

**Electoral structure review - Northern Grampians Shire Council - Response Submission  
Halls Gap Residents and Ratepayers Association - Halls Gap - 03 April 2023, 03:56 pm**

Halls Gap would be termed a 'Community of Interest' in the VEC guidelines for we are quite distinct from the shire's other townships in that Tourism is a massive influence on our lives.

The Northern Grampians Shire is a huge shire geographically with truly diverse needs. The current ward system attempts to cater for the people of Halls Gap likely having different issues and priorities to St Arnaud which is over 100 kms away. The Halls Gap Residents and Ratepayers Association believes the existing structure of NGS serves our needs well but understand it is not permitted under the new legislation however we find it totally unacceptable that

Discounted Option 1: 7 wards each with one Councillor, has been discounted in the Preliminary Report

We believe that this option would serve the Halls Gap community the best as it would mean that our ward boundary would remain as it is today and we would have the same representation for Halls Gap as we do today.

We want somebody on council who is elected by the 1,491 voters from Halls Gap, Lake Fyans, Ledcourt, Black Range, Lake Lonsdale and Great Western voters, someone who is elected by us and represents the interests of the old South West Ward.

HGR&RA believe a no ward shire or a ward which includes part of the Stawell township will not represent us as well as Discounted Option 1.

We want this Discounted model back on the table.

It is bewildering how the preliminary report dismissed this option while saying:

"It was acknowledged that this model appeared to capture communities of interest but was not considered worthy of further public comment."

VEC discounted this as they believed Stawell would have to be split into 4 wards. This is incorrect as the proposed map shows 3 wards. Their own second recommendation splits Stawell! Nevertheless, to discount the 7 ward option they state that splitting Stawell could cause disharmony. This argument is nonsense. Three wards would do little more than indicate which Councillor each part of Stawell should contact.

[Personally, before moving to Halls Gap over a decade ago, I lived on a road where the actual Shire boundary (not just the Ward) passed right down the middle of the road. It made not one scrap of difference to the people of Christmas Hills who were split between 2 shires.]

As an aside, one Councillor wards help spread the workload. A large part of a Councillor's work is requests/contact from his constituents, in a one ward shire we would have 7 Councillors and many would therefore send their email to all 7 Councillors. It is highly possible that this time consuming part of every Councillors role could more than triple, quite possibly increase sevenfold.

It is too early to infer that some wards will have difficulty providing a Councillor in the future. If you look at past elections you will sometimes see Councillors elected unopposed but if you look at the previous election for the ward you will more often than not, see that it was contested by more than double the vacant positions. As stated in the guide, quite often an unopposed election can be due to satisfaction with the sitting Councillor.

We are alarmed that the VEC's submission guide states,

“In a response submission, you must address the options the panel proposes in the preliminary report. It is unlikely that the panel will consider other electoral structures at this stage.”

HGR&RA would have made a submission but knew nothing about it until too late. The Halls Gap Residents and Ratepayers Association meets the first Wednesday of every season so the information distribution in late January and closing date for submissions in mid-February, very much worked against us with our meetings held in the first week of December and March. The fact that our association was not aware of what was happening until it was too late to make a submission is not just a failing on our behalf. How could one of the Shire’s Ratepayer Associations, which always has their Councillor attend, fail to receive any notification about this?

We believe the same is true for the Great Western Future group and the Halls Gap Community Association. The date has passed but the quote above only says ‘unlikely’ not impossible that panels will consider other structures at this stage so under these circumstances we are asking that the panel reconsider Discounted Model 1, which the preliminary report acknowledges ‘captures communities of interest’.

Local Government is about Decentralization and the Ward system goes one step further in diverse shires like NGS.

As the guidelines state

“You must address the proposed models detailed in the report and maps above.”

We will also give our views on the Recommended Models.

First Recommendation: (Not supported by HGR&RA) That Northern Grampians Shire have one single ward with seven Councillors.

Our main concern with this model is that with only one ward there could potentially be a lack of representation for the areas outside the townships of Stawell and St Arnaud i.e. it does not recognise the diverse regions of the shire. There could also quite conceivably be a top heavy Stawell representation and it would be a distinct possibility that each of the 7 Councillors could all reside in Stawell and St Arnaud.

In the submission guide it has the heading, 'One vote, one value: why the reviews matter.'

If a no ward model is adopted, we do not believe the votes of Halls Gap residents will retain their value. Stawell has 4728 voters, St Arnaud and surrounds has well over 2,000 voters while Halls Gap has only 574. With 10,172 voters a Councillor needs 1272 votes (12.5%) to be elected. In a contested Shire wide election, under the preferential voting system, a Halls Gap candidate could get nearly all our towns votes and still easily miss out on being elected. Areas outside the main towns have to be seen to matter.

It should be noted that 8 of the 11 submissions received wanted wards.

The NGS is the ONLY submission suggesting that "an unsubdivided municipality better ensures all communities of interest would be represented" without any explanation for the basis of this view.

Second Recommendation: (Not supported by HGR&RA) 3 Wards with 2 Councillors per ward.

This model has half of Stawell in the same ward as Great Western and Halls Gap. Although we view this as a slightly better option there is still the issue of diversity in that an elected Councillor is representing both Stawell and other smaller regions in the shire and this has the potential to cause a conflict in representation. Once again the voting system is likely to favour Stawell candidates due to their population dominance.

In Summary, we the Halls Gap Residents and Ratepayers Association want Discounted Option 1 : 7 wards and 7 Councillors.  
As shown in the attached map

# A single-councillor ward model with 7 councillors

