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### **Department of Premier and Cabinet**

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### **Submission – Reforms to Councillor Numbers and Allowances Discussion Paper**

Sorell Council welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the above paper.

For many years, Sorell Council has continued to be an active supporter of comprehensive reform of local government in Tasmania.

- Sorell Council proactively reduced councillor numbers from 12 to 9.
- From 2015 to 2018, Council fully participated in the State Government and subsequent Local Government Board process for potential council mergers in the south-east, culminating in the rejection of the Sorell–Tasman merger by the Tasman Council in both 2018 and 2019.
- Council supported the Local Government Board's *Future of Local Government Review* recommendations (October 2023).

We already support reduction in councillor numbers as part of more comprehensive reforms and detailed review, as a product of the redesign of council boundaries based on demographic, economic, asset and service provision catchment analysis and applicable benchmarking.

We generally support the proposed reductions to councillor numbers based on an agreed comparative assessment that achieves like-for-like outcomes across the state.

- Practical detail on how smaller councils can legitimately represent their communities in practice, particularly in ways that engage effectively with communities as well as attend formal meetings, manage quorum matters, and handle the increasing demands of the role is recommended.
- The increased risk of geographic 'loading' with fewer councillors in peri-urban councils may need further consideration.
- Councillor numbers are one coarse metric to achieve an effective and representative community 'Board'. Ensuring there is a sufficient distribution and mix of requisite skills, experience, and qualifications within the councillor cohort is vital. The proposed reforms therefore only partially address this.
- The methodology for setting councillor numbers and allowances should be embedded in legislation. The proposed methodology contained in the Discussion Paper, with associated national comparative data, is considered an appropriate initial mechanism.

For most councillors, allowances will remain comparatively very low.

- The relatively small increase in already inadequate allowances could be viewed as tokenistic.
- Many people assume councillors receive a full-time salary or large allowances equivalent to the average wage or professional (non-executive) board position. Highlighting the quantum rather than the percentage would be more relatable for the average person and show the true differences.
- The increased allowances as proposed will have little impact on attracting skilled and diverse candidates. Particularly for smaller and mid-sized councils, we doubt that redistribution of a few thousand dollars will offset the potential disruption and reduction in community representation at this time.

The superannuation treatment proposed is welcome for clarity and fairness, noting there may be some councillors who would prefer to manage their own superannuation matters — particularly if taxation arrangements remain unchanged.

The tax treatment of allowances could be reviewed to make the payment more attractive to candidates.

- Enable salary sacrifice equivalents.
- Enable novated leasing options.
- Deduct tax from the monthly payments (as is common for director fees on boards and advisory groups).
- Review applicable tax brackets for allowances not to be considered as additional employment thereby avoiding a higher tax rate.

In summary, a fairer and more consistent framework is welcome. However, reducing councillor numbers without deeper reforms seems piecemeal and risks becoming a tokenistic exercise. It distracts from the more challenging reforms that we know local government in Tasmania urgently needs reforms that Sorell Council has been advocating for over 10 years and that our communities deserve.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Discussion Paper. Sorell Council remains committed to working collaboratively with the Tasmanian Government and the local government sector to achieve meaningful reforms that strengthen councils and benefit communities across the State.

Yours sincerely,



**Robert Higgins**  
Chief Executive Officer