

Local Council Representation Review

Final Report



**GOLDEN PLAINS
SHIRE COUNCIL**
May 2019

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Version 1



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Recommendation

The Victorian Electoral Commission recommends that Golden Plains Shire Council consist of seven councillors elected from three wards (one three-councillor ward and two two-councillor wards).

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.

Executive summary

The *Local Government Act 1989* (the Act) requires the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) to conduct an electoral representation review of each local council 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 people 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 ward boundaries and the number of councillors per ward).

The VEC conducts all reviews based on three main principles:

1. taking a consistent, State-wide approach to the total number of councillors
2. if subdivided, ensuring the number of voters represented by each councillor is within plus-or-minus 10% of the average number of voters per councillor for that local council
3. ensuring communities of interest are as fairly represented as possible.

Current electoral structure

Golden Plains Shire Council currently comprises seven councillors elected from an unsubdivided electoral structure. Prior to the last representation review in 2007, Golden Plains Shire Council comprised nine councillors elected from nine single-councillor wards.

Visit the VEC website at vec.vic.gov.au to access a copy of the 2007 review final report.

Preliminary submissions

Preliminary submissions opened at the commencement of the current review on Wednesday 30 January 2019. The VEC received 25 submissions for the representation review of Golden Plains Shire Council by the deadline at 5.00 pm on Wednesday 27 February 2019.

Preliminary report

A preliminary report was released on Wednesday 27 March 2019 with the following options for consideration:

- Option A (preferred option)
Golden Plains Shire Council consist of seven councillors elected from an unsubdivided electoral structure.
- Option B (alternative option)
Golden Plains Shire Council consist of seven councillors elected from three wards (one three-councillor ward and two two-councillor wards).
- Option C (alternative option)
Golden Plains Shire Council consist of eight councillors elected from three wards (two three-councillor wards and one two-councillor ward).

Response submissions

The VEC received 24 submissions responding to the preliminary report by the deadline at 5.00 pm on Wednesday 24 April 2019.

Public hearing

The VEC conducted a public hearing for those wishing to speak about their response submission at 6.30 pm on Wednesday 1 May 2019. Five people spoke at the hearing.

Recommendation

The Victorian Electoral Commission recommends that Golden Plains Shire Council consist of seven councillors elected from three wards (one three-councillor ward and two two-councillor wards).

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

Background

Legislative basis

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

The Act states 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 people 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 local council
- whether a local council should be unsubdivided or subdivided.

If a local council is subdivided, the VEC must ensure that the number of voters represented by each councillor is within plus-or-minus 10% of the average number of voters per councillor for that local council.² On this basis, the review must consider the:

- number of wards
- ward boundaries
- number of councillors that should be elected for each ward.

Public engagement

Public information program

The VEC conducted a public information program to inform the community of the representation review, including:

- public notices printed in local and state-wide papers
- public information sessions to outline the review process and respond to questions from the community
- media releases announcing the commencement of the review and the release of the preliminary report
- a submission guide to explain the review process and provide background information on the scope of the review

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

² *ibid.*

- an information email campaign targeted at known community groups and communities of interest in the local council area
- sponsored social media advertising geo-targeted to users within the local council area
- ongoing information updates and publication of submissions on the VEC website.

More information on the VEC's public information program for the representation review of Golden Plains Shire Council can be found at Appendix 3.

Public consultation

Public input was accepted by the VEC via:

- preliminary submissions at the start of the review
- response submissions to the preliminary report
- a public hearing that provided an opportunity for people who had made a response submission to expand on their submission.

Public submissions are an important part of the review process but are not the only consideration. The VEC ensures its recommendations comply with the Act and are formed through careful consideration of public submissions, independent research, and analysis of all relevant factors.

The VEC's principles

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

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

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

2. If subdivided, ensuring the number of voters represented by each councillor is within plus-or-minus 10% of the average number of voters per councillor for that local council.

This is the principle of 'one vote, one value', which is enshrined in the Act. This means that every person's vote counts equally.

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

Each local council 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 local council or ward.

Developing recommendations

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

- internal research specifically relating to the local council under review, including data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and .id³; voter statistics from the Victorian electoral roll; and other State and local government data sets
- 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
- careful consideration of all input from the public in written submissions received during the review and via oral submissions at the public hearing
- advice from consultants with extensive experience in local government.

Deciding on the number of councillors

The Act allows for a local council to have between five and 12 councillors but does not specify how to decide the appropriate number.⁴ In considering the number of councillors for a local council, the VEC is guided by the Victorian Parliament's intention for fairness and equity in the local representation of voters under the Act.

The starting point in deciding the appropriate number of councillors for a local council is comparing the local council under review to other local councils of a similar size and type (Principle 1). Generally, local councils 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 also considers the particular circumstances of each local council which could justify fewer or more councillors, such as:

- the nature and complexity of services provided by the Council
- geographic size and topography
- population growth or decline
- the social diversity of the local council.

³ .id is a consulting company specialising in population and demographic analysis and prediction information products in most jurisdictions in Australia and New Zealand.

⁴ Section 5B(1) of the *Local Government Act 1989*.

Deciding the electoral structure

The Act allows for a local council ward structure to be unsubdivided—with all councillors elected ‘at-large’ by all voters—or subdivided into a number of wards.

If the local council is to be subdivided into wards, there are three options available:

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

A subdivided electoral structure must have internal ward boundaries that provide for a fair and equitable division of the local council.

The Act allows for wards with different numbers of councillors, as long as the number of voters represented by each councillor is within plus-or-minus 10% of the average number of voters per councillor for that local council (Principle 2). For example, a local council may have one three-councillor ward with 15,000 voters and two single-councillor wards each with 5,000 voters. In this case, the average number of voters per councillor would be 5,000.

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

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

- the VEC’s recommendation at the previous representation review and the reasons for that recommendation
- the longevity of the structure, with the aim of keeping voter numbers per councillor within the 10% tolerance for as long as possible (Principle 2)
- communities of interest, consisting of people who share a range of common concerns, such as geographic, economic or cultural associations (Principle 3)
- the number of candidates in previous elections, as large numbers of candidates can lead to an increase in the number of informal (invalid) votes
- geographic factors, such as size and topography
- clear ward boundaries.

Golden Plains Shire Council representation review

Profile of Golden Plains Shire Council

Golden Plains Shire Council is located in Victoria's south-west, between the regional centres of Ballarat and Geelong. It incorporates a predominantly rural landscape as well as growing residential areas. Golden Plains Shire covers 2,704 square kilometres, with an estimated population of 21,688 in 2016.

Many residents commute to Ballarat or Geelong for employment, education and services, and proximity to these regional centres has contributed to the Shire's population growth. Golden Plains Shire is the fifth fastest growing local council area in regional Victoria.⁵

Golden Plains Shire is known for its gold mining history and heritage and has numerous small towns and villages. Bannockburn is the largest town, located in the south-east close to Geelong. About a quarter of the Shire's population resides in Bannockburn, which had an estimated 5,283 residents in 2016.⁶ Towns with populations exceeding 1,000 are located close to the Bannockburn region (Teesdale, Inverleigh and Lethbridge) and also in the north of the local council closer to Ballarat (Smythesdale).

Golden Plains Shire is known for its agricultural industry, which focuses on wool and grain growing, and intensive poultry and pig farming. Construction and wine production also contribute to the local economy.⁷ The 'Golden Plains Food Production Precinct', in the south of the Shire, is planned to become one of Victoria's premier areas for intensive agriculture.⁸

Golden Plains Shire has been attracting young couples and young families as well as older adults and empty nesters looking for an affordable semi-rural lifestyle within reasonable distance of Ballarat, Geelong and Melbourne. In 2016, couples with children comprised 50.7% of family units in the Shire, while couples without children comprised 37.7%. The median age in Golden Plains Shire is 39 years, which is below the average age for regional Victorians of 42 years. There is also a lower proportion of people at post-retirement age (65+ years) in the Shire's population at approximately 13%, compared to 19.6% for regional Victoria.⁹

⁵ Know Your Council, 'Golden Plains Shire', <http://knowyourcouncil.vic.gov.au/councils/golden-plains>, accessed 6 May 2019.

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, '2016 Census QuickStats – Bannockburn (Vic.)', http://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/SSC20132?op=endocument, accessed 6 May 2019.

⁷ Know Your Council, loc. cit.

⁸ Golden Plains Shire Council, 'Investment Boom in Golden Plains', <https://www.goldenplains.vic.gov.au/news/investment-boom-golden-plains>, accessed 6 May 2019.

⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, '2016 Census QuickStats – Golden Plains (S)', http://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/LGA22490?op=endocument, accessed 6 May 2019.

Golden Plains Shire has a lower unemployment rate of 4.7% compared to 6% for regional Victoria. While the agriculture, forestry and fishing sectors continue to provide employment to residents, the major industries that employ Golden Plains Shire residents are: health care and social assistance (13.7%), construction (11.5%), retail trade (9.8%) and manufacturing (8.9%). The health care and social assistance and construction sectors have grown in recent years.¹⁰

Compared to the state median weekly incomes of \$1,419 (household) and \$644 (personal), the Golden Plains Shire population had a similar median household weekly income at \$1,448 and median personal weekly income at \$628. Median weekly incomes were higher in Golden Plains than in rural and regional Victoria overall.

Census statistics indicate some variations in socio-economic disadvantage across Golden Plains Shire. The SEIFA index¹¹ is used to reflect disadvantage such as low income, low educational attainment and high unemployment. Some areas in the Shire are experiencing lower levels of disadvantage (such as Bannockburn, Inverleigh and Teesdale) while other areas in the Shire (such as Linton and the central west region) have higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage.¹²

Most people in Golden Plains Shire were born in Australia. Approximately 9% were born overseas, with about 3% of residents speaking a language other than English. Italian, German and Croatian were the top three languages other than English spoken in the Shire.¹³

The traditional custodians of the area are the Wadawurrung peoples.¹⁴ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up about 1% of the Shire's total population. This population is slightly lower than average for local councils across rural and regional Victoria.

There are an estimated 18,567 voters in Golden Plains Shire, with a ratio of about 2,652 voters per councillor. The Shire's population is forecast to increase steadily, reaching approximately 29,500 by 2031.¹⁵ Growth across the local council area is expected to be uneven, with the fastest rate of growth occurring in the Bannockburn area.¹⁶

¹⁰ id, 'Golden Plains Shire: Industry sector of employment', <https://profile.id.com.au/golden-plains/industries?WebID=10>, accessed 6 May 2019.

¹¹ Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas is a product developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics that ranks areas in Australia according to relative socio-economic advantage and disadvantage. The indexes are based on information from the five-year Census.

¹² id, 'Golden Plains Shire: SEIFA by profile area', <https://profile.id.com.au/golden-plains/seifa-disadvantage-small-area?WebID=150>, accessed 6 May 2019.

¹³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Quickstats – Golden Plains (S)', loc. cit.

¹⁴ Aboriginal Victoria, 'Welcome to Country and Acknowledgements Map', <https://achris.vic.gov.au/weave/wca.html>, accessed 6 May 2019.

¹⁵ id, 'Golden Plains Shire: Population and age structure map', <https://forecast.id.com.au/golden-plains/population-age-structure-map>, accessed 6 May 2019.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

Current electoral structure

Golden Plains Shire Council currently comprises seven councillors elected from an unsubdivided electoral structure. Prior to the last representation review in 2007, Golden Plains Shire Council consisted of nine councillors elected from nine single-councillor wards.

Visit the VEC website at vec.vic.gov.au to access a copy of the 2007 review final report.

Preliminary submissions

At the close of submissions on Wednesday 27 February 2019, the VEC had received 25 submissions for the representation review of Golden Plains Shire Council. A list of people who made a preliminary submission can be found in Appendix 1.

Submissions were received from a range of stakeholders including community organisations and individuals. The submissions were made available on the VEC website.

Number of councillors

Preliminary submissions expressed a variety of opinions on the appropriate number of councillors for Golden Plains Shire Council.

Eight submissions supported keeping the number of councillors at seven, including one submission that also supported reducing the number of councillors to five if there was strong justification and community support. Seven preliminary submissions indicated support for an increased number of councillors, although of these submissions one also accepted seven councillors as an alternative.

Electoral structure

Eighteen preliminary submissions expressed a desire to introduce a subdivided electoral structure, with a range of proposals for ward representation put forward.

Three submissions proposed similar three-ward models that divided the local council area into a ward for the northern areas closer to Ballarat, a central ward covering the rural areas, and a ward for the southern areas closer to Geelong. The three submissions varied in the numbers of councillors for each ward:

- North Ward (3), Central Ward (1), South Ward (3)
- North Ward (3), Central Ward (2), South Ward (4)
- North Ward (1-4), Central Ward (1-4), South Ward (1-4).

Three submissions supported four-ward models, with slightly varying boundaries and numbers of councillors:

- Bannockburn area (3), Smythesdale area (2), Linton area (1), south-west area (1)

- Bannockburn area (3), Smythesdale area (3), Linton/Rokewood area (1)
Meredith/Lethbridge area (2)
- Bannockburn area (3), Smythesdale area (2), Linton/Rokewood area (1)
Meredith/Lethbridge area (1).

An additional submission indicated a preference for three or four wards but did not describe a specific electoral structure.

Other submissions proposed various ward arrangements, including a two-ward model (dividing the local council area into eastern and western halves), a five-ward model (wards for the north-west near Ballarat, the south-east near Geelong, with the central areas subdivided between three wards), a six-ward model (one ward for Bannockburn, with the remaining area subdivided into five wards), a seven- or eight-ward model comprising only single-councillor wards, and a 12 single-councillor ward model. A further submission indicated a preference for either five or seven wards but did not describe a specific model. Six submissions advocated for wards in general, without describing a specific electoral structure.

Those in support of a subdivided electoral structure argued that there is a perception that Bannockburn dominates the local council; that areas outside Bannockburn and its immediate surrounds feel disadvantaged and disenfranchised; that the current councillors have an urban focus and do not understand or promote the needs of rural communities; and that different areas of the local council have very different focuses and need individual representation. Submissions also argued that current councillors are unknown to many people and that wards would make councillors more accessible and accountable to local communities. The majority of submissions calling for a subdivided electoral structure came from residents of Inverleigh, who indicated that the Inverleigh community feels underrepresented and argued that a subdivided electoral structure would enable a local resident, who could best represent their local area, to be elected to the Council.

Six submissions expressed a preference for retaining the current arrangement of seven councillors elected from an unsubdivided local council. Those in support of the current electoral structure argued that it works well, provides good balance for local representation, enables councillors to govern for the entire Shire, and is fairer than the former nine single-councillor ward structure. Submitters argued that voters have a greater choice of candidates with an unsubdivided electoral structure and that this has enabled voters to choose their preferred candidate regardless of where they reside, whereas wards result in fewer candidates to choose from and carry the risk of uncontested elections. These submissions also argued that having a larger pool of candidates from across the council (and therefore greater choice and a more competitive election) could lead to higher quality councillors; that elections are fairer for

candidates; and that an unsubdivided structure allows for uneven population growth across the local council area.

Those in support of retaining the current unsubdivided electoral structure also provided arguments against subdivided structures, contending that the reduced competition and uncontested elections that can occur with subdivided structures can lead to complacent councillors. Additionally, they argued that wards can foster resentment and division between groups within the community and work against the best interests of the Shire overall.

Preliminary report

A preliminary report was released on Wednesday 27 March 2019. The VEC considered public submissions and research findings when formulating the options presented in the preliminary report.

Number of councillors

When considering the appropriate number of councillors for a local council, the VEC reviews population data and assesses other factors which may merit an increase or decrease in the number of councillors, such as projected population growth or special circumstances relating to distinct communities of interest.

When compared to other regional Victorian local councils of similar size and number of voters, Golden Plains Shire Council sits within the seven-councillor range but is approaching the top of the list of comparative local councils. Golden Plains Shire Council is also experiencing rapid (although uneven) population growth, with the greatest growth expected for Bannockburn and the surrounding areas. These two factors may justify an increase in the number of councillors. However, VEC's analysis and the information provided in preliminary submissions did not identify any other special circumstances that would support a recommendation for additional councillors on Golden Plains Shire Council. On balance, the VEC considered seven councillors to be appropriate for Golden Plains Shire Council, but also acknowledged some justification for an increased number of councillors.

Electoral structure

In its preliminary report, the VEC found that the uneven distribution and growth of the population in Golden Plains Shire Council posed a challenge for developing ward boundaries. The VEC found that an unsubdivided electoral structure is a suitable model for the Shire because it can effectively address issues associated with ward boundaries. Unsubdivided electoral structures can foster a 'whole-of-shire' approach to representation and community identity, and enable voters to raise concerns and vote on matters they care about regardless of their location within the local council. Unsubdivided electoral structures also allow all voters to choose from the widest selection of candidates, reduce the risk of uncontested elections occurring in sparsely

populated rural areas, and do not limit the number of councillors that can be elected from any area of a local council. Because there are no ward boundaries, uneven population growth is not an issue. The VEC noted that in previous elections under the current unsubdivided structure, councillors have been elected from across the Shire without any area dominating or being unrepresented. The VEC put forward an unsubdivided model, reflecting the existing electoral structure of the local council, as its preferred option.

However, the VEC recognised that a majority of preliminary submissions called for a return to wards to ensure local representation. The VEC also noted that there were fewer candidates from areas outside the Bannockburn area at the 2016 general election for Golden Plains Shire Council compared to previous elections. Therefore, the VEC also considered subdivided electoral structures when preparing options for the preliminary report.

When developing potential subdivided electoral structures for Golden Plains Shire Council, the VEC found that three-ward models were the most effective at balancing voter-to-councillor ratios across the local council area as well as providing representation for the major geographic regions of the Shire. The VEC put forward two subdivided electoral structures based around a three-ward electoral structure, taking into account the concepts and boundaries suggested in preliminary submissions.

Option B consisted of seven councillors distributed across:

- a two-councillor ward (Goldfields Ward) in the north-west of the local council (Haddon, Napoleons, Scarsdale and Smythesdale), covering the region focused on Ballarat
- a two-councillor ward (Central Plains Ward) in the thinly populated central area of the local council (Cape Clear/Illabarook/Rokewood Junction, Dereel, Inverleigh, Linton, Rokewood/Corindhap, Shelford and Teesdale)
- a three-councillor ward (Eastern Plains Ward) in the south-east of the local council (Bannockburn, Batesford, Lethbridge, Maude/Steiglitz/She Oaks and Meredith), covering the growth area focused on Geelong.

This option was largely based on the preliminary submission from Jeff Langdon, with modifications to the boundaries made to enhance its long-term sustainability.

Option C consisted of eight councillors distributed across:

- a three-councillor ward (Goldfields Ward) in the north-west of the local council (Haddon, Linton, Napoleons, Scarsdale and Smythesdale)
- a two-councillor ward (Central Plains Ward) in the central area of the local council (Cape Clear/Illabarook/Rokewood Junction, Dereel, Inverleigh, Rokewood/Corindhap, Shelford and Teesdale)

- a three-councillor ward (Eastern Plains Ward) in the south-east of the local council (Bannockburn, Batesford, Lethbridge, Maude/Steiglitz/She Oaks and Meredith).

Option C combined elements of the preliminary submission from Shayne Wren with the preferred model from the VEC's last representation review of Golden Plains Shire Council in 2007, and further modifications were made to enhance the viability of the option.

It was considered that both options provided recognition of and representation for the differing needs and focuses of the three major geographic areas of the local council (north-west, central, and south-east regions) and accommodated uneven population growth across the local council area. Also, all wards in Option B and Option C were multi-councillor and would have the same counting method used at an election. Option C also provided an opportunity to consider whether the number of councillors in the local council should be increased to eight.

Options

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

- Option A (preferred option)
Golden Plains Shire Council consist of seven councillors elected from an unsubdivided electoral structure.
- Option B (alternative option)
Golden Plains Shire Council consist of seven councillors elected from three wards (one three-councillor ward and two two-councillor wards).
- Option C (alternative option)
Golden Plains Shire Council consist of eight councillors elected from three wards (two three-councillor wards and one two-councillor ward).

Public response

Response submissions

The VEC accepted submissions responding to the preliminary report from Wednesday 27 March 2019 until 5.00 pm on Wednesday 24 April 2019. The VEC received 24 response submissions. Of these, 11 were returning submitters who had provided the VEC with a submission at the preliminary stage of the review. A list of people who made a response submission can be found in Appendix 1.

Table 1 indicates the level of support for each option.

Option A	Option B	Option C
8	10*	6

*One submission supporting Option B was also accepting of Option C.

A range of arguments were put forward in favour of the three options. Arguments seen in response submissions were similar to those at the preliminary submission stage.

Unsubdivided electoral structure (Option A)

Support for Option A

Supporters of Option A came from: Bannockburn (2), Napoleons (1), Teesdale (3) and outside the local council area (2).

Those in support of retaining the current unsubdivided electoral structure argued that the current structure works and enables a whole-of-shire approach to representation. Supporters believed that unsubdivided electoral structures provide the greatest freedom and choice for voters when selecting candidates, choosing issues to support and approaching councillors to discuss concerns, and also reduced the risk of uncontested elections. Supporters argued that Option A would allow the best candidates to be elected regardless of their location. It was also argued that unsubdivided structures were the most democratic option, as all votes have equal value, and the highest percentage of voters would be represented by a person they voted for.

Opposition to Option A

Those wishing to change to a subdivided electoral structure stated that areas outside of Bannockburn feel unrepresented under the current structure and that this fosters discord between rural and urban areas of the Shire. Four councillors are currently from the Bannockburn

area, leading to a perception that Bannockburn is favoured by the Council's decision-making. It was argued that there has been a decline in the number of councillors from rural areas and these submitters were concerned that future councils may be entirely comprised of Bannockburn-based councillors, which would further decrease representation of rural areas. In contrast to submissions in support of Option A, opponents felt that the Council does not take a whole-of-shire approach, and that rural areas need rural councillors as they are more accessible to rural residents and have greater local knowledge. It was also argued that the unsubdivided structure leads to an overwhelming workload for councillors and that this is anticipated to increase with the growing population. Opponents of Option A believed that the current structure deters rural candidates due to the cost of campaigning across the whole council area, and the belief that it is harder for rural candidates to be elected compared to those from the more highly populated area around Bannockburn.

Subdivided electoral structures (Option B and Option C)

Support for wards (general)

Those wishing for a change to a subdivided electoral structure stated that this would deliver better rural representation and guarantee councillors for the central and north-western regions of the Shire into the future. It was argued that wards would reduce councillor workloads to a more manageable level, enabling better representation for communities and improved wellbeing for councillors. It was also argued that uncontested elections were not necessarily an indicator of a malfunctioning subdivided electoral structure, as in situations where a councillor has the support of the community there would be no need to challenge that councillor. It was also argued that an uncontested election would save costs. The fact that the current Golden Plains Shire Council supports a move to wards was also put forward as a strong argument for change.

Opposition to wards (general)

Those opposing a move to wards argued that, under the previous nine single-councillor ward structure, reduced competition led to complacent councillors and poor representation, and that wards would not guarantee improved council performance. It was argued that if rural communities wish for more rural councillors they could achieve this by putting forward and supporting rural candidates, and that there was no need to change the electoral structure for this to occur. It was also argued that a move to a subdivided electoral structure would be counter-productive for rural people as it would reduce the voting power of rural areas while increasing representation for towns in the Shire.

Option B

Supporters of Option B came from across the local council area: Bannockburn (Councillor David John Evans and Golden Plains Shire Council), Berringa (1), Cape Clear (1), Elaine (1), Inverleigh (2), Linton (2) and Smythesdale (1).

Those in support of Option B argued that it captured the three major geographic regions of the Shire (south-east, central, north-west), and provided a good balance of representation across the Shire. Concerns with Option B were that the Central Plains Ward is a large area and the two councillors for this ward would be less accessible to residents than councillors in other wards.

One submitter in support of Option B (David Cadby) provided a possible modification to improve this model which divided the Central Plains Ward into two single-councillor wards. The VEC tested this modification and found that it was not viable as it was not possible to balance current or future voter-to-councillor ratios across the divided central area of the Shire within the legislated plus-or-minus 10% tolerance.

Option C

Supporters of Option C came from across the local council area: Barunah Park (1), Gheringhap (1), Inverleigh (1), Ross Creek (1), Scarsdale (1), and Smythesdale (1).

Similar to Option B, those in support of Option C felt that this model captured the three major geographic regions of the Shire (south-east, central, north-west), and provided a good balance of representation across the Shire. Supporters felt that the additional councillor enabled more equitable, balanced representation across the shire, and allowed for future growth in the north-west and south-east.

One submission raised a concern that Option C did not represent the three regions as well as Option B, and multiple submissions raised a concern that the additional councillor could lead to tied votes on council and an additional cost to ratepayers. As with Option B, there was also concern that the Central Plains Ward was a large area and councillors for this ward would be less accessible to residents.

One submitter in support of Option C also provided two suggestions for ward names:

- Grenville, Leigh, Bannockburn (based on the names of pre-amalgamation Shires)
- Woody, Rokeleigh, Meriburn.

Public hearing

The VEC conducted a public hearing for those wishing to speak about their response submission at 6.30 pm on Wednesday 1 May 2019 at Rokewood Memorial Hall, 66 Ferrars Street, Rokewood. Five speakers attended the public hearing. A list of people who spoke at the hearing can be found in Appendix 1.

Three speakers supported Option B and two supported Option C. There were no speakers in support of the current unsubdivided electoral structure.

The arguments put forward by speakers in support of Option B and Option C largely reflected the arguments in the response submissions. The speakers discussed the different focuses of communities in the Shire, and the challenge of representing these communities in a local council of this size under an unsubdivided electoral structure.

Representation for local communities and the Shire as a whole

All speakers felt that, under the current unsubdivided electoral structure, the quality of local representation had declined or was likely to decline in the future.

N. Bruce McDonald and John Bolitho both stated that many members of the Golden Plains Shire community initially supported the unsubdivided electoral structure that was introduced at the 2008 election, but that the community has found local representation has since declined. Mr McDonald argued that the unsubdivided structure initially appeared to provide representation from across the Shire, but that this was because the existing councillors that had been elected from across the Shire under the previous subdivided electoral structure were returned at the 2008 election.

Peter Trevaskis spoke for the Inverleigh Progress Association and argued that Bannockburn is currently overrepresented as four out of seven councillors reside in the Bannockburn area, and that Bannockburn is favoured by the Council while other areas feel unrepresented. Mr McDonald and Mr Bolitho expressed similar views, stating that the Inverleigh community felt unrepresented and disenfranchised, with Mr McDonald arguing that the unsubdivided structure did not ensure that councillors had an interest in or understanding of the communities of interest outside their own local area.

Noel Sharkey felt that the unsubdivided structure returned a poor result at the 2016 election and argued that communities in the Shire need local representation with councillors who are more accountable to their communities.

Councillor David John Evans stated that during his time as a councillor he has observed that many residents do not know who the current councillors are or who to contact to raise concerns. Cr Evans argued that, due to the challenges councillors face in providing adequate representation across the Shire under the unsubdivided electoral structure, continuing under this

structure is likely to result in suboptimal performance from councillors and a risk that councillors would, out of necessity, become more selective in which issues they address.

All speakers felt that the introduction of wards would improve representation for local communities in the Shire.

Mr Trevaskis argued that residents in the central and north-west areas of the Shire have a closer association with Ballarat than Bannockburn, as people from these areas travel to Ballarat for their shopping, farming equipment and supplies, and schooling. This view was supported by Mr McDonald, who argued that the Shire's attention is divided between Ballarat and Geelong and felt that the agricultural focus of the central region gave it a closer association with Ballarat due to the livestock saleyards (Central Victoria Livestock Exchange) and agricultural dealers located in this area.

Mr Trevaskis also argued that the most disadvantaged residents live in the area at the opposite end of the Shire to Bannockburn and currently have little representation. Mr Trevaskis supported Option B, arguing that a combined total of four councillors would improve representation for residents of the central and north-west areas, and provide more equal representation for communities across the whole Shire.

Cr Evans noted that in both Option B and Option C, Inverleigh and Teesdale were included in Central Plains Ward, but felt that these towns had more of a southern identity and may relate more to Bannockburn and the Eastern Plains Ward. However, Cr Evans acknowledged the need to balance voter-to-councillor ratios across wards and felt that this should not be an impediment to adopting a subdivided structure. Mr McDonald and Mr Bolitho disagreed with Cr Evans, arguing that Inverleigh did not share a community of interest or strong association with Bannockburn, but rather related more closely to the rural central and northern parts of the Shire due to the rural agricultural lifestyle of the Inverleigh area, and was appropriately placed in the Central Plains Ward. Mr McDonald also stated that Inverleigh residents travelled to Geelong rather than Bannockburn for shopping and other services.

Mr McDonald argued against the view that the current unsubdivided electoral structure benefited the Shire by allowing communities of interest to remain undivided. Mr McDonald dismissed the argument that the introduction of wards could be detrimental because they would split communities, arguing that many of the Shire's communities are already split across different local councils by the external council boundary. Mr McDonald stated that wards would be no different and would not physically split communities, but would improve their chances of representation on council. Mr McDonald also argued that a community that is split across wards could actually gain increased representation from this situation, as the community as a whole could benefit from representation by councillors from both sides of the ward boundary.

Cr Evans rebutted an argument that wards would be detrimental because they may encourage partisanship within or between wards. Cr Evans acknowledged that while wards would probably become partisan, this occurs through all layers of government and is managed, and that councillors who represent wards must also act for the benefit of the whole Shire.

Uncontested elections

The VEC noted in the preliminary report that there could be a risk of uncontested elections under a subdivided structure compared with the current unsubdivided structure, especially given the history of uncontested elections under the previous single-councillor ward structure. In response to this concern, speakers suggested that the subdivision of the local council would re-invigorate interest from the local community and encourage more candidates to nominate for local government elections, ensuring contested elections.

In response to questioning, Mr Bolitho felt that more people would be willing to stand as candidates under a subdivided electoral structure, particularly young people. Mr Bolitho stated that the Inverleigh Progress Association had received feedback that young people have little interest in council because they feel disenfranchised under the current structure. Mr Bolitho felt that the increased accountability of wards would encourage more young people to engage in council and nominate.

When questioned about the risk of uncontested elections under a subdivided structure, Mr Bolitho felt that this was unlikely to be an issue. Mr Bolitho felt that councillors who represent their communities well are less likely to be challenged in an election, that the local community is very passionate and active, and that many locals would be willing to challenge a councillor who provided poor representation. Similarly, Mr McDonald argued that the uncontested elections of the past were not necessarily indicators of a malfunctioning electoral structure, and that he had previously been well represented by a councillor who was elected uncontested. Mr McDonald cited the results of the 2008 general election, where previously uncontested councillors were re-elected under the unsubdivided structure, as evidence that these 'uncontested' councillors were genuinely supported by their communities.

Cr Evans felt that the introduction of wards could encourage a greater number of candidates to stand for the Goldfields Ward and Central Plains Ward, whereas under the unsubdivided electoral structure candidates faced many difficulties engaging with their constituents during the short campaigning period. Multiple speakers also felt that candidates from rural areas were disadvantaged under the current structure due to the growing Bannockburn population, sparse rural population, and the greater travel time and postage costs of campaigning in rural areas. Mr Trevaskis argued that this may lead to good candidates being unsuccessful, whereas a ward structure may provide a greater chance of success.

Councillor workloads

Cr Evans spoke of the challenges that councillors face under an unsubdivided structure in providing the level of representation that they and the Shire's residents expect from council. Cr Evans felt that the size of the Shire and the growing population posed difficulties for managing councillor workloads, responding to issues in a timely manner, gaining adequate knowledge of issues to make informed decisions, as well as increasing travel time and costs that are not sufficiently covered by councillor allowances. Cr Evans indicated that wards would help councillors achieve better outcomes and representation for local communities, and a more achievable work-life balance for councillors. Subsequent speakers also supported Cr Evans' concerns about the health and welfare of councillors in the Shire.

Supporters of Option B and Option C recognised the larger workloads that would be required of councillors representing the Central Plains Ward.

Option B: Seven councillors elected from three wards (one three-councillor ward and two two-councillor wards)

Supporters of Option B felt that this option provided the best representation for the Shire.

Mr Trevaskis noted that the recommended preliminary option from 2007 representation review was a similar three-ward structure, and that the current Golden Plains Shire Council supports Option B.

Cr Evans raised concerns with the increased number of councillors in Option C, arguing that an even number was unfavourable as there was a greater risk of deadlocked council votes.

Option C: Eight councillors elected from three wards (two three-councillor wards and one two-councillor ward)

Supporters of Option C felt that this option provided better representation for the north-west of the Shire, with Linton being included in the Goldfields Ward. The south-east boundary was thought to be acceptable, but it was also argued that this boundary could be improved at the next review when population numbers are likely to have changed across the Shire.

Those supporting Option C noted that an extra councillor may increase costs to the community but argued that this would be balanced by the introduction of wards, which they believed would improve the governance and decision-making processes of council. Supporters of Option C did not consider the risk of tied council votes to be an issue, arguing that this can be managed and that absences or conflicts of interest often occur during council meetings.

The final speaker (Mr Bolitho) stated that although his response submission supported Option B, that the points raised by previous speakers during the public hearing led him to modify his views, concluding that he would be satisfied if either Option B or Option C were to be adopted.

At the public hearing, Mr Sharkey tabled suggested amendments to both Option B and Option C, which divided the central ward into two wards (Option B) and three wards (Option C) and increased the number of councillors in Option C to ten. These suggested amendments were unviable as they unbalanced voter-to-councillor ratios across wards. Increasing the number of councillors to ten was also not considered to be appropriate for the Shire at this time. Therefore, the suggested amendments did not impact the VEC's views on the recommended option.

Findings and recommendation

The VEC's findings

From its research into the local council area and submissions to this review, the VEC identified three distinct geographic regions in Golden Plains Shire: the south-east Bannockburn region with a predominantly Geelong focus; the north-west region with a predominantly Ballarat focus; and the central region with a rural agricultural focus. Additional information provided in response submissions and during the public hearing indicated that the central region of the Shire has become increasingly associated with Ballarat, largely due to support and trade for agricultural industries coming from Ballarat and its surrounds. Public feedback indicated that the Bannockburn region has a growing urban character, which is distinctly different from other areas of the Shire.

Many preliminary submissions raised concerns that towns and localities outside the Bannockburn area are not sufficiently represented. Response submissions in support of Option B, Option C, as well as speakers at the public hearing put forward similar arguments against Option A, indicating that the desire to move to a subdivided structure is largely driven by dissatisfaction with rural representation under the current electoral structure, and concerns about the potential for decreased rural representation in the future.

Multiple submissions argued that rural communities should have representatives that live locally. It was argued that representatives living in local communities are more likely to be known to locals and are more physically accessible when voters wish to discuss issues. It was also argued that local representatives would be better advocates for rural communities because they live in and understand the issues in their community and can better represent the interests of those communities during council decision-making.

In the preliminary report, the VEC observed that at the 2008 general election, eight candidates were from rural localities and townships across the local council area and all seven councillors were elected from rural areas, which could be taken to indicate that the unsubdivided electoral structure provided good representation for rural areas. However, public feedback highlighted that six of the seven councillors from the previous subdivided electoral structure were returned at this election, indicating that this spread of representation from across the local council area in 2008 was largely an artefact of the previous structure. New rural councillors have since been elected under the unsubdivided structure, and a majority of councillors residing in the Bannockburn area is not yet an established ongoing pattern. However, there does appear to be an emerging pattern of fewer rural candidates standing for election, as well as increasing numbers of candidates and first-time councillors being drawn from the south-east of the Shire.

Through the public consultation on this review, the VEC observed strong support for change from the Golden Plains Shire community, including from Golden Plains Shire Council itself. The VEC received submissions from both current and former councillors that, despite their best efforts, councillors in the Shire struggle to provide representation for all areas. The VEC has also heard from residents who feel that representation has deteriorated since the introduction of the unsubdivided electoral structure and that wards would deliver improved representation and greater accountability from councillors. This strong support for change from both the community and the council was taken into consideration by the VEC in determining the appropriate electoral structure for Golden Plains Shire.

One of the major concerns with a subdivided electoral structure is the history of uncontested elections in the Shire under the previous nine single-councillor ward structure that was in place prior to the 2008 general election. At the Shire's 2002 and 2004 general elections, six out of the nine wards were uncontested. There have also been modest numbers of candidates seen at elections under the current electoral structure: 11 candidates in 2008, and 12 candidates in both 2012 and 2016. Combined with a possible decline in candidates from rural areas, these recent patterns do pose a risk of uncontested elections for wards located in the central and north-west of the Shire. The VEC considers that this risk would be lessened under either of the subdivided options put forward, as the proposed multi-councillor wards are larger than those of the previous electoral structure; the overall number of councillors in the Shire has been reduced from nine; and the population of the Shire is growing at a rapid pace. However, it is acknowledged that the risk of uncontested elections remains.

The VEC has also noted that individuals and multiple community groups from across the entire local council area have actively engaged in the representation review process, displaying a strong and passionate interest in their communities. The VEC noted in response submissions and at the public hearing that there is a strong community belief that the introduction of wards would motivate and encourage more people to stand as candidates, and assist in engaging younger community members who currently feel disenfranchised. It is also worth noting that community feedback from response submissions and the public hearing indicated that some members of the local community do not feel that an uncontested election in their area would necessarily be an indicator of a poorly-functioning electoral structure, instead believing that within Golden Plains Shire, councillors who provide good representation and have strong community support are less likely to be challenged than poorly performing councillors. However, the VEC considers that uncontested elections are generally not desirable in the goal to achieve fair and equitable representation as voters are not given the opportunity to elect a representative of their choice.

While there are valid arguments and supporters both for and against retaining the existing electoral structure, the VEC considers that, on balance, a move to a subdivided electoral structure would provide an opportunity for the rural community to gain improved representation, and thereby improve representation for the Shire as a whole.

Both Option B and Option C divide the council according to the general geographic regions of the Shire, increasing localised representation for the area covered by Goldfields Ward, stabilising representation for the area covered by the Central Plains Ward, and decreasing representation drawn from the Bannockburn region. However, the precise ward boundaries differ between these two options.

In Option B, the Yarrowee River forms part of the boundary between the Central Plains and Eastern Plains Wards, supplying a stronger boundary for this ward. The Central Plains Ward is also slightly smaller in area than in Option C, benefiting councillors representing this ward. In addition, while both options account for projected population change across the Shire, Option B provides for the possibility of greater than expected growth for the Bannockburn region. In Option C, the south-east boundary is set farther away from the town of Teesdale. Also, the addition of an extra councillor in Option C enables a stronger ward boundary in the north of the Shire, encompassing Linton, Enfield State Park and surrounding localities within the Goldfields Ward. However, the VEC also notes that two submissions received from residents of Linton supported Option B, and overall public support for Option B was greater than that for Option C.

Taking into account information gathered via research, public submissions and the public hearing, the VEC does not consider that Option C provides significantly more favourable representation than Option B. There have not been any special circumstances that have arisen within the local council area since the 2007 representation review that would strongly support an increase in councillors. Therefore, the VEC recommends Option B.

Ward names

The VEC acknowledges that there is interest within the Golden Plains Shire for ward names that reflect the Shire's geography and history, such as ward names that recognise the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage of the Shire. Differing views on final ward names were expressed through submissions, with no clear consensus of opinion. Accordingly, the VEC has not changed the names in the recommended option since it was presented in the preliminary report. Should the community prefer alternative names to those provided, the Act provides for ward names to be altered by an Order in Council.

The VEC's recommendation

The Victorian Electoral Commission recommends that Golden Plains Shire Council consist of seven councillors elected from three wards (one three-councillor ward and two two-councillor wards).

This recommendation is submitted to the Minister for Local Government as required by the *Local Government Act 1989*. The model was designated as Option B in the VEC's preliminary report for this review. Please see Appendix 2 for a detailed map of this recommended structure.

Appendix 1: Public involvement

Preliminary submissions

Preliminary submissions were received from:

Barry, Eliza and Peel, Ewan

Bolitho, John and Anne

Bury, Ross

Cadby, David

Cameron, Robert

Gamble, Gavin

Hart, Jennifer

Inverleigh Progress Association

Jenkins, Sharon

Langdon, Jeff

Maddy-Byrne, Marilyn

Maguire, Susanne

McBeath, Diane

McCallum, Stuart

McDonald, Elizabeth

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

Saccuzzo, Frank

Sharkey, Noel E.

Steele, Cameron

Thornton, Luanne

van Galen, Lana

White, Glenda

Wilson, Noel

Windle, Christine

Wren, Shayne

Response submissions

Response submissions were received from:

Blake, Janet [Jenny] Mary Leishman

Bolitho, John and Anne

Cadby, David

Curtis, Chris

Dittloff, Michael

Dunne, Mark

Evans, David John (Councillor)

Gamble, Gavin

Golden Plains Shire Council

Inverleigh Progress Association

Lewers, Helen

Maddison, David

Maddy-Byrne, Marilyn

McCallum, Stuart

McDonald, N. Bruce

McIntyre, Josh

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

Roberts, Peter

Sharkey, Noel

Smythesdale Progress Association

Sztynda, Halina

van Galen, Lana

White, Glenda

Wren, Shayne

Public hearing

The following individuals spoke at the public hearing:

Bolitho, John

Evans, David John (Councillor)

McDonald, N. Bruce

Sharkey, Noel

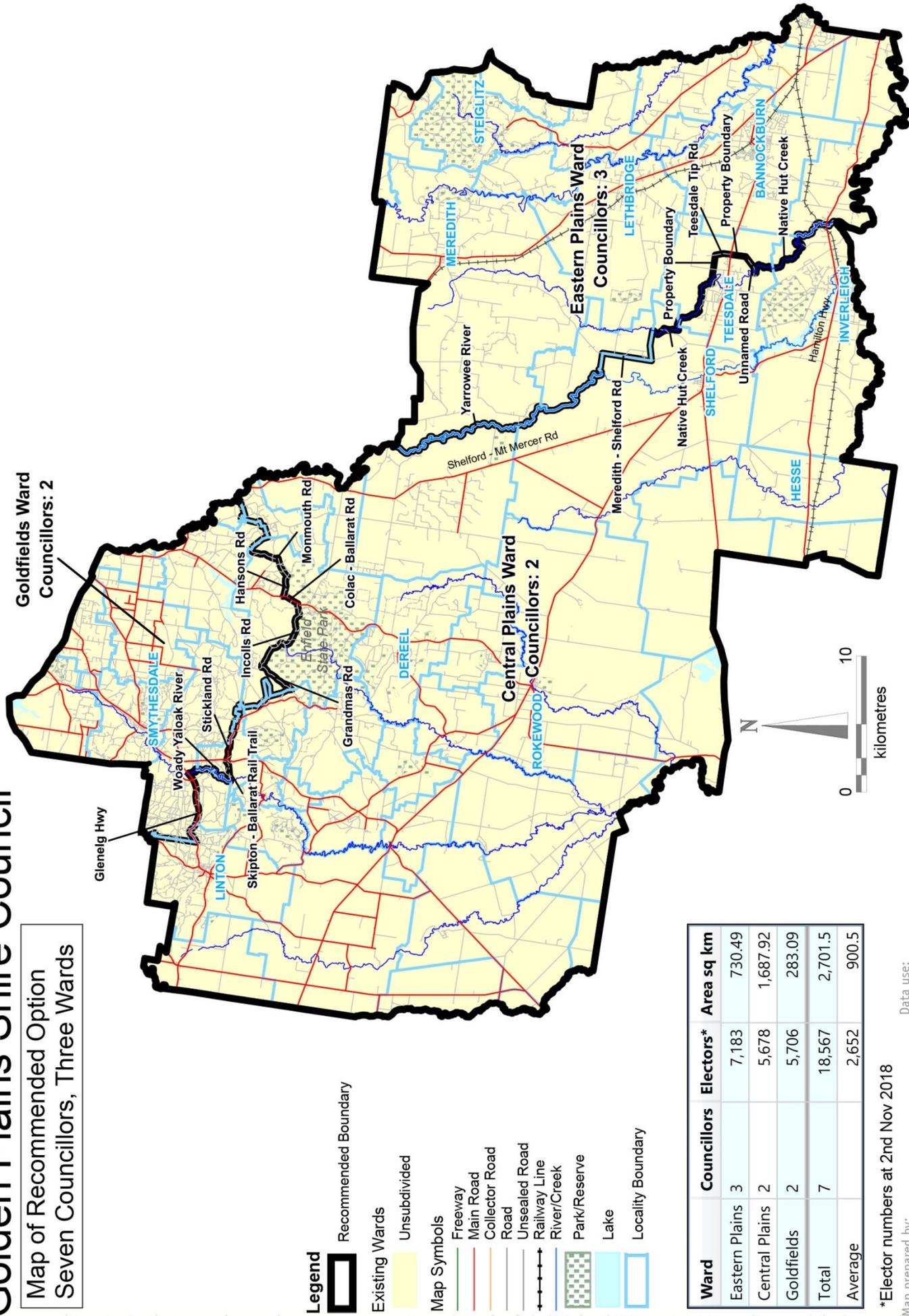
Trevaskis, Peter (Inverleigh Progress Association)

Appendix 2: Map

The map is provided on the next page.

Golden Plains Shire Council

Map of Recommended Option
Seven Councillors, Three Wards



Legend

- Recommended Boundary

Existing Wards

- Unsubdivided

Map Symbols

- Freeway
- Main Road
- Collector Road
- Road
- Unsealed Road
- Railway Line
- River/Creek
- Park/Reserve
- Lake
- Locality Boundary

Ward	Councillors	Electors*	Area sq km
Eastern Plains	3	7,183	730.49
Central Plains	2	5,678	1,687.92
Goldfields	2	5,706	283.09
Total	7	18,567	2,701.5
Average		2,652	900.5

*Electors numbers at 2nd Nov 2018

Map prepared by:

Data use:



Victorian Electoral Commission **VEC**

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Department of Environment, Land, Water &
Planning

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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>	Thursday 17 January	Wednesday 20 March
<i>Ballarat Courier</i>	Wednesday 23 January	Wednesday 27 March
<i>Ballarat Miner/Golden Plains Times</i>	Thursday 24 January	Thursday 21 March
<i>Geelong Advertiser</i>	Wednesday 23 January	Wednesday 27 March

Media releases

A media release was prepared and distributed to local media to promote the commencement of the review on Wednesday 30 January 2019. A further release was distributed with the publication of the preliminary report on Wednesday 27 March 2019. A final media advisory was circulated on the publication date of this final report.

Public information sessions

Public information sessions for people interested in the review process were held on Wednesday 30 January 2019 at:

- Woody Yaloak Recreation Reserve, 55 Heales Street, Smythesdale
- Bannockburn Shire Hall, 12 High Street, Bannockburn.

Submission guide

A submission guide was developed and made available on the VEC website, or in hardcopy on request, throughout the review timeline. The submission guide provided information about the review, the review timeline and how to make submissions to the review.

Online submission tool

An online submission tool was developed and made available during the submission periods of the review. The tool allowed people to make a submission from the VEC website. During the preliminary submission stage, users also had the opportunity to map out their preferred subdivisions through the online submission tool using Boundary Builder. Boundary Builder includes real elector numbers so that users can see if their preferred structure and number of councillors meets the plus-or-minus 10% rule.

VEC website

The VEC website delivered up-to-date information to provide transparency and facilitate public participation during the review process. All public submissions were published on the website.

Email and social media engagement

The VEC delivered an information email campaign targeted at known community groups and communities of interest in the local council area. This included a reminder email at each milestone of the representation review process.

The VEC also published sponsored social media advertising that was geo-targeted to users within the local council area. This included advertising at both the preliminary submission and response submission stages. The total reach of these posts was 8,412 during the preliminary submission stage and 8,280 during the response submission stage.

Council communication resources

The VEC provided the Council with a communication pack that included information on the review in various formats. While the council was encouraged to distribute this information and raise awareness of the review, the VEC is an independent reviewer and all communications resources include references and links to the VEC website and core materials.

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