



Community Engagement and Accountability

In last week's column I said that I would write about community engagement and accountability. I should have said 'touch on' the subjects as they are large topics and I will come back to them and cover them at different times as they have a season to them.

I started my working life in England where local government is the equivalent of local and State government together in Australia. In learning how this different environment works I was told that in NSW it is really up to the community to hold its local Council accountable.

The importance of community engagement

While participatory democracy is an important part of local government decision-making it is essential that councils have a clear, robust and structured community engagement process in place. This helps ensure that the best decisions are made for the whole community, including 'the silent majority'.

Councillors are the representatives of the community. Therefore, they are accountable to the community. It is important that the community is able to contact and meet with councillors to discuss and contribute their views and ideas. Councillors should therefore spend time undertaking formal and informal community engagement. This helps

ensure that a council's policies and programs are acceptable to, and meet the needs of, the community.

When a council is developing important policies, strategies and plans, such as a council's community strategic plan, delivery program or operational plan, it is required by law to put the drafts on public exhibition and consider all the comments or submissions received.

The Local Government Act 1993 also requires councils to adopt a community engagement strategy to guide its engagement with the local community when developing their plans, policies and programs.

Accountability

Councillors are accountable to the community through community engagement, open and transparent decision-making, as well as regular planning and reporting.

Ultimately, councillors are accountable to the community every four years on election day. This is pertinent as the next Local Government elections are 12 months away on the second Saturday in September 2020.

At all times, council decision making should be transparent. Fundamentally, community engagement processes are designed to promote a culture of accountability to the local community.

Implicitly, the needs of the community should be reflected in the decisions of council.

Councils must regularly

provide information to the public, which demonstrates:

- » the council is being administered in accordance with the Local Government Act 1993
- » the council is allocating resources consistent with its vision and strategic plan as well as the corporate objectives stated in the community strategic plan
- » the performance of the council is monitored and reviewed to ensure council objectives are being pursued
- » the interests of all the community is served
- » each councillor is acting with integrity.

Reporting

I was a member of the Department of Local Government's Working Party that developed the Integrated Planning and Reporting reforms in 2009 and I will explain Integrated Planning and Reporting in more detail in future columns. However, one of the main forms of accountability is the Council reporting to the community on what has been achieved towards the community's needs and aspirations. This is done in a variety of ways, but I have to say that the implementation has generally been a disappointment throughout NSW. This is partly because of a lack of measures in the various plans against which the Council can be held accountable.

The Delivery Program translates the community strategic plan goals into

actions. The General Manager is responsible for reporting at least six-monthly on the achievements in implementing the Delivery Program and the effectiveness of the principal activities undertaken in achieving the objectives in the Community Strategic Plan at which those activities are directed.

The deadline for the report on the 12 month progress of councils' Delivery Programs is the end of August. This will then also be included in their Annual Reports that will be available at the end of November.

I have looked for these 6 Monthly Delivery Program progress reports on the websites of our three Councils – Orange City Council; Cabonne Council and Blayney Shire Council. The only one I can find is in the attachments to the Business Papers of Blayney Shire Council for the August meeting.

Best practice would have all of the plans and reports available on the same webpage so the community can compare plans and results.

I generally find Orange City Council's website very difficult to navigate so have sent an email to request a copy of the report and look forward to the opportunity of analysing it.

As Orange City Council has just announced the appointment of its new CEO, I will cover roles and responsibilities in next week's column.

Need more detailed information?

The Integrated Planning and Reporting framework enables councils, with their communities, to ask and answer some key questions including:

- » Where are we now?
- » Where do we want to be in the future?
- » How will we get there?
- » How will we know when we've arrived?

The key reporting questions include:

- » How much did we do?
- » How well did we do it?
- » Is anyone better off as a result? If not, why not?

Orange City Council's key strategic planning and reporting documents can be found at:

http://www.orange.nsw.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/CommunityStrategicPlan_2019.pdf

<http://www.orange.nsw.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/DeliveryOperationalPlan-.pdf>

<http://www.orange.nsw.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Annual-Report.pdf>

<http://www.orange.nsw.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Community-Engagement-ST011.pdf>

Blayney Shire Council's key strategic planning and reporting documents can be found at:

<https://www.blayney.nsw.gov.au/your-council/planning-for-our-future/community-strategic-plan/community-strategic-plan>

<https://www.blayney.nsw.gov.au/your-council/council-publications>

Cabonne Council's key strategic planning and reporting documents can be found at:

<https://www.cabonne.nsw.gov.au/Council/Business-Papers-Reports-and-Publications/Integrated-Planning-and-Reporting>

I am happy to receive comments from readers about this column and other issues you would like me to cover so please either contact me at Orange City Life or aes@amandaspalding.com

Footnote: Much of the explanations I give in this column come from the Office of Local Government Councillor Handbook 2017.