

Premier forced to step in over minister's council merger remarks

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NSW premier Gladys Berejiklian has been forced to publicly correct one of her ministers and declare there will be no more council mergers, after the minister flagged a possible revival of the controversial policy before the next state election.

Local government minister Gabrielle Upton revived the issue of forced mergers during a budget estimates hearing on Friday morning, where she repeatedly refused to rule out further forced mergers, saying only that "there are no plans at this time".



Berejiklian abandons council mergers
NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian defends the policy of council amalgamations, but concedes the implementation was wrong.

However, Ms Berejiklian moved quickly to correct the record on Friday afternoon, issuing a statement soon after Fairfax Media had published Ms Upton's comments.

"We have drawn a line under this issue," Ms Berejiklian said in the statement. "There will be no more forced council amalgamations."

The correction came as an embarrassing postscript in the NSW government's botched handling of the policy, which became a long-running headache as the government was forced to fight numerous councils through the courts.

Five weeks ago, Ms Berejiklian abandoned the remaining Sydney mergers, explained the decision to backflip on the policy as [necessary to ensure certainty ahead of the council elections](#) of September 9.



NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian, right, and Local Government Minister Gabrielle Upton arrive at a press conference in July during which they announced the government's backflip on council mergers. Photo: AAP

The issue was thought to be dead, until the opposition seized on Ms Upton's comments during the local government budget estimates hearing on Friday morning.

Pressed on the issue by Labor's shadow minister Peter Primrose, who asked her to commit to no further forced mergers before the 2019 state election, Ms Upton said: "Let me put it another way, I won't rule them in. I won't rule them out. There are no plans."

This latest debacle comes as ratepayers in the 20 newly amalgamated councils, created through the state government's merger policy, prepare to go to the polls next Saturday to elect their new council representatives.

A further 26 councils across NSW will also have elections on September 9, following the government's decision in February to abandon the remaining mergers in the bush, and its decision in July not to pursue the remaining Sydney mergers.

Despite the premier's correction, Ms Upton's remarks will most likely fuel speculation among anti-merger campaigners that the government will revive the policy after the September 9 elections.

Speaking at a community forum this week, Hunters Hill mayor Richard Quinn said the issue would not be put to rest until legislative protections were in place.

"Until we know that legislation is in place that requires governments to have a mandatory plebiscite if a merger proposal is to be considered ... the war hasn't been won," he said.

Hunters Hill Council was one of seven Sydney councils that claimed victory over the government's policy of forced mergers, after challenging the validity of the mergers through the courts.

Liberal mayor of Ryde Bill Pickering, who is seeking re-election as an independent after he failed to secure a position on the Liberal ticket during the party's preselection process, said the agenda of forced mergers was "not off the table".

Cr Pickering claimed he was dumped from the party's ticket due to his decision to campaign against the government's planned merger of Ryde with Hunters Hill and Lane Cove councils.

Deputy mayor Jane Stott and councillor Roy Maggio, both Liberals, also failed to secure the party's preselection and are running as independents.

"The spectre of council amalgamation will re-emerge," Cr Pickering said. "They've replaced us who were opposed to [council mergers], with those who support it.

"The factional business interests [of the NSW Liberal Party] believe it is much easier to control bigger entities than smaller councils."

<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/nsw-government-refuses-to-rule-out-a-return-to-council-mergers-20170901-gy8ugk.html>