

Berejiklian slaps down Upton gaffe over council mergers

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NSW Local Government Minister Gabrielle Upton. Picture: John Grainger

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian has been forced to slap down one of her ministers who, a week before half the state votes in local council elections, flagged the possibility there could be more forced council mergers ahead.

In an embarrassing gaffe, Local Government Minister Gabrielle Upton refused to rule out more forced council mergers across NSW during evidence yesterday to a budget estimates hearing.

Labor opposition spokesman Peter Primrose repeatedly pressed Ms Upton about whether the NSW government could commit to no further forced council amalgamations before the next state election in March 2019.

Ms Upton replied: “Let me put it another way — I won’t rule them in, I won’t rule them out: there are no plans.”

Within an hour, Ms Berejiklian stepped in to “clarify” the government position, effectively contradicting her minister: “We have drawn a line under this issue. There will be no more forced council amalgamations.”

The speedy correction from the Premier comes just weeks after she and Ms Upton called a media conference to jointly announce that the NSW government would be dropping expensive court action to fight 14 councils that had successfully appealed against efforts to force their amalgamation.

Mr Primrose said Ms Upton's comments to the budget estimates committee fuelled his belief that the NSW government always had a "phase two" of forced mergers after abandoning some in regional areas last year, and then backing down on more in the face of court action.

He criticised the government for not releasing in full a KPMG report with advice that he said many believed could contain a list of other councils marked for merger.

The government has so far used cabinet confidentiality to block release of the document.

About half of the voting population in NSW will go to the polls in local council elections next Saturday.

The issue of forced mergers remains most contentious.

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/state-politics/berejiklian-slaps-down-upton-gaffe-over-council-mergers/news-story/c8529b714074e6a76ac71b8c852639e4>