

# Councils' report card shows need for reform

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The residents of South Sydney wait an average of four months for development applications to be processed, while in Bogan, in the state's west, it takes two days.

Hunters Hill home owners pay the highest rates in the state - \$1015 - while next door, North Sydney residents pay Sydney's lowest rates of \$353.

The NSW Local Government's annual report card, a 244-page tome that compares the performance of councils over the past three years, was released yesterday and the news was mixed.

It revealed that the 172 councils, which each year raise \$2 billion in rates, fees and fines, provide vastly different standards of service.

The Local Government Minister, Tony Kelly, refused to characterise the results of the study as either good or bad, saying only that ratepayers in underperforming councils should take matters up with their councils.

But he acknowledged that some councils were not performing up to scratch, highlighting South Sydney's slowness on development applications.

"The big variations in council

performance don't say they should be amalgamated, but do show that some reform is needed," he said.

His department would be asking underperforming councils to "please explain" over the next 12 months, he said.

The director of the Property Council of Australia, Ken Morrison, was less sanguine. "This is a damning report," he said.

"One third of councils aren't processing DAs within the statutory 40-day time period.

"Over the last two years average processing times have increased by 5 per cent, council legal costs are up more than 7 per cent, all in a period when the average number of DAs lodged with councils dropped by 12 per cent.

"This means extra costs for home owners and business."

According to the Opposition, one area ripe for reform is State Government planning regulations which were to blame for rising legal costs incurred by many councils, its Local Government spokesman, Andrew Fraser, said.

The report noted that the cost of fighting development applications made under complex legislation had pushed the coun-

## TOP BILLING HOW NSW COUNCILS PERFORM, 2001/02

Council	Average rates (\$)	Average days to process a development application	Council	Average rates (\$)	Average days to process a development application	Council	Average rates (\$)	Average days to process a development application
1 Hunters Hill	1015.34	98.67	13 Fairfield	612.84	40.27	25 Willoughby	522.15	57.22
2 Pittwater	923.23	92.00	14 Randwick	606.22	43.76	26 Holroyd	497.39	98.00
3 Ku-ring-gai	822.58	57.38	15 Ashfield	604.81	46.10	27 Ryde	492.95	53.00
4 Manly	817.90	104.00	16 Canada Bay	602.90	63.50	28 Parramatta	478.90	50.18
5 Sutherland	806.12	92.70	17 Strathfield	602.73	72.65	29 Botany Bay	464.44	48.42
6 Mosman	781.75	89.24	18 Kogarah	587.29	61.45	30 Auburn	433.01	68.18
7 Warringah	720.85	88.00	19 Blacktown	586.48	35.04	31 Sydney	427.10	25.43
8 Woollahra	707.27	88.85	20 Rockdale	573.14	62.37	32 South Sydney	374.36	116.70
9 Lane Cove	695.18	75.21	21 Hurstville	569.84	49.32	33 North Sydney	353.92	95.50
10 Leichhardt	678.14	99.39	22 Burwood	568.44	40.84	34 Concord	-	-
11 Bankstown	641.76	67.83	23 Marrickville	554.15	70.00	35 Drummoyne	-	-
12 Canterbury	622.38	52.44	24 Waverley	523.47	85.32			

SOURCE: NSW DEPT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

cils' legal costs up, but it also blamed council policies.

It encouraged councils to avoid court and to use other dispute resolution forums.

In the last financial year, 12 councils spent more than \$500,000 on legal advice, with Ku-ring-gai topping the list at \$2.4 million.

The Mayor of Ku-ring-gai, Ian Cross, said SEPP 5 and SEPP 53 -

the controversial planning laws which encourage medium density development - had pushed their costs up.

"The past year has seen a significant increase, of around 45 per cent, in inappropriate SEPP 5 development applications being appealed in the Land and Environment Court," Cr Cross said.

"In one SEPP 5 appeal alone

Ku-ring-gai Council's costs were about \$200,000, which is almost 10 per cent of our total court costs for the year."

He said challenging SEPP 5 development applications in environmentally sensitive areas had cost the council \$750,000.

A spokesman for Diane Beamer, the Minister Assisting the Minister for Planning, said Ku-ring-gai Council's legal costs

were high because of the council's "intransigence in residential development strategy".

"If they had come up with a workable residential strategy they would have encountered no legal expenses," he said.

The Royal Australian Institute of Architects said the number of councils was partly to blame for development application delays.

Caroline Pidcock, the presi-

dent of the institute's NSW chapter, said processing could be improved if councils were amalgamated, and could use improved resources to keep better quality planning staff.

"I think there are too many councils, the resources are then spread really thinly and they don't get a critical mass of people together to help assess applications," she said.