Banyule City Council Electoral Representation Review
Victorian Electoral Commission Preliminary Report
Banyule City Council’s Response Submission

SUMMARY

Banyule City Council (Council) has thoroughly considered the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) recommendations for the future electoral structure of Council contained in its preliminary report that was released on 21 August 2019.

The VEC has recommended three alternate electoral structures for Banyule, namely:

- **Option A** – Nine Councillors elected from three three-Councillor wards;
- **Option B** – Nine Councillors elected from three three-Councillor wards with different boundaries to those in Option A; and
- **Option C** – Nine Councillors elected from single Councillor wards.

In its preliminary submission Council advanced a compelling argument in favour of retaining the current single seven member ward structure. Council continues to argue it is not necessary to increase the number of Councillors. Council notes that many of the preliminary submissions provided to the VEC, including most of those provided by community organisations, support Council’s view on this. A summary of Council’s rationale for retaining the current seven single member ward structure is provided in Attachment 1 to this submission.

Council is therefore disappointed that the VEC has not proposed the option of maintaining seven single member Wards. However, of the options proposed by the VEC, Council supports Option C being nine Councillors elected to nine single wards with slight adjustments to the ward boundaries proposed by the VEC. The adjustments suggested by Council would better accommodate existing communities of interest and future-proof the structure so that it does not need to be changed again by the time of the next review. Council’s suggestions for the Ward boundaries under Option C is provided at Attachment 2 of this submission.

The rest of this submission sets-out Council’s response to the three options proposed by the VEC.

**OPTION C – COUNCIL’S PREFERRED OPTION**

Council strongly endorses the continuation of a single ward structure for Banyule. This is generally supported by the community with most of the preliminary submissions from community groups arguing in favour of single member wards.

As noted in its preliminary submission Council strongly believes that a single member structure:

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

The VEC acknowledges the current Option C boundaries capture existing communities of interest only “reasonably well.” Council believes the proposed boundaries can be improved and can better represent communities of interest. Council suggests an alternate boundary map to be considered in replacement of the existing map for Option C. This is provided as Attachment 2 of this submission.

From Council’s initial work with the VEC Boundary Builder, Council believes the proposed alternative ward boundaries will not make substantial difference to the voter population projections.

The key characteristics of the boundaries suggested by Council compared to those proposed by the VEC are as follows:

- Beale and Sherboune wards remain the same as proposed by the VEC;
- Council’s proposed ward boundaries do not split suburbs. This is most evident with the Heidelberg industrial estate remaining in Olympia ward and Rosanna remaining in Ibbott ward and not being split across two wards;
- Council’s proposed ward boundaries use logical major roads and the Plenty River as boundaries in the absence of suburb boundaries; and
- Council’s proposed ward boundaries incorporate existing communities of interest.

**OPTION A**

Council does not believe that a multimember ward structure is suitable for the Banyule community. Council favours option A over option B of the two multimember structures proposed by the VEC.

It is Council’s view that multimember structures lack accountability between elected members, cause confusion for residents and can create tension and unpleasant working relationships between elected members with differing political and local points of view.

Option A combines Ivanhoe, Eaglemont and Heidelberg West, three very contrasting suburbs by way of socio-economic status and would also combine two vastly different communities of interest, being the Somali community and the Ivanhoe and Eaglemont residents all of which have different needs for representation. Currently, and in the proposed single member structure with amended boundaries, these communities of interest would be represented each by their own single Councillor.

By combining these communities of interest the VEC’s intention is to provide better representation with more elected members, however Council believes it would actually have the reverse impact due to the extremely different needs for each of these communities. It would result in a further isolation of each community of interest and alignment of the communities’ with one of the three elected members because of the differences in their needs. In turn this could cause a separation between elected members and may contribute to disagreements and friction between the three elected members for the ward.
Option A combines the suburbs within Banyule with the highest projected growth, being Ivanhoe, Heidelberg and Heidelberg Heights. Council questions the long-term viability of this option. As these suburbs grow and develop between now and the next review, Council is concerned that further structure changes will be required.

**OPTION B**

Council does not believe that a multimember structure is suitable for Banyule as discussed earlier. Of the two multimember options proposed by the VEC Option B is least preferred by Council. The proposed boundaries for Option B would see the following suburbs combined:

**South Ward:**
Ivanhoe, Ivanhoe East, Eaglemont, Heidelberg, Viewbank and Lower Plenty

**North East Ward:**
Greensborough, Montmorency, Briar Hill, St Helena, Eltham North, Watsonia, Lower Plenty and Macleod

**North West Ward:**
Heidelberg West, Heidelberg Heights, Bellfield, Macleod, Bundoora, Watsonia North and Watsonia.

The VEC notes that this option “could appear to create wards based on socio-economic status.” Council confirms that this structure, whilst not intentional, would highlight and draw attention to the inequality between the areas within Banyule, and would cause severe detriment to its community.

The proposed North West ward would contain suburbs that are considered the most disadvantaged whilst the South ward would combine Banyule’s most ‘well-to-do’ areas. This would create an imbalance within the whole Banyule municipality between the wards and the elected members representing each ward.

Council’s concern that multimember structures have the potential to create unhealthy and uncooperative relationships between elected members would be exasperated by the problems that this structure would create. In short, by combining “like suburbs,” Option B would divide the Banyule community.

**CONCLUSION**

Council continues to strongly believe that the current structure of seven single member wards is the most appropriate and functional electoral structure to enable delivery of effective and accountable electoral representation for Banyule. However, of the options the VEC has proposed, Council supports Option C being nine Councillors elected to nine single wards with some boundary adjustments as recommended in this submission.

Option C, with Council’s suggest boundary changes, will provide the best alternate option for representation of all community members into the future. This option, as opposed to the multimember structures, will continue to support the optimal representation of the communities of interest by neither separating nor combining them with others that are differently aligned.

Council would like a representative, Cr Rick Garotti, to be heard in support of this submission at the upcoming public hearing on 25 September 2019 held at 1 Flintoff Street, Greensborough.
Attachments:

1. Summary of Banyule City Council Rationale for Current Seven Single Member Ward Structure
2. Banyule City Council Suggested Ward Boundaries for Option C
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 seven single Councillor representation arrangements:

1. Follow logical boundaries and doesn’t split suburbs;
2. Deliver strong representation of local communities of interests; and
3. Deliver effective and efficient representation.

Council acknowledges that the current number of Councillors results in a higher than average voter to Councillor ratio than other councils, although still within the plus or minus 10% threshold, but believes that minor boundary adjustments to the existing structure rather than major changes to the structure of the municipality would achieve the same desired reduction in voter to Councillor numbers.

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.

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.

It is Council’s view that the additional cost of increasing to nine Councillors would not deliver enough benefits to warrant such a significant change.

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. This is a good indication that the workloads of individual Councillors are sustainable and the current number of Councillors are fulfilling the needs of the community.

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.

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 in 2007, recognised that any change to the current structure would affect these.

By the time the next scheduled electoral review is due (2031) 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 could be catered to with slight boundary adjustments to the existing seven wards and will continue to provide adequate representation to members of the community.