

Number of districts in country and metropolitan regions

The proposal to abolish a district in the country region attracted a large number of objections, almost all of them opposing the move. This caused the Commissioners to review carefully the proposal that had been advanced and the reasons behind it.

Even before the 2006 amendments to the Act, the problems associated with declining population growth in country regions relative to growth of the State as a whole was becoming apparent. In the 2003 division the Commissioners decided that there was insufficient population in the Mining and Pastoral Region to sustain the status quo and the number of districts in that Region was reduced from six to five. In the reasons in *Western Australia's New Electoral Boundaries August 2003* report, p.18, the Commissioners had this to say about the Agricultural Region:

“Adjustments to region boundaries have been necessary to ensure the retention of the existing number of seven districts within the region. Despite this, it is noted that all the districts within the region will be under quota at the mid-point. Unless there is a significant reversal of the population decline, it is likely that the next division of the State of electoral boundaries will need to consider a reduction of the number of districts in the region.”

The Commissioners' prognostication about the possible further reduction of country districts was, of course, overtaken by events in the form of the 2006 amendments that reflected the so-called 'one vote one value' principle. This made the electoral regime considerably more

prescriptive and in the 2007 division the number of districts in the country regions was reduced from 23 to 17. In the 2011 division no change was made to the total number of districts in country regions. The decline in population growth in country regions, not in absolute terms but relative to growth of the State as a whole, has continued. This is the historical context in which the 2015 division falls to be considered.

At the risk of oversimplification, the main reason behind the 2015 proposal to alter the allocation of districts between regions was the immense difficulty in drawing rational boundaries in the metropolitan regions with only 42 districts. In stark reality the driver behind the decision was the need to create an additional district in the metropolitan area rather than to remove one from the country, although the latter was an inevitable consequence of the former. In the 2015 Proposals Report the Commissioners stated that the decision was not taken lightly. They recognised the serious consequences of removing a district from the country and the problems created by the 'tyranny of distance' both for the electors and their representatives.

Again as a broad summary, the objections to the abolition of a country district focussed on the inherent unfairness of eroding the level of representation available to country people and, by increasing the size of districts, increasing the difficulty encountered by residents in gaining access to their elected representatives and for the elected representatives in servicing the electorates. Some proffered the

opinion that reducing the number and increasing the size of districts would lead to inadequate representation of country people and also ran the risk of disconnecting existing communities of interest. As the Wheatbelt Development Commission (a statutory body) remarked:

“This highly disbursed population, across communities of differing interests, is difficult to adequately represent. Considerable travel distances and times limit[s] access to elected members, as their ability to travel out and the electors’ ability to travel to an electoral office, becomes compromised over these distances.”

The Commissioners again acknowledge the force of the arguments put in the objections and they have been given the most serious consideration. However, the Commissioners believe there is no reasonable alternative to the proposal to create a new district in the metropolitan area, with the inevitable consequence that a country district must be abolished.

The outer perimeter of the metropolitan regions follows the demarcation lines of the ‘the metropolitan area of Perth’ as defined in the *Metropolitan Region Town Planning Scheme Act 1959 (WA)* (since repealed but appearing in identical form in the *Planning and Development Act 2005 (WA)* Sch 3). The Commissioners formed the view that it was virtually impossible to reconfigure the boundaries of the metropolitan districts within the existing outer perimeter of the Perth metropolitan area without having artificial demarcation lines between districts. In some instances these demarcation lines paid little regard

to physical features and threatened to disconnect existing communities of interest. In many instances, they also left districts with very high VFADEs, often in areas where trends of demographic change suggested further material population increases.

The Commissioners think it is fair to say that none of the persons lodging suggestions, comments on suggestions or objections that dealt with a ‘whole of State’ scenario advanced a feasible solution based on 42 districts within the existing outer perimeters of the Perth metropolitan area.

The Commissioners also came to the conclusion that the only way that rational boundaries could be drawn in 42 metropolitan districts without an inordinate number of them having very high VFADEs was to:

- expand the metropolitan perimeter to areas that are presently ‘country’ and have few residents or
- take areas that are presently within the metropolitan perimeter and are densely populated, and join them with areas that are presently ‘country’ and have few (or fewer) residents.

At neither the suggestions nor the objections stage of this process was a persuasive case made in favour of the first of those alternatives. The Commissioners formed (and remain of) the view that it is not a feasible option at the present time. At the suggestions stage some interested parties pressed the second alternative (i.e. moving one or more of the localities of Secret Harbour, Golden Bay and Singleton or parts of the Shire of Serpentine-Jarrahdale) from the metropolitan regions

to the South West Region. While in their objections, most of the interested parties who had advocated that option reiterated the suggestions, no new or different ways of resolving the problem were advanced.

After a detailed and close re-examination of the options, the Commissioners remain of the view expressed in the 2015 Proposals Report that it would be very difficult to provide a solution to the problems in the metropolitan regions that did not involve the removal of some localities and (or) local government areas from the metropolitan regions to the South West Region. This would involve flow-on

effects to the South West and Agricultural Regions that raise material community of interest arguments. The Commissioners have not been persuaded that, at this time, the inevitable disruption to communities of interest can be justified.

The Commissioners have therefore decided that, of the total of 59 districts, 43 should be situated in the three metropolitan regions and 16 in the three country regions. They have also decided that there should be no change to the outer perimeter of the metropolitan regions. The result of this final reapportionment is set out in Table 3.

Table 3: Total numbers of electors and average enrolments for country and metropolitan regions 2015

State ADE ¹	Country total electors with LDA ²	Country ADE	Average country VFADE ³	Metropolitan total electors	Metropolitan ADE	Average Metropolitan VFADE
24,923	403,393	25,212	+ 1.16%	1,103,174	25,655	+ 2.94%

¹ Average District Enrolment at 9 March 2015.

² Large District Allowance which now includes districts in the Agricultural Region as well as the Mining and Pastoral Region.

³ Variation From Average District Enrolment at 9 March 2015 includes LDAs.

Before leaving this issue, the Commissioners wish to deal with one aspect that was raised, in varying ways, in several of the objections and which was clearly considered serious by those objectors. As one of the objectors (a country local government authority) noted:

“Given the population growth within Perth metropolitan area is set to continue the further erosion of electoral representation in non metropolitan parts of the state will also continue. This will be detrimental to the representation and engagement each regional elector receives in the Parliamentary process if these electorates are to expand or change significantly.”

Another objector (an association representing 10 country local government authorities) made the following comment:

“For [us] there would appear to be only one solution to this problem and that is to amend the Act ... so that when further reviews are carried out, new seats are added to the metropolitan area without detriment to electoral representation within regional areas of the State. As such [we request] that a review of all electoral legislation form part of the final findings for this current review of the State’s electoral region and district boundaries. And whilst any review will have no impact on the 2017 election[s] changes to electoral legislation could be in place in time for future State elections.”

As already stated, the number of districts (59) and of regions (6) is fixed by statute and the Commissioners have no power to change those numbers or to conduct a review of electoral legislation generally.

Country district to be abolished

While there were numerous objections to the removal of a district from the country regions, no objector suggested that a district in either the Agricultural Region or the South West Region should be abolished. At the suggestions stage, one of the submissions left open the possibility that North West Central might be abolished.

As already indicated, the Commissioners looked again at the question whether a new district had to be created in the metropolitan area but remain of the view it is unavoidable. They also re-examined which of the country districts should be abolished. They have decided, for the reasons set out in the 2015 Proposals Report, that the district of Eyre is the one that should be abolished.

Descriptions of final boundaries

Terms used to describe districts in the country and metropolitan regions are defined as follows:

- 'No change' indicates that the boundaries remain as they were set in the 2011 division (and, accordingly, as they were for the 2013 State election)
- In relation to country regions (unless otherwise indicated), descriptions of 'gains' to or 'cedes' from a district refer to local government authorities that have been included in or removed from the district, completely or partially
- In relation to metropolitan regions (unless otherwise indicated), descriptions of 'gains' to or 'cedes' from a district refer to localities that have been included in or removed from a district, completely or partially
- 'Part' (when describing 'gains' to or 'cedes' from a district) refers to part only of a local government area or locality and indicates that the local government area or locality is situated in two or more districts
- 'Remainder' (when describing 'gains' to or 'cedes' from a district) refers to a local government area or locality that was previously split between two or more districts and which has been united in a single district.

All metropolitan districts have the same name as an adjacent locality. For the purpose of describing boundaries, the entities are differentiated by the words 'district of' or 'locality' associated with their name.

The description of the boundaries of some of the districts is necessarily at a high level of generality. Greater definition of the exact boundaries is to be found in deposited plans lodged with Landgate and detailed maps, which are published on the Electoral Boundaries WA website www.boundaries.wa.gov.au and available in printed form upon request.