



19 April 2023

Electoral Representative Advisory Panel
C/O Victorian Electoral Commission
Via Email - CentralGoldfields.ERAPSubmissions@vec.vic.gov.au

Dear Ms Julie Eisenbise

Council appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Preliminary Report of the Local Government Electoral Structural Review and wishes to address the options proposed in the Preliminary Report as required by the submission guidelines.

Councillor Numbers

Council agrees with the conclusion in the Preliminary Report that seven Councillors is the appropriate number for Central Goldfields Shire and notes that this number sits comfortably within the comparisons provided. This number was advanced in Council's initial submission.

Council is keen to qualify the modest growth assumptions referred to in the Preliminary Report. Council's current four-year Council Plan targets population growth as a key priority. There are several factors which support that opportunity:

- Central Goldfields Shire sits between, and Maryborough is equidistant from, the two fastest growing regional cities in Australia (Ballarat and Bendigo)
- The Ballarat-Maryborough Growth Corridor is supported by passenger rail with increasing services being added¹.
- Within that growth corridor the Victorian Government has invested in a Talbot Futures project to plan for added population growth for Talbot supported by town sewerage.
- Council has prioritised added growth for Maryborough including Maryborough North² with recent growth and development trending up.
- Flood mitigation work has been completed for Carisbrook including a levee and appropriate planning amendments have been made to prepare for growth.
- Dunolly is positioned to accommodate added growth.
- The Victorian Government has invested in funding to develop a UNESCO World Heritage Listing Bid for the Victorian Goldfields. UNESCO expert consulting advice suggests that Bid is likely to be successful. Central

¹ <https://www.centralgoldfields.vic.gov.au/Council/News-Media/More-trains-Gallery-Garden-and-sporting-upgrades-funded-thanks-to-2022-23-State-Budget>

² <https://www.centralgoldfields.vic.gov.au/Council/Policies-Plans-Strategies-and-Documents/Council-Plans/2021-2025-Council-Plan> - page 7 Our Key Opportunities For Growth

Goldfields Shire, as the name suggests, is the centre of the Goldfields and has an exceptionally high level of gold rush heritage housing stock which is likely to be in high demand.

Accordingly, Council remains firmly of the view that seven Councillors are appropriate and does not support a reduction to six as proposed in Model 2 within the Preliminary Report.

Option 1 Unsubdivided Structure

It is important to note that none of the previous submitters to the Review favoured an unsubdivided structure. The option of an unsubdivided structure was also canvassed in the previous review in 2011 and again there was a distinct lack of support for this model.

Council has argued in its initial submission to the Review that the population distribution within Central Goldfields Shire may well create a situation where the residents in rural townships and locations may not be able to achieve meaningful representation in relation to Maryborough residents. This is a serious concern and it is pleasing this issue has been noted within the Preliminary Report.

Importantly many of the issues impacting residents in the Maryborough are separate and different to those for residents in rural wards. As noted in the Preliminary Report the average age of residents within the Shire is older than the Victorian average. These older residents relate more comfortably to a known and identified individual ward Councillor within their locality than would be facilitated by a more nebulous unsubdivided structure. Residents find comfort in ready and close identification of the Councillor they elect.

As previously submitted a Proportional Representation arrangement for council representation would be foreign to rural voters and may well be confusing and potentially result in higher level of informal votes.

Council would like to challenge two issues identified within the Preliminary Report:

- It was stated that: *“retaining a subdivided structure would not necessarily guarantee locally-based representatives, given that the Councillor elected for Flynn Ward in the 2020 local government election did not reside within it.”* In fact the Councillor from Flynn Ward and her husband have a farm within Flynn Ward and she is very readily identified within that Ward. The practice over time has been almost extensively for Councillors to live within their wards and have direct connection with them.
- The Preliminary Report also states: *“this model may also foster a shire-wide approach to representation and to council business.”* The operating culture of successive councils has been for all Councillors to take a whole-of- Shire perspective. Silo lobbying or barriers have never been issues. Put simply all Councillors realise the importance of developing Maryborough for the future prosperity and sustainability of the Shire. Maryborough Councillors have always recognised, and been ready to address, the challenges of rural residents and the benefits of developing the range of lifestyle and accommodation issues which the rural townships and locations add to the Shire offering.

- In addition a recent report on the [Commission of Enquiry into Moira Shire Council](#) noted that residents in that municipality felt that “their interests were no longer being adequately represented” by the unsubdivided structure.

In summary the unsubdivided model has been previously proposed for consideration in 2011 and the finding then was it was not appropriate or wanted by the community. The situation in 2023 is no different and the lack of any submission in favour of it into the Preliminary Report is a good indication of this.

Option 2 Multi Councillor Ward Structure

Council understands the benefit of carefully considering the benefits and disadvantages of each option available under the *Local Government Act 2020*, however this particular option which proposes three wards of two Councillors has, in Council’s view, serious disadvantages.

As previously stated, Council believes the present number of Councillors is appropriate and notes that is in line with the Preliminary Report conclusions. There are very clear population growth opportunities which have been outlined and has been indicated Council is actively seeking to capture these. Reducing the number of Councillors to six works against this.

Reducing the number of Maryborough Councillors from four to two is of particular concern. As indicated earlier, Council is actively targeting population growth in Maryborough and with current resolutions for development in Maryborough North.

It has also been pointed out, and noted within the Preliminary Report, that the issues for residents in Maryborough and rural locations are separate and different. It was for that reason that Council, noting the actual and future planned growth in Maryborough, proposed in its initial submission that the Maryborough boundaries be broadened. In Option 2 the boundaries would actually be compressed with the result that many Maryborough residents would be located together with rural residents in hybrid type wards. This works directly against what Council believes should take place.

Council also challenges the view in the Preliminary Report that “*this model broadly captures geographic communities of interest in the shire.*” Maryborough residents who would be integrated with the rural communities have no direct community of interest. Similarly, the communities of Carisbrook and Talbot have had longstanding separate community of interest treatments extending back to pre-amalgamation local government structures and extending back to the gold rush period.

Of the three models advanced within the Preliminary Report Council believes this would be entirely unsupported by residents and work against the quality representation sought.

Option 3 Single Councillor Ward Structure

Council continues to believe this structure, with changes to Maryborough Ward to reflect the requirements of the *Local Government Act 2020* and slightly modified ward boundaries in the rural wards, is best suited to provide quality representation for the residents of Central Goldfields Shire.

- The Electoral Boundaries Review of 2011 arrived at the model it did after considerable consultation and input. In essence Council is of the view that this model, which has worked so well, remains essentially absolutely fit for purpose recognising some minor changes are necessary to reflect growth

changes since then and to address the need for change in the non-complying Maryborough Ward structure.

- The Preliminary Report states “*Model 3 has some potential drawbacks, including the division of Maryborough across four wards, which would almost certainly divide a community of interest to a significant degree.*” Council wishes to challenge that view.

The very reason Council proposed retaining the Maryborough name within the four proposed new wards rather than quite different names was simply to retain the distinct Maryborough identity.

This would mean residents within each of the proposed four Maryborough wards would be able to relate to their own ward Councillor on individual resident issues, a model which clearly is attractive especially to older residents. Importantly though the four Maryborough Councillors would be able to work together on cross-boundary community of interest issues and it would be expected that is exactly what they would choose to do as they do now in the multi-Councillor ward.

- Council has thought carefully about the Maryborough structure and absolutely accepts the community of interest view in the Preliminary Report. There is a clear community of interest in Maryborough which is separate and different for the rural communities. Council believes that Option 3 absolutely addresses that need and will achieve it, which neither of the other options will deliver. It also will ensure that Maryborough residents retain the same number of Councillors and enables the Maryborough wards to accommodate projected growth.
- The Preliminary Report identifies that individual wards may result in lower candidate numbers in some wards. It should be noted that over years Council has regularly been refreshed by new candidates who are elected as Councillors. In fact the majority of Councillors are newly elected for the first time in 2020 with only two Councillors presently elected who served on council before 2016.

In summary Council considers that the main drawback which the Preliminary Report identified in relation to Maryborough community of interest is actually not a drawback and facilitates the continued development of that opportunity. If indeed the Panel believes there may potentially some drawbacks with this model, Council shares the Panel’s conclusion that any “*drawbacks of Model 3 may be balanced by continuation of a subdivided model similar to the current structure*”.

Conclusion

The Preliminary Report has provided options which Council has considered very carefully and thoughtfully. This follows considerable discussion and reflection leading to our original submission which we based on our own deep understanding of our community and its needs as well as the planned evolution and development of Central Goldfields Shire. Interestingly throughout the process there was ready agreement between Councillors on the most suitable model for our Shire and its residents.

As stated initially, the opportunity to have further input after consideration of the Preliminary Report is appreciated. This further reflection and evaluation of the alternatives presented leads Council to conclude unhesitatingly that Option 3 is, and remains, the preferred model for Central Goldfields Shire.

We would like to take the online opportunity to present our case to the Panel.
Councillor Chris Meddows-Taylor and I are nominated to represent Council.

Yours sincerely



Cr Grace La Vella

MAYOR, CENTRAL GOLDFIELDS SHIRE