

NORTH

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## Whittlesea councillors are gone but what next for the ratepayers?

**Months of workplace bullying and scandals have drawn to a close at Whittlesea. And while investigations remain ongoing and some questions left unanswered, what does this turning point mean for ratepayers?**

Anthony Piovesan, Whittlesea Leader

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 The sacking of former CEO Simon Overland, which councillors still cannot justify, proved a major turning point in the demise of Whittlesea Council.

Former Whittlesea councillors have left the South Morang chambers for good, just days after the State Government passed a bill sacking the scandal-plagued council.

It follows a [damning report by monitor](#) Yehudi Blacher which alleged a “toxic culture” at the embattled local authority, evident from the high turnover of chief executive’s in recent years.

This included former Victoria Police chief Simon Overland who was [sacked by councillors](#) as Whittlesea’s CEO last November – the fifth chief executive in five years.

The report also revealed ratepayers footed the bill of \$500,000 on legal disputes between councillors and CEOs.

The governor officially gave Royal Assent on Friday, March 20.

So what will the Local Government (Whittlesea City Council) Bill 2020, which will see administrators appointed at the council, mean for its ratepayers?

### **2020 COUNCIL ELECTIONS CANCELLED**

Councillors will be dismissed and administrators appointed until at least the 2024 local government elections.

Municipal Association of Victoria president Coral Ross said interim administrators would ensure the council could continue to make decisions, run council meetings and deliver services to ratepayers.

“Now the work begins to restore public confidence in the council, so that the Whittlesea community can enjoy local services, programs and infrastructure and return to a democratically elected local council in 2024,” Cr Ross said.

### **INTERIM ADMINISTRATOR APPOINTED**

Former chief executive of three Melbourne councils Lydia Wilson will attempt to restore good governance at Whittlesea Council.

She will be an interim administrator until a panel of three permanent administrators is appointed — they will form the council until October 2024, when elections will be held.

Ms Wilson was chief executive of Manningham Council for six years until 2012, and also served as CEO of the Macedon Ranges Shire and City of Yarra councils.

## **BUSINESS AS USUAL**

Whittlesea acting chief executive Joe Carbone said the council was “pleased” with Mr Blacher’s decision to hand down his findings three months into the investigation.

“We are pleased that the monitor has made his recommendations at this early stage rather than waiting the full six months of his appointment,” Mr Carbone said.

“We would like to thank (Local Government MP Adem Somyurek) Minister Somyurek for accepting Mr Blacher’s recommendations and moving quickly to act upon them.”

Mr Carbone was [appointed earlier this month](#) after former acting chief executive Kelvin Spiller’s departure.

He was the former Manningham Council chief executive reassured ratepayers the focus would be on serving the community.

“The past three months has been unsettling for our staff and community,” Mr Carbone said.

“In this challenging time, where coronavirus is rapidly evolving and changing the way we go about our normal everyday lives, our focus can be solely on supporting our community as best we can.”

## **QUESTIONS LEFT UNANSWERED**

In her final statement as Whittlesea Mayor Cr Emilia Sterjova blamed misogyny and “vindictive personal attacks” for her demise.

After the *Leader* reported on Monday night the council would be sacked, former Cr Sterjova engaged Media and Public Affairs advisor George Hazim to handle the councillor’s public relations.

It also followed revelations Cr Sterjova had [threatened legal action](#) against State Government monitor Yehudi Blacher, after his recommendation to sack the council.

While Mr Hazim told the *Leader* ratepayers would not fork out “a single cent” for his services, he ignored requests to provide a statement in writing.

Mr Hazim also did not respond to the *Leader’s* questions about who would pay for Cr Sterjova’s most recent legal consultation.

## **“ASLEEP ON THEIR WATCH”**

In a fiery speech to state parliament on Tuesday, Yan Yean state Labor MP Danielle Green said the council’s dismissal was the “end of an era”.

Ms Green made said council staff were “suicidal” as councillors fought among themselves and subsequent scandals emerged.

“Staff contacted me deeply concerned. They were suicidal,” Ms Green said.

“It is just unconscionable that these councillors cannot take responsibility for these behaviours.”

Ms Green also revealed damning claims about former Whittlesea councillor Ricky Kirkham, who resigned just hours before he was set to face a panel over claims of “serious misconduct”.

“This is the same man who chased me down the street threatening to hit me,” Ms Green said.

“So if a councillor who had been a mayor did that to me, an elected public official and in front of children, what on earth was that councillor and others doing behind closed doors.”

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