

Electoral Reform Discussion Paper

1. Background

1.1. Purpose

The purpose of this discussion paper is to request Council-endorsed Local Government feedback to inform WALGA's advocacy on Local Government electoral reforms expected to be proposed by the State Government, specifically:

- full spill elections every 4 years; and
- compulsory voting at Local Government elections

These options have been raised in statements by the Minister for Local Government, Hon Hannah Beazley MLA, but no formal proposals have yet been provided for consultation. While WALGA has relevant advocacy positions (discussed further below), the purpose of this discussion paper is to undertake early sector engagement to ensure WALGA's positions reflect the sector's current views and enable timely, well-informed and effective engagement with the anticipated State Government reform proposals.

1.2. WALGA existing advocacy positions

1.2.1. Elections

WALGA has established advocacy positions reflecting the sector's support of voluntary voting and elections of half the offices on Council every two years. These advocacy positions are provided in Appendix 1.

In late 2024 WALGA conducted a review of its Elections Advocacy Positions to ensure they reflected the sector's contemporary view.

Local Government responses at that time indicated strong (98%) support for half spills every two years, which was reflected in the adopted Advocacy Position [2.5.16 Elections](#).

While voluntary voting was supported by an overall majority of responses (74%), compulsory voting was supported by a majority (64%) of metropolitan respondents and a majority (61%) of Class 1 and 2 respondents.

State Council requested that the WALGA secretariat undertake further investigation of the implications of compulsory and voluntary participation in Local Government elections before reporting back to State Council.

In the interim, Advocacy Position [2.5.15 Participation in Local Government Elections](#) was retained, expressing support for voluntary voting with a note that further work was being undertaken.

This investigation was ongoing when the Minister for Local Government raised the prospect of further Local Government election reform.

A State by State comparison of electoral statistics is provided in Appendix 2.

1.2.2. Election costs

In 2024, WALGA conducted a review of five Local Government biennial election cycles up to and including the 2023 Local Government elections. The review demonstrated significant cost increases and concerns about the lack of transparency in costings provided by the Western Australian Electoral Commission (WAEC).

In September 2024, State Council adopted Advocacy Position [2.5.18 Local Government Elections Analysis 2015-2023](#), calling for an independent audit of the WAEC's cost allocation methods and the introduction of Service Level Agreements to ensure transparency of costing methodology.

Cost implications are a relevant consideration in assessing the appropriateness of any proposed electoral reform. However, the current lack of transparency in costing methodology makes it impossible to confidently forecast cost impacts.

This discussion paper seeks to identify the factors associated with each reform proposal that may affect election costs. This is further complicated by the interaction of possible reform options and external economic factors.

WALGA has requested that the Department of Local Government, Regulation and Industry Safety (LGIRS) and the Western Australian Electoral Commission, undertake modelling to identify the cost implications of any proposed reforms.

A comparison of available electoral costs data, State by State, is included as Table 4 in Appendix 2.

WALGA has contacted other Local Government associations to ask if they have experienced changes in costs associated with compulsory four-year, all-in all-out, local government elections. As this has been the approach in most jurisdictions for some time, responses were largely unable to address changes in cost.

2. Election Frequency

Current situation

Western Australia holds biennial elections, with half of the offices on Council elected every two years for four-year terms. All other Australian jurisdictions hold full spill elections every four years (four-year terms).

Considerations

Considerations include:

- Voter participation and fatigue
- Continuity, knowledge retention and mentorship for new Council Members
- Stable whole-of-Council mandate and collective accountability
- Capacity for candidate recruitment
- Administrative requirements
- Extraordinary vacancies and backfilling
- Timing and transitional arrangements

Re-election rates

WALGA has analysed the composition of Councils following the last two Local Government elections in other Australian jurisdictions, all of which have full spill elections. A comparison of available data on re-election rates is included as Table 2 in Appendix 2.

This data suggests that on average, re-elected Council Members make up between 47% and 57% of Council following full spill elections.

By comparing over 700 consecutive ordinary election results, the review identified nine occasions when the membership of Council following an ordinary election was 100% different from the Council following the previous ordinary election. However, four of these local governments held mid-term extraordinary elections, meaning the changes in membership occurred over two or more elections within a four-year period.

Costs

In one respect, a change to a four-year cycle would reduce costs by reducing the number of elections. However, the cost of each election may increase. The WAEC uses the number of vacancies to inform quotations for the conduct of elections. Full spill elections would double the number of vacancies, with possible increased costs associated with printing and postage and increased staffing for the count.

WALGA cannot definitively determine an overall cost impact to Local Government without the requisite cost-modelling from the WAEC. WALGA has requested that the WAEC provide this modelling to LGIRS. The cost impact of a change in election frequency may also vary between Local Governments.

Questions

1. Does your Local Government support half spill elections every two years or full spill elections every four years?
2. What are the key considerations informing this view?
3. If full spill elections every four years were introduced, what transitional arrangements and consequential amendments may be required?
4. Any other comments?

3. Compulsory or Voluntary Voting

Current situation

Voting in Local Government elections is voluntary in Western Australia and South Australia. All other Australian jurisdictions have compulsory voting.

Considerations

Considerations include:

- Voter participation and democratic legitimacy
- Voter engagement, awareness and/or fatigue
- Administrative and enforcement requirements
- Application to owner and occupier rolls

Participation rates

A comparison of available participation data is included as Table 3 in Appendix 1.

Costs

The WAEC uses expected participation rates to inform quotations for the conduct of elections. It is likely that an increased participation rate would increase election costs through higher reply-paid charges and increased staffing for the count. However, in-person elections become more cost effective than postal elections at higher participation rates.

WALGA cannot definitively determine an overall cost impact to Local Government without the requisite cost-modelling from the WAEC. WALGA has requested that the WAEC provide this modelling to LGIRS. The cost impact of compulsory voting may also be different for each Local Government depending on their current participation rates and methods for holding elections, and whether these would change significantly.

Tasmania implemented compulsory voting in Local Government elections in 2022. Local Government Association Tasmania (LGAT) advised that this resulted in reasonably significant cost increases. The Tasmanian Electoral Commission reported a \$9.32 per elector cost for the first compulsory Local Government elections in 2022, a 35% increase from \$6.92 in 2018. An analysis of the factors contributing to this increase is not available and it may be challenging to draw direct comparisons between Tasmania and WA.

It is likely that the cost impact of compulsory voting would be moderated if elections also transition to a 4 yearly cycle.

Questions

5. Does your Local Government support compulsory voting or voluntary voting in Local Government elections?
6. If the frequency of Local Government elections were changed to every 4 years, would your Local Government support compulsory or voluntary voting?
7. What are the key considerations informing this view?
8. Any other comments?

Appendix 1- WALGA Elections Advocacy Positions

2.5.15 Participation in Local Government Elections

Position Statement	The Local Government sector supports voluntary participation in Local Government elections. <i>Noting that State Council at its 6 December 2024 State Council meeting resolved that the WALGA Secretariat further investigate implications of compulsory and voluntary participation in Local Government elections and report back to State Council.</i>
Background	Voluntary participation in Local Government elections is a long-established position of the Local Government sector, and was confirmed as a result of sector feedback received during the Local Government reform process.
State Council Resolution	December 2024 - 090.5/2024 February 2022 – 312.1/2022 December 2020 – 142.6/2020 March 2019 – 06.3/2019 December 2017 – 121.6/2017 October 2008 – 427.5/2008
Supporting Documents	Advocacy Positions for a New Local Government Act WALGA submission: Local Government Reform Proposal (February 2022)

2.5.16 Elections

Position Statement	The Local Government sector supports: 1. Councillors serve four-year terms with elections every two years and half of the Council positions spilled at each election. 2. First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) voting system for Local Government elections. If Optional Preferential Voting (OPV) remains as the primary method of voting, the sector supports the removal of the 'proportional' part of the voting method for general elections. 3. First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) voting system for internal Council elections.
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4. Councils holding elections by means of in-person, postal and/or electronic voting.
5. Current legislative provisions of Mayor/President of Class 1 and Class 2 Local Governments being directly elected by the community and Class 3 and Class 4 Local Governments determining whether its Mayor or President is elected by the Council or by the community.

Background

The sector positions on Local Government elections have been long-established. This was confirmed as a result of sector feedback received during the Local Government reform process.

Following the 2023 Local Government Elections where legislative reforms to Local Government elections processes were first implemented, sector wide consultation was conducted on key elements of the elections advocacy positions to determine if they accurately reflected the sector's contemporary view.

State Council Resolution

December 2024 - 091.5/2024

February 2022 – 312.1/2022

December 2020 – 142.6/2020

March 2019 – 06.3/2019

December 2017 – 121.6/2017

October 2008 – 427.5/2008

2.5.18 Local Government Elections Analysis 2015-2023

Position Statement

That WALGA advocate to the State Government:

1. For an independent Local Government election audit, focusing on the Western Australia Electoral Commission's (WAEC) service delivery and cost allocation methods and costing applications used, to confirm that marginal cost recovery principles are applied and that the costing program is being effectively managed.
2. For the requirement for the WAEC to develop and implement Service Level Agreements with Local Governments, similar to those agreements currently used in New South Wales and Victorian Local Government elections and that includes:
 - a. transparency of costing methodology,
 - b. direct engagement with Local Governments pre and post elections, and
 - c. the roles and responsibilities of the WAEC and Local Governments in the conduct of elections.

3. For a review of the legislative framework that would allow for more than one election services provider to conduct Local Government elections.
4. For a mandated WAEC Report to Parliament specific to Local Government elections post each election cycle, outlining costs, results, voter turnout and matters for improvement both in the conduct of elections and the legislation, if relevant.

Background

A comprehensive review and analysis of five election cycles up to and including the 2023 Local Government election against the backdrop of legislative reforms to the Local Government electoral process in Western Australia was carried out by WALGA.

With a focus on postal elections conducted exclusively by the Western Australian Electoral Commission (WAEC), the analysis has found evidence of the rising cost and reduced service level of conducting Local Government elections in Western Australia.

Elected Member feedback, costs vs service comparisons and engagement by the sector with WALGA's governance services over the 2023 Local Government election period, are the basis for the position outlined above.

State Council Resolution

September 2024 - 065.4/2024

Appendix 2 - Election Statistics

The data in the following tables is derived from publicly available reports issued by the respective State Electoral Commissions for the elections they conducted. The different content and format of reporting in each jurisdiction can make direct comparisons challenging.

Table 1: Comparative overview

Jurisdiction	Compulsory/optional voting	Frequency	Postal/In Person
Western Australia	Optional	Half spill every 2 years	Postal or in person
South Australia	Optional	Full spill every 4 years.	Postal.
Northern Territory	Compulsory	Full spill every 4 years	Postal or in person.
Queensland	Compulsory	Full spill every 4 years.	Postal or in person.
New South Wales	Compulsory	Full spill every 4 years.	In person.
Victoria	Compulsory	Full spill every 4 years.	Postal
Tasmania	Compulsory	Full spill every 4 years.	Postal

Table 2: Average percentage of returning Council Members (at individual Council level)

States with full spills only. Calculated using publicly reported ordinary election results including elections conducted by private providers.

State	Most recent election year Average % of Council Members who were Council Members the previous term	Previous election year Average % of Council Members who were Council Members the previous term
Queensland	2024 47%	2021 49%
New South Wales	2024 54%	2021 49%
Victoria	2024 46%	2020 47%
South Australia	2022 57%	2018 48%
Tasmania	2022 53%	2018 54%

Table 3: Percentage of all elected candidates who were returning Council Members (at State level)

States with full spills only. Official state level percentage reported by electoral commissions for elections they conducted.

State	Most recent election year % of returning Council Members	Previous election year % of returning Council Members
Queensland	2024 43.2%	2021 46.0%
New South Wales	2021 56.8%	2016/17 (amalgamations) 60.6%
Victoria	2024 43.0%	2020 51.9%
South Australia	2022 50.0%	2018 55.3%
Tasmania	2022 46.0%	2018 48.0%

Table 4: Election participation rates

State	Election Year	Election Year	Election Year
WA	2023 31.2%	2021 30.2%	2019 29.1%
NSW	2024 84.54%	2021 (2020 postponed) 83.56%	2016/2017 (amalgamations) 2017: 79.58% 2016: 79.27%
NT	2025 <i>Official report not yet available.</i>	2021 61.3%	2017 58.5%
QLD	2024 82.31%	2020 (COVID impacted) 77.71%	2016 83.04%
SA	2022 32.9%	2018 31.6%	2014 31.99%
TAS	2022 (First election with compulsory voting) 84.79%	2018 58.72%	2014 54.58%
VIC	2024 81.46%	2020 81.47%	2016 72.15%

Table 5: Election costs

Election costs invoiced to Local Governments.

State	Election Year	Election Year	Election Year
WA	2023 <i>postal elections only</i> \$5.17 per elector 1,763,392 electors (115 districts)	2021 <i>postal elections only</i> \$4.06 per elector 1,727,712 electors (92 districts)	2019 <i>postal elections only</i> \$3.70 per elector 1,619,431 electors (86 districts)
NSW	2024 \$55.67million 5,242,086 electors (125 councils)	2021 \$46million (<i>budgeted</i>) 4,838,137 electors (122 councils)	2016/2017 2017 \$19.17 million 2.73 million electors (45 councils) 2016 \$14.11 million 1.97million electors (76 councils)
NT	2025 NA	2021 \$1,864,193 142,546 electors	2017 \$1,593,775 133,927 electors
SA	2022 \$8.93million (ex GST) \$6.93 per elector (ex GST)	2018 \$6.57million (ex GST) \$5.41 per elector (ex GST)	2014 \$4.36million (ex GST) \$3.77 per elector (ex GST)
TAS	2022 <i>voting became compulsory</i> \$9.32 per elector 410,975 electors	2018 \$6.92 per elector 356,810 electors	2014 <i>first all-in all-out</i> \$5.59 per elector 375,355 electors

Note: Data in this table is taken from reports published by the relevant Electoral Commissions. Due to differences in the ways electoral costs are apportioned, a per elector cost is only provided if it was reported. Data for QLD and VIC is not clearly discernible in Election Reports, and therefore not presented in this table.