

***Local Government (Empowering Councils) and Other
Legislation Amendment Bill 2025***

Sandy Bolton, MP for Noosa

Mr Speaker, as an elected representative in the first de-amalgamated Noosa Council in 2013, I can attest to the importance of partnerships between the levels of government, especially state and our 77 LGs. Councils are complex organisations, with considerable workforces, responsible for a vast and essential array of services to their communities, with representatives often the most ‘known’ by residents.

The Bill’s proposed changes to the legislative framework governing Queensland’s councils must strike the right balance. Whilst removing red-tape and empowering Councils to operate efficiently, oversight and transparency must be retained to meet community expectations.

The challenge in maintaining this balance is evident with 68 submissions made, many of which varied markedly in their support for the amendments.

Those well supported, including by the Local Government Association QLD (LGAQ) were amendments to help expedite decision making, provide consistency and clarity on remuneration and employment, streamline training processes, and confirming Mayors as the official Council spokesperson, as examples. However, issues were raised by submitters, and at the public hearing, around several other amendments.

Noosa Council, the Crime and Corruption Commission (CCC) and Local Government Managers Australia (LGMA), noted that mandating Councils to appoint senior executive employees via a panel including the Mayor, CEO and Deputy Mayor or Committee Chairperson has several potential flaws. These include the possible politicising of operational appointments, conflict of interest, lack of diversity, and insufficient recruitment and technical expertise especially for highly specialised roles. They noted it also removes the option for Councils to show flexibility, discernment, and independence, to reflect localised issues and differences in resources and capacity, as well the opportunity to utilise outside expertise where beneficial. We should be listening and acting on these concerns.

Changes to conflicts of interest frameworks also saw dissent amongst submitters.

LGAQ and LGMA recommended simplifying the existing framework, instead the bill reinstates the approach from 2013-2018 of ‘material’ personal interest disclosures and a greater reliance on self-assessment and removes ‘close personal relationships’ from the framework. Concerns including this being a ‘retrograde’ step were expressed by submitters who highlighted this as a high-risk area for elected officials, with Noosa Council, LGMA, and CCC stressing the need for clearly defined and comprehensive rules. LGAQ also recommended the development of a centralised online portal to help manage declarations consistently and transparently, which warrants consideration.

Also of issue was removing the ban on councillors with identified conflicts from lobbying staff or other councillors outside formal meetings, with the Office of the Independent Assessor identifying it as an integrity risk.

Finally, the re-introduction of a requirement for Mayors and councillors to automatically resign to run for State parliament, irrespective of the outcome, was also contentious.

The LGAQ confirmed they held a special general meeting in December where a majority of Queensland councils voted in opposition to this amendment, and claims that forcing resignation may lead to good candidates choosing not to run, as well that eligibility should be standardised across local, state and federal governments. Given that state MPs must resign to run for other levels of government, as do federal members, I am unsure why there is not a harmonisation across all jurisdictions, with consistency the key.

For Queensland's 77 councils, this bill may create efficiencies, clarity and consistency across some elements, however as raised, there are also ambiguities, a lack of flexibility, and risks in implementing some of the amendments, which could impact the intended efficiencies.

Last minute amendments were also made to the *Working with Children (Risk Management and Screening) Act 2000* to provide for the sharing of information required under new national laws to help protect children against risk from those working in early childhood.

Thank you to the Committee and Secretariat for your work on this bill, and to all submitters, many of whom echoed sentiments I

continue to make in this chamber that legislation which has the potential to undermine good governance, erode public trust and raises questions around transparency, accountability, and representation, should not be supported.

(677 words)