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Submission on Proposed Reforms to Councillor Numbers and Allowances

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the discussion paper *Reforms to Councillor Numbers and Allowances (2025)*. I appreciate the State Government's intent to modernise local government, ensure fair remuneration for elected members, and promote consistency across councils.

However, I do not support the proposal to legislate a reduction in the number of councillors. In my view, the proposed reform would reduce representation and diversity, increase workload, and deliver no tangible benefit to ratepayers. While well-intentioned, it risks weakening local democracy rather than strengthening it.

Representation and Local Democracy

The discussion paper highlights Tasmania's relatively high ratio of councillors to population. While that may be statistically correct, it overlooks the essential character of Tasmanian local government; that is, small communities, dispersed populations, and close personal connections between residents and their elected representatives.

Councillors are often the first point of contact for residents on issues both within and beyond council's remit. This accessibility is a cornerstone of trust in local government. Fewer councillors would inevitably reduce the number of available entry points for residents to engage with their council, especially in a rapidly growing municipality like Brighton.

Effective representation cannot be measured by ratios of population, sealed road distances, the value of development applications, and the value of a Council's assets alone. It is about how well councillors reflect the diversity of views, needs, and experiences within their community. A smaller council would make that harder, not easier, and that would be to the detriment of the entire local government sector.

Diversity and Accessibility of Elected Office

Brighton Council currently benefits from a broad mix of ages, professional backgrounds, and life experiences. That diversity enriches debate and ensures decisions are grounded in lived experience.

Reducing councillor numbers would almost certainly narrow that diversity. It would make it harder for new or younger candidates to succeed, especially against well-known long-term incumbents, and could discourage potential candidates from running at all. The small increase in allowance proposed will not offset the additional workload that would fall on fewer councillors, and does not provide for an allowance which offsets reasonably against full time or part time work for someone considering entering local government. The increase in allowance, therefore, would not encourage additional candidates to the sector, as those of us who have already been elected can demonstrate that we are not involved in the sector for the money that is paid.

Many of us balance full-time employment and volunteer in community service organisations. Expecting fewer councillors to manage increased expectations, without providing a living wage for the time involved, risks making elected office accessible only to those who have retired from the workforce, or those with the means or flexibility to absorb the extra load. That would be a backward step for representation, diversity, and inclusion.

Workload, Governance, and Council Function

The discussion paper acknowledges the link between councillor numbers and workload but assumes efficiencies can be gained through smaller councils. This is not realistic in practice.

Fewer councillors would mean fewer people to share committee work, community events, consultation forums, and the increasing administrative and legislative responsibilities that accompany the role. While I do not believe this would necessarily reduce transparency in itself, it would inevitably shift more of the early policy and vision-setting work to Council Officers. That would reduce the practical influence of elected members over the direction of their councils and could unintentionally centralise decision-making.

Decision-making itself would not become more efficient. Council decisions are made by vote, regardless of the number of councillors. A reduction in Councillor numbers would impact the richness of debate and the breadth of perspective would certainly diminish.

Cost and Community Value

The discussion paper proposes that the reform will be cost-neutral overall, with savings from fewer councillors being redirected to increased allowances for those who remain.

This framing assumes that ratepayers will benefit simply because the total cost to council remains unchanged. In reality, cost-neutrality offers no tangible benefit to the community and, in this case, reduces the level of representation they receive for the same cost.

The argument also overlooks the potential hidden costs of the change, which is a greater reliance on Council Officers, increased workloads, and possible reductions in engagement or responsiveness. Councillor allowances are not a significant component of overall council expenditure. Reducing representation to reallocate a modest amount of money within existing budgets does not represent reform in the public interest.

Risk and Transition

Reducing councillor numbers will make councils less resilient to temporary absences, vacancies, or conflicts of interest that affect quorum. The smaller the council, the greater the impact when one councillor cannot participate. This is especially relevant for fast-growing councils like Brighton, where the complexity of issues and pace of change demand broad and sustained engagement.

I would encourage the government to consider providing councils with flexibility to make a local case for retaining their current numbers. The current proposal does not adequately recognise the diversity of council sizes, geographies, and growth pressures across certain municipalities.

Recognising and Strengthening the Role of Councillors

Tasmania's local government sector has already undergone meaningful reform, including the introduction of mandatory councillor training and other capability-building measures. These are positive steps that directly improve councillor performance and community confidence.

Further improvements should build on that approach, strengthening councillor skills, transparency, and engagement, not reducing the number of people able to serve. The distinct role of councillors as connectors between community and government should be recognised and protected.

Conclusion

Local government in Tasmania works best when it is close to the people it serves. Councillors provide that closeness, the ability for residents to contact someone local, approachable, and accountable.

Reducing councillor numbers would make councils less representative, less diverse, and no more efficient. It delivers no cost savings, and it risks discouraging the very people our system most needs (working Tasmanians, younger voices, and new community leaders) from participating in local democracy.

I urge the government to retain current councillor numbers and focus reform efforts on strengthening capability, training, and community engagement. That approach would achieve the intended goals of a more modern and effective local government system without compromising the principles of representation and accessibility that our communities value most.



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