Submission to the 2026 Northern Territory Local Government Representation Review

Expanding the boundary of Belyuen Community Government Council to incorporate the surrounding unincorporated area of the Cox Peninsula.

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1 Submissions

1.1 Definition

What is a Local Government Council?

Local Government Councils are responsible for community-level services.

They manage local roads, car parks, street signage, stormwater drainage, lighting, footpaths, parking, cycle paths, parks, gardens, playgrounds, sporting fields and courts, swimming pools, public toilets, animal management, land and coast care programs, libraries, waste management, cemeteries, and community events as well as programs such as youth and seniors support, sport and recreation, disability services, Mens & Womens Services, Culture programs, childrens services and aged care. Local Governments in remote regions are also responsible for strategic planning, workforce development, Indigenous employment & training and mental health & wellbeing.

In some instances, local government also deliver mechanical & civil workshops, retail stores, fuel outlets, Aerodrome Services, Centrelink and Australia Post services.

2 Council Resolution

RECOMMENDATION:

That Council:

1. endorse this submission to the 2026 Local Government Representation Review;
2. request that the Local Government Representation Review Committee retain Belyuen Community Government Council as an independent local government area;
3. confirm Council's opposition to amalgamation with Wagait Shire Council or another local government council;
4. support retention of the current single-area, non-ward representation structure;
5. support further investigation of appropriate boundary arrangements for currently unincorporated Cox Peninsula land;
6. request that future boundary investigations consider mineral exploration, mining, future rateable land, infrastructure, tourism and Aboriginal economic development;
7. authorises the Chief Executive Officer to make any minor administrative amendments required before submission; and
8. authorises the Mayor and Chief Executive Officer to lodge the final submission with the Local Government Representation Review Committee.

Moved: **Mayor Woodie**

Seconded: **Cr: D. Yarrowin**

Carried

3 Executive Summary

The Belyuen Community Government Council respectfully submits that Belyuen should remain an independent local government area and should not be amalgamated with Wagait Shire Council, West Daly Regional Council, Litchfield Council or any other local government authority.

Council further submits that the 2026 Local government Representation review should recognise the distinctive geographical, cultural, social, economic and governance circumstances of Belyuen when considering the future configuration of local government on the Cox Peninsula.

The Council's preferred position is:

1. Belyuen Community Government Council remain an independent council.
2. Belyuen's existing indigenous community-based governance arrangements be retained.
3. The current single-area, non-ward representation structure be retained unless future evidence demonstrates that a change is necessary.
4. The Committee should recognise the potential for appropriately selected unincorporated Cox Peninsula land that falls within the Kenbi Land Claim determination to be incorporated into the local government area along with an additional parcel of land that would provide a natural boundary alignment.
5. Any future boundary changes affecting Belyuen should be developed through consultation with Belyuen residents, Traditional Owners, the relevant Aboriginal corporation, neighbouring councils and affected landholders.
6. Future economic development, including mineral exploration, mining and other major developments on currently unincorporated Cox Peninsula land, should be considered as part of the long-term viability and appropriate configuration of local government.
7. Any future boundary proposal should protect Belyuen's capacity for local decision-making, cultural authority and community representation.

The Council does not support the abolition or amalgamation of Belyuen Community Government Council due to its relatively small population.

The *Northern Territory Local Government Act 2019* expressly recognises geography, population, viability and appropriateness as relevant considerations in determining local government areas. It also requires consideration of community interests, communication and travel, population trends, population density and physical features. These considerations support maintaining Belyuen as a distinct local government area.

4 Current Challenges

4.1 Lack of Representation

We believe that indigenous Territorian's should be entitled to representation through an accessible system of local government that enables local decision-making, community participation and equitable access to local services.

4.2 Small Scale of Existing Councils

We consider that a key objective of local government reform should be the elimination of unincorporated areas wherever practical. The Cox-Daly region is adjacent to existing local government areas and contains communities with clear links to surrounding districts. Incorporation of this land into new or existing local government structures would address this democratic deficit and provide opportunities of scale for each of the expanded entity to build long term sustainability for the entire region.

4.3 Access to Homelands & Outstations

There are currently five outstations that connect Belyuen people to Homelands and Country on the Cox Peninsula.

The existing Belyuen Council boundary restricts access of these homelands for local Indigenous people due to lack of maintenance and up-keep of homeland roads, associated resources and infrastructure.

Expansion of the Belyuen Council boundary to include these homelands and outstations will create an immediate positive impact on the health & wellbeing of local Indigenous people of this region.

5 Benefits for the Community

5.1 Distinct community of interest

Belyuen represents a distinct community of interest.

The community has its own:

- community identity;
- cultural interests;
- local governance arrangements;
- community facilities;
- service-delivery requirements;
- economic-development aspirations; and
- relationship with surrounding Aboriginal lands and Traditional Land Owner interests.

The existence of a small population should not, of itself, be interpreted as evidence that Belyuen lacks a viable community of interest.

Indeed, the 2022 Representation Review specifically recognised the discrete nature of Belyuen's communities and the geography of the region when determining that its existing representation structure was appropriate.

5.2 Local decision making and self-determination.

Maintaining an independent Belyuen Council provides the community with a direct democratic mechanism through which local priorities can be determined.

An amalgamation would necessarily place Belyuen within a larger electorate and governance structure in which Belyuen residents would constitute only a small proportion of the overall population.

This creates a significant risk that decisions affecting Belyuen would increasingly be made according to priorities established outside the community.

An independent council provides:

- direct local representation;
- accountability to Belyuen residents;
- greater responsiveness to local priorities;
- a clear institutional voice for indigenous people; and
- an established platform for engagement with the Northern Territory and Australian governments.

Council considers that these characteristics are particularly important for a remote Aboriginal community.

5.3 Geography and remoteness

Belyuen's geographical circumstances distinguish it from larger mainland councils.

Travel to and from Belyuen is affected by the physical geography of the Cox Peninsula and by the need to use transport connections that are fundamentally different from those of larger urban councils.

The Local Government Act expressly requires the Representation Committee to consider communication and travel, including issues arising from remoteness and distance.

A larger council covering a geographically extensive area may have difficulty providing the same level of local engagement and responsiveness as a dedicated Belyuen local government council.

For this reason, geographic scale should not automatically be treated as an argument for amalgamation.

6 Demographic and Community of Interest Considerations

6.1 Existing Governance Structure is appropriate

Council submits that the current representation model should be retained.

The existing structure provides:

- one local government area;
- no wards;
- five ordinary elected members; and
- a Mayor/President elected by Council.

The 2022 Representation Review examined this structure and determined that five members were appropriate given the geography and discrete communities of Belyuen.

There is therefore no demonstrated need to replace the current structure with a ward system or to incorporate Belyuen into another council.

Council requests that the Committee retain the existing structure unless compelling evidence demonstrates that change is necessary.

6.2 Protecting Local Representation

A common concern with amalgamations is the loss of local identity and representation.

Existing community identities, history and cultural significance should be recognised and preserved.

This concern can be addressed through an appropriate governance model.

We recommend that the Review Committee give consideration to the Belyuen Community Government Council providing the committee with a strategic plan that includes representation, governance and long term service delivery for the future local government boundary.

7 Economic Development & Future Viability

7.1 Community control and decision-making

Belyuen's future viability should not be assessed solely on its current population.

The Cox Peninsula contains significant opportunities for future economic development.

These include:

- tourism;
- Aboriginal economic development;
- land development;
- infrastructure;
- construction;
- natural-resource development;
- mineral exploration;
- mining;
- renewable energy;
- environmental and cultural tourism; and
- associated service industries.

7.2 Mining and future rate base

Council considers that future mineral development potential should be included in the long-term assessment of the Belyuen local government boundaries as part of ensuring viability of a council entity with a small potential rates base

The Cox Peninsula is already associated with significant mineral exploration and mining activity, including the Finniss Lithium Operation.

Core Lithium's Finniss project demonstrates that major resource projects can occur within the broader Cox Peninsula area.

Council recognises that the existence of a mineral title does not automatically mean that land is rateable, and that the rating treatment of individual mining leases and other tenures must be determined under the applicable Northern Territory legislation.

Nevertheless, future mining and resource development can generate:

- additional rateable land and improvements where legally applicable;
- increased commercial activity;
- employment;
- demand for infrastructure;
- transport requirements;
- waste and environmental management requirements;
- economic activity associated with contractors and suppliers; and
- opportunities for local procurement, employment & training.

Accordingly, the future local government boundary should be assessed against the long-term economic geography of the Cox Peninsula, rather than only its current residential population.

8 Relationship with an expanded Shire Council

Council acknowledges that there should be a legitimate discussion regarding the future incorporation of portions of unincorporated Cox Peninsula land into an expanded Shire Council.

However, such an arrangement should not result in the loss of Belyuen's independent local government status.

If the Northern Territory Government considers expansion of a neighbouring Shire Council into currently unincorporated Cox Peninsula land, Belyuen submits that:

1. Belyuen's existing local government area should remain intact;
2. Belyuen should not be merged with a neighbouring Shire Council;
3. any boundaries between councils should be based on clearly defined geographic, community and service-delivery considerations;
4. Aboriginal land and Traditional Owner interests must be fully considered, including the future development of freehold land within the Kenbi Land Claim determination
5. the economic consequences of mining and future development must be assessed; and
6. affected communities must have a meaningful opportunity to participate in the boundary reform process.

The Local Government Act permits local government boundaries to be changed and councils to be merged, however those powers should be exercised only where the resulting arrangement provides an appropriate and effective system of local government.

9 Strategic Boundary Principle

Belyuen Council proposes the following principle for future boundary planning:

Local government boundaries on the Cox Peninsula recognise established communities, Aboriginal interests, geographic and transport connections, existing and future economic activity, environmental considerations and the long-term viability of local government, while protecting the right of established communities such as Belyuen to retain effective local democratic representation.

Belyuen Council considers this approach preferable to a simple population-based amalgamation model.

10 Proposed Future boundary Investigation

Council recommends that the Committee and Northern Territory Government undertake a detailed GIS assessment of:

- the existing Belyuen local government boundary;
- the existing Wagait Shire boundary;
- all Cox-Daly unincorporated land;
- Aboriginal freehold land;
- native title interests;
- existing infrastructure;
- roads and transport connections;
- future development areas;
- environmental reserves;
- communities and population;
- land tenure; and
- potential future rateable land.

This assessment should be used to develop a long-term Cox Peninsula local government framework.

Council's previously prepared conceptual boundary maps should be treated as strategic options only. Any final boundary proposal should be based on verified cadastral and land-tenure information.

11 Financial and Economic Viability

Council submits that the financial viability of Belyuen should be considered over an appropriate long-term horizon.

A small current population does not necessarily mean that a community is incapable of supporting a viable local government authority.

The assessment should consider:

- current government grants;
- current own-source revenue;
- existing council assets;
- service delivery costs;
- future population;
- tourism opportunities;
- commercial development;
- Aboriginal economic development;
- mineral exploration and mining;
- future infrastructure;
- potential rateable properties;
- opportunities for strategic partnerships; and
- the cost of administering a larger regional council.

A comparison should therefore be undertaken between:

Scenario 1 – Belyuen remains independent;

Scenario 2 – Belyuen remains independent with selected future boundary expansion;

Scenario 3 – Belyuen is amalgamated with another council; and

Scenario 4 – Belyuen remains independent while unincorporated Cox Peninsula areas are allocated to an expanded council.

Belyuen Council considers Scenario 4 worthy of detailed investigation because it provides a pathway for improving local government coverage of currently unincorporated areas without removing Belyuen's independent governance.

12 Cultural and Community Considerations

Any future boundary change must recognise that local government boundaries do not exist independently of Aboriginal cultural and land interests.

Belyuen Council submits that the Committee should ensure that boundary decisions:

- respect Traditional Owner interests;
- recognise Aboriginal land tenure;
- recognise cultural heritage;
- protect community identity;
- support local decision-making;
- avoid unnecessarily separating established communities; and
- provide affected Aboriginal communities with meaningful participation.

The Local Government Act itself identifies the rights and interests of Aboriginal traditional owners as a fundamental matter within the legislative framework.

13 Benefits of maintaining an independent Belyuen Council

Maintaining Belyuen as an independent council provides:

Strong local democracy

Decisions remain directly accountable to the Belyuen community.

Cultural continuity

The council remains closely connected to local cultural priorities and community structures.

Economic advocacy

Belyuen has a dedicated institution capable of negotiating with government and industry regarding future development.

Local employment

Council operations can continue to support local employment and skills development.

Strategic flexibility

Belyuen can establish partnerships with neighbouring councils without surrendering its independence.

Future growth

Belyuen council can participate in future land, tourism, infrastructure and resource-development opportunities.

Stronger Aboriginal representation

An independent council provides an established local-government platform for Aboriginal community decision-making

14 Recommendation to the Representation Review Committee

Belyuen Community Government Council respectfully requests that the Local Government Representation Review Committee recommend that:

Recommendation 1

Belyuen Community Government Council's current five-member, non-ward representation structure and independent Local Government area is retained

Recommendation 2

This structure provides fair and effective representation, given Belyuen's community of interest, geography, travel and access circumstances

Recommendation 3

Recognition of the significant amount of unincorporated land on the Cox Peninsula and recommend that its future local government status be examined and consideration given to Belyuen Community Government Council

Recommendation 4

Any change to external boundaries be based on meaningful consultation with residents, Traditional Owners, relevant Aboriginal entities, affected landholders and neighbouring councils

Recommendation 5

The incorporation of currently unincorporated Cox Peninsula land into a local government area should not require the abolition or amalgamation of Belyuen Community Government Council.

Recommendation 6

Future boundary planning give consideration to existing and prospective economic development, including mineral exploration, mining, infrastructure, tourism and Aboriginal economic development.

15 Conclusion

Belyuen Community Government Council submits that independence is the most appropriate governance arrangement for Belyuen.

Belyuen is not just a small population within the broader Cox Peninsula. It is an established community with its own identity, governance arrangements, cultural interests, geographic circumstances and economic aspirations.

The *Local Government Act 2019* requires the Representation Committee to consider community of interests, economic and social interests, communication and travel, population, density and physical geography. These considerations support a careful and community-specific assessment rather than an assumption that a small population requires amalgamation.

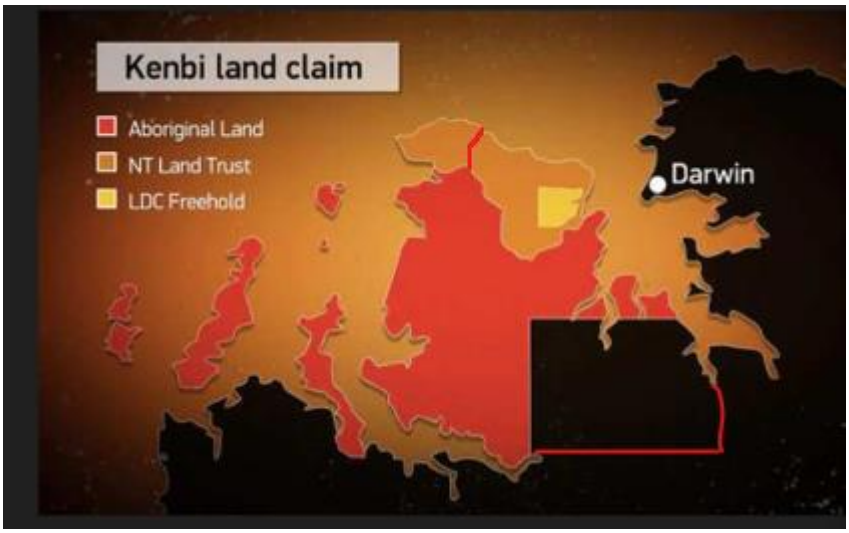
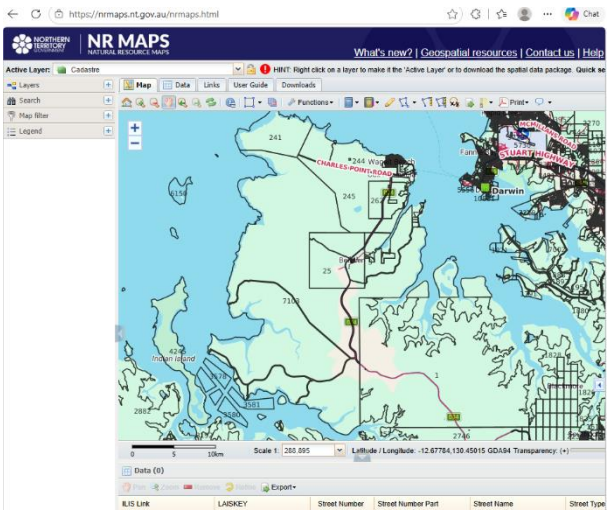
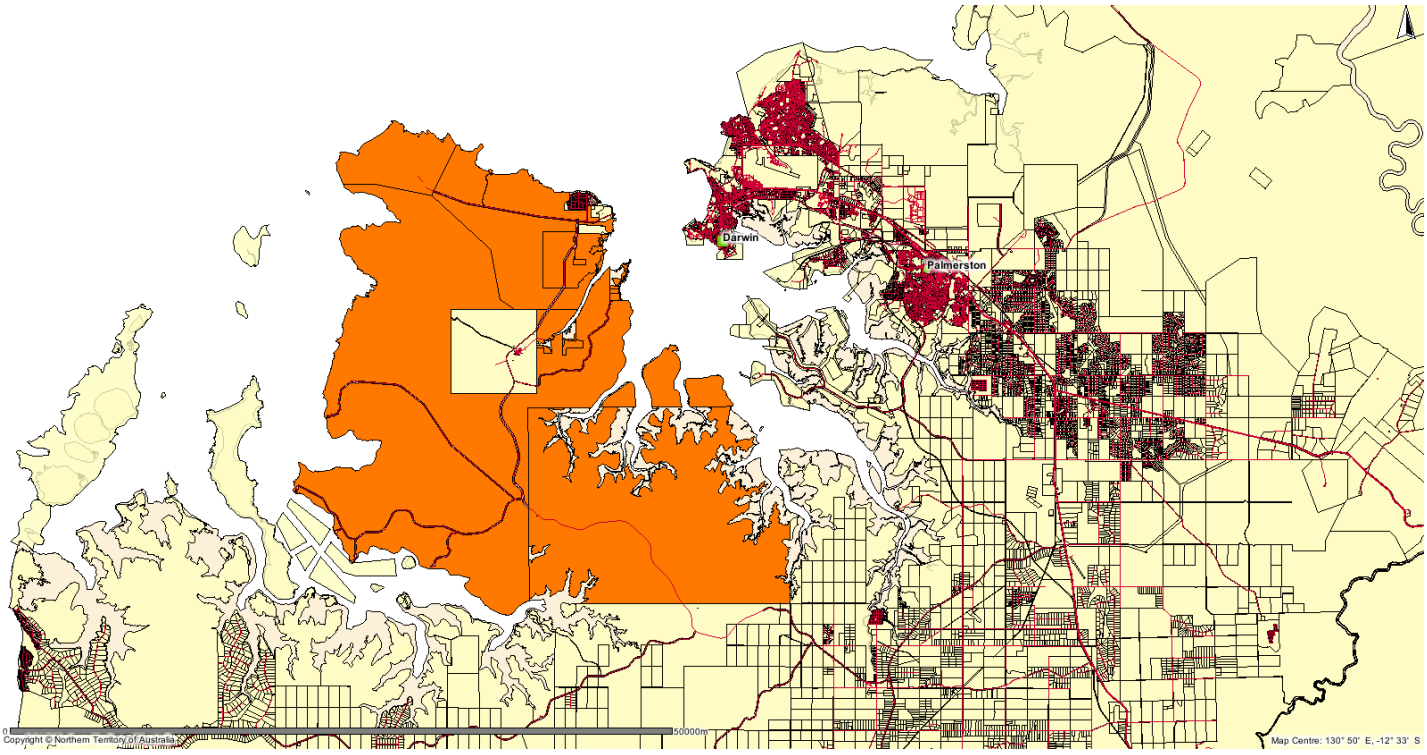
The 2022 Representation Review provides an important precedent: after considering Belyuen's population, geography and discrete communities, the Committee concluded that its existing five-member structure was appropriate.

The current 2026 review provides an opportunity to build on that finding.

Belyuen Council therefore respectfully requests that the Committee:

Retain Belyuen Community Government Council as an independent local government authority and recognise its right to continue providing local democratic governance to the Belyuen community.

Council further supports a separate strategic examination of the future incorporation of currently unincorporated Cox Peninsula land, including land associated with future residential, commercial, tourism and mineral development.

The future of the Cox Peninsula should be planned around strong local government, Aboriginal self-determination, sustainable economic development and effective community representation rather than through amalgamation for its own sake.

Appendices - Images