NCOSS

The Council of Social Service of NSW (NCOSS) is an independent non-government organisation (NGO) and is the peak body for the non-government human services sector in NSW.

NCOSS has as its vision a society where there is social and economic equity, based on cooperation, participation, sustainability and respect. NCOSS works with its members on behalf of disadvantaged people and communities towards achieving social justice in New South Wales.

NCOSS membership is composed of community organisations and interested individuals. Affiliate members include local government councils, business organisations and Government agencies. Through current membership forums, NCOSS represents more than 7,000 community organisations and over 100,000 consumers and individuals.

FEEDBACK ON THE CONSULTATION PLAN MARCH 2008

Language

The Plan under consultation makes several references to people with *mental* disability. This form of language has been outmoded for some time. The more current and correct terminology would be to refer to people with intellectual disability and people with mental health issues.

While only a "cosmetic" change, NCOSS is concerned that Returning Officers could be exposed to this archaic language, possibly then using it in their own activities and in reference to the general community. This could cause unintended offense. Updated terminology serves to model respectful behaviour towards people with disability.

Further, the Plan refers to the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care (DADHC) but the term *Home Care* is typed incorrectly in the document as *Homecare*.

Goal Three: Promote equal access at buildings used at elections

The NSWEC does not own the buildings it uses during elections, but NCOSS does not accept that NSWEC has “very limited influence” regarding the level of accessibility of the buildings it leases. The NSWEC can choose to lease buildings with the best possible accessibility as a priority consideration. To this end, there should be an improvement strategy that sets out the proportion of leased premises that are to have “full” accessibility. This improvement strategy should contain designated performance benchmarks against which the Commission reports and should show measureable and marked increases at each subsequent election.

NCOSS recommends that NSWEC engages local Councils in using their own accessible buildings to serve as offices and polling places for the September election and thereafter. Council Chambers, administration buildings, senior citizens centres and neighbourhood centres are frequently more accessible than commercial use buildings.

Goal Four: Provide more options that promote equal access to enrolment and voting.

NCOSS contends that people with disability should have the option of registering as General Postal Voters if required.

While the proposed amendment to the Local Government (General) Regulation 2005 to enable pre-poll voting will certainly assist some people with disability, the cost and effort involved in pre-poll voting could prove a disincentive to voting for some people with disability. Pre-poll voting for people with disability also assumes that the offices of Returning Officers and other pre-poll voting centres are completely disability accessible.

Consequently, NCOSS recommends a further amendment that provides the option for people with disability to register as General Postal Voters.

One of the suggested strategies for Goal Four involves requesting that Councils provide a bus service on Election Day. This could be of great assistance to some people with disability. NSWEC should be clear that buses should be appropriately wheelchair accessible and available to people with a range of disabilities at very low or no cost, in order to facilitate their equal participation in voting.

Goal Five: Enable election staff to provide assistance that promotes equal access and participation.

The existing suggested strategies for Goal Five involve guidelines for assistance by Returning Officers and Polling Officials and the development of recruitment criteria for election officials can be effective.

NCOSS recommends that a strategy for this Goal could involve reporting. Returning Officers could be required to report on the following:

- The number of electoral staff with cultural competencies and specific expertise in disability
- Any problems with accessibility or other, encountered by people with disability at electoral offices and polling places. This could include any local solutions or future suggestions. This should not be limited to actual complaints, but could be helpful in recording comments, reactions etc by voters and staff in this regard.

- Other constructive observations by electoral staff in engaging with people with disability and other voters.

A simple collation of these reports would provide valuable information to NSWEC towards future improvements at the local level.

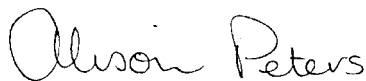
NCOSS further recommends that strategies for the recruitment of electoral staff with required competency and expertise be specifically targeted and not left to chance. In other words, NSWEC could actively seek people with the necessary expertise to work during the elections. This could entail employing people with disability as electoral staff. An ongoing record of permanent and short-term electoral staff with specific expertise could be maintained for future recruitment purposes.

CONCLUSION

NCOSS commends the NSWEC for its continued strategies to improve access to voting for people with disability in NSW. In acknowledging that this is an ongoing process, NCOSS would encourage NSWEC to accelerate any access strategies for the enhanced participation of people with disability in processes that affect their lives. But this participation must not be more onerous or expensive for people with disability than is expected for people without disability.

NCOSS is pleased to provide feedback to NSWEC in this regard. Should you require clarification or further information, please contact Christine Regan Senior Policy Officer on 9211 2599 ext 117 or chris@ncoss.org.au

Yours sincerely



Alison Peters
Director