

## ***At a glance - Local Government Electoral Bill discussion paper***

The Government is inviting public comment on forward-looking reforms to how we conduct local government elections in Tasmania.

The discussion paper is organised around five key outcomes:

1. a more flexible and accessible format for local government elections
2. a better voting franchise for electors and changes to eligibility to run for office
3. better quality of public information at elections
4. strengthened donations disclosure and electoral advertising requirements
5. other changes to support the integrity of elections.

### **Future format of elections**

The paper outlines scenarios for how we may conduct local government elections in the future. This responds to challenges, namely decreasing postal services standards and increasing costs, which will continue to challenge the conduct of elections by postal ballot. We know some change to the current model is inevitable. The goal is to ensure our legislation provides flexibility to adapt the format of elections having regard to evolving technologies and community needs, among other things.

The paper presents two scenarios:

- The first scenario is an upfront change to an **attendance voting mode**, either with a single polling day or a polling period, which would represent a substantial departure for local government elections in Tasmania.
- The second scenario relies upon **continued distribution by mail of ballot papers**, with electors encouraged and enabled to complete and return ballots by hand to physical issuing places, creating a 'hybrid' electoral system.

In either instance, voters with barriers to participation (including electors with a print disability, who live in remote locations or are interstate or overseas) would be better served by legislative amendments to enable telephone voting, along with an option to continue to access conventional postal voting where that is practicable.

### **New directions: who should vote in local government elections and how should we elect the deputy mayor?**

While proposed reforms in the discussion paper seek to support and deliver on initiatives agreed through the earlier Local Government Legislation Review, there are two main exceptions to this where we think there is merit in testing recent community and sector views about alternative approaches. These are:

- consideration for the continued eligibility to vote by non-citizens; and

- the manner of electing deputy mayors, proposing that the deputy mayor is instead elected ‘around the table’ in the manner of deputy mayor vacancies during the term, and also that councils may elect between a deputy mayor appointed for a fixed period, or an acting mayor appointed from time-to-time.

## **Technical reforms**

### *A more flexible and accessible format for local government elections*

This set of reforms will provide future flexibility for the conduct of local government elections and, importantly, remove current barriers to using available assistive practices and technologies for electors with print disabilities and electors who are interstate or overseas.

### *A better franchise for electors and changes to eligibility to run for office*

This set of reforms will make the administration of the local government electoral franchise more robust and, importantly, embed the core ‘one person, one vote’ principle for future elections. It also provides a higher – but appropriate – bar for nomination without the introduction of a candidate nomination fee.

### *Better quality public information at elections*

This set of reforms is intended to improve the understanding by electors of the candidate field, including notation on the ballot where candidate nominations have been lodged by a registered political party and the publication of candidate information statements and relevant regulatory information provided by the Director of Local Government.

### *Strengthened donations disclosure and electoral advertising requirements*

This set of reforms will provide integrated approach to the management of political donations and electoral expenditure, including advertising. It seeks to align requirements for Tasmanian local government and Legislative Council elections to the extent considered appropriate and practicable. Importantly, it introduces gifts and donations disclosure requirements for non-incumbent candidates for the first time. Proposed prohibitions on the publication of deceptive and misleading statements are aligned to the *Electoral Act 2004*.

### *Other changes to support the integrity of elections*

These additional reforms provide for the continued integrity of local government elections and adopt measures common to other jurisdictions and Tasmanian parliamentary elections. Sanctions for elections offences will be enhanced and the Tasmanian Electoral Commission provided with corresponding powers of investigation; and a legislated caretaker framework will embed the voluntary policy approach adopted by most councils at the 2022 elections. Consistent with the Local Government Legislation Review, elector polls are to be retained, but a larger section of the electorate will be required to petition for an elector poll to be held, reflecting their substantial costs.