



Local elections and public health: A critical connection

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Adele Broadbent, John Kerr, Tim Chambers, Lucy Telfar-Barnard, Caroline Shaw, Michael Baker , Nick Wilson

Summary

Local and regional councils in Aotearoa New Zealand play a vital but sometimes underappreciated role in supporting public health. Their responsibilities extend far beyond traditional water and sewerage infrastructure. Councils directly influence the well-being of communities every day, despite recent central government moves to dilute those mandates.

As voting opens for the 2025 local elections, New Zealanders need to consider the health impacts of council decisions and scrutinise candidates' policies and track records on public health.

Local and regional councils in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) shape many aspects of daily life which have a direct bearing health and wellbeing. The [Health Act 1956](#) mandates local authorities to “improve, promote, and protect public health,” which includes appointing environmental health officers, managing nuisances (ie rubbish, pests), and making bylaws to safeguard community health.

[Voting opens](#) on 9 September and closes at 12 noon 11 October 2025. This is an important opportunity to ensure the health and wellbeing of communities is supported by people willing to take a stand on issues relating to public health.

In this Briefing, we highlight several key areas where local government can impact public health. We encourage citizens to consider these issues (and the topic of health and wellbeing more broadly) in their voting decisions and interaction with local government candidates.

How our councils can impact public health in NZ

1. Water supply and sanitation

The introduction of councils in the 1860s and 1870s led to drastically improved sewerage systems and waste collection, reducing the spread of diseases such as typhoid in NZ. Today, councils still oversee both water supplies and waste management.

However, there has been a chronic under-investment in basic water infrastructure, leading to nearly 20% of reticulated water leaking from pipes and wasting the country an estimated \$122 million a year.¹ These high leakage levels are a hazard to health and puts NZ among the worst performers compared to other high-income jurisdictions.² The total infrastructure deficit is estimated at \$120-185bn over the next 30 years. Addressing this deficit is only possible through a sustained and substantial commitment from elected officials to prioritise water infrastructure investment.

Under the “[Local Water Done Well](#)” plan, councils retain ownership of water services but establish new, financially separate water organisations to be run solely or jointly with other councils. A key consideration should be whether your council’s Water Services Delivery Plan has been submitted and accepted by the Department of Internal Affairs. Check whether your council is on the accepted list [here](#).

2. Urban planning and healthy environments

Urban planning decisions around the location and availability of parks, cycleways, and community facilities, such as sports facilities, swimming pools, and libraries, affect physical activity, mental health, and social connections.^{3 4}

Local government can also shape healthy food environments, ensuring policies support the availability of healthy food, such as local farmers' markets,⁵ supermarkets and community gardens. Other measures include:

- expanding smokefree areas,⁶
- installing outdoor gym equipment in parks,⁷
- increasing access to drinking water fountains⁸ and
- supporting local food re-distribution programmes.⁹

Local alcohol policies¹⁰ such as restricting trading hours and outlet density, plus restrictions on gambling, such as limiting numbers of poker machines,¹¹ also play a part in supporting healthy communities.

3. Investing in how we travel

Councils are responsible for developing, maintaining and operating a large network of local roads and for delivering public transport infrastructure and services. These are crucial to our health, allowing access to work, family and friends and healthcare. However, current transport arrangements also cause significant physical and mental health harm through injury, physical inactivity and air and noise pollution.¹²

Councils can improve our short- and long-term health and well-being, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to climate change by investment in street-level changes to increase walking, cycling and public transport use.^{13 14}

4. Council housing and affordable homes

Access to safe, warm, and affordable housing is essential for public health.¹⁵ Councils are key players in providing and maintaining council housing, enforcing some basic housing quality regulations, and ensuring policies and district plans address the availability and affordability of decent housing. Council policy can also support community efforts to address homelessness. Poor housing conditions and overcrowding are linked to a range of illnesses, particularly respiratory illness and mental health challenges, which also disproportionately affect Māori, Pacific peoples, and low-income families.¹⁶

5. Community safety, emergency preparedness and responding to climate change

Local councils are at the frontline of community safety, from designing safe public spaces to planning for natural hazards and public health emergencies. Their preparedness and response capacity can be the difference between resilience and crisis during events like floods, earthquakes, or pandemics.

Community safety includes climate change adaptation and mitigation. The Auditor General has described councils as at the “[front line of a wider response to climate change](#)”, citing their responsibility for civil defence, regional and district land use, planning and major community infrastructure.

Why we should also care about how local government is funded

Given our brief overview above, it is obvious that the decisions made by mayors, councillors, and community board members affect everyone’s health and wellbeing. But we also suggest that there is a need to fix what NZ mayors have described as a “broken” funding model for local government.¹⁷ That is, central government needs to directly contribute more resources to local government infrastructure. Alternatively, it needs to improve local government financing eg, by giving back to local government a proportion of locally-raised GST,¹⁸ and allowing them to raise revenue from local fuel taxes.¹⁷

As such, there is a case for supporting those local and central government politicians who are trying to ensure local government is adequately and sustainably funded.

What this Briefing adds

- Voting opens for Local body elections 2025 on 9 September and closes at 12 noon on 11 October.
- Local government plays an important, but often underappreciated, role in supporting the health and well-being of citizens and communities.
- Water supply, sewage/waste disposal, urban planning, healthy transport, affordable housing, emergency preparedness and climate change are just a few of the local government responsibilities that have a bearing on public health.

Implications for policy and practice

- New Zealanders should keep the role of local government in ensuring health and well-being in mind when considering and engaging with candidates and campaign platforms.
- Voters can examine proposed policies and agendas and ask candidates what they would do in the areas described above.
- When elected, local government officials need to continue to progress health-related issues and central government politicians need to address the problems with the current funding model for local government.

Authors details

[Adele Broadbent](#), Communication Lead, Public Health Communication Centre, Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka, Pōneke | University of Otago, Wellington

[Dr John Kerr](#), Science Lead, Public Health Communication Centre, Department of Public Health, tākou Whakaihu Waka, Pōneke | University of Otago, Wellington

[Assoc Prof Tim Chambers](#), Ngāi Tahu Research Centre, University of Canterbury | Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha

[Dr Lucy Telfar-Barnard](#), Department of Public Health, tākou Whakaihu Waka, Pōneke | University of Otago, Wellington

[Assoc Prof Caroline Shaw](#), Department of Public Health, tākou Whakaihu Waka, Pōneke | University of Otago, Wellington

[Professor Michael Baker](#), Director, Public Health Communication Centre and Department of Public Health, University of Otago, Wellington, New Zealand

[Prof Nick Wilson](#), Co-Director, Public Health Communication Centre, and Department of Public Health, Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka, Pōneke | University of Otago, Wellington

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