

Electoral structure review - Hepburn Shire Council - Response Submission
Brian Hood - Trentham - 16 April 2023, 02:41 pm

Thank you for the opportunity to submit on the three proposed models.

I am the councillor for Coliban ward, currently the Mayor of Hepburn Shire Council 2022/23 and served as Deputy Mayor in 2020/21.

Model 1.

I strongly oppose model 1. An unsubdivided model would not serve the numerous communities spread across Hepburn Shire well. It is vitally important that residents from the many smaller towns and communities across the shire have ready access to representation. This is especially important in Hepburn where a greater proportion of the community are of an older age than the Victorian average and those people rely on access to a representative that is part of their community, a representative that is aware of that community's issues and is accessible. Hepburn spans a large geographic area from east to west. While there are a few common issues across the shire there are also vast differences between the many towns and communities from one end of the shire to the other. As an example the communities of Clunes and Trentham have little in common and do not relate to each other. But people do relate to their own area quite strongly. Hepburn has an engaged community and many challenges so it is important that residents have a local representative who is familiar with their community's needs.

An unsubdivided model raises the risk of political parties and/or unrepresentative single-issue interest groups having undue influence in the democratic process. This exploitation should be avoided.

An unsubdivided model raises the risk of larger population centres dominating the Council and smaller population centres being left without a voice.

I note with significant concern that an unsubdivided model did not serve the residents of Moira Shire well and contributed to dysfunctionality in its Council. That risk should not be imposed on Hepburn Shire.

The effectiveness and efficiency of councillors carrying out their responsibilities across an unsubdivided and geographically large shire must also be questioned. It is a lengthy time-consuming drive from Trentham to Clunes and residents need clarity on just who their representative is and where they are located.

Councillors are already obligated under the Local Government Act to make decisions in the best interests of the whole shire. It is the Act, and councillor codes of conduct, that are the relevant tools to ensure such evidence-based, whole of shire decision making takes place. The ward structure is not the tool for achieving those objectives.

Model 2.

I do not support model 2. I see no compelling evidence to support an increase in the number of councillors from 7 to 8. My observation is that seven is the appropriate number for Hepburn, as it is for many other similarly sized Councils across Victoria. There are no practical or logistical reasons to support an increase in the number of councillors. Further, it could be quite problematic to implement a model that has an even number of councillors. That is an avoidable and unnecessary risk. The increased likelihood of the need for a casting vote would place undue pressure, and power, on the Mayor of the day. To a lesser extent model 2 is not ideal in that residents would face the question of which of the two councillors representing their ward do they turn to for assistance.

Model 3.

I strongly support the adoption of model 3 - electing seven councillors from seven wards. Seven is the appropriate and justifiable number for Hepburn. Altering the boundaries of the existing five wards in order to create seven wards is entirely achievable. The larger population communities in Creswick and Daylesford/Hepburn can be allocated across two wards each that have meaningful boundaries. Model 3 affords residents the best chance of being represented and having their voice and concerns heard. At the grass roots level of government it is critically important that all residents are well represented. That is a fundamental foundation of democracy.

In the event that the Minister decides to adopt either of models 2 or 3 there would need to be some discussion with Hepburn Shire Council and the community on the precise location of ward boundaries and ward names, both matters that could easily be settled.

Cr. Brian Hood
Trentham.