

Submission for the Hepburn Shire Council Structural Review, April 2023 from Louise Johnson and Daniel McDairmid

Comments in relation to the Local council electoral structure review, Preliminary Report, Hepburn Shire Council, March 2023 are provided below.

Number of councillors

The proposed number of councillors (7 or 8 people) appears to be appropriate in comparison with shires of a similar size. This number supports diversity of thinking for a Shire with diversity geographically and interest-wise. However, we consider that 6 councillors as sufficient for diversity if quality candidates stand and are elected.

Electoral structure

Our first preference is for the model (3 wards and 2 councillors per ward with 6 in total as outlined in our initial submission). The rationale in the report for dismissing this option is not clear, apart from 9 councillors (3 per ward) being considered too many and 6 councillors (2 per ward) too few in comparison with similar size Shire populations.

The model of 3 wards and 2 councillors per ward allows smaller population centres the opportunity to elect a 'local' councillor and reduces the cost from the current system and does not make the wards too large. The use of the size of the wards for this Shire as an issue is invalid given the sizes of other rural Shires with smaller population bases. It is common for rural people to accept that geographic distance is a fact of life, and the issue should not be used to stop them receiving a workable and responsive local government authority.

The quality of the councillors and staff of the Shire is more important than ward sizes. To achieve this requires an appropriate revenue base commensurate with services provisions. The Shire has service pressures at either end of the age continuum i.e. young families and aged residents as well as tourist traffic pressure impacting on amenities that is not evaluated by raw population figures. Ward divisions that look good on a map will not necessarily be cohesive in relation to the needs of people within a ward.

Regular structural reviews without consideration of electoral boundaries will not address the challenges of a geographically large area and small rate base in the long term.

In the longer term, it is important to address the issue that the Shire has too small a rate base for the services needed for residents and tourist traffic, by adopting a 3 ward and 2 councillors per ward model. A balance would be achieved by recommending permanent supplementary funding to counter the issues in a geographically expansive, tourist oriented but resident population static Shire.

Accepting that the review parameters do not allow for Shire boundaries to be adjusted, we express a preference for Model 2 (4 wards with 2 councillors per ward). We do not support Model 1 or 3 and refer you to the comments provided below. We consider Model 3 to be the worst possible option.

Model 2 (4 wards with 2 councillors per ward) – Preferred, within models presented

- There is potential to break down the perceived parochialism of the current structure with five wards represented by seven councillors
- Opportunity to attract councillors with big picture thinking, beyond the interests of a smaller single councillor ward
- Opportunity retained for locals who are passionate about issues affecting their region to stand for Council
- Travel to attend community events is still realistic within the ward for councillors
- It may increase the costs to the Shire but does preserve the notion of giving smaller population centres a chance of real representation.

Model 1 (unsubdivided) – Not preferred

- May attract councillors with “big picture” thinking, forcing a focus on whole of Shire agenda, but no guarantee of this if a person stands and is elected for predominantly promoting the interests of a small area/interest group.
- May reduce perceived parochialism associated with the current model.
- Small communities may be distanced from decision-making.
- Possibility that large populations centres dominate decisions.
- Major influence for decisions could be seeded to interest groups or individuals who can organise effective political campaigns.
- Travel for councillors may be more extensive than currently with associated risks of night travel in areas with kangaroos and wombats, particularly in Winter. May need to consider accommodation for evening events given large distances travelled.
- May favour those with the financial means to campaign heavily across the Shire that do not necessarily have community interests at heart.
- Voting system may be subject to manipulation by candidates or create confusion within the community

Model 3 (7 single councillor wards) - Not preferred, least desirable option.

- Easily subject to parochialism
- May not attract councillors concerned about the interests of the whole Shire and councillors with a vision confined to their ward alone may be elected
- May not foster cohesion on issues of concern to the whole Hepburn Shire community
- Separation of Hepburn and Daylesford is not conducive to consideration of community asset development and services in these populated areas.