

Local council ward boundary review

Final Report

Wellington Shire Council

April 2024



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April 2024

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Content approval

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1	3 April 2024	VEC panel member
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1	8 April 2024	Acting Electoral Commissioner	Final approval

Acknowledgement of Country

The Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) acknowledges the Gunaikurnai and Taungurung peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters for which it is holding this review and pays respects to ancestors and Elders past, present and emerging. The VEC acknowledges their custodianship for many thousands of years and their continuing living culture.

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Executive summary

Under section 17 of the *Local Government Act 2020* (Vic) (the Act), the Minister for Local Government asked the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) to conduct ward boundary reviews for 10 local council areas prior to the next general local council elections in October 2024.

For these 10 councils, the number of voters per councillor is forecast to be out of balance by October 2024, with the number of voters per councillor in one or more wards forecast to vary from the average number of voters per councillor for all of the wards by more than 10 per cent.

Wellington Shire Council was one of the 10 local council areas under review. The purpose of this review was to correct this forecast imbalance for the October 2024 local council election.

During its review, the VEC looked at:

- the number of currently enrolled voters in each ward
- the forecast number of enrolled voters at the next election
- adjustments to the locations of existing ward boundaries.

This report presents the VEC's final advice to the minister on the recommended ward boundary adjustments for Wellington Shire Council to meet the requirements of the Act.

More information about the background to the review is available on [page 7](#) of this report.

Recommendation

The VEC recommends adjustments to the boundaries of the following wards within Wellington Shire Council:

- Central Ward
- Coastal Ward
- Northern Ward

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

Detailed maps of the ward boundary adjustments are provided as [Appendix 1](#) of this report.

Summary of review steps

Developing ward adjustment models

The VEC considered a range of factors when deciding on appropriate ward boundary adjustments:

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

More information on the way the VEC decided on ward adjustments is available on [page 8](#).

Preliminary report

The VEC published a preliminary report on Wednesday 14 February 2024. The following model was presented for community consideration:

- Preliminary model, which proposed changes to the boundaries of all wards.

A summary of the model presented can be found on [page 13](#).

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

Response submissions

The VEC received 1 submission responding to the preliminary report. The submission did not include a map.

A full analysis of the response submission received can be found on [page 14](#).

Public hearing

An online public hearing for those wishing to speak about their response submission was scheduled for 10 am Friday 15 March 2024. As no submitters asked to speak, the hearing did not go ahead.

Background

About the 2024 ward boundary reviews

Under section 15(2) of the *Local Government Act 2020* (Vic), for a council that is divided into wards:

- a) each ward should have an approximately equal number of voters per councillor; and
- b) the number of voters per councillor in a ward should not vary from the average number of voters per councillor for all of the wards by more than 10 per cent.

On 22 February 2023, the VEC provided advice to the Minister for Local Government on councils that were projected to have at least one ward with the number of voters per councillor outside this +/-10% range at the time of the October 2024 local council elections.

This advice was based on:

- current enrolment and enrolment trends
- future population projections
- legislated changes to council entitlements for council-enrolled voters.

On 20 April 2023, in response to this advice and under section 17 of the Act, the minister asked the VEC to conduct ward boundary reviews for 10 local council areas before the October 2024 local council elections. These reviews aimed to balance the number of voters per councillor for the wards of these 10 councils in time for the 2024 elections. At the end of each review, the VEC must provide a report to the minister containing recommended ward boundary adjustments for the council.

Wellington Shire Council was one of the 10 local council areas under review.

During its review, the VEC looked at:

- the number of currently enrolled voters in each ward
- the forecast number of enrolled voters at the next election
- adjustments to the locations of existing ward boundaries.

A ward boundary review does not change a council's electoral structure, number of councillors, or ward names. A ward boundary review also cannot change the external boundaries of a local council, divide local councils, or amalgamate local councils.

The VEC ward boundary review team

The VEC ward boundary review panel provides a recommended structure to the Electoral Commissioner. The Electoral Commissioner will review the panel's recommendation and then decide on the final recommendation for provision to the Minister for Local Government. The VEC panel is made up of 2 senior VEC members including the program sponsor. Administrative and technical support for the program is provided by VEC electoral structure and boundary review experts as well as specialists from across the VEC.

Public engagement

Public information program

The VEC conducted a public information and awareness program about the Wellington Shire Council ward boundary review. This included:

- printed public notices in state-wide newspapers
- public information sessions to outline the review process and respond to questions from the community
- a media release to announce the start of the review
- information on social media channels
- website content on vec.vic.gov.au, including:
 - current information on the review process
 - fact sheets for each council under review and a submission guide.

Wellington Shire Council was also offered and took up 2 optional methods to promote the reviews:

- printed public notices in local newspapers
- targeted social media advertisements for the council area.

Public consultation

The VEC encouraged input to the ward boundary review of Wellington Shire Council via:

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

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

Developing recommendations

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

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

When developing the final recommendation, the VEC considered:

- whether the adjusted wards would comply with section 15(2) of the Act (see below), and how long they are likely to comply

- whether meaningful and effective ward boundaries could be established and whether these would be easily identifiable to local communities
- the representation of communities of interest
- the voter distribution and physical features of the area, and the impact these may have on the shape and size of wards
- the scale of ward boundary changes, aiming for minimal change (where possible)
- other matters raised in public submissions not already listed above.

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

During this review, the VEC aimed to recommend ward boundary adjustments that help ensure a council's wards comply with section 15(2) at the time of the 2024 local council elections and, if possible, also comply based on voter numbers at the time the review is conducted. The VEC used forecasts of population and voter change to assess compliance at the 2024 elections with as much accuracy as possible.

In some cases, population change and other factors impacting voter numbers meant it was not possible to adjust the ward boundaries of a council so that both 'current' (at the time of the review) and 'forecast' (at October 2024) voter numbers were within the legislated +/-10% tolerance. Where this happened, the VEC prioritised compliance at the October 2024 elections to ensure each vote would have approximately equal value at the 2024 elections. In some cases, the VEC's recommended model may set the current ward deviations outside the +/-10% tolerance. This was because the ward deviations were forecast to change over a short period of time and move within the +/-10% tolerance by the time of the 2024 local council elections.

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

About Wellington Shire Council

Profile

Wellington Shire Council is located in the Gippsland region of eastern Victoria, between East Gippsland to the east and the Latrobe Valley to the west. It stretches from Victoria's high country in the north to Ninety Mile Beach and Bass Strait to the south. With an area of 11,008 km², it is the third largest council in Victoria by area.

The Traditional Custodians of the land in Wellington Shire Council are the Gunaikurnai People and Taungurung Peoples. The majority of Wellington Shire Council is located on Gunaikurnai Country.

Landscape

Wellington Shire Council is serviced by the Princes and South Gippsland highways connecting the shire with other council areas to the east and west. It is also serviced by the Melbourne to Bairnsdale rail line and the West Sale regional airport. There is an RAAF base in East Sale.

The council area supports many environmentally significant areas, including the Alpine National Park, the Gippsland Lakes, the Strzelecki Ranges, Ninety Mile Beach and many other river, lake, coastal and mountain areas. Some of Wellington's wetland environments are of international environmental significance and substantial areas in the north are in water catchment areas (DTP 2024). Over 26% of the council area is in public ownership as a State or national park (DAFF 2021).

Sale is the largest town in the shire, and serves as a regional centre, providing the main health, education and community services for the council area. Over 60% of people live in Sale and the towns of Heyfield, Maffra, Rosedale, Stratford and Yarram (DTP 2024). Smaller townships include Briagolong, Dargo and Licola in the north, and Alberton, Loch Sport, Port Albert and Seaspray in the south.

Wellington Shire Council is predominantly rural, with agriculture, forestry, and oil and gas being major economic drivers. Over 35% of land is used for forestry (native and plantation) and over 30% is used for livestock production (including dairy, beef, sheep and poultry farming) (ABARES 2022, DAFF 2021). Healthcare and social assistance, defence and tourism also contribute significantly to the local economy (DTP 2024).

Social and economic shifts are expected to see the emergence of new industries supporting the local economy, including renewable energy and sustainable agriculture (DTP 2024).

Responding to the challenges of climate change is expected to be a priority for the council into the future (WSC 2021).

Community

Wellington Shire Council was home to 45,639 people in 2021 (ABS 2022a), an increase of 4,199 over the previous decade (ABS 2011). The population is expected to grow by about 1.3% per year to be over 57,000 by 2041 (.id 2022b).

With an older population compared to the state overall, the median age of residents in 2021 was 44, higher than the Victorian average of 38 (ABS 2022a). Over 44% of Wellington residents were aged 50 years and over which was also higher than the Victorian average of 34.6% (ABS 2022a). The average household size of 2.3 persons in 2021 was lower than the Victorian average of 2.5 (ABS 2022a).

In 2021, over 80% of people were born in Australia and for over 87% of people English was the only language spoken at home. Of those who were born overseas, the United Kingdom and New Zealand were the most common countries of origin (.id 2022a).

Similar to much of regional Victoria, in 2021 most people lived in separate dwellings and over 71% of dwellings were owned outright or had a mortgage (.id 2022a). The median household weekly income in 2021 was \$1,272, lower than both Victoria and regional Victoria medians of \$1,759 and \$1,386 respectively (ABS 2022a, 2022b).

Wellington Shire Council's economy supports 18,650 jobs (Remplan 2021) and in 2021 53.5% of the population over 15 years of age were in the workforce, which is lower than the regional Victorian average of 57.4% (.id 2022a). The most common industries of employment in 2021 for residents were hospitals, dairy cattle farming, defence and primary education (ABS 2022a).

Current electoral structure

Wellington Shire Council has a total of 9 councillors and is divided into 3 wards with 3 councillors per ward (Central, Coastal and Northern wards).



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

There are an estimated 43,875 voters in Wellington Shire Council, with an estimated ratio of 4,875 voters per councillor.

By October 2024, the voter-to-councillor ratios of Central and Northern wards are forecast to be outside of +10%, and the voter-to-councillor ratio of Coastal Ward is forecast to be outside of -10%.

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

Last review

The VEC conducted an electoral representation review of Wellington Shire Council in 2015. That review was carried out under the *Local Government Act 1989* (Vic), which was replaced by the *Local Government Act 2020* (Vic).

After conducting the review, the VEC recommended that Wellington Shire Council adopt a structure of 9 councillors elected from 3 wards (3 wards with 3 councillors each).

Visit the VEC website at vec.vic.gov.au to access a copy of the 2015 representation review final report.

Preliminary findings and response

The current ward boundary review of Wellington Shire Council was required due to the voter-to-councillor ratios in all wards, which were projected to be outside of the legislated +/-10% range at the October 2024 local council elections. To balance the number of voters across wards, voters need to be transferred from both Northern and Central wards (whose deviations are forecast to be outside +10%) to be included within Coastal Ward (which is forecast to be outside -10%).

One of the challenges in balancing voter numbers between wards for Wellington Shire Council is the high number of council-enrolled electors along Ninety Mile Beach between The Honeysuckles and Paradise Beach. Some of these voters own holiday homes, however many own land that cannot have a dwelling constructed due to environmental constraints, and there has been uncertainty over the future of these lots for many decades. A 2019 Victorian Ombudsman's report recommended that the undevelopable land along Ninety Mile Beach should no longer have council rates levied, and that some of the land be compulsorily acquired by the State Government for public conservation purposes (Victorian Ombudsman 2019).

Given the changes that may result from implementing the recommendations of the 2019 Ombudsman's report, plus the recent changes to council-based voting entitlements under the *Local Government Act 2020* (Vic), there is an increased level of uncertainty about how many eligible ratepayers will choose to enrol in this area prior to the October 2024 elections. This leads to greater uncertainty when forecasting voter numbers for this review, particularly in Coastal Ward, which has the highest proportion of non-resident ratepayers in the shire.

The VEC has taken into account the anticipated nature and timing of these changes as best as possible when estimating the +/-10% voter deviations required under the Act as part of this ward boundary review.

Preliminary report

The VEC's ward boundary review of Wellington Shire Council began with the release of a preliminary report on Wednesday 14 February 2024.

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

When preparing the preliminary report, the VEC considered a range of ward boundary adjustments for Wellington Shire Council and chose the strongest model for public consultation. The following model was presented for community consideration:

- Preliminary model, which proposed changes to the boundaries of all wards.

Preliminary model

The changes proposed in the preliminary model included increasing the size of Coastal Ward by extending its northern boundary north up to the La Trobe River (north of Longford) and then to the Thomson River and the Traralgon-Maffra Road (north of Rosedale). These changes

would result in the towns of Longford and Rosedale and some rural communities both north and south of Princes Highway being moved into Coastal Ward.

Under the preliminary model, Central Ward was proposed to retain Sale and Wurruk as the key populated areas and retain its existing boundaries to the north (Northern Ward), east (municipal boundary) and west (Thomson River). Central Ward was proposed to be reduced in size by moving its southern boundary north to extend along the La Trobe River and the southern shoreline of Lake Wellington.

The southern boundary of Northern Ward was proposed to remain unchanged where it joined Central Ward. However, where it met Coastal Ward, the ward boundary was moved north to the Thomson River and Traralgon-Maffra Road. This resulted in Northern Ward being reduced in geographic size, retaining the towns of Heyfield, Maffra and Stratford and the rural communities in the north of the council area.

Response submissions

The VEC received one response submission to the preliminary report from the public by the deadline of 5 pm on Wednesday 6 March 2024. You can find a list of people or organisations who made a response submission in [Appendix 2](#).

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

Table 1: Preferences expressed in response submissions		
Preliminary model	No preferred model indicated	Other
-	1	-

The response submission received was from Wellington Shire Council. The Council did not provide direct support for the preliminary model, but rather highlighted some positive and negative features of the model. It did not provide any alternative proposed model.

Preliminary model

Arguments put forward in support of the preliminary model were that no other model would meet legislative requirements with strong boundaries and reflect communities of interest to the same degree as the preliminary model.

Arguments put forward against the preliminary model were that it divided some communities of interest:

- Rural farming communities north of Princes Highway, including Denison and Nambrok, are included in Central Ward, whereas their main communities of interest are to the north in Heyfield and Maffra, which are in Northern Ward.

- Longford is included in Coastal Ward, though its main communities of interest are in Sale, which is in Central Ward.

The response submission highlighted the challenges of dividing a large rural shire like Wellington Shire Council into 3 similar sized wards that reflect reasonable communities of interest. It further acknowledged that a balancing act would be required to ensure voter deviations were within the legislated +/-10% range.

Public hearing

An online public hearing for those wishing to speak about their response submission was scheduled for 10 am on Friday 15 March 2024. As no submitters asked to speak, the hearing did not go ahead.

Findings and recommendation

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

The recommended model

The VEC recognises the presence of multiple, distinct townships and communities within Wellington Shire Council, that are spread across large and diverse areas. As was reflected in the response submission, there is a strong desire for these diverse communities of interest to be reflected in the ward boundaries as much as is practical whilst also meeting legislated voter deviations.

After considering the model presented in the preliminary report, the requirements of the Act and the public submission, the VEC has chosen to put forward the preliminary report model, with no further adjustments, as the VEC's recommended model.

The preliminary model is being recommended as it satisfactorily meets all legislated requirements and, due to the distribution of voters and the geography of the council area, no other model could be developed that used strong features for boundaries as effectively or represented communities of interest as adequately.

The recommended model seeks to minimise overall boundary changes and retain the essential structure of the existing ward boundaries. The model makes use of strong features as ward boundaries, including rivers, main roads, railway lines and locality boundaries. Existing ward boundaries are retained where practical.

The changes proposed by the recommended model include the towns of Longford and Rosedale and some rural communities north and south of Princes Highway moving into Coastal Ward, and both Central and Northern wards being reduced in size accordingly.

The response submission identified that the rural communities north of Princes Highway, such as Denison and Nambrok, generally have communities of interest associated with the towns of Maffra and Heyfield to the north. The VEC acknowledge this and also note that the communities north of Princes Highway are some distance from the southern coastal communities in Coastal Ward. While the ward boundary adjustments in these areas are not ideal, these changes were largely unavoidable. Lake Wellington and the town of Sale prevented Coastal Ward from being extended in any logical manner anywhere else than as proposed.

The recommended model proposes that Central Ward retain Sale and Wurruk as its main populated areas, although Longford is to be moved into Coastal Ward. Retaining Wurruk in Central Ward was considered a preferred outcome for Central Ward, rather than including

Wurruk in Coastal Ward, given their geographic proximity and the clear communities of interest between Wurruk and Sale.

The response submission identified that the town of Longford is also effectively part of the Sale community, and the preliminary model would place Longford in a different ward to its community of interest. The VEC acknowledge this drawback to the model. However, with the need to increase the number of voters in Coastal Ward to correct voter deviations, the inclusion of Longford was felt to be the most logical option as it is the town closest to the southern coastal communities not already located in Coastal Ward. Moreover, the La Trobe River is the most practical boundary between Coastal and Central wards in this location.

A key feature of the recommended model is that it keeps the community focus of each proposed ward similar to the existing structure:

- Coastal Ward remains focussed on the coast and the rural hinterland in the southern part of the council area. This now includes Rosedale and Longford and their surrounding rural communities.
- Sale and Wurruk are maintained as the focus for Central Ward, which have similar communities of interest, and the immediately surrounding rural areas to the north of Lake Wellington.
- Northern Ward retains its focus on the towns of Heyfield, Maffra and Stratford and the rural communities to the north of the council area.

The recommended model will affect 3,982 voters, with 1,370 voters in the existing Central Ward and 2,592 voters in the existing Northern Ward to be included in the proposed Coastal Ward. The ward boundary adjustments proposed by the recommended model will therefore affect 9% of voters within Wellington Shire Council (based on current enrolment figures).

Despite some uncertainty as outlined earlier in this report relating to the forecast voter numbers of non-resident ratepayers, particularly in the Ninety Mile Beach area of Coastal Ward, the recommended model has been tested against a number of possible voter enrolment projections, and is robust enough to still be within deviation at the 2024 local council elections in all enrolment scenarios. A benefit of the multi-councillor ward model for Wellington Shire Council is that it allows for greater tolerance to changes in voter numbers that may occur in one part of the council area, which assists with the longevity of the proposed ward boundaries.

While the VEC acknowledges there are both potential benefits and drawbacks for this recommended model, it considers the boundary adjustments of this model have the best potential to promote fair and equitable representation for voters in Wellington Shire Council while also complying with the requirements of the Act.

The VEC's recommendation

The VEC recommends adjustments to the boundaries of the following wards within Wellington Shire Council:

- Central Ward
- Coastal Ward
- Northern Ward

The recommended adjustments were presented as the preliminary model in the preliminary report.

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

Please see [Appendix 1](#) for detailed maps of the recommended ward boundaries.

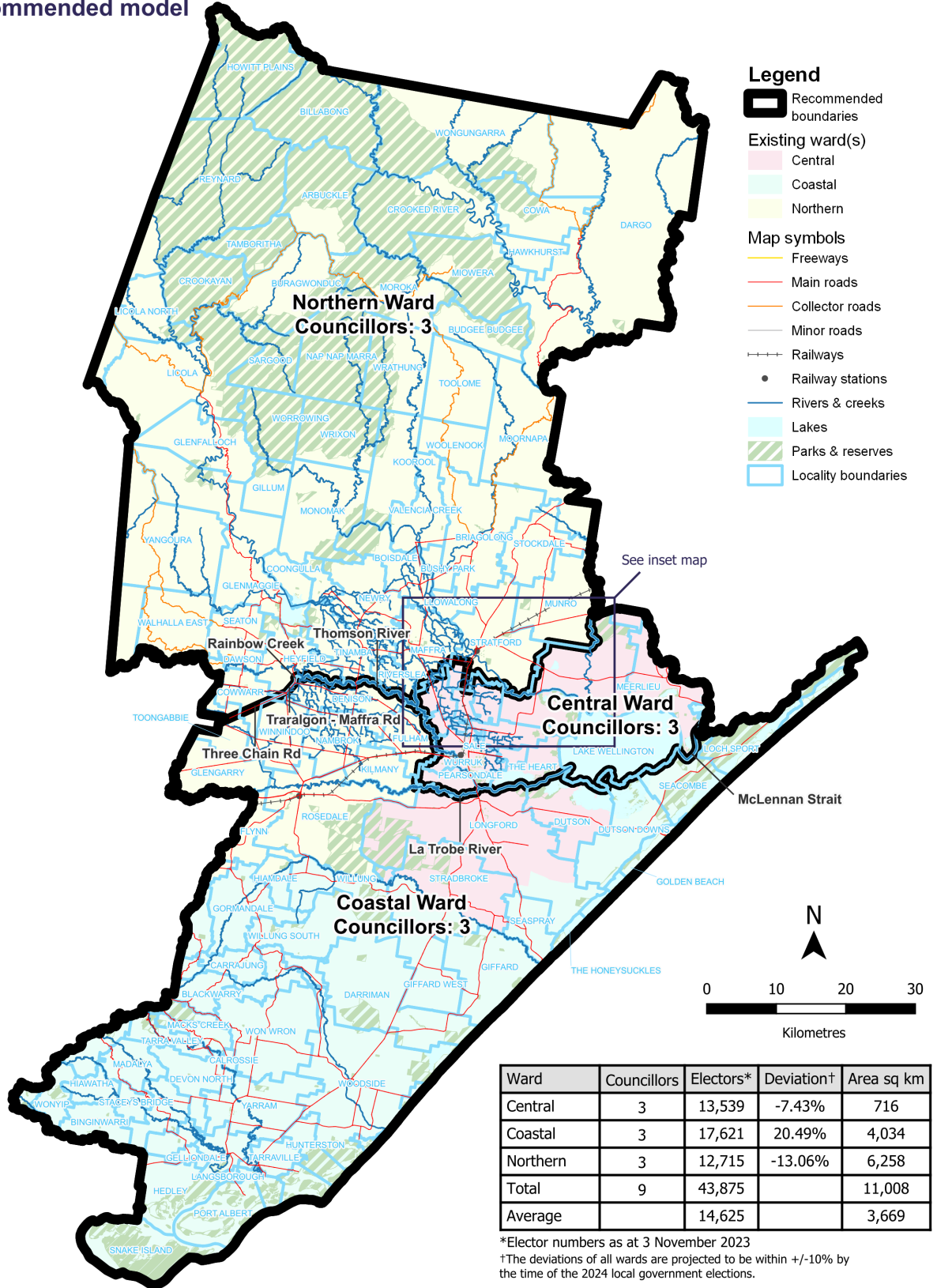
References

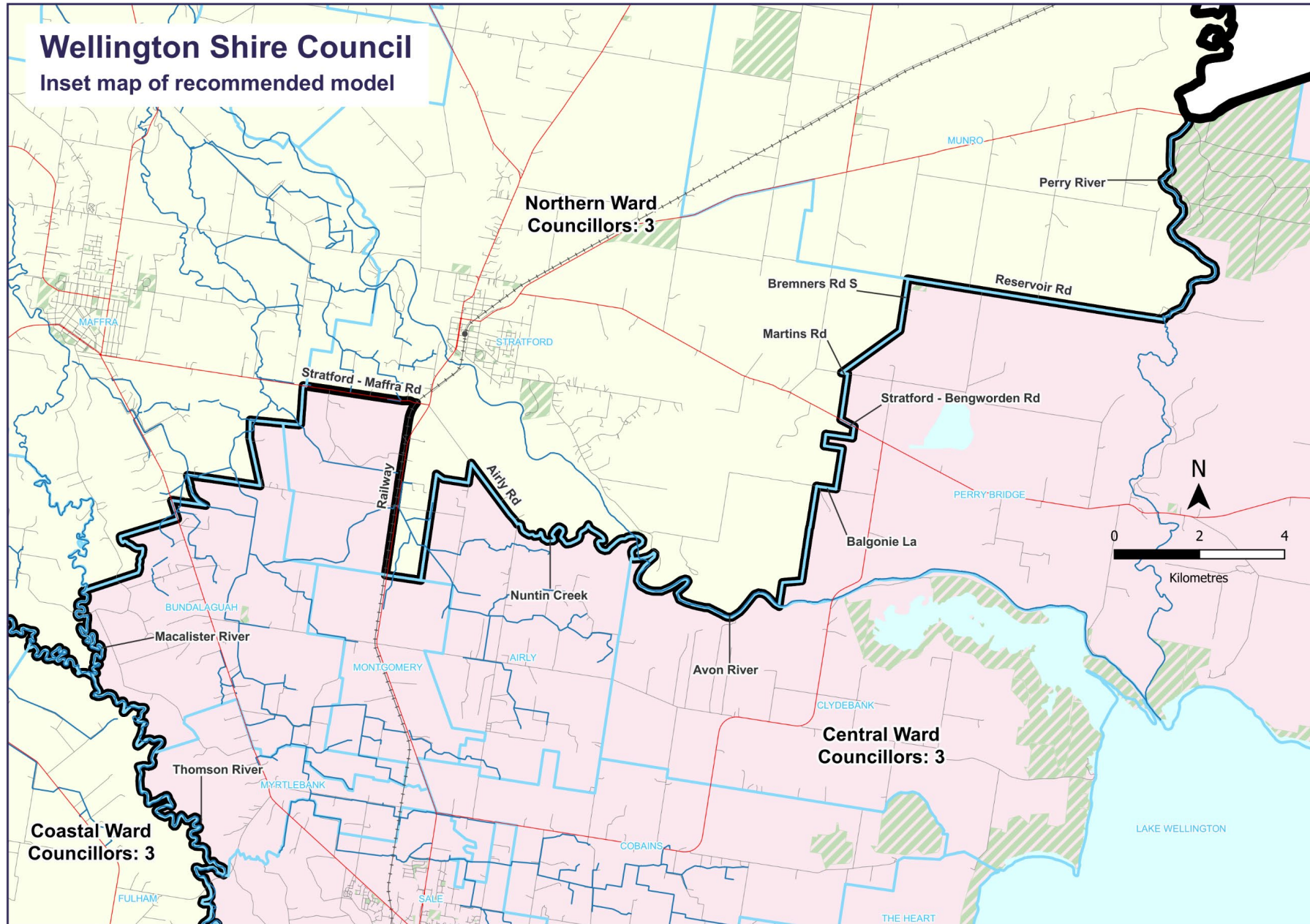
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Appendix 1: Map of recommended model

Wellington Shire Council

Recommended model





Data for recommended model

Ward	Electors*	Deviation†	Area# (square km)
Central	13,539	-7.43%	716
Coastal	17,621	+20.49%	4,034
Northern	12,715	-13.06%	6,258
Total	43,875	n/a	11,008
Average	14,625	n/a	3,669

* Elector numbers at 3 November 2023.

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

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

Appendix 2: Public involvement

The VEC wishes to thank the submitter to the review for its participation in the review process.

Response submissions

Response submission was made by:

Wellington Shire Council

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