

Council elections to go ahead despite Sydney's COVID-19 outbreak



By [Megan Gorrey](#)

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The NSW government is pushing to hold council elections for more than five million voters in early September as planned while making voting by post or online easier as Sydney's COVID-19 outbreak worsens.

Amid growing fears Sydney's lockdown could be extended for weeks, Local Government Minister Shelley Hancock said voters would be able to vote in person, by post or online in the elections, which were postponed last year.



The government is pushing for council elections to go ahead as planned on September 4. ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

Mrs Hancock said the government would adopt “a range of measures to help maintain the safety and wellbeing of voters, candidates and polling staff for local government elections” on Saturday, September 4.

The government's insistence on pressing ahead with the polls has divided councillors, as the NSW Opposition questioned whether the major logistical exercise could proceed safely given the threat posed by the fast-spreading Delta variant.

On Friday, the government changed regulations to expand the eligibility criteria for postal voting to include permanent or temporary residents of nursing homes, retirement homes and hospitals, and those who are self-isolating due to COVID-19.

Any voter who "reasonably believes that attending a polling place on election day will pose a risk to the health or safety of the person, or of another person, because of the COVID-19 pandemic" will also be eligible to cast their vote by post, [according to the new regulations](#).

All residents who are enrolled to vote will be able to pre-poll vote from August 23. Online voting, or iVote, will be rolled out for the first time in council election to vulnerable voters, including those who have a disability.

North Sydney independent councillor Zoe Baker said expanding postal and online voting at this stage would be resource-intensive and require education campaigns to inform potentially millions of residents how to vote.

"It's all well and good to expand it eight weeks out, but postal voting is a particularly cumbersome process, particularly for an electorate that's not familiar with it," she said.

"I understand the reluctance to postpone, but I think public health and safety should come first. I think if they push through it will be the lowest voter turnout ever."

All voters will be able to pre-poll vote in a bid to ease crowds at polling places on election day. BEN RUSHTON

City of Sydney Liberal councillor Craig Chung was "torn" about whether the polls should go ahead.

“We’ve extended it for a year already,” he said. “People want democracy. We have to find a way to live with this virus.”

Labor’s local government spokesman Greg Warren said there was a real concern whether elections could be held safely in less than two months and urged the government to develop contingency plans to avoid another delay.

Mr Warren said online voting could be further expanded and polling booths could extend their opening hours or implement a booking system, to avoid large crowds at voting venues such as schools.

“Don’t vote and be fined or attend a polling booth at the peril of your own health – that is the conundrum voters throughout the state currently face,” he said.

About 5.1 million voters (including business owners in the City of Sydney) are enrolled in this year’s elections, and more than 5000 candidates are expected to vie for a place on 125 of the state’s 128 councils.

Voting is compulsory and those who don’t vote face a \$55 fine, which is paid to NSW Treasury.

Councillors have raised concerns proceeding with the September poll would heavily favour incumbents who already had a profile, and candidates backed by the major parties, who had the funds and resources to campaign through letterbox drops.

Local Government NSW president Linda Scott, who is also a Labor councillor at the City of Sydney, was confident the safety of voters could be prioritised in a way that allowed councils to hold fair and transparent elections.

“The new rules ... focus on ensuring COVID-safe voting, which gives every eligible member of the community an opportunity to elect the council of their choice.”

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