

Submission to Model Meeting Code amendments

Gillian Boyd

Councillor, Shoalhaven City Council

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

I consent to my details being shared

Promoting transparency, integrity and public participation.

I believe that removing pre meeting briefings will unnecessarily add to the length of Ordinary meetings. Briefings held prior to meetings introduce Councillors to the matters to be resolved, providing Councillors with an opportunity in a less formal setting to ask questions, clarify details and be informed of historical background that help Councillors understand how the matter has evolved over time. This is particularly important for Councillors serving their first term on Council.

I also believe that Councillors should receive the same information as the Mayor, unless it is of a personal or confidential nature. In my experience, the Mayor is selective on which Councillors receive information resulting in some Councillors not being fully informed when decisions are made at meetings.

Promoting the Dignity of the council chamber

I believe that it is vital to retain the option of attending Ordinary meetings online for both staff and Councillors.

In my experience I have seen Councillors attend meetings online regularly. One was an older Councillor who had mobility constraints but actively participated on-screen. One Councillor who was elected at the recent elections has never attended a meeting due to carer responsibilities. She does a great job and contributes positively and intelligently to each meeting. We also had one Councillor attend online because he feared for his personal safety by attending an Ordinary meeting in person.

Removing the option to attend online limits the pool of potential candidates for election to Council. It impacts disproportionately on women particularly women with caring responsibilities. People with Disability who may be unable or prevented from travelling due to lack of appropriate transport and inaccessibility of the Council Chambers will

also be discouraged from participating. Owning a reliable car will also be a prerequisite to being a Councillor where there is no alternative form of reliable transport.

Our Local Government Area is large and driving from the south of the LGA to the Council Chambers can be in excess of 80 kilometres adding up to an additional 3 hours travelling time to attend meetings. Roadworks and accidents can extend that time and impact on Councillors' ability to arrive at meetings punctually. I am sure there are larger LGAs across the state where this situation is exacerbated. It is important to have the option of attendance online to overcome the tyranny and time that distance consumes.

Staff must also have the option to attend online, for the same reasons. They can answer questions put to them online equally as well as if they were in the room. They may not need to answer questions thereby wasting their valuable at-home time and overtime and allowance costs.

The quality of the Audio-visual equipment available to use during meetings must also have an impact on the quality of online participation by staff and Councils. All Councils must have access to high quality online functionality and be appropriately funded by the State Government to ensure this is in place to encourage full participation in Local Government affairs, irrespective of their gender, location, socio-economic status or physical ability.

I think attendance at Ordinary meetings and Committee meetings in person should be encouraged but not mandated. Online attendance must remain as a viable and accepted option and must not be subject to Mayoral or elected Councillor approval.

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In my recent experience , I have observed that in Ordinary meetings the Mayor is very selective in the application of the 'disorder' ruling. It is my observation that the ruling of disorderly conduct and the demand for an unqualified apology is applied to selected individuals to stifle the expression of their views on matters before the Council.

Councillors and the Mayor are using personal attributes to make assumptions about individual Councillors' facial expressions and gestures. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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Depoliticising the role of the General Manager.

I find the CEO's comments on Notices of Motion very helpful, providing additional background information on what can be very obscure matters raised via a Notice of Motion.

I would be dismayed if the Mayor had the sole responsibility for determining whether or not a Question on Notice should be answered. All requests for responses to Questions on Notice be provided with reasons given by staff as to why the questions cannot be answered.

Councillors can approach Directors for answers to questions. Directors will seek responses from appropriately qualified/informed staff as required. Councillors should not be permitted to request the attendance of specific staff lest it be used as a pretext to belittle or demean the staff member. Selecting staff to respond to questions is an operational matter and is not in the purview of elected Councillors.

I strongly believe that the only way to depoliticise the role of the general manager is to employ the general manager under the Local Government Industry Award and/or remove the provision of the Local Government Act that allows the Mayor to end the GM/CEO contract without a valid reason. The removal of GM/CEOs following elections is a disruptive and expensive exercise for Councils and demonstrates complete disregard and disrespect of the role of a Public Servant. Notwithstanding the impact it has on CEOs/GMs that are dismissed for spurious, political reasons.

Restricting Councils from holding briefing sessions.

Decisions must always be made by resolution at a Council or Committee meeting. However, I contend that to make these decisions Councillors must have the opportunity to explore issues openly and candidly from staff who are expert on the matters under consideration. I believe that briefings held in the Council chambers with the public present do not facilitate free exchange of ideas and exploration of issues. To facilitate transparency of decision making briefings could be webcast.

I find the Council Chamber intimidating and, the combative environment challenging. It is not conducive to the exchange of ideas and free-flowing discussion of issues under consideration. The public who attend council meetings can be aggressive and intimidating and are generally not restrained in their response to individual councillors who express views that they do not agree with. Members of the public have urinated all over public toilets and have accosted Councillors after meetings. It is not an environment conducive to intelligent and thoughtful exploration of issues that will be decided on at future meetings.

Councillors should continue to be permitted to contact relevant staff through councillor request systems. Council must be adequately funded to develop request systems that facilitate provision of timely and accurate information to Councillors.