

Individual elected-member commentary in Council communications

New Zealand local-government practice and a proposed fair-access protocol

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Purpose

To assess whether New Zealand local-government practice supports a blanket proposition that regular Council publications should not carry the personal opinions or political views of elected members, and to identify a practical framework that permits representative voice while protecting Council neutrality, fairness and public resources.

Executive conclusion

The evidence does not support a blanket prohibition. A number of New Zealand councils have deliberately published individually attributed commentary from ordinary councillors on Council-controlled channels. Other councils formally contemplate elected-member columns in their pre-election protocols and suspend them only during the pre-election period. The Office of the Auditor-General (OAG) likewise expressly refers to “Mayoral or Members’ columns in Council publications” and recommends their suspension during the pre-election period because of electoral-advantage risk.

The stronger, evidence-based position is therefore: Council communications need not be confined to a single corporate voice. Individual elected-member commentary can be legitimate where it is clearly attributed, access is equitable, Council’s formal position is distinguished from the member’s view, normal legal and conduct constraints apply, and special safeguards operate in the pre-election period.

Key evidence at a glance

Authority / source	Practice located	Why it matters
Nelson City Council	Recurring “Councillor’s Comment” in Council publication/channel.	Direct precedent for ordinary councillors having an identifiable first-person voice.
Tararua District Council	Current 2026 “Councillor Column” series.	Ordinary councillors discuss priorities, judgments and Council issues in their own voice.
South Waikato District Council	Multiple councillor columns in Council’s In Touch newsletter.	Columns explicitly acknowledge disagreement and robust debate among members.
Timaru / Ōpōtiki protocols	Elected-member columns restricted or suspended in pre-election period.	Implies such communications are contemplated outside the special election period.
Office of the Auditor-General	Refers expressly to Mayoral or Members’ columns in Council publications.	The concern identified is electoral advantage in the pre-election period, not an inherent ban.

Quick links - open the examples immediately

The following links go directly to the strongest examples and policy sources cited in this paper.

- [Tararua - Councillor Column \(Peter Naylor, July 2026\)](#)
- [Tararua - Councillor Column \(Erana Peeti-Webber, February 2026\)](#)
- [Nelson - current Councillor Comment \(Nigel Skeggs, June 2026\)](#)
- [Nelson - Councillor Comment archive](#)
- [Office of the Auditor-General - pre-election communications guidance](#)
- [Timaru - 2025 Election Protocols \(PDF\)](#)
- [Opotiki - Pre-election Protocol Policy \(PDF\)](#)

1. Scope and method

A national web-based sweep was undertaken across New Zealand local authorities, with targeted searches for councillor columns, elected-member commentary, Council newsletters, communications protocols and pre-election policies. The Department of Internal Affairs records 78 local authorities: 67 territorial authorities and 11 regional councils.

This is an evidence survey of publicly accessible and indexed material, not an OIA audit of every authority's internal policy. Accordingly, absence of an indexed example should not be treated as evidence that an authority prohibits such commentary.

2. Direct precedents involving ordinary councillors

Nelson City Council

[Open the Council / official source](#)

Nelson provides one of the clearest precedents. Its Council publication *Our Nelson* has carried a recurring "Councillor's Comment" feature written by individual councillors. Examples include Matt Lawrey, Yvonne Bowater, Trudie Brand and Matthew Benge. The pieces are written in the first person and include personal judgments, priorities, observations about Council processes and advocacy on public issues.

For example, a 2023 Councillor's Comment by Cr Matthew Benge discussed planning rules, climate resilience and possible high-rise development, stating his own views and urging public participation. This is materially different from a corporate media release merely reporting a Council resolution.

Tararua District Council

[Open the Council / official source](#)

Tararua currently publishes a "Councillor Column" series on its official website. In February 2026 Cr Erana Peeti-Webber described what motivated her to stand for Council and identified her own priorities. In May 2026 Cr Alison Amboy wrote in the first person about her roles and perspective. In July 2026 Cr Peter Naylor evaluated Council's Long Term Plan pre-engagement and central-government reform announcements. The format deliberately identifies the individual councillor as the speaker.

South Waikato District Council

South Waikato's Council-produced *In Touch* newsletter repeatedly carried separate "Councillor Column" contributions. A July/August 2021 column by Cr Gary Petley discussed difficult Council matters, personality clashes and robust debate, concluding that councillors "won't always agree" and "won't always win". A January/February 2022 column by Cr Hans Nelis went further into policy advocacy, stating that he would defend local self-determination and control of local assets in the context of local-government reform.

These examples are important because they demonstrate that a Council-controlled publication can accommodate plurality among elected members rather than requiring every contribution to reproduce a single corporate voice.

Palmerston North City Council

A 2024 Council report records elected members writing newspaper columns and appearing on radio to discuss their roles and Council projects as part of Council's wider communications and community-engagement activity. This is not as direct as a Council newsletter column, but it supports the legitimacy of individual elected-member communication as part of representative engagement.

3. Formal policy evidence

Office of the Auditor-General

[Open the Council / official source](#)

The OAG's local-government pre-election communications guidance is particularly significant. It identifies a risk that Council communications resources may advantage sitting members during an election period. For that reason, it recommends that mass communications facilities including Council-funded newsletters to constituents and "Mayoral or Members' columns in Council publications" be suspended during the pre-election period.

Implication: the OAG treats members' columns as an established form of Council communication requiring special election-period restraint; it does not state that such columns are inherently improper throughout the triennium.

Timaru District Council

[Open the Council / official source](#)

Timaru's 2025 Election Protocols state that Council communications will be restricted during the pre-election period and that "Elected members' columns in Council publications will be suspended." The protocols separately prohibit use of Council resources for campaigning and suspend elected-member radio slots.

The wording is useful because it distinguishes ordinary representative communications from campaign use of public resources. A temporary suspension rule presupposes that the activity exists or is contemplated outside the restricted period.

Ōpōtiki District Council

[Open the Council / official source](#)

Ōpōtiki's adopted 2025 Pre-election Protocol Policy states that newsletters, media releases, advertisements and regularly published columns will not feature elected members during the pre-election period. It also states that comments made by elected members should be identified as personal comment unless authorised by management, and makes members responsible for the accuracy and appropriateness of political comment during that period.

This is particularly relevant to the practical issue: the policy recognises "personal comment" as a category that can be identified and managed. The safeguard is attribution and election-period control, rather than an assumption that an individual political view can never appear in a Council communications environment.

4. What the evidence does - and does not - establish

- It establishes that ordinary councillor columns and first-person elected-member commentary are an accepted practice in at least some New Zealand councils.
- It establishes that national good-practice guidance and multiple Council protocols expressly contemplate elected-member columns.
- It supports a distinction between representative commentary and use of Council resources for election campaigning.
- It does not establish an unrestricted right for a councillor to publish anything through Council channels.
- It does not establish that Council staff must publish defamatory, confidential, misleading, personally abusive or electioneering material.
- The survey did not locate a clean current precedent in which an ordinary councillor used an official Council column expressly to campaign against an already-adopted Council resolution. That narrower proposition should therefore not be overstated.

5. Proposed elected-member communications protocol

If Council wishes to recognise elected members' representative role while preserving the integrity of Council communications, the following model would provide a workable middle ground.

Principle	Proposed rule
Purpose	Provide residents with access to the perspectives of their elected representatives and improve democratic engagement.
Equal access	Offer each elected member substantially equal opportunity, frequency, word limit and placement, preferably through a rotating column.
Clear attribution	Label each contribution with the member's name and a statement that the views are the member's own and are not necessarily the formal position of Council.
Corporate position	Where a column discusses a matter already decided by Council, accurately state the Council decision or provide a link to the relevant resolution so readers can distinguish the institutional decision from the member's commentary.
Editorial limits	Council may require compliance with law, confidentiality obligations, privacy, defamation, accuracy requirements, the Code of Conduct and reasonable standards against personal abuse. Editing should not be used to remove a political viewpoint merely because it differs from the majority.
Right of correction	Staff may identify demonstrable factual errors and request correction. Genuine differences of opinion, interpretation or policy judgment should not be treated as factual errors.
No electioneering	Council-funded channels must not be used to solicit votes, promote candidacy, attack election opponents as candidates, seek campaign donations or otherwise confer an improper electoral advantage.
Pre-election period	Suspend or materially restrict individual member columns during the defined pre-election period, consistently with OAG guidance and Council's election protocol.
Transparency	Publish the protocol so elected members, staff and the public understand the distinction between Council information and representative commentary.

6. Suggested position for Council consideration

Suggested principle: Council communications should distinguish between the corporate voice of Council and the representative voices of individual elected members. Subject to fair access, clear attribution, legal and conduct obligations, and pre-election restrictions, Council-controlled publications may provide space for individual elected members to express views on matters of public and Council interest, including views that are not identical to the majority position.

7. Conclusion

New Zealand practice demonstrates that the choice is not simply between a purely corporate publication and an uncontrolled political forum. Councils including Nelson, Tararua and South Waikato have used identifiable councillor commentary, while formal protocols and OAG guidance manage the genuine risks through attribution, fairness and election-period restrictions. A blanket rule that personal elected-member opinion has no place in regular Council media is therefore a policy choice, not a demonstrated New Zealand local-government norm.

Sources

Department of Internal Affairs - Local Government Policy (78 local authorities): [Open source](#)

Office of the Auditor-General - Communications guidance in the local government pre-election period: [Open source](#)

Tararua District Council - Councillor Column, 20 July 2026: [Open source](#)

Tararua District Council - Councillor Column, 2 February 2026: [Open source](#)

Tararua District Council - Councillor Column: Alison Amboy, 11 May 2026: [Open source](#)

Nelson City Council - Our Nelson, Issue 180, Councillor's Comment: [Open source](#)

Nelson City Council - Our Nelson, Issue 92, Councillor's Comment: [Open source](#)

Nelson City Council - Our Nelson, Issue 119, Councillor's Comment: [Open source](#)

South Waikato District Council - In Touch, July/August 2021: [Open source](#)

South Waikato District Council - In Touch, January/February 2022: [Open source](#)

Palmerston North City Council - Council agenda/report, 5 June 2024: [Open source](#)

Timaru District Council - Election Protocols for Incumbent Elected Members, 2025: [Open source](#)

Ōpōtiki District Council - Pre-election Protocol Policy, adopted 17 February 2025: [Open source](#)

Note on evidential weight: The cited examples demonstrate existence and legitimacy of the practice; they do not prove that every New Zealand local authority follows it. Policies should also be checked against the Council's current Code of Conduct, communications policy, election protocol and any relevant legal advice before adoption.