



**Property Council of Australia** ABN 13 00847 4422  
**A** Level 4, 91 King William Street, Adelaide SA 5000  
**T** +61 8 8236 0900  
**E** [info@propertycouncil.com.au](mailto:info@propertycouncil.com.au)  
**W** [propertycouncil.com.au](http://propertycouncil.com.au)  
**T** [@propertycouncil](https://twitter.com/propertycouncil)

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Office of Local Government  
GPO Box 1533  
Adelaide, SA 5001  
[DIT.LocalGovernmentReform@sa.gov.au](mailto:DIT.LocalGovernmentReform@sa.gov.au)

### Local Government Participation and Elections Review – Discussion Paper

Dear Minister Brock,

The Property Council welcomes the opportunity to provide comment to the Office of Local Government on its Discussion Paper, the Local Government Participation and Elections Review.

As an industry body, we share the Government's goal of a more engaged and effective local government sector in South Australia. Strong participation from a diverse range of community members and stakeholders is essential for councils to make informed decisions that reflect the needs of their residents and businesses.

The Property Council of Australia is the leading advocate for Australia's largest industry – property. Our industry represents 13 per cent of Australia's GDP and employs 1.4 million Australians. Property Council member organisations are investors, owners, developers, builders, and managers of real estate across all major asset classes including commercial, office, residential, industrial, retirement communities, hotels, purpose-built student accommodation and more.

We understand the Office is seeking feedback on the proposed targets against four key topics. Our response focuses on two key areas outlined in the Discussion Paper.

- 1. Increasing voter turnout and broadening representation**
- 2. Enhancing community engagement throughout the council term**

The Property Council will also consider other specific aspects proposed by the Review, including councillor allowances, compulsory voting, and council wards.

We look forward to the outcomes of the Review, and we thank the Minister for his consideration.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bruce Djite', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

**Bruce Djite**  
SA Executive Director, Property Council

## Increasing voter turnout and broadening representation

The Property Council notes that in 2022, there was a statewide voter turnout in council elections of 33%. Whilst the Review has not set a numerical target for voter turnout, we argue that 33% is not a reflection of a community exercising their right to access democracy and have their voices heard. As such, we support exploring alternative voting methods in order to improve accessibility and convenience.

A great number of transactions, including many government processes, are conducted online. Indeed, many Australians lodge their tax returns electronically, submit social services claims and collect welfare benefits online.

Democracy must be accessible for everyone. Is it because elections held at a local government level are too convoluted and confusing? Or, simply because they are not compulsory that the turnout is only 33%?

Making voting available online for constituents could drive up the voter turnout rate in council elections. We believe that if the above transactions and processes can be achieved safely and securely through online portals and electronic methods, voting in a local government election in a similar capacity would drastically incentivise the community.

The Electoral Commission of Queensland, in the recent 2024 local government elections, offered multiple 'ways to vote'. These included on election day itself, early voting, voting by post, voting by telephone, and via 'mobile polling'. These multiple avenues create a far more accessible way to vote and engage with local government, and the Property Council encourages the Office to consider such options as these in order to streamline the voting process.

The Property Council also urges initiatives that address barriers to participation for younger demographics and culturally and linguistically diverse communities. We advocate for measures to promote candidate diversity, including targeted outreach programs and capacity building workshops.

## Enhancing community engagement throughout the council term:

The Property Council believes in fostering ongoing communication channels between councils and residents. This could include utilising social media platforms, citizen advisory panels, and community forums more effectively. Sourcing community expertise to influence council decision making processes would be an asset to any governing council. Undertaking community events, targeted at various age and societal demographics could considerably increase community participation. Engaging local professionals as guest speakers, local businesses, artists, and other community groups which showcase the diverse talent of the community would be advantageous in increasing involvement and participation amongst constituents.

It is important to showcase business minded members of the community in order to promote economic growth and vibrancy in Adelaide and wider South Australia.

Councils should be encouraged to develop clear and accessible information on their strategic plans, budgets, and decision-making processes. Ultimate transparency is paramount in driving engagement and indeed the confidence of the community.

We also recommend exploring the creation of online portals within council websites. This would be where individuals can access information, lodge enquiries, and track council projects in an easy and accessible manner. Although councils may already do this, we recommend making it even easier and transparent for the community to access.

## **Additional Considerations**

This review into local government engagement should explore the potential impact of any proposed reforms on the financial sustainability of councils. The Property Council does not encourage radical overhauls of systems which could cost councils well over their means.

We advocate for maintaining a strong role for local businesses and the entire business community, and their participation in council decision-making. We acknowledge that in the City of Adelaide for example, commercial ratepayers make up approximately 80% of the net council rates and should therefore be afforded a strong voice. This can be addressed through further, more thorough consultative opportunities on the council's prerogatives, or indeed an increased say in terms of proportionality.

### ***Compulsory Voting***

The Property Council acknowledges the possibility that making voting compulsory in local government elections could have a positive impact on community engagement.

This could be a catalyst for two very different outcomes.

We would see increased engagement, inevitably. However, council elections fall the same year as State government elections, and occasionally federal elections. Making voting compulsory could lead to major voter fatigue and increased feelings of discontent towards councils. However, it could also lead to mobilising various sections of the community, leading to better quality outcomes.

The Property Council cautions against any immediate action from the Office on compulsory voting.

### *Councillor Allowances*

Reviewing councillor allowances prior to every nomination and election cycle is an important consideration for attracting a diverse range of quality candidates.

The Property Council acknowledges the importance of setting competitive allowances. Allowances should be set at a level that acknowledges the time commitment and responsibilities associated with the councillor role, while also being mindful of the financial sustainability of councils.

Benchmarking allowances against other states or councils with similar responsibilities and budgets could be an informative way to determine councillor salaries.

If councils are to attract nominees who, although possessing a strong desire to serve the community, may be either working full time or having many other time-consuming commitments, there must also be a financial incentive to attract a strong quality of candidate.

With regard to this, a clear and transparent framework for determining and reviewing councillor allowances is essential. Public disclosure of allowances promotes accountability and builds trust with the community.

### *Consideration of Council Wards*

The Property Council also urges the Office to consider the benefits of removing council wards. While ward systems can offer localised, specific representation to individual areas of council, they can also lead to:

- Fragmented decision-making. Council decisions may prioritise the concerns of individual wards over the broader needs of the entire community.
- Reduced Efficiency. Resource allocation and service delivery might be less efficient when divided by ward boundaries.
- Disproportionate say. Due to population shifts over time, some wards may eventually have considerably more constituents leading to more candidates on the council.

The alternative approach to the status quo would be a more generalised, 'at-large' system, where all council members are elected by voters across the entire council area, and therefore addressing the above concerns. This approach would:

- Encourage candidates with a broader vision. Council members would be elected based on their ability to represent the entire community.
- Promote equitable representation. Every vote would hold equal weight, regardless of location within the council area.
- Enhance efficiency. Resources and services could be allocated based on the overall needs of the council area, not individual wards.
- Removal of single-issue candidates. Those who run on a platform targeted specifically at mobilising niche sections of the community in order to get elected.

The Property Council of Australia is open to discussing the merits of both ward and at-large systems and believes the most suitable approach will depend on the specific circumstances of each local government area.

We propose that, given the unique governance of the City of Adelaide under the *City of Adelaide Act 1998*, **the Office should contemplate a trial to evaluate the elimination of ward boundaries within the City of Adelaide.**

The Property Council is confident that by working collaboratively, we can develop a robust and effective local government sector in South Australia. We look forward to participating in further discussions on this important reform process.