




Speech By
Hon. Stirling Hinchliffe

MEMBER FOR SANDGATE

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MATTERS OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Local Government Elections

 **Hon. SJ HINCHLIFFE** (Sandgate—ALP) (Minister for Local Government, Minister for Racing and Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (2.33 pm): The quadrennial local government elections of 2020 were historic, and I do not use that word lightly. The month leading up to the 28 March official election day was like nothing I have seen in my lifetime. We watched as governments and health authorities across the globe scrambled to understand the virus that was changing the world as we knew it. Election campaigning picked up at pace. Then, as circumstances dictated, the situation changed dramatically. The elections went ahead and I would like to say welcome and congratulations to our 77 mayors and more than 500 councillors, new and old hands alike.

Every decision made by the Electoral Commission of Queensland was done in consultation with our Chief Health Officer, Dr Jeannette Young. Her advice was based on a solid foundation of science, not hysteria and not a need for headlines. This government stayed the course with Dr Young and the elections went ahead. More than 1.2 million people cast their votes at pre-polls—historic. More than 560,000 registered for postal votes—historic. Almost 37,000 voted by phone—again, historic. On election day almost 760,000 people went to a polling booth to cast a ballot. All up, about 77 per cent of all electors participated in the 2020 elections, comparing well to the 83 per cent in 2016.

The decision to go ahead with the elections was not taken lightly. An important factor the government considered was that the elections ensured continuity of government and were therefore an essential service to Queenslanders. Dr Young advised the ECQ that the elections were safe to proceed and highlighted the importance of having councils in place to lead the community response to COVID-19. Throughout the election period, this government continually monitored the advice of health experts. The ECQ put in place recommended health measures, especially monitoring of social distancing. It worked. The curve continues to flatten. There has been no corresponding peak in COVID-19 cases as many out in the community and beyond predicted.

With informed advice, the right decision was made to continue with the elections. Now that all councils have been declared, we can get on with the business of government together. Our mayors and councillors now have issues to deal with that they could not have anticipated just a few months ago. One of those issues is staff and the continued employment of their workforce during this pandemic. In the past few weeks, thousands of Queenslanders have lost their jobs, have been furloughed or had their incomes greatly reduced. I know councils across the state are deeply concerned about how to keep their workforce in place and keep their financial sustainability in place. I wish to acknowledge the co-operation between key stakeholders, including the Local Government Association of Queensland, the Local Government Managers Australia Queensland, the Australian Services Union and the Australian Workers' Union on this task.

Today I can also announce some changes to local government funding programs to ease administrative burdens and keep job-creating projects on track. These programs include the Palaszczuk government's signature Works for Queensland program, the Local Government Grants and Subsidies

Program and the Indigenous Councils Critical Infrastructure Program. Reporting requirements on projects yet to be completed will be relaxed from monthly to a minimum of quarterly. Councils have also told us that some information requirements are an administrative burden that can significantly delay grant payments being processed. We have listened and we have acted. Relaxing these rules temporarily, at this stage until 30 September, will support councils' cash flow and get funding into their hands more quickly.

The times we are in are certainly unprecedented. It has become, as I have said in other places, a bit of an overused word, but there is no better one. It is unprecedented and the way in which this parliament is responding is indeed unprecedented. It is vitally important that we come together. It is vitally important that democracy in local government comes together and has a chance to move forward. That is why I am so pleased to see that the regulatory changes that we have put in place to allow councils across the state to meet in different ways and in different forms while meeting their obligations for accountability and transparency have been met and are responded to. I want to congratulate all of those 77 councils across Queensland for the way in which they have responded to these extraordinary circumstances.