

Representation Review - Banyule City Council - Preliminary Submission

Banyule City Council - Greensborough - 18 Jul 2019

Banyule City Council's Submission to the Victorian Electoral Commission – Banyule City Council's Electoral Representation Review.

Summary

This submission addresses the two overarching considerations confronting the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) in their electoral representation review, namely:

1. What is the optimal structure for the municipality; and
2. Given the optimal structure, how many wards/Councillors should there be.

1. Council structure

Banyule City Council (Banyule Council) believes that:

- The municipality should be subdivided into wards as a subdivided municipality enables Councillors to better communicate with their constituents and gain a clearer understanding of local issues and concerns.
- The cost of conducting an election campaign is less as the candidates only have to canvass electors within their own ward and not the municipality as a whole.

2. Number of Wards/Councillors

- Banyule Council believes that the current structure of seven single Councillor wards delivers effective and accountable electoral representation.

Background

Banyule Council's last review was conducted by VEC in 2007 when initially the VEC recommended an increase to nine single Councillor wards for Banyule. After extensive public consultation which showed a clear preference for seven single Councillor wards, the VEC's final recommendation and ultimate decision by the Minister was that Banyule Council is best represented by seven single Councillor wards with minor ward boundary adjustments to futureproof the structure.

Banyule Council's view is that this structure still remains the best option for Banyule and can be supported by Council's history of good governance and satisfaction ratings that have continued to be above the metro and state wide averages.

This view is further supported by the Minister for Local Government's recent announcement of a proposed Local Government Bill including a reform to mandate single Councillor ward structures for all local councils to provide for more direct accountability.

The consultation paper for the proposed Bill states that single member structures "provide stronger local democracy with direct accountability to the community" and "are the best way to ensure representation is genuinely local."

The paper further notes that "single member wards for each council enable residents to more effectively receive direct representation. Councillors will be more accountable to local communities, fostering true 'local' government."

This structure also more closely reflects the way Members of Parliament are elected.

The direct cost of delivering Council's governance service per Councillor, otherwise known as the cost of governance, for Banyule Council is \$46,712.29 (as per 2017/2018 reporting, www.knowyourcouncil.vic.gov.au). This means any increase in number of Councillors would come at a cost of roughly \$47,000 per additional Councillor.

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Submission

Banyule Council believes that the current structure of seven single Councillor wards is the correct electoral structure to deliver effective and accountable electoral representation.

The current electoral representation arrangements:

1. Deliver good governance;
2. Deliver accountable representation to the community;
3. Deliver strong representation of local communities of interests; and
4. Deliver effective and efficient representation.

1. Good Governance

Good governance strengthens the confidence the community has in local government and is a strong reminder of accountability of Council and the community it serves. Banyule Council believes a key indicator that its existing structure should remain is the strong governance culture and lack of Councillor related issues at Banyule in the past or present.

A single Councillor structure allows for respectful relationships between elected Councillors because Councillors are independent and accountable for their own actions. The division of multi-member wards permits the opportunity for arguments and further separation of opinions on matters of the community. Uneven workload and unfairness is far more apparent as well as possibilities of conflicts between Councillors in multi-member structures. This has been the case with a number of other councils that have a multi member structure.

Banyule Council has an excellent history of collaboration between Councillors and no history of governance issues between its elected representatives, this is attributed to healthy, respectful relationships where elected members feel responsible for and accountable to their own wards. Relationship breakdowns between members are noted within other municipalities that have multi-member ward structures.

Further support for the retention of seven single member wards is that Banyule Council has continually achieved above average (Metro and State) results for overall performance in Council community satisfaction surveys.

2. Accountable Representation to the Community

Banyule Council contends that single Councillor wards:

- Deliver fair and equitable representation for all voters;
- Enable Councillors to be identifiable and accountable to their area as the entire municipality;
- Represent local issues and can provide better advocacy on local issues;
- Better represent well defined communities of interest and local viewpoints and in doing so provide for better advocacy on local issues;
- Allow elected Councillors to develop greater knowledge of local issues and concerns;
- Allow residents in the ward know which Councillor represents their interests;
- Allow residents to have greater access to their local Councillor; and
- Distribute resident representation and responsiveness evenly across elected Councillors.

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On the other hand Banyule Council contends that multi-member wards:

- Result in larger Wards which can make it difficult for candidates to campaign and for Councillors to communicate with voters and the community.
- Do not provide the same level of accountability as single member wards.
- Do not provide the same level of advocacy on local issues as single member wards.
- Make it more difficult for residents to readily identify who their local Councillor is;
- Potentially favour political parties and political groups through ticketing which can make the election of non-politically aligned candidates more difficult; and
- Can result in one ward Councillor undertaking more work than other Councillors and the workload not being effectively or fairly shared.

In advocating for a single Councillor structure, Banyule Council believes each elected representative is held accountable for the representation of the ward. In a multi-member structure the issues that arise can result in an uneven workload and inequity resulting in possible conflicts between members.

A single member ward structure encourages community confidence in its representation and provides clarity to the community when it comes to understanding which Councillor to approach for local issues. A single ward Councillor also has the ability to be fully knowledgeable and aware of local matters and interests of their community.

A single member ward structure also provide for greater connection with the local Councillor, who is a member of the local community; understands local community needs and issues; and is better able to represent distinct communities of interest more effectively than in multi-member wards.

3. Strong Representation of Communities of Interest

Banyule Council submits that the current electoral structure provides a fair and equitable distribution of electors across the municipality taking into account the different communities of interest that exist within the municipality and using logical geographical boundaries.

The current ward structure contains clearly identified communities of interest and follows logical geographic boundaries. The existing ward boundaries were carefully prepared to ensure that the major community hubs such as Heidelberg, Ivanhoe and Watsonia were not split by ward boundaries. Council's existing seven wards in almost all cases follow logical geographical boundaries such as major roads, rivers and creeks whilst retaining distinct communities of interest. Any change to the existing boundaries is likely to threaten those communities of interest.

The VEC's submission guide details the best structure for 'communities of interest which are in the same geographical area' is to create ward boundaries that reflect the community of interest. Council believes an increase in Councillors and any change to the structure or ward boundaries would require splitting suburbs and divide the existing communities of interest in Banyule.

Banyule Council recognises that there are distinct communities of interest across the municipality that are clearly represented by the current ward boundaries and the VEC's previous findings recognised that any change to the current structure would affect these.

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4. Effective and Efficient Representation

Banyule Council acknowledges that the current number of Councillors results in a higher than average voter to Councillor ratio than other councils, however is still within the plus or minus 10% threshold, with each of the seven wards having almost equal amount of voter population as one another. By maintaining the existing seven wards and single Councillor wards, Council believes the representation is shared equally by each Councillor, which would not be the case if multi-member wards were introduced.

Council submits that there is no requirement to increase the number of Councillors and the community's needs are being met by the current seven elected members. The workload of the current structure is not excessive and there is no evidence to suggest an increase in Councillors is required.

Council contends that a Councillor's workload and involvement in Council activities is governed by the complexity of issues the Council is involved with, and is not necessarily proportional to the number of electors.

By the time the next scheduled electoral review is due (2031) Banyule Council will continue to have relatively low population growth with a forecast of 7.98% growth (<https://forecast.id.com.au/banyule>).

It is Council's view that this low growth in population will not adversely impact on the workload of individual councilors, which is currently equally managed by seven single Councillors and Councillors will continue to provide adequate representation to members of the community.

The direct cost of delivering Council's governance service per Councillor, otherwise known as the cost of governance, for Banyule Council is \$46,712.29 (as per 2017/2018 reporting, www.knowyourcouncil.vic.gov.au). This means any increase in number of Councillors would come at a cost of roughly \$47,000 per additional Councillor.

Conclusion

In summary, Banyule Council believes that the current structure of seven single member wards is the correct electoral structure to deliver effective and accountable electoral representation.

Banyule's current electoral structure meets the requirements set out in the Local Government Act as it relates to ward boundaries that provide fair and equitable representation for all electors; and equality of votes. Banyule currently has seven Councillors in seven single member wards. The number of electors in each ward is currently within the plus or minus 10% requirement. The predicted population growth in Banyule is relatively low and will not adversely impact on the current structure.

Banyule Council submits that the current electoral structure provides a fair and equitable distribution of electors across the municipality taking into account the different communities of interest that exist within the municipality and using logical geographical boundaries. The current ward structures have been carefully prepared to ensure that major community hubs such as Heidelberg, Ivanhoe and Watsonia are not split by artificial boundaries. Any change to the existing boundaries is likely to threaten those communities of interest.

Banyule Council submits that the electoral representation is not "one size fits all" and whilst it could be argued that Banyule has a higher than average voter to Councillor ratio, Banyule's proven track

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record is evidence that the existing structure works best for the municipality. Each Council should be reviewed on merit and it is clear that Banyule's structure responds well to its community.

Banyule Council supports the Minister for Local Government's view that single member wards provide stronger local democracy with direct accountability to the community and enables residents to more effectively receive direct representation.

Banyule Council requests the VEC to impartially review Banyule's structure noting the current structure is working well for Banyule and its community and should be retained.