CENTRAL DESERT
REGIONAL COUNCIL

2026 NT Local Government Representation Review Submission

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Executive Summary

Central Desert Regional Council (CDRC) supports the retention of its current representation structure and submits that the existing arrangements continue to provide fair, effective and geographically appropriate representation for the communities of the Central Desert region. The current four-ward model, comprising Akityarre, Anmatjere, Northern Tanami and Southern Tanami Wards, reflects established communities of interest, cultural and language groupings, regional service delivery patterns and the practical realities of governing one of the Northern Territory's largest and most remote local government areas.

In considering the matters set out in Sections 31 and 32 of the *Local Government Act 2019*, CDRC submits that the current allocation of 12 elected members across the four wards remains appropriate and continues to support equitable representation across a geographically vast and culturally diverse region. The existing ward boundaries recognise important language, cultural, kinship and traditional ownership connections that remain central to local identity, community governance and effective representation. Retaining these boundaries helps ensure that communities with shared interests and established relationships continue to be represented by councillors who understand local priorities and circumstances.

CDRC further submits that the Committee should recognise the unique characteristics of remote local government, including extensive travel distances, low population density, dispersed settlements and limited transport infrastructure. In these circumstances, a degree of variation in elector-to-councillor ratios is both reasonable and necessary to ensure effective representation. While enrolment growth in Northern Tanami Ward should continue to be monitored, current demographic trends do not warrant changes to ward boundaries or councillor allocations at this time.

The Council does not support the introduction of an undivided council model, as this may reduce representation for smaller and more remote communities and weaken the strong local connections currently fostered through ward-based representation.

Overall, CDRC considers that the existing structure achieves an appropriate balance between electoral fairness, cultural representation, community identity, geographic practicality, operational efficiency and effective local governance. Therefore, recommends that no changes be made to the current four-ward structure, ward boundaries, ward names or councillor numbers as part of the 2026 Local Government Representation Review.

Economic Interests and Communities of Interest

While CDRC is frequently considered as a single local government area for administrative purposes, the economic realities across the region are diverse and closely tied to distinct geographic, cultural and service delivery catchments.

The Central Desert region covers approximately 281,338 square kilometres and comprises numerous dispersed Aboriginal communities connected through local employment markets, cultural networks, transport corridors and government service delivery arrangements. The Council area has a population of approximately 4,170 residents, of whom more than 80% identify as Aboriginal.

The regional economy is underpinned by several interconnected sectors, including:

- Local government employment and municipal service delivery
- Education and training services
- Primary health care and aged care services
- Aboriginal community-controlled organisations
- Indigenous ranger programs and land management activities
- Arts centres and cultural enterprises
- Tourism and cultural tourism
- Pastoral operations
- Mining and exploration activities, particularly within the Tanami region
- Community Development Program and other government-funded employment initiatives

Importantly, these economic relationships do not operate uniformly across the Council area.

Anmatjere Ward

Communities within Anmatjere Ward maintain close economic and service relationships with Alice Springs via the Stuart Highway corridor. Residents frequently access health, education, retail, banking, freight and government services through Alice Springs, creating a distinct regional economic catchment. Employment opportunities are often linked to highway transport services, tourism, pastoral enterprises and government service provision.

Northern and Southern Tanami Wards

The Northern and Southern Tanami Wards have strong economic connections associated with the Tanami Road corridor and nearby mining operations. These communities often experience unique workforce, transport and infrastructure issues that differ significantly from those experienced by communities closer to Alice Springs. The growth in enrolment within Northern Tanami Ward suggests continued economic activity and population stability associated with these regional influences.

Akityarre Ward

The Akityarre Ward includes communities with strong cultural and family connections extending into eastern Central Australia. Economic participation is often linked to community services, land management, cultural enterprises, art production and regional government programs.

Importance of Ward Representation

The current ward structure allows these differing economic interests to be represented directly at the council table. Councillors can advocate for infrastructure priorities, housing requirements, employment opportunities and service delivery needs that are specific to their communities and economic catchments.

Council considers that a move to a non-ward structure could reduce representation for smaller and more remote communities whose economic priorities may differ significantly from larger population centres. Accordingly, the existing ward model remains the most effective mechanism for ensuring that local economic interests continue to be represented fairly and effectively.

Social and Cultural Interests

The strongest communities of interest within Central Desert are cultural, linguistic, kinship and traditional ownership connections.

Ward boundaries broadly align with:

- Anmatyerre communities
- Alyawarra communities
- Warlpiri communities
- Eastern Desert cultural groupings

These cultural identities remain highly relevant to local governance and community decision-making.

Unlike urban councils where suburbs may define communities of interest, Central Desert communities are separated by substantial distances and maintain distinct cultural identities. Maintaining dedicated ward representation assists communities in ensuring their voices are heard through elected members who understand local priorities and cultural obligations.

Regional Interests

The Council area contains community clusters that naturally interact through:

- School networks
- Health service delivery
- Sporting competitions
- Ceremonial and cultural activities
- Family and kinship networks
- Road and transport corridors

The current wards broadly reflect these established regional relationships.

Communication and Travel

Communication and travel considerations are among the most significant factors affecting local government representation within CDRC and are a critical consideration under Section 31 of the Local Government Act 2019.

Central Desert spans approximately 281,338 square kilometres, making it one of the largest local government areas in the Northern Territory. Communities are separated by vast distances, with travel between some communities requiring several hours of road travel and, in some circumstances, overnight journeys.

Unlike urban councils where elected members can readily attend meetings, community events and constituent engagements within a short period of time, councillors in Central Desert face substantial logistical challenges.

These include:

- Long distances between communities
- Significant travel costs
- Limited public transport options
- Dependence on private vehicles and council transport
- Seasonal road closures caused by flooding and weather events
- Roads that are largely unsealed and subject to deterioration
- Significant travel times for attendance at council and committee meetings
- Variable access to telecommunications infrastructure

Digital Communication Challenges

Although telecommunications have improved across parts of the Territory, many communities continue to experience:

- Inconsistent mobile phone coverage
- Limited internet reliability
- Reduced data speeds during peak periods
- Service interruptions caused by weather events or infrastructure failures
- Variability in access to digital devices and online services

These factors can limit the ability of elected members to engage virtually with residents and can reduce opportunities for participation in meetings when travel is not possible.
For many residents, face-to-face engagement remains the preferred and most effective form of communication, particularly where English may be a second, third or fourth language.

Language and Cultural Communication

The Council area encompasses several Aboriginal language groups and cultural affiliations. Effective communication frequently relies on local knowledge, cultural understanding and relationships built within communities over extended periods.

Ward-based representation assists in ensuring communities are represented by elected members who:

- Understand local cultural protocols
- Speak local languages or can communicate effectively through established relationships
- Have first-hand knowledge of community priorities
- Are regularly present within their communities

This form of local representation is particularly important in remote communities where trust, cultural authority and community connection play a significant role in effective governance.

Implications for Representation Structures

Given the significant geographic scale of the Council area, the practical challenges associated with travel and communication strongly favour retaining ward-based representation.

The current four-ward structure ensures elected members are distributed across the region and remain closely connected to the communities they represent. It also promotes equitable participation by smaller and geographically isolated communities that might otherwise struggle to secure representation under a non-ward system.

For CDRC, effective representation is not solely a matter of elector numbers. It is equally dependent upon the ability of elected members to physically access communities, maintain regular communication with residents and represent distinct local interests across an exceptionally large and remote landscape.

For these reasons, Council considers that the challenges associated with travel, remoteness and communication provide a compelling justification for retaining the existing ward model and existing ward boundaries.

Seasonal Road Closures and Access Constraints

The scale and remoteness of the CDRC area mean that road accessibility is a significant governance and representation issue. While communities are connected by a network of sealed and unsealed roads, many of these transport routes are vulnerable to seasonal weather conditions, particularly during the summer wet season.

Although Central Australia receives lower annual rainfall than the Top End, intense rainfall events associated with monsoonal systems, tropical lows and ex-tropical cyclones can result in widespread flooding and prolonged road closures. These impacts are often intensified by the large number of creek crossings, floodways and unsealed road sections throughout the region.

Key transport routes serving communities within Central Desert include:

- The Tanami Road
- Plenty Highway
- Sandover Highway
- Central Arnhem Road connections through adjoining regions
- Numerous community access roads linking outstations and smaller settlements

During significant rainfall events, communities can become isolated for days or, in some instances, weeks. Flooded river crossings, damaged road surfaces and washouts can prevent travel by residents, councillors, council staff, emergency services and contractors.

These disruptions affect local government representation in several ways:

- Councillors may be unable to attend council meetings or community meetings in person
- Community consultation and engagement activities may need to be postponed;
- Constituents may be unable to travel to council offices or service centres
- Essential services and supplies may be delayed
- Electoral activities, candidate engagement and voter participation can become more difficult
- Communication with isolated communities may become dependent on limited telecommunications infrastructure

The impact of road closures is particularly significant because many elected members represent communities located hundreds of kilometres from Council's principal administrative centres. As a result, representation cannot be assessed solely on elector numbers. The ability of a councillor to physically visit communities, maintain engagement with residents and understand local issues is fundamentally affected by road conditions and seasonal access constraints.

The current ward structure assists in mitigating these challenges by ensuring elected members are geographically distributed throughout the Council area. Communities continue to have local representatives residing within, or near, the areas they represent, reducing reliance on long-distance travel from other parts of the region.
Maintaining local representation is particularly important during periods of isolation when community priorities often centre on emergency management, road restoration, housing impacts, service continuity and community wellbeing. Elected members with direct local knowledge are best placed to communicate these needs to Council and other levels of government.

Accordingly, CDRC submits that seasonal road closures, extensive travel distances and periodic community isolation are compelling factors supporting the retention of the current ward structure and councillor representation model. These realities reinforce the importance of balancing electoral equality against the practical challenges associated with governing one of Australia's largest and most remote local government areas.

Population Trends

The population of the CDRC area has remained relatively stable over recent years, decreasing marginally from 4,241 residents in 2020 to 4,170 residents in 2025, representing a decline of just 1.7 per cent. While this indicates a modest reduction in overall population, electoral enrolment trends tell a different story.

Enrolment across the Council area increased by approximately 9.5 per cent between 2021 and 2026, demonstrating that the number of eligible electors participating in local government representation continues to grow despite relatively stable population levels. Importantly, this growth has not occurred evenly across the region. Northern Tanami Ward recorded enrolment growth of approximately 35.3 per cent over the same period, significantly higher than the growth experienced in Akityarre Ward (4.7 per cent), Anmatjere Ward (3.1 per cent) and Southern Tanami Ward (7.6 per cent).

These figures indicate that demographic and enrolment changes are occurring at different rates across the Council area and highlight the importance of ongoing monitoring of population and voter trends to ensure representation arrangements remain effective and equitable in future reviews. However, while variations exist between wards, the current elector-to-councillor ratios remain within a reasonable range when considered alongside the unique geographic, cultural and operational circumstances of the region.

Any assessment of representation in Central Desert must balance electoral equality with the need to preserve established communities of interest, cultural and language group connections, and practical ward boundaries that support effective governance across extremely remote areas.

Population density is a particularly significant consideration for CDRC. Covering approximately 281,338 square kilometres and supporting a population of around 4,170 residents, the region has one of the lowest population densities of any local government area in Australia. In this context, representation challenges arise not from population concentration but from the vast geographic scale of the Council area and the dispersion of communities across remote locations.

The current ward structure provides an important mechanism for ensuring that residents across the region continue to elect representatives from within their local area, maintaining strong community connections and local representation despite the substantial distances involved. For this reason, the existing ward model remains an effective and appropriate response to the unique demographic and geographic characteristics of the Central Desert region.

Physical Features of the Local Government Area

The CDRC area is defined by its vast geographic scale, remote settlement pattern and challenging physical environment. Covering approximately 281,338 square kilometres, the region consists of extensive desert landscapes, isolated communities, large pastoral holdings, significant areas of Aboriginal land, and a network of sealed and unsealed transport corridors that connect communities across Central Australia.

The Council area is characterised by considerable distances between population centres, with many communities separated by hundreds of kilometres and reliant on a limited road network for access to services, employment and regional centres. These physical features create unique governance and representation challenges that differ substantially from those experienced by municipal and urban councils.

The geography of the region continues to influence almost every aspect of community life, including service delivery, travel patterns, economic activity and social interaction. The vast distances involved affect how residents access health, education, retail and government services, while the condition and availability of transport routes often determine the frequency and nature of interactions between communities.

Physical geography also shapes local economies, with communities maintaining connections to transport corridors, employment centres and service hubs. As a result, the region comprises several distinct communities of interest that are influenced as much by geography as by culture, language and history.

The current ward structure broadly reflects these geographic realities and has proven effective in supporting local representation across the Council area. Communities within the Northern and Southern Tanami Wards share common transport routes, economic connections and regional interests associated with the Tanami corridor.

Communities within Anmatjere Ward maintain strong links through the Stuart Highway corridor and their connection to Alice Springs as a major service centre. Similarly, communities within Akityarre Ward share distinct geographic, cultural and traditional connections across the eastern Central Desert region. The existing ward boundaries therefore recognise the practical influence of geography on community identity and interaction, while ensuring elected representation remains closely connected to the communities and regions councillors are elected to serve.

Section 32 Considerations

For CDRC, cultural identity is not simply a social consideration; it is a fundamental determinant of how communities are organised, how leadership is exercised, how people interact, and how representation is understood. This is particularly relevant to the Section 32(2) requirement to keep identifiable communities, including cultural and language groups, within a single ward where possible.

In considering the matters set out in Section 32(2) of the *Local Government Act 2019*, CDRC submits that the existing ward structure continues to provide an appropriate balance between electoral equality and effective representation within a vast and remote local government area. Current enrolment figures indicate that Akityarre Ward has 269 electors represented by two councillors, Anmatjere Ward has 1,009 electors represented by four councillors, Northern Tanami Ward has 483 electors represented by two councillors, and Southern Tanami Ward has 948 electors represented by four councillors.

This equates to approximately 134 voters per councillor in Akityarre Ward, 252 in Anmatjere Ward, 241 in Northern Tanami Ward and 237 in Southern Tanami Ward. While variations exist across the wards, these differences reflect the practical realities of representing remote communities and have been shaped by considerations of geographic isolation, community representation needs, cultural identity and travel requirements. In the context of the Central Desert, absolute voter equality should not be pursued at the expense of effective local representation, particularly for smaller and more remote Aboriginal communities.

The Act also requires consideration of keeping wards within rural and remote areas as small as practicable. While the existing wards are geographically large, ranging from approximately 40,450 square kilometres in Anmatjere Ward to 92,960 square kilometres in Northern Tanami Ward, these boundaries reflect established community connections and regional service delivery patterns. Further subdivision would likely increase governance complexity, create additional administrative burden and potentially fragment recognised communities of interest without delivering any meaningful improvement in representation.

Importantly, the current ward boundaries maintain a high degree of demographic and geographic uniformity. The wards are broadly organised around shared cultural and language identities, similar settlement patterns, common transport networks and long-established community relationships. They also allow identifiable communities and language groups to remain within a single ward wherever possible, supporting culturally appropriate representation and effective community engagement. Council therefore considers that the existing ward structure satisfies the objectives outlined in Section 32(2) and continues to provide an equitable and practical model of representation for the Central Desert region.

Maintaining these cultural groupings within a single ward helps ensure that elected members understand local priorities, cultural protocols and community expectations. It also reduces the risk of communities competing for representation within larger or culturally diverse wards where their interests may become diluted.

Further subdivision of wards could create several risks:

- Firstly, it may divide established language groups, traditional owner groups or communities of interest across multiple wards, potentially weakening their collective representation and creating confusion regarding elected representation
- Secondly, smaller wards may struggle to attract sufficient candidates, particularly in very remote communities where the pool of eligible and willing candidates is already limited. This could reduce electoral competition and community choice

There are also practical governance risks. Additional wards would require boundary changes, ongoing reviews and potentially more complex electoral administration. Given the vast geographic scale of the Central Desert region, creating smaller wards would not necessarily reduce travel distances for councillors or improve access to representation. Instead, it may create artificial boundaries that cut across established cultural, social and service delivery relationships.

In Central Desert, effective representation is achieved not through strict population equality alone, but through maintaining strong connections between elected members and the cultural communities they represent. The existing ward structure achieves this balance by recognising cultural identity, geographic realities and longstanding community relationships while continuing to provide equitable representation across the region.

Governance and Operational Considerations

From a governance and operational perspective, CDRC considers that the existing four-ward representation model continues to provide fair, effective and practical representation across one of the Northern Territory's largest and most remote local government areas. The current structure ensures that representation is distributed across geographically distinct regions, enabling communities to elect councillors who have a strong understanding of local priorities, cultural considerations and service delivery challenges.

Importantly, the ward system preserves representation for diverse Aboriginal language groups, cultural communities and regional interests, ensuring that decision-making reflects the broad range of perspectives that exist across the Council area. The existing model also promotes local accountability by maintaining close connections between councillors and the communities they represent, strengthening community confidence in local government and encouraging direct engagement between elected members and residents.

The ward structure is particularly important in supporting participation from smaller and more remote communities. By guaranteeing representation across the Council area, the current arrangement reduces the risk that larger population centres could dominate council decision-making or disproportionately influence election outcomes. Residents can elect representatives who understand the unique circumstances of their region and who can effectively advocate for local needs while contributing to whole-of-council governance. This balance between local representation and broader strategic decision-making has been a key strength of the current model.

In contrast, a non-ward structure could create several governance and operational challenges. There is a risk that representation from smaller and geographically isolated communities could diminish, particularly if candidates from larger population centres are better positioned to campaign across the Council area. Election campaigns would likely become more expensive and logistically complex due to the vast distances involved, potentially discouraging participation by candidates from remote communities.

A non-ward model may also weaken localised representation by reducing the direct connection between councillors and specific communities of interest. Given the size, cultural diversity and geographic complexity of the Central Desert region, the current ward system remains an essential mechanism for ensuring equitable representation, effective governance and meaningful community participation throughout the Council area.

Recommendations

CDRC recommends that the Local Government Representation Review Committee:

1. Maintain the current four-ward representation model, comprising Akityarre, Anmatjere, Northern Tanami and Southern Tanami Wards

2. Maintain the existing composition of 12 elected members, with councillor numbers remaining unchanged across the four wards

3. Retain the current ward boundaries, which continue to reflect established communities of interest, regional connections and practical service delivery arrangements

4. Give significant weight to language, cultural identity, kinship networks and traditional ownership relationships when assessing representation arrangements and ward structures across the Council area

5. Recognise that the unique circumstances of remote local government, including vast geographic distances and extremely low population density, warrant some flexibility in achieving elector-to-councillor parity across wards

6. Support the continuation of a ward-based system of representation and not pursue the introduction of an undivided council structure, given the potential impact on representation for smaller and more remote communities

7. Monitor future enrolment and demographic trends within Northern Tanami Ward, particularly considering recent growth, while recognising that current enrolment levels do not justify alterations to ward boundaries or councillor allocations currently

8. Affirm that the existing representation structure provides an appropriate balance between electoral equity, community identity, cultural representation, geographic realities, operational efficiency and effective local governance across the Central Desert region

Based on the matters outlined in Sections 31 and 32 of the *Local Government Act 2019*, and having regard to the cultural, geographic, demographic and operational characteristics of the Central Desert region, CDRC submits that the current representation structure continues to serve the interests of its communities effectively.

Cr Adrian Dixon
President

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