



2015-16

**Council
Representation
Reviews**

Final Report

2015 Gannawarra Shire Council Electoral Representation Review

Wednesday 4 November 2015

This page has been left intentionally blank

Contents

1 Recommendation	4
2 Executive summary	5
3 Background	7
3.1 Legislative basis	7
3.2 The VEC's approach	7
3.3 The VEC's principles	9
3.4 The electoral representation review process	9
4 Gannawarra Shire Council representation review	11
4.1 Profile of Gannawarra Shire Council	11
4.2 Current electoral structure	12
4.3 Public information program	13
5 Preliminary report	14
5.1 Preliminary submissions	14
5.2 Preliminary report	14
6 Public response	18
6.1 Response submissions	18
6.2 Public hearing	19
7 Findings and recommendation	20
7.1 The VEC's findings	20
7.2 The VEC's recommendation	23
Appendix 1: Public involvement	24
Appendix 2: Map	25
Appendix 3: Public information program	26

1 Recommendation

The Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) recommends Gannawarra Shire Council continue to consist of seven councillors elected from one three-councillor ward, one two-councillor ward and two single-councillor wards, with modified ward boundaries.

This recommendation is submitted to the Minister for Local Government as required by the *Local Government Act 1989*.

Please see Appendix 2 for a detailed map of this recommended structure.

2 Executive summary

The *Local Government Act 1989* (the Act) requires the VEC to conduct an electoral representation review of each municipality in Victoria before every third council general election.

The purpose of an electoral representation review is to recommend an electoral structure that provides fair and equitable representation for the persons who are entitled to vote at a general election of the council. The matters considered by a review are:

- the number of councillors
- the electoral structure of the council (whether the council should be unsubdivided or divided into wards and, if subdivided, the details of the wards).

The VEC conducts all reviews on the basis of three main principles:

1. ensuring the number of voters represented by each councillor is within 10 per cent of the average number of voters per councillor for that municipality
2. taking a consistent, State-wide approach to the total number of councillors and
3. ensuring communities of interest are as fairly represented as possible.

Current electoral structure

The last electoral representation review for Gannawarra Shire Council took place in 2007. The review recommended that Gannawarra Shire Council consist of seven councillors to be elected from one three-councillor ward, one two-councillor ward and two single-councillor wards.

Preliminary submissions

Preliminary submissions opened at the commencement of the current review on Wednesday 15 July. The VEC received four submissions by the deadline for submissions at 5.00 pm on Wednesday 12 August.

Preliminary report

A preliminary report was released on Wednesday 9 September with the following options for consideration:

- Option A (preferred option)
Gannawarra Shire Council continue to consist of seven councillors elected from one three-councillor ward, one two-councillor ward and two single-councillor wards, with modified ward boundaries.

- Option B (alternative option)
Gannawarra Shire Council consist of five councillors elected from an unsubdivided municipality.
- Option C (alternative option)
Gannawarra Shire Council consist of seven councillors elected from an unsubdivided municipality.

Response submissions

The VEC received seven submissions responding to the preliminary report by the deadline for submissions at 5.00 pm on Wednesday 7 October.

Public hearing

The VEC conducted a public hearing for those wishing to speak about their response submission at 7.00 pm on Thursday 15 October. Two people spoke at the hearing.

Recommendation

The VEC recommends Gannawarra Shire Council continue to consist of seven councillors elected from one three-councillor ward, one two-councillor ward and two single-councillor wards, with modified ward boundaries.

This electoral structure was designated as Option A in the preliminary report. Please see Appendix 2 for a detailed map of this recommended structure.

3 Background

3.1 Legislative basis

The Act requires the VEC to conduct an electoral representation review of each municipality in Victoria before every third general council election, or earlier if gazetted by the Minister for Local Government.

The Act specifies that the purpose of a representation review is to recommend the number of councillors and the electoral structure that provides ‘fair and equitable representation for the persons who are entitled to vote at a general election of the Council’.¹

The Act requires the VEC to consider:

- the number of councillors in a municipality and
- whether a municipality should be unsubdivided or subdivided.

If a municipality should be subdivided, the VEC must ensure that the number of voters represented by each councillor is within 10 per cent of the average number of voters per councillor for that municipality.² On this basis, the review must consider the:

- number of wards
- ward boundaries (and ward names)
- number of councillors that should be elected for each ward.

3.2 The VEC’s approach

Deciding on the number of councillors

The Act allows for a municipality to have between five and 12 councillors, but does not specify how to decide the appropriate number.³ In considering the number of councillors for a municipality, the VEC is guided by the Victorian Parliament’s intention for fairness and equity in the local representation of voters under the Act.

The VEC considers that there are three major factors that should be taken into account:

- diversity of the population
- councillors’ workloads and
- profiles of similar municipalities.

¹ Section 219D of the *Local Government Act 1989*.

² *ibid.*

³ Section 5B(1) of the *Local Government Act 1989*.

Generally, those municipalities that have a larger number of voters will have a higher number of councillors. Often large populations are more likely to be diverse, both in the nature and number of their communities of interest and the issues of representation.

However, the VEC considers the particular situation of each municipality in regards to: the nature and complexity of services provided by the Council; geographic size and topography; population growth or decline; and the social diversity of the municipality, including social disadvantage and cultural and age mix.

Deciding the electoral structure

The Act allows for a municipality ward structure to be:

- unsubdivided—with all councillors elected ‘at large’ by all voters or
- subdivided into a number of wards.

If the municipality is subdivided into wards, there are a further three options available:

1. single-councillor wards
2. multi-councillor wards or
3. a combination of single-councillor and multi-councillor wards.

A subdivided municipality must have internal ward boundaries that provide for a fair and equitable division of the municipality, and ensure that the number of voters represented by each councillor remains within 10 per cent of the average number of voters per councillor for the municipality.

In considering which electoral structure is most appropriate, the VEC considers the following matters:

- communities of interest, encompassing people who share a range of common concerns, such as geographic, economic or cultural associations
- the longevity of the structure, with the aim of keeping voter numbers per councillor within the 10 per cent tolerance as long as possible
- geographic factors, such as size and topography
- the number of voters in potential wards, as wards with many voters can have a large number of candidates, which can lead to an increase in the number of informal (invalid) votes and
- clear ward boundaries.

3.3 The VEC's principles

Three main principles underlie all the VEC's work on representation reviews:

- 1. Ensuring the number of voters represented by each councillor is within 10 per cent of the average number of voters per councillor for that municipality.**

Over time, population changes can lead to some wards in subdivided municipalities having larger or smaller numbers of voters. As part of the review, the VEC corrects any imbalances and also takes into account likely population changes to ensure ward boundaries provide equitable representation for as long as possible.

- 2. Taking a consistent, State-wide approach to the total number of councillors.**

The VEC is guided by its comparisons of municipalities of a similar size and category to the council under review. The VEC also considers any special circumstances that may warrant the municipality having more or fewer councillors than similar municipalities.

- 3. Ensuring communities of interest are as fairly represented as possible.**

Each municipality contains a number of communities of interest. Where practicable, the electoral structure should be designed to ensure they are fairly represented, and that geographic communities of interest are not split by ward boundaries. This allows elected councillors to be more effective representatives of the people and interests in their particular municipality or ward.

3.4 The electoral representation review process

Developing recommendations

The VEC bases its recommendations for particular electoral structures on the following information:

- internal research specifically relating to the municipality under review, including Australian Bureau of Statistics and .id (Informed Decisions) Pty Ltd⁴ data; voter statistics from the Victorian electoral roll; and other State and local government data sets
- small area forecasts provided by .id (Informed Decisions) Pty Ltd
- the VEC's experience conducting previous electoral representation reviews of local councils and similar reviews for State elections
- the VEC's expertise in mapping, demography and local government

⁴ .id is a company specialising in population and demographic analysis that builds suburb-level demographic information products in most jurisdictions in Australia and New Zealand.

- careful consideration of all input from the public in written and verbal submissions received during the review and
- advice from consultants with extensive experience in local government.

Public involvement

Public input is accepted by the VEC through:

- preliminary submissions at the start of the review
- response submissions to the preliminary report and
- a public hearing, which provides an opportunity for people who have made a response submission to expand on this submission.

Public submissions are an important part of the process, but are not the only consideration during a review. The VEC ensures its recommendations are in compliance with the Act and are formed through careful consideration of public submissions, independent research, and analysis of all relevant factors, such as the need to give representation to communities of interest.

4 Gannawarra Shire Council representation review

4.1 Profile of Gannawarra Shire Council

Located in north-western Victoria, Gannawarra Shire is bounded by Swan Hill Rural City in the north, the Murray River (and the New South Wales border) in the east, Campaspe and Loddon Shires in the south, and Buloke Shire in the west. The Shire is predominantly rural, with approximately 47 per cent of its 3,735 square kilometres consisting of dryland agriculture and plantations, 33 per cent irrigated agriculture, 10 per cent conservation and natural environment and 5 per cent intensive use.⁵ The main agricultural uses of land are dairy farming, grain and crop farming, grazing, horticulture and viticulture, with some timber production.⁶

Gannawarra Shire has a population of 10,326.⁷ The municipality is projected to experience slow population decline at an annual rate of 0.7 per cent between 2011 and 2031, a common situation in inland rural municipalities in Victoria.⁸ By contrast, regional and rural Victoria as a whole is expected to experience moderate growth at an annual rate of 1.3 per cent. The Shire has a population density of three people per square kilometre, making it significantly less dense than rural and regional Victoria on average.

As shown in Table 1, the Shire contains two major towns and several smaller towns.⁹

Table 1: Gannawarra Shire population distribution

Town	Population	Proportion of Shire population (%)
Kerang	3,872	37.4
Cohuna	2,313	22.3
Koondrook	769	7.4
Leitchville	619	6.0
Quambatook	361	3.5
Murrabit	330	3.2
Lake Charm	311	3.0
Lalbert	224	2.2

Gannawarra Shire is less culturally diverse than rural and regional Victoria as a whole, with only 5 per cent of the population born overseas (compared with the rural and regional average of 10

⁵ profile.id, *Gannawarra Shire*, profile.id.com.au/gannawarra/home

⁶ Department of Transport, Planning and Local Infrastructure, *Victoria in Future 2015*, 2015.

⁷ ABS, *Estimated Resident Population*, 2013.

⁸ op. cit., Department of Transport, Planning and Local Infrastructure.

⁹ As at 2011 Census.

per cent), and less than 2 per cent speaking a language other than English at home (compared with the rural and regional average of 5 per cent). Approximately 1.6 per cent of the population identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. The original inhabitants of the area are the Baraparapa and Wemba Wemba Aboriginal people.

Gannawarra Shire's median age is 47, higher than the median age for rural and regional Victoria of 42. Over 17 per cent of the population is 70 years of age or older, compared with 12 per cent in regional and rural Victoria. The population is expected to continue ageing over the next 20 years, with significant out-migration of people aged 15–29.¹⁰

Gannawarra Shire has a lower unemployment rate and a lower rate of workforce participation than regional and rural Victoria generally, which is likely due to the relatively large proportion of the population at retirement age or above. Approximately 48 per cent of the workforce earns less than \$400 per week, higher than the rural and regional Victorian average of 40 per cent.

Approximately 24 per cent of the workforce is engaged in the agricultural, forestry and fishing industries, twice the rural and regional average for these industries. However, as in regional and rural Victoria generally, manufacturing and construction, retail trade, and health care and social services are also significant employers.

4.2 Current electoral structure

The last electoral representation review for Gannawarra Shire Council took place in 2007. Prior to the review, Gannawarra Shire Council consisted of seven councillors elected from five wards: two two-councillor wards and three single-councillor wards.

In its 2007 electoral representation review, the VEC recommended that Gannawarra Shire Council change to consist of seven councillors to be elected from four wards: one three-councillor ward, one two-councillor ward and two single-councillor wards. The recommendation to change the electoral structure, but retain the same number of councillors, was based on the following considerations:

- Seven councillors was an appropriate number given Gannawarra Shire's relatively large geographic area, and when compared to municipalities of a similar population size.
- The requirement for each councillor to represent no more than plus or minus 10 per cent of the average number of voters per councillor across the Shire meant that ward boundaries had to be redrawn.
- The argument made in public submissions that Gannawarra Shire is comprised of a number of distinct, autonomous communities of interest, and so should be subdivided rather than unsubdivided to ensure fair and equitable representation.

¹⁰ Rural Councils Victoria, *Rural Migration: Trends and Drivers*, 2013, p.15.

Wards were re-named as Avoca, Murray, Patchell and Yarran Wards.

4.3 Public information program

Public involvement is an important part of the representation review process. The Gannawarra Shire Council representation review commenced on Wednesday 15 July and the VEC conducted a public information program to inform the community, including:

- public notices of the review and the release of the preliminary report in local and state-wide papers
- media releases announcing the commencement of the review, the release of the preliminary report and the publication of this final report
- a public information session to outline the review process and respond to questions from the community
- coverage through the municipality's media, e.g. Council website or newsletter
- a helpline and dedicated email address to answer public enquiries
- ongoing information updates and publication of submissions on the VEC website and
- a *Guide for Submissions* to explain the review process and provide background information on the scope of the review.

See Appendix 3 for full details of the public information program.

5 Preliminary report

5.1 Preliminary submissions

The VEC received four preliminary submissions by the deadline for submissions at 5.00 pm on Wednesday 12 August.

Gannawarra Shire Council did not lodge a preliminary submission, but there were submissions from two long-term councillors, as well as a submission from the Proportional Representation Society of Australia (Victoria-Tasmania) Inc. (PRSA) and a joint submission from two members of the public. Councillors Goulding and den Houting proposed a reduction to five councillors and a switch to an unsubdivided structure, which would bring the benefits of reduced costs for ratepayers, a Shire-wide perspective on the part of councillors, and more choice for voters at elections. The PRSA preferred seven councillors and strongly advocated an unsubdivided structure, arguing that it would maximise effective votes, ensure that a minority could not control the Council, widen voter choice of candidates, facilitate representation of non-geographic communities and encourage councillors to become familiar with all parts of the municipality. In contrast, Richard and Cresenz Walters believed that the current division of the Shire into four wards was fair and equitable, and that having councillors elected to wards gave a sense of responsibility for the councillors and a local contact for the ratepayers.

A list of people who made a preliminary submission can be found in Appendix 1.

5.2 Preliminary report

A preliminary report was released on Wednesday 9 September. The VEC considered public submissions and research findings when formulating the options presented in the preliminary report.

Number of councillors

The VEC considers that similar types of municipality of a similar size should have the same number of councillors, unless special circumstances justify a variation.

Gannawarra Shire is towards the lower end of the seven-councillor band of rural councils. Mansfield Shire Council has more voters than Gannawarra and only five councillors. However, Mansfield's special circumstances (its large percentage of non-resident voters who tend to have fewer demands on council, and its high proportion of uninhabited forests and mountains) explain why it has fewer councillors than might be expected based only on the total number of voters. Of municipalities neighbouring Gannawarra Shire, Loddon Shire has fewer councillors than Gannawarra Shire, but also has somewhat fewer voters. After a slight decline since the 2007 representation review, Gannawarra Shire's population is expected to be more stable until 2031.

The VEC considered that seven councillors remained an appropriate and viable number for Gannawarra Shire Council.

On the other hand, it was significant that two councillors recommended a reduction to five councillors. Councillors Goulding and den Houting are the longest serving councillors; Cr Goulding is the current mayor, and Cr den Houting was Mayor from 2006 to 2010. Both councillors submitted that a reduction in councillors would reduce costs to ratepayers. For Cr Goulding, another reason for reduction was that the population had decreased. He stated that it would be comparable to the five-councillor Loddon Shire, which works extremely well. Cr den Houting submitted that 'the role of individual Crs is, by admission, not too onerous, 5 Crs could handle the work load'.

Gannawarra Shire Council faces few development pressures. There are demographic differences between the two main towns and the rural parts of the Shire, but the Shire lacks the social diversity (such as a high proportion of immigrant groups) that can increase the demands on Council. Moreover, the Shire is relatively small in area, being little more than half the size of most of its neighbours. The two seven-councillor municipalities that have fewer voters than Gannawarra Shire (Yarrriambiack and Buloke Shires) are much larger in area. Their geographic size increased the workload for councillors, which was why the VEC recommended at their last reviews that they should have seven councillors.

A change to five councillors would increase Gannawarra Shire's voter to councillor ratio to 1,806. This would still be a lower figure than that of most other rural municipalities.

Given Gannawarra Shire's stability and homogeneity, its relatively small size in both area and voters, and evidence from councillors about workloads, the VEC considered five councillors to be a valid option.

Electoral structure

The 2007 representation review recommended the current ward structure largely because, in the VEC's view, the ward boundaries accurately reflected communities of interest across the Shire. This still appears to be the case. In terms of land use, the Shire is divided into a western half dominated by dryland cereal grain production and an eastern half based on irrigated farming. The current Avoca Ward generally corresponds with the dryland farming area. The town of Kerang is the commercial hub of the Shire and comprises the bulk of the voters in Patchell Ward. Cohuna has a distinct identity, with its own secondary school, football team and community associations, and is the centre of an irrigated dairy farming district that corresponds with Yarran Ward. The riverside towns of Koondrook and Murrabit are based largely on the red gum timber industry, citrus farming and tourism, and their community of interest is captured in Murray Ward.

Boundaries between the wards are clear, mostly using watercourses such as the Loddon River and Barr Creek.¹¹

One of the main advantages of a subdivided structure is that it is conducive to local representation, with councillors who are expert on their own areas. Under the current structure, five of the seven councillors are elected from multi-councillor wards, which allow some scope for diversity of representation and choice for voters. As the current ward structure effectively reflects Gannawarra Shire’s geographic communities of interest, the VEC considered that it should be presented as the preferred option in this representation review.

Even in a relatively stable municipality like Gannawarra, populations of areas change at different rates. On the current boundaries, Murray Ward is uncomfortably close to the 10 per cent threshold with an enrolment 9.45 per cent above the average, and Yarran Ward is tending towards 10 per cent above. Conversely, Avoca Ward’s enrolment is relatively declining. The VEC proposed to remedy this by transferring the localities of Benjeroop from Murray Ward to Avoca Ward, and Horfield from Yarran Ward to Patchell Ward. This transfer of 90 voters (1 per cent of the total) solves the numbers problem, though at the cost of losing the Loddon River boundary at Benjeroop.

The VEC modelled ward structures with fewer than seven councillors, but found that the ward boundaries cut across communities of interest and thus were unsatisfactory.

The alternative to the current ward structure is an unsubdivided municipality. Cr Goulding stated that an unsubdivided structure would allow for a Shire-wide perspective from all councillors. Cr den Houting wrote that an unsubdivided structure might eliminate uncontested elections (which he believed to be unsatisfactory) and encourage more candidates.

One of the potential flaws of a ward structure is increased likelihood of uncontested elections, which reduce choice for voters. This has been a feature of Gannawarra Shire Council elections, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Candidates in Gannawarra Shire Council elections

Election	Candidates	Candidates per vacancy	Uncontested wards
2003	17	2.4	1 (of 5 wards)
2005	8	1.1	4 (of 5 wards)
2008	10	1.4	1 (of 4 wards)
2012	9	1.3	2 (of 4 wards)

¹¹ op. cit., profile.id.

Apart from the 2003 election, voters of Gannawarra Shire have had very little choice. In fact, almost half of the ward elections so far this century have been uncontested. Uncontested elections are less likely under an unsubdivided structure, as a contest will take place if there is only one more candidate than the total number of councillors to be elected. An unsubdivided structure would enable voters to choose from all the candidates on offer. A Shire-wide proportional representation election may offer more scope for diversity of representation than elections under the current structure. Given the Shire's relatively compact size, it should not be too daunting for candidates to campaign or for councillors to meet their constituents across the municipality. Experience of elections in smaller rural councils indicates that voters would not be overwhelmed by a plethora of candidates.

The VEC concluded that an unsubdivided structure was worth consideration. Therefore the VEC put forward two unsubdivided options—one for five councillors and one for seven councillors.

Options

After careful consideration, the VEC put forward the following options:

- Option A (preferred option)
Gannawarra Shire Council continue to consist of seven councillors elected from one three-councillor ward, one two-councillor ward and two-single-councillor wards, with modified ward boundaries.
- Option B (alternative option)
Gannawarra Shire Council consist of five councillors elected from an unsubdivided municipality.
- Option C (alternative option)
Gannawarra Shire Council consist of seven councillors elected from an unsubdivided municipality.

6 Public response

6.1 Response submissions

The VEC accepted submissions responding to the preliminary report from Wednesday 9 September until 5.00 pm on Wednesday 7 October. The VEC received seven response submissions. A list of people who made a response submission can be found in Appendix 1. Table 3 indicates the level of support for each option.

Table 3: Preferences expressed in response submissions

Option A	Option B	Option C
2	4	1

A majority of submissions, including those by Crs den Houting and Goulding, supported a reduction to five councillors and a change to an unsubdivided structure. Arguments for reducing the number of councillors included a cost saving through reduced councillor remuneration¹², comparison with similar shires, and the manageable workload with fewer councillors. These submitters supported a structural change because an unsubdivided structure would end the need to realign ward boundaries and would enable the whole municipality to vote for all the councillors. Nigel and Dorothy Turner stated that all parts of the Shire had a farming bond, and all the communities interacted and had respect for each other. They thought that, in Gannawarra Shire, the majority of voters would know or know somebody that knows every candidate, ‘thus improving the opportunity for an excellent representative Council’.

The PRSA supported the seven-councillor Option C because it would leave the fewest voters unrepresented, but considered Option B fully acceptable if the VEC decided that a smaller Council was preferable. The PRSA strongly supported an unsubdivided structure because the Society believed that structure would maximise choice for voters and produce the most representative election outcomes.

Two submissions supported the current structure. The Council resolved to support Option A, but did not give any reasons for its stance. Max Fehring believed that the number of councillors should stay at seven because the business of the Council was in many ways just as great as in larger councils, which had more resources than Gannawarra Shire Council. In his view, the seven councillors proved their worth in natural disasters such as the 2011 floods. Mr Fehring was concerned that, with five councillors, there could be meetings of only two or three as a result of

¹² Cr Goulding wrote that the reduction would ‘save a minimum of \$50,000 a year’.

councillor absences for various reasons. He thought that the question of cost was not very relevant, because councillors for Gannawarra Shire are paid less than councillors in larger councils. Mr Fehring supported the ward structure because it gave local communities the opportunity to elect someone who was familiar with the area and accessible.

6.2 Public hearing

The VEC conducted a public hearing for those wishing to speak about their response submission at 7.00 pm on Thursday 15 October in the Council Chamber, Kerang Office, Gannawarra Shire Council, 47 Victoria Street, Kerang. A list of people who spoke at the hearing can be found in Appendix 1.

Mr Fehring was concerned that a reduction to five councillors with an unsubdivided structure could reduce public access to councillors and impose a larger burden on councillors, both in their role as representatives and in campaigning for election. He considered that although Council policies were not based on wards but on need, the wards meant that councillors did not lose sight of where they came from. Asked about the proposed changes to ward boundaries under Option A, Mr Fehring replied that while there was no problem with the change to Benjeroop in the north (transferred from Murray Ward to Avoca Ward), the locality of Horfield in the south (transferred from the Cohuna-based Yarran Ward to the Kerang-based Patchell Ward) in fact had closer associations with Cohuna. However, he understood why the change was made.

Cr den Houting (who was speaking as an individual, not on behalf of the Council) proposed a change to an unsubdivided municipality with five councillors because the change would eliminate ward boundary adjustments, produce fairer and more robust representation, save costs, attract more candidates in elections, and end parochialism. Cr den Houting thought that the Council was working well, but that an unsubdivided structure would enhance a Shire-wide view. He acknowledged that during the 2007 review he and other councillors had maintained that the Shire consisted of a number of distinct, autonomous communities of interest, but said that he thought that was no longer the case, because 'I have found that the basic desires & interests and backgrounds of all our communities are, if not the same, certainly very similar'.

7 Findings and recommendation

7.1 The VEC's findings

Most response submissions supported Option B in the VEC's preliminary report, advocating a change to an unsubdivided council with five councillors. All the options in the preliminary report would provide fair and equitable representation for the voters of Gannawarra Shire.

The best approach to deciding between the options is to consider the number of councillors and the electoral structure separately.

Number of councillors

Arguments for reducing the number of councillors relate partly to the nature of the municipality, and partly to the work done by councillors. Gannawarra Shire is one of Victoria's smaller rural shires in terms of its population and its area. The Shire is socially homogeneous, and is not facing development pressures. These factors mean that, even though all councils, regardless of their size, have to make a wide range of strategic and policy decisions, the workload for Gannawarra Shire councillors may not be as significant as demands on councillors representing larger, more diverse municipalities.

When asked at the public hearing why the number of councillors should be reduced to five, Cr den Houting replied that five councillors would work as well as seven, that five 'could do the job', and that all councillors were part-time except for the Mayor. The VEC did not consider this to be a strong positive reason for changing to five councillors. Although experienced councillors might well be able to perform their functions with five councillors, the increased workload could be a deterrent to less experienced people who were thinking of standing for Council. One aspect that both sides agreed on was that the part-time nature of a councillor's role in Gannawarra Shire was a positive, as their usual work kept councillors grounded in reality. This part-time nature of the role might be more difficult to achieve with five councillors.

One of the main reasons given by Cr den Houting and others for a five-councillor Council is that the reduction would generate savings by reducing councillor remuneration costs. In the context of achieving fair and equitable representation, the VEC does not regard the cost argument as sufficient reason in itself to justify a reduction in representation.

Five is the minimum number of councillors under the Act. The VEC considers that this number is suitable for the smallest rural councils. Gannawarra Shire is not one of the smallest councils. In terms of numbers of voters, Gannawarra Shire is some 20 per cent larger than the five-councillor Loddon Shire. Unlike the smallest councils, Gannawarra includes substantial urban centres, as

well as rural areas. In light of the size of the Shire and councillor workloads, the VEC considers that seven is the appropriate number of councillors for Gannawarra Shire Council.

Electoral structure

In its 2007 representation review of Gannawarra Shire Council, the VEC heard persuasive arguments from the Council and other submitters that the Shire comprised distinct communities with a low degree of interdependence. This was particularly so in the case of Kerang and Cohuna, which had well established and clearly differentiated identities, with separate newspapers, community groups and progress associations. Diverse land uses for agricultural purposes within the Shire were also identified, such as the distinction between the dryland west and the irrigated east. Following that review, the VEC concluded that these well-defined geographic communities of interest would be most effectively represented in a subdivided structure.¹³

In the current review, there has been much less public support for wards, and submitters who insisted on the distinct nature of the various communities in 2007 are now proposing an unsubdivided structure. When asked what had changed in the meantime, Cr den Houting said that he felt that people were now more aware of local government. He stated that each individual community is a bit different, but that from a Council point of view their needs ('good roads and bridges, public lighting, playgrounds, sportsgrounds and swimming pools, footpaths, kerb & guttering, waste collection, libraries .., and so on') were much the same across the Shire. However, Cr den Houting's statement is about Council services rather than about representation of communities. All areas of a municipality need services from the Council, but one of the VEC's basic principles in a review is to ensure that communities of interest are as fairly represented as possible.

Gannawarra Shire is basically rural in nature, with the towns functioning largely as service centres for their agricultural hinterlands. Nigel and Dorothy Turner's submission stated that

Agriculture is the main stay of Gannawarra, so whether it is dryland or irrigated agriculture, or intensive animal industries, we have a farming bond. Talking about distinct, autonomous communities of interest is not relevant as all communities interact and have respect for each other.

At the 16 September Council meeting, the Mayor made the same point:

Similar issues and challenges affect all our communities and our communities are highly connected. For example, my farm is in Cohuna, but we purchase grain from a supplier in

¹³ See Victorian Electoral Commission: *Final Report - Electoral Representation Review for the Gannawarra Shire Council, 17 December 2007*, p. 16.

Lalbert, who also supplies farmers in Murrabit. Residents of one community play sport in another and send their kids to school in yet another.¹⁴

It is undeniable that there are interconnections between the communities in Gannawarra Shire. Nevertheless, there are also differences between them. Unlike most unsubdivided councils, Gannawarra Shire is not based on a single, dominant urban centre. In Gannawarra Shire there are two main urban centres, each of which has its own progress association and a wide range of community and sporting groups, as well as its own hospital and secondary school(s).¹⁵ Although the whole Shire is rural, the different land uses, whether dryland or irrigated, dairying or citrus, shape their local communities. These differences are broadly reflected in the current wards.

Parochialism is one of the potential weaknesses of a ward-based structure. At the public hearing, Cr den Houting said that parochialism 'is from time to time quite evident in council discussions especially during capital expenditure prioritising at budget time'. However, Cr den Houting himself praised the work of all the councillors on the Quambatook Weir, which directly affected only one ward. It appears that in general parochialism is not a serious issue in Gannawarra Shire, and that councillors look beyond their own area.

The strongest argument for changing to an unsubdivided structure is the pattern of uncontested elections under the current structure. Cr den Houting pointed out that:

At the moment we have 4 out of our 7 councillors that have not been elected, including myself. In the past, the Murray ward has not had an election opportunity with both the sitting Cr and his predecessor not having an election since before 2000. In the now Patchell ward (and Wandella prior to that), we have not had an election in two of the last 4 elections. Hopefully with an unsubdivided Shire we would attract more candidates in future elections. I believe there would be less reservation from our communities to nominate for council.

An unsubdivided structure would probably provide more choice for voters, and the councillors would be elected by the voters rather than stepping into a ward unopposed. However, there is no guarantee of a contest under an unsubdivided structure. It may be that the pool of citizens who are willing to be councillors is quite limited. As well, the challenge of campaigning across the entire Shire may in fact deter some prospective candidates. It should be noted that the relative lack of contests under the current structure does not mean that most councillors have been entrenched in their positions for long periods. Two current councillors were first elected in 2003;

¹⁴ Downloaded from gannawarra.vic.gov.au/assets/Agendas-and-Minutes/September-Ordinary-Council-Minutes.pdf

¹⁵ Gannawarra Community Directory, downloaded from gannawarra.vic.gov.au/assets/Community-Directory/Community-Directory-December-2014.pdf, 21 October 2015.

one councillor was first elected in 2005; one was elected in 2008; and the remaining three were elected at the Council's most recent election, in 2012.

On balance, the VEC considers that there is insufficient reason to change the electoral structure at this review. The Shire still comprises different geographical communities that are reflected in the ward structure. Most councillors are elected through proportional representation (in the three-councillor Patchell Ward and the two-councillor Yarran Ward), which can promote representation of diversity. The ward structure does not seem to have engendered much parochialism, as councillors are clearly acting for the good of the Shire as a whole. The VEC acknowledges that the pattern of uncontested elections under the current structure is undesirable, but a change to an unsubdivided structure would not necessarily solve this issue. Gannawarra Shire Council is projected to experience only slight population decline, which—at its anticipated rate—will have little impact on the enrolment, allowing the current ward structure (with minor adjustments) to stay within the accepted tolerance at least until the next scheduled electoral representation review.

7.2 The VEC's recommendation

The VEC recommends Gannawarra Shire Council continue to consist of seven councillors elected from one three-councillor ward, one two-councillor ward and two single-councillor wards, with modified ward boundaries.

This electoral structure was designated as the preferred option in the preliminary report. Please see Appendix 2 for a detailed map of this recommended structure.

Appendix 1: Public involvement

Preliminary submissions

Preliminary submissions were received from:

Neville Goulding

Keith den Houting

Proportional Representation Society of Australia (Victoria-Tasmania) Inc

Richard and Cresenz Walters

Response submissions

Response submissions were received from:

Max Fehring

Gannawarra Shire Council

Neville Goulding

Keith den Houting

Dianne Peace

Proportional Representation Society of Australia (Victoria-Tasmania) Inc.

Nigel and Dorothy Turner

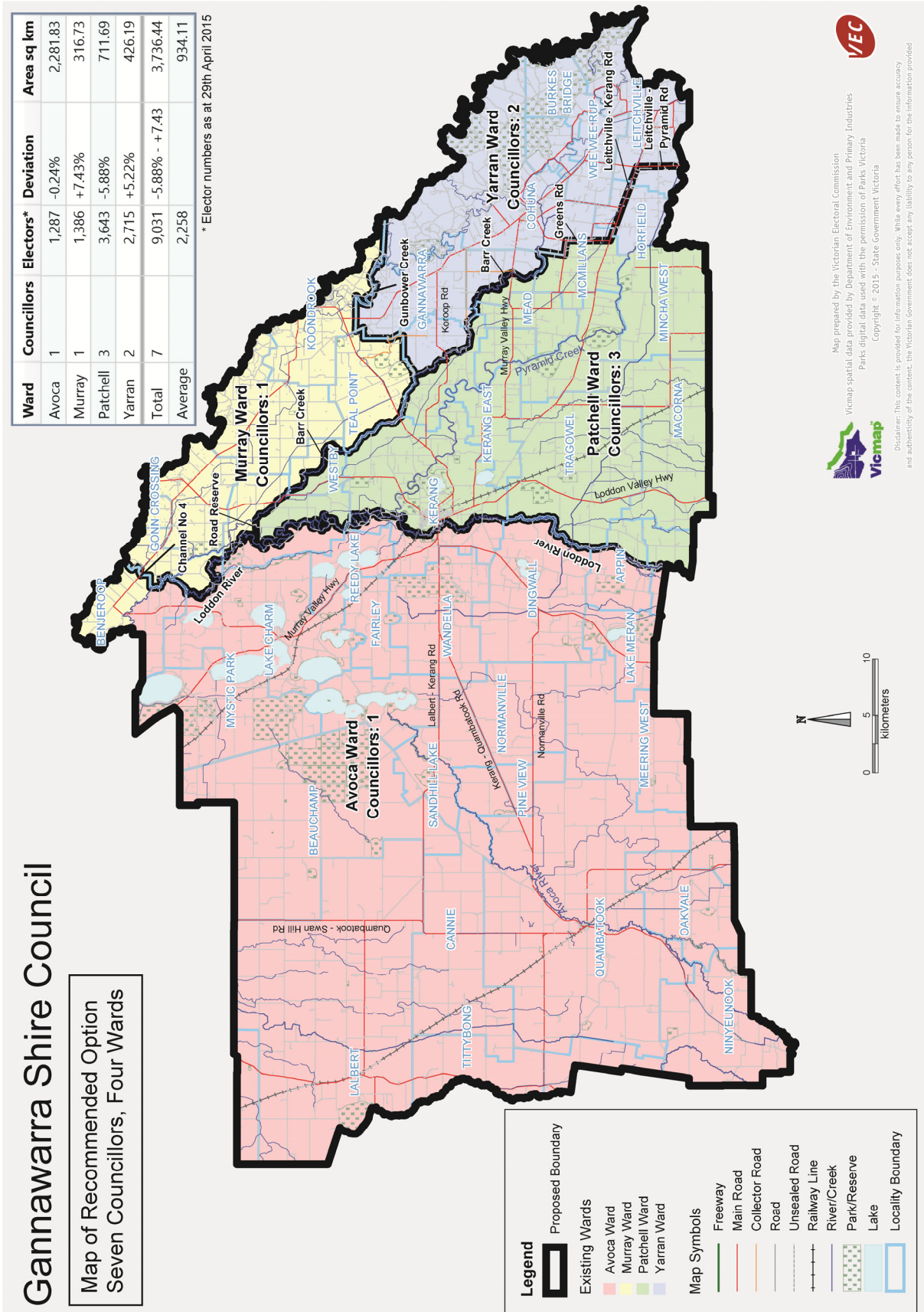
Public hearing

The following individuals spoke at the public hearing:

Max Fehring

Keith den Houting

Appendix 2: Map



Gannawarra Shire Council

Map of Recommended Option
Seven Councillors, Four Wards

Appendix 3: Public information program

Advertising

In accordance with the Act, public notices of the review and the release of the preliminary report were placed in the following newspapers:

Newspaper	Notice of review	Notice of preliminary report
<i>Herald Sun</i>	Wednesday 15 July	Wednesday 9 September
<i>Kerang Gannawarra Times</i>	Tuesday 14 July	Friday 11 September
<i>Kerang Gannawarra Times</i>	Friday 17 July	Tuesday 15 September

Media releases

A media release was prepared and distributed to local media at the commencement of the review on Wednesday 15 July. A further release was distributed at the publication of the preliminary report on Wednesday 9 September. A final release was circulated on the publication date of this final report.

Public information session

A public information session for people interested in the review process was held on Wednesday 22 July in the Council Chamber, Kerang Office, Gannawarra Shire Council, 47 Victoria Street, Kerang.

Helpline and email address

A telephone helpline and dedicated email address were established to assist members of the public with enquiries about the review process.

VEC website

The VEC website delivered up-to-date information to provide transparency and facilitate public participation during the review process. An online submission tool was made available and all public submissions were posted on the website.

Guide for Submissions

A *Guide for Submissions* was developed and distributed to those interested in making submissions. Copies of the *Guide* were available on the VEC website, in hardcopy on request and also provided to Council.

Council website and newsletter

Information about the review was provided to Council for publication in council media, e.g. website and newsletter.

This page has been left intentionally blank.

Victorian Electoral Commission
Level 11, 530 Collins Street
Melbourne VIC 3000

131 832

gannawarra.review@vec.vic.gov.au