

## **FLYING AGENDA: Sector Consultation – Compulsory and Voluntary Voting and Election Frequency**

*By Felicity Morris, Manager Governance and Procurement*

### **RECOMMENDATION**

**That State Council endorse the Electoral Reform Discussion Paper for the purposes of sector consultation.**

***Responses close at 5:00pm on Tuesday, 20 January.***

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Following a report to State Council on WALGA's Elections Advocacy Position in December 2024, State Council requested that the WALGA Secretariat further investigate the implications of compulsory and voluntary voting in Local Government elections.
- WALGA's sector-wide consultation in late 2024 showed:
  - 74% support for voluntary voting overall, but majority support for compulsory voting among metropolitan and Class 1 and 2 Local Governments.
  - 98% support for four-year terms with a two-year spill (biennial elections).
- Recent Ministerial comments have indicated State Government support for reform, including consideration of compulsory voting and a four-year, all-in/all-out election cycle. These comments have prompted renewed interest and discussion across the sector.
- The introduction of compulsory voting is likely to require a transition to a four-year, all-in/all-out election cycle, and this model has been the subject of recent Ministerial commentary and interest from parts of the Local Government sector.
- WALGA has contacted both the Department of Local Government, Industry Regulations and Safety (LGIRS) and the Minister's office seeking details on the consultation process and timeframes but no further information has been provided.
- In anticipation of potential reforms, it is proposed that a discussion paper be circulated to all Local Governments, with Council-endorsed feedback to inform a proposed advocacy position for consideration by State Council.

### **ATTACHMENT**

- Draft Electoral Reform Discussion Paper

### **BACKGROUND**

#### **WALGA Elections Advocacy Position Review**

WALGA has long-standing advocacy positions in support of voluntary voting and elections of half the Council every two years. In late 2024 WALGA conducted a review of its Elections Advocacy Positions ([Advocacy Position 2.5.15 Elections](#)) to ensure they reflected the sector's contemporary view.

A total of 92 Local Governments participated in the sector-wide consultation. The results informed a report to the [State Council meeting in December 2024](#). The strong (98%) support for half spills every two years was reflected in the adopted advocacy position.

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.

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

### **2025 Ministerial statements and response**

In June 2025, Hon Hannah Beazley MLA, Minister for Local Government, stated her support for a four-year election cycle, citing concerns about voter fatigue and the rising costs of conducting biennial elections. These messages were repeated in Minister Beazley's address to WALGA's 2025 Local Government Convention, which also raised the possibility of compulsory voting.

In response to Minister's Beazley's comments, several Zones considered motions relating to four yearly, all-in/all-out elections.

These Zone resolutions were referred to the Governance Policy Team at the [State Council meeting in September 2025](#).

### **COMMENT**

The issues of compulsory voting and election frequency are complex, with significant implications for democratic participation, governance, and electoral administration. It is critical that WALGA is well-positioned to engage with the State Government, based on a clear sector position. While the Secretariat has undertaken research to provide relevant data, further consultation is recommended. The information presented in the attached Electoral Reform Discussion Paper is intended to support sector engagement.

### **State By State Comparison**

While voting in Local Government elections is compulsory in most Australian states, Western Australia and South Australia remain exceptions where participation is voluntary. In Tasmania, voting in Local Government elections was made compulsory in 2022. In South Australia, a former Minister for Local Government initiated a Local Government Participation and Elections Review in October 2023, which included the question of whether voting in Local Government elections should be made compulsory. However, no further action has been taken.

All Australian states and territories, except Western Australia, conduct Local Government elections on a four-year cycle using an "all-in, all-out" approach.

The attached Electoral Reform Discussion Paper includes an overview of key statistics for each State relating to Local Government elections.

### **Policy considerations**

The policy considerations in this area are complex, and open to competing views. The Electoral Reform Discussion Paper lists high-level considerations that have been raised in

the debate on these matters but does not provide a recommended view. Local Governments are invited to identify the key considerations that inform their position.

### **Election Costs**

The sector has expressed concerns regarding rising election costs and a lack of transparent costing methodology. Election costs are a relevant factor in assessing electoral reform proposals, balanced with the value of civic engagement and representation. The Electoral Reform Discussion Paper seeks to identify the factors associated with each reform proposal that may affect election costs. However, it is not possible to confidently forecast the precise cost impact. Cost modelling would require collaboration with the WAEC to assess the complex interactions of a range of factors to reflect real-world conditions and resource requirements. WALGA has requested that the WAEC assist the LGIRS to undertake cost modelling to quantify the cost impacts of reform proposals.

### **Proposed consultation**

It is proposed to circulate the Electoral Reform Discussion Paper to all Local Governments, seeking a Council endorsed position by Friday, 27 February. The consolidated feedback would inform a report and proposed advocacy positions to be presented to State Council.

# Electoral Reform Discussion Paper

## 1. Background

### 1.1. Purpose

The purpose of this discussion paper is to request 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), it is appropriate to seek feedback to refine and/or confirm the sector's position to enable 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) 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.

## 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

### 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 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. 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.

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

### Questions

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

DRAFT

# Appendix 1- WALGA Elections Advocacy Positions

## 2.5.15 Participation in Local Government Elections

Position Statement	<p>The Local Government sector supports voluntary participation in Local Government elections.</p> <p><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></p>
Background	<p>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.</p>
State Council Resolution	<p>December 2024 - 090.5/2024</p> <p>February 2022 – 312.1/2022</p> <p>December 2020 – 142.6/2020</p> <p>March 2019 – 06.3/2019</p> <p>December 2017 – 121.6/2017</p> <p>October 2008 – 427.5/2008</p>
Supporting Documents	<p>Advocacy Positions for a New Local Government Act</p> <p>WALGA submission: Local Government Reform Proposal (February 2022)</p>

## 2.5.16 Elections

Position Statement	<p>The Local Government sector supports:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Councillors serve four-year terms with elections every two years and half of the Council positions spilled at each election.</li> <li>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.</li> </ol>
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3. First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) voting system for internal Council elections.
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	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	<b>2024</b> 47%	<b>2021</b> 49%
New South Wales	<b>2024</b> 54%	<b>2021</b> 49%
Victoria	<b>2024</b> 46%	<b>2020</b> 47%
South Australia	<b>2022</b> 57%	<b>2018</b> 48%
Tasmania	<b>2022</b> 53%	<b>2018</b> 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	<b>2024</b> 43.2%	<b>2021</b> 46.0%
New South Wales	<b>2021</b> 56.8%	<b>2016/17 (amalgamations)</b> 60.6%
Victoria	<b>2024</b> 43.0%	<b>2020</b> 51.9%
South Australia	<b>2022</b> 50.0%	<b>2018</b> 55.3%
Tasmania	<b>2022</b> 46.0%	<b>2018</b> 48.0%

**Table 4: Election participation rates**

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

**Table 5: Election costs**

*Election costs invoiced to Local Governments.*

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