

6.1. MM01 Mayoral Referendum

North Sydney Council has had a popularly elected Mayor since the 1980s. That will change in September, thanks to a referendum question put to the community at the last local government elections in 2017. At that time, the community was asked: Do you favour the election of the Mayor by Councillors for a term of two years?

The community voted in favour of the proposal 52.43% to 47.47%. The question was badly worded in many respects. It did not address whether removing a popularly elected mayor would reduce the number of Councillors, resulting in this Council having to seek external advice on the implications and then having to restructure the Wards for the second time in five years.

No additional material, such as arguments for or against, can be distributed with a Referendum question at a polling booth, so many residents were voting on something about which they had no prior knowledge. The General Manager at the time elected not to promote for or against arguments widely so the only information circulated was a small article in the centre of Council's community newsletter. Not surprisingly, many residents hadn't known they would be asked a Referendum question, let alone to form a view on the subject.

Let me say here, I am in favour of Councils having a popularly elected Mayor. A Mayor elected by the whole community, not just 10 people, has the confidence of the community. They have the time to form productive working relationships with external organisations and other levels of government and bring consistency to Council. After nine years in the job, I can say there is always plenty to do and I don't believe our community will be well served by someone who tacks the work on to their day job for a couple of years.

Of course there are also arguments for a Mayor elected by Councillors, including the Mayor having the support of the Councillors who elect them and more Councillors having the opportunity to serve as Mayor.

The issue at hand is not what I, or current Councillors, think on this issue. The relevant matter is what our community would prefer. The last decision was made after five years of a dysfunctional Council that was subject to Performance Improvement Orders and a public inquiry. We have now had four productive and positive years with Councillors driving through a busy and progressive agenda.

At the last election many residents told me they didn't have enough information to make an informed decision. They felt forced to answer the question in a vacuum – and they didn't like it. We can't change the decision for this election, but we can revisit the question in September to ensure the community can make an informed decision. The

position of popularly elected Mayor has worked well for this Council over decades. We need to go back to the community and let them have a fair and informed choice about how their Council should be led.

I therefore recommend:

1. THAT the General Manager report back to the April meeting of Council with wording for a Referendum question asking whether the community supports a change from a Mayor elected by Councillors for a term of two years to a popularly elected Mayor for the four-year term of Council.

2. THAT the report include recommendations for how the Referendum questions can be promoted to the community so that the implications of each model can be fully understood and considered by the community before they vote.

**COUNCILLOR JILLY GIBSON
MAYOR**