

Review of City of Blacktown ward boundaries, 2023

Submission from Ben Raue

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission regarding the proposed alterations to wards for the City of Blacktown for the 2024 local government elections.

I am an independent political scientist with a particular expertise in local government electoral systems. I have previously written detailed guides to the City of Blacktown elections in 2016¹ and 2021².

I believe that the proposed ward boundaries fall short of the necessary changes needed to accommodate expected population growth. Two of the five wards in the City are growing much faster than the other wards, and this justifies drawing those wards at the smallest legally permissible size.

I have prepared an analysis of the proposed ward boundaries and suggested some alternative boundaries which would do a better job of adjusting to ongoing population growth trends in the City of Blacktown.

A note on data sources

The NSW Electoral Commission publishes a website which contains regular updates on enrolment statistics by micro-area for each local government area (usually monthly)³. These updates match each micro area to the appropriate ward. This allows for the calculation of enrolment statistics for each ward over an extended period from 2007 until 2023.

Boundary changes can make it difficult to compare over an extended period. Micro areas change roughly every five years as new Census geography is implemented for the electoral roll. These areas are now called Statistical Areas 1 (or SA1s), and were previously called Census Collection Districts (or CCDs). These boundaries change in some areas with each Census, particularly in areas that have been subject to substantial development in recent years. The current SA1s were first used for enrolment reporting as of April 2023.

Ward boundaries also change on a different schedule, usually a few months before the regularly-scheduled council election. This is usually some time after the boundary change was implemented.

Recent history of redistributions in Blacktown

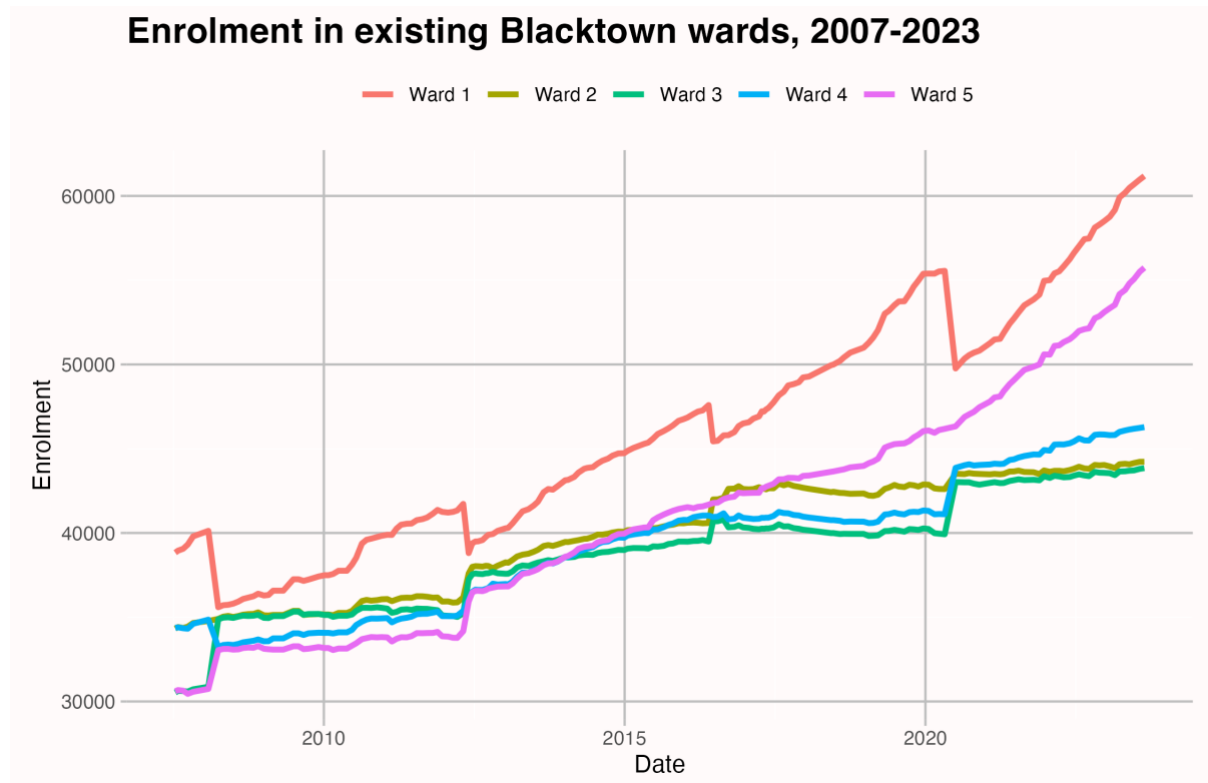
Ward boundaries for the City of Blacktown have been redrawn prior to the 2008, 2012, 2016 and 2021 elections.

¹ <https://www.tallyroom.com.au/archive/nswcouncil2016/blacktown2016>

² <https://www.tallyroom.com.au/archive/nswcouncil2021/blacktown2021>

³ <https://roll.elections.nsw.gov.au/lg/ex35>

At every one of these redistributions, a substantial portion of Ward 1 was removed, but Ward 1 has consistently remained the ward with the largest number of electors of the five wards, for the last sixteen years. By the time a ward redistribution has been implemented, the reduced Ward 1 would already be substantially more populous than its neighbours.



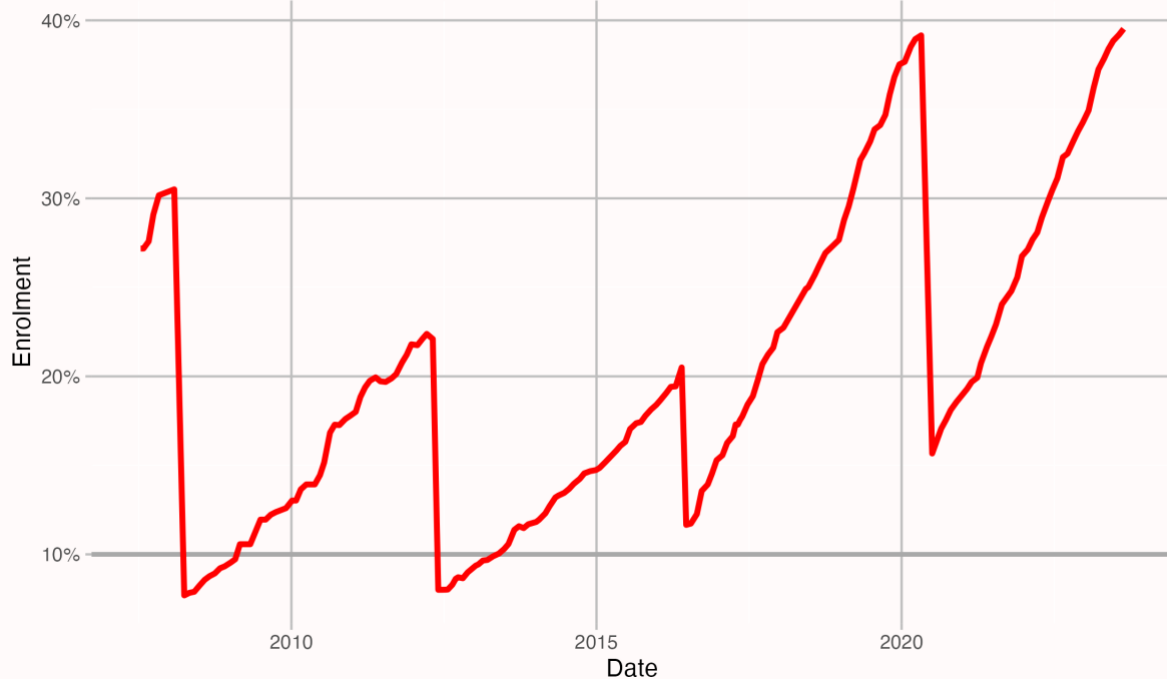
By the time of the 2008 election, the electoral roll in Ward 1 was 8.9% larger than the smallest ward. The number was 8.6% in 2012.

At the following redistributions, despite legislation requiring that wards are drawn with a variation of less than 10% between the largest and smallest ward enrolments, the electoral statistics never showed the gap between the largest and smallest wards being less than 10%.

As of the 2016 election, the gap was 13.6%. The next election was originally scheduled for September 2020, and at that point the newly-drawn Ward 1 had 17.5% more electors than Ward 3. By the time of the election (delayed until December 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic), the gap was 26.8%.

Enrolment deviation in existing Blacktown wards, 2007-23

Gap between enrolment in most populous and least populous ward as % of least populous ward.



There is a persistent problem with Ward 1 outstripping other wards in terms of population. Considering this history (and no particular reason to expect this trend to stop), the council should be obligated to draw Ward 1 to have the minimum legal enrolment, to give space for future growth. Instead, the proposed boundaries draw Ward 1 with the maximum legal enrolment.

Some time passes between the drawing of electoral boundaries and the conduct of an election. If you wish to ensure that the wards are as close to each other in enrolment at the time of election, the faster-growing areas should be drawn with smaller numbers of electors than other areas.

The current proposed boundaries

The current proposal being exhibited makes the smallest changes possible to keep the variation in enrolment numbers within 10% - the legislated rule.

The report calculates enrolment numbers as of May 2023. I took the raw enrolment data and reconstructed the SA1s transferred to recalculate the estimated elector numbers for each redrawn ward.

My figures ended up being slightly different to the council numbers. I believe my numbers are correct.

The council numbers suggested that Ward 1's enrolment is 9.9% higher than the smallest ward. I believe this figure is only 9.3%.

| Proposed new ward | Council estimates | Raue estimates |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Ward 1 | 52,758 (9.9%) | 52,854 (9.3%) |
| Ward 2 | 49,192 (2.5%) | 49,032 (1.4%) |
| Ward 3 | 48,354 (0.7%) | 48,354 (0.0%) |
| Ward 4 | 48,009 (0.0%) | 48,494 (0.3%) |
| Ward 5 | 50,868 (6.0%) | 50,447 (4.3%) |

Two different calculations of the number of electors contained in each proposed ward as of May 2023.

Either way, the fastest-growing ward has been drawn perilously close to the legal limit, ensuring that it will very quickly exceed that 10% boundary.

Indeed, it appears that this has already happened. Enrolment in the proposed Ward 1 was 10.05% larger than in the proposed Ward 3 as of July. This figure had reached 10.3% as of August.

By September 2023, Ward 1 will have a much larger population than some of the other wards.

If you reference the first chart, you can see that Ward 1 has continuously maintained the largest enrolment despite large numbers of voters being moved to other wards. Almost 6,000 voters were moved out of Ward 1 in 2020, with wards 3 and 4 gaining the most voters. Ward 5 had outstripped the three southern wards by 2020, but its enrolment was not reduced at all by the 2020 redistribution.

| Ward | Increase in enrolment |
|-------------|------------------------------|
| Ward 1 | +22.9% |
| Ward 2 | +1.6% |
| Ward 3 | +1.9% |
| Ward 4 | +5.5% |
| Ward 5 | +20.3% |

Change in enrolments from July 2020 until August 2023

Since 2020, wards 1 and 5 have grown substantially, while the other wards have largely stood still. From July 2020 until August 2023, wards 1 and 5 have each grown by over 20%, while the other three have experienced very slow growth.

Wards 1 and 5 between them elect 40% of the council, with the other three wards electing the other 60%. As of July 2020, those two wards covered 42.4% of the total electoral roll in the City of Blacktown. As of August 2023, that number was 46.5%. This uneven growth can either reduce inequality or increase it, depending on which wards are drawn on the smaller or larger end of the allowable range.

Two alternative proposals

I would like to suggest two different alternative proposals that would create more space for wards 1 and 5 to absorb expected population growth over the next year in the lead up to the 2024 local government election.

Both maps are the same for wards 1, 2 and 3.

The first map moves roughly the same number of electors as the original council proposal – about 7% of electors are moved to a different ward. The second map makes more substantial changes to wards 4 and 5 to produce more compact boundaries. This requires more voters to be moved – approximately 19.4% of voters are moved, based on the May 2023 enrolment statistics.

In both versions, Ward 1 loses Acacia Gardens and Parklea to Ward 2, in addition to the parts of Quakers Hill already moved out in the council proposal.

Ward 2 then loses parts of Quakers Hill to either Ward 4 or 5, and a small part of Ward 1 that was moved into Ward 2 in the council proposal is instead moved into Ward 4 or 5.

Two SA1s in the suburb of Blacktown between Richmond Road and the railway line are moved from Ward 3 into Ward 2, to ensure that Ward 3 fits within the allowable range.

Ward 3 then expands to take in Woodcroft and the remainder of Doonside from Ward 4. This enhances the use of Bungarabee Creek as the clear boundary between wards 3 and 4, all the way from the southern LGA boundary to Richmond Road.

The second proposal was prepared to address the increasingly elongated nature of Ward 4. This ward stretches from the south-western corner of the ward up into the middle of the LGA. The 2020 version of the ward already stretches as far as Quakers Hill, but the original council proposal (and the first version of my proposal) both take this ward further. The ward would now stretch more than two thirds of the way across the LGA diagonally.

My second proposal instead rearranges wards 4 and 5. Ward 5 (which will become increasingly dominated by the growing population in Marsden Park) instead takes in the surplus parts of Quakers Hill that can't fit into wards 1 and 2, along with Colebee.

Ward 4 takes in the remaining parts of Mount Druitt, but also expands to take in the neighbouring suburbs of Dharrak , Emerton, Lethbridge Park, Plumpton , Tregear , Whalan, and parts of Hebersham. Both wards end up becoming much more compact.

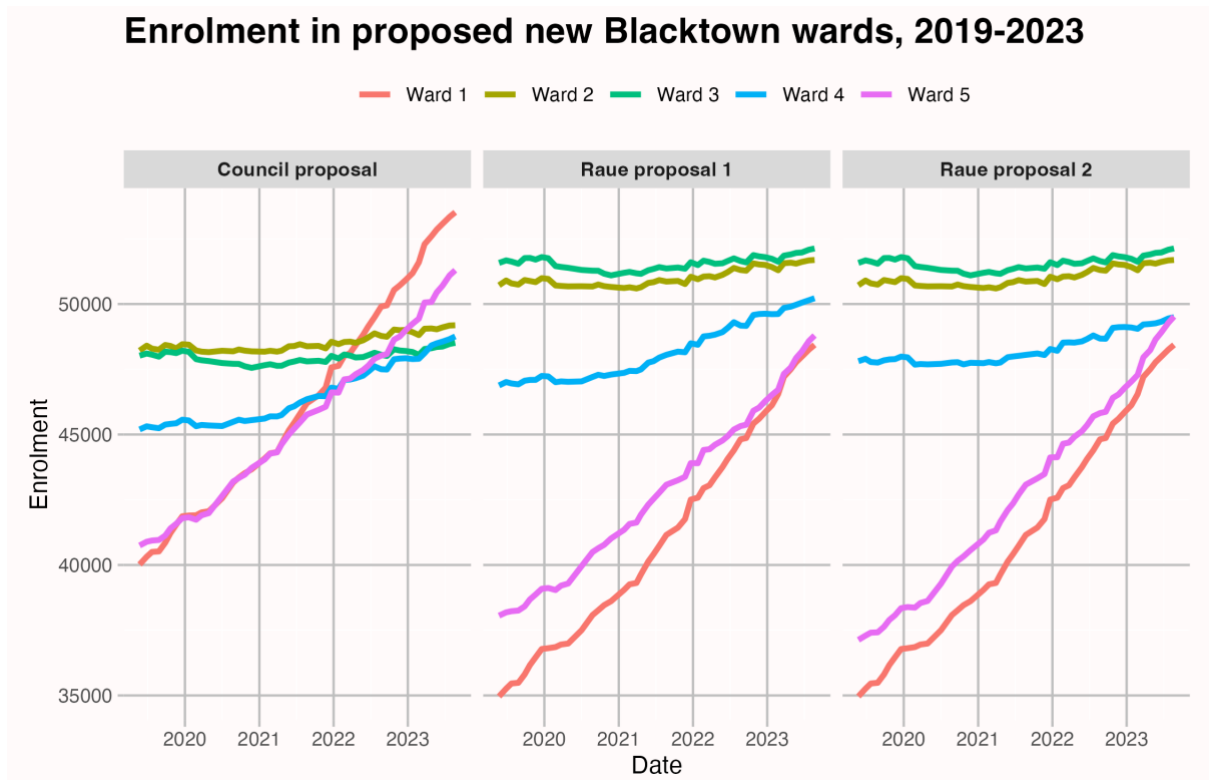
Either proposal would take advantage of the differential growth rates and will aim to produce wards of similar enrolments as of the September 2024 local government election, but the second option would also redesign wards 4 and 5 to be more appropriate for the future.

| New ward | Alternative proposal 1 | Alternative proposal 2 |
|----------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Ward 1 | 47,770 (0.0%) | 47,770 (0.0%) |
| Ward 2 | 51,549 (7.9%) | 51,549 (7.9%) |
| Ward 3 | 51,959 (8.8%) | 51,959 (8.8%) |
| Ward 4 | 50,124 (4.9%) | 49,413 (3.4%) |
| Ward 5 | 47,931 (0.3%) | 48,642 (1.8%) |

Enrolment as of May 2023 for the two alternative ward proposals.

Trajectory of population growth for different ward proposals

The NSWEC began using the SA1s from the 2021 census as of April 2023, and previously used SA1s from the 2016 census from May 2019. I have applied the various versions of ward proposals to the data dating back to May 2019, and thus can see what the enrolment was in each proposed ward back to mid-2019.



While all of the proposals draw all five wards within 10% as of early 2023, the five wards have been growing at quite different rates.

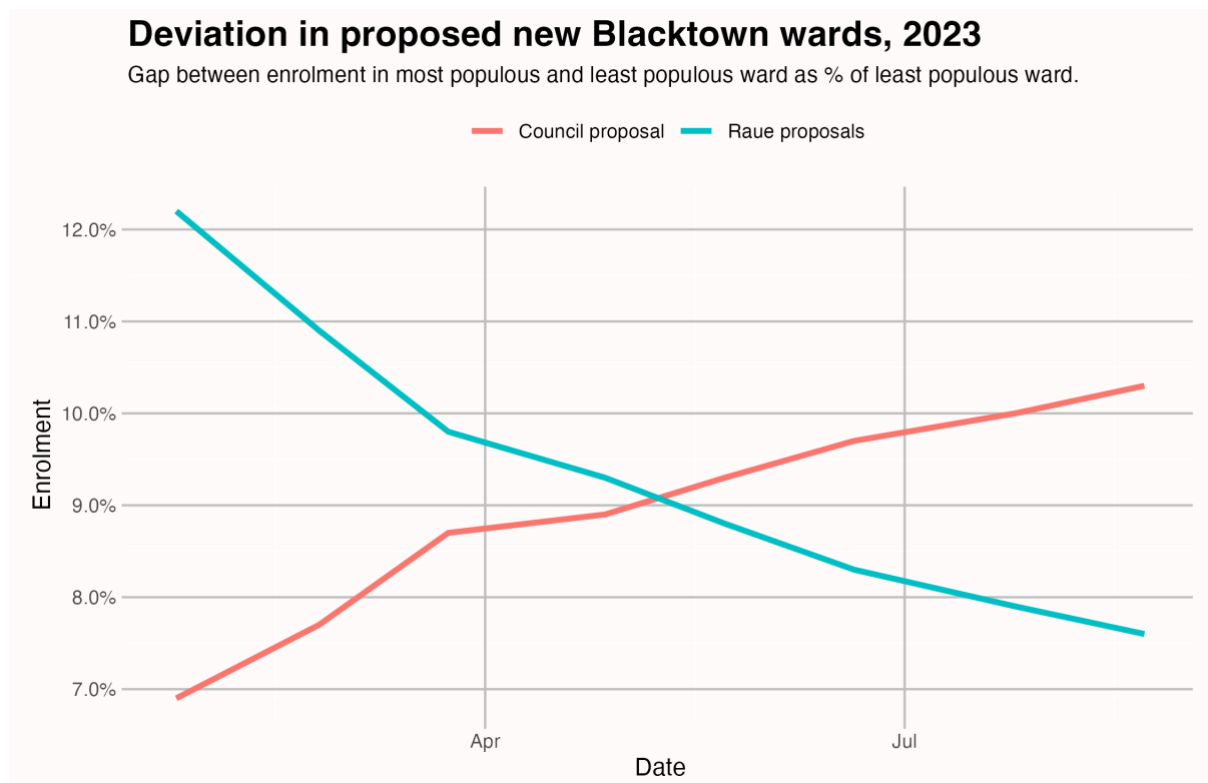
Wards 1 and 5 are very fast-growing. Ward 4 grows more slowly, while wards 2 and 3 barely grow at all.

In my proposals, wards 1 and 5 are drawn so that they are at the bottom end of the range as of 2023, which should leave them much closer to wards 2 and 3 by the time of the next election.

You can also use this data to look at whether the gap between the smallest and largest ward is growing or shrinking over the last few months.

The largest and smallest wards (wards 3 and 1 respectively) are drawn exactly the same in both of my alternative proposals, so the gap between those wards is the same in both proposals.

As of April 2023, the council proposal had a smaller deviation of 8.9%, compared to 9.3% for my alternative proposal. By May 2023, the two paths had crossed. By August 2023, the council proposal has a deviation of 10.3%, while the deviation in my alternative proposal has shrunk to 7.6%. If this trend continues steadily until September 2024, that deviation will have almost disappeared by the time of the election.

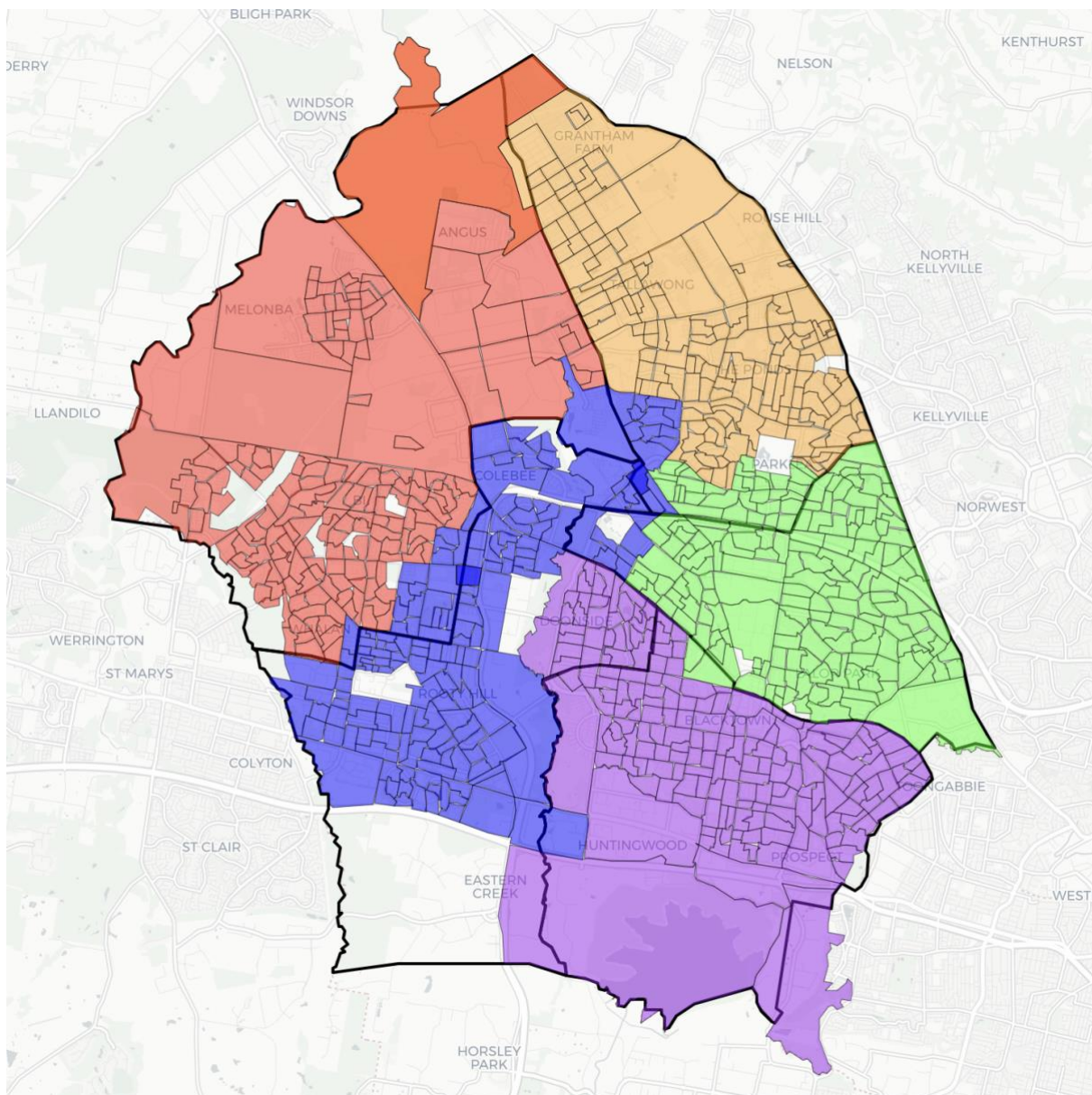


Appendix – alternative proposal maps

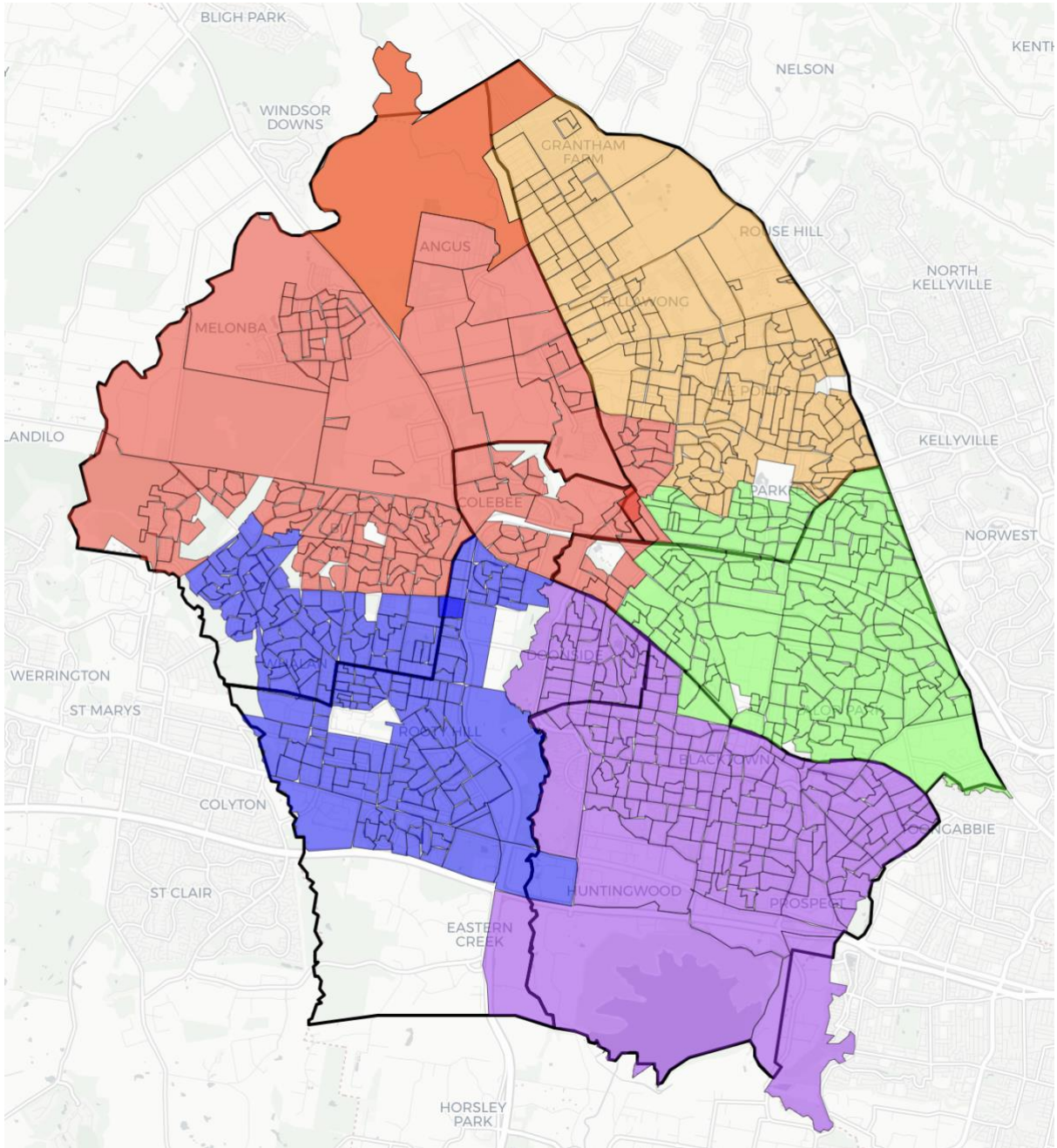
These maps were produced based on SA1 maps. In a handful of cases, an SA1 was previously split between two wards and thus appears twice on the map (in a darker shade). In the case of SA1s 1131522 and 1156322, I have unified those SA1s in a single ward which is clear based on the surrounding SA1s. In the case of 1163030 (the northernmost SA1 in the City), I have made no changes. The SA1s at the southern end of Bungarribee Creek cross the creek but only contain electors on one side of the creek. I am proposing no changes here.

There are also a number of places where an SA1 contains no electors and thus is missing from the map. The ward boundary in this area is less important as it affects no electors.

The proposed ward boundaries are shown by colouring each SA1. The existing ward boundaries are shown as thick black lines.



Alternative proposal 1



Alternative proposal 2