

Local council electoral structure review

Final Report

Yarriambiack Shire Council

May 2023

Revised July 2023

Acknowledgement of Country

The electoral representation advisory panel acknowledges the Wotjobaluk, Jaadwa, Jadawadjali, Wergaia and Jupagulk peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters for which it is holding 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.

Document history and version control

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2	21 July 2023	Program Sponsor	Revised version with inclusion of good governance wording

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Executive summary

An independent electoral structure review panel appointed by the Minister for Local Government has reviewed the electoral structure of Yarriambiack Shire Council.

The purpose of the review is to advise the Minister on the appropriate number of councillors and electoral structure for the council.

The panel looked at:

- whether the council had an appropriate number of councillors
- whether it should be unsubdivided or subdivided
- appropriate ward names.

This report presents the panel's final advice to the Minister on the recommended new electoral structure of Yarriambiack Shire Council to meet the requirements of Victoria's *Local Government Act 2020* (the Act).

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

Recommendation

The electoral representation advisory panel recommends that Yarriambiack Shire Council adopt a multi-councillor ward structure, with a total of 6 councillors, 3 wards and 2 councillors per ward.

The recommended names for the 3 wards in this electoral structure are Dunmunkle Ward, Hopetoun Ward and Warracknabeal 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.

Please see [Appendix 1](#) for a detailed map of this recommended electoral structure.

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 submissions

The panel received 5 preliminary submissions. Of these, 2 submissions included maps.

A summary of the preliminary submissions is contained in the preliminary report, available on the VEC website at vec.vic.gov.au.

Preliminary report

The panel published a preliminary report on Wednesday 15 March 2023 with the following electoral structure models for public consultation:

- Model 1: an unsubdivided electoral structure with 7 councillors.
- Model 2: a subdivided electoral structure with a total of 6 councillors, 3 wards and 2 councillors per ward.
- Model 3: a subdivided electoral structure with a total of 7 councillors, 7 wards and one councillor per ward.

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

Response submissions

The panel received 2 submissions responding to the preliminary report. Of these, no submissions included maps.

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

Public hearing

An online public hearing for those wishing to speak about their response submission was scheduled for 2 pm on Thursday 13 April 2023. As there were no submitters who nominated to speak, the hearing did not go ahead.

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 elections.

The Act introduced several changes to local government representation, including the types of electoral structures local councils may have. Large and small rural shire councils (including Yarriambiack Shire Council) can have one of 3 electoral structures:

- unsubdivided (entire council area with no wards)
- single-councillor wards
- multi-councillor wards with the same number of councillors per ward.

For Yarriambiack Shire Council, the electoral representation advisory panel examined:

- the number of councillors
- whether the council should be subdivided into wards or unsubdivided.

For subdivided structures, it also examined:

- the number of wards
- where the ward boundaries should be
- the names of each ward
- how many councillors should be elected for each ward.

The Act requires electoral structures to provide fair and equitable representation and facilitate good governance. For subdivided structures, 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 Yarriambiack Shire Council had 3 members:

- Ms Julie Eisenbise (Chairperson)
- Mr Tim Presnell
- Acting Electoral Commissioner Ms Dana Fleming.

The panel is independent of councils and the Victorian State government.

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

To inform the public about the Yarriambiack Shire Council electoral structure review, the VEC supported a public information and awareness program, which included:

- printing public notices in state-wide, and some local, newspapers
- holding public information sessions to outline the review process and respond to questions from the community
- sending out media releases announcing the start of the review and the release of the preliminary and final reports
- publishing information on social media channels
- 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
- regularly updating the VEC website content on vec.vic.gov.au, with:
 - current information on the review process
 - submission guides and fact sheets for each council under review with background information
 - preliminary and response submissions from the public.

Public consultation

The panel encouraged public input to the review of Yarriambiack Shire Council via:

- preliminary submissions at the start of the review
- 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 Yarriambiack Shire 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 rural shire 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
- whether a particular type of electoral structure requiring a certain number of councillors would best suit the council (see 'Deciding the electoral structure' below)
- any matter raised in public submissions not already listed above.

Generally, local councils with a larger number of voters will have a higher number of councillors. Large populations are often more likely to 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 particular circumstances of a 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

The electoral structure of large and small rural shire councils can be:

- unsubdivided (entire council area with no wards)
 - made up of single-councillor wards
- or
- made up of multi-councillor wards with the same number of councillors per ward.

When developing electoral structure models for Yarriambiack Shire 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 can be established and whether these would be easily identifiable to local communities
- 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 any 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 government 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 always possible to create a subdivided structure that complies with section 15(2) based on voter numbers that were current at the time of the review as well as 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. Voters' rolls are a combination of state electors (making up the majority of a voters' roll) and a smaller number of ratepayer-based voting entitlements. The Act introduced changes to ratepayer-based entitlement categories, which come into full effect at the 2024 local government elections. As this will change the makeup of voters' rolls, and therefore compliance with section 15(2) of the Act, this is a consideration of the panel during this review.

Deciding on ward names

The panel has taken the following approach to naming wards.

1. Existing ward names were retained where possible and appropriate (if the name was still relevant to the area covered by a ward).
2. Where a new name was required, the panel based this on features such as:

- places (registered under the *Geographic Place Names Act 1998*) located 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 be named using Aboriginal language. Meaningful consultation is a significant and important process which the panel is not able to undertake within the timeframes of the current review program.

At the same time, 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 in some cases put forward new ward names using Aboriginal language, but only where this is the name of a place within a ward, it is currently in common use, and this name is registered under the *Geographic Place Names Act 1998* (Vic). This is a practical solution to the reality that many of Victoria's geographic features are named using Aboriginal language.

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, an appropriate consultation process should be followed before doing so.

About Yarriambiack Shire Council

Profile

Yarriambiack Shire Council is in north-western Victoria, 300 km north-west of Melbourne. The shire is between the Wimmera River and the Grampians mountain range and covers an area of 7,326 km². It shares its borders with Mildura Rural City Council to the north, Buloke Shire Council to the east, Northern Grampians and Horsham shire councils to the south and Hindmarsh Shire Council to the west.

The Traditional Custodians of the Yarriambiack area are the Wotjobaluk, Jaadwa, Jadawadjali, Wergaia and Jupagulk peoples.

Landscape

Located in the Wimmera Southern Mallee region of Victoria, Yarriambiack Shire Council is home to significant areas of mallee parks and mallee ecosystems in Australia as well as some of the largest areas of semi-arid wilderness. Wyperfeld National Park, Paradise Flora and Fauna Reserve, Outlet Creek, Wathe Flora and Fauna Reserve and Albacutya Reserve are areas of cultural, historical and conservation value (Department of Transport and Planning, 2021).

At the 2021 Census, the shire's population was 6,556. Almost two-thirds of the population live in 5 of the shire's main urban centres – Warracknabeal, Murtoa, Hopetoun, Minyip, and Rupanyup.

Warracknabeal (population 2,227) (ABS, 2021e) is home to 34% of the shire's population. It is the major service and commercial centre, supporting the shire's grain and agricultural industries.

Murtoa, the shire's second largest town (population 780) (ABS, 2021c), is a major hub for grain handling and home to Victoria's largest inland grain storage point (Yarriambiack Shire Council, 2023a). Hopetoun (population 509) (ABS, 2021a) is a town servicing the north of the shire and is known for its landscape of rolling sand hills and grassy plains. Located in the south of the shire, Minyip (429) (ABS, 2021b) and Rupanyup (353) (ABS, 2021d) make up the remaining urban populations.

There are 4 major highways (Borong, Henty, Sunraysia and Wimmera) connecting major towns in the shire and service centres in other councils. Yarriambiack also has a freight rail network servicing agricultural and grain transport industries.

Community

The shire is known as the heartland of grain production and handling for the Mallee and Wimmera regions (Yarriambiack Shire Council, 2023a). Agriculture is the main industry and employs almost half of the population's workforce. The shire produces around one quarter of Victoria's wheat and barley (Yarriambiack Shire Council, 2023a).

Over the last 20 years, the shire's population declined from 7,739 in 2001 (ABS, 2001) to 6,556 in 2021 (ABS, 2021f). This trend is expected to continue with an estimated annual growth rate of -0.3% and a decrease of more than 1,000 residents by 2036 (Department of Transport and Planning, 2021).

The profile of the shire is somewhat older than the overall state and regional populations, with around 53% aged 50 or older. The median age is 52, higher than the regional Victorian median of 43 (ABS, 2021f).

Almost 85% of the shire are born in Australia and 1.7% identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ABS, 2021f). English is the most common language spoken with 89.7% speaking only English at home (ABS, 2021f).

Most of the shire own their home either outright or with a mortgage (70%), and the median weekly household income is \$1,102 (ABS, 2021f).

Current number of councillors and electoral structure

Yarriambiack Shire Council is currently divided into 3 wards with a total of 7 councillors:

- one ward with 3 councillors (Warracknabeal)
- 2 wards with one councillor each (Dunmunkle and Hopetoun).

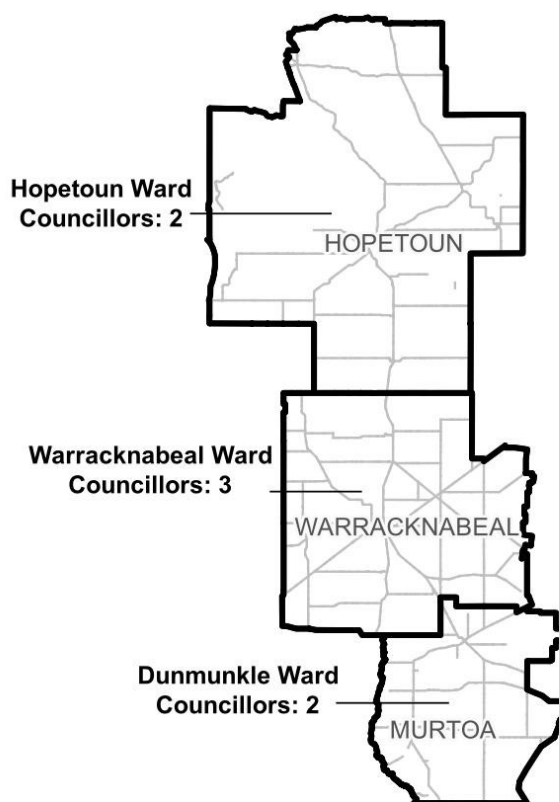


Figure 1: Diagram of current electoral structure of Yarriambiack Shire Council.

There are approximately 5,594 voters in Yarriambiack Shire Council, with a ratio of 799 voters per councillor.

Visit the VEC website at vec.vic.gov.au for more information on Yarriambiack Shire Council.

Last electoral structure review

The VEC conducted an electoral representation review of Yarriambiack Shire Council in 2015. 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 Yarriambiack Shire Council continue to consist of 7 councillors elected from 3 wards (2 wards with 2 councillors and one ward with 3 councillors).

Visit the Yarriambiack Shire Council profile [on the VEC website](#) to access a copy of the 2015 representation review final report.

Before the 2015 review, a representation review of Yarriambiack Shire Council was completed in 2005 and resulted in the current electoral structure being implemented.

Before the 2005 representation review, Yarriambiack Shire Council comprised of 5 wards with a total of 9 councillors (3 wards with one councillor each 2 wards with 3 councillors each).

Preliminary submissions

At the close of submissions on Wednesday 15 February 2023, the panel had received 5 submissions for the electoral structure review of Yarriambiack Shire Council. You can find a list of people who made a preliminary submission in [Appendix 2](#).

The panel received submissions from a range of stakeholders including individuals and Yarriambiack Shire Council. Submissions were published on the VEC website.

A summary of the preliminary submissions is contained in the preliminary report, available on the VEC website at vec.vic.gov.au.

Preliminary report

A preliminary report was released on Wednesday 15 March 2023. The panel considered public submissions and research findings 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: an unsubdivided electoral structure with 7 councillors.
- Model 2: a subdivided electoral structure with a total of 6 councillors, 3 wards and 2 councillors per ward.
- Model 3: a subdivided electoral structure with a total of 7 councillors, 7 wards and 1 councillor per ward.

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

Response submissions

The panel received 2 response submissions to the preliminary report from the public by the deadline of 5 pm on Wednesday 5 April 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 (unsubdivided, 7 councillors)	Model 2 (3 wards with 2 councillors per ward)	Model 3 (7 single-councillor wards)
1*	1	-

*One submitter indicated support for more than one option.

One of the 2 submissions addressed matters outside the scope of the review and did not state which model was preferred. No submissions suggested alternative ward names.

Model 1

There were no submissions in direct support of an unsubdivided electoral structure. Jennifer Turnbull felt Model 1 may be suitable but expressed concerns that it could result in a concentration of candidates and elected councillors coming from one area in the shire. Turnbull suggested this would leave parts of the shire without representation.

Model 2

The submission from Turnbull supported Model 2. Turnbull reasoned that with 2 councillors per ward, the ward would likely still be represented if one councillor was absent or unavailable. Additionally, Turnbull supported the proposed ward boundaries and noted they were the closest to the current structure of the shire.

Model 3

No response submissions supported this model. However, Turnbull pointed out possible drawbacks of a single-councillor ward structure, such as the potential for a ward to miss out on representation at council meetings if a councillor was absent. Turnbull also suggested the proposed boundaries of Model 3 would not serve the interests of the communities in each ward.

Public hearing

An online public hearing for those wishing to speak about their response submission was scheduled for 2 pm on Thursday 13 April 2023. As there were no submitters who nominated to speak, the hearing did not go ahead.

Findings and recommendation

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, and consequently facilitates good governance. 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 is within +/-10% of the average number of voters per councillor in any other ward.

Number of councillors

After considering the requirements of the Act, public submissions and the agreed criteria, the panel found 6 or 7 councillors to be an appropriate number for Yarriambiack Shire Council.

The panel considered the characteristics of Yarriambiack Shire Council in relation to similar rural shire councils, including its size and geography, population and the number and distribution of voters across the shire.

Yarriambiack Shire Council currently has 5,594 voters represented by 7 councillors covering an area of 7,326 km². Other rural shires with a similar number of voters generally also have between 5 and 7 councillors.

In some cases, a local council may have special circumstances that support a recommendation for fewer or more councillors. While the panel did not identify any new special circumstances since the representation review in 2015, the panel noted the shire has similar features and circumstances to other rural shires with comparable councillor numbers. It also recognised that the geographic features and uneven distribution of voters across the shire make developing a satisfactory subdivided electoral structure for Yarriambiack Shire Council challenging.

The Act's requirement for multi-councillor ward structures to have the same number of councillors per ward also poses difficulties, as multi-councillor ward structures are not possible with the current number of councillors. Because of this, the panel also considered subdivided electoral structures with fewer or more councillors. The panel explored whether an increase or decrease in the number of councillors would enable multi- or single-councillor ward structures to be created that may provide more favourable representation for the community. As a result, the panel put forward one option with fewer councillors: Model 2.

Electoral structure

After considering the requirements of the Act, public submissions and the agreed criteria, the panel found Model 2 the best model for promoting fair and equitable representation for voters in Yarriambiack Shire Council and consequently facilitate good governance.

The panel reviewed the arguments in support of each of the 3 proposed models while forming its final recommendation. Considering the challenges presented by the size and shape of the shire, the panel found a multi-councillor ward electoral structure, such as Model 2, may be better suited to addressing the representation needs of geographic communities of interest in the shire than an unsubdivided structure. Under a subdivided model, wards covering specific

geographic areas would be more likely to adequately represent the shire's communities of interest. For example, the communities in Hopetoun and sparsely populated northerly towns such as Lascelles or Tempy.

No submitters offered significant arguments in favour of or opposed to Model 3. However, the panel viewed the single-councillor ward electoral structure as the least favourable of the preliminary models put forward for the shire, because it would divide a relatively small number of voters between 7 wards, including a 3-way split of Warracknabeal's town centre. The panel also viewed the boundaries of Model 3 as balancing voter numbers across wards, but potentially at the expense of communities of interest in artificial grouping or division of towns. Overall, the panel saw the 7 proposed wards as having less longevity than the multi-councillor ward structure of Model 2.

The panel found Model 2 reflected and represented the shire's communities of interest more favourably. In addition, the panel considered Model 2 to provide strong and identifiable ward boundaries, particularly the use of the Borung Highway as a north/south divide. While the panel still viewed extending Hopetoun Ward further south to link the southerly towns of Brim, Lah and Crymelon as a possible drawback, it considered the model's viability and longevity as a significant strong point for compliance with the +/-10% tolerance at the October 2024 local council elections.

While it is not possible for an electoral structure to address all issues in the shire, the panel considered that, on balance, Model 2 the best model for promoting fair and equitable representation for voters in Yarriambiack Shire Council and consequently facilitate good governance under the requirements of the Act.

Ward names

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

- Dunmunkle Ward: The existing name of the ward under the current electoral structure. The new ward covers much of the same area as this existing ward.
- Hopetoun Ward: The existing name of the ward under the current electoral structure. The new ward covers much of the same area as this existing ward.
- Warracknabeal Ward: The existing name of the ward under the current electoral structure. The new ward covers much of the same area as this existing ward.

The panel noted that while the ward boundaries of the current Dunmunkle, Hopetoun and Warracknabeal wards would change under Model 2, the ward names remained appropriate.

The panel's recommendation

The electoral representation advisory panel recommends that Yarriambiack adopt a multi-councillor ward structure, with a total of 6 councillors, 3 wards and 2 councillors per ward.

The recommended names for the 3 wards in this electoral structure are Dunmunkle Ward, Hopetoun Ward and Warracknabeal 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 *Local Government Act 2020* (Vic). This electoral structure was designated as Model 2 in the preliminary report.

Please see [Appendix 1](#) for a detailed map of this recommended electoral structure.

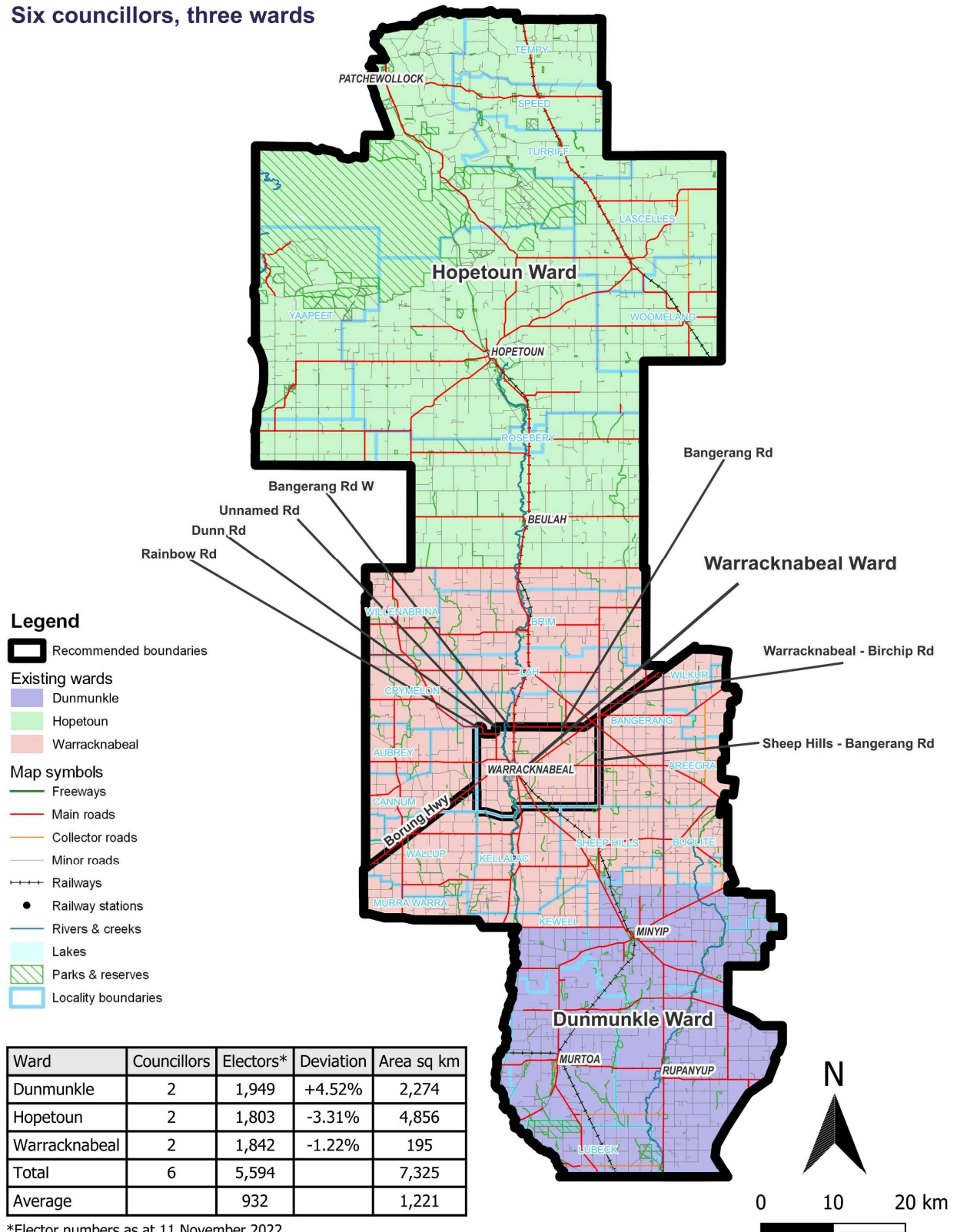
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Appendix 1: Map of recommended structure

Yarriambiack Shire Council

Six councillors, three wards



*Elector numbers as at 11 November 2022

Map prepared by:



Data use:



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Appendix 2: Public involvement

The panel wishes to thank all submitters to the review for their participation in the review process.

Preliminary submissions

Preliminary submissions were made by:

Bourke, Jo

Connolly, Diane

Healy, Carmel

South, Vicki

Yarriambiack Shire Council

Response submissions

Response submissions were made by:

Hamilton, Tom (Councillor)

Turnbull, Jennifer

Public hearing

A public hearing was not held.

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