



I love local government and have spent most of my life working in councils in NSW and the north of England and want to see our councils be the best they can be.

I am grateful for this opportunity to write a column on 'How to get the best out of our Councils' as we, the community, can do a lot more to help our Councils to serve us better. I aim to explain how we might do that by first explaining the framework of local government.

In the midst of all of the controversy over the proposals to amalgamate councils over the last few years there were other reforms. The NSW Local Government Act provides the legal framework for the system of local government for New South Wales. The aim of the Act is to enable councils to carry out their functions in a way that **facilitates local communities that are strong, healthy and prosperous.**

The purpose of the Act includes to **'facilitate engagement with the local community** and to provide for a system of local government that **is accountable to the community and that is**

sustainable, flexible and effective.

In making decisions councils should:

- recognise diverse local community needs and interests.
- consider social justice principles.
- consider the long term and cumulative effects of actions on future generations.
- consider the principles of ecologically sustainable development.
- be transparent and decision-makers are to be accountable for decisions and omissions.

Many years ago, in England, I worked with a woman who had been brought up in Greece under the 'Colonels' regime. She told me that there was a book called 'The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship' and the regime tore it in half and gave the 'Responsibilities' half out to all citizens. Having worked in local government for many years I

sometimes feel as if the communities of Australia got the other half of the book, and need to spend more time exercising our responsibilities as well as our rights!

So what do Councils do?

Local government is complex, so I am summarising what the community can expect from their councils.

Councils should provide strong and effective representation, leadership, planning and decision-making.

Councils should carry out functions in a way that provides the best possible value for residents and ratepayers.

Councils should plan strategically, using the integrated planning and reporting framework, for the provision of effective and efficient services and regulation to meet the diverse needs of the local community.

WHAT ARE COUNCILS' FUNCTIONS?

Providing and maintaining infrastructure

Providing an appropriate and affordable level of infrastructure is one important contribution a council makes to its community. For example, councils provide and maintain local roads, bridges, public car parks, footpaths, sporting fields, parks, and art galleries and, in regions, are responsible for water and sewerage.

Planning for sustainable development

Councils have a major role in providing long term strategic planning for a local government area as well as town planning, zoning and subdivisions. Councils are responsible for processing development applications, for building site and compliance inspections, and for ensuring compliance with building regulations.

Protecting the environment

Councils also have a major role in helping to protect the environment. They have responsibilities under the Protection of the Environment Operations Act 1997 and can issue various protection of the environment notices including clean up, prevention, compliance cost, provision of records and information and noise control notices.

They also carry out activities to preserve access and amenity to the environment, such as

recycling, street cleaning, regulating parking and management of vegetation including bush land reserves.

Supporting community development

Councils provide a range of services, including some aimed at groups in the community with special needs. Community services include libraries, sport and recreation facilities, home care services such as 'meals on wheels', swimming pools, playground facilities and child care centres.

Supporting economic development

This is not shown on the diagram as it is not mandatory but many communities consider it important and councils chose to contribute to economic development by working with local businesses, coordinating economic development groups/ activities/events and providing tourism services and facilities.

Safeguarding public health

Councils help maintain high standards of public health and reduce the risk of exposure to a wide range of diseases through activities such as food shop inspections, waste disposal, pest and vermin control and hazardous material containment. They also ensure public safety through controlling dogs and cats (or companion animals).



So that's all I have time for this week. Next week I will write about community engagement and accountability. I would love to receive feedback about what issues you would like me to cover at aes@amandaspaldingconsulting.com