

Local Government Advisory Board

REVIEW OF COUNCILLOR REPRESENTATION

Formal review report from the Shire of Wagin February 2023

Summary:

The Shire of Wagin held a Special Meeting 20 February 2023 on the conclusion of public consultation and resolved:

(Resolution)

Report:

1. Councillor Numbers

The Shire of Wagin conducted a review of elected member offices March to June 2020. At that time council resolved to reduce elected member offices from eleven (11) to nine (9).

Currently, the Shire of Wagin has nine elected member offices with one vacant due to a resignation January 2023. A submission to the Electoral Commissioner to remain at eight members until the October 2023 election will be submitted.

2. Minister's Memorandum

The Minister for Housing; Lands; Homelessness; Local Government wrote to local government Chief Executive Officers September 2022 advising requirements in relation to Local Government Reform (specifically, changes to council size).

This memorandum referenced a Voluntary Pathway (to reduced council size) whereby councils resolve to advise the Department of its intention and to conduct public consultation. A review of representation would be conducted, and report submitted (this report). The probable outcome would be a reduction in council size based on population in line with reform recommendations (being 5,6 or 7 councillors based on a population less than 5,000 as is the case for Wagin).

Alternatively, the Reform Election Pathway would see the spill of all offices and the full council newly elected.

The Shire of Wagin Council resolved at the September 2022 ordinary meeting to follow the Voluntary Pathway:

COUNCIL DECISION/4873 COUNCIL RESOLUTION

Moved Cr G R Ball

Seconded Cr D C Lloyd

- 1. That Council advise the DLGSC of its intention to undertake a process and to include a plan outlining the potential changes to be implemented for the ordinary elections to be held in 2023.**
- 2. That Council initiate a ward and representation review to determine the specific changes to the structure of Council for the 2023 to be completed by 14th February 2023.**

Carried 8/0

3. Public Notice and Consultation

Public discourse, notices and news items circulated following the decision to initiate the review.

A Discussion Paper and Public Notice was made available for the required six-week consultation period with recurrent advertising via local newsletter, official website, library, social media and noticeboards as well as publicity at organised events. A submission form was attached to the Discussion Paper and was available additionally as a loose item.

There were no submissions.

See Attachments 1, 2, 3 to this report.

4. Considerations for elected member offices

A significant matter is that Council had conducted a review in 2020. This had considered population, diversity, local democracy and availability of candidates with a resolution to reduce council size to nine (9).

The present number demonstrates no dysfunction and a good working relationship with staff. There is diversity on council with three female members and a spread in professional backgrounds. It would be desirable to have some younger representation but otherwise, the council reflects the community in most respects.

Given that some of the members were elected in 2021, a disruption to membership may contribute to reduced diversity and reduced growth in experience.

A significant principle for local democracy is the ability to attract candidates and successfully elect the number of offices. In reforming council size to a reduced number of offices, this may conversely place a cap on this activity. If a community can field candidates and elect (say) nine councillors, that is democratic – particularly if that enables a more complete reflection of the community, a greater diversity of participants.

This may mean that a council of five, six or seven may be less diverse in membership but also less diverse in levels of experience; politics; sociological and economical philosophy and capability to assess and deliver on behalf of the community.

This may result in some risk; it is possible a smaller, less diverse council will have a concentrated power centre with increased influence of that majority.

There is a possibility that workload will increase for elected members, particularly if committees are utilised, with a need to increase delegation to staff or rely on legislated positions.

There is a potential for a lower level of review and reduced organisational accountability. A reduced number of offices may mean a reduced level of skilled and experienced councillors to work with the administration – and where risk presents, an increased reliance on systemised response.

The mitigation of these risks to diversity of views, representation and organisational viability requires the maintenance of the maximum in capacity and capability; for these reasons, it is recommended that the maintenance of maintain the maximum permissible number of offices be pursued.

5. Recommendation and Council Resolution

Given the Minister has flagged legislation that sets elected member offices according to population, it is recommended to Council that it determine that seven offices be the appropriate number for the elections of October 2023.

The Council Resolution is as follows:

Ian McCabe
Chief Executive Officer
21 February 2023