

Question

The Hon. DAMIEN TUDEHOPE: What would be the ballpark figure for running a referendum?

JOHN SCHMIDT: I wouldn't be able to give you that offhand.

The Hon. DAMIEN TUDEHOPE: Say it was a standalone one, as opposed to—

JOHN SCHMIDT: I can come back to you on notice, because we do that already with councils when we have our contractual arrangements with councils. Quite often they don't know whether they want to have a referendum at the time of the election. They have to let us know by a certain time this year, and then we give them a cost for that additional bit of work. I can give you what that would be for just a standard referendum as part of the local government elections, if the current arrangements apply. I'll try to give you some figures then if we just had to do a standalone. But having in mind, if you want to get a feel for it, if you're talking about an undivided council, which is the best example—because presumably it would be a whole-of-council election—the cost between running an election to fill a vacancy for an entire council compared to a referendum would not be greatly different because you would have the same number of electors, you would have to have the same number of polling places, the same number of venues, and the counting would be easier because it's a yes-no situation. Depending on the size of the council, the figures would vary, but I will come back on notice and try to give a flavour of that.

Response

The cost of conducting a constitutional referendum is very similar to the cost of conducting an all-ward mayoral or full councillor election. The delivery of a referendum entails almost all the same operational aspects with the exception of candidate related activities, such as nomination and electoral material processing. The other significant difference is the count process being a simpler process with no need for centralised count centres.

Nevertheless, as voting in a referendum is compulsory most other aspects of delivering an election, such as venue hire, staffing, logistics, materials, and elector awareness campaigns are the same.

The costs for conducting a referendum vary depending upon the size of the council. Therefore, for comparison, three categories of councils have been provided below: small, medium, and large. The range of electors in each category is as follows:

Council size	Average number of electors	Range of electors
Small councils	4,256	901 – 7,960
Medium councils	19,745	8,281 – 39,786
Large councils	102,910	40,294 – 257,253

In the event of a council wishing to conduct a constitutional referendum in conjunction with the 2024 ordinary (councillor) elections, there would be an incremental cost on top of the election estimates previously provided to councils. The average additional cost for these referendums is estimated at:

	Estimated average additional cost
Small Councils	\$28,000
Medium Councils	\$98,000
Large Councils	\$386,000

The estimated average total costs below are for conducting a standalone referendum, not in conjunction with councillor elections:

	Estimated average total cost
Small Councils	\$168,000
Medium Councils	\$590,000
Large Councils	\$2,321,000

The funding model for the 2024 NSW Local Government elections is based on a split of 'core' administrative costs that are covered by the State and 'direct' costs that are recoverable from councils.

The current approximate split between core and direct costs for the 2024 NSW Local Government elections is:

Core costs	57%
Direct costs	43%

The funding model for any stand-alone constitutional referendums following the 2024 NSW State Local Government elections would need to be confirmed.