Review of Election Day Issues at the 2024 Queensland Local Government Elections
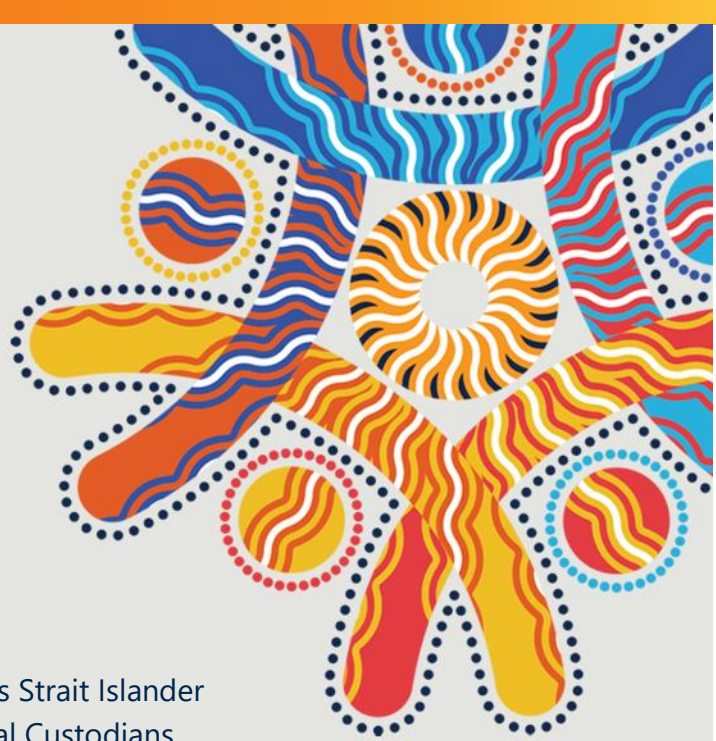
Electoral Commission of Queensland

20 June 2024

nous

Nous Group acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia. We pay our respect to Elders past, present and emerging, who maintain their culture, country and spiritual connection to the land, sea, and community.

This artwork was developed by Marcus Lee Design to reflect Nous Group's Reconciliation Action Plan and our aspirations for respectful and productive engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

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Glossary of key terms

Table 1 | Glossary

Key Term	Brief Description
Absentee vote	At local government elections, electors in divided councils can vote within their local government area but outside of their division. Where this occurs, it is called an absent vote.
Declaration vote	A declaration vote is issued when there is a requirement for an elector to declare they are eligible to vote. This occurs for example for postal votes, and when electors vote in person but their details either cannot be found on the electoral roll, or their details are different to what is found on the electoral roll.
Declared institution	Facilities such as nursing homes, hospitals and aged-care centres that are registered to have election assistants visit to take electors' votes in person.
Early voting	A process for voting in an attendance election prior to election day at a designated early voting centre.
Election delivery model	The model agreed by the ECQ to inform planning and preparation for an electoral event.
Electoral Commission of Queensland (ECQ)	The independent statutory authority responsible for conducting local and state government elections in Queensland
Election Management System (EMS)	The software used to manage administrative processes that support election delivery.
Formality / Informality	The proportion of ballot papers that are completed correctly (formal) or incorrectly (informal). An informal ballot does not contribute to the election result.
Mobile voting	Mobile polling refers to polling facilities that can move around, often in remote areas by way of electoral visits
Postal vote	A type of declaration vote that is mailed to an elector's nominated postal address. Electors must complete and return the postal ballot so the declaration can be scrutinised, and if accepted, the ballot paper is extracted and is admitted to the counting process.
Returning Officer	An officer appointed under the Local Government Electoral Act 2011 to conduct an election for a local government area.
Table weighting	The system or 'formula' used to determine the number and types of staff required to operate each individual polling place, based on forecast turnout.
Telephone voting	A secure, audited service offered to eligible Queensland electors, which enables them to cast their vote via telephone.
Turnout	The percentage of total eligible electors who participated in the election.
Temporary Election Staff (TES)	The personnel, encompassing a broad range of roles, which are brought on to staff and facilitate key election services, including polling places and counting activities.
Voter footprint	The voter services offered by the ECQ for electors during the electoral period.

Executive summary

Nous Group (Nous) was engaged by the Electoral Commission of Queensland (ECQ) to conduct a targeted, independent review of the 2024 Local Government Elections (LGE) in Queensland. The focus of this review was to inquire into issues that were reported on election day that hampered or impeded the voting experience, including excessive queuing and ballot paper shortages at some polling sites. Appendix A.1 provides and overview of the Terms of Reference for this review.

Nous employed a mixed-methods data collection approach to the review to understand the extent to which election day issues occurred and the underlying drivers of these issues. Findings are across three core election temporal periods: planning and preparation, delivery, and reporting activities.

Planning and preparation

Nous found that ECQ engaged significant planning and preparation work ahead of LGE2024, with many markers of good practice.

Election stakeholders (specifically voters, candidates, councils and ECQ) have different needs and priorities for LGEs. A challenge for LGE2024 was that it was not explicit how these were being balanced at an organisational level. For example, stakeholders consulted during the review had made varying assumptions about the importance of delivering the election at minimal cost for councils, versus in a way that maximised accessibility and choice for voters. Establishing a shared set of relative priorities may help coordinate planning and preparation activities in the future.

The budget for LGE2024 was cost-conscious, designed in a way to minimise costs to councils. The need to be cost efficient was felt strongly across ECQ and shaped many of the planning and preparation activities. However, the budget used as the premise for planning and cost recovery activities was not as well informed as it could have been. It reflected missed opportunities to validate assumptions with corporate areas across ECQ, and to incorporate lessons learned and improvement opportunities identified pursuant to the 2020 LGE.

There were also several issues with key election forecasting data that underpinned much of the planning and preparation work that informed the election delivery model. A lack of access to timely and relevant data limited ECQ's ability to work agilely in the lead-up to the election to respond to staffing and resourcing needs.

ECQ actively discussed risks in the lead up to the election and employed good governance arrangements to monitor and address issues as they emerged. Key risks, where ECQ focused much of its time and resources, were not realised during the election, suggesting they were successfully mitigated. However, there is also evidence that some risks were not characterised or escalated appropriately within these channels, leaving ECQ exposed to key risks on election day.

The election delivery period

LGE2024 was successful, with turnout returning to pre-COVID levels. For many Queenslanders, the voting experience was quick and convenient, with strong 'satisfaction' measured across the state, particularly in early, postal, and other alternative voting services.

On election day, most polling places saw substantially higher turnout that forecast which created significant pressures for voters and election day staff. For example, some polling places saw election day turnout three times that forecast. This culminated in excessive queueing and ballot paper shortages in some locations.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Establish clear, shared principles for the delivery of high-quality elections. Develop a clear and succinct resource that communicates the markers of a successful election.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Review cost recovery arrangements. Further explore opportunities to increase the budget for future LGEs.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Ensure costs that are communicated to councils are compiled with input from all relevant areas of ECQ. Use the shared vision of election success (recommendation 1) to communicate the minimum-viable and non-negotiable elements of the election delivery model.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Continue to invest in ECQ's risk culture and capability. Curate a risk culture that emphasises shared ownership of issues and their resolution, collaboration across services, and feedback loops to proactively identify and monitor risks across the organisation.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Review and update core assumptions within the voter forecast model to take on lessons about voter behaviour. Build quality assurance and feedback loops into data modelling and reporting processes to promote consideration and incorporation of new information.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Further invest in ECQ's data and analytics capability to enable data-driven and real-time decision-making. Continue to iterate forecasting models to accurately reflect shifting voter behaviour preferences and place-based population changes.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Revise the assumptions that underpin the polling place resourcing model. Specifically, consider restoring table weighting to historic estimates and planning capacity to undertake queue control functions.

RECOMMENDATION 8

Seek opportunities to influence voters toward early voting as a means of 'de-risking' election day. Build a deeper understanding of voter behaviour and how ECQ can influence this.

1 Introduction

1.1 Elections are the democratic right and responsibility of eligible Queenslanders

Under Queensland electoral law, voting is compulsory for eligible residents over the age of 18. Elections provide Queenslanders the opportunity to determine who will represent them on key social, political, and economic matters. It is the right and responsibility of every eligible citizen to have a say in the laws and systems of government that influence them.

The corollary of this is that it is upon the Queensland Government to ensure that the delivery of elections is free, fair, transparent, and accessible to all Queenslanders. Achieving this is a complex undertaking.

1.2 Nous was engaged to review LGE2024 with a focus on issues that arose on election day

Delivery of LGE2024 became a focal point for media scrutiny following election day with reporting of excessive queuing and ballot paper shortages at certain voting places.

Nous Group was commissioned to conduct an independent review of these events, with a focus on understanding the extent to which these issues occurred and their underlying drivers.

This report is structured across three distinct temporal phases, each core aspects of the election delivery timeframe: planning and preparation; delivery; and post-election reporting.

Nous used a mixed methods approach to collecting and analysing data for this review. This included consultations with Temporary Election Staff (TES) and Returning Officers from across the state, with a focus on sites that experienced election day issues; Nous- and ECQ-led surveys for Returning Officers, candidates, and voters; consultations with ECQ leaders and staff; consultations with interjurisdictional electoral commissions; consultation with and written submission from the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ); and review and analysis of extensive documentation and data from ECQ (see Appendix A.2).

It is important to note some limitations in the data collation process. ECQ does not formally collect information about queuing issues, nor real-time ballot paper levels at polling places.[1] Nous' targeted interviews with Returning Officers and TES were only able to cover a small sample of polling places and focused on those with known issues. The analysis of post-election activities remains incomplete, as these operations are still ongoing, especially the non-voter programs. Similarly, the final costs for the election will not be finalised until the end of the financial year.

Despite these constraints, the data collected provides a robust foundation for the review's findings and recommendations.

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[1] Despite not collecting formal data, ECQ does conduct a polling place auditing program, which audits queue length and management and ballot paper findings. Findings from this audit program have been incorporated into this report.

2.9M ELECTORS VOTED IN LGE2024

ELECTION TIMELINE

- **29 Jan** — notice of election
- **29 Jan – 4 Mar** — postal vote applications
- **29 Jan – 13 Feb** — candidate nominations
- **14 Feb** — ballot paper draw
- **4 Mar – 15 Mar** — early voting
- **16 Mar** — ELECTION DAY
- **16 Mar** — postal vote completion deadline
- **26 Mar** — postal vote return deadline
- **4 Apr** — Final results declared

SNAPSHOT OF LGE2024

LGE2024 was a large general election with concurrent local contests

FORMAL VOTES BY TYPE

ELECTION DAY	1.26m
EARLY	1.07m
POSTAL	0.37m
OTHER	0.07m

343* CONTESTS INCLUDING

1,422 CANDIDATES FOR **MAYOR & COUNCILLOR**

*Among these 343 total contests, 15 Mayor and 46 Councillor contests were uncontested

Counting and declarations:

Results were declared for **85%** of contests within **2 weeks**

All results were declared by **4 April**

156 EARLY VOTING POLLING PLACES

1,031 ELECTION DAY POLLING PLACES

This included improvements on key areas of election success

↑ **6.5%** Increase in **Enrolment**

↑ **0.8%** Mayoral v**ote formality**
0.3% Councillor **vote formality**

↑ Turnout increased to **82%** UP FROM **77%** in LGE 2020 REVERTING BACK TO **83%** in LGE 2016

However, election day was marked by key issues at some polling places

BALLOT SHORTAGES

LONG QUEUE TIMES

Election day turnout **exceeded forecasts** across Queensland:

Under / Over Forecast
0
-40000
-80000
-120000

Grey indicates that there were no votes taken on election day in LGA because the area either:
- Had a full postal election
- Had no contested elections
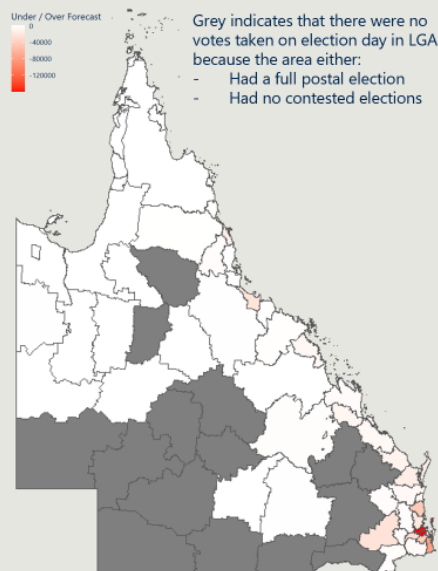
These issues impacted voters:

Poor awareness and understanding of the need to vote within their LGA

Confusion and frustration about how polling places were coordinated and managed

Experiences of long wait times in queues

Need to attend alternative polling places, particularly if ballot papers were exhausted

According to the LGE2024 voter survey:

36% of election day voters were **DISSATISFIED** with polling processes

29% of election day voters queued **LONGER THAN 30 MINS**

Source: Election day forecast and actual turnout data provided by ECQ.

2 Preparation and planning for the election

KEY FINDINGS

- ECQ engaged in significant planning work ahead of the LGEs, with many markers of good practice evident.

- Election stakeholders (specifically voters, candidates, councils and ECQ) have different needs and priorities for LGEs. A challenge for LGE2024 was that it was not explicit how these were being balanced at an organisational level. For example, stakeholders consulted during the review had made varying assumptions about the importance of delivering the election at minimal cost for councils, versus in a way that maximised accessibility and choice for voters. Establishing a shared set of relative priorities may help coordinate planning and preparation activities in the future.

- The budget for LGE2024 was cost-conscious, designed in a way to minimise costs to councils. The need to be cost efficient was felt strongly across ECQ and shaped many of the planning and preparation activities. However, the budget used as the premise for planning and cost recovery activities was not as well informed as it could have been. It reflected missed opportunities to validate assumptions across ECQ's corporate areas, and to incorporate lessons learned and improvement opportunities identified pursuant to the 2020 LGE.

- The forecasting assumptions that ECQ relied on proved problematic. It significantly underestimated election day turnout. Furthermore, a lack of reliable, real-time data constrained ECQ's ability to work with agility in the lead-up to the election. This warrants further investment in ECQ's data capability, including improving basic forecasting models and the IT systems.

- ECQ was alive to certain election risks and mitigated those effectively. However, there is evidence that other risks - namely those associated with the election day issues - were not characterised or escalated appropriately. ECQ should continue to invest in its risk culture and supporting resources.

2.1 Planning activities for the LGE were extensive and reflect an organisation on a journey of maturation

ECQ invested heavily in planning and preparation activities

ECQ made substantial efforts towards improving the planning and preparation activities ahead of LGE2024, with a view to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of its internal processes.[2] This began with an extensive review of LGE2020 to identify opportunities to improve its election delivery across future elections. Through this process, ECQ identified several opportunities for improvement, many of which focused on improving the voter services footprint, such as to extend early voting hours and the revise the staffing mix at polling places.

Another key change was to mature its approach to project management across ECQ's key election projects and programs. Election planning involves 41 distinct projects across 16 distinct programs of work, each led by one of ECQ's business areas and subject matter experts. For the first time, ECQ established a project assurance team with the purview to provide consistency across these projects and supports to project and

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[2] Data received from ECQ 14/04/2024, *2024 Elections Project Approach*.

program managers. Staff across ECQ found this to be an improved approach to previous elections and one to scale with continued investment.[3]

Elections serve multiple stakeholder groups, each with their own needs and priorities

ECQ serves multiple stakeholder groups when delivering elections. These stakeholder groups have different expectations for a successful election, as outlined in Figure 1. Agreeing how to balance these competing priorities is essential to plan and prepare a high-quality election delivery model.

ECQ develops a range of strategic documents that guide its approach to election delivery. These are valuable resources, however they are not all anchored back to a common set of principles or priorities; there is evidence that leaders and staff within ECQ did not always share a consistent understanding of how stakeholders' needs and preferences were to be prioritised and reflected in election planning work. For example, there is an inherent tension to providing voters choice, accessibility and safety in polling sites while also minimising the costs of election delivery borne by councils. Similarly, providing election results in an accurate and timely way can require long hours and high workloads, which can risk the occupational health and safety of ECQ's workforce.

There is opportunity to establish shared language and a common vision around what the Commissioner holds most important in planning for the election, to allow decisions to be made and refined through this lens and to ensure this is reflected throughout the organisation.

Figure 1 | Stakeholder groups have different expectations for election delivery[4]

ECQ MUST FIND A 'BALANCE' ACROSS THESE COMPETING EXPECTATIONS

ECQ
- Be able to balance their hats as service provider and regulator of elections
- Secure the occupational health and safety of its workforce across all phases of elections
- Attract and retain talent with relevant expertise
- Be able to operate efficiently and effectively, mindful of its limited FTE and funding arrangements.

VOTERS
- Need support to build knowledge of election events
- Want choice in how they participate in election (i.e. mode of voting)
- Expect accessibility and safety in polling sites
- Expect limited delays in being able to cast votes
- Want visibility around election outcomes in a timely way

CANDIDATES
- Need support in understanding their statutory rights and responsibilities
- Want assurances that the election will be an integrous event
- Expect good communication throughout election phases and rapid declaration of election results

COUNCILS
- Need assurances that the logistics of the election event meet the needs and preferences of their local communities
- Need to minimise costs of election delivery
- Need timely declaration of results to enable them to carry out their functions effectively

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[3] Sourced from consultations with ECQ leaders and staff between 06/03/2024 – 17/05/2024.
[4] Drawn from consultations with ECQ staff, Returning Officers and TES, and Local Government stakeholders, supplemented with insights from Returning Officer and candidate surveys.

2.2 The significant organisational focus on lean delivery generated mixed results for the election

The business case for LGE2024 set ECQ up to deliver to a very tight budget

The lead time for LGEs is long, with business cases for the operating budget developed approximately 24 – 36 months ahead of the event, and cost estimates are socialised with councils 12 months in advance of the election to support councils in their forward financial planning.

Many Queensland councils operate in a cost-sensitive environment and ECQ is alive to this and is mindful of how it can control and communicate costs to councils in an effective, productive manner. Several internal policy decisions have been made in recent years to manage the cost-recovered portions of election delivery, including by committing to not to charge councils significantly above their original estimates. The budget for LGEs therefore need to be set in a way that supports delivery of good elections - but are also affordable for all stakeholders involved.

While there is a robust process in place to develop the business case for LGE2024, several factors were noted that meant that the available budget may not have been fit for purpose.

For example, as described in section 2.1, ECQ did not have a clear statement about how the needs and preferences of different stakeholder groups should be balanced, and how this should translate down into planning and resourcing decisions. Cost efficiency, however, was always a key driver.

The business case for the budget was developed by ECQ's financial subject matter experts, but feedback suggested that this arrangement represented a missed opportunity to draw on expertise from its core operational arms (such as Election Event Management), or to cost for continuous improvement initiatives. For instance:

- The fact that voter forecast estimates and election cost forecasts were developed by different parts of ECQ, without sufficient collaboration, meant that these respective figures were not as well linked as they might otherwise have been.

- ECQ conducted an extensive post-election review process following LGE2020 and identified several areas to improve and refine its election delivery model. However, many of these were not supported within the budget and needed to be subsequently rationalised or omitted from further planning work.

- There were significant changes in costs of service delivery between when the budget was approved and when the LGE took place.

There are potential lessons for the timing and process through which the business case for the budget is assembled (namely to ensure that the right people are engaged and improvement opportunities canvassed at the right times), but also lessons for how cost efficiency should be prioritised for election planning and delivery within a cost-recovered model.

As shown in Table 2, the cost-per-elector for LGEs in Queensland is significantly lower than that of comparable jurisdictions. It is also lower than that for State Government Elections (SGE) in Queensland that are funded by the State Government, suggesting there is a real focus on lean delivery when working in the current cost recovery model.

New South Wales (NSW) provides a compelling comparison point with cost-per-elector over twice that in Queensland. In NSW, councils can choose to use the New South Wales Electoral Commission (NSWEC) for LGEs delivery but can also choose another provider. This allows NSWEC to be firm in its commitment to high-quality, integrous elections and a high standard of election delivery that is consistent between local

and state elections. In circumstances where councils may be financially challenged to meet their cost recovery obligations, the Minister for Local Government can be called upon to help resolve the issue.

Table 2 | Cost per elector in Queensland elections compared to other jurisdictions

	Queensland (ECQ)[5]	New South Wales (NSWEC)[6]	Northern Territory (NTEC)[7]
LGE	$10.40	$29	$15.10
SGE	$13.40	$25.30	$30.60

ECQ ultimately recovered 70% of the total costs to deliver the election from its councils, absorbing the remainder 30% internally.[8] As at 31 May 2024, ECQ had expended 94% of its total allocated budget.[9] This includes up to $2.27 million in savings attributable to a decision to delay proposed implementation of increases to the cost of letter services by Australia Post until after the election.[10]

Importantly, there were known issues with LGE2024 that have a resourcing basis, including high levels of stress and distress for staff involved in election activities. A larger available budget may have allowed ECQ to plan differently in a way that mitigated some of these challenges.

Providing this for future LGEs may require councils to increase their contributions under current cost recovery arrangements (which may in turn require new solutions to assist councils in financial stress); or for ECQ to meet a greater proportion of costs and be supported through a larger allocation of substantive funding.

2.3 The forecasting data that underpins planning and preparation work proved to be problematic

Forecasting voter behaviour is an essential element of election planning and preparation

Forecasting for Local Government Elections in Queensland is a difficult undertaking and differs from other election types such as the State Government election as it must account for divided and undivided councils, geographical size and the requirement to vote within an elector's local government area.

Forecast data is crucial as it shapes the election delivery model; it anticipates how voters will participate in the election and directly corresponds to the planning and resourcing needs, including preparedness to deliver key voter services (postal, early, and election day voting) at the required scale. Forecasting data

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[5] Data received from ECQ, 04/04/2024, *LG Elections Budget Estimates Passed to Councils.*
[6] NSW Electoral Commission, *Report on the Conduct of the 2021 NSW Local Government Elections: Part* One, https://elections.nsw.gov.au/getmedia/ad862d85-d1cc-4117-9ab3-4af9f3c5c143/nswec-lge21-part-1.pdf. Note that LGE2021 costs in NSW are particularly inflated because the election was delayed twice due to Covid. For LGE2024, NSWEC is anticipating ~$25 per elector; data received from NSWEC, 15/05/2024, *NSWEC Response to Nous Request.*
[7] Northern Territory Electoral Commission, *2021 Local Government Elections Report*, 2024, https://ntec.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1350364/2021-LG-Elections-Report.pdf; Northern Territory Electoral Commission, *2020 Territory Election Report*, 2021, https://ntec.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1235560/2020-Territory-Election-Report.pdf.
[8] Data received from ECQ, 04/04/2024, *LG Elections Budget Estimates Passed to Councils.*
[9] Data received from ECQ, 10/06/2024, *LGE Finance Update 31.05 (Expanded Graph).*
[10] Data received from ECQ, 10/06/2024, *Consolidated Feedback Clean.*

needs to be broadly accurate from the outset to be useful, and able to be extracted and shared throughout the planning and delivery phases to respond to inform and be informed by expectations for voter behaviour.

Voter behaviour was significantly different than the ECQ forecasts

Voter behaviour refers to the ways voters engage with election services. ECQ used a simple model to forecast voter behaviour for LGE2024 that accounted for factors such as population growth and distribution in a uniform way across the state. The forecasts themselves were grounded in recent trends in voter behaviour at recent Queensland elections as well as some other interstate and national elections. A key limitation however is that they did not adequately account how voting preferences would change from 2020. For example, in 2020 there were 'stay-in-place' orders in force which reduced elector mobility and reduced the occurrence of cross-divisional voting.

Figure 2 depicts ECQ's forecasts for voter behaviour, alongside the actual voting behaviours. Importantly, the model was not iterated over the planning period. For example, the estimate for early voting turnout remained unchanged following decisions to reduce the operating hours of its early voting centres (compared to initial planning work), which was likely to reduce early voting numbers.[11] Concerns raised by Returning Officers who were given forecast data to inform their own planning activities were also not addressed in a meaningful way.[12]

The lack of mature data systems and structures further constrained ECQ's ability to forecast accurately and make real-time data-informed decisions in the lead-up to the election. This issue was twofold:

- **ECQ leaders did not have access to the 'right' data in the lead-up to and during the election.** Without this, ECQ did not have a 'complete' view of the election and its key planning activities, including if and where changes were necessary at the local level across LGAs.

- **The process of extracting and interpreting ECQ data is laborious and unreliable.** Data and insights to inform real-time and data-driven decision-making cannot easily be collated at short notice. It requires extensive planning and preparation to have key data and reports available leading up to and during the election delivery period.

There is an opportunity to strengthen the data capability within ECQ for future elections, for example by enhancing the model it uses for forecasting; and further investing in the infrastructure and people capability required to generate insights in a rapid and responsive way.

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[11] Noting that the expanded operating hours for early voting centres was first introduced in LGE2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. ECQ had initially planned for the same operating hours for LGE2024; however, determined to return to pre-Covid operating hours during its cost realisation process.
[12] Sourced from consultations with Returning Officers and TES between 22/04/2024 – 10/05/2024.

Figure 2 | Election forecasts were not reflected in voter behaviour during the LGE[13]

Percentage of votes by voting method

Turnout at early, postal, and alternative voting methods were over forecast, contributing to election day turnout being acutely under forecast.
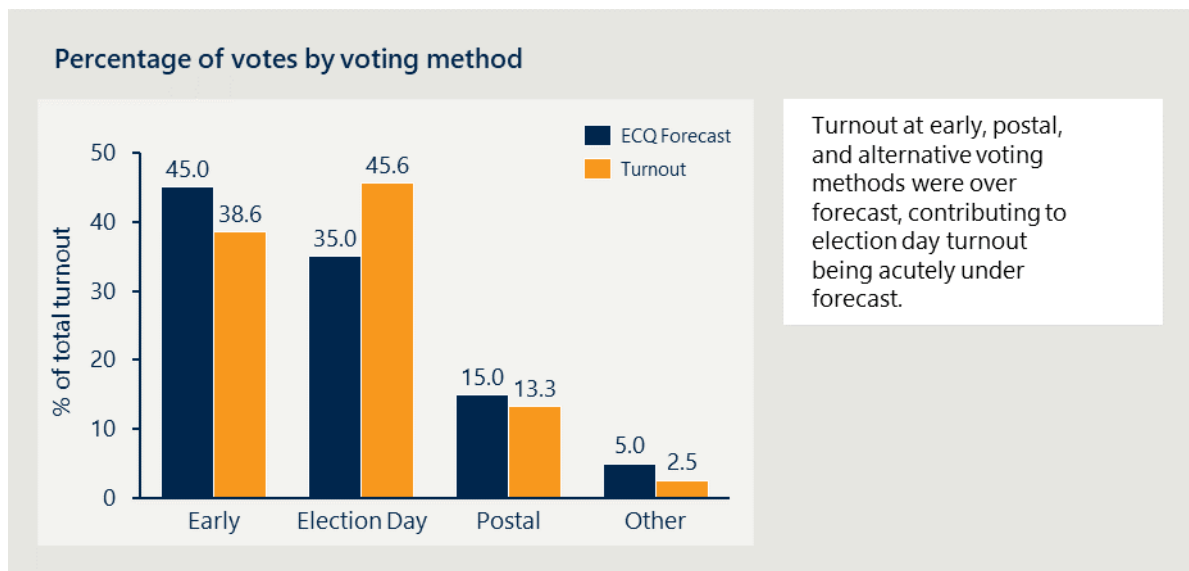
2.4 Governance arrangements within ECQ to oversee election preparations saw mixed success

ECQ had key governance structures in place

ECQ establishes a separate governance structure for the oversight of major election events, as depicted in Figure 3. Central to this structure is the Election Delivery Board (EDB), which provides strategic direction on all aspects of election preparation and delivery.

Figure 3 | Governance for LGE2024

The Election Delivery Board (EDB) has ultimate oversight for the election. It provides the platform for ECQ leaders to discuss the election as-a-whole.

Program Managers are responsible for ensuring oversight to a group (Program) of projects, including providing support to Project Managers and overseeing key risks.

Project Managers lead and coordinate project activities, including managing budget and risks.

Project Teams deliver the key project activities. In many instances, the Project Manager is the Project Team.

There was a strong organisational focus on key risks

ECQ established many measures as part of its focus on risk in the lead up to election, including risk registers, and its most comprehensive rehearsal program to date.

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[13] Data received from ECQ 09/05/2024, *Nous Data 090524.*

Importantly, ECQ successfully managed many of the largest risks where it focused its time and resources. For example, personal safety of temporary election workers and threats to election integrity from fringe actors, cyber security, and a focus on the stability of the EMS, were all effectively managed in LGE2024. These were key areas for improvement following LGE2020.

However, other key risks were not appropriately characterised or escalated within ECQ's structures and therefore not managed effectively, contributing to the issues realised during the election delivery stage. The factors underpinning this shortfall were threefold:

- **ECQ staff were capacity constrained:** Many staff report that they were working over capacity, with project and program leaders responsible for expansive bodies of work. In some instances, project delivery took precedence to high quality project management, including risk identification.

- **ECQ continues to build its project management maturity:** While ECQ has invested heavily in maturing its risk understanding and capability in recent years, staff are still on a learning journey. Continued focus is required to ensure that staff at all levels are confident to detect and act upon risks appropriately and consistently.

- **ECQ's risk culture could be more productive:** There was a divide in how strategic information was communicated between the senior leadership team and the organisation more broadly, with a disconnect in ideas about how to prioritise and mitigate key risks, including the risks on which to focus the organisation's efforts.[14]

Whilst an effective structure for maintaining strategic oversight of the election, the EDB was not an effective mechanism for the identification and management of risk. Many staff looked to EDB as the primary platform for discussing election risks and cross-departmental dependencies, however, the size and scope of EDB did not enable robust discussion to this effect. This was further constrained by the lack of identification of key risks in ECQ's risk registers, which left EDB and ECQ leadership falsely assured and / or unaware of emerging election risks.[15]

ECQ should continue to review and mature its risk culture to ensure it reflect fit-for-purpose and approach structures, processes, and attitudes.

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[14] Sourced from consultations with ECQ leaders and staff between 06/03/2024 – 17/05/2024.
[15] Sourced from consultations with ECQ leaders and staff between 06/03/2024 – 17/05/2024.

3 The election delivery period

KEY FINDINGS

- LGE2024 was largely successful, with a return to pre-COVID turnout levels. For many Queenslanders, the voting process was quick and convenient with relatively high 'satisfaction' measured across the state.

- Early voting attracted fewer electors than anticipated. Those who did attend were broadly satisfied with their experience. There is an opportunity for ECQ to consider how it can drive more voters to early voting to capitalise on the strengths of this model and reduce the risks associated with election day voting.

- The corollary of early voting trends is that in many locations election day voting was significantly higher than forecast. As such, key resources such as staff and ballot papers were not sufficiently supplied. Where this occurred, it significantly impacted the voter experience. For example, there was evidence of long, disorganised queues at many polling places, which created frustration among voters and a chaotic, stressful experience for staff.

- A small number of polling places temporarily ran out of ballot papers, leaving voters stuck in indeterminate queues; unable to vote at their preferred polling place; unable to vote in the election at all; and / or prompted to abandon the voting experience entirely. The voter experience at sites that experienced these issues was one of confusion, frustration, and despondence.

- Mitigating these issues in future elections will rely on better election preparedness. There are important lessons not only for ensuring the relative accuracy of the forecasting model, but also pragmatically reviewing resourcing assumptions (such as table weighting).

- There are also clear lessons about the value of key staffing roles on election day and ensuring there are sufficient Queue Controllers and Senior and normal Issuing Officers across election day.

3.1 Most eligible Queenslanders successfully participated in LGE2024

Turnout for LGE2024 was strong

Voting for LGE2024 opened on Monday 4th March, closing at 6p.m. on Saturday 16th March. During this period, Queenslanders were supported to vote through a variety of channels, including early voting, postal, telephone, declared institution, and election day voter services. Table 3 depicts the total turnout through each of these channels.

Strong turnout indicates that Queenslanders were aware of the election. 82% percent of all enrolled voters participated in the election. This represents a 5% increase in the turnout rate compared to 2020, and a reversion back to pre-COVID norms (LGE2016 saw 83% turnout).[26]

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[26] Data received from ECQ 09/05/2024, *Nous Data 090524.*

Queenslanders made informed decisions at the ballots, with a 96.01% vote formality rate, this includes 96% and 95% formality for mayoral and councillor votes respectively.[27] This represents a respective increase of 0.8% and 0.3% on LGE2020, indicating that improved processes and voter education supported more Queenslanders to successfully participate in the election.[28]

Table 3 | Queenslanders were supported to vote through a range of voter services[29]

Voter service	Election day (in person)	Early voting (in person)	Postal voting	Telephone voting	Mobile polling	In-person declaration	Informal votes	Total turnout
Total turnout	1,260,205	1,068,908	368,769	17,770	11,075	39,680	113,586	**2,879,993**

For many Queenslanders, the voting process was quick and convenient

Many voters were able to turn-up and vote, without any major issues or barriers to participate. Table 4 depicts voter satisfaction with the service they used. High satisfaction with telephone and postal voting services highlights successes in ensuring accessibility for all Queenslanders, including those with additional needs such as elderly people, those who live in remote areas, and those with disability.

Satisfaction with election day voting services is noticeably lower than other types, reflective of the issues experienced on election day. Despite this, almost half of election day voters report receiving a service that met their expectations, highlighting that in many areas, election day services were delivered to a high standard.

Table 4 | Voter satisfaction with key election services[30]

Voter service	Election day	Early	Postal	Telephone
'Satisfied' with the process	47%	76%	88%	87%
Additional success measures	57% Report queue times of 20-minutes or less	87% Report queue times of 20-minutes or less	95% Confident that they knew how to fill the ballot paper correctly	96% Satisfied with the time waited to speak to an operator

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[27] Data received from ECQ 10/06/2024, *Consolidated Feedback CLEAN*.

[28] Data received from ECQ 09/05/2024, *Nous Data 090524*; ECQ, *2020 Local Government Elections: Report on the Elections*, 2020, https://www.ecq.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0025/17836/2020-Local-Government-Elections_Report-on-the-Elections.pdf#page=35&zoom=100,0,0.

[29] Data received from ECQ 09/05/2024, *Nous Data 090524*.

[30] Data received from ECQ, 17/05/2024, *ER-ECQ-Post Local Government Elections Research-Topline Report.* Note, this data has been collected from the post-election voter survey commissioned by ECQ. The survey saw 3,005 respondents and was not administered by Nous.

Early voting was well-run, albeit with turnout below forecasts

For voters, early voting provides the opportunity to cast their vote at a time and date that is most convenient with them. It is particularly valuable to those who want to avoid election day crowds and who, for a variety of reasons, would not be able to attend election day voting in their local area.

For ECQ, early voting can also 'de-risk' election day. Early voting provides an opportunity to view voter behaviour patterns and identify and respond to any issues as they emerge. It also relaxes the pressure on election day itself. By shifting more voters to early voting services, ECQ can respond to election challenges in a time-sensitive way, which is not possible during election day itself.

ECQ delivered 156 early voting sites statewide, including at least one site in each LGA (excluding full postal LGAs). By the end of the early voting period, over one million people had voted through this channel. This represented 30.5% of all enrolled voters and 38.6% of those cast formal ballots at LGE2024.[31]

Early voting centres were well run. Voters were satisfied with the quality of the early voting service. Seventy-six percent reported feeling 'satisfied' with their early voting experience.[32]

However, early voting turnout was lower than forecast. ECQ forecast that 45% of those who participated in the LGE would engage early voting services – significantly higher than the 38.6% who did.[33]

3.2 Some polling places experienced significant issues on election day

While early voting saw turnout below forecast, election day turnout significantly exceeded its forecast. Election day saw 45.6% of all electors who participated in the election, over ten percentage points greater than its forecasted 35%.[34]

ECQ operated 1,031 polling places across Queensland on election day. At the individual polling place level, 91% of election day polling places saw turnout that exceeded their forecasts.[35] Some saw turnout over 200% - 300% of forecasts. The largest gap between forecasted and real turnout at a single polling place in Redland City Council, which saw 2,708 voters above forecasts. Figure 4 depicts this, highlighting that these forecasting issues occurred across the state.

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[31] Data received from ECQ 09/05/2024, *Nous Data 090524.*
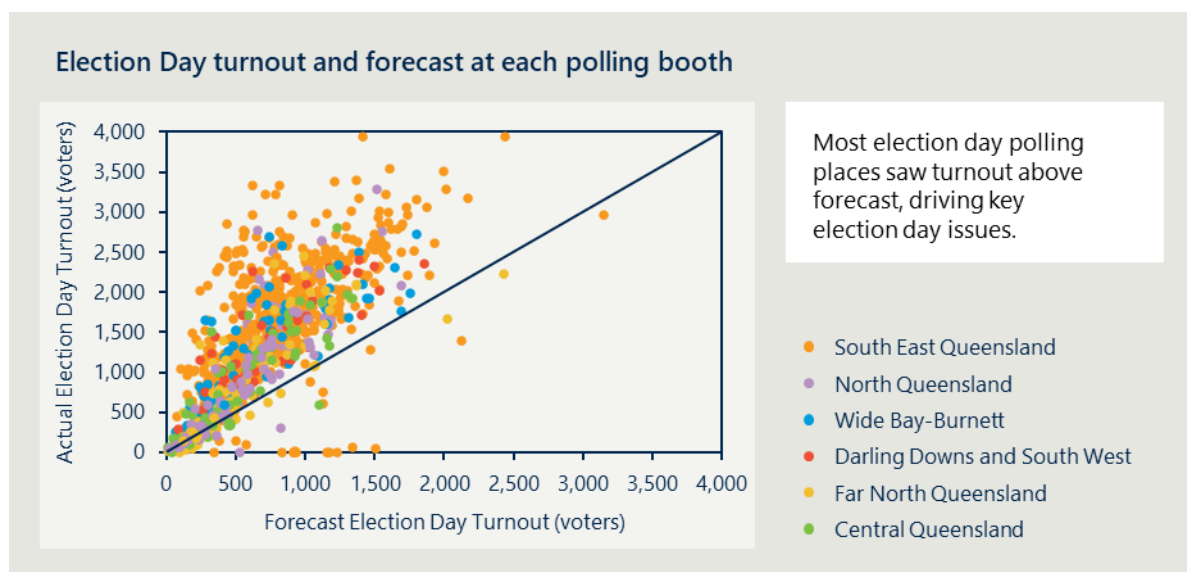[32] Data received from ECQ, 17/05/2024, *ER-ECQ-Post Local Government Elections Research-Topline Report.*
[33] Turnout data received from ECQ 09/05/2024, *Nous Data 090524*; forecast data received from ECQ 03/04/2024, *70ECQM~1.*
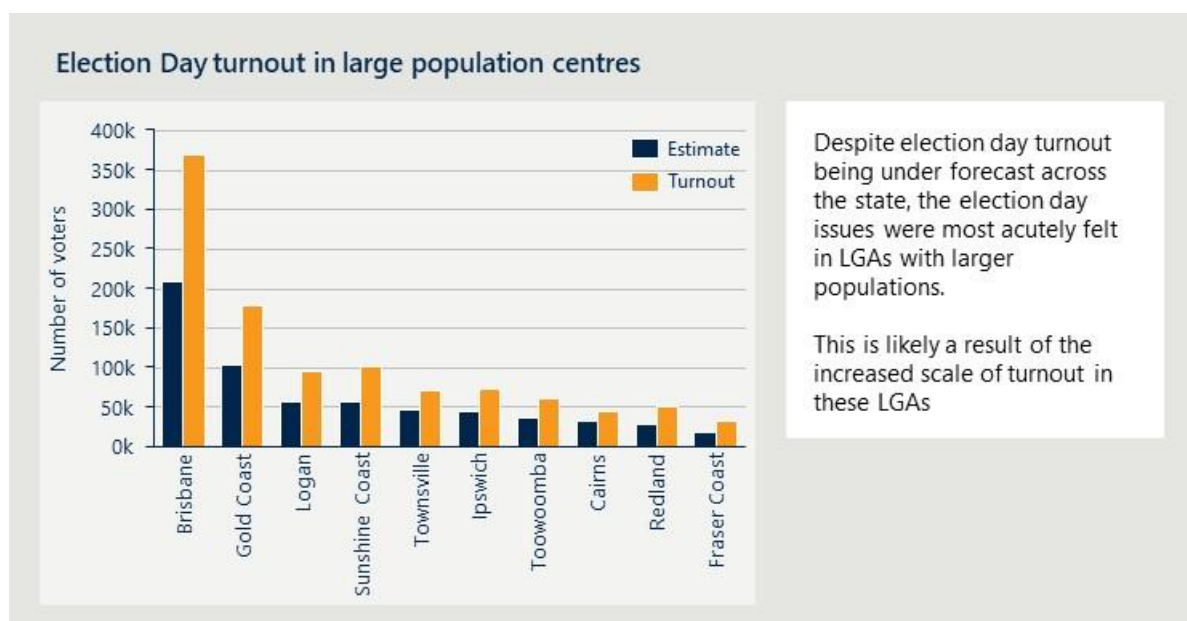[34] Data received from ECQ 09/05/2024, *Nous Data 090524.*
[35] Data received from ECQ 02/05/2024, *LGE2024 Election Day Votes & Staff.*

Figure 4 | Election Day turnout exceeded forecasts at 91% of polling places[36,37]

Election Day turnout and forecast at each polling booth

Most election day polling places saw turnout above forecast, driving key election day issues.

- South East Queensland
- North Queensland
- Wide Bay-Burnett
- Darling Downs and South West
- Far North Queensland
- Central Queensland

Across the state, election day saw 500,000 more voters than forecast.[38] The resultant issues were most acutely experienced in large population centres. This is depicted in Figure 5, which depicts the extent turnout exceeded estimates in Queensland's most populated LGAs.

Figure 5 | Election Day issues were acutely felt in LGAs with large populations[39]

Election Day turnout in large population centres

Despite election day turnout being under forecast across the state, the election day issues were most acutely felt in LGAs with larger populations.

This is likely a result of the increased scale of turnout in these LGAs

These issues significantly impacted the voter experience, among whom, 36% percent of election day voters reported feeling 'dissatisfied' with their voting experience.[40]

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[36] Data presented shows forecast turnout. A 'table weighting' was applied to this forecast to formulate total vote taken capacity as described further in Section 3.3
[37] Data received from ECQ 02/05/2024, *LGE2024 Election Day Votes & Staff*.
[38] Data received from ECQ 02/05/2024, *LGE2024 Election Day Votes & Staff*.
[39] Data received from ECQ 02/05/2024, *LGE2024 Election Day Votes & Staff*.

They also placed pressure on staff. Many temporary electoral staff (TES) were exposed to significant workplace and occupational health and safety risks that could be considered inappropriate. In some instances, they report working 12-16-hour days without breaks and without access to food and hydration.[41]

There was evidence of long queueing at times across many polling places

Evidence of excessive queuing across Queensland suggests systemic, rather than isolated issues. It is difficult to quantify the true extent of these issues - ECQ does not collect robust data about queues at polling places throughout the day, nor is there an agreed or legislated expectation for an appropriate queue length.

There is evidence of 'excessive' queuing in at least 13 LGAs.[42] At its most extreme, polling place staff report queues of up to three-hours long,[43] and these issues were pronounced in LGAs with larger population centres (Figure 5). Staff at a few polling places reported incidents of voters passing out in queues.[44]

This was not the case at all polling places, but many. Evidence from ECQ's independent polling place auditing program found 'reasonable' queuing times at the 18 polling places audited, but did identify that five of these polling places appeared to be short-staffed.[45]

There is evidence of polling places running out of ballot papers at sites across Queensland

Among the polling places that experienced queuing issues, several also experienced ballot paper shortages. There is evidence of ballot paper shortages in at least 39 individual polling places and across eight LGAs, with confirmation that at least 18 polling places ran out at some point during the day.[46]

Ballot paper supply levels were based directly on the voter forecasts used for each polling place (typically between 1.1 and 1.5 times expected turnout) and thus, consistently not prepared to manage election day turnout.

Among the 18 polling places audited on election day, seven did not have sufficient ballot papers.[47] Sites typically ran out of ballots either during the early afternoon, or shortly before closing of polls at 6p.m. At its most extreme, one polling booth first ran out at 10:30 a.m. before twice requiring additional resupply during election day. The longest period a booth had to be shut due to ballot paper shortages was around two hours; however, a small amount of polling places ran out shortly before 6p.m., providing voters limited opportunity to attend an alternative polling place prior to close of voting.[48]

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[40] Data received from ECQ, 17/05/2024, *ER-ECQ-Post Local Government Elections Research-Topline Report*.
[41] Sourced from consultations with Returning Officers and TES between 22/04/2024 – 10/05/2024.
[42] This includes Logan, Cairns, Fraser Coast, Bundaberg, Sunshine Coast, Scenic Rim, Tablelands, Gold Coast, Brisbane, Moreton Bay, Toowoomba, Ipswich, and Townsville.
[43] Sourced from consultations with Returning Officers and TES between 22/04/2024 – 10/05/2024.
[44] Sourced from consultations with Returning Officers and TES between 22/04/2024 – 10/05/2024.
[45] Data received from ECQ 04/04/2024, *Crowe Elections Site Visits – SMT*.
[46] Data received from ECQ 17/04/2024, *For Nous LGE2024 Queuing and Ballot Paper Shortages*; supplemented by information shared during consultations with Returning Officers and TES between 22/04/2024 – 10/05/2024.
[47] Data received from ECQ 04/04/2024, *Crowe Elections Site Visits – SMT*.
[48] Sourced from consultations with Returning Officers and TES between 22/04/2024 – 10/05/2024.

3.3 Multiple factors underpinned these election day issues

The staffing model was not set up to meet demand in many polling places

Polling place staffing was determined from ECQ's original forecasting estimates. Based on ECQ's table weighting assumptions (that each Issuing Officer and each Senior Issuing Officer will be able to issue 600 ordinary and 500 ordinary, absent, or declaration votes throughout the day respectively),[49] 38% of all election day polling places saw turnout that exceeded their expected issuing capacity.

Beyond being understaffed at polling places, many stakeholders reflected that there was not the right mix of staff and staffing roles available. There are lessons about the appropriateness of ECQ's resourcing model, elements of which were changed in the lead up to LGE2024 to reduce costs. For example:

- **The table weighting estimates for polling places were ambitious.** ECQ had initially estimated that Issuing Officers could each process 450 votes per day, and Senior Issuing Offices could manage 500 votes. This was increased to 600 and 500 votes respectively, which reduced the amount of staff required to administer many polling places (based on forecast turnout). While there was significant variation in how many votes each Issuing Officer processed, feedback suggested that these assumptions created an unmanageable workload for many issuing officers, contributing to long queues and a stressful experience.

- **The absence of Queue Controllers was felt sorely.** Another resource rationalisation decision was to not continue with the queue controller role that was introduced in 2020, as initially planned for LGE2024. Without these positions in the election day staffing footprint, this removed a key communication point between ECQ and voters as resources were not available to communicate with voters as they arrived at polling places, nor support those moving through queues. This contributed to queues that were long, poorly managed, and inefficient, which frustrated voters.

- **The extra time required to process cross divisional votes was not adequately factored in.** Without the resources to manage queues (Queue Controllers), many voters lined up in the wrong queue. The time lost showing voters to the right queue reduced the productivity of issuing points. ECQ also underestimated the amount of Senior Issuing Officers positions would be required for the election to administer absentee and declaration ballots, with some sites running out of these ballots, but not ordinary ballots. Of note, this issue most frequently - but not exclusively - occurred at polling places near divisional boundaries, contributing to queuing issues and ballot paper shortages at these sites.

There is an opportunity to revise future resourcing models accommodating the lessons learnt from LGE2024 polling place experiences.

While there were policies and systems in place to provide additional resources on election day, these struggled to meet demand

ECQ procured ballot papers at well above the maximum possible turnout. This included over 4.8 million mayoral ballot papers and 3.8 million councillor ballot papers, with an additional 1.9 million blank overprint ballots.[50] Despite this, many polling places required resupply on election day – at an atypical level.

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[49] Data received from ECQ 03/04/2024, *Polling Place Approved Logic – LG January 2024.*
[50] Data received from ECQ, 01/05/2024, *LGE2024 Ballot Paper Requirements (simplified).*

It is common for some polling places to require additional ballot papers on election day. For a variety of reasons (such as unexpected community events and surprise weather patterns) polling places can exceed their individual forecasts. Where this occurs, the Returning Officer is responsible for resupply.

Despite ECQ having policies and systems in place to supply additional ballot papers to polling places, they were not able to manage the scale of resupply required. As a result of under-forecasting, many more polling places than usual were under-supplied with ballot papers for their election day turnout. This meant that Returning Officers were overstretched, forced to resupply ballot papers at far more polling places than typical, or in some cases, than possible.

3.4 As a consequence of these issues, some voters were unable to participate in the election

A small subset of voters was unable to vote at all on election day because ballot papers ran out late in the voting period. Others abandoned the queues due to long wait times.

TES took their own initiative for how to respond to this issue, including collecting Voter Information Cards (VICs) and recording handwritten names. ECQ had not identified voters being unable to vote because of election delivery issues as a risk. Consequently, TES were not well informed about what to do in these circumstances to provide a consistent statewide response to the issues. A policy directive on this matter would have been of value.

As the regulator of elections, ECQ also regulates non-voting. It is an offence to fail to vote in an election without a valid or sufficient excuse. As ECQ pursues its non-voting compliance activities, it will need to consider how it applies these regulatory responsibilities in the areas that experienced these election day challenges.

4 Counting and reporting of results

- Despite some issues on election day, results were tallied appropriately, and elections declared in a timely matter.

- While there was a small number of electors were unable to vote for reasons beyond their control (such as the unavailability of ballot papers at their local polling places), this did not occur in numbers that would have affected the outcomes of election.

4.1 Election day issues did not affect election reporting activities

Key election results were reported efficiently, supporting councils to return to business-as-usual in a timely manner. All contests were declared within 19 business days of election day.[51] By the end of the first week of counting, 32% of contests were declared, and by the end of the second, 85% of were declared. This is consistent with, and an improvement upon, LGE2020, which saw all contests declared within 23 days of election day.[52]

Candidates in high-profile seats were also declared in a timely manner. Brisbane, Logan, and Ipswich all experienced queuing and ballot paper shortages on election day. Each was declared within 17-, 6-, and 12-days following election day, respectively.

4.2 It is unlikely that the events of election day affected the results of the election to the extent that the incorrect candidate was declared elected

The anecdotal evidence of the number of electors who sought to vote on election day but were unable to is low. The longest period that a polling booth went without ballot papers was two hours, and at many sites the issue was resolved within 15 minutes. Some voters who experienced extensive queues likely attended another site, however data was not collected on election day about the number of people who chose not to queue.

The turnout in the divisions or wards in 2024 that had been identified as areas with high queuing was on average 1.6% lower than in the same areas in the 2016 local government elections.

While declarations revealed close races in some local government areas is unlikely that the outcomes of these elections would have changed should issues with ballot papers or long queues had not occurred at all.

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[51] Data received from ECQ 09/05/2024, *Nous Data 090524*. Declarations were finalised on Thursday 04/04/2024. This count includes weekends and public holidays.
[52] Data received from ECQ 23/04/2024, *2020 Declarations.*

5 Recommendations for the future

RECOMMENDATION 1

Establish clear, shared principles for the delivery of high-quality elections. Develop a clear and succinct resource that communicates the markers of a successful election. This includes how ECQ balances the needs of its stakeholders and how ECQ's business areas operate in a coordinated, complementary way, with a shared view of election success. Specifically, this resource should address the tension between delivering a 'cost-efficient' and 'effective' election. This resource should evolve across electoral cycles to reflect evolving voter preferences and best practice delivery approaches. It should be used to anchor planning and investment activities.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Review cost recovery arrangements. Further explore opportunities to increase the budget for future LGEs. This may include involving the broader Queensland Government to work with councils on how they can meet the costs of best practice elections; or to revisit how costs are shared between councils and ECQ.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Ensure costs that are communicated to councils are compiled with input from all relevant areas of ECQ. Use the shared vision of election success (recommendation 1) to communicate the minimum-viable and non-negotiable elements of the election delivery model. Ensure business units within ECQ are actively involved in, and collaborate, throughout this planning and budgeting process.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Continue to invest in ECQ's risk culture and capability. Curate a risk culture that emphasises shared ownership of issues and their resolution, collaboration across services, and feedback loops to proactively identify and monitor risks across the organisation. Increase staff competence and confidence to effectively use planning tools and resources.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Review and update core assumptions within the voter forecast model to take on lessons about voter behaviour. Build quality assurance steps into data modelling and reporting processes to promote consideration and incorporation of new information. Ensure any changes are appropriately flowed through to resource allocations.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Further invest in ECQ's data and analytics capability to enable data-driven and real-time decision-making. Continue to iterate forecasting models to accurately reflect shifting voter behaviour preferences and place-based population changes. Explore opportunities for data to support real-time decision-making during election delivery periods, including by facilitating information flows across ECQ.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Revise the assumptions that underpin the polling place resourcing model. Specifically, consider restoring table weighting to historic estimates and planning capacity to undertake queue control functions.

RECOMMENDATION 8

Seek opportunities to influence voters toward early voting as a means of 'de-risking' election day. Build a deeper understanding of voter behaviour and how ECQ can influence this. Use available levers (such as expanding the early voting footprint and operation hours or using strategic communications) to drive voter behaviour toward early voting.

A.1   Review Terms of Reference

Nous Group (Nous) will undertake an independent review of specific matters relating to the planning and delivery of the 2024 Local Government Elections.

The review will cover:

- The extent of queuing delays at polling sites on election day, and the drivers of these delays
- The sufficiency of ballot papers at polling booths on election day, where and why there were shortfalls at different booths, as well as the extent to which these were addressed in a timely way
- The impact of delays and resourcing issues on electors' capacity to vote
- Electoral Commission of Queensland's (ECQ) regulatory response to non-voting in locations with known delays or resource challenges
- Suitability of cost-recovery arrangements to deliver effective LGEs.

The following would be out of scope:

- Lived elector experience. We will not do consultation directly with electors, given that these insights will be more fulsomely collected by Electoral Commission of Queensland's voter experience survey.

Note:

- It is recognised that Local Government Elections and State By-Elections were occurring concurrently in Inala and Ipswich West. Electors in these regions completed an additional ballot paper at the same time as casting votes for the Local Government Election. Findings from this review will therefore apply to both Local Government and By-Elections.

A.2   Evidence for the review

120+ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED	**115** SURVEY RESPONSES — RETURNING OFFICER SURVEY	**7** CONSULTS — ECQ LEADERS
8 FOCUS GROUPS — ECQ BUSINESS AREAS	**4** FOCUS GROUPS — RETURNING OFFICERS	

120+ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

115 SURVEY RESPONSES
RETURNING OFFICER SURVEY

7 CONSULTS
ECQ LEADERS

8 FOCUS GROUPS
ECQ BUSINESS AREAS

4 FOCUS GROUPS
RETURNING OFFICERS

20+ DATASETS ANALYSED

228 SURVEY RESPONSES
CANDIDATE SURVEY

3 FOCUS GROUPS
LOCAL GOVERNMENT SECTOR REPRESENATITVES

3 FOCUS GROUPS
FIRST NATIONS STAKEHOLDERS

3 CONSULTS WITH INTERJURISDICTIONAL COMMISSIONS

8 FOCUS GROUPS WITH STAFF AT SITES WITH BALLOT PAPER SHORTAGES

13 FOCUS GROUPS WITH STAFF AT SITES WITH EXCESSIVE QUEUING

A.3   Stakeholders engaged

Table 5 | List of stakeholders engaged

Consultation type	Stakeholders
8 x 30-minute – 1-hour one-on-one interviews with ECQ leaders	• Electoral Commissioner of Queensland • Assistant Electoral Commissioner • Executive Director, Election Event Management • Chief Financial Officer • Director, Funding Disclosure and Compliance • Team Leader, Data Insights • Executive Director, Digital Technologies • First Nations Engagement Officer
8 x 1-hour focus groups with ECQ business areas	Election Event Management • Executive Director, Election Event Management • Manager, Election Operations • Program Manager Strategy, Policy, and Governance (x 2) • Manager, Communication • Director, Strategy, Policy and Governance Digital Technologies • Executive Director, Digital Technologies • Program Manager • Project Manager Corporate Services (x 2) • Director, Corporate Services • Senior Human Resources Officer • Learning and Development Officer
3 x 1-hour focus groups with electoral commissions in other jurisdictions	NSW Electoral Commission • Deputy Electoral Commissioner Victorian Electoral Commission • Director, Event Strategy and Delivery Northern Territory Electoral Commission • Deputy Electoral Commissioner

Consultation type	Stakeholders
4 x 1-hour focus groups with Returning Officers across Queensland	• 13 total Returning Officers engaged across metropolitan, regional, and remote LGAs:
13 x 1-hour focus groups with staff at polling places that experienced queuing issues	• 30 total stakeholders engaged, including Returning Officers and TES across 12 sites and 8 LGAs:
8 x 1-hour focus groups with staff at polling places that experienced ballot paper shortages	• 23 total stakeholders engaged, including Returning Officers and TES across 9 sites, and 5 LGAs.
1 x 1-hour focus groups with Local Government sector stakeholders	• LGAQ, General Manager, Assist • LGAQ, Manager, Governance and Advisory Services
2 x surveys to Returning Officers and Candidates to understand their election experiences	• Returning Officers (115 responses); Candidates (228 responses)

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750
PEOPLE

75
PRINCIPALS

5
COUNTRIES

+80.7 **2020–22 NET PROMOTER SCORE**
– global consulting average: **+76.6**