

Submission: Discussion Paper - Reforms to Councillor Numbers and Allowances

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission concerning the proposed reforms to councillor numbers and allowances. This feedback is presented in my individual capacity as a councillor of the Meander Valley Council, and I speak only for myself.

Councillor Numbers and Representation

Meander Valley Council (Transition from Nine to Seven Councillors)

For the Meander Valley Council, reducing the number of elected members from nine to seven appears workable. This reduction is unlikely to impede effective decision-making or fair representation within our local government area.

Concerns with Five-Member Councils (Risk to Diversity and Governance)

I have significant concerns about the proposal for other local government areas to move to a five-member council structure. While the Discussion Paper suggests these reforms will 'strengthen governance,' I believe reducing the cohort to just five members will do the opposite.

A cohort of only five councillors poses a substantial risk to democratic representation and diversity. It makes it difficult to ensure that the council represents the full range of views, beliefs, and interests within the community. There is a high likelihood that a five-member council will be dominated by mainstream perspectives, potentially disadvantaging or overlooking minority groups. Diversity is a crucial component of effective governance, fostering cooperation and leading to decisions that best serve the entire community. Five members are simply insufficient to guarantee this vital level of representation.

Electoral Thresholds and Legitimacy

I wholeheartedly agree with the concept that higher election vote thresholds will enhance the legitimacy of elected councillors. The proposed reduction in council numbers will naturally make it more challenging to be elected or re-elected, which I welcome. To occupy a seat at the council table, representatives should be supported by a strong voter mandate, ensuring they truly reflect the will of the local government area.

Councillor Allowances and Remuneration

Adequacy of Allowances (Meander Valley Perspective)

It is acknowledged that current councillor allowances are low. For active councillors, the position currently requires a significant personal financial donation to the role. In my own experience, I reduced my paid employment to a 0.7 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) to accommodate daytime council obligations, leaving me financially worse off.

From a Meander Valley perspective, the proposed increase in the allowance is so paltry that I do not believe it will make any measurable difference to attracting or retaining councillors. It will remain a small offset against the costs of the councillor role. The need for Councillors to subsidise their service with their personal finances will continue.

However, I note that for councillors who limit their participation only to mandatory meetings, the current allowance may be considered adequate. The increase will therefore not have its intended effect of incentivising broader participation or attracting a more diverse field of candidates in local government areas like ours.

Superannuation Equivalent Payments

Regarding the proposal to make it mandatory for superannuation equivalent payments to be directed into a nominated superannuation fund, I do not have a strong objection. Given the still-low level of the Meander Valley allowance, even with the proposed 14.25% increase, I do not see this as a critical reform for our area. I can, however, appreciate the benefit of this measure for councils where the allowance is already substantially higher and will see a greater increase.

Broader Reforms for Governance and Diversity

Methodology for Ongoing Reviews

The methodology and ongoing review framework for councillor allowances and numbers must be embedded in legislation. There should be no ambiguity or discretion on this matter. Any changes should be made law and not left to the interpretation of individuals or individual councils.

Compulsory Councillor Education

I wholeheartedly agree with introducing compulsory councillor education, and would extend this to support mandatory training for councillor candidates as well. It is an act of pure arrogance for any councillor, regardless of their tenure, to believe they are above professional development. While the current online platform, "Learn to Lead," is acknowledged as clunky, the support available means that refusing training is an excuse, not a reason. Candidate training has the potential to ensure that candidates are better equipped to commence the role of councillor. It could also help someone understand that perhaps the role is not for them, thus ensuring less turn around of councillors and the associated costs. Candidate training should be made available well in advance of the election period.

Remote Meeting Attendance

I am not supportive of allowing remote meeting attendance except in very strictly defined and extreme circumstances. Post-COVID community feedback in Meander Valley was not favourable toward remote attendance.

Being a councillor is a privilege, and we are aware of meeting schedules and should plan to attend in person. Furthermore, if a councillor is too unwell to attend in person, it can be reasonably argued that they may not be in a suitable state to make good decisions. Without robust definitions of what constitutes a good reason, this measure could be open to abuse. Communities want assurance that their representatives are meeting together regularly and in the most efficient way for debate and decision-making.

I recognise that this flexibility is being proposed to help manage quorum issues in the proposed new five-member councils; however, my fear remains that the reduced numbers will already erode democracy and representation, and flexible attendance is a temporary fix that will not address the core issue.

Measures for Diversity and Good Governance

I wholeheartedly agree with and support providing parental leave for councillors, as this is essential for attracting a broader and more diverse field of candidates and promoting better governance.

Regarding 'delivering stronger sanctions for serious councillor misconduct', I note this has not been sufficiently defined in the Discussion Paper, nor is the definition thorough enough in the

referenced ‘Local Government Priority Reform Program 2024–2026.’ To include this in legislation will require a watertight definition—therefore, in the current undefined form, I can neither support nor oppose it.

Critical Reform for Candidate Attraction (Privacy and Safety)

A key barrier to attracting a stronger, more diverse field of candidates is the requirement for council election candidates to include their home address on election material. Anecdotally, I know of people who will not stand because they fear for the personal safety and privacy of their family and themselves, if their address is made public on advertising material.

For candidates affiliated with political parties or who have a business address, this is often not an issue, but for independent candidates who are forced to use home addresses, they open themselves up to potential abuse.

I strongly recommend that candidates be required to record their address with the Tasmanian Electoral Commission (TEC), but only be required to include their town or suburb on advertising material. This simple change would be a significant incentive for privacy-conscious individuals to stand for office.

Conclusion

In summary, my position is as follows:

- **Councillor Numbers:** I support the reduction from nine to seven councillors for Meander Valley, but strongly oppose the move to five-member councils for other local government areas due to the risk to diversity and representation.
- **Allowances:** The proposed allowance increase is not a sufficient incentive to attract a stronger field of candidates for Meander Valley.
- **Training and Parental Leave:** I support mandatory training for both councillors and candidates, and fully support parental leave provisions.
- **Remote Attendance:** I do not support remote attendance without robust, legally defined circumstances.
- **Candidate Privacy:** I urge the government to introduce a measure that allows candidates to omit their full address from election material for reasons of safety and privacy, recording it only with the TEC.

Cr Anne-Marie Loader (Meander Valley Council)
131 King Street
Westbury TAS 7303

anne-marie.loader@mvc.tas.gov.au

