Questions and answers about the Online Voting Working Party

Will online voting be used just for council elections or can it be used for District Health Boards?

We will need to wait for the outcomes from the working party but it is certainly a consideration.

Will online voting in local elections lead the way for online voting in national elections?

The framework and context for running local authority elections is different to national elections. We do not know what the demand is for online voting in national elections. That said, using online voting for local authority elections may drive and inform demand for online voting at Parliamentary elections. It may also drive demand for online voting at School Boards of Trustee elections.

How expensive would it be?

The cost of online voting will be assessed as part of the next phase of work. However, we do know it will need investment in new electoral infrastructure, which will probably add to the cost of local authority elections. Under the Local Electoral Act, local authorities meet the cost of local elections. So we would need to look at how the initial costs can be covered.

The exact costs will depend on the number of local authorities using the system, the technology used and audit and security requirements.

As an example the total additional cost of a pilot of online voting at the 2011 New South Wales State Government elections was approximately $4 million, or $84 per online vote submitted. By comparison, the total cost to local authorities conducting the 2010 local authority elections in New Zealand was $13.73 million.

Overseas experience indicates that online voting has the potential to deliver longer-term cost savings. In New Zealand’s case, there are savings that can be achieved by reducing manual handling and processing of ballots and postage costs. Online voting can only be implemented if it is affordable. Further work is needed on matters of cost and funding options.

Why would it be more expensive?

Initially it will require new electoral infrastructure. There will also be a need to invest in developing security systems or to make sure currently existing security processes can be adapted.

How can we be sure people will only vote once? How secure will online voting be?

That is unknown at the moment. There is a strong possibility that we can leverage the work done to develop RealMe, the new secure way to for New Zealanders to access services and prove their identity online.

New Zealand already permits electors who have a RealMe logon to update their electoral enrolment details online. The Electoral Amendment Bill 2013, introduced on 17 August 2013, will enable electors with a RealMe verified identity to enrol online. The bill will be implemented in time for the 2014 general election.
Online passport renewals and the online census completion option in 2013 are other examples of popular and successful digital services involving sensitive information. Currently, 33 per cent of all eligible adult passport renewal applications are completed online. For the 2013 census, about 35 per cent of all census forms submitted were submitted online.

**Will on-line voting risk disenfranchising people who aren’t comfortable with computers or who don’t have access to the internet?**

In 2012, four out of five New Zealand homes had some form of internet connection according to information published by Statistics New Zealand. That leaves one in five homes without an internet connection. Ensuring electors in these homes can vote is of paramount importance. It is likely that some form of paper based voting option will still be needed at local authority elections for the foreseeable future. Ensuring that electors without internet access can continue to participate in local authority elections is something that the working group will be specifically considering.

**Where has it been used overseas and with what results?**

Online voting for public elections is still relatively new internationally and its use is currently limited.

A trial of technology assisted voting was undertaken at the New South Wales State General Election in 2011. The trial involved online voting and electronic kiosk voting and targeted electors with disabilities, electors living in remote parts of the state and electors who were out of state at the time of the election. An independent evaluation of the trial concluded that the new voting methods were effective and elector participation rates were successful.

Other places which have successfully trialled or are using online voting for local government elections include Canada, Estonia, Norway and Switzerland.

**Who will be on the working party?**

People involved in central and local government and those with expertise in Information Communication Technology are likely to be members of the working party.

**What will the working party be looking at?**

The working party will consider:
- the different options for online voting;
- the experience in other jurisdictions;
- the availability and suitability of different software products on the market;
- affordability, costs and savings;
- security, integrity and access issues;
- integration with the First Past the Post and Single Transferable Vote voting systems;
- ensuring that results are auditable;
- a trial, including possible partner local authorities; and
- legislative implications.