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Push to hand planning power back to wards

■ Jacob Saulwick

A proposal to allow councillors from individual wards to determine planning controls for their area would be the “biggest devolution” of power in years, Housing Minister Anthony Roberts says.

Mr Roberts last week joined Premier Gladys Berejiklian and Treasurer Dominic Perrottet in announcing the government’s housing affordability package, which offered financial incentives for first home buyers and also changes to planning laws.

But the measures also included a proposal to deliver more power to the smaller wards that make up councils. Under the proposal, the minister could use section 117 of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act to require indi-

vidual council wards to develop their Local Environment Plans.

“This is the biggest reform by way of empowering local communities and neighbourhoods that has ever been put up before,” he said.

Most Sydney councils are made up of individual wards. Liverpool Council, for instance, includes councillors from a north ward and a south ward. After elections in September, the amalgamated Inner West Council will include ward councillors from the old council boundaries of Ashfield, Marrickville and Leichhardt.

Mr Roberts’ plans, which he described as the “biggest devolution” in planning powers for many years, would enable “councillors if they so choose ... to develop their own LEPs within a council”.

However, local government

representatives and developers were sceptical about how the system might work. And there is, as yet, no detail on where or how the ward powers will be granted.

Keith Rhoades, the president of the Local Government Association, said a council as a whole would still have to agree on the shape of a particular ward Local Environment Plan. “Particularly in metro councils, politics will play a part in that,” Cr Rhoades said.

Chris Johnson, from developer group Urban Taskforce, said the proposal “does seem a bit of a contradiction” when set against the government’s professed desire to increase housing supply, and its council merger policy. “We’re worried that there’s a real confusion emerging in the material that is coming out,” Mr Johnson said.



Premier Gladys Berejiklian, Treasurer Dominic Perrottet and Minister for Planning and Housing Anthony Roberts last week. Photo: Nick Moir