

Review of City of Parramatta 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 Parramatta 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 Parramatta elections in 2017¹ and 2021².

I am also a resident of the City, having lived in the area since 2016.

I believe that the proposed ward boundaries fall short of the necessary changes needed to accommodate expected population growth. The Rosehill ward has been growing at an astonishing pace and this should be reflected in the boundaries by drawing Rosehill at the bare minimum size legally allowed. I also think this gives an opportunity to do some more thinking about which areas fit well together by reorganising Rosehill ward to be made up of two distinct areas, rather than the three distinct areas that currently make up that ward.

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 the City of Parramatta.

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 Parramatta

¹ <https://www.tallyroom.com.au/archive/nswcouncil2017/parra2017>

² <https://www.tallyroom.com.au/archive/nswcouncil2021/parramatta2021>

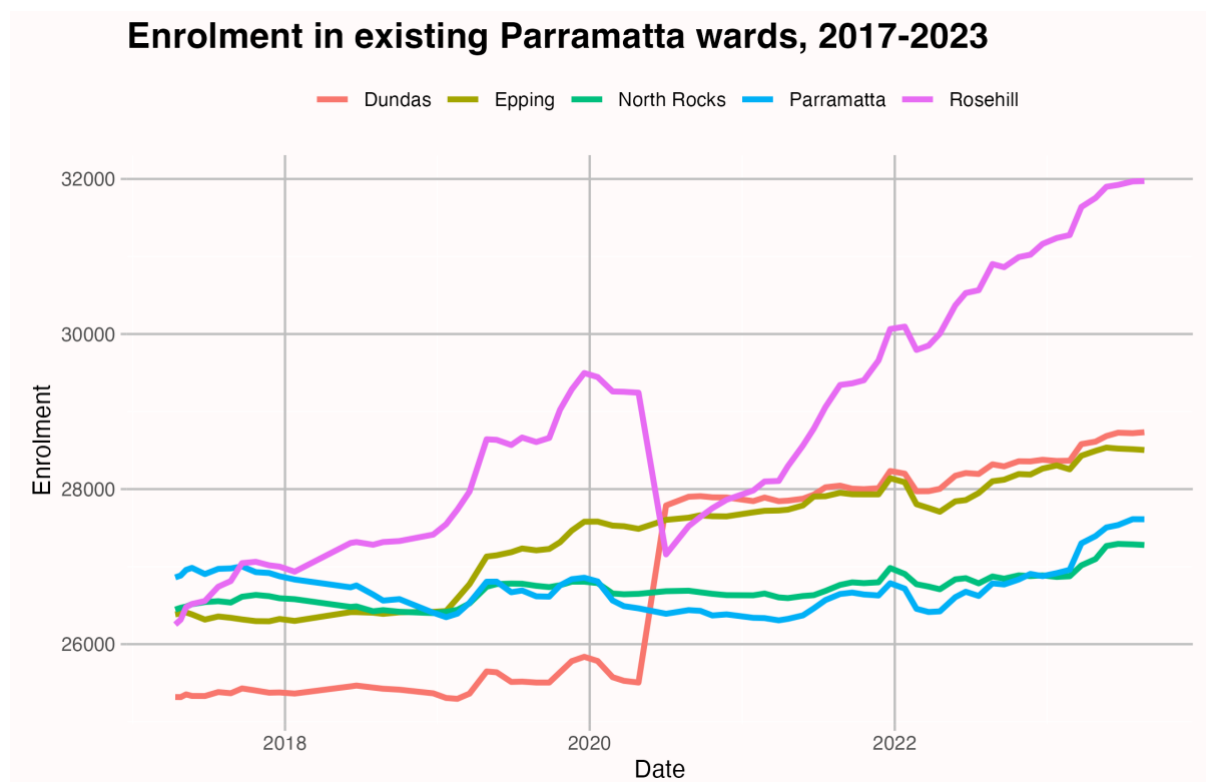
³ <https://roll.elections.nsw.gov.au/lg/ex35>

The City of Parramatta's boundaries were changed as part of the council amalgamations process in 2016, losing territory to Cumberland council and gaining territory from The Hills, Hornsby and the former Auburn councils.

When the new council boundaries were announced, they came with a new set of boundaries for five wards that were a clean break from the old wards that had existed prior to the change.

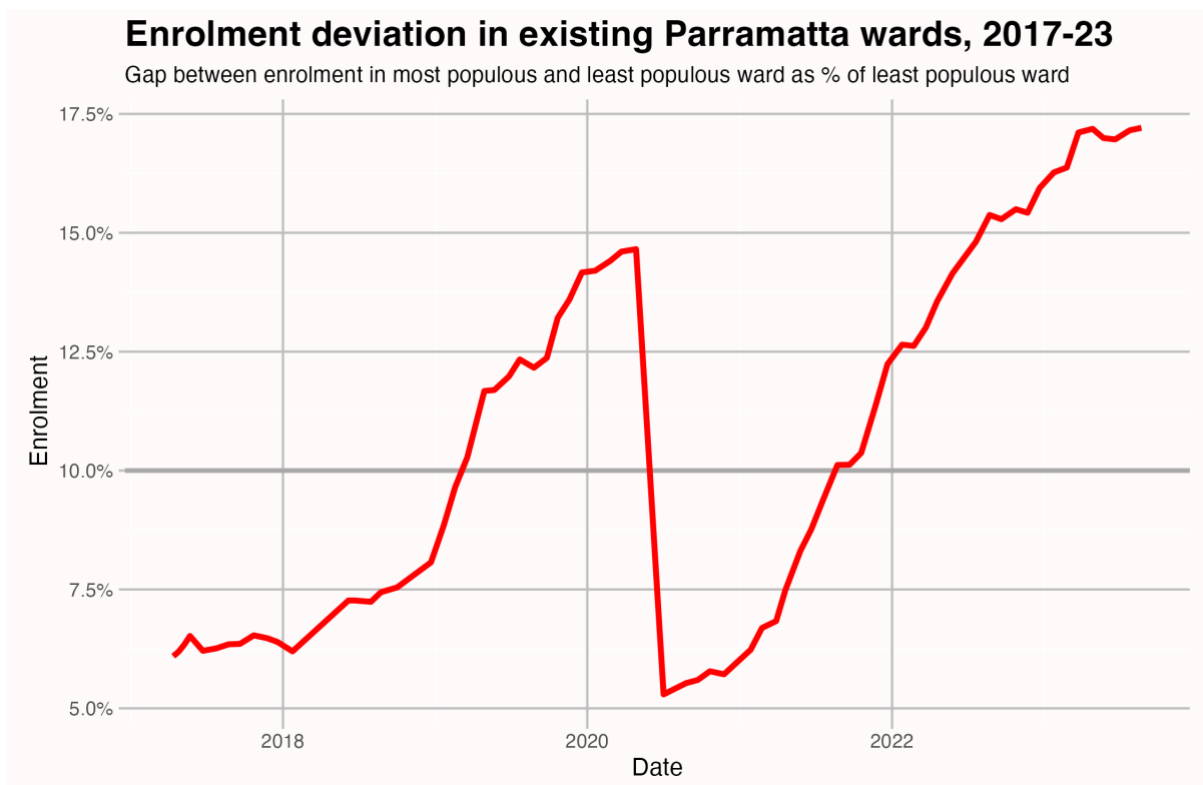
These boundary changes were first implemented in electoral roll statistics in early 2017, so I can track the wards of the council (and more general population trends) back to April 2017.

These first set of boundaries were used for the September 2017 elections. A minor redistribution was implemented for the elections scheduled for September 2020. This redistribution moved a small area between Victoria Road and the river from Rosehill ward into Dundas ward, and did not touch the other three wards.



These boundary changes were applied in the enrolment statistics in early 2020, and for a brief moment Rosehill ward was not the most populous ward, but it quickly regained its lead.

The election was postponed to December 2021 due to COVID-19, by which point the most populous ward (Rosehill) had 12.2% more electors than the least populous ward (Parramatta).



As of August 2023, this gap has widened to 17.2%.

There is always a gap between the time when enrolment data is downloaded and used to determine a redistribution, and when those new boundaries are applied in the main dataset, so it's not possible to definitively ensure that wards stay within the range intended.

The last redistribution was conducted using enrolment data as of July 2019, but the enrolment statistics did not implement the change until July 2020. In the meantime, the gap between the smallest and largest wards on the old boundaries grew from 12.3% to 14.7%.

As of July 2019, the new Rosehill ward drawn for the 2020 election was the smallest of the five wards, with Dundas ward 4.1% bigger. Rosehill was the third-largest ward by the time the new boundaries were implemented in July 2020, and became the largest ward by January 2021.

It can be difficult to contain a fast-growing area, which makes it all the more important that those fast-growing areas are drawn with the absolute minimum permissible population at the time of the decision.

The example of the last redistribution shows how Rosehill ward was drawn as the ward with the smallest enrolment, but had become the largest ward only four months after the originally scheduled election date. More minimalistic mapmaking will likely result in larger gaps in enrolment by election day.

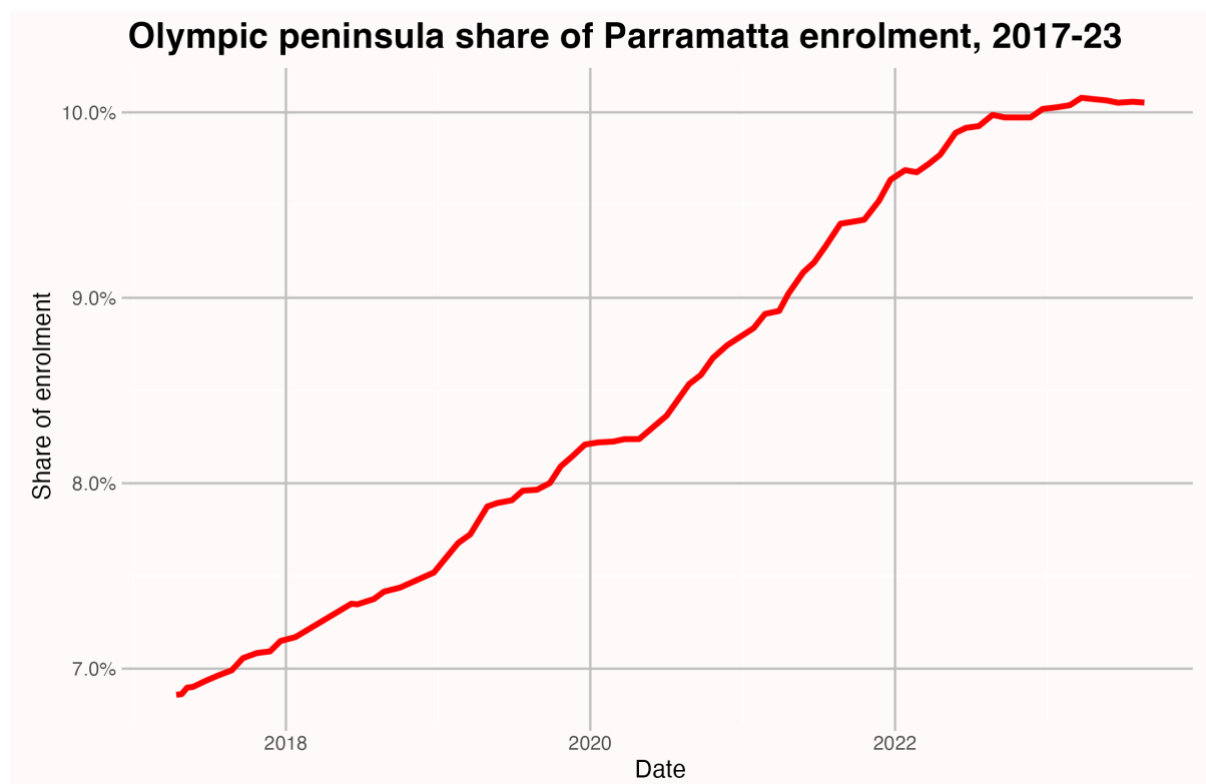
Population growth trends

The population of a council area does not grow evenly. If it did, there would be no need for redistributions. In order to best understand what you need to do when redrawing electoral boundaries, it's necessary to go beyond just looking at the numbers right now, but looking at a longer-term trend.

The main growth area in the City of Parramatta over the last six years has been the growth in population in the Olympic peninsula area: the area covering Sydney Olympic Park, Wentworth Point, Newington, Silverwater and a small part of Lidcombe.

From April 2017 until August 2023, the electoral roll on the Olympic peninsula has grown by 60.9%. Meanwhile the remainder of the City of Parramatta has grown by just 6.0%. The overall growth rate has been 9.8%.

This has increased the importance of the Olympic peninsula as it makes up a larger share of the total roll in the City of Parramatta.



This chart shows the Olympic peninsula's share of the total council roll. In 2017, less than 7% of voters lived in this area. This number reached 10% in 2022 and has stayed there. That means that there is one half of a ward's worth of voters living in this area, and this should grow in the coming years.

The current proposed boundaries

The current proposal being exhibited makes relatively small changes to the Rosehill ward which still leave it as the second-most populous ward in the council.

Proposed new ward	Enrolment
Dundas	28,721 (2.3%)
Epping	28,514 (1.6%)
North Rocks	29,620 (5.5%)
Parramatta	28,075 (0.0%)
Rosehill	29,172 (3.9%)

Enrolment per ward as of July 2023

The changes are minimalistic, leaving Dundas and Epping wards entirely untouched. They rely very heavily on maintaining the existing wards, rather than thinking through sensible borders for the future.

The mapmakers have fulfilled their obligations by chopping up the small part of the City of Parramatta lying south-west of the railway line, most of which is in the suburb of Parramatta along with some of Mays Hill. This small area has a strong community of interest and it's bizarre to split it in the middle.

I would argue that the combination of the Parramatta CBD (along with part of the area mentioned above) with a ward that stretches out west from Westmead doesn't make much sense. That Parramatta CBD area is separated from most of the ward by Parramatta Park and the North Parramatta heritage precinct.

The Parramatta CBD has stronger links to the Granville/Harris Park/Rosehill area to the south and east, as well as to the suburban parts of the suburb of Parramatta along with North Parramatta to the north, rather than to Westmead in the west.

The council's proposal also does nothing to address the divided nature of the current Rosehill ward. Rosehill ward currently includes the Olympic peninsula, along with a strip between the Parramatta River and Victoria Road in the north, and the Harris Park/Rosehill cluster (along with part of Parramatta itself) in the south-west.

These areas don't have great transport connections. The only bridge connection between the northern strip and the Olympic peninsula is Silverwater Road. To travel between the south-western cluster and the northern strip, you have to leave the ward to enter Dundas and then drive along Victoria Road. All of the suburbs on the opposite shore of the river from the south-western cluster's residential areas are now in Dundas ward. To travel between the south-western cluster and the Olympic peninsula, you can either go through the northern strip and cross Silverwater Road, or travel along the M4 freeway. None of them are strong direct connections.

Unfortunately there is no option that doesn't involve pairing the Olympic peninsula with another area that doesn't have a strong connection – the Olympic peninsula is not populous enough to have its own ward, and it has weak transport connections to all parts of the City. But I would argue it would be better to pair it with just one other area, not two.

An alternative proposal

I suggest starting the process by cleaving one of the three parts of Rosehill ward away from the other two. The obvious choice is to move the strip north of the river into Dundas ward. Ermington and Rydalmere are split in half by the current ward boundary, and could be unified in a single ward.

This leaves Rosehill ward slightly under quota. I suggest topping it up by adding the entire Parramatta CBD south of the river as far as Parramatta Park. This leaves the Park on the edge of a ward rather than cleaving across the middle, and unifies the Parramatta CBD with southern Parramatta, Harris Park and Rosehill, which all have very strong connections.

In this scenario, Dundas is now well over quota. I suggest resolving this imbalance by moving two SA1s in Dundas Valley into Epping ward, which currently covers about half of that suburb. I also suggest moving more of North Parramatta and the remainder of Parramatta out of Dundas ward into Parramatta ward. This unifies the homes around Church Street, rather than using that street as a boundary. It also widens the corridor of inner suburbia from the Parramatta River in the south to James Ruse Drive in the north which are included in the Parramatta ward.

Finally, Dundas would lose part of Oatlands, specifically those areas to the west of Belmore Street. Ideally Oatlands would all be kept together, but this boundary is easy to identify and Oatlands has a lot in common with the suburbs of North Rocks.

My proposal would leave Rosehill as the smallest ward, with the three north-eastern wards all about 6% larger. This would likely put the wards more on track to be equal in size come September 2024.

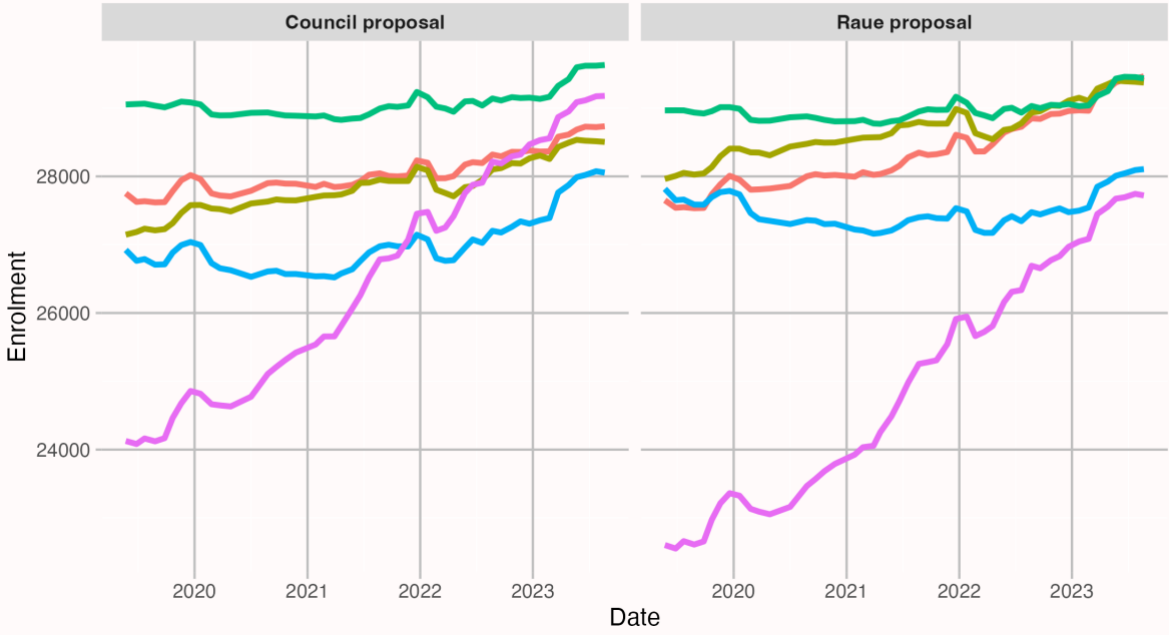
Proposed new ward (Raue)	Enrolment
Dundas	29,429 (6.1%)
Epping	29,384 (5.9%)
North Rocks	29,453 (6.2%)
Parramatta	28,092 (1.3%)
Rosehill	27,744 (0.0%)

Enrolment per ward as of July 2023

This final chart below shows the trajectory of the council's proposed wards and my alternative wards since 2019. While the trajectory is similar, Rosehill starts from a much lower base, and thus doesn't end up as the second-largest ward by early 2023. If recent historical trends continue, my alternative Rosehill ward will be somewhere in the middle of the pack by September 2024, rather than way out in front.

Enrolment in proposed new Parramatta wards, 2019-2023

Dundas Epping North Rocks Parramatta Rosehill

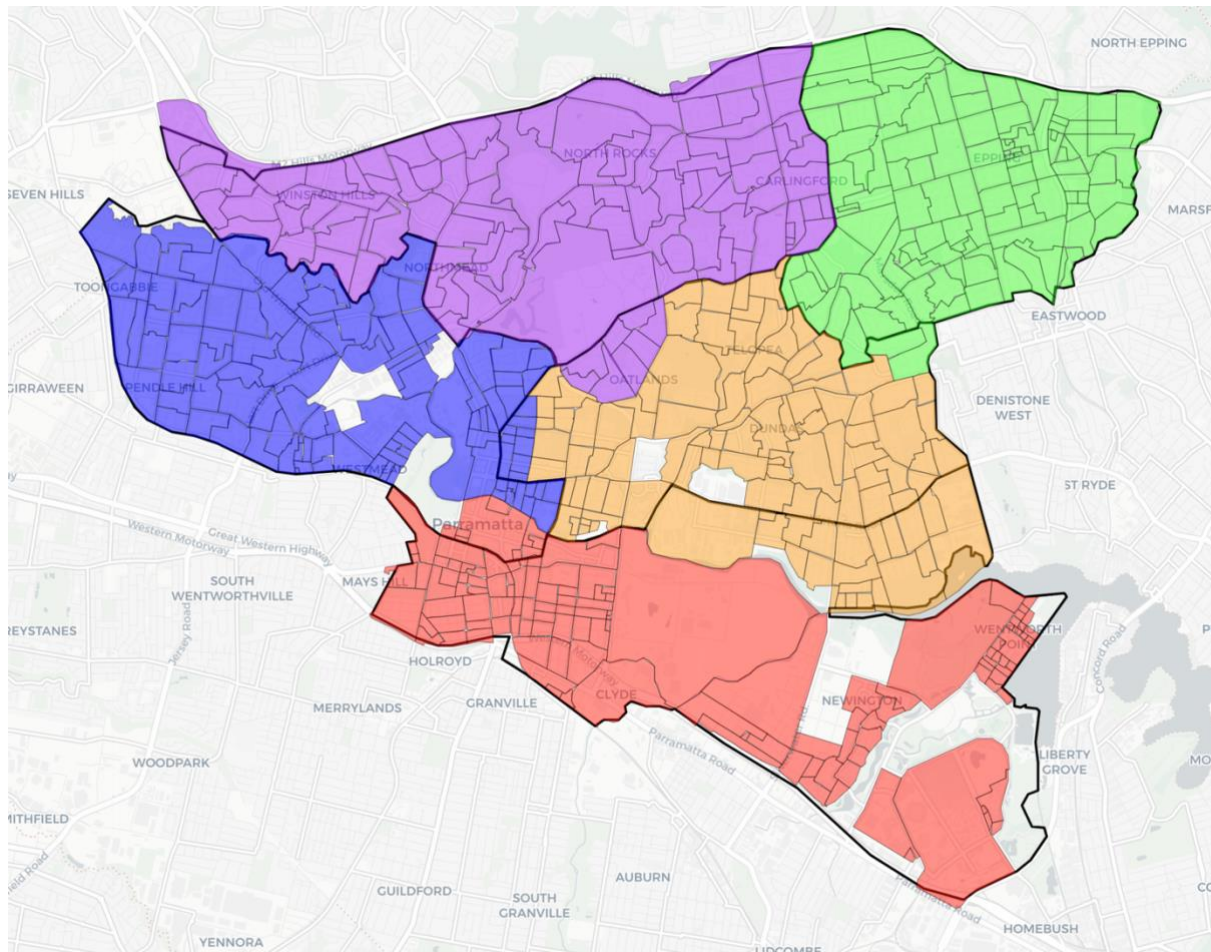


Appendix – alternative proposal maps

This map was produced based on SA1 maps.

There are 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