

'Arcane' address disclosure to go after councillors raise safety concerns



Ross Giblin/Stuff

Porirua mayor Anita Baker says it is reassuring that it will be more difficult to find her address. (File photo)

Council candidates won't have to disclose their address on election ads, in a law change to alleviate "growing fears" of online and offline abuse.

Previously, council candidates had to list a physical address on every electoral ad including flyers and hoardings. For independent candidates, that usually meant disclosing their home address. The updated law – which should be in place before nominations open for local body elections – allows them to use a phone number or email address instead.

Dunedin mayor Aaron Hawkins, who inadvertently brought the issue to the attention of Local Government New Zealand by "thinking out loud" on Twitter about the issue, said public address disclosure was "arcane".

"Nobody has been able to make the case for what purpose it serves," he said. "We heard loud and clear that it does act as a disincentive for people to stand for local government, particularly at a time when we have pointed online discourse directed at candidates."

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Hamish McNeilly/Stuff

Aaron Hawkins says the previous rule is "arcane" and there is no good reason to keep it.
(File photo)

Local Government Minister Nanaia Mahuta said the change would "create a safer local electoral environment that supports diverse candidacy, and better protects candidates of all backgrounds from harassment".

Christchurch City councillor Sara Templeton, who [unmasked an online harasser](#) and drew attention to the

[issue of online abuse](#), said having to provide her address when she first ran for council as a stay-at-home mum was “daunting and uncomfortable”.

CHRIS SKELTON

Christchurch councillor Sara Templeton approaches Netsafe after a fake social media account was used to troll her and other female politicians. (First published March 2022)

“This will help candidates feel more comfortable about standing,” she said. “It’s an important step to reduce barriers but if we want councils truly reflective of community we need to do more.”

Online abuse is likely to be worse for council candidates in the lead up to this election. Between the last local government elections in 2019 and this year’s elections, there had been a “rapid increase in violence and vulgarity and venom towards politicians”, said [Disinformation Project researcher Sanjana Hattotuwa](#).

“New Zealand is no longer enjoying a high-trust political environment,” he said. Online abuse was getting worse at a faster rate after the Parliament protests. “The infodemic has contributed to a significant deterioration in civil engagement both online and offline,” Hattotuwa said.

Supplied

Sanjana Hattotuwa, from the Disinformation Project, says abuse towards politicians has changed over the course of the pandemic as disinformation spreads. (File photo)

Porirua mayor Anita Baker said removing the address

requirement was a good move, but the growing problem of online abuse could not be solved with electoral law changes.

Baker spoke out about [the frequent online harassment she received](#), saying she no longer wore leopard print because of targeted and sexist abuse on Facebook.

Not disclosing her address would make her feel safer but didn't really present a barrier to anyone who did want to find where she lived in a community like Porirua. "It might help people who haven't decided if they're going to run," she said. "The fact that people can't easily show up at your house is reassuring."

The proposed law change has cross-party support – at the first reading, National MP Erica Stanford spoke about her sister having to disclose her parents' address to stand for a community board.

"That was something that really upset her. It upset me [her] having to put my parents' address, who I thought would possibly be targeted. It is a real threat, it is a real concern, it does put people off," Stanford said at the first reading.

An example of social media abuse received by Wellington City councillor Teri O'Neill. (File photo)

Supplied

An example of social media abuse received by Wellington City councillor Teri O'Neill. (File photo)

"I really welcome [the change]. You expect to be held to account but that doesn't extend to knowing where you

live," said Rebecca Matthews, a Wellington City councillor who has received an online death threat.

Tamatha Paul and Teri O'Neill, also city councillors who have been [targeted by online abuse](#), both felt relieved by the change.

"This is a great first step, it's one extra safety measure. It will help to encourage lots of different people coming from vulnerable communities," said O'Neill, cautioning that it only broke down one barrier to standing for local government.

She had to have security at a community event in the midst of sustained social media abuse in 2019 and said she would caution other young women and queer people to think twice before running, due to the level of abuse.

Jericho Rock-Archer

Wellington City councillor Teri O'Neill says the change broke down one barrier to standing for local government. (File photo)

Paul said she would feel safer and the change was important for her flatmates, who were also young women. "This doesn't just affect me, but also the people I live with. It's really good they've gotten rid of the requirement," she said.

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