



SERVING AS A MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT IN THE COOK ISLANDS

A Practical Guide for Prospective Candidates (2026)

**Serving with Integrity, Respect,
and
Commitment to the Community**

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INTRODUCTION

To become a Member of Parliament in the Cook Islands, you need to meet a few basic requirements and then put your name forward at election time.

To be eligible, you must:

- Be a Cook Islands citizen
- Be at least 18 years old
- Be enrolled as a voter in a Cook Islands electorate
- Not be disqualified (for example, by holding certain public offices or having certain criminal convictions).

WHY STAND FOR PARLIAMENT?

Serving as a Member of Parliament is a responsibility to:

- Represent the interests of your constituency
- Uphold the Constitution and laws of the Cook Islands
- Contribute constructively to national decision-making
- Act with integrity, transparency, and respect.

Before standing, potential candidates should reflect strongly on their motivation to serve and their readiness for public scrutiny and accountability.

HOW IT WORKS

When a general election is called, you nominate yourself to stand in a specific electorate — the area you want to represent, or you can stand for a Political Party if you succeed in a pre-selection runoff with other potential candidates.

Tip: You don't have to belong to a political party. Some MPs have been elected as independents.

The Cook Islands uses a first-past-the-post system, meaning whoever gets the most votes in that electorate wins the seat.

There are 24 seats across the Cook Islands — some on Rarotonga, some on the outer islands. You'd stand in the electorate where you're enrolled.

Practically speaking, most candidates campaign in their community — meeting people, sharing their views, and explaining why they want to represent that area. It's very much a grassroots process, especially in smaller electorates.

The next general election is expected in 2026, which will determine the 19th Parliament.

If you're thinking about standing, it's worth contacting the Electoral Office directly for the formal nomination process and deadlines — they handle the official side of elections, separate from Parliament itself.

PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

1. Understand the Role and Responsibilities

Prospective candidates should take time to understand:

- The structure and functions of Parliament
- The role of a Member of Parliament (MP)
- Expectations of ethical conduct and accountability
- Legislative processes and committee work.

Practical steps:

- Observe parliamentary sittings
- Read standing orders and relevant legislation
- Attend civic education or governance workshops
- Gain the support of any of the Political Parties operating in the Cook Islands

Tip: If you don't wish to join a Political Party, you are welcome to stand as an Independent candidate. However, you need to be mindful of the financial burden associated with that route.

2. Know the Legal Requirements

Anyone considering candidacy must ensure they:

- Meet eligibility requirements under Cook Islands law
 - Understand nomination processes and timelines
 - Comply with electoral laws, including campaign finance and disclosure rules
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- Respect election codes of conduct

Tip: Early consultation with electoral authorities helps avoid disqualification or compliance issues.

3. Engage with Your Community Year-Round

Effective representation grows from genuine community connection.

- Listen actively to community concerns
- Participate in local events, cultural activities, and church or village life
- Support community initiatives in a voluntary capacity

Remember: This engagement should be ongoing and authentic—not limited to election periods.

4. Build Knowledge and Skills

Strong MPs develop:

- Public speaking and communication skills
- Critical thinking and problem-solving abilities
- Cultural competency and respect for traditional leadership
- Understanding of national issues such as health, education, economy, and climate resilience

Consider: leadership training, governance courses, or mentorship from experienced leaders.

5. Act with Integrity and Respect

Public trust is central to democratic leadership.

- Be honest and transparent in word and action
- Avoid conflicts of interest
- Treat opponents, officials, and voters with dignity
- Respect diversity of views within the community

Think: Ethical behaviour before, during, and after elections strengthens democracy for everyone.

6. Prepare for Public Life

Standing for Parliament affects personal and family life. Candidates should prepare for:

- Media scrutiny
- Public criticism and disagreement
- Time commitments and travel
- Emotional and mental resilience

Tip: Strong support networks are essential.

7. Communicate Clearly and Responsibly

Effective communication includes:

- Explaining your values and intentions clearly
- Listening more than speaking
- Using respectful language
- Avoiding misinformation or personal attacks

Remember: Responsible communication contributes to constructive public discourse.

8. Respect the Democratic Process

Regardless of outcome:

- Accept election results with maturity
- Respect the authority of electoral institutions
- Continue contributing positively to the community

Consider: Democracy is strengthened when all participants act responsibly.

9. Be Aware Of The Financial Reality of Being a Member of Parliament

One of the least discussed—but most important—realities of becoming a Member of Parliament is the **financial pressure that comes with the role.**

While Members of Parliament receive a salary, the position also brings with it a wide range of **social and community expectations** that can have significant personal financial implications.

As an MP, you may face:

- Requests from individuals for **financial assistance**
- Expectations to provide **donations or sponsorships** for events, sports teams, or cultural activities
- Appeals for help with **school fees, travel costs, or medical expenses**
- Ongoing **family obligations and extended family expectations**
- Community demands for support during **funerals, church activities, and island events**
- Constituent expectations that you will “help” in ways that may go beyond your formal role

For many MPs, these requests are frequent and, at times, overwhelming. The challenge is that these expectations are deeply rooted in our culture of **community care, generosity, and leadership**.

However, it is important for potential candidates to understand:

- You **cannot meet every request**
- Your role is to **serve, represent, and advocate**—not to personally fund community needs
- Without clear boundaries, these pressures can lead to **financial strain and personal hardship**

✓ Key Advice for Candidates

- **Set clear personal boundaries early**
- Be transparent with your community about what you can and cannot provide
- Focus on your role as a **law-maker and advocate**, not a financial provider
- Where possible, **connect people to government programmes or services** instead of providing personal funds
- Maintain **financial discipline and planning** for yourself and your family
- Don't promise anything you may not be able to deliver.

Leadership in Parliament is not only about policy and debate—it is also about navigating the **expectations of people who look to you for support in many forms**. Understanding this reality early will help you serve effectively while protecting your own wellbeing.

FINAL REFLECTION

Standing for Parliament is not just about being elected—it is about **service, character, and commitment** to the people of the Cook Islands.

Those who approach candidacy with humility, preparation, and respect contribute meaningfully to the nation’s democratic future.

