

Review of Camden Council ward boundaries, 2023

Submission from Ben Raue

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission regarding the proposed alterations to wards for Camden Council 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 a detailed guide to the Camden Council election in 2021¹.

I believe that the proposed ward boundaries fall short of the necessary changes needed to accommodate expected population growth. The North ward has been growing at a much faster rate than the South ward, with the Central ward falling slightly in between. This justifies drawing the South ward as the most populous ward, giving room for the other wards to catch up with population growth. The boundaries should also have some consideration for which suburbs are faster-growing than others, not just the raw population numbers as of 2023.

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

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)². 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 Camden

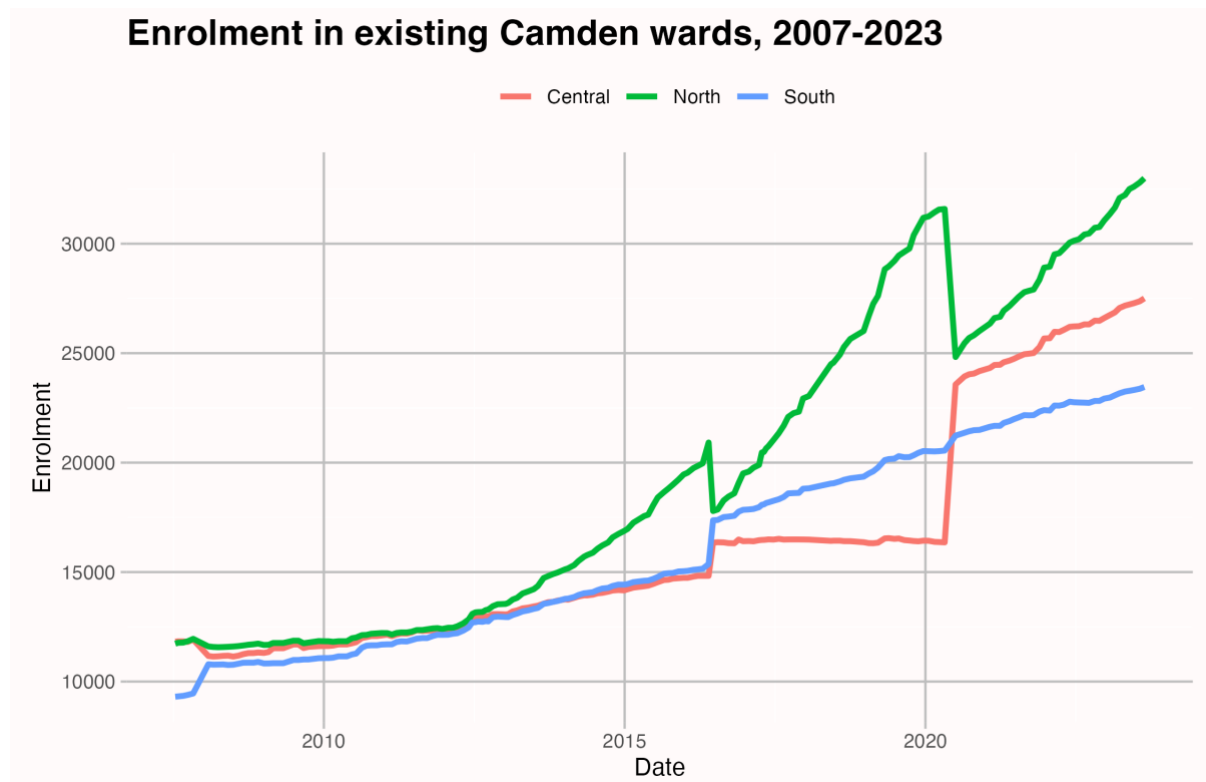
Ward boundaries for Camden Council have been redrawn prior to the 2008, 2016 and 2021 elections.

¹ <https://www.tallyroom.com.au/archive/nswcouncil2021/camden2021>

² <https://roll.elections.nsw.gov.au/lg/ex35>

At the redistributions prior to the 2016 and 2021 elections, a substantial portion of North Ward was removed, given to both Central and South wards in 2016 and to Central ward in 2021.

Despite these changes, North Ward 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 North Ward would already be substantially more populous than its neighbours.

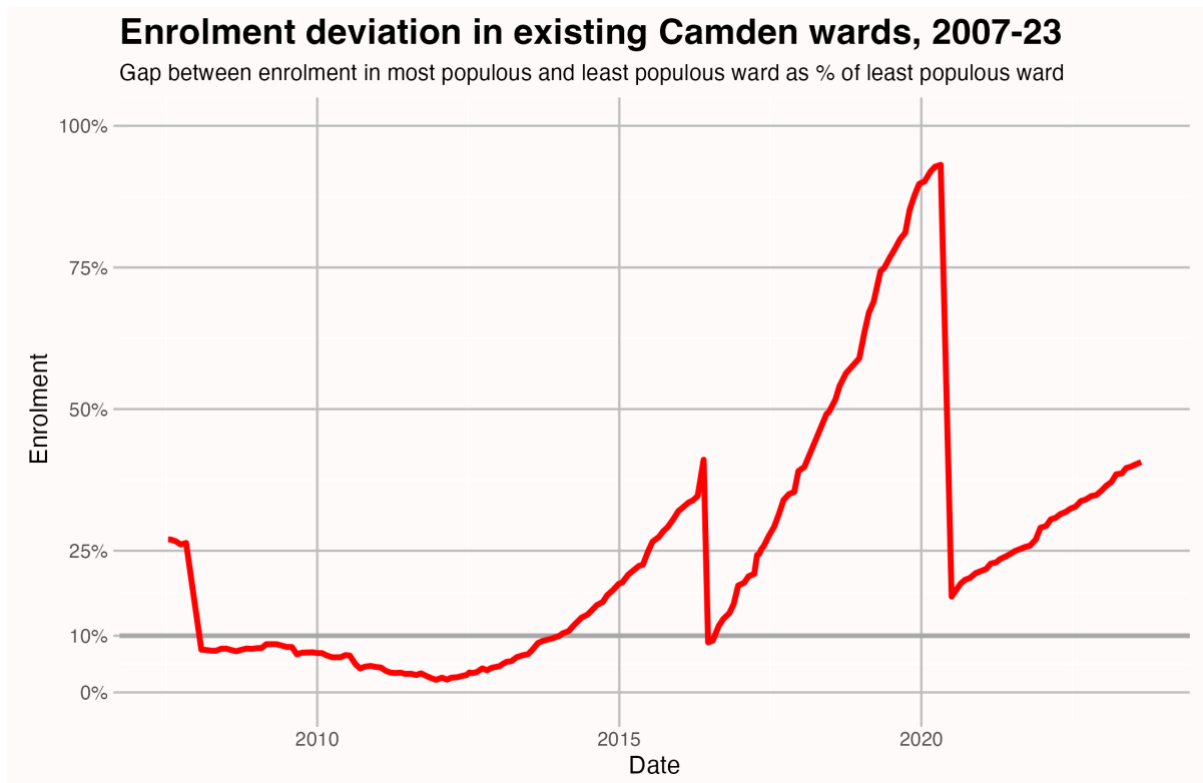


At the following redistributions, despite legislation requiring that wards are drawn with a variation of less than 10% between the largest and smallest ward enrolments, the electoral statistics showed the gap between the largest and smallest wards being less than 10% only briefly.

When the redistribution was implemented in June 2016, the North Ward was already 8.8% larger than the Central Ward, and that gap was greater than 10% within two months.

When the next redistribution was implemented in July 2020, the North Ward was already 16.9% larger than the South Ward.

As of the 2016 election, the gap was 13.0%. The next election was originally scheduled for September 2020, and at that point the newly-drawn North Ward had 19.9% more electors than the South Ward. By the time of the election (delayed until December 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic), the gap was 29.1%.



There is a persistent problem with North Ward 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 North Ward to have the minimum legal enrolment, to give space for future growth.

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.

There is also a tremendous variation in the amount of growth between the different suburbs of Camden Council. Paying attention to how these suburbs are combined can not just draw a faster-growing ward at the lower end of the permissible range, but can change the trajectory of growth to reduce the differences in population growth between the wards.

Growth trends per suburb

The easiest way to compare enrolment per suburb is to look at the first and last months of data using the 2016 SA1s. I have matched each SA1 to the suburb which makes up the largest share of that SA1, and then compared the data in those SA1s in May 2019 and March 2023.

There are seventeen suburbs in the LGA which had an enrolment of 1000 or more as of 2023. The vast majority of population growth over these four years has taken place in five suburbs:

- Oran Park (roll up 85.9%)

- Leppington (79.9%)
- Gledswood Hills (78.7%)
- Bringelly (43.0%)
- Spring Farm (39.5%)

The total roll in the LGA over this period increased by 16,644. Those five suburbs have grown by 14,051 voters.

Three of these five suburbs are currently contained in the North Ward. A fourth (Gledswood Hills) is proposed to be added to the North Ward.

In contrast, growth is very slight in more established suburbs, such as:

- Camden (roll up 4.4%)
- Narellan (3.1%)
- Mount Annan (2.8%)
- Narellan Vale (1.7%)
- Gregory Hills (1.2%)
- Camden South (0.4%)

The current proposed boundaries

The current proposal being exhibited does draw the fastest-growing North Ward to have fewer electors than the Central Ward, but still leaves the slow-growing South Ward with the smallest roll.

Ward	Enrolment greater than minimum
Central Ward	+9.7%
North Ward	+3.4%
South Ward	+0.0%

Enrolment as of April 2023

If you reference the first chart, you can see that North Ward has continuously maintained the largest enrolment despite large numbers of voters being moved to other wards.

Ward	Increase in enrolment
Central Ward	+16.7%
North Ward	+32.9%
South Ward	+10.5%

Change in enrolments from July 2020 until August 2023

Since 2020, North Ward has grown substantially quicker than the other two wards.

While I have some issues with the raw numbers, I also want to draw attention to some head-scratching decisions as to where the fastest-growing suburbs have been placed.

The North Ward lost the medium-growth Harrington Park (grown 10% from 2019 to 2023) and replaced it with Gledswood Hills (grown 79% from 2019 to 2023). While Gledswood Hills

is currently smaller in population than Harrington Park, its fast growth would likely accelerate the speed of growth in that fast-growing ward.

Meanwhile the fast-growing Spring Farm has been moved from the slowest-growing South Ward into the Central Ward.

An alternative proposal

I would like to suggest an alternative proposal which does two things:

- Ensures that the fastest-growing wards have smaller enrolments as of the current day; and
- Re-arranges suburbs to spread out the fastest-growing suburbs between the three wards, to reduce the discrepancy between the trajectory of growth of each ward over time.

For my proposal, I am suggesting the following changes:

- Move most of Leppington (barring one SA1 west of Eastwood Road from the North Ward to the Central Ward.
- Move Narellan Vale from Central Ward to the South Ward.

The suburbs of Harrington Park, Gledswood Hills and Spring Farm remain in their existing wards.

Overall my proposal significantly reduces the number of electors moving wards. The council's original proposal would move 25.01% of the council's electors (as of April 2023). My proposal moves just 12.66%.

Ward (Raue proposal)	Increase in enrolment
Central Ward	+3.6%
North Ward	+0.0%
South Ward	+5.5%

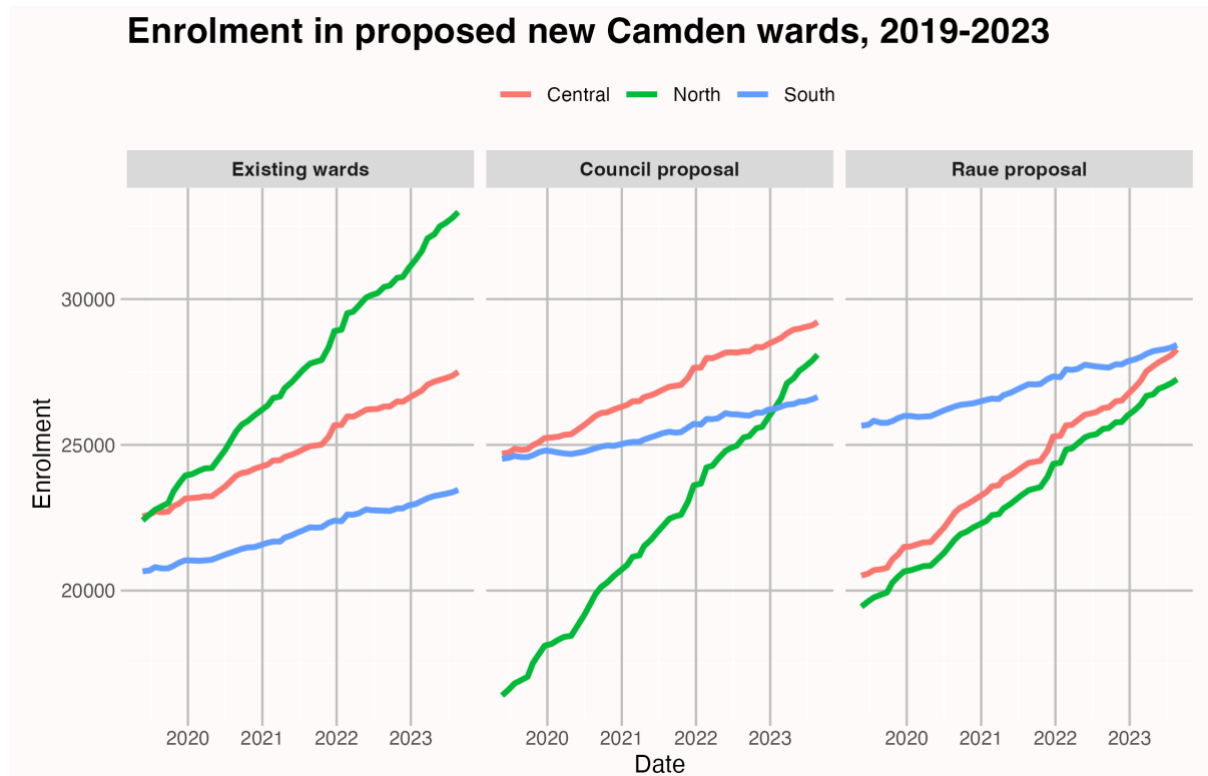
Enrolment as of April 2023

The addition of Gledswood Hills to the North Ward significantly increased the rate of growth in the ward over the last four years (and likely in the next four years) and barely reduced the total roll compared to the removal of Harrington Park.

Leppington is one of the fastest-growing suburbs in the council area, so removing that suburb from the North Ward makes a big difference to the rate of growth in that area, while also increasing the rate of growth in the Central Ward.

The original proposal swapped Spring Farm for Harrington Park in Central Ward, replacing a slightly smaller but faster-growing suburb with a larger but slower-growing suburb. I have reversed this, and then added an additional suburb to Central Ward: Narellan Vale. This makes the South Ward the most populous ward in the council, but not by an enormous margin.

The following chart shows the estimated number of electors per ward from 2019 until August 2023 for the existing wards, the council’s proposed wards, and my alternative proposed wards. I don’t have population projections for future growth, so the best I can use is to look at recent growth to see the trajectory of an area.



The inclusion of Leppington and Gledswood Hills in the North Ward makes an enormous difference to the rate of growth. The council’s proposed North Ward starts out with a much smaller roll in 2019 than my proposed alternative, but ends up larger by mid-2023. Meanwhile the growth trajectory for the Central Ward is much shallower for the council’s proposed map.

On my map, the Central and North wards will catch up to the South Ward, likely in 2024. Indeed the Central Ward will likely become the largest ward in the next few months, but the 10% rule won’t be violated for some time. It is feasible that the 10% limit won’t be breached until after the September 2024 election, which could allow the council to avoid a redistribution prior to the 2028 election (although it may be wise to do so regardless).

Another way to view these trajectories is to look at the proportional increase in each ward’s enrolment from 2019 to 2023.

	Central	North	South
Existing wards	22.0%	47.2%	13.5%
Council proposal	18.3%	71.3%	8.7%
Raue proposal	37.8%	40.1%	10.8%

The council’s proposal significantly worsens the different rates of growth. The Central and South wards become slower-growing wards while the North Ward becomes much faster-growing.

Notes on ward names

Whatever ward model is adopted, the wards of Camden Council are due for renaming.

If the existing Council proposal is adopted, I would suggest renaming the South Ward as the "South-West Ward" and the Central Ward as the "South-East Ward".

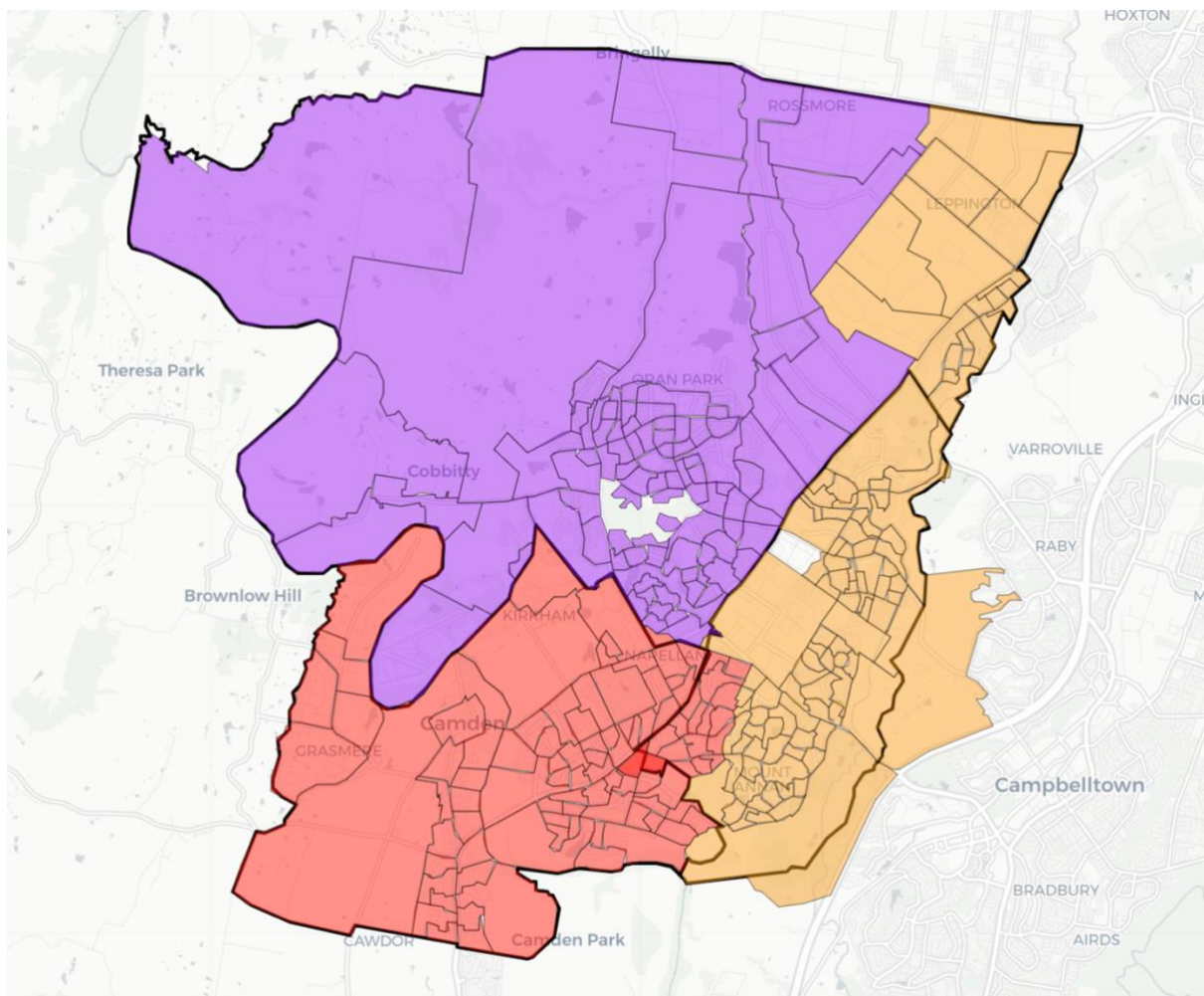
If my proposal was adopted, I would suggest renaming the South Ward as the "South-West Ward", the Central Ward as the "East Ward", and the North Ward as the "North-West Ward".

Appendix – alternative proposal maps

This map was produced based on SA1 maps. In a single case an SA1 was previously split between two wards and thus appears twice on the map.

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