

NSW Government balks at decision to strip councils of approval powers

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Some NSW or Sydney councils may retain the ability to grant or block development applications, after the state government balked at an immediate decision to hand those powers to independent panels.



*Premier Gladys Berejiklian, Treasurer Dominic Perrottet and Minister for Planning and Housing Anthony Roberts unveiled a housing affordability package.
Photo: Nick Moir*

[Fairfax Media reported this week](#) planning minister Anthony Roberts would seek cabinet approval on Thursday for a proposal to require all councils to set up and use panels to decide on development applications.

But the government instead said on Thursday it would canvass opinions on the so-called Independent Housing and Assessment Panels (IHAPS).

"We are going to be consulting on this," the Premier, Gladys Berejiklian, said.

"Our intention is much greater use of IHAPS," she said.

"But we also want to consult before we issue those new regulations to make sure communities feel that they are part of the decision-making process."

The theory behind using independent panels is that while elected councillors are able to determine the shape of plans for an area through the development of a Local Environment Plan, the implementation and enforcement of that plan is left to independent experts.

The former planning minister, Rob Stokes, announced in January an intention to introduce regulation allowing the government to require a council to use a panel to decide planning applications.

But Mr Stokes, leery of another fight with local government, stopped short of mandating the use of IHAPS.

After Fairfax Media reported that a proposal to make IHAPs mandatory would be taken to cabinet, council representatives reacted strongly.

Keith Rhoades, the president of Local Government NSW said he was concerned making planning panels mandatory had the potential to "reduce the accountability and transparency of planning decisions."

"Councils are accountable to the community where [local planning panels] are not," Cr Rhoades said. "There is no accountability like the ballot box."

Mr Roberts said on Thursday he would not comment on cabinet deliberations but was "incredibly happy with the outcome in respect to IHAPs."

But he could not say what the government would do about them. "We firmly believe IHAPS play an important role and will play an important role as we move forward in developing solutions with respect to housing affordability," he said.

The Minister said he would, however, also give more powers to councillors from specific wards to develop plans for their neighbourhood.

"We will be empowering ward councillors to actually create and develop the LEPs rather than the council as a whole," he said.

<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/nsw-government-balks-at-decision-to-strip-councils-of-approval-powers-20170601-gwi94i.html>