

Postponement of the 2021 local government elections



Frequently asked questions

Questions about the postponement of council elections

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When will council elections be held?

All council elections will be held on **4 December 2021**.

Why are council elections being postponed?

Council elections are being postponed in response to the current outbreak of the Delta variant of the COVID-19 virus. Global experience has demonstrated that previously effective mitigation strategies for the COVID-19 virus are no longer effective in containing the spread of the Delta variant. Only the strictest controls will contain the current outbreak.

It would be untenable for the Government to encourage electors to leave their homes to vote at a time when people are also being advised not to leave their homes unless it is essential to do so, to limit the spread of the virus.

The Government is also concerned that the current outbreak and restrictions may see a low voter turnout at council elections that could jeopardise the legitimacy of election outcomes and public confidence in them.

Has the NSW Electoral Commissioner been consulted?

The decision to postpone council elections has been made in consultation with the NSW Electoral Commissioner and NSW Health. The NSW Electoral Commissioner has advised the Government that it is no longer tenable to hold council elections during the current COVID outbreak. The Commission now faces insurmountable challenges in conducting council elections in areas affected by outbreaks.

The current outbreak and stay at home restrictions do not only affect electors' ability to vote in person but also the ability of election workers to attend polling places and counting venues for the purposes of their work. The Commission is also finding it increasingly difficult to engage and retain election workers because of fear of COVID.

Why have council elections in regional areas been postponed?

The current outbreak has seen stay at home restrictions imposed in the Orange, Blayney and Cabonne local government areas and cases and transmission hotspots identified in other regional areas.

The Government cannot take the chance that there will be no further outbreaks in regional areas between now and 4 September 2021 that would put council elections in those areas at risk.

Conducting council elections in regional areas will also require the movement of personnel and equipment from Greater Sydney to those areas creating the risk that holding elections in regional areas may cause the virus to be seeded in those areas.

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Why can't council elections be held on 4 September 2021 by postal voting?

When holding postal voting only elections for the 2021 local government elections was proposed as an option to address the risks of holding council elections during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was strongly opposed by the local government sector. It is now too late to revisit that option.

To allow council elections to be held by postal voting only outside the circumstances current permitted under the *Local Government Act 1993* (the Act) would require an amendment to that Act. The earliest this could occur is in the week starting on the 4 August when Parliament is scheduled to resume, by which time it will already be too late. There is no guarantee any legislation mandating postal voting only elections would be supported by the local government sector or would pass the Parliament.

Even if the necessary amendments could be passed, the NSW Electoral Commission has advised that it will not be logistically possible to distribute, receive and process postal votes for every elector in NSW in the time between now and 4 September.

Why can't council elections be held on 4 September 2021 using on-line voting?

Technology assisted voting is currently only available to a limited class of electors and only at council elections administered by the NSW Electoral Commissioner. The eligibility criteria for technology assisted voting for council elections is largely the same as State elections.

As with postal voting, to allow council elections to be held by online voting only would require an amendment to the Act. The earliest this could occur is in the week starting 4 August. The Parliament has previously indicated opposition to any expansion of technology assisted voting and any legislation allowing an expansion of technology assisted voting would be unlikely to pass.

Even if the necessary amendments could be passed, the NSW Electoral Commission has advised that its online voting systems could not accommodate every elector in NSW.

Questions about the 4 December 2021 elections

How can the Government be sure that it will be safe to hold council elections on 4 December 2021?

The restrictions imposed under the *Public Health (COVID-19 Temporary Movement and Gathering Restrictions) Order 2021* are designed to contain and reduce the spread of the current outbreak. It is hoped that the measures imposed under the Public Health Order will be effective in containing the current outbreak well before December.

The Government also expects that community vaccination rates will have increased to a level by December to allow available mitigation strategies to be more effective in containing the spread and impact of the Delta variant.

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What legislative measures have been taken to support council elections in December being COVID-safe?

Amendments have been made to the *Local Government (General) Regulation 2005* (the Regulation) to facilitate delivery of the December 2021 local government elections in a COVID-safe manner.

Among other things, the amendments to the Regulation expand the eligibility criteria for pre-poll and postal voting in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and allow technology assisted voting at elections administered by the NSW Electoral Commission.

The criteria for pre-poll voting for the 2021 elections have been relaxed allowing any elector to vote during the pre-poll voting period. This will mean that voting will not occur on a single day but over a period of 13 days, including election day. This will assist in allowing a range of COVID-safe measures to be implemented at polling places.

Additional eligibility criteria have been introduced for postal voting in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These allow electors to vote by post if they are self-isolating because of COVID-19 related reasons, or because they reasonably believe that attending a polling place on election day will pose a risk to their health or safety or the health or safety of another person because of COVID-19. Permanent and temporary residents in hospitals, nursing homes, retirement villages and similar facilities are also eligible to vote using postal voting because of their particular vulnerability.

Technology assisted voting, or iVote, will be able to be made available to electors at council elections administered by the NSW Electoral Commission, and will operate in the same way it does for State elections. Eligibility to vote using iVote will be limited to the same criteria that apply at State elections. Electors who are eligible to vote by post and who have applied for but have not received their postal ballot paper 8 days before election day will also be eligible to vote using iVote.

New powers have also been introduced to allow election managers and officials to maintain COVID-safe measures at and around polling places and at venues where votes are scrutinised or counted. The Regulations empower election managers to:

- restrict posters being displayed and canvassing activities within 100 metres of polling places where this is necessary to comply with a public health order or to reduce the risk of infection from COVID-19, (where posters and canvassing are restricted, links to the posters and other election material may instead be published on the election manager's website)
- prohibit or restrict the number of scrutineers present at polling places and places where ballot-papers are scrutinised or votes counted where this is necessary to comply with a public health order or to reduce the risk of infection from COVID-19, subject to there being alternative scrutiny arrangements (eg filming the counting of votes)

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- temporarily suspend voting at a polling place for up to 4 hours and to adjourn voting for up to 13 days after election day in response to a health hazard.

What are the key dates for the 4 December local government elections?

Key dates for the December 2021 local government elections are as follows:

Key date	Step
25 October 2021	Close of electoral rolls (6pm) Candidate nominations open Commencement of the “regulated period” for the elections (for example, published electoral material must comply with authorisation rules)
26 October 2021	Postal vote application opens
3 November 2021	Close of candidate nominations (12pm) Registration of electoral material that is for distribution on election day commences
4 November 2021	Ballot paper draw
5 November 2021	Caretaker period commences
22 November 2021	Pre-poll voting opens iVote commences
26 November 2021	Registration of electoral material for distribution on election day closes (5pm)
29 November 2021	Postal vote applications close (5pm)
3 December 2021	Pre-poll voting closes
4 December 2021	iVote applications close (1 pm) iVote voting closes (6pm) Election day (8am-6pm)
17 December 2021	Return of postal votes closes (6pm)
21 – 23 December 2021	Results declared progressively as counts are finalised by Returning Officers

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Questions about the effect of the postponement of council elections?

What does the postponement of the elections mean for current councillors?

Current councillors will continue to hold their civic offices until council elections are held on 4 December 2021. The civic offices of current councillors will expire on election day on **4 December 2021**.

What does the postponement of the elections mean for popularly elected mayors?

Popularly elected mayors will continue to hold their civic offices until council elections are held on **4 December 2021**.

What does the postponement of the elections mean for mayors elected by councillors?

The making of the order will not affect the requirement to hold mayoral elections. Mayoral elections must be held for mayors elected in September 2019 when their two year-terms expire in September 2021. The Office of Local Government will issue more detailed guidance on this before September.

Mayors elected in September 2020 will continue to hold office until council elections are held on 4 December 2021.

The civic offices of all mayors elected by councillors will expire on election day on **4 December 2021**.

What does the postponement of the elections mean for deputy mayors?

Deputy mayors may be elected for the mayoral term or a shorter term. Deputy mayors hold their office for the term specified by the council's resolution. If a deputy mayor's term expires before election day on 4 December 2021, an election may need to be held for deputy mayor. It should be noted however, that councils are not required under the Act to have a deputy mayor.

What does the postponement of the elections mean for chairpersons of county councils?

Chairpersons of county councils now hold office for two years. Chairpersons of county councils elected in September 2020 will continue to hold office until council elections are held on 4 December 2021.

The civic offices of chairpersons of county councils will expire on the election day for their constituent council on **4 December 2021**.

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When will council elections be declared?

In response to changing postal delivery services, on the advice of the NSW Electoral Commission, the time for the receipt of postal votes has been extended to 13 days after election day. This change has been made to provide a greater opportunity for valid postal votes to be received and counted. This change will mean it is unlikely council elections will be declared before **21 December 2021**.

When should councils schedule their first meetings after the election?

As noted above, council elections are not likely to be declared before **21 December 2021**. Councils should schedule the timing of their first meetings following the election on this basis.

Councils that elect their mayor are required to hold a mayoral election with 3 weeks after the declaration of the ordinary election and will be required to schedule a meeting for this purpose within 3 weeks of the declaration of the election.

When scheduling the first meeting following the election, councils will need to factor in the Christmas/New Year period.

What needs to happen at the first meeting after the elections?

At the first meeting after the election:

- all councillors and members of county councils must take an oath or make an affirmation of office - councillors are not permitted to participate in meetings until they have done so
- councils must, by resolution, declare that casual vacancies occurring in the office of a councillor within 18 months of the election are to be filled by a countback of votes cast at the election if councils want to fill vacancies by these means – councils that do not resolve to fill vacancies using a countback at their first meeting after the election will be required to fill vacancies using a by-election
- councils that elect their mayors must hold a mayoral election and an election for deputy mayor where they have one
- joint organisations must elect a new chairperson
- county councils must elect a new chairperson.

The Office of Local Government will issue more detailed guidance about these requirements closer to the elections.

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What does the postponement of elections mean for joint organisations?

The composition of joint organisation boards may need to change in September 2021 if mayors of member councils elected by councillors are not re-elected.

Joint organisations elected chairpersons for a two-year term in 2020. Chairpersons elected in 2020 will continue to hold office until council elections are held on 4 December 2021.

The civic offices of chairpersons of joint organisations will expire on the election day for their member council on **4 December 2021**.

Will councils need to hold by-elections to fill casual vacancies occurring before 4 December 2021?

No. The order postponing the ordinary elections provides that any casual vacancies occurring in a council between now and 4 December are to be filled by the ordinary election for that council to be held on 4 December 2021.

This means that councils are not required to hold a by-election to fill casual vacancies occurring between now and 4 December 2021 or to apply to the Minister for a dispensation from the requirement to hold a by-election.

General managers are still required to notify the Office of Local Government, Local Government NSW, and the NSW Electoral Commissioner of any vacancies within 7 days of their occurring.

What happens if the resignation of councillors between now and 4 December results in a loss of quorum?

It is not possible under the Act for councils to lose quorum because of councillor resignations.

A quorum is defined under section 368 of the Act as *"a majority of the councillors of the council who hold office for the time being and are not suspended from office"*. This means that the quorum is calculated based on the number of councillors who hold office at a particular point in time and does not include civic offices that are currently vacant.

How will the postponement of elections to 4 December 2021 affect the next term of councils?

The postponement of the elections will not affect the timing of future council elections, and the subsequent ordinary local government elections will still proceed in September 2024.

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What does the postponement of elections mean for the requirement for councillors to lodge returns of interests?

Under the *Model Code of Conduct for Local Councils in NSW*, councillors (and designated persons) must lodge returns of their interests within three months of 30 June of each year.

All current serving councillors, members of county councils and voting representatives of the boards of joint organisations must lodge a written return of interests with the general manager (or the executive officer in the case of joint organisations) before **30 September 2021** unless they have submitted a return within the previous three months.

Returns of interests must be tabled at the first meeting of the council or board of the joint organisation after they are required to be lodged. They must also be made publicly available free of charge on councils', county councils' and joint organisations' websites, unless there is an overriding public interest against disclosure of the information contained in them or to do so would impose unreasonable additional costs on the council or joint organisation.

When will the caretaker period begin for the next local government elections?

The caretaker period no longer commences on 6 August 2021 and *Circular 21-17 Council decision-making prior to the September 2021 local government elections* may now be disregarded.

The caretaker period for the 4 December 2021 elections will now commence on **5 November 2021** and end on **4 December 2021**.

During the caretaker period, councils, general managers, and other delegates of councils (other than a joint regional planning panel, a local planning panel or the Central Sydney Planning Committee) must not exercise the following functions:

- entering into any contract or undertaking involving an expenditure or receipt by the council of an amount equal to or greater than \$150,000 or 1% of the council's revenue from rates in the preceding financial year (whichever is the larger)
- determining a "controversial development application" (as defined by clause 393B(3) of the Regulation), except where a failure to make such a determination would give rise to a deemed refusal, or such a deemed refusal arose before the commencement of the caretaker period
- appointing or reappointing the council's general manager (except for temporary appointments).

Councils should plan now to avoid the need to make these types of decisions during the caretaker period.

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The Office of Local Government will issue more detailed guidance about the caretaker requirements closer to the elections.

When will the “regulated period” begin for the next local government elections?

The “regulated period” is the period commencing 40 days before elections in which rules regulating “electoral material” as defined by the Regulation come into effect.

The regulated period no longer commences on 26 July 2021 and *Circular 21-12 “Electoral matter” and use of council resources prior to local government elections* may now be disregarded.

The “regulated period” for the 4 December 2021 elections will now commence on **25 October 2021** and end on **4 December 2021**.

Councils should plan now to issue publications that may be affected by the rules governing “electoral material” during the regulated period before that period commences.

The Office of Local Government will issue more detailed guidance about “electoral matter” and use of council resources during the regulated period closer to the elections.

How will the postponement of the elections affect councils’ IP&R cycle?

The postponement of the elections will not impact on councils’ IP&R cycles.

The postponement of council elections from 4 September 2021 to 4 December 2021, will not alter the requirement under the Act for councils to review the community strategic plan before 30 June 2022 and establish a new delivery program to cover their principal activities for the 4-year period commencing on 1 July 2022.

However, the postponement of elections will impact of the timing of the end of term report.

Has Central Coast Council’s referendum been postponed?

Central Coast Council will not be proceeding with its referendum on 4 September 2021. It will be a matter for the Council to determine the future timing of the referendum based on the advice of NSW Health and the requirements of the Public Health Order.

How does the postponement of elections affect councils that are currently under administration?

Four councils are currently under administration:

- Balranald Shire Council
- Central Coast Council
- Central Darling Shire Council
- Wingecarribee Shire Council.

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Balranald Shire Council, Central Coast Council and Central Darling Council will continue under Administration despite the postponement of the elections.

Wingecarribee Shire Council's suspension expires on **10 September 2021** and councillors who continue to hold their civic offices in that council will resume their offices from that date to **4 December 2021** when their civic offices expire.

Where can I get more information?

Contact your Engagement Manager or the Office of Local Government's Council Governance Team on 4428 4100 or olg@olg.nsw.gov.au.