

Community Reference Panel Results Report

May 2011

1.1 Introduction

In February 2011, Council called for community members from diverse backgrounds to nominate to be a part of its Community Reference Panel. The panel was established to work with Council on how to communicate and consult with the Wollongong community. The outcomes and ideas generated by the panel would assist Council to continue to improve the way it communicates with, and works with the community and projects and matters of interest. Further, the feedback can be used to inform Council in achieving its Integrated Planning and Reporting Requirements, in the development of the Community Engagement Strategy for the Community Strategic Plan.

The Community Reference Panel was promoted via Council's website, libraries and community centres, advertisements in the Advertiser and the Illawarra Mercury. In addition information, packages were distributed by via Community Development and Engagement networks and flyers were translated into 8 languages and distributed via Council's multicultural workers.

In total, 47 Expressions of Interests were received and these applicants broadly reflected the diversity of the Wollongong Local Government Area.

1.2 Community Reference Panel Workshops

All Community Reference Panel applicants were invited to attend three workshops held on; 14, 17 and 21 March 2011. Workshops commenced at 6pm and concluded at 8pm and each focused on a different topic using a variety of techniques such as a survey, world café, small group discussions, engagement technique demonstrations and open discussions. Topics covered in each workshop are outlined below. Attendance at workshops varied from 22 – 33 participants.

- Workshop 1 – Focused on communication methods, community participation and examples of positive or good communication. Participants also completed a short survey about communication and engagement.
- Workshop 2 – Explored the diversity of the Wollongong community, engagement and engagement techniques.
- Workshop 3 – Evaluated engagement techniques and communication through the use of case studies and also provided an opportunity for open discussion.

2 Key Findings

2.1 Workshops

The following section outlines the key findings from the three Community Reference Panel workshops.

As a part of an ice breaker activity participants discussed reasons for wanting to be involved in the Community Reference Panel. Panel members were enthusiastic, passionate and demonstrated a commitment to their community and a desire to influence change. A summary of responses are listed below and are categorised as community, Council and personal factors.

Community

- A desire to be involved in community
- Make a contribution to the community
- Learn more about the Wollongong community

Council

- A desire to be involved Council
- To gain a better understanding of how Council works
- Feeling frustrated at being excluded from Council related decisions
- A commitment to openness and transparency
- Help Council discover news ways of communicating and engaging with the community
- To have more say in priorities for Wollongong
- To keep Council honest
- Improve youth involvement with Council

Personal reasons

- To be proactive
- Set an example for family/children
- Share experience and knowledge with others
- To work with people of different backgrounds
- To make a difference in the community
- For personal growth

A world café technique was used in workshop one to explore communication. During this activity participants discussed times when they felt involved in the community, aspects of good communication and features of successful meetings. A summary of responses recorded on butchers paper during the activity is outlined below.

Participants indicated they felt involved in the community when:

- Helping others/organisations and volunteering such as Bushcare, SCARF, Lions Club fair and Clean Up Australia Day
- Working with others for a common cause with a common goal
- Being part of community events and celebrations such as Australia Day celebrations, Viva La Gong, ANZAC Day, St George Illawarra winning NRL premiership
- Being involved in sport
- Making a contribution and it being valued
- Working on community issues and solutions
- Participating in community consultation activities

Good Communication was described as:

- Using a variety of methods to communicate the one message
- Being tailored to the target group
- Being polite

- Listening
- Being kept informed
- Delivering messages clearly

Panel members indicated that features of good meetings include:

- Clear agenda and purpose
- Everyone has the opportunity to have a say and is heard
- Good facilitator/chairperson
- Kept to time
- Variety of techniques and methods of communication
- Outcomes and contributions are clearly communicated
- Feedback is provided

In small groups during workshop 2 participants discussed engagement. Discussion focused on features of good engagement and engagement techniques.

Good engagement involves:

- Providing detailed information which is readily available
- Allowing enough time for the community to consider the project/issue and provide feedback
- An objective spokesperson
- Having an open agenda
- Council responding and providing feedback
- Not using technical language/jargon and short hand
- Commencing engagement early in the project lifecycle

Techniques which we mentioned when discussing good engagement included:

- Participative workshops such as a charette
- Focus groups
- Surveys/questionnaires
- Informal engagement techniques such as “pavement consultation” and action theatre
- Active participation
- Neighbourhood forums
- Bang the Table
- Round table discussions
- Phone surveys
- Open Council meetings
- Advisory panels
- Design – problem solving

Following the smaller group discussion of positive aspects of engagement, the whole group discussed examples of poor consultation and suggested changes to Council’s current community consultation policy. Key points from this discussion are outlined below.

Examples of poor consultation included:

- DA Notification – a view was presented that when a development will impact on more than just adjoining and adjacent properties, more surrounding residents/business/neighbours should be notified.
- Dogs on Beaches - Review of Environmental Effects documentation was unclear and lacked evidence

Participants suggested that Councils consultation policy should:

- Include collaboration
- Consider the community as the client
- Not just listen but listen and hear
- Identify participation
- Include Council's commitment to giving feedback

Open discussions held during the third workshop focused on how Council can improve its community engagement processes. Improvements included:

- Be clear on purpose
- Provide all the information and facts to the community
- Provide options and include cost benefit analysis
- Be open and transparent
- Recognise knowledge, experience and expertise that exists in the community
- Be accountable for decisions
- Consult early in the process
- Let the community identify priorities, define issues and problems
- Let the community know how they can have an affect and influence decisions
- Stop dictating and start listening
- Don't make decisions prior to consultation/engagement
- Genuine consultation not just communication
- Community consultation/participation should be the heart of local government
- Senior and executive staff must support engagement processes and consider feedback from the community

At the conclusion of the third Community Reference Panel workshop, each person was asked to mention one positive thing they had gotten out of the workshops. Responses are summarised as follows:

- Council listened to us
- Had an opportunity have a say
- Enjoyed meeting other panel members
- Listening to the views of others
- Enjoyed the interactivity and diversity
- Seeing so many people care about the workings of Council
- Community participation
- Being involved
- Learn more about Wollongong
- Public perception from past is changing
- Being involved with discussions
- Diversity with a common concern

2.1 Survey

During workshop one, participants were asked to complete a survey which focused on communication and engagement. In total 33 surveys were completed. Survey results are outlined below.

Table 1 highlights the methods participants currently use and their preferred methods to get information about Council and its services. The most common methods currently used were articles in the newspaper (19), Council's website (17) and the Council column in Illawarra Mercury on Saturday (16). While the most preferred methods to get information about Council and its services were, Council's website (18) and Council newsletter (15), followed by articles in the newspaper (14) and stories on the local TV news (14). Personal visits to Council's administration building was the least common and least preferred method to get information about Council amongst Community Reference Panel participants.

Table 1: Current Versus Preferred Methods to Get Information About Council and Its Services			
Current Methods		Preferred Methods	
Articles in the newspaper, i.e. Illawarra Mercury , The Advertiser	19	Council website	18
Council website	17	Council newsletter	15
Council column in newspaper (Saturday's Illawarra Mercury)	16	Articles in the newspaper, i.e. Illawarra Mercury, The Advertiser	14
Stories on the local TV news i.e Win News	15	Stories on the local TV news i.e Win News	14
Advertisements in The Advertiser (newspaper)	14	Advertisements in The Illawarra Mercury (newspaper)	13
Advertisements in The Illawarra Mercury (newspaper)	14	Council column in newspaper (Saturday's Illawarra Mercury)	12
Segment on local radio i.e. ABC Illawarra, i98, Wave FM, Power FM, VOX	11	Advertisements in The Advertiser (newspaper)	12
Rates notices	10	Segment on local radio i.e. ABC Illawarra, i98, Wave FM, Power FM, VOX	12
Other	10	Social media i.e. online discussion boards, Facebook, Twitter, etc	11
Libraries and/or community centres	8	Other	11
Letter box drops	6	Libraries and/or community centres	8
Council newsletter	4	Letter box drops	8
Personal visits to Council's administration building	3	Rates notices	7
		Personal visits to Council's administration building	2

N= 33, participants could nominate chose multiple methods.

When asked if they would access information about Council services, facilities and activities from a social network such as Facebook, Twitter and discussion boards if it was available, 14 respondents indicated they would access information this way, 14 said they would not and 5 were unsure (see Table 2).

TABLE 2: Respondents Who Would Access Information About Council Services, Facilities And Activities From A Social Network Such As Facebook, Twitter, Discussion Boards, etc If Available.	
Yes	14
No	14
Unsure	5

N= 33.

Table 3 outlines the best method for Council to provide respondents with information about a project or issue in which it was seeking input. The most preferred methods were email (20) and advertisements in the Illawarra Mercury (12), while the least preferred method was a display in Council's administration building.

TABLE 3: Best Method to Provide Information to Respondents About a Project or Issue that Council Was Seeking Input From The Community.	
Email	20
Advertisements in The Illawarra Mercury (newspaper)	12
Council column in newspaper (Saturday's Illawarra Mercury)	10
Social media i.e. online discussion boards, Facebook, Twitter, etc	10
Neighbourhood Forum meeting	10
Council website	10
Advertisements in The Advertiser (newspaper)	9
Libraries and/or community centres	9
Information kiosks at central locations	8
Other	8
Community forum	7
Display in Council's administration building	1

N= 33, participants could nominate chose multiple methods.

Preferred methods for engagement on local short to medium term project or issue, such as upgrading park facilities were email (19), community meetings and workshop, focus groups/group discussions (see Table 4):

TABLE 4: Preferred Method Of Engagement/Consultation – On A Local Short To Medium Term Project or Issue.	
Email	19
Community meetings	17
Workshops, focus groups/group discussions	16
Neighbourhood Forum meeting	11
Access via Council's website	9
Social media i.e. online discussion boards, Facebook, Twitter, etc	7
Information kiosks at central locations	7
Other	7

N= 33, participants could nominate chose multiple methods.

While the preferred method of engagement on city wide, long term projects or issues, such as climate change or job creation were information kiosks at central locations (26), community meetings (20), workshops, focus groups/group discussion (17) and attending a conference/seminar/symposium with other community members and key Council staff (17) (see Table 5).

TABLE 5: Preferred method of engagement/consultation – on a city wide, long term project or issue.	
Information kiosks at central locations	26
Community meetings	20
Workshops, focus groups/group discussion	17
Attend a conference/seminar/symposium with other community members and key Council staff	17
Access via Council's website	14
Email	14
Neighbourhood Forum meeting	13
Social media i.e. online discussion boards, Facebook, Twitter, etc	7
Other	7

N= 33, participants could nominate chose multiple methods.

Table 6 outlines the preferred ways of providing input and feedback to Council on a project or issue. Completing an online form (20), send an email to Council (20) attend a workshop, focus group/group discussion (17) and written submission (12) were the most preferred methods.

TABLE 6: Preferred way of providing input/feedback to Council on a project or issue.	N=33
Complete an online form	20
Email to Council	19
Attend a workshop, focus group/group discussion	17
Make a written submission to Council	12
Attend a community meeting	11
Attend a Neighbourhood Forum meeting	10
Online discussion board	6
Through an information kiosks at a central location	5
Other	5

N= 33, participants could nominate chose multiple methods.

Respondents were also asked to provide any additional comments and suggestions on how Council can improve the ways it communicates or engages with the community. These comments are summarised below:

- Community access to senior Council staff prior to Council meeting
- Revise Council's website and promote achievements on website
- Communicate to all residents in an area about projects/Development Applications, not just limited to immediate neighbours
- Distribution of a Council newsletter
- Strengthen role of Neighbourhood Forums
- Provide more detailed information in The Advertiser
- Easy to find community notices/community news in Illawarra Mercury
- Utilise social media and other media
- Email The Advertiser pages to rural residents
- Return phone calls
- Employ more bi-lingual workers and better engagement of CALD communities
- Use multiple styles of engagement and communication techniques
- Send important Council information to Schools for inclusion in school newsletters
- Involve emergency personnel and listen to their views
- Listen to the community and act on it
- Send important information about Council via SMS to key community contacts who can 'spread the word'
- Engage with community through a range of mechanisms

- Utilise events to engage with the community
- Public media misses to many people, use direct mail
- Reply to all letters and advise of updates on issues raised
- Provide Council information in other languages
- Be fun and be at the top of digital media communication e.g. gaming, social media, video and by listening to people engaging through story telling

The demographic characteristics of Community Reference Panel survey respondents are outlined in table 7.

Table 7: Demographics of Community Reference Panel Survey Respondents	
Postcode	Number
2500	7
2505	1
2508	2
2515	3
2516	3
2517	3
2518	4
2519	4
2525	1
2526	4
2530	1
Gender	
Male	18
Female	15
Age	
16-20	4
21-30	3
31-40	5
41-50	6
51-60	7
61-70	5
71-80	2
80+	1

N= 33.