



## **DISCUSSION PAPER**

### **REVIEW OF COUNCILLOR REPRESENTATION**

## **BACKGROUND:**

The Shire of Wagin conducted a review of councillor representation in mid-2020 and Council decided in October 2020 to reduce the number of Councillors from eleven to nine, effective at the 2021 elections. Prior to this, council reduced the number of offices (elected members) from 13 members to 11 members in 2003. The Shire has not operated a ward system for many years and there no intention to change this situation.

This Review Discussion Paper has been prepared in response to a late September 2022 memorandum from the Minister for Housing; Lands; Homelessness; Local Government about local government reform. This memorandum detailed a number of proposed changes to the Local Government Act but specified the approach to changes in council size.

Specifically, the Minister has indicated reform will mean that districts of populations of less than 5,000 will have five, six or seven councillors. Wagin has a population of approximately 1,800 with nine councillors, which will mean a reduction in councillor offices to five, six or seven.

This paper and other actions reference the provisions of Schedule 2.2 of the *Local Government Act* which specify:

### **7. Reviews**

**(1) Before carrying out a review a local government has to give local public notice advising —**

**(a) that the review is to be carried out; and**

**(b) that submissions may be made to the local government before a day fixed by the notice, being a day that is not less than 6 weeks after the notice is first given.**

**(2) In carrying out the review the local government is to consider submissions made to it before the day fixed by the notice.**

A number of factors may be considered when deciding upon a change in Councillor representation. There are no wards (or segmentation of the shire) within the district, so all councillors represent the entire district and all electors. Matters such as community of interests, physical and topographical features and economic factors are therefore not applicable in this discussion. Relevant factors are those impacting on representation, including:

- Demographic trends
- Economic factors
- Ratio of councillors to electors

## **CURRENT SITUATION:**

The Shire of Wagin comprises nine Councillors. The President is elected by the Councillors. Elector numbers for the 2021 local government elections were 1,285 (one councillor per 143 electors).

## **THE PROCESS:**

The review process is required to be carried out in accordance with the provisions of the *Local Government Act 1995* and involves a number of steps as follows:

### **CONSULTATION**

- Council resolves to undertake the review
- Public submission period opens – a minimum of six weeks is allowed for the lodgement of submissions

### **EVALUATION**

- Public submission period closes
- Council considers all submissions and relevant factors and makes its decision
- Council submits a report to the Local Government Advisory Board for its consideration

### **DECISION**

- Local Government Advisory Board makes a recommendation to the Minister for Local Government
- The Minister makes a decision and makes recommendation to the Governor
- Any changes approved by the Minister will be in place for the next election (October 2023) where possible or where mandated.

## **ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF A REDUCTION IN THE NUMBER OF ELECTED MEMBERS:**

The Department of Local Government and Communities has the following viewpoint on Council membership:

*The ideal number of elected members for a local government is for the local government to determine. There is a diverse range of Councillor/elector ratios across Western Australia reflecting the sparsely populated remote areas and the highly populated urban areas. The structure of the Council's operations will provide some input into the number of elected members needed to service the local government.*

However, the state government reform program has determined that populations of up to 5,000 will have 5, 6, or 7 councillors (including the President). A decision by

Council to maintain a greater number than 5, 6 or 7 elected members is subject to the Local Government Act being amended as the Minister has indicated but may see all offices vacated at the next election and the number of councillors mandated. This could be as few as five. In considering the number of councillors, it is open to a decision being made locally to have five, six or seven councillors.

The **advantages** of a reduction in the number of elected members may include the following:

- There is a marginal benefit in decision-making. The decision-making process may be more effective and efficient if the number of Councillors is reduced – but only in the reduction of diversity of views and less time in debate. It may be more timely to ascertain the views of fewer people and decision making may be easier. A smaller number of people may be more cohesive and cooperative.
- There is little effect on community consultation provided the community, individuals and groups are able to contact an elected member. This may be an administrative matter.
- The cost of maintaining elected members and governance activities is likely to be reduced. A lesser number of elected members, however, may result in an increased need for individual commitment from those elected in the participation in Council's affairs.
- Fewer elected members may mean increased levels of profile within the community.
- Fewer positions on Council may lead to greater interest in elections with an increased possibility of contested elections.
- There is a State-wide trend for reductions in the number of elected members and some local governments have found that having fewer elected members has worked well.

The **disadvantages** of a reduction in the number of elected members may include the following:

- A smaller number of elected members may result in an increased workload – this is dependent on the extent of use of committees and how administration resources are utilised; consequently, assuming all elected members are equal, there is some possibility of reduced effectiveness. This may be reliant on nominees for office and possible that a demanding role may discourage some from nominating for Council.
- A reduction in the number of elected members may limit the diversity of interests around the Council table, reducing community participation.

## **COMPARISONS WITH SOME OTHER LOCAL GOVERNMENTS.**

The following are some examples of Councillor representation with population and elector ratios in medium sized agriculturally based Shires. The ratio is how many councillors per 100 persons or electors. The average of these councils is 0.9 councillor per 100 population or 1.4 councillors per 100 electors. For Wagin this is much less than these numbers, reflecting a much greater population (more than 1800 against an average of 770). This also means Wagin councillors each represent more electors and more persons than neighbouring councils. For comparison, it should be noted that a large regional council such as Plantagenet has nine councillors and serves a population of 5,388 (0.2 councillor per 100 persons). Kojonup has a similar population to Wagin and one less councillor resulting in a similar ratio of representation to Plantagenet (0.2 per 100 persons). This indicates Wagin has regional significance and is atypical to its neighbours.

It is highly likely that councils with seven members will remain at that size. Councils with eight or nine members and a district population of less than 5,000 will be reducing the number of offices (members) to five, six or seven. A decision to not change may result in a mandated membership number less than seven.

	Population	Electors	Councillors	Councillors ratio	
				/100 Pop.	/100 Electors
West Arthur	798	582	7	0.9	1.2
Dumbleyung	671	467	7	1.0	1.5
Williams	684	284	9	1.3	3.2
Lake Grace	1,268	908	8	0.6	0.9
Woodanilling	423	290	6	1.4	2.1
Wagin (current)	1,761	1,285	9	0.5	0.7

## **SOME OPTIONS, COSTS AND IMPLICATIONS TO CONSIDER WITH RESPECT TO REPRESENTATION RATIOS ASSOCIATED WITH MAINTAINING NUMBERS OF ELECTED MEMBERS IN WAGIN:**

The 2022/23 Shire of Wagin budget allows \$63,171 in meeting fees and expenses for nine elected members (an average of \$7,019 per elected member). The President and Deputy President have allowances of \$15,375 included in that amount. This approximates to \$3,587 per 100 population and \$4,916 per 100 electors.

A reduction to seven elected members including a President, would reduce the total cost to \$54,027 (an average of \$7,718 per elected member). The greater average costs reflect the same level of allowances for the President and Deputy President and no change to committee membership or structure (some costs are fixed and do not

change), the total being distributed to less councillors. However, reduced total costs do result in lower costs per capita. A reduction to seven councillors would approximate to \$3,068 per 100 population and \$4,204 per 100 electors.

**OTHER FACTORS TO BE CONSIDERED:**

Whilst the Councillor Representation Ratio has been addressed in the preceding sections, the following factors could also be considered:

**Demographic Trends:**

Census data over the last four census periods is shown in the following table.

Shire of Wagin – Census Statistics 2006 - 2021

	2006	2011	2016	2021
Total Population Wagin	1846	1847	1852	1761
Median Age Wagin	42	45	49	49
Median Age Australia	37	37	38	38
65 years and over	16.9%	19.7%	24.7%	27.6%
15 to 64	61.4%	59.6%	57.4%	57.0%
0 to 14	21.7%	20.7%	17.9%	15.7%

The table shows that the population of the Shire has been stable but ageing with an increased median age and a greater percentage of people aged 65 years and over. This could translate into a higher demand for the Shire to meet the needs of people in the higher aged groups. The Shire is however keen to grow the population and is currently focussed on improving sporting and recreational facilities and encouraging business activity to enhance employment opportunities and strengthen the local economy.

**Economic Factors:**

The economy of the Shire is largely agriculturally based with wool, livestock and coarse grains being the economic mainstays. Wagin is however well supported with ancillary industries with some downstream processing of agricultural products, manufacturing, fabrication, vehicle, plant and machinery servicing and a strong general retail sector. In addition, the district is well served by builders, associated trades and accounting and legal, medical and allied health professions.

These businesses and services have been relatively stable over a long period and are not expected to change much in the foreseeable future.

Notwithstanding this relatively buoyant economic situation, the 2021 census showed that the average weekly household income in Wagin of \$1,183 was well below the State average of \$2,214, or Australia’s overall average of \$2,240. This could indicate

a greater proportion (and therefore reliance) on fixed incomes such as pensions. This accentuates the importance of all residents within the Shire of Wagin having adequate and diverse Councillor representation, to ensure that a reasonable level of equity to the provision of services that the Shire provides to the community.

### **Effectiveness and Efficiency of Council Meetings:**

A fair degree of flexibility exists as to how a local government structures its business to deal with matters at Council meetings. Some Councils extensively utilise committees which make recommendations to Council, whilst others operate with very few committees and conduct most of their business through their ordinary Council meetings. There are also wide differences in how decision-making is delegated to the Chief Executive Officer.

Councils with several committees and relatively few delegations to the CEO for example, would logically need to have more elected members than Councils which operate with few committees and which delegate a broad range of functions and decisions to the Chief Executive Officer. The key issues revolve around the capacity to make timely and effective decisions, compliance with legislation, the capacity to attract candidates for Council positions and the ability to attract high performing CEO's and professional staff.

### **IMPLEMENTATION:**

Advice from the Minister is that reform will result in reduced Councillor numbers. Should Council decide to not reduce councillor numbers, it is open to the government to legislate and mandate the number of councillors according to the population of the district. The Minister has indicated that a population of up to 5,000 will see five, six or seven councillors. This could mean as few as five councillors would be mandated.

It is expected that the reduction in Councillor numbers will take effect from the next election due in October 2023.

### **ELECTION CYCLES**

Ordinarily five offices would be vacant at the October 2023 election – that is, Council would seek to fill five councillor offices. A change to seven councillors, for example, would mean that just three vacancies would exist and candidates would be sought for these vacancies at the election of October 2023.

The remaining four council positions would then become vacant in October 2025 and be subject to election as per the normal election cycle.

**SUBMISSIONS:**

Your opinion matters. You are invited as a member of the community to participate in this process and make known your view on how many councillors ought to represent the community at Council. You may also make mention of any relevant factor that would assist Council in deciding how many councillors is suitable for this district.

Written submissions will be received up to 4.30pm Thursday 16 February 2023. Submissions may be made by way of the attached form or may be submitted in any written form. Submissions should be lodged with:

The Chief Executive Officer  
Shire of Wagin

PO Box 200  
WAGIN WA 6315

[shire@wagin.wa.gov.au](mailto:shire@wagin.wa.gov.au)

Hand delivered to the administration office 2 Arthur Rd Wagin.

Attachment: submission form.



## SUBMISSION FORM

### REVIEW OF COUNCILLOR REPRESENTATION

I/We favour the following option with respect to the number of Councillors that should represent electors within the Shire of Wagin:

(Tick Box)

7 Councillors

6 Councillors

5 Councillors

9 Councillors

Other ( Please specify)

Reasons/Comments in support of favoured option (Optional)

Name: .....

Ratepayer / resident Address:.....