

Local council ward boundary review

Preliminary Report

Wellington Shire Council

February 2024



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February 2024

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Level 11, 530 Collins Street
Melbourne Victoria 3000
T 131 832
info@vec.vic.gov.au
vec.vic.gov.au

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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 has 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 is one of the 10 local council areas under review. The purpose of this review is to correct this forecast imbalance for the October 2024 local council election.

In its review, the VEC is looking 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.

At the end of the review, the VEC will recommend ward boundary changes to the minister, with the aim of all wards in Wellington Shire Council being within the legislated +/-10% tolerance at the time of the 2024 local council election.

This preliminary report presents proposed ward boundary adjustments for Wellington Shire Council.

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

Ward boundary models

After considering research and the requirements of the Act, the VEC is presenting a single model for public consultation, outlining the proposed ward boundary changes to Wellington Shire Council.

Details on this model, including a map, are available in [Appendix 1](#).

Next steps

The VEC is now seeking feedback on its preliminary ward boundary model. You can make a response submission to the preliminary model until 5 pm on Wednesday 6 March 2024. If any submitters ask to speak at a public hearing, the VEC will hold this online on Friday 15 March 2024. Following the hearing, the VEC will present its final recommendation to the minister on Wednesday 10 April 2024.

More information about the review process is available on the VEC website at vec.vic.gov.au

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 aim to balance the number of voters per councillor for the wards of these 10 councils in time for the 2024 elections.

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

In its review, the VEC is looking 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.

At the end of the review, the VEC will recommend ward boundary adjustments to the minister, with the aim of all wards in Wellington Shire Council being within the legislated +/-10% tolerance at the time of the 2024 local council election.

The ward boundary review panel

Leading the VEC's review is a ward boundary review panel, which has 2 members:

- the Electoral Commissioner - Mr Sven Bluemmel (Chairperson)
- the Program Sponsor, Electoral Structure and Boundary Review Program - Ms Kirsty Williamson.

Administrative and technical support for the panel is provided by the VEC's team of electoral structure and boundary review experts as well as specialists from across the VEC.

Public engagement

Public information program

The VEC is conducting a public information and awareness program about the Wellington Shire Council ward boundary review. This includes:

- 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 now invites input to the ward boundary review of Wellington Shire Council via:

- response submissions to this preliminary report
- an online public hearing for anyone who makes a response submission and wishes to speak to the ward boundary review panel and expand on their submission.

Public submissions are an important part of the review process and the VEC will consider them alongside other factors during the review. These factors are outlined below.

Considerations in developing models

The model in this preliminary report complies with the Act and was 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 preliminary model for Wellington Shire Council, 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).

In addition to the above, the VEC's final recommendation will also consider matters raised in public response submissions.

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 aims 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 uses forecasts of population and voter change to assess compliance at the 2024 elections with as much accuracy as possible.

In some cases, population change and other factors impacting voter numbers mean it is not possible to adjust the ward boundaries of a council so that both 'current' (at the time of the review) and 'forecast' (at October 2024) voter numbers are within the legislated +/-10% tolerance. Where this happens, the VEC prioritises compliance at the October 2024 elections to ensure each vote will 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 is because the ward deviations are 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 will take 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 electoral structure 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 models

One of the challenges facing the ward boundary adjustments for Wellington Shire Council is the high number of council-enrolled electors, located mainly in the existing Coastal Ward 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 has provided some improved clarity about the future of these lots, which recommended that the undevelopable land along Ninety Mile Beach should no longer have council rates levied and for the land to be compulsorily acquired by the State Government for public conservation purposes (Victorian Ombudsman 2019).

Given the expected changes to be put in place to implement the recommendations of the 2019 Ombudsman's report, and 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 as council-enrolled electors prior to the October 2024 election. 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 timing and nature of these changes as best as possible when estimating the +/-10% deviations required under the Act as part of this ward boundary review.

Ward boundary model for public feedback

The VEC considered a range of ward boundary adjustments for Wellington Shire Council and chose the strongest model for public consultation.

The following model is presented for community consideration:

- Preliminary model, which proposes changes to the boundaries of Central, Coastal and Northern wards.

A map of the preliminary model is included in [Appendix 1](#).

Preliminary model

In order to bring all wards within +/-10% voter deviation for the 2024 local council elections for Wellington Shire Council, some voters need to be transferred from Northern and Central wards (both of which are forecast to be above 10%) to be included within Coastal Ward (which is forecast to be outside -10%).

Having considered a number of preliminary options, the panel has decided to put forward one model for public comment. This model has been put forward as the panel felt that it satisfactorily met all legislated requirements. No other model could be developed that used strong features for boundaries as effectively, or represented communities of interest as adequately, to the same degree as the proposed preliminary model.

The preliminary model minimises overall boundary changes and retains the essential structure of the existing ward boundaries, whilst also maintaining communities of interest as much as possible. The model makes use of strong features as ward boundaries, including rivers, main roads, railway lines and locality boundaries. Existing ward boundaries have been retained where practical.

The preliminary model proposes to extend the boundary of Coastal Ward north to include the towns of Longford and Rosedale, and extend its northern boundary up to the Latrobe River (north of Longford) and then the Thomson River and the Traralgon-Maffra Road (north of Rosedale).

Central Ward is proposed to retain Sale and Wurruk as the key populated areas and retains its existing boundaries to the north (Northern Ward) and east (municipal boundary). The southern boundary of Central Ward is proposed to extend along the Latrobe River and the southern shoreline of Lake Wellington.

The southern boundary of Northern Ward is proposed to remain the same where it joins Central Ward, however where it meets Coastal Ward, the ward boundary has been moved north to the Thomson River and Traralgon-Maffra Road.

The key feature of the preliminary 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 respective 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.

A potential drawback of the preliminary model is that the northern part of the proposed Coastal Ward includes areas north of Princes Highway up to the Thomson River, which are some distance from the southern coastal communities. The panel felt this to be unavoidable as Lake Wellington and the town of Sale prevents Coastal Ward from being extended in any logical manner to the north of the Latrobe River anywhere else than as proposed. Whilst there may not be strong communities of interest between this area north of Princes Highway and some coastal communities in the south, the panel felt there were still likely to be some communities of interest associated with rural land uses both north and south of Princes Highway. Moreover, the panel felt there to be strong community connections for the rural areas in proposed Coastal Ward with the towns of Longford and Rosedale, which are both now proposed to be within the same ward. The panel also felt that retaining Wurruk in Central Ward was a preferred outcome, rather than including Wurruk in Coastal Ward, given the communities of interest likely to exist between residents of Wurruk and Sale.

The preliminary 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 relocated into the proposed Coastal Ward. The ward boundary adjustments proposed by the preliminary model will therefore affect 9% of voters within Wellington Shire Council (based on current enrolment figures).

The Act introduced changes to ratepayer-based entitlement categories, which come into full effect at the 2024 local council elections. The current voter deviations for two of the proposed wards in the preliminary model (Coastal and Northern wards) are set outside the legislated +/-10% range to account for these changes to entitlement categories as well as forecast population change across the council between the time of the review and the October 2024 elections. All ward deviations are forecast to be within the legislated +/-10% range by October 2024.

Given elector growth forecasts across the shire, the voter deviations for the preliminary model are also expected to be within the legislated +/-10% range through to 2028, thereby reducing the likelihood of a further ward boundary review being required prior to the 2028 local council elections.

Wellington Shire Council is geographically large with many diverse landscapes and communities. Overall, the panel felt that the preliminary model proposes an effective electoral structure for Wellington Shire Council that provides a good balance between meeting legislated voter deviations, impacting a minimal number of voters (less than 10%), using strong features as ward boundaries and maintaining communities of interest as much as possible.




The panel welcomes feedback and suggestions for improvement to the preliminary model from the public through response submissions.

Next steps

Response submissions

Any person or group, including the local council under review, can make a response submission to the VEC. Your submission should address the model or models proposed in this preliminary report.

You can make a submission:

	<p>Online</p> <p>Visit vec.vic.gov.au and make an account to use the online Public Submission Tool. You may save a draft submission to finish later.</p>
	<p>By email</p> <p>Wellington.WardReview@vec.vic.gov.au</p>
	<p>By post</p> <p>Ward boundary review panel Victorian Electoral Commission Level 11, 530 Collins St Melbourne VIC 3000</p>

The panel must receive all response submissions before 5 pm on Wednesday 6 March 2024. If you post your submission, it must reach the VEC before the deadline. Late submissions will not be accepted.

Required information

To be considered, your submission must include your:

- full name
- contact phone number or email address
- postal or residential address.

To protect the integrity and transparency of the review process, the VEC will not consider submissions without this information. If you are submitting as a group or organisation, you must include a nominated contact person authorised to submit on behalf of your group.

The VEC will handle information provided by submitters in accordance with its privacy policy at vec.vic.gov.au/privacy

Public access to submissions

To ensure transparency in the ward boundary review process, your submission will be published on the VEC website at vec.vic.gov.au. The VEC will remove your signature and

contact details, including residential and postal addresses, from all public copies but must publish your full name (or group name) and locality (suburb or town).

Please note that any submission content that is potentially defamatory, offensive, obscene or that includes the personal information of people or organisations who are not a party to the submission may also be redacted before publication.

Public hearing

If you make a response submission, you can also ask to speak at an online public hearing to support your submission and expand on your views.

The online public hearing is scheduled for:

Time: 10 am

Date: Friday 15 March 2024

The VEC encourages participation in the public hearing. If you wish to speak at the public hearing, you **must** indicate this in your response submission. The public hearing will not be held if there are no requests to speak.

Anyone can attend a public hearing, but you will only be able to speak if you expressly asked to speak in your response submission. If you ask to speak, the VEC will contact you to arrange a time for you to speak at the hearing. You will have 10 minutes to address the public hearing panel. The members of the public hearing panel may ask you questions.

Visit the VEC website at vec.vic.gov.au for more information on public hearings.

Final report

Following the public hearing, the VEC will consider all evidence and prepare a final report for the Minister for Local Government containing recommended ward boundary adjustments for the local council.

The final report is scheduled to be provided to the minister on Wednesday 10 April 2024. The minister will consider the final reports, including any determination to make the reports publicly available. Any change to the ward boundaries of Wellington Shire Council following this review is expected to apply at the October 2024 local council elections. Under the Act, the final council electoral structure will be set by an Order in Council published in the Victoria Government Gazette.

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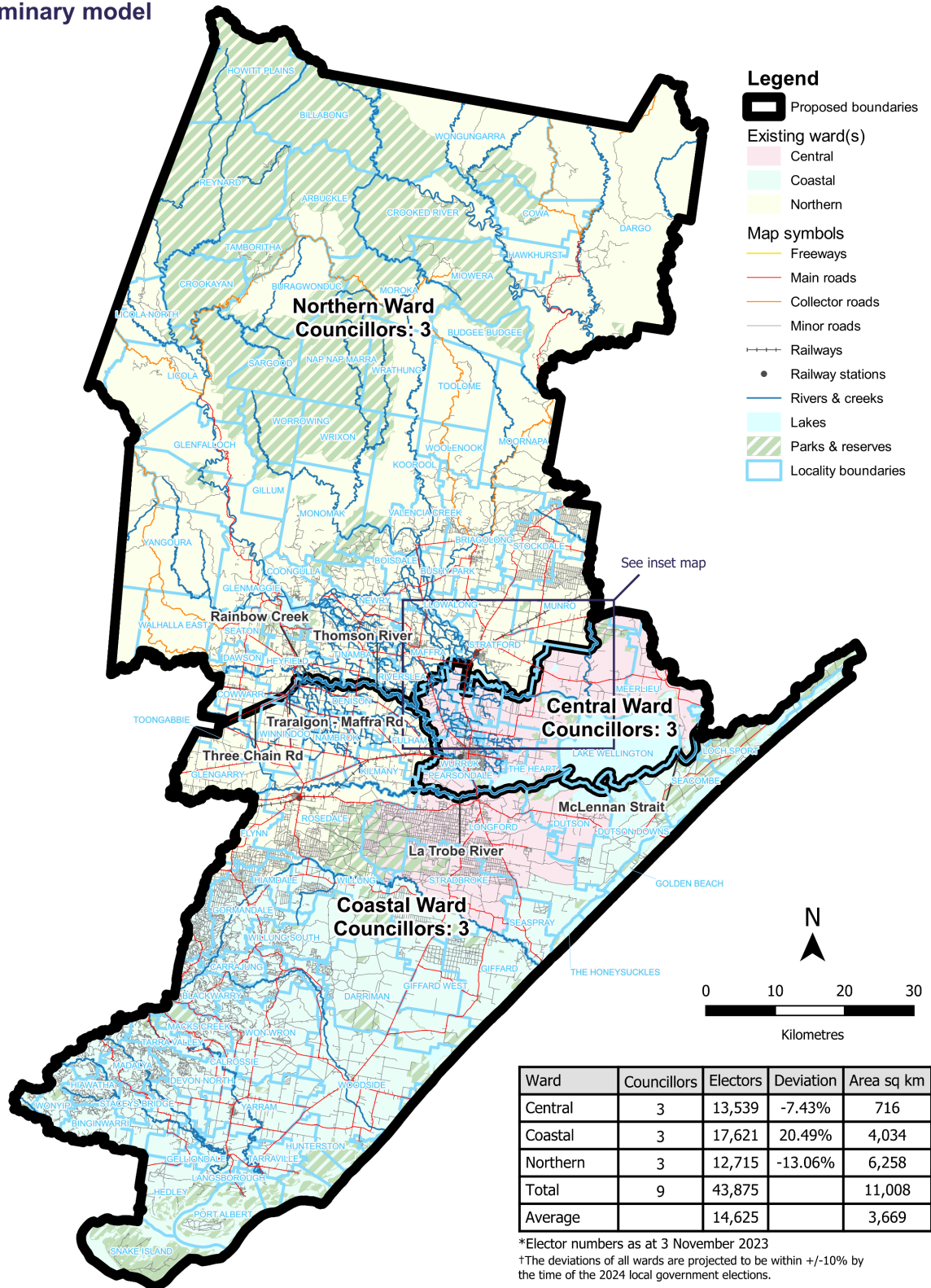
Appendix 1: Preliminary model map

The following map is included in this report:

Map	Page
Preliminary model – with proposed changes to the boundaries of Central, Coastal and Northern wards	19

Wellington Shire Council

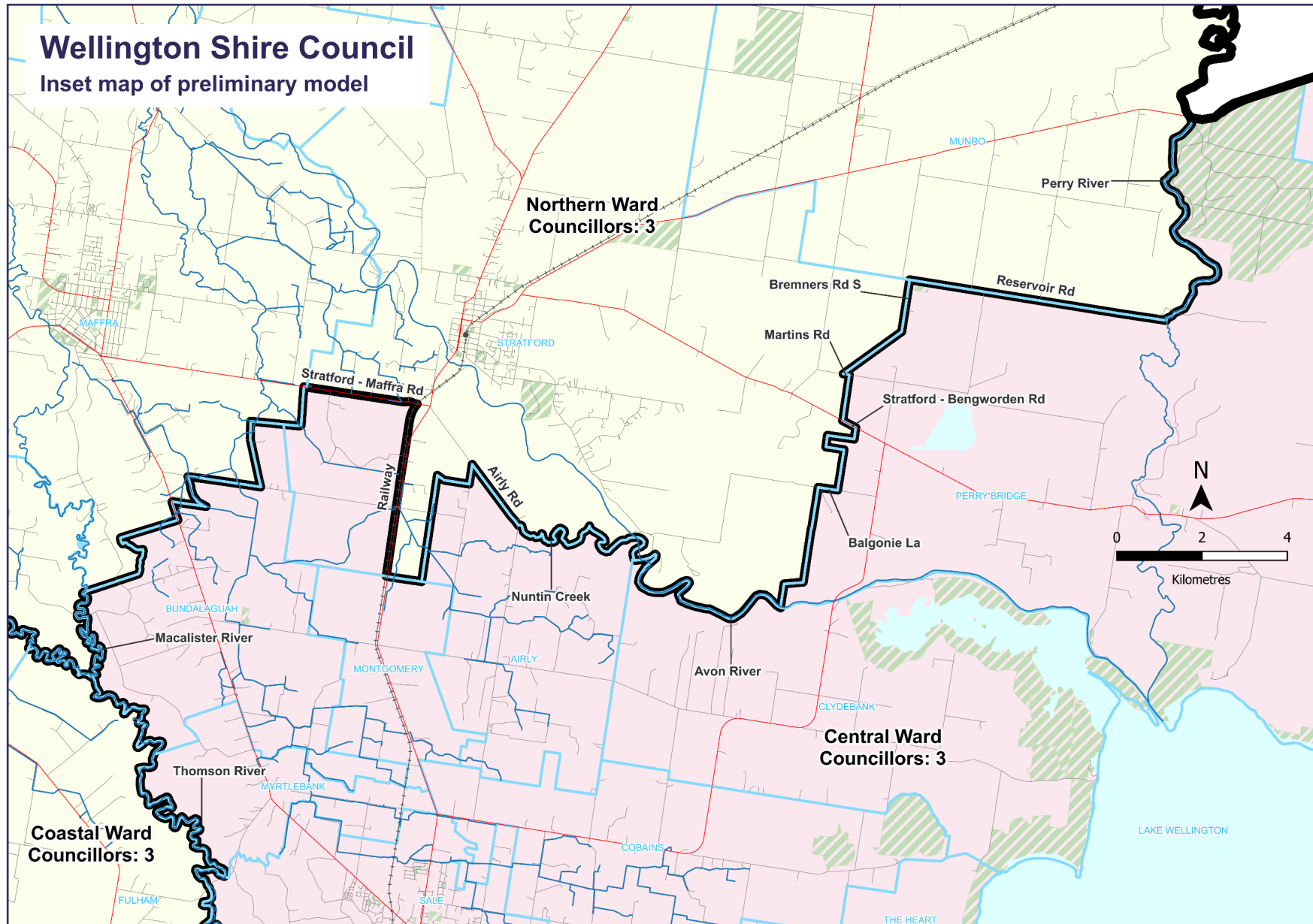
Preliminary model



Map prepared by:
 Victorian Electoral Commission

Data use:
 Layers for alignment:
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Data for preliminary model

Ward	Electors*	Deviation†	Area# (square km)
Central Ward	13,539	-7.43%	716
Coastal Ward	17,621	20.49%	4,034
Northern Ward	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 forecast to be within +/-10% by the time of the 2024 local council elections. The current deviation of some wards may be set outside +/-10% at the time of the review to offset forecast change between the review and the 2024 election.

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

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