



# ST PETERS RESIDENTS ASSOCIATION INC.

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Representing the Residents of St Peters, College Park, Hackney, Stepney, Maylands, Evandale & Joslin.

## SUBMISSION TO THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT PARTICIPATION AND ELECTIONS REVIEW

### ***Topic 1: How people engage with their council. Community Engagement Charter.***

The Discussion Paper recommends that instead of councils having a Public Consultation Policy, they will be required to have a Community Engagement Charter.

It is not clear how the flexibility of the Charter will improve council communication if there is a lack of desire on its part to do so.

We suggest that 'Community Engagement Charter' as opposed to a 'Public Consultation Policy' is merely semantics. At least a policy has set rules and obligations and can be enforced.

### ***Council meetings.***

#### ***Should councils be required to livestream their meetings and make recordings available?***

There are positive and negative arguments that can be advanced with reference to the issue of live recordings of council meetings.

One advantage of this is that it would make councils more accountable, by having a recording of proceedings. Citizens may want to know what happened at a council meeting which they were unable to attend, and so recordings would make meetings more accessible and transparent.

On the negative side, elected members may be tempted to deliver 'set speeches' and play to the audience if they know they are being recorded rather than discussing issues in a cogent and sensible manner or raise matters that may be contentious. Overall recording appears to have a positive impact on elected members and staff behaviour.

The possibility of elected members 'grandstanding' may make council meetings longer and more tedious than some of them already are and may further deter sensible citizens from nominating for election to councils.

Transparency and accessibility appear to be in conflict with efficiency and productivity.

***All metropolitan councils hold their meetings during the evenings, but councils in regional areas often hold their meetings during business hours. Should councils be required to hold their meetings at a particular time to maximise community participation?***

Country councils may find it difficult to hold meetings at night in view of the risk associated with elected members having to drive long distances on dark country roads.

Work practices are also varied in the country with the requirements of harvesting and farming impacting on the availability of elected members. Flexibility is required, as there are different considerations impacting on scheduling and timing of council meetings in country and city areas. Being prescriptive is not a solution.

It should be up to each council to decide the meeting schedules to suit differing needs.

***Support council members to engage with communities.***

***How should elected members be supported to engage directly with their communities?***

Council staff should support elected members to engage with their communities through arranging public forums and community events. Elected members are basically responsible for interacting with their communities. If they fail to do so, then electors can remove them from office at election time.

One of the key issues that is constantly referred to by community groups has been that Council administrations appear to have become too corporate in their operations. This has led to a sense of communities and even elected members being 'outside' the decision-making process. Changes to the Planning system introduced in 2019 have impacted on the capacity of elected members to engage with the local community. These reforms have resulted in less input from local communities and meant that elected members and councils are not able to influence or participate in major planning decisions in local communities across South Australia.

Destruction and loss of built heritage and character, and over-development remain critical problems which concern elected members, local councils, and local communities but they are powerless to intervene.

The introduction of the State Government legislated 'Planning Reforms' from 2016 have resulted in major projects outsourced to the State Planning Commission. The Commission does not reflect the views of local government areas but rather vested political and commercial interests.

The taking away of planning from local communities has had a profound impact on the conduct of councils across South Australia since 2019. This transfer of power from the local community has led to much dissatisfaction and cynicism when it comes to planning issues that impact on local areas.

Elected members and local councils should have the power to make decisions that impact on their communities. Smaller, less bureaucratic, decentralised decision-making is more democratic and more responsible to local concerns.

In other words, transfer decision-making back to Councils and community engagement will naturally occur. Elected members will have a reason to engage with the community.

***Should all council members be provided with a specific allowance to support constituent work?***

We submit that existing elected members' allowances should be sufficient to cover any normal costs of constituent work. It is an allowance and not a wage.

Reimbursement of actual expenses should continue to be made for non-usual activities such as attending conferences and training courses, as long as they are not ratepayer funded 'junkets'.

The question assumes that local government members should be equated to State Government parliamentary representatives. This is detrimental to what local representation is about. Local Government has a different function and role to State Government. By increasing monetary allowances to elected members it erodes the sense that this is a civic role which is intimately linked to the community and daily life in the community.

***What other ideas do you have to strengthen the relationship between council members and their local community members?***

Council Administration needs to be made more accountable to the elected members. Information conveyed by Council staff to elected members is often not concise or clearly stated but appears to be obtuse, overly complex and bound by confidentiality clauses. This means that elected members often cannot discuss critically important matters or projects with their constituents. In order to improve communication with local community members an independent referral or advisory agency might be highly effective for both the community, and elected members, when seeking an alternative to the advice being pushed by Council administrators.

Council administration should support Residents' Associations as these groups do valuable work by acting as an interface between elected members and the community, and so often bring both closer together.

Residents groups hold public meetings and invite councillors along to speak.

***Topic 2: How can we encourage a greater number of more diverse candidates?***

What is the definition of diverse? Rather than trying to control the make-up of councils it is better to respect that local government areas are already diverse.

There is no evidence that more diverse elected members make better decisions and run better councils than those with less diverse members.

Sometimes outside social engineering can have disastrous consequences and bureaucrats need to accept that communities are different historically, politically, socially, economically, and environmentally.

Prior to the last council elections in November 2022, the Adelaide City Council was very culturally diverse but was riven with conflict. Many members either left or were not re-elected. We don't ask for plumbers, electricians or doctors to be culturally diverse, so what is the obsession with making elected members more diverse? New ethnic communities will take their time acclimatising to the Australian culture and will gradually take up opportunities that are available.

***Increase council members' allowances.***

***Would more, and a more diverse range of, people be attracted to the role if allowances were increased?***

We don't want people to be attracted to local government for the money. We want them to care about the local community. In any event we don't think that increasing allowances will necessarily attract more diverse candidates or less diverse candidates. The council allowance is not a living wage and should not try to be.

It is important that local government attracts good quality people in what is basically volunteer work for the community, with some payment/allowance for reasonable costs incurred in this work. This does not mean that only rich people stand for election to council, as people from all walks of life become councillors.

***Should council members be able to attend some council meetings electronically?***

There are positive and negative arguments that can be advanced with electronic attendance at a council meeting.

Yes and No.

There may be valid reasons why a councillor cannot attend a meeting in person, but generally it is desirable that all councillors attend in person to foster debate, discussion and inter-personal relationships.

The discussion of confidential matters would be difficult with electronic meetings as it would be impossible to guarantee that no one else was in hearing or viewing range.

However, perhaps an allowance of 2 or 3 meetings a year per councillor could be permitted for valid reasons such as parental duties or working away from home.

***Term limits for council members.***

***Should term limits for council members be introduced?***

No. The point of elections is that there will be a natural turnover of members over time.

SPRA considers however that a term of 4 years is often too long for people to commit to. The pace of life today is such that there is greater mobility in employment and locality of living.

It is suggested that a two or three year term would encourage more people to nominate for council, as the long-term commitment will be lessened.

***Required training for candidates.***

***Should people be required to complete an online course before nominating?***

Candidates should be aware of the commitment that they will face and should complete a course before nominating. While this may put off some people who only see the prestige of the position, others will be prepared for the responsibilities that will be involved. It is better to have a candidate who will "stay the course" rather than a person who will lack commitment and perhaps resign before the end of the term.

Any course should be run centrally by a body such as the Local Government Association to ensure uniformity of information.

**Consider real-time publishing of nominations.**

**Should councils have a role in the nomination process?**

Should nominations be lodged with councils this may result in council administrators getting involved in what some might see as helping the “right” person to be elected - one who will support the aims and objectives of the council staff, rather than the general community.

**If ECSA continues to receive nominations directly, should there be a requirement for nominations to be published throughout the nomination process, not just at the end? If so, how should these be published?**

We support the independent ECSA receiving nominations, registering them and posting details of them on-line as received. The council should also be required to ‘mirror’ the nominations on its website and to also post them on a physical noticeboard in the public area of the council office for those who are not computer literate (this will help to foster age and digital diversity).

If people are to be encouraged to nominate for election, they need to be kept up to date with who has nominated and how many nominations have been lodged. This should minimise the situation arising where there are no candidates for any one ward.

**Remove council wards.**

**Should councils continue to have wards? If so, why? And if not, what would be the benefits of removing them?**

Council wards provide an opportunity for a close relationship between elected members and the area they represent. This opportunity is lost when a councillor is required to represent and be familiar with the much larger area of an entire council area.

Wards also facilitate the election of independent members of the public who run election campaigns without the backing of political parties who have much greater finances and workforce at their disposal. Thus, wards are a great contributor to local democracy and should be retained.

This idea of doing away with wards again appears to be politically motivated. Elected members in local government are not bound by the constraints of a homogenous political party. Wards allow for difference and for nonpolitical representation. While elected members are free to join a political party should they wish to, they should always take a local viewpoint and not be bound by party policies.

**Should wards only be kept in councils where a council’s size warrants their retention?**

The idea that size is a determinant of a ward is a fallacious argument. The so-called ‘economies of scale’ mitigate against democratic representation and discriminate based on size as a factor.

It should be left up to individual councils to decide whether they wish to retain wards or not.

***Lack of nominations trigger for boundary reform.***

***Should potential boundary changes be referred to the SA Boundaries Commission when a council receives significantly fewer nominations than it has vacancies?***

No. The process of electing people as Councillors is independent of the need for council boundary adjustments and amalgamations.

We think it is most unwise to consider making a council larger if that council does not attract sufficient nominations. Country councils already suffer from having to provide services to a large geographical area. Long travel times for elected members may already be a disincentive to serve on a council. To make a council area even larger seems counter-productive to us. We are not aware of lack of nominations being a major problem for councils in SA, except for the last election when the Electoral Commission, in its wisdom, decided that it would receive candidates' nominations and not make them available to the public as they were lodged. Consequently, potential candidates were kept in the dark about which wards and/or positions lacked adequate nominations.

Is it better to have a single nomination in each of two wards, or to have one ward with no nomination while another has two potentially good candidates vying for the one position? While there are disadvantages with people moving their nominations around from ward to ward, and having political parties seeking to game the system, these disadvantages are small compared to the major disadvantage of an inadequate number of candidates for any ward or position.

***What are other factors that might encourage—or dissuade—people to stand for election to their councils?***

The biggest factor that discourages competent candidates from nominating is the time commitment that must be made. Most people already have busy lives and lack the time to commit to more activities. This is especially true for the modern family with two wage earners and children to bring up, leaving little quality family time.

***What ideas do you have to increase nominations?***

There must be better incentives to attract more candidates where nominations fall short. Perhaps varying the times of meetings, supplying meals before meetings, assisting elected members with transport to meetings and offering new members of council training in public speaking. There are a range of sensible measures which can be pursued to encourage more nominations, without resorting to boundary changes.

***Topic 3: How can we achieve a better voter turnout?***

***Is there any particular reason why councils do not warrant compulsory voting when the two other spheres of Australian governments do?***

***Should voting for councils be compulsory in SA council elections?***

One of the great things about Local Government in South Australia is that it is largely not the plaything of the major political parties, and so not dominated by them, as is the case in Eastern states.

Local government is clearly not the same as State and Federal government. It is misleading to compare them. Council elected members work part-time in their elected capacity and receive a small monetary allowance for this work. By contrast elected State and Federal politicians

receive a full-time employees' salary and are expected to work full-time in their elected capacity as politicians.

Local government is not dominated by party politics as State and Federal governments are. This is greatly valued by local communities. While there is some political party infiltration of local government, this sphere of government still allows independent candidates to run for election and to receive a fair chance of being elected. Once voting is made compulsory the major parties will seek to have their pre-selected candidates elected. Political parties will throw resources at getting their candidates elected, pushing out the small independents who wish to run but cannot compete with the finances and workforce of the parties. Local government will be used as a training ground for future State and Federal politicians on a much larger scale than is currently the case if compulsory voting is imposed.

The Brisbane City Council has full-time elected members who receive salaries. Voting for elected members is compulsory. It is dominated by the major political parties. This is a fate we wish to avoid in SA.

In SA we can avoid the curse of politicizing local government and driving small independents out by maintaining voluntary voting. So no, we do not support compulsory voting which we consider to be a retrograde step.

The push for compulsory voting is coming from the major political players who seek to benefit from this change. Also, at the forefront of pushing for this change is the development lobby, which seeks to politicize local government to its advantage.

### ***Change the method of voting.***

#### ***How should people vote for their councils?***

It is clear that postal voting has increased the proportion of the public voting. The increase of voting from 20% to 30% and above is a marked improvement. The 34.5% turnout at the 2022 council election was quite good and consistent with voluntary voting patterns in other countries.

Postal voting benefits independent candidates who do not have the resources of the major parties to staff multiple polling places and to print costly how to vote cards.

### ***Consider who can vote for their council.***

#### ***Should the franchise for council elections be changed in any way?***

In general, the current franchise is satisfactory and equitable as it provides for those who are already on the State electoral roll, as well as those who have a 'property franchise' and who wish to exercise the right.

SPRA however is of the view that the current one month residency provision for non-citizens is far too short, and that it should be at least twelve months. This will help to avoid the alleged issues in the most recent Adelaide City Council elections.

### ***Change the timing of council elections.***

#### ***Should council elections be moved to a different year from SA government elections?***

It would be preferable that Local Government elections are not in the same year as those for the State Parliament, even though they are seven months apart. As there are no fixed dates for Federal elections, it is still possible for these to occur in the same year however, and this cannot be avoided.

***Election promotion.***

***Should councils have a stronger role in promoting elections locally to increase voter turnout?***

Councils should have a stronger role in promoting elections locally to increase voter turnout. The LGA advertising programs encouraging people to vote are bland and general. They have a strong emphasis on portraying cultural diversity but fail to tap into local concerns. Councils are in a better position to know what local community concerns are and to be able to spur some excitement among their electorates. Perhaps the Electoral Commission or the State Government could provide funds to councils to do this promotion work, especially for country councils which have a low-income base.

***Would removing wards provide voters with greater choice, and produce fairer results?***

We do not agree that removing wards would provide voters with greater choices. We submit that removing wards would be a regressive move and would actually reduce voters' choices. A candidate who has to door-knock and deliver election material to an entire council area is facing a more onerous, time-consuming and expensive task than is a candidate seeking election to represent a smaller ward.

Candidates who may have the backing of political parties will be unfairly advantaged by the removal of wards as they have access to greater financial and workforce resources to assist their election campaign. Again, it is the smaller independent candidates who will struggle to be elected in a council area with no wards, as they will face a much more onerous and expensive task to campaign across an entire council area compared to the work involved in campaigning across a ward area.

If a candidate in one ward is not elected on x votes and another candidate in another ward is elected on x votes, the first candidate needs to accept this. Not all is fair in politics. There are swings and roundabouts. The unfortunate candidate needs to be philosophical and grown-up about it.

***Consider candidate information.***

***What information should candidates be required to include with their nominations?***

Candidates are required to provide a profile with the nomination form that contains some information about themselves. The Regulations detail what can or cannot be in the profile, and this seems to be sensible, except for Part 5 (2)(c)(iv) which states: -

*(c) the profile must be accurate and must not— (iv) comment on decisions or actions that have been made or taken by the council or on the decisions or actions of past or present members of the council.*

This provision seems a little ridiculous as the candidate's platform may be one that is in opposition to a council decision or policy, and one that the candidate seeks to alter. It should be removed from the Regulation as it only serves to protect a council from criticism.

The Regulations state that the candidate profile must not exceed 1000 characters. This assumes that spaces are counted as a character, and so the profile can only be about 200 to 250 words in length. This is considered to often be insufficient for a candidate to set out their credentials and platform for election. The regulation should be changed to 2000 characters, as this profile statement may be the only opportunity for a voter to be able to compare the candidates.



The Regulations require a candidate to declare any current or past membership of a registered political party in the preceding 12 months. This time frame is too short as evidence shows that politically aligned candidates have often decided years in advance that they will stand at the next council election. They will then resign party membership a year in advance so that they do not need to declare membership. This regulation should be changed so that they must declare any party membership during the preceding council term.

***Is there a role for councils to play in enabling all candidates to reach potential voters?***

No. You are more likely to frighten potential candidates off if you have councils running 'meet and greet' candidates public meetings. It may also affect the impartiality of the council and council staff. Councils could however provide ECSA approved information on candidates on their websites.

St Peters Residents Association Inc  
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