

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

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SUBMISSION ON THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (EMPOWERING COUNCILS) AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL 2025

Introduction

This submission, made in response to the *Local Government (Empowering Councils) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2025* (the Bill), is written by Leader of the Brisbane City Council Opposition, Cr Jared Cassidy.

Brisbane City Council operates politically and is currently dominated by the LNP. This structure can lead to robust political debate and bias, so it is vital any changes to the Bill take this into account.

While the BCC Opposition welcomes genuine reform that improves integrity, transparency and efficiency in local government, we are concerned that, as drafted, key elements of the Bill risk entrenching existing power imbalances, weakening practical accountability, and further politicising council processes in Brisbane.

Concerns particularly relate to:

- Changes to the councillor conduct framework;
- Transparency, access to information and demonstrated political bias;
- Senior executive and senior contract employee appointments; and
- Broader integrity and governance settings leading to politicised decision making.

Councillor Conduct Framework

The current councillor conduct system used by Brisbane City Council has displayed high levels of bias and is deeply politicised. Opposition Councillors in Brisbane have received a significantly higher number of warnings and adverse findings than councillors in the Administration, while engaging in robust but appropriate scrutiny.

The Bill proposes to remove "conduct breaches" from the councillor conduct framework, so that only more serious matters of "misconduct" require external investigation by the Office of the Independent Assessor (OIA).

The Opposition supports this change because:

- OIA investigations are expensive and time-consuming, generating significant legal and administrative costs for council. Limiting investigations to serious misconduct will significantly reduce these costs.
- It allows councils to deal with minor behavioural issues internally and more swiftly.



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However, there are serious concerns:

- The changes will allow the chairperson to order a councillor to leave a meeting. In Brisbane, where the Administration holds a strong majority and already exercises tight procedural control, there is a real risk that this power will be used in a political way to silence opposition voices, rather than as a neutral tool for maintaining order.
- No guarantee of impartial local processes: Simply shifting more power to internal processes, without independent oversight or clear safeguards, risks politicisation.

Political Bias: Transparency and Access to Information

In recent years, it has become increasingly difficult for Opposition Councillors to access clear, detailed information. I note that since 2024/25, the Annual Budget has contained limited information, including the removal of figures in the Suburban Works Program. The BCC Opposition also notes an increase in politicised answers via Questions on Notice and formal requests for information.

The Bill's provisions dealing with "committee information" such as that of the Establishment and Coordination Committee in Brisbane, risk locking Opposition Councillors out of key executive decision-making information until matters are "finally resolved". In practice, this may allow the Administration to withhold critical documents and briefings from opposing councillors. This undermines the role of councillors as representatives and decision-makers, reducing them to "rubber stamps" after the fact.

Senior Executive Appointments and Political Influence

The Bill proposes to re-empower councillors to appoint senior executive employees (via appointment panels) and enable Brisbane City Council councillors to appoint "senior contract employees".

In a chamber dominated by a single Administration, these panels and appointment powers will be effectively controlled by the ruling group. That presents serious risks:

- Increased potential for politicised and factional appointments.
- Erosion of the perceived neutrality and merit-based nature of the senior public service; and
- Long-term embedding of an Administration's preferences into the senior ranks of the organisation.

Given the current imbalance of power in Brisbane City Council, there is a real risk this re-empowerment will be used to reinforce the Administration's control over the bureaucracy, not to broaden democratic participation.

Conflicts of Interest and Integrity

The Bill significantly reshapes the conflicts-of-interest regime, including carving out numerous circumstances where conflicts will not apply (e.g. whole-of-LGA rates and planning schemes, certain donations, and some gifts and travel below defined thresholds).

While simplification is welcome, the cumulative effect is a more permissive integrity regime that:

- Normalises small but frequent gifts, hospitality and sponsored travel;
- Relies heavily on councillors' self-assessment and public explanation, rather than on robust, independent standards.

Combined with reduced external oversight in the conduct framework, there is a risk that real and perceived conflicts of interest will not be adequately managed, further eroding public trust.

Conclusion

The *Local Government (Empowering Councils) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2025* contains some positive intentions, particularly in reducing unnecessary and costly external investigations of minor conduct issues. However, without stronger safeguards, the Bill risks entrenching the existing political dominance of the Administration in Brisbane, weakening practical transparency and budget scrutiny, increasing the risk of politicised senior appointments, and diluting the integrity framework in ways that may damage public confidence.

I urge the Committee to amend the Bill to pair reductions in OIA involvement with robust protections against partisan misuse of internal conduct powers; mandate stronger transparency and equal information rights for all councillors; embed independent, merit-based safeguards into senior staff appointment processes; and retain a high standard of conflicts-of-interest management and politically neutral communication.

Only with these changes will the Bill truly "empower councils" in a way that strengthens, rather than undermines, local democracy and public trust.

Regards,



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