Electoral structure review of Hepburn Shire Council

Submission to Preliminary Report

Submitted by:

Name:	Ian MacBean
Contacts:	██████████ ██████████
Address:	██████████ Trentham VIC 3458 (██████████ Trentham)
Date:	19 April 2023

I wish to speak to my submissions at the hearing, 26 April 2023

Submission in summary

(i) Within the limitations of its brief, I commend the Preliminary Report for its presentation of first round submissions and the three structure models: unsubdivided; multi-councillor wards; and single councillor wards.

(ii) Change should be based on demonstrated need and I don't believe the case for significant change has been made.

(iii) Of the options available to the Panel, the single-councillor ward structure is nearest the status quo and demonstrated as workable – and, in my opinion, should be adopted.
I could be persuaded that a multi-councillor ward structure is acceptable if widely supported but would suggest further consultation is required. I totally reject the more radical change in an unsubdivided structure.

(iv) I note that much of the consultation relies on assertion and opinion (my own included) and wish the Panel well in its deliberations.

Preamble

There are many needs in local government arising from the cumulative effects of cost shifting, growth pressures and increasing community expectations. I don't think re-arranging Ward boundaries sits high in any list of needs and neither will it address many of the more pressing needs. The case for change must be made and, desirably, via a more consultative community engagement process than the current top-down approach permits. Nonetheless I appreciate that the Panel has a task to undertake within certain parameters and will participate as best I can.

I re-iterate the arguments I submitted in my preliminary submission in favour of a single councillor seven Ward structure. In particular I note that the externally-driven amalgamations of local government during the mid-1990s did not serve Trentham well, or Hepburn Shire for that matter.

[I have chosen not to include a recitation of my credentials and personal/family history in the district in my submission in the belief that the arguments submitted should stand on their merits in helping determine the final recommendations – although I believe I do have relevant background that informs my submission.]

Response to Preliminary Report

While I'm disappointed by the numbers of preliminary submissions received (0.12% of voters) I note the observation attributed to Disraeli that '*history is made by those who show up*'. Even so the range

of opinions and suggestions submitted for the electoral structure of Hepburn Shire cover most imaginable options; the Preliminary Report provides a helpful summary.

I fully endorse the analysis of number of councillors (p15-16) and will focus my comments of the discussion and models for the electoral structure:

1. Unsubdivided structure

Consistent with preliminary submissions from community members much of the rationale relies on assertion.

Among potential benefits to Hepburn Shire, removing the possibility of ward boundaries dividing towns or communities is clearly a benefit but I submit that the corresponding potential disadvantages of any ward-based structure requires on-the-ground community consultation and, in any case, finding best-fit boundaries once the principles are agreed is the bread-and-butter work of the VEC. Eliminating the need for future ward boundary adjustments is a bureaucratic benefit that has little or no community benefit.

I find it difficult to understand the paragraph dismissing the argument that local representation would be diminished in an unsubdivided structure apparently solely on past evidence of candidates standing from across the shire. In the past four elections in Coliban Ward all candidates, except one, lived in the ward – and the exception was an almost invisible candidate who polled badly.

The argument that the proportional representation system in an unsubdivided ward structure should give candidates with a good level of local support a *reasonable* chance of reaching a quota again seems to depend on assertion. The added concern I have here is that the costs to individuals contesting an unsubdivided structure is likely to diminish the range of potentially interested and worthy candidates - particularly, as mentioned in my preliminary submission, given we do not have any shire-wide means of communications.

As presented, I do not find the case for an unsubdivided ward structure at all convincing.

2. Multi-councillor ward structure

The proposal for a four wards each with two councillors is intriguing but, as presented, does not make a convincing case (and notwithstanding that the case for an increase in the number of councillors is refuted in the Preliminary Report).

It may be better than a suggested three ward structure but, aside from all the detail noted that would need fine-tuning, all it offers in my opinion is a multi-councillor ward structure without any obvious or potential benefits except bringing representation closer to communities.

3. Single-councillor ward structure

The proposal as presented shows a workable and modest change to the status quo . . . possibly with some fine-grain consultation required for how the Daylesford-Hepburn Springs and Creswick urban areas will be incorporated into separate wards.

I do want to challenge the claims made in preliminary submissions by people against the single-councillor ward structure, as summarised (p 14):

> Those opposed . . . argued that this structure would result in reduced cooperation on issues affecting the whole shire. (*and*) could encourage parochialism with councillors only responsive to their ward rather than shire-wide needs and could increase the likelihood of uncontested elections.

This ignores the oath required of councillors to act in the best interests of the shire and its residents and really needs to be shown as an existing or historic problem rather than speculation and assertion. A populist 'takeover' of council in an unsubdivided council poses a much greater hypothetical risk.

In my experience the quality and effectiveness of councils varies term-to-term and it is in the best interests of the voting rate-payer to elect the best candidate presenting for election.

Submission ends