

OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

ID: 503025 - APB:lc

8 June 2022

Email: secretariat.ntec@nt.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

2022 Local Government Representation Review – City of Palmerston

The City of Palmerston has considered the 2022 Local Government Representation Review (LGRR) in context of the Palmerston Municipality and makes the following submission.

It is our understanding that LGRR is to consider how to provide the best community representation at the Local Government level in the Northern Territory. We further understand from the LGRR documents that the aim of the representation reviews is to ensure that all voters in the Local Council area are fairly represented.

In addition, the *Local Government Act (2019) Section 24(h)* states:

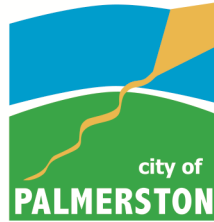
24. A council has the following objectives:
(h) generally, to act at all times in the best interest of the community as a whole.

Wards

The Council considers the existing structure of not having wards for the municipality of Palmerston is appropriate for our community and ensures delivery on the above principles for the Community of Palmerston as a whole.

Council strongly supports that Palmerston remains undivided (no wards) for reasons identified within LGRR information and related documents, and the following.

Council is unaware of a desire by the Palmerston Community to transition to a ward structure and is not aware of any dissatisfaction with the current system. Council's 2021 Community satisfaction survey indicated the highest community satisfaction since 2012, and introduction of wards was not identified by the community at this time. This supports the reasoning that the current structure of no wards is providing the community with best representation. The distinction between previous poor performance and the current performance of Council cannot be attributed to whether the Council has wards or not, as it has always been undivided, but recent community satisfaction can be attributed to a higher quality of representation.



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

In relation to the community being fairly represented, a ward system does not allow the community to select a council that truly represents them but limits the options that the community has for selecting representation from within their community of interest. A good example of this, is Palmerston seniors, who live throughout the municipality and who would not be able to select a senior if there are no representative candidates in their ward. Additionally, wards also limit representative candidates from gaining sufficient votes, as their votes are restricted to one ward instead of from across the municipality. Effectively, wards dilute the voter base for communities of interest that are spread throughout the municipality, rather than all residing within one ward.

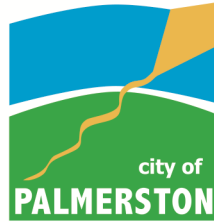
The current system without wards, allows for Palmerston communities of interest to select their representative from wherever they live in Palmerston rather than diluting their chances of success. Restricted selection of representation from wards does not represent the interests of the community as a whole where, as required by the *Local Government Act 2019*.

However, Council concedes that for some local government areas, representation in wards is appropriate to support regional distinctions, such as distinct towns, communities, language and cultural groups, travel time, distances, and communications. These factors do not apply in Palmerston where the community is not geographically separated, travels times are less than 15 minutes from boundary to boundary, and the population is relatively homogenous.

Council does not support the view that Elected Members of wards are more likely to be known by their constituents. While this point of view may be valid in regional local government areas, where there are distinct towns, communities, language groups and limited interaction because of travel times and distances, this point of view is not warranted within a relatively compact and homogenous community such as Palmerston. As stated above, Palmerston's communities of interest are dispersed throughout the municipality, not located exclusively within a handful of suburbs. It is the responsibility of all candidates to make themselves known to their constituents. Door knocking and letterbox dropping are no longer the only methods of campaigning, as acknowledged by the AEC in 2013, that Social Media campaigns demonstrate new opportunities and increased access to voters with lower cost compared to traditional media.¹ Council is not aware of any evidence that there is a differential of being 'known' between a ward, or no ward, structure.

The view that not having wards is less confusing or less burdensome for voters is not supported as Council considers the Palmerston community able to make its own informed decisions. Again, there is not any known evidence supporting this view.

¹ [Electoral Engagement using Social Media - Australian Electoral Commission \(aec.gov.au\)](https://www.aec.gov.au)



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

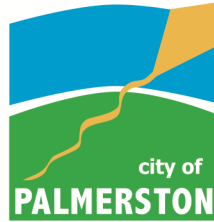
Furthermore, commentary that there will be less candidates in a ward system is not considered valid. In fact, there is risk that there could be large differences in candidate numbers across different wards, resulting in some wards being very competitive, and others potentially not having sufficient numbers to contest the ballot or fill vacancies, resulting in supplementary elections. Wards with uncontested seats are likely to have a poorer outcome for the community while wards that are hotly contested are likely to see highly suitable candidates not elected, remembering that the ultimate goal is for representation of the entire local government area, not just the ward.

Council does acknowledge that with wards, a by-election would be less expensive. However, the higher chance of uncontested elections, due to wards with insufficient candidates to fill the available vacancies, would also result by-election or supplementary election costs to fill vacancies. Council considers the right for all voters within the community to elect its representatives, outweighs the potential costs of a by-election or supplementary election. Council is responsible for ensuring it manages its budget and is responsible to its community for its decisions. Again, Council would like to see evidence of the number of supplementary and by-elections as a result of insufficient nominations and resignations, compared between Councils with wards and councils without wards.

In relation to potential improved voter turnout and less informal votes, Council does not consider that there is sufficient data to make an evidence-based decision to introduce wards on this basis. Council is of the view that lack of engagement of voters requires improvement in education, communication and understanding of the importance that Local Government plays to the community, and therefore the importance to vote. A change to the way voting occurs may in fact lead to greater confusion of representation when the community is used to the current structure.

Council does not support the view that wards will result in greater diversity of backgrounds, skills, experience and opinions among elected members. It is a contradiction to state that wards are to be delineated based on communities of interest, social, regional, or other homogenising factors but candidates do not need to reside within the ward. Wards may lead to forum shopping based on greater chance of success rather than a genuine community interest.

Both the 9th and 10th City of Palmerston Councils have had very good representative diversity with gender balance, and a spread of ages, professional and cultural backgrounds. As indicated above, with reference to seniors, wards may result in reducing diversity instead of increasing diversity. Improvements on representative diversity can be achieved through greater education and communication to encourage people to nominate who reflect the diversity of our Community.



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

Council cannot identify a defensible reason for the introduction of wards within the Palmerston municipality, nor is there a desire by the community for wards, or any indication of dissatisfaction with the no wards system or fair representation.

As such, the City of Palmerston Council **strongly objects** to the introduction of wards within the Palmerston municipality.

External boundaries

Whilst the matter of wards is a decision of the LGRR Committee, Council understands that the Committee can also make recommendations about a number of matters. Although the committee has indicated that they will not be considering recommendations on the external boundaries of Councils, Council makes the following comments regarding some of these for your information and consideration.

City of Palmerston has expressed a desire to the Northern Territory Government to amend its boundaries to include the development of Northcrest. The recent amendment of boundaries, following Council's request, included all areas identified, with the exception of Northcrest. The Council accepts the decision at this time but wishes to reinforce that it still holds the position that Northcrest should be incorporated into Palmerston.

Number of elected representatives

Council currently has eight Elected Members, and the Council considers that at this point in time that this number is adequate. However, as the city grows a future review of total numbers of Elected Members would be considered appropriate.

We thank you for the opportunity to submit our views and look forward to Stage Two consultation on the draft findings of the Committee.

Should you have any queries or concerns please contact me on mayor@palmerston.nt.gov.au or (08) 8935 9969.

Yours sincerely

Athina Pascoe-Bell
Mayor