

SUBMISSION RESPONSE TO DISCUSSION PAPER PART B

This response relates specifically to the proposed amendments outlined in Chapter 7 regarding appointment of principal member of council.

Katherine Town Council (KTC) strongly supports retaining the current provision of the *Local Government Act 2019* in relation to optional direct election of the principal member of Council (the Mayor).

Katherine is the third-largest municipality in the Northern Territory and is an important hub supporting tourism, agriculture, cultural and defence industries. The population in Katherine is about 10,000. Around 8,000 people live in the Katherine municipality. Around six per cent work in defence at the nearby RAAF Tindal base, adding about 2,000 additional people.

Katherine is also a centre for residents of the surrounding Big Rivers Region, coming to town for services such as medical, retail and more. The Big Rivers Region, which includes Katherine, has a total population of over 21,000 and includes 23 Aboriginal communities and town camps.

Despite having a relatively small population, Katherine is the central hub for the surrounding areas, providing services to communities from the Western Australia border to the Gulf of Carpentaria and other parts of the Northern Territory.

KTC has seven elected members consisting of one full-time Mayor and six part-time Councillors. The Mayor is directly elected by the community. Electing mayors at large empowers the entire community to choose their leader, enhancing democratic legitimacy.

Given the popularity of Katherine's Mayors since 1978, it is clear the community enjoys selecting their Mayor through direct election. Further, Katherine's elected Mayors have always been a powerful ambassador for the town, and they use can and do use their profile appropriately to leverage improvements well beyond the powers granted to them under the local government legislation.

KTC supports retaining direct election of the mayor because:

- **They have greater community visibility** – the community and others know who the mayor is, which can reinvigorate democratic politics and civic engagement to counteract widespread political apathy.
- **They gain increased legitimacy and accountability** – their personal character is at stake and they can be more visibly held to account for decisions made by Council.
- **They provide stable leadership** over a four year period, rather than different leaders for shorter periods of time
- **They can provide better leadership of 'place' not just the Council** – this can assist in building coalitions of support and partnerships with key stakeholders.

International research shows that directly elected mayors are portrayed as being more visible, more accountable, more legitimate and more powerful than other kinds of city leaders because

they can draw upon a direct and distinctive place-based mandate given to them by their community.

Community-elected mayors often have the autonomy to pursue policies that reflect the electorate's will, fostering innovative and responsive governance. This independence can be crucial in addressing local issues effectively, as the mayor is directly answerable to the voters rather than a political caucus.

In the UK, where directly elected mayors are a relatively contemporary phenomenon, evidence demonstrated more transparent decision-making, that the mayor had a higher public profile, that the council was better at dealing with complex issues and that relationships with partners improved.

Nominating to become a directly elected mayor provides an opportunity for the community to understand how that individual will represent their community. On the contrary, peer-elected mayors do not have to stand in front of the electorate and explain their ideology and approach.

One of the potential complications of peer-elected mayors is the potential for 'backroom deals', where councillors take turns at the role of mayor. There are examples of councils where the peer-elected mayor has changed over far too often. For example, In Wollondilly Shire (NSW), over a 27-year period from 1993 – 2020, there were 21 mayors – with an average term of 15 months. Clearly a dysfunctional 'revolving door' of mayors which can result in decades of little planning, and little progress.

KTC feels strongly that **local leadership matters**, and the direct election of the Mayor provides the community with greater transparency and understanding of the individual who will lead the community over the next four years, rather than an individual chosen from a group of part-time Councillors who may not have the commitment, willingness or capacity to take on a full-time leadership role.

Regular changes in mayoral leadership can significantly disrupt the continuity and efficiency of council operations. Each incoming mayor may introduce different priorities, management styles, and levels of familiarity with existing systems, leading to shifts in strategic direction and potential delays in project implementation. This inconsistency can hinder long-term planning and the effective delivery of services to the community.

Moreover, newly appointed mayors may lack established relationships with key stakeholders, both within the council and the broader community. Building these connections takes time, during which the council's ability to respond promptly to community needs may be compromised. Such transitional periods can also affect staff morale and the overall stability of the council's administrative functions.

To promote stability and ensure that mayors are directly accountable to the broader community, it is advisable to adopt a system where mayors are elected at large by the constituents. Such a mandate can enhance the mayor's legitimacy, foster consistent leadership, and align council operations more closely with the community's long-term interests.

