

Local council electoral structure review

Final Report

Merri-bek City Council

December 2023

Acknowledgement of Country

The electoral representation advisory panel acknowledges the Wurundjeri people as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters for which it held this review and pays respects to ancestors and Elders past, present and emerging. The panel acknowledges their custodianship for many thousands of years and their continuing living culture.

Report approval

Version	Date approved	Approved by
1	6 December 2023	The Honourable Frank Vincent AO KC
1	6 December 2023	Mr Sven Bluemmel

Version approval

Version	Date approved	Submission approved by	Brief description
1	8 December 2023	Program Sponsor	Final proofread and confirmed to be sent

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Executive summary

An electoral structure review panel appointed by the Minister for Local Government has reviewed the electoral structure of Merri-bek City Council.

The purpose of the review was to advise the Minister on the appropriate number of councillors and electoral structure, including ward names, for the council.

Under Victoria's *Local Government Act 2020* (the Act), Merri-bek City Council must now have a single-councillor ward electoral structure.

The panel looked at:

- the appropriate number of councillors and wards for the council
- the location of ward boundaries
- appropriate ward names.

This report presents the panel's final advice to the Minister on the recommended new electoral structure of Merri-bek City Council to meet the requirements of the Act.

More information about the background to the review is available on [page 6](#).

Recommendation

The electoral representation advisory panel recommends that Merri-bek City Council adopt an 11 single-councillor ward structure – 11 wards with one councillor per ward.

The recommended names for the 11 wards in this electoral structure are Bababi Djinanang Ward, Box Forest Ward, Bulleke-bek Ward, Brunswick West Ward, Djirri Djirri Ward, Harmony Park Ward, Pascoe Vale South Ward, Pentridge Ward, Randazzo Ward, Warrk-Warrk Ward, and Westbreen Ward.

This advice is submitted to the Minister for Local Government as required by the Terms of Reference of the electoral representation advisory panel and the Act.

A detailed map of the boundaries for the recommended electoral structure is provided as [Appendix 1](#).

Summary of approach

Developing electoral structure models

The panel considered a range of factors when deciding on its final recommendation including:

- research and analysis
- voter growth or decline over time
- public submissions (see below).

More information on the way the panel decided on the models is available on [page 7](#).

Preliminary report

The panel published a preliminary report on Wednesday 18 October 2023 with the following electoral structure models for public consultation:

- Model 1: a subdivided electoral structure with a total of 11 councillors – 11 wards with one councillor per ward.
- Model 2: a subdivided electoral structure with a total of 11 councillors – 11 wards with one councillor per ward, with different ward boundaries to Model 1.
- Model 3: a subdivided electoral structure with a total of 11 councillors – 11 wards with one councillor per ward, with different ward boundaries to Model 1 and Model 2.

The full preliminary report is available on the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) website at vec.vic.gov.au

Response submissions

The panel received 22 submissions responding to the preliminary report. Of these, 3 submissions included maps.

A full analysis of response submissions received can be found on [page 15](#).

Public hearing

The panel held an online public hearing for those wishing to speak about their response submission at 10 am on Tuesday 14 November 2023. Five people spoke at the hearing.

Background

About the 2023–24 electoral structure reviews

In October 2022, the Minister for Local Government formed 2 electoral representation advisory panels to review and provide advice on the electoral structures of 39 local councils, under section 16 of the Act. If the Minister accepts the electoral structure recommended by the panel, any changes will take effect at the October 2024 local council elections.

The Act introduced several changes to local government representation, including the types of electoral structures local councils may have. All metropolitan, interface and regional city councils (including Merri-bek City Council) must now have single-councillor ward electoral structures.

For Merri-bek City Council, the electoral representation advisory panel examined:

- the number of councillors and wards
- where the ward boundaries should be
- the names of each ward.

The Act requires electoral structures to provide fair and equitable representation and facilitate good governance. Each ward must have an approximately equal number of voters per councillor (within +/-10% of the average). While conducting the review, the panel also noted the role of a councillor as specified under section 28 of the Act.

The electoral representation advisory panel

The panel that conducted the electoral structure review of Merri-bek City Council had 3 members:

- The Honourable Frank Vincent AO KC (Chairperson)
- Ms Liz Williams PSM
- Electoral Commissioner Mr Sven Bluemmel.

The purpose of the review is to advise the Minister on the appropriate number of councillors and electoral structure, including ward names, for the council. The panel is independent of councils and the VEC.

Under the Act, the VEC is not responsible for reviewing council electoral structures but must provide administrative and technical support to the panel. The Electoral Commissioner (or their delegate) must be a member of each panel.

Public engagement

Public information program

On behalf of the panel, the VEC conducted a public information and awareness program to inform the public about the Merri-bek City Council electoral structure review. This included:

- public notices in state-wide newspapers
- public information sessions to outline the review process and respond to questions from the community
- media releases announcing the start of the review with the release of the preliminary report
- information on social media channels
- updated website content on vec.vic.gov.au, including:
 - current information on the review process
 - submission guide and fact sheets for each council under review with background information
 - response submissions from the public.

Merri-bek City Council was also offered but did not take up 2 optional methods to promote the reviews:

- targeting social media advertisements at the council area
- notifying voters in the council area subscribed to the VEC's VoterAlert service about the start of the review and release of the preliminary report.

Public consultation

The panel encouraged public input to the review of Merri-bek City Council via:

- response submissions to the preliminary report
- an online public hearing for anyone who made a response submission to speak to the panel and expand on their submission.

Public submissions are an important part of the review process and are considered alongside other factors addressed during the review. These are outlined below.

Developing recommendations

The panel's final recommendations comply with the Act and were developed through careful consideration of:

- research and analysis conducted by the VEC support team, including geospatial and demographic data
- rates or patterns of population and voter change over time, and relevant forecasts of growth or decline based on forecast information provided by .id (informed decisions, a company specialising in demographics and forecasting)
- input received during public consultation.

Deciding on the number of councillors

The Act allows local councils to have between 5 and 12 councillors, but neither the Act nor the Local Government (Electoral) Regulations 2020 specify how the number of councillors is to be determined. As such, the recommendation put forward by the panel in this report is guided by

the Act's intention for fairness and equity in voter representation and the consequent facilitation of good governance.

In examining the appropriate number of councillors for Merri-bek City Council, the panel considered the following criteria:

- the population and number of voters in the council area, compared to other councils with a similar population size and number of voters in the same category (for example, other comparable metropolitan, interface and regional city councils)
- patterns of population change and voter growth or decline in the council area over time
- the current and past numbers of councillors
- the representation needs of communities of interest in the council area
- any matter raised in public submissions not already listed above.

Local councils with a larger number of voters will often have more councillors. Large populations generally have greater diversity, both in the type and number of communities of interest and issues relating to representation. However, the ideal number of councillors can also be influenced by the circumstances of each council, such as the:

- nature and complexity of services the council provides
- geographic size and topography of the area
- forecast population and voter growth or decline
- social diversity.

Deciding the electoral structure

Under the Act, regional city, metropolitan and interface councils must now have single-councillor ward electoral structures.

When developing single-councillor ward models for Merri-bek City Council, the panel considered these criteria:

- whether the structure would comply with section 15(2) of the Act (see below), and for how long it would likely comply
- the appropriate number of councillors, as outlined above
- whether meaningful and effective ward boundaries could be established and whether these would be easily identifiable to local communities
- the representation of communities of interest
- the voter distribution and physical features of the area, and the impact these may have on the shape and size of wards
- past elections for the council, including:
 - numbers of candidates nominating
 - incidences of uncontested elections

- rates of informal voting.
- other matters raised in public submissions not already listed above.

Under section 15(2) of the Act, subdivided structures must aim for an approximately equal number of voters per councillor in each ward. This means the number of voters represented by each councillor in a ward should be within +/-10% of the average number of voters per councillor for all wards.

During this review, the panel aimed to recommend a structure that would comply with section 15(2) at the time of the 2024 local council elections and, if possible, also comply based on voter numbers at the time the review was conducted. The panel used forecasts of population and voter change to assess compliance at the 2024 elections with as much accuracy as possible. In some cases, population change and other factors impacting voter numbers mean it is not possible to create compliant subdivided structures based both on voter numbers that were current at the time of the review and forecast voter numbers. In these instances, the panel prioritised compliance at the 2024 local government elections to ensure each vote will have approximately equal value at the 2024 election.

One of the factors that may impact compliance with section 15(2) is the number of current and forecast voters with ratepayer-based voting entitlements, also known as council-enrolled voters. Voters' rolls include both state-enrolled electors (the majority of the roll) and a smaller number of council-enrolled electors. The Act introduced changes to ratepayer-based entitlement categories, which come into full effect at the 2024 local council elections. The panel took this change to the makeup of voters' rolls, and therefore compliance with section 15(2) of the Act, into consideration during this review.

Deciding on ward names

The panel has taken the following approach to naming wards.

1. Retaining existing ward names if these were still relevant to the area covered by the ward.
2. When a new name was required, the panel based this on features such as:
 - places (registered under the *Geographic Place Names Act 1998*) in the ward
 - compass directions
 - native flora or fauna.

Use of Aboriginal language

The panel recognises that there should first be meaningful consultation with local Aboriginal communities and groups before a ward is named using Aboriginal language. Meaningful consultation is a significant process that the panel was not able to undertake within the timeframes of the current review program.

The panel also recognises that many of the place names in current use across Victoria are based on Aboriginal language. As such, the panel has only put forward new ward names using Aboriginal language if:

- it is the name of a place within a ward
- it is currently in common use

and

- the name is registered under the *Geographic Place Names Act 1998*.

Unregistered names using Aboriginal language have not been put forward by the panel as new ward names. While the panel supports the adoption of names based on Aboriginal language, this requires appropriate consultation.

Accordingly, for the panel to consider an Aboriginal language ward name that is suggested in a public submission to the review, the name submitted needs to comply with the above guidelines.

About Merri-bek City Council

Profile

At its southern point, Merri-bek City Council is 4 km from the Melbourne CBD. It spans an area of about 51 km², extending north to the Metropolitan Ring Road, west to Moonee Ponds Creek (which forms most of its boundary with Moonee Valley City Council) and east to Merri Creek (which forms most of its boundary with Darebin City Council).

The Traditional Custodians of the land in Merri-bek City Council are the Wurundjeri people. The name Merri-bek (meaning 'rocky country' and acknowledging the connections to Merri Creek) was one of 3 names put forward by the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation to replace the council's former name of 'Moreland'. The new name was formally recognised by the Victorian Government in September 2022 following community consultation and council endorsement.

Landscape

The council area is highly urbanised. Most land is designated residential, but there are also important industrial sites and commercial centres. Open space and parklands account for 15% (839 hectares) of the council land area and are located throughout, particularly along Merri and Moonee Ponds creeks (Merri-bek 2023).

The council area includes the suburbs of Brunswick, Brunswick East, Brunswick West, Coburg, Coburg North, Pascoe Vale, Pascoe Vale South, Oak Park, Fawkner, Glenroy, Hadfield and Gowanbrae. It also extends into parts of Fitzroy North, Parkville, and Tullamarine.

Housing growth and development has mostly moved north along the main transport corridors. The well-established suburbs in the south, such as Brunswick and Coburg, are more densely populated and have undergone greater rates of growth. In the northern parts of the council area, dwellings are larger and more separate.

The council area's northern boundary is the Western Ring Road, while Sydney Road and Lygon Street are the major north–south roads. Boundary Road, Bell Street, Moreland Road and Albion Street run east–west. Major train lines, such as the Upfield and Craigieburn lines, follow the north–south transport corridors and various tram routes provide additional transport services.

Commercial activity is concentrated along Lygon and Nicholson streets and Sydney Road in Brunswick and further north in Glenroy.

Population and Community

In 2021 the council area was home to 171,357 people (ABS 2022), with Brunswick, Coburg, and Glenroy the most populous suburbs (Merri-bek 2023). Forecast to grow at a rate of 1.4% per annum, the population will likely surpass 250,000 by 2036. A significant portion of this growth is expected in Brunswick, Brunswick East, and Coburg (Merri-bek 2022).

The proportion of the population identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander is 0.6%, similar to the Greater Melbourne average of 0.7% (ABS 2022, 2022a).

At the 2021 Census, the median age was 35, which was lower than the metropolitan average (ABS 2022). About one third of residents were born overseas (ABS 2022) and 31% of households used a language other than English at home (ABS 2022). The council area has a prominent and well-established Italian community, and large Arabic and Greek-speaking populations (ABS 2022). Religious diversity is evident with the presence of Catholic, Islamic, and Eastern Orthodox communities (ABS 2022).

The median weekly household income in the council is \$1,943, compared to \$1,901 in Greater Melbourne. In terms of housing, 28.1% of houses are owned outright, lower than the 29.7% for Greater Melbourne. People who own homes with mortgages account for 31.1%, lower than the 37.1% for Greater Melbourne. Also, dwellings that are occupied by renters account for 38.3%, which is higher than the 30.2% for Greater Melbourne (ABS 2022, 2022a).

The social profile changes somewhat across the council area and particularly in the northernmost suburbs. The suburbs of Fawkner and Hadfield, for example, have a greater proportion of overseas-born residents and higher levels of social disadvantage compared with the suburbs further south (.id 2023a, 2023b).

Current number of councillors and electoral structure

Merri-bek City Council is currently divided into 3 wards with a total of 11 councillors:

- one ward with 3 councillors (South)
- 2 wards with 4 councillors each (North-East and North-West wards).

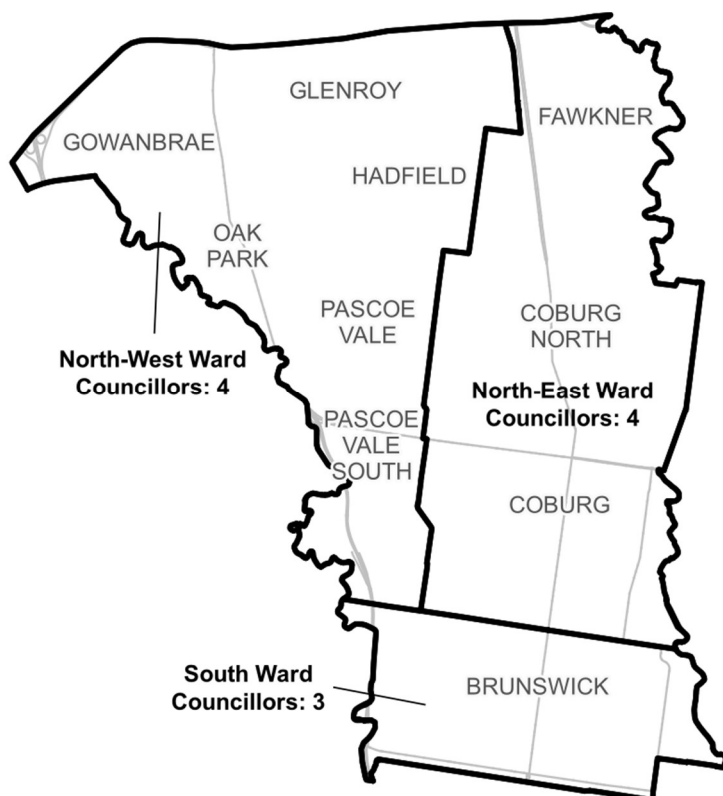


Figure 1: Diagram of current electoral structure of Merri-bek City Council.

There are approximately 130,481 voters in Merri-bek City Council, with an approximate ratio of 11,861 voters per councillor.

Visit the VEC website at vec.vic.gov.au for more information on Merri-bek City Council.

Last electoral structure review

The VEC conducted an electoral representation review of Merri-bek City Council in 2011. This review was carried out under the *Local Government Act 1989* (Vic), which was replaced by the *Local Government Act 2020* (Vic).

After conducting the review, the VEC recommended that Merri-bek City Council continue to consist of 11 councillors elected from 3 wards (2 wards with 4 councillors each and one ward with 3 councillors).

Visit the VEC website at vec.vic.gov.au to access a copy of the 2012 representation review final report.

Preliminary report

A preliminary report was released on Wednesday 18 October 2023. The panel considered research findings and the requirements of the Act when formulating the models presented in the preliminary report.

After careful consideration, the following electoral structure models were put forward for public consultation:

- Model 1: a subdivided electoral structure with a total of 11 councillors – 11 wards with one councillor per ward.
- Model 2: a subdivided electoral structure with a total of 11 councillors – 11 wards with one councillor per ward, with different ward boundaries to Model 1.
- Model 3: a subdivided electoral structure with a total of 11 councillors – 11 wards with one councillor per ward, with different ward boundaries to Model 1 and Model 2.

The full preliminary report is available on the VEC website at vec.vic.gov.au

Response submissions

The panel received 22 response submissions to the preliminary report from the public by the deadline of 5 pm on Wednesday 8 November 2023. You can find a list of people or organisations who made a response submission in [Appendix 2](#).

The table below provides an overview of preferences in response submissions. You can read an analysis of submissions below this table.

Table 1: Preferences expressed in response submissions				
Model 1 (11 single-councillor wards)	Model 2 (11 single-councillor wards)	Model 3 (11 single-councillor wards)	No preferred model indicated	Other
7*	3*	11*	1	3

*Three submitters indicated support for more than one option.

A total of 22 submissions were received in response to the models put forward for public comment, including one from a community group (the Brunswick Residents Network), one from a current South Ward councillor, Lambros Tapinos, and 3 mapped submissions detailing alternative single-councillor ward structures. Most submitters focused on interests specific to their own neighbourhoods, particularly where ward boundaries either united or divided communities.

Model 3 was the most favoured, supported in 11 submissions, followed by Model 1 (7 submissions) and Model 2 (3 submissions). One submission did not indicate a preference for any of the proposed models.

Six submitters opposed having to change to a single-councillor ward structure, with most arguing fair and equitable representation would be diminished as a result. For example, Kenna Morrison suggested it was less likely electors in a single-member ward would be represented by a councillor they voted for, unlike wards where multiple candidates are elected. Marion Attwater argued single-councillor wards would give residents the false impression that only the councillor elected from their ward could be contacted about issues, and suggested this could be an issue for residents if their ward councillor was away or held different political views to themselves. The Brunswick Residents Network saw benefits in having councillors from varying backgrounds and with different skills represent the one area, while Bernard Flinn doubted whether one councillor would be able to represent all of the issues within the area covered by a ward.

In contrast, Vita Mezzatesta supported the adoption of single-councillor wards, hoping it would bring about better governance and foster closer connections between councillors, electors and the council more generally.

Model 1

Seven submitters supported Model 1. Michael Stanley considered all parts of the council area and felt that overall Model 1 was best aligned with communities of interest. This was particularly the case, Stanley argued, in the south with the division of Brunswick using Blyth and Victoria Streets, and in the north, by keeping most of Hadfield intact and the use of clear ward boundaries to divide Glenroy. Marion Attwater supported Model 1 as it provided a better boundary between the Pascoe Vale and Pascoe Vale South Wards. For Kevin Chen the 'suburb-centric' wards in Model 1, covering the area north of Moreland Road as far as Fawkner, made more sense than the division of the same area in models 2 or 3. Chen also felt the division of Brunswick to create 2 horizontally configured wards better reflected the movement of people towards the main roads to access services.

Most supporters of Model 1 saw Sydney Road as a focus or feature uniting the communities of Brunswick and identified the interests shared across both sides of the road. For these reasons they opposed the use of Sydney Road as ward boundary as proposed in models 2 and 3. There was general support for the suburb-based ward names proposed in Model 1, as residents would likely identify and recognise these easily. However, some preferred basing ward names on local features and made specific suggestions along these lines.

Submitters arguing against Model 1 pointed to areas where parts of different communities with few connections were combined together in the same ward. Vita Mezzatesta felt this was the case for the section of Coburg located in Pascoe Vale South Ward. Similarly, the Manassis family (Terry, Fotis and Julie) argued that there were strong community connections between areas north and south of Bell Street and that Model 1 did not align with these, but rather divided them. Kelvin Thomson and Cr Lambros Tapinos, both suggested in their respective submissions that Model 1 failed to make use of some very clear and more recognisable features as ward boundaries.

Regarding appropriate ward names, Kevin Chen preferred not to have suburb-based ward names, but ones based on prominent features in the ward, as was proposed in Model 2. Kenna Morrison supported the ward names proposed in Model 1, but only because the proposed consultation had not taken place to use appropriate Aboriginal language.

Model 2

Three submitters supported Model 2. Both Bernard Flinn and Kenna Morrison favoured Model 2 in their respective submissions for the same reasons, arguing that Brunswick communities identify with each other laterally rather than vertically, so maintaining Sydney Road as a central feature was important. In line with their opposition to Model 1, the Manassis family stated that Sydney Road is a strong boundary that separates communities of interest.

Cr Tapinos did not support Model 2 and considered the voter deviation in Westbreen Ward to be undesirable. Michael Stanley also opposed Model 2 but did not provide reasons for this view.

Model 3

Model 3 received the most support, largely due to the division of wards in the centre of the council area, which as with Model 2 set it apart from Model 1, as well as the use of Sydney Road as a ward boundary in the south and the use of the Craigieburn train line as a boundary in the north.

Vita Mezzatesta felt Model 3 provided the best approach in the north and centre of the council area. The use of the Craigieburn train line to divide Glenroy and Oak Park was considered the better option, and as with Model 2, the division of Coburg was preferred over Model 1.

Mezzatesta also favoured the use of Sydney Road as a boundary separating Brunswick into wards. Gino Iannazzo highlighted the use of Gordon Street in models 2 and 3 as the better approach to capturing communities of interest in this area, rather than the division proposed in Model 1 where a larger proportion of Coburg residents were included in the Pascoe Vale South Ward. Iannazzo felt models 2 and 3 best captured communities of interest, but preferred Model 3 because it proposed a more even distribution of voters in Westbreen Ward. Cr Tapinos preferred Model 3 for the same reason, and like other submitters felt models 2 and 3 better reflected communities of interest in the north and south, highlighting in particular a preference for the ward capturing Fawkner.

Kelvin Thomson also supported Model 3, arguing it proposed the clearest ward boundaries that more effectively captured communities of interest compared to models 1 and 2. Thomson felt the use of Craigieburn train line as a boundary in the north provided a better division of the area and a clearer ward boundary compared to models 1 and 2, while adopting Sydney Road as a boundary in the south was felt to be more appropriate than the use of Victoria and Blyth Streets as proposed in Model 1. Thomson also supported the configuration of wards capturing communities in Coburg and along the eastern border, where the use of Sydney Road as a boundary continues (as in Model 2) so that the wards extend beyond Bell Street. Similarly, the Manassis family felt that extending these wards over Bell Street better reflected their community connections.

Several submitters focused mainly on the division of wards in the south of the council area, where the preference was to use Sydney Road to divide Brunswick, resulting in two vertical wards similar to the adjacent wards covering Brunswick East and Brunswick West. The Brunswick Residents Network felt the division of Brunswick using Sydney Road, an established and recognisable feature of the area, was the better of the two options. Daniel Sullivan favoured Model 3 as the boundaries made sense, especially in the south of council area, and also supported the use of Sydney Road as a boundary dividing Brunswick.

In the north, there was a strong preference for using the Craigieburn train line as a ward boundary. Jacqueline Traine, Jahangir Hosseini, Julie Ryan and Maryam Reshadati provided separate submissions suggesting this approach was the most appropriate for Glenroy and surrounds. The train line was considered a physical barrier, which also marked distinct communities of interest on either side.

Many submitters supported the ward names proposed in Model 3. However, Daniel Sullivan and Cr Tapinos were opposed to naming wards after the creeks of Moonee Ponds and Merri, which make up large parts of the council's boundaries, which could be confusing for residents. Sullivan was also opposed to ward names after suburbs, as in most cases the suburb was not wholly contained in the ward and did not believe wards should be named after politicians. Cr Tapinos suggested a mix of place, Indigenous and locality-based names was the best approach to ward naming.

Other options

Three alternative, mapped proposals were submitted for the panel to consider. All 3 consisted of 11 single-councillor wards. Natalie Abboud's mapped proposal aimed to better capture the communities of interest in and around Coburg. North of Moreland Road, Abboud's submission resembled Model 1, while south it was similar to Model 3. Matt Bird provided two separate alternative structures: the first avoided using major transport corridors as boundaries and, as a point of difference to the proposed models, had 3 rather than 4 wards to capture Brunswick, Brunswick East and Brunswick West; the second proposed limiting a ward covering Fawkner from extending west beyond Fawkner Cemetery and used Sydney Road as a boundary for dividing Brunswick.

Ward names

The panel received several submissions from the public that discussed the use of Aboriginal language for ward names, chiefly those from Brunswick Residents Group, Garry Page, Kenna Morrison and Lambros Tapinos. In addition to several submissions supporting the panel's proposed ward names, 3 submitters (Garry Page, Kevin Chen and Lambros Tapinos) proposed specific ward names that use (or may use) Aboriginal language that were not put forward by the panel in a preliminary model. The panel includes these names for the Minister's information but notes that it was not possible to verify whether appropriate consultation took place with relevant Aboriginal groups about the proposed names:

Ballerrt Mooroop, Garrong, Merri-bek, Merribek, Merri, Moomba, Naree Naree, Tullamarine and Yooralla.

The panel also notes that one submitter (Garry Page) provided a detailed submission on the process adopted by the ERAPs for using Aboriginal language as ward names. As stated on pages 9 and 10 of this report, the review considers proposals for ward names where the name is registered as per the rules and guidelines required under the *Geographic Place Names Act 1998*. New names based on Aboriginal language and not yet registered require appropriate community consultation and approval before registration can occur. The timeframes of each individual council review, and the review program overall, do not permit the panel to undertake such consultation. As such, the panel consults the register of place names before recommending a particular name be adopted. The register lists all place and road names currently in use.

Public hearing

The panel held an online public hearing for those wishing to speak about their response submission at 10 am on Tuesday 14 November 2023. Four people spoke at the hearing.

You can find a list of people who spoke at the hearing in [Appendix 2](#).

Kelvin Thomson spoke first and in favour of Model 3. He commended the use of Moreland Road in all 3 models as a strong ward boundary, as it best captured the communities of interest centred around Brunswick, Brunswick East and Brunswick West. Thomson suggested the ward boundaries of Model 3, including Moreland Road, Sydney Road and the Craigieburn Railway line were all very clear features and better reflected communities of interest in Coburg, Harmony Park and Merri Creek wards than models 1 and 2. Model 3 was also preferred as it provided the best option for the communities captured in the area of Bababi Djinanang Ward by not extending so far west to include Hadfield as in other models. Thomson added that after Model 3, the next preferred option was Model 2, while Model 1 was considered the weakest.

Thomson elaborated on support for using Sydney Road as a ward boundary, arguing that communities had been formed and people base their activities on either side of it, and that it should not be considered a feature uniting a ward.

Kenna Morrison spoke in support of Model 1 and focused mostly on the wards covering the Brunswick area in the south. Morrison indicated that the ward names proposed in Model 1 were the most suitable. It was argued that Sydney Road should not be used as boundary dividing wards as in Model 2. Brunswick residents, it was claimed, identified more with the end of Sydney Road they lived closest to rather than which side they lived on, with the north being more commercial and the south more residential. Additionally, Morrison noted that businesses on Sydney Road have more in common with those across the road than those further north or south. For these reasons Morrison argued Sydney Road should be seen as a feature to unite wards and felt that splitting Brunswick into wards configured vertically was not appropriate – the area was more appropriately configured into north and south wards.

Morrison did not support adopting ward names based on Aboriginal language without first undertaking appropriate consultation with relevant Indigenous groups.

Asked whether Sydney Road played a unifying role for communities north of Moreland Road, Kenna Morrison expressed agreement with Kelvin Thomson's comments but did not elaborate further, stating they were not familiar with this area.

Merri-bek councillor Lambros Tapinos spoke in favour of Model 3, and suggested that Coburg and Brunswick would be best served by the vertical configuration of wards using Sydney Road as a ward boundary. They argued that this would actually increase the focus councillors provided to the area. Cr Tapinos also suggested that as Fawkner was not projected to grow significantly, placing Bababi Djinanang Ward at negative deviation could possibly disadvantage its residents.

In relation to ward names, Cr Tapinos made various suggestions:

- using locality names for wards was only considered appropriate where one locality was the exclusive focus, such as in Brunswick East and Brunswick West
- naming wards after Merri and Moonee Ponds creeks was not appropriate because both made up significant parts of the council's boundaries, which could cause confusion for residents
- adopting Moomba as a ward name was preferred instead of the proposed Bababi Djinanang Ward, as it might resonate more with local residents given Melbourne's well-known Moomba Festival
- the proposed ward name of Randazzo should be replaced with Coco Jackson after the Caribbean-Australian champion boxer who lived in the area.

In response to a question on the way the industrial zone is captured in Model 3, Cr Tapinos felt it should not be split, even if keeping it all in the one ward meant changing the boundaries around Coburg and Coburg North. Asked whether Pentridge could be a suitable name replacement for Merri Creek Ward, Cr Tapinos suggested it may, as the former prison was now a major activity hub, was likely to surpass Coburg in size and significance, and the name had lost all stigma.

Natalie Abboud, a former councillor and mayor of Merri-bek City Council first outlined their opposition towards single-councillor wards. Abboud considered the 4 wards south of Moreland Road as proposed in Model 3 to be the best option and noted the high rate of growth expected for Brunswick.

Capturing the communities north of Moreland Road was the main focus of Abboud's submission. Abboud felt Bell Street provided a strong boundary to separate the 2 wards centred on Coburg and Coburg North and felt the latter would be better served using Queens Parade as its northern boundary. Concerns were raised about using Sydney Road as a boundary in the Coburg area because it served different purposes north and south of Moreland Road. In the south, Abboud argued that Sydney Road functions as a clear divide of the activity centres, whereas north it was a central feature of the Coburg community. Moreover, Abboud suggested splitting the Coburg community would be problematic and divisive.

Findings and recommendation

The panel notes there was strong opposition expressed in public submissions to the move to a single-councillor ward structure, and that many submitters felt a multi-councillor ward structure would better reflect and capture communities of interest.

The panel also observed that many submitters expressed a strong preference for entire localities (suburbs) to be captured within a single ward. While the panel took this into consideration when developing its preliminary models, this is not always possible due to high population densities within some suburbs. Because of this, voter numbers within some suburbs often exceed what can be accommodated within one single-councillor ward. Where it is not possible to capture an entire geographic community within one ward, the panel must determine which parts are most logically located in a different ward to fulfil the requirements of the Act. Communities not defined by connections to a suburb, but by other characteristics, are usually more dispersed over larger areas and cannot be contained within single-councillor wards. As there is usually more than one community of interest to consider, accommodating the claims of one will likely impact another. Balancing competing claims in submissions is difficult, but an essential part of the review process.

As outlined in the submission guide for this review, the panel is committed to the principle of 'one vote, one value', which is a requirement for subdivided electoral structures under the Act. This is to ensure that every person's vote counts equally. When undertaking an electoral structure review, the panel must adhere to the Act's legislated equality requirement to seek to ensure the number of voters per councillor in a ward to be within +/-10% of the average number of voters per councillor in any other ward.

The panel also noted concern in various submissions that meaningful consultation with local Wurundjeri groups had not been undertaken to ensure proposed ward names of Woi wurrung origin were adequate. The panel would like to note that the timeline for the electoral structure review presented a barrier to conducting such meaningful and significant consultation with the appropriate local Wurundjeri body. However, the panel reiterates that local councils are able to conduct such consultation and present their own findings and ward name recommendations directly to the Minister for Local Government.

Number of councillors

After considering the requirements of the Act, public submissions and the agreed criteria, the panel found 11 councillors to be an appropriate number for Merri-bek City Council.

The panel considered the characteristics of Merri-bek City Council in relation to metropolitan councils, including its size and geography, population and the number and distribution of voters across the council area.

Merri-bek City Council currently has 130,481 voters represented by 11 councillors and covers an area of 51 km². Other metropolitan councils with a similar number of voters usually also have 11 councillors.

In some cases, a local council may have special circumstances that support a recommendation for fewer or more councillors. The panel did not identify any new circumstances for Merri-bek City Council since the representation review in 2011 and found no strong arguments in the submissions for increasing or decreasing the current number of councillors.

Electoral structure

After considering the requirements of the Act, public submissions and the agreed criteria, the panel found Model 3 to be the single-councillor ward model with the best potential to promote fair and equitable representation for voters in Merri-bek City Council and consequently facilitate good governance.

The panel considered a range of factors in coming to this final recommendation, including population and voter numbers, communities of interest, the use of strong ward boundaries and the various arguments presented in submissions. The panel acknowledges the strong level of interest in the review and the many, convincing suggestions made through the public submission process. The various suggestions put forward in submissions provided valuable information about local communities and were an important factor in the panel's deliberations.

In the north of the council area the panel determined models 2 and 3 best captured the Fawkner community of interest. In both models the ward is contained along the western edge of Fawkner cemetery. The panel considered this a better approach to extending the ward westwards to include part of Hadfield and a section of Glenroy west of the train line as in Model 1. Further, use of Bakers Road to mark the southern boundary of the ward was preferred over the combination of streets and rail line proposed in Model 1.

Moving to the north-west, the panel felt Model 3 provided a better approach in the division of Glenroy and surrounding suburbs compared with Model 2. Although Model 2 made greater use of Boundary Road as a clear ward boundary, several minor roads were used towards the council's western border. The use of main roads in Model 2, such as Cardinia and Widford streets, was considered to provide a clear division of Glenroy, creating two roughly even wards. However, the use of the Craigieburn train line as a ward boundary in Model 3 was considered superior to the other models. The panel found this physical divide functioned also as a clear marker of communities and was favoured in a large number of submissions. While the boundary effected a split Oak Park, it recognised the shared community interests in the area west of the train line.

In the centre of the council, the panel considered the configuration of wards in models 2 and 3 to be more suited to the communities and geography of the area than those in Model 1. The creation of two vertically oriented wards in the centre and east, using a clear boundary in Sydney Road to separate the two, was considered a better fit for communities of interest than the stacked wards proposed in Model 1. Although Bell Street provided a solid ward boundary, the panel acknowledged community connections extending across the main thoroughfare. Moreover, including part of Coburg in the same ward as Pascoe Vale South as in Model 1 was

not considered the best option. The panel also notes a clear preference for models 2 and 3 in submissions for the same reasons.

Finally, in the south, the panel considered the configuration of wards capturing the Brunswick area. All models proposed 4 wards for the area south of Moreland Road, with Brunswick East and Brunswick West contained within their own wards using the same boundaries. The division of Brunswick, either along Blyth and Victoria streets to create two stacked and even sized wards or using Sydney Road to provide two wards configured vertically, was possibly the most difficult decision. Both options had good levels of support in submissions, and both were supported by strong arguments. Whether Sydney Road was more appropriately used as a divide, or a focal point of the community was the key question. In the end, the panel found both arguments persuasive, but that in this case it was more appropriate to use Sydney Road as the boundary division. The panel considered the benefits of this approach as providing a clear, easily identifiable feature of the local area to mark the separation of the area into wards and which would also allow its continuous use as a boundary in the wards further north. Moreover, the panel deemed that a consistent approach to using strong ward boundaries throughout the council area, as proposed in the north and centre in Model 3, was the most suitable approach in this instance.

Moreover, the panel took the view that regardless of which option for this area of the council was adopted, 2 councillors would cover the same area and would be required to work together to address issues relevant to the local community, particularly those of residents and businesses connected to Sydney Road.

The panel notes many valid arguments of merit both in favour of and against the 3 models proposed in this review. However, the panel considers Model 3 to be the single-councillor ward model with the best potential to promote fair and equitable representation for voters in Merri-bek City Council and consequently facilitate good governance under the requirements of the Act.

The panel noted that a return to single-councillor wards represents a large electoral structure change for Merri-bek City Council. There was a significant challenge in creating a single-councillor ward structure that complies with the legislated +/-10% requirement and captures geographic communities within wards while addressing the differences in population density and projected growth found in the council.

While it is difficult to predict the number of candidates likely to stand at future elections, past election results provide some indication. The panel examined past election results for Merri-bek City Council including numbers of candidates nominating, incidences of uncontested elections and rates of informal voting. It found there to have been relatively strong candidate numbers across the council area/all wards under the current electoral structure. The panel assumes this trend will continue under a structure of 11 single-councillor wards, minimising the risk of uncontested or failed elections under this structure.

Ward names

The ward names for the panel's recommended electoral structure were based on the following:

- Bababi Djinanang Ward: New name based on a park in the ward. This name is registered in the VICNAMES register.
- Box Forest Ward: New name based on a school in the ward. This name is registered in the VICNAMES register.
- Bulleke-bek Ward: New name based on a park in the ward. This name is registered in the VICNAMES register.
- Brunswick West Ward: New name based on a locality in the ward. This name is registered in the VICNAMES register.
- Djirri Djirri Ward: New name based on a park in the ward. This name is registered in the VICNAMES register.
- Harmony Park Ward: New name based on a park in the ward. This name is registered in the VICNAMES register.
- Pascoe Vale South Ward: New name based on a locality in the ward. This name is registered in the VICNAMES register.
- Pentridge Ward: New name based on a historic site in the ward. This name is registered in the VICNAMES register.
- Randazzo Ward: New name based on a park in the ward. This name is registered in the VICNAMES register.
- Warrk-Warrk Ward: New name based on a bridge in the ward. This name is registered in the VICNAMES register.
- Westbreen Ward: New name based on a creek in the ward. This name is registered in the VICNAMES register.

The panel reviewed a number of ward names proposed in submissions applicable to the final recommended model. This included the renaming of wards based on the creeks which form major parts of the council's boundaries in the east and west. The panel agreed with the suggestion made in a submission that this could be confusing for residents given these natural features would likely be relevant to multiple wards. In this instance alternative names suggested in submissions have been adopted. In place of Moonee Ponds Creek Ward, the panel propose using Djirri Djirri Ward, which is the name of a similar ward put forward in Model 2. Instead of Merri Creek Ward, the panel recommends using Pentridge Ward, which is also the name of a similar ward put forward in Model 2.

The panel also noted the preference in some submissions for not naming wards after people. As such, the ward names of Thomson and Dunstan have been reconsidered, and while both referred to parks and reserves registered in VICNAMES and relevant to the area, the panel acknowledges that these names are also associated with people.

In place of Dunstan Ward, the panel propose using the name Brunswick West Ward, which is the name of an equivalent ward put forward in Model 1, and notes the suburb is wholly contained in the ward. In the place of Thomson Ward, the panel have proposed using Pascoe Vale South Ward, also the name of an equivalent ward put forward in Model 1, and which is wholly contained in the ward.

The panel would also like to note another alternative name for this ward (Moonah) which the panel found appealing. 'Moonah' was a previously used ward name from an old electoral structure (2005) and is the common name of the *Melaleuca lanceolata* tree. However, the word Moonah is not registered in VICNAMES within the council area and so does not comply with the guidelines for naming wards: unregistered names using Aboriginal language have not been put forward by the panel as this requires appropriate consultation.

The panel's recommendation

The electoral representation advisory panel recommends that Merri-bek City Council adopt an 11 single-councillor ward structure – 11 with one councillor per ward.

The recommended names for the 11 wards in this electoral structure are Bababi Djinanang Ward, Box Forest Ward, Bulleke-bek Ward, Brunswick West Ward, Djirri Djirri Ward, Harmony Park Ward, Pascoe Vale South Ward, Pentridge Ward, Randazzo Ward, Warrk-Warrk Ward, and Westbreen Ward.

This advice is submitted to the Minister for Local Government as required by the Terms of Reference of the electoral representation advisory panel and the Act. This electoral structure was designated as Model 3 in the preliminary report.

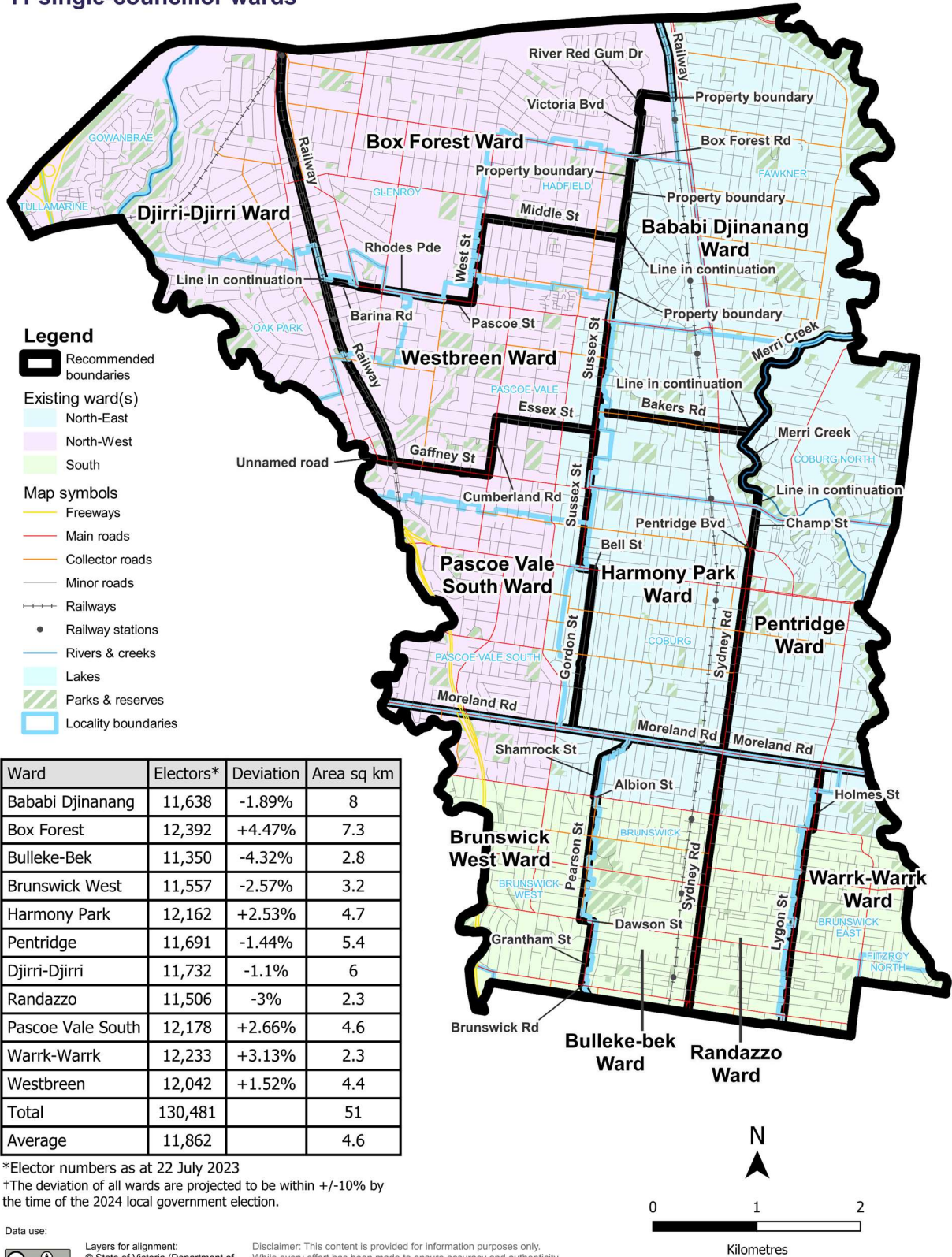
A detailed map of the boundaries for the recommended electoral structure is provided as [Appendix 1](#).

References

- ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) (2022) [Moreland 2021 Census All persons QuickStats](#), ABS, accessed 1 September 2023.
- (2022a) [Greater Melbourne 2021 Census All persons QuickStats](#), ABS, accessed 1 September 2023.
- (2023) [Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas \(SEIFA\), Australia, Suburbs and Localities, Indexes, SEIFA 2021](#), ABS, accessed 1 September 2023.
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- Local Government Act 1989 (Vic)
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- Merri-bek City Council (2023) [Merri-bek planning scheme](#), Merri-bek City Council, accessed 1 September 2023.
- .id (informed decisions) (2023) [City of Merri-bek, Average household size](#), .id, accessed 1 September 2023.
- (2023a) [City of Merri-bek, People born overseas](#), .id, accessed 1 September 2023.
- (2023b) [City of Merri-bek, Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage](#), .id, accessed 1 September 2023.

Appendix 1: Map of recommended structure

Merri-bek City Council Map of recommended option 11 single-councillor wards



Data for recommended structure

Ward	Electors*	Deviation†	Area# (square km)
Bababi Djinanang	11,638	-1.89%	8
Box Forest	12,392	+4.47%	7.3
Bulleke-bek	11,350	-4.32%	2.8
Brunswick West	11,557	-2.57%	3.2
Djirri Djirri	11,732	-1.1%	6
Harmony Park	12,162	+2.53%	4.7
Pascoe Vale South	12,178	+2.66%	4.6
Pentridge	11,691	-1.44%	5.4
Randazzo	11,506	-3%	2.3
Warrk-Warrk	12,233	+3.13%	2.3
Westbreen	12,042	+1.52%	4.4
Total	130,481	n/a	51
Average	11,862	n/a	4.6

*Elector numbers at 25 July 2023

†The deviations of all wards are projected to be within +/-10% at the time of the 2024 local government elections.

#Ward area (square km) and total council area is measured at level of accuracy required for electoral boundaries. This may vary slightly from other data sources (e.g. ABS).

Appendix 2: Public involvement

The panel wishes to thank all submitters to the review and speakers at the public hearing for their participation in the review process.

Response submissions

Response submissions were made by:

Abboud, Natalie

Attwater, Marion

Bird, Matt

Bird, Matt (second submission)

Brunswick Residents Network

Chen, Kevin

Flinn, Bernard Francis

Hosseini, Jahangir

Iannazzo, Gino

Karabinis, Anna

Karabinis, Helen

Manassis, Terry, Fotis and Julie

Mezzatesta, Vita

Morrison, Kenna

Page, Garry

Reshadati, Maryam

Ryan, Julie

Stanley, Michael

Sullivan, Daniel

Tapinos, Lambros (Councillor, Merri-bek City Council)

Thomson, Kelvin

Traine, Jaqueline

Public hearing

The following people spoke at the public hearing:

Abboud, Natalie

Morrison, Kenna

Tapinos, Lambros

Thomson, Kelvin

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