

Representation Review - Banyule City Council - Response Submission

Peter Castaldo - Rosanna - 18 Sep 2019

I would like to thank the VEC for their well considered consultation process and report which incorporated all ideas put forward in what I would regard as a very fair and independent evaluation. I questioned whether I should make a submission in the first round but believed that it was important to consider the community's views as best I could and not rush to forming a position. This was important because, as a councillor, I take my role and responsibilities very seriously. I make this submission as a resident and also as a representative of the community. After reading the report and a number of submissions, I have come to the same conclusion as the VEC and strongly recommend that option A is the standout best option and would lead to the fairest and most strategic representation for the residents of Banyule into the future. I would put option C second, and option B last.

As a councillor, it is easy to just wish to continue with the existing structure we currently have, as we develop deep connections with the residents and organisations located in our specific ward, and our focus and efforts are developed in these areas. They are your community and they are the ones you work hardest to represent. It is always going to be easier politically to win in the same ward structure and area than in a system that has undergone serious change and/or covers new areas. For this reason, I have found almost no councillor I have spoken to who wishes to change what they have currently as it was the system that got them elected. Single-member ward councillors want a single-member ward structure and multi-member ward councillors want a multi-member ward structure. So, in self interest, it is easy for me to say I would like the same 7 single-member wards, or 9 single-member wards if it has to change. This is the view that the majority of councillors at Banyule have come to. It may be a coincidence that they have all chosen this to be their preferred position, but, given my further investigation across other council areas, a very strong statistical correlation exists between the view of the councillor with what they have is the best structure and therefore, with due respect to my colleagues, I would suggest in the interests of an independent evaluation of the position, the position of Banyule City Council should not be given any more weight than any other submission due to the inherent bias that I believe it has been written with. That also suggests that all other councillors, including myself, may have a bias towards what we currently have, i.e. a single-member ward structure. Notwithstanding my 'probable' bias to 'keep it the same', I have still come to the conclusion that the multi-member ward structure suggested in option A is the best option to for Banyule residents. I was the only councillor to vote against the council position, as expressed in the Council's second submission, and none of my input was included in that submission because I was not part of the majority. My view that council should not have a position in the first round was also excluded and we had a position before any evaluation was undertaken.

It is by this very process and conclusion that has caused me to come to the view that that a multi-member ward structure would lead to the opportunity of minority views and positions being given a greater opportunity to be heard, represented and incorporated into the discussion than is likely if we did not have multiple representatives for each area. We have a broad community within our council area. It is valued and also to its detriment sometimes in that people can negatively judge an area or someone from it before getting to know the broader diverse group of people that live in each area. The opportunity for a range of representatives for residents in an area is important, in my view, so that people have options and can choose who they wish to represent them. This goes to the very foundation of the concept of democracy. If you don't believe your representative reflects your values well then you have the choice to speak to another that is representing your area. I have had numerous calls from residents in other wards complaining about their representative and asking for me to push their opposing view. This is difficult because part of the local councillor culture is that you stay out of other councillor's ward business as much as possible.

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This diminishes the opportunity for as broad a representation opportunity and therefore disengages a number of people who would otherwise have their views debated.

An important argument for multi-member wards is that good decision-making requires a balanced approach. This is created or imposed in state and federal government by having two layers (an upper and lower house) involved in making decisions. In local government, though, we have no balancing mechanism. I think that a multi-member structure would provide a balancing mechanism that is currently missing, and provide the vast majority with at least one voice that represents them in their voting boundaries.

OPTION A

This provides a good composition, especially in the southern areas, due to two very different communities of interest at the opposite ends of the economic spectrum. We know that when representation has to represent both ends of this spectrum their minds are considerate of both groups. I strongly oppose any suggestion that these two groups be separated. I have seen some suggest that councillors would tend to represent one or the other. As an elected representative, I know that I work hard to represent all people the best that I can, not one social group. Instead of the lowest economically rated community having just 1 out of 7 or 9 people representing their views, a multi-member ward council would lead to 3 out of 9 people representing their views. I constantly hear councillors suggest they represent multiple communities, not just one, and always work hard to represent their residents, which is consistent with having a greater proportion of people representing each voter directly under a multi-member ward.

OPTION B

For the reasons given above, I think this option would lead to division in the community and perhaps a stigma of being in the wealthy or poorer community. Despite liking a multi-councillor ward structure, I believe under this boundary structure it would lead to worse outcomes than that of a single-councillor ward structure.

OPTION C

This is my second preference, but far behind option A. The community that I currently represent would be split in two, even though they are very much the same and would lead to two councillors representing those at the high end of the economic spectrum and a concentration of the lower socio economic area into only having 1 representative out of 9 (not 3) that would be concentrating their efforts in a multi-member structure.

SUMMARY

While my views may be quite specifically focused on the lower half of Banyule, the principles are true for the whole of Banyule. I believe, from personal experience and in dealing with the bias I discussed above, that option A is a very clear winner for both equitable, broad and balanced democratic representation.