



ACCOUNTABILITY

– Integrated Planning and Reporting

In last week's column I said that I would write about how Councils should be accountable to their communities through their Integrated Planning and Reporting framework.

In my second column on 25th September 2019 I explained that '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.'

Reforms to the Local Government Act have aimed to make Integrated Planning and Reporting the backbone of the Act as the aim is for councils to be held accountable by their communities (rather than the NSW Government). However, this does require a well informed community that understands how and what to hold their council accountable for. I aim to assist that through these columns.

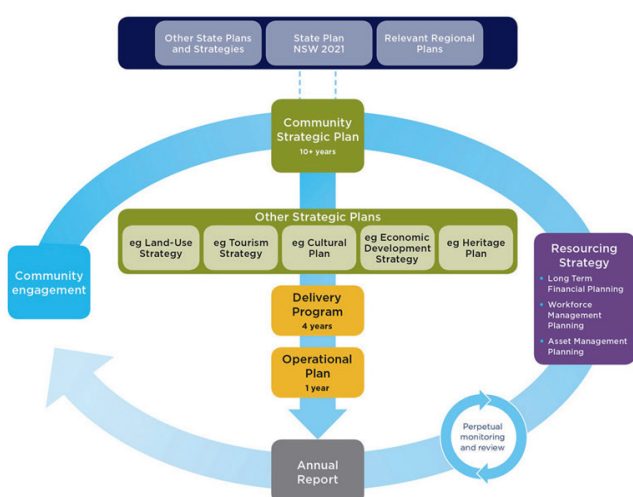
The initial intention of the reforms was to get councils to be more strategic to develop and maintain sustainable communities that are recognised by their:

- confidence, self-reliance and ability to assume responsibility for the future
- social cohesion
- functional economy
- robust environment
- sound infrastructure.

And develop strong and sustainable local government characterised by:

- Good governance
- Representative democracy and community support
- Sound policy
- Sufficient resources
- Meaningful planning
- Connectedness, and
- Strong leadership.

This diagram explains the relationship between the plans and programs and reporting requirements:



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

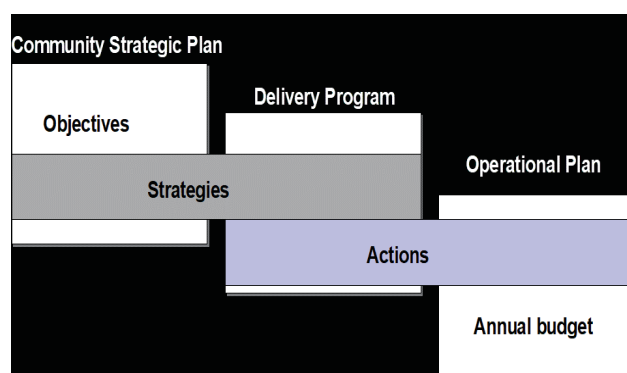
- » Where are we now?
- » Where do we want to be in the future?
- » How will we get there?
- » How will we know when we've arrived?

These questions are asked at the beginning of each Council term (normally 4 years) and councils facilitate communities to identify their aspirations and priorities through community engagement and develop a Community Strategic Plan (CSP) for at least the next 10 years. This is not the council's plan it is the community's plan and is based on social justice principles of equity, access, participation and rights.

The CSP can be seen as the investment portfolio for the local government area as it is the way to engage other partners, (like the NSW Government, community and businesses) in delivering on the community's priorities. The CSP is developed as a partnership between Council, state agencies, community groups and individuals. There was initially intended to be a 'two-way exchange between state, regional and council planning' and one of the challenges has been that this has never really been achieved. It tends to be a one way process as the requirement is that: 'available state and regional draft plans and strategies were considered for the development of the CSP'

Another Essential Element is 'CSP identifies assessment methods for determining whether objectives are being achieved'. There is considerable weakness in the implementation of this as many councils do not identify meaningful assessment and performance methods against which performance can be judged.

The relationship between the 3 levels of plans is:



The intention of the 4 year Delivery Program (DP) is to be the Council's 'accountability plan' as the 'DP directly addresses the objectives and strategies of the CSP, identifying the principal activities council will undertake in response' to the CSP. The DP is Council's plan. It is prepared after each ordinary election of councillors to cover 4 year period commencing the following 1 July. So, the next local government elections are in September 2020 and the new Plans will be developed to take effect from 1 July 2021.

The DP details principal activities to be undertaken to achieve the objectives established in the CSP within the resources identified in the Resourcing Strategy. It is an essential element that the DP includes a method of assessment to determine the effectiveness of each principal activity in achieving the objectives in the CSP. The DP allocates high level responsibilities for each action or set of actions to a senior staff member.

The DP is reviewed each year during preparation of the Operational Plan. It seems that this has been misinterpreted by some councils to mean that the Delivery Program is a rolling program. It has been misinterpreted this way by Orange City Council, Cabonne and Blayney Councils. This was never the intention as the assessment measures in the DP need to stay the same over the Council term so the Council can be held accountable. If it is treated as a rolling program, then the goalposts keep on changing. You cannot be measured against a moving target.

The Delivery Program should only be changed during a Council term if there is a major change in the circumstances of a Local Government Area, like a major disaster. The revised Delivery Program needs to be exhibited to the community for 28 days for comment.

The same goes for the CSP. It needs to have static targets/ measures so that performance can be assessed. Some councils are moving it forward every year, which is not what was intended and does not achieve accountability.

The General Manager must ensure progress reports are provided to council with respect to DP at least every 6 months. A Council is required to include in its Annual Report a report on its achievements in implementing its delivery program and the effectiveness of the principal activities undertaken in achieving the objectives at which those principal activities are directed (S428(1)). I have mentioned in several columns how poorly this is being implemented by our 3 local councils. Parkes Shire Council is an example of good practice. It has a 4 year Delivery Program with assessment measures and reports regularly to its community on progress towards the objectives of the Community Strategic Plan. <https://www.parkes.nsw.gov.au/your-council/plans-for-the-future/integrated-planning-reporting/>

The final opportunity for each elected Council to demonstrate its accountability to the community is through its End of Term Report which reports on the progress on implementation of the CSP and the effectiveness in achieving its objectives over the last term of council. It is required to be presented to the final meeting of the outgoing council – so, in August or September 2020. This should include the achievements of other partners in delivering the CSP. This is the 'accountability report' of the outgoing Council and should be read by electors when they are considering how to vote at the September 2020 local government elections.

To review the effectiveness in achieving objectives the End of Term Report should ask these questions:

1. Did Council do what it said it would do towards achieving the objectives of the Plan?
2. Did other partners in the process do what they said they would do towards achieving the objectives of the plan?
3. Were these actions effective – did anything change or start to improve?

The newly elected Council in September 2020 will review the existing CSP and undertake community engagement to develop a new or revised CSP of at least 10 years. Part of that review will include considering the End of Term Report from the former Council. Some Councils start the process of reviewing the CSP before the election. This is not in the spirit of having a new Council as the roles of Councillors include:

- to develop and endorse the community strategic plan, delivery program and other strategic plans, programs, strategies and policies of the council, and
- to keep under review the performance of the council.

I shall write in future columns about the Resourcing Strategy and Community Engagement.

I have received feedback that many people find these columns informative and 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@amandaspaldingconsulting.com