Module 3 — Planning, Budgeting and Engagement

Narration script · Huon Valley Candidate and Councillor Knowledge Series

Slide 1 — Planning, Budgeting and Engagement (title slide)

Welcome to Module Three of the Huon Valley Candidate and Councillor Knowledge Series.

The first two modules covered what local government is, and who does what inside a council. This module is about how a council sets its direction.

Councils do not decide their future one meeting at a time. They set it through a suite of plans required by Part Seven of the Local Government Act 1993, and they fund those plans through the annual budget.

We will work through each of those documents, and finish with the part that holds the whole thing together — engaging with the community.

Slide 2 — Before You Begin

This module is designed for prospective candidates, election candidates, councillors and community members.

It covers the plans a council must prepare under Part Seven of the Local Government Act 1993 — how they connect, how they are funded, and how the community is engaged in making them.

No prior knowledge of the Act is assumed or needed.

You may pause at any time.

Slide 3 — Direction Is Set Through Plans

A council acts as a body. No individual councillor sets the direction of the organisation. The council does — collectively, in public, through documents it adopts by resolution.

A ten-year plan commits priorities and money well beyond the term you were elected for. You are making decisions on behalf of councillors who have not been elected yet.

And your influence is greatest upstream, at the planning stage — long before a proposal reaches the table with a recommendation attached. By then, most of the room to move has already been taken up.

Module Two covered the roles. This module covers the instrument.

Slide 4 — The Role of a Council

Before the plans, be clear about what they are for.

Section 19A sets out the role of a council — to support and improve the wellbeing of the community. The Act describes four ways it does that. By harnessing and building on the unique strengths and capabilities of the community. By providing infrastructure and services that need local approaches to be effective. By representing and advocating for the community in regional, State-wide and national decision-making. And by promoting the social, economic and environmental sustainability of the community, including by planning for and adapting to climate change risks in the exercise of its functions.

That last point deserves clarification. It is about how Council carries out its own activities — planning for the risks a changing climate presents to its services and infrastructure, and adapting the way it works accordingly. It is not a statement that Council is responsible for climate change.

Section 20 allows the Minister to issue a local government charter — guidance on that role, which a council is to have regard to when performing its functions and in preparing its strategic plan.

Module One covered the role of local government. This is its statutory expression.

Slide 5 — The Part 7 Suite

Part Seven requires a council to prepare a suite of documents. It is easier to hold in your head if you group them by time horizon.

At the long end — at least ten years — there are three: the strategic plan, the long-term financial management plan, and the long-term strategic asset management plan.

Supporting those are four strategies and policies: the financial management strategy, the asset management strategy, the asset management policy, and now the community engagement strategy.

And each financial year, two more: the annual plan, and the estimates — what most people call the budget.

Nine documents, one direction. Each must be consistent with the strategic plan above it. That consistency requirement is the thread running through everything that follows.

Slide 6 — The Strategic Plan

Section 66 requires a strategic plan for the municipal area, covering at least ten years.

It identifies community wellbeing priorities, and specifies strategies for achieving outcomes in relation to those priorities. Note the wording — priorities and outcomes, not activities. It is a direction-setting document, not a work program.

In preparing it, the council consults the community and any authorities and bodies it considers appropriate, and has regard to the local government charter. That consultation must be carried out in accordance with the council's community engagement strategy. Engagement here is not simply good practice. It is a statutory step.

Once adopted, the plan is published and available for public inspection.

Everything else in Part Seven must be consistent with this document. Get it wrong, and everything downstream inherits the error.

Slide 7 — Planning the Money

A plan that is not funded is not a plan.

The long-term financial management plan covers at least ten years, must be consistent with the strategic plan, and must refer to the long-term strategic asset management plan. Those two are deliberately tied together, because the largest single driver of a council's long-term financial position is what it owns, and what that will cost to renew.

The financial management strategy sits alongside it, and must also be consistent with the strategic plan. For both, the Minister may set the minimum contents.

This is where you need to understand the assumptions — growth, rate increases, borrowing. Those assumptions are choices, and they are yours to test.

Slide 8 — Planning the Assets

Then the assets. Three documents, three sections.

The asset management policy, section 70C, sets the council's approach. It must be consistent with the strategic plan, and it guides both the long-term asset plan and the long-term financial plan.

The asset management strategy, section 70D, turns that policy into an approach, and must also be consistent with the strategic plan.

The long-term strategic asset management plan, section 70B, covers at least ten years. It applies to every asset in a class the Minister specifies as a major asset, and it refers back to the long-term financial management plan.

The Content of Plans and Strategies Order sets out what these documents must cover — service levels, asset condition, likely use and impact, sustainability, and climate change adaptation.

Roads, bridges, buildings, stormwater. For most councils this is the largest financial exposure they carry.

Slide 9 — Consistency Is the Point

Stand back and look at the shape of it.

The strategic plan is the reference point. The long-term financial and asset plans, the financial and asset management strategies, the asset management policy and the annual plan must all be consistent with it.

That is not a drafting nicety. It is a statutory requirement, and it is what stops a council's documents drifting apart from each other and from what the community was told.

Section 70F lets the Minister specify the minimum contents of each document, and requirements about how they are prepared, consulted on, reviewed and published.

So when a report tells you a proposal is consistent with the strategic plan, that is not a courtesy. That is the test.

Slide 10 — Review and Publish

Three timeframes worth committing to memory.

Every four years, the council reviews its strategic plan, long-term financial management plan, long-term strategic asset management plan, financial management strategy, asset management strategy, asset management policy, and community engagement strategy.

Within one month of adopting any of them, the council publishes it on its website, where it stays until it is repealed or replaced.

Here is why the four-year cycle matters. A council term is four years. If you are elected, you will sit through one of these reviews and be asked to adopt what comes out of it. That is not a document handed to you. It is a document you are responsible for.

Slide 11 — The Annual Plan

The annual plan is where a ten-year intention becomes this year's work.

Section 71 requires one for each financial year. It must be consistent with the strategic plan. It must state the manner in which the council is to meet that plan's goals and objectives. It must include a summary of the estimates adopted under section 82. And it must include a summary of the major strategies for the council's public health goals and objectives.

Once adopted, the general manager makes it available for public inspection.

It is where the community can hold the two things side by side — what the council said it would do over ten years, and what it is doing this year.

Slide 12 — Estimates and the Budget

Section 82 calls the budget the estimates.

The general manager prepares them. They contain estimated revenue, expenditure, borrowings, capital works, and any other detail the Minister requires.

The council adopts them by absolute majority, before 31 August, and not more than a month before the financial year starts.

During the year, the council may alter an estimate by absolute majority, or adjust individual items by simple majority so long as the total is not altered. It may also authorise the general manager to make minor adjustments, which must be reported at the next ordinary meeting.

The general manager prepares the estimates. The council adopts them. That sentence contains the whole relationship set out in Module Two, and the voting rules behind it are covered in Module Six.

Slide 13 — The Community Engagement Strategy

Now the piece that ties this module together.

Section 70DA requires a council to establish and implement a strategy for engagement with the community — when developing its plans, policies and programs, and for the purpose of determining its major activities.

It must contain strategies to ensure the community is informed about, and has a reasonable opportunity to contribute to, the decisions, activities and services of the council. It must set out the principles and procedures the council will follow when engaging and consulting. And it must cover any other prescribed matters.

The strategy applies to itself. The council must consult the community when preparing or reviewing it, and it is subject to the same four-yearly review as the other Part Seven documents.

And remember section 66. Consultation on the strategic plan must follow this strategy. Engagement does not sit beside the planning framework. It is built into it.

Slide 14 — Choosing the Level of Engagement

Engagement is not one thing, and this is where councils most often come unstuck.

The IAP2 public participation spectrum — which the Huon Valley Council's own community engagement framework is built on — sets out five levels.

Inform: we will keep you informed. Consult: we will listen, and tell you how your input shaped the decision. Involve: we will work with you so your concerns are reflected in the options. Collaborate: we will develop the solution together with you. Empower: we will implement what you decide.

As you move along that spectrum, the community's impact on the decision increases, and so does the promise the council is making.

The level chosen depends on complexity, community interest, legislative requirements, and the time and budget available. Those are legitimate constraints.

What is not proper is promising a level of influence the council does not intend to deliver. Consulting on a decision that has already been made damages community trust more than not consulting at all.

Slide 15 — Five Things to Remember

Before we finish, five things worth remembering.

One. Councillors set direction through plans, not one decision at a time.

Two. The strategic plan is the reference point. Everything else must be consistent with it.

Three. A plan that is not funded is not a plan.

Four. The general manager prepares the estimates. The council adopts them.

Five. Engagement is built into the planning framework, not added to it.

And underpinning all five — ask for the advice you may not want. Long-term financial and asset planning is where frank and fearless advice matters most, because the difficult news arrives years before the consequences do.

Slide 16 — Next Module

In the next module we look at good governance and councillors — what good governance means in practice, the principles that underpin it, and the standards expected of you as an elected member.

Thank you for watching.