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Preliminary Submission to the Electoral Structure Review

Background

Northern Grampians Shire Council is currently divided into four wards, with a total of seven councillors:

- two single-councillor wards
- one ward with two councillors
- one ward with three councillors

The councillors are satisfied with the current electoral structure and believe that it has served the residents of the shire well over the years and believe that there is no need for reform. However, the councillors understand that under the new *Local Government Act 2020* (the Act) the current electoral structure is no longer compliant. The review being conducted by the Election Representation Advisory Panel over the coming year is required to consider several variables regarding electoral structures namely:

1. the number of councillors per council
2. if the electoral structure is to be subdivided or unsubdivided
 - a. If subdivided determine:
 - i. the number of wards
 - ii. ward boundaries
 - iii. number of councillors per ward and
 - iv. ward names

Northern Grampians Shire is classified as a small rural council. Under the Act there are three structure options available to small rural councils:

1. single-councillor wards (the official default)
2. multi-councillor wards
3. unsubdivided ward

Number of Councillors per Council

The Act provides for a council to have between 5 and 12 councillors but does not specify an appropriate number, however the intention is for local representation to be fair and equitable. In determining an appropriate number of councillors several factors need to be considered.

1. the size of the council
2. the number of councillors in comparable councils
3. the nature and complexity of services provided by the Council
4. geographic size and topography
5. population growth or decline
6. the social diversity of the local council



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Northern Grampians Shire Council is classified as a small rural council covering 5,730 km², with two major towns located 90 kms apart and seven smaller townships.

The table below details Victorian small rural councils and the current number of councillors, the population, and area of each shire.

| Small Rural Councils | Number of Councillors | Population | Area km ² |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|------------|----------------------|
| Indigo Shire | 7 | 17,400 | 2,000 |
| Hepburn Shire | 7 | 16,600 | 1,500 |
| Murrindindi Shire | 7 | 15,200 | 3,100 |
| Benalla Rural City | 7 | 14,500 | 2,400 |
| Central Goldfields Shire | 7 | 13,500 | 1,500 |
| Alpine Shire | 7 | 13,200 | 4,800 |
| Northern Grampians Shire | 7 | 12,000 | 5,700 |
| Ararat Rural City | 7 | 11,900 | 4,200 |
| Strathbogie Shire | 7 | 11,500 | 3,300 |
| Gannawarra Shire | 7 | 10,700 | 3,700 |
| Mansfield Shire | 5 | 10,200 | 3,800 |
| Loddon Shire | 5 | 7,800 | 6,700 |
| Pyrenees Shire | 5 | 7,700 | 3,400 |
| Yarriambiack Shire | 7 | 6,600 | 7,300 |
| Buloke Shire | 7 | 6,200 | 8,000 |
| Towong Shire | 5 | 6,200 | 6,700 |
| Hindmarsh Shire | 6 | 5,700 | 7,500 |
| West Wimmera Shire | 5 | 4,000 | 9,100 |
| Borough of Queenscliffe | 5 | 3,200 | 9 |

As the table above shows, the Northern Grampians Shire covers an area of 5,700km² – one and half times the median area of all the small rural councils. The councillors represent diverse communities, including the commercial and tourist area of Halls Gap, and major agribusiness across the shire, with the two major towns of Stawell and St Arnaud servicing the needs of industry and agriculture.

Given the size of Northern Grampians Shire Council, its population and the dispersed nature of our community, the councillors believe that the current representation is fit for purpose and any reduction in Councillor numbers would disenfranchise some community segments that jeopardises fair representation.

Council Boundary Structure

As detailed above there are three available options for the electoral structure of our council. The justification for our preference is detailed below.

Option 1 – Single-councillor ward

This option is not preferred as it would require Stawell and St Arnaud to have multiple wards within each town creating arbitrary division of the town. This would not engender harmony and would undo considerable work undertaken by the council to unite communities across the shire.



Option 2 – Multi-councillor wards

This option is not preferred as it would prevent having seven councillors and would result in either more or less representation in the shire than has been identified as appropriate. Any reduction in the number of councillors could be seen as a breach of trust and a challenge to democracy also an even number of councillors would not provide a stable platform for decision-making. An odd number of Councillors is warranted for a clear majority to be recognised in much the same way as is currently applied with state and federal legislatures.

Option 3 – Unsubdivided wards

This option is preferred for following reasons:

1. reducing the likelihood of uncontested elections
2. providing a greater, more diverse choice of candidates
3. removing the requirement for ward boundary changes to ensure the voter to councillor ratio is maintained as set out in the Act

Submission conclusion

If the current preference is not acceptable under the terms of the Act then a single ward environment presents the lowest risk to community representation. A single ward Council would also provide a greater, more diverse choice of candidates across the community and would engender greater emphasis for recognised leaders to stand for election.

In conclusion the submission is that the councillor composition for Northern Grampians Shire Council is made up of seven councillors and that the electoral structure is unsubdivided.

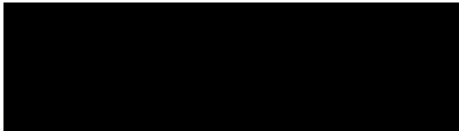




Signed



MAYOR, CR KEVIN ERWIN



CR MURRAY EMERSON



CR TREVOR GREASY



CR ROB HASWELL



CR KAREN HYSLOP



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