

Engaging the Large and Diverse Community of Parramatta: How to Establish a Residents' Panel

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the process involved in establishing a Resident's Panel in local government. Parramatta City Council has recently established a Residents' Panel that is representative of the local community. The Panel is consulted regularly to provide direct feedback and inform council decisions. The processes involved in establishing a panel are explored, including; budgets, marketing, policy development and software selection.

Keywords

Residents' Panel, community engagement, local government, community consultation, software

Introduction

Local government has the greatest capacity of any level of government to connect and engage people and build community. Parramatta City Council has recently begun the process of establishing a representative Residents' Panel. The Residents' Panel is a chance for residents to 'have their say' and provide direct feedback and input to council to inform its decisions. The Residents' Panel is Parramatta City Council's deliberate strategy to engage the community in quality participative governance.

Parramatta City Council is committed to delivering the best possible services to the community. The establishment of the Residents' Panel aims to increase accountability and transparency in council's decision-making and provide an avenue for community input and feedback.

In establishing the Panel, council hopes to increase community understanding, awareness and trust in council decision-making whilst also providing for representative feedback to inform its decisions.

The Residents' Panel is part of Parramatta City Council's commitment to engaging and understanding the community. The Panel aims to create a community that is engaged in the pursuit of creating a thriving local government area and making Parramatta the leading city in Sydney.

Parramatta City Council's Residents' Panel differs from many other local government panels in its commitment to creating a panel that is truly representative statistically and representative both geographically and demographically. The Panel aims to involve up to one percent of the population in order to maximise statistic validity.

This paper will discuss the process undertaken to make the theory of a representative Residents' Panel a reality.

A snapshot of Parramatta

Parramatta is located in New South Wales, 24 kilometres west of Sydney's CBD. Parramatta City Council is the seventh largest and fastest growing local government area in New South Wales, Parramatta ranks as one of the state's four 'primary centres' along with Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong.

More than 35 per cent of Parramatta's 144,490 residential population was born overseas, with the 44,000 non-English speaking component almost doubling over the past 15 years.

English, Arabic (10 per cent of households), Chinese, Mandarin and Cantonese (8 per cent) and Korean (2 per cent) are the most widely spoken languages.

Around 120,000 people travel daily through the Parramatta Primary Centre for work, shopping, study purposes or access to the city's many services and facilities.

What is Parramatta City Council's Residents' Panel?

Parramatta City Council's Residents' Panel is a group of self-nominated residents who have registered to be on the Panel and to offer feedback and input into council decisions. Parramatta City Council's Panel aims to represent the population geographically and demographically and have a membership of one percent of the local population.

Residents' Panels are common in local government in the United Kingdom and several councils in Australia have a form of Residents' or Citizens' Panel. However, Parramatta City Council's Panel differs from other panels due to its objective to be statistically relevant and to represent the local community demographically and geographically. The Panel is an ongoing group of residents who are consulted several times a year. There is no selection process other than living within the local government area boundaries.

Why establish a Residents' Panel?

The General Management Team and councillors of Parramatta City Council have made engaging the local community a high priority. In response, the Community Engagement Unit was established in 2004 to concentrate on developing strategies to more effectively engage with the community. The establishment of the Residents' Panel was identified as a critical strategic element in the new Community Engagement Unit.

The General Management Team and Councillors' focus on community engagement was outlined in Parramatta City Council's 2003 Corporate Assessment:

"To ensure future ambitions and priorities are shared, and services are delivered that reflect the views of Parramatta's citizens and partners, Council should:

- Develop a corporate policy and framework for the participation of citizens
To commence the change management process Council should consider the inclusion of the following priorities in the 2004/5 Management Plan:
- Initiate a citizen engagement program that encourages regular community input to policy, strategy and Council priority setting."

What do we hope to achieve?

Parramatta City Council hopes to achieve a closer link with its residents, a more transparent decision making process and increased trust in the community. The Residents' Panel aims to advance the democratic process by involving residents in the decision-making process by seeking their opinion and input. Parramatta City Council aims to achieve a closer link with the community and to create further understanding in the community of Council's services and decision making processes. Establishing a Residents' Panel allows council to:

- better understand the needs and aspirations of the community
- involve members of the community in the facilitation of Parramatta City Council's decision-making processes
- develop ongoing partnerships with the Parramatta community
- empower the community
- make informed decisions
- increase transparency and accountability in decision making.

Establishing a Residents' Panel

Parramatta City Council's Residents' Panel has come a long way since its identification in the Corporate Assessment of 2003 where it was deemed necessary to actively engage the community in key policy directions, strategic direction and service provision.

The main steps in establishing a Residents Panel have been:

1. Obtaining council approval for the establishment of a Residents' Panel
2. Preparing an appropriate budget allocation
3. Recruiting suitable staff
4. Recruitment of the Panel
5. Development of policy and procedures
6. Selection of software.

1. Obtaining council approval for the establishment of a Residents' Panel

The full support of Council was very important in effectively establishing the project and its future viability. On the basis of initial research Council endorsed and firmly supported the establishment of the Residents' Panel.

2. Preparing an appropriate budget allocation

In allocating a budget for this project it was necessary to decide on the following factors before the project commenced:

- The size of the Panel — this impacts on budget needs for marketing and promotions and staff requirements, in our case we aimed to have one per cent of the population (1500 members) on the Panel
- The method and mode of research — Parramatta City Council's Panel aimed to offer all modes of consultation available (mail, telephone, hard-copy, on-line, face to face and multilingual)
- The number of research projects to be conducted each year.

This first year budget is heavily focussed on building the necessary infrastructure. The expenditure provided for 2004–05 was \$350,000 and was set as following:

Budget item	Approx. cost (\$)
Salaries (two permanent staff and occasional casual staff)	130,000
Staff training	5000
Recruitment costs	5000
Consultants	10,000
Promotional materials (postcards, pens, stationary, telecommunications)	10,000
Marketing and promotions (advertising, recruitment, etc.)	40,000
Software (panel, consultation and GIS interface software and trials)	140,000
Hardware	10,000
Total	350,000

The emphasis in the second year will be on consolidating the Panel, focussing on marketing and maintaining the panel and conducting research.

3. Recruitment of staff

Two permanent staff members were recruited to manage the Residents' Panel. These positions are the Residents' Panel Coordinator and the Residents' Panel Project Officer.

The qualifications/skill set that was determined for these positions was a mix of community consultation, marketing and communications, research experience and skills in software selection and information management.

4. Recruitment of panel members

The creation of the Panel and recruitment of panellists required the development of a marketing strategy. In order for the Panel to succeed, the marketing process needed to communicate and engage effectively with the target market. The marketing strategy was aimed at engaging all members of the Parramatta local government area (LGA) community over the age of 16. A multiple-segment strategy was developed where a different marketing strategy was prepared to target the different segments within the community.

Demographic segmentation of the community was undertaken using the available Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data. The identification process used the following demographic keys:

1. Where residents are born
2. The various ages of residents
3. Where persons are located within the LGA
4. Gender of persons located within the LGA
5. Ethnicity of persons located within the LGA (identified through Languages spoken at home)
6. Family Type.

The following five core segments of the community were identified using CDATA, which is the ABS Demographic and Mapping tool. A psychographic analysis of each was developed.

- Older Citizens
- City Dweller
- Migrant Community
- Professional/workers
- Younger Residents.

The promotional strategy planned for each group was based on the three pillars of Trust, Interactivity and Ownership.

Trust

To establish an effective and sustainable Residents' Panel trust needed to be created and maintained within the community.

Prior to the implementation of the Residents' Panel, Parramatta City Council had cultivated a certain level of independent trust. However the Panel needed to build its own reputation. The production of information and marketing materials and the launching of the Panel's website helped to build trust and promote the establishment of the Panel. Partnerships with external organisation in the community

were established in order to co-promote and to build trust through association. Partnerships include Chinese Australian Forum, Grey Path and the Parramatta Chamber of Commerce.

A reward system for Panel members creates incentive and also trust in involvement in the Panel. Building trust through rewards has become mainstream in many of the larger commercial panels for example Emailcash and PureProfile has used this technique to bolster their online communities. As the Panel progresses the affects of rewards schemes in involvement and retention will become clearer.

Marketing Methods

Advertising and marketing campaigns targeted the multiple-segments of the community. Residents were asked to respond and self-nominate for the Panel. The self-nomination of Panel members ensures that the people who have registered to be on the Panel have a genuine interest in the Residents' Panel. The marketing budget allocated for the first year was \$45,000.

The methods used to recruit panel members have been:

- postcards (reply paid) delivered to every household in the LGA with council's quarterly newsletter *Community News*
- postcards disseminated through council services, such as the library, recreation and community centres and also in bulk mail such as rates notices
- coverage in local newspapers, including advertising and media coverage
- development of posters displayed in shop windows throughout the area, council services and local buses
- banner display at the town hall and other places of interest
- advertising in local newspapers
- media releases produced some coverage in major newspapers
- advertising in the main multicultural newspapers; Arabic, Chinese and Korean
- radio advertising campaign targeted at young people
- emails through email group providers to their members in the area
- advertising in bus shelters
- information stalls at Council events, e.g. Spring Fair and Australia Day
- a website.

Website

The launching of the Residents' Panel Website has been an important milestone in establishing the Residents Panel. The website aims to be interactive and attract regular visitors.

Further work on the website is currently being undertaken to create:

- A Residents Corner; this will contain chat rooms and collaborative discussion boards — this will be on council discussion areas and possibly wider policy and lobbying areas

- An Information Portal, linking the Panel website to other pages within council and to other community groups to provide information to residents that may be of interest.

Feedback to Panel Members

Regular feedback to Panel members promotes ownership of the Panel and helps to retain and attract members. Reports on all consultations are provided with details of what the Panel said and how their input has influenced outcomes.

5. Development of policy and procedures

The Policy was developed in consultation with key stakeholders within council; the General Management Team, Residents' Panel staff, Planning and Outcomes staff and Councillors. The Policy at this stage is yet to attain final Council Approval and the Procedures will continue to evolve with the Panel.

The following were seen as the key components of the Residents' Panel Policy and Procedures:

Eligibility and composition of the Panel

Members of the Residents' Panel will be required to live in the Parramatta Local Government Area and be over the age of 16. Parramatta City Council staff and Councillors are not eligible to be members of the Panel.

The Panel will have up to 1500 members, or equal to one percent of the LGA population. Panel members involved in consultation will represent the population both demographically and geographically.

The Residents' Panel does not aim to reach the hard to reach/minority groups within the community. These groups will be consulted when required by different processes.

When is the Residents' Panel used?

The Panel will not be consulted on all issues in council, the following criteria will be applied as a guide to council's use of the Panel. Use of the Panel will be considered appropriate:

- when input and feedback is required to make decisions on key policy or future directions of Council, e.g. twenty-year strategic plans
- when community input is required to develop strategies to achieve long-term visions, such as management plans and three to five-year plans
- when reviewing our performance in regards to services provided. This could be conducted to assess specific or general services or when there is a change in services proposed.
- when council requires further information on an area or issue and where the community's view is little understood
- when an issue may have a major impact on the majority of the community.

Priorities for consultation will be established in consideration of council's requirements for strategic planning and the degree of potential impact on people or place.

Proposals for consultation are required to fit the criteria and need to be received by the Community Engagement Unit within the designated period of notice as outlined in the procedures.

Approval of issues to be presented to the Residents' Panel for consultation will be decided by the Manager of Community Engagement in consultation with the General Management Team.

Principles of operation

Effective community engagement using the Residents' Panel will be driven by council's values and a set of principles, not shaped by particular techniques.

These principles of operation are:

- commitment
- clarity of purpose
- communication
- inclusiveness
- collaboration
- timeliness
- flexibility and responsiveness
- evidence
- continuous learning.

6. Selection of software

The selection of software that is able to meet the needs of managing the Panel and the research and surveying needs has been a major focus in the establishment of the Panel. Due to the fact that we are attempting to create a system that is truly cutting edge an exhaustive procedure has been put in place that has tested the abilities of the two major components of the overall system, being:

- the Panel Management System
- the Consultation System.

At the time of this paper the software provider has not yet been selected for either component, but a tendering and testing process has been put in place so that a decision can be made by 30 June 2005. The estimated cost of the software setup is \$146,000.

To efficiently manage the Panel, the Panel Management Software System will be required to:

- allow information to be collected on-line, by CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) and with direct-data entry capacity (i.e scanning of hard-copy surveys)

- managing and monitoring response rates by Panel members
- have the ability to accumulate points for completing surveys as part of a rewards system.
- have the ability to allocate applicable Collection District codes to panellists so that it will enable us to create a thematic map of required survey data over time. This graphical information is extremely helpful in identifying 'problematic points' with an area.

To efficiently conduct consultations the consultation software will be required to:

- create surveys that can collect information online, by mail and by telephone
- have the capacity to extract data on a question basis in a variety of formats
- produce simple cross-tabulations of questions
- monitor who is completing the survey by demographics
- offer a variety of question types
- deliver multilingual functionality and, if possible, translation.

Consultation methods

The specific consultation technique will be selected to be best suited to the consultation requirements.

Consultation may be conducted by:

- questionnaires and surveys
- mail
- email
- web-based surveys
- telephone
- face-to-face.

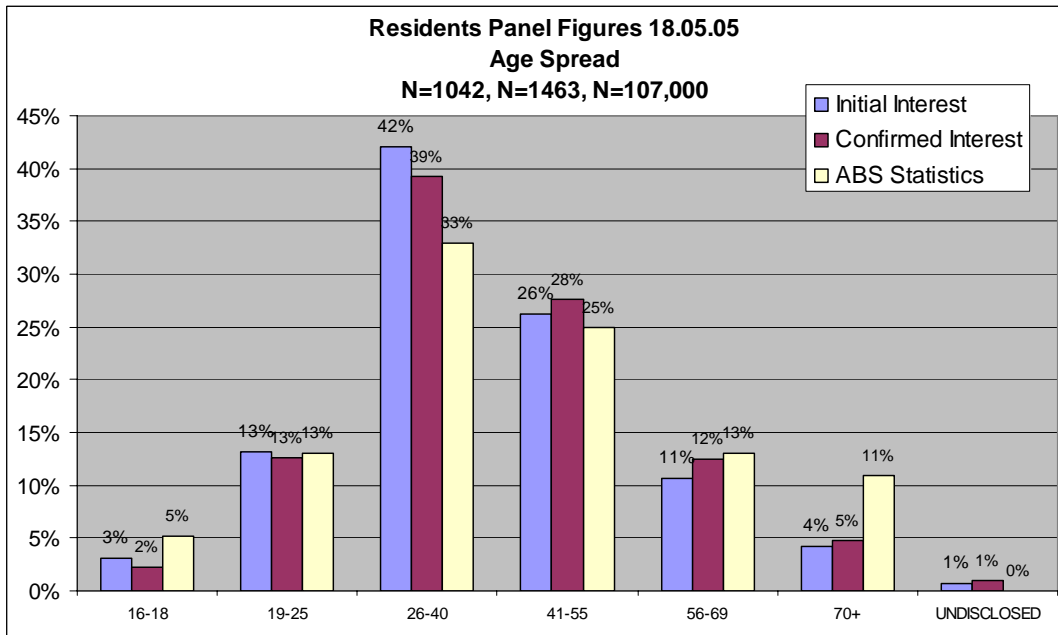
More detailed methods are:

- focus groups
- in-depth interviews
- web-based collaborative groups
- public meetings
- workshops.

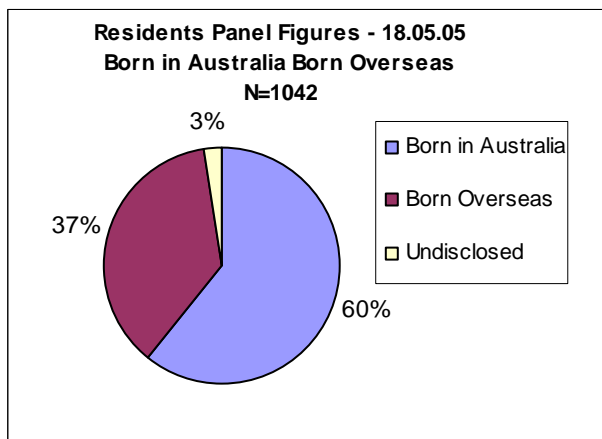
Panel progress

In June 2005, at the time of this paper, the Panel statistics were very near to those of the Australian Bureau of Statistics for the Parramatta area:

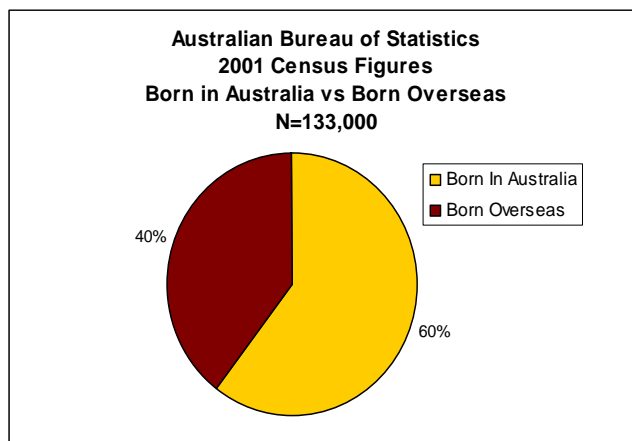
- Currently 1529 people interested in joining the Panel; of this, 1127 have confirmed they are interested. To confirm interest, Panel members are required to return personal demographic information.



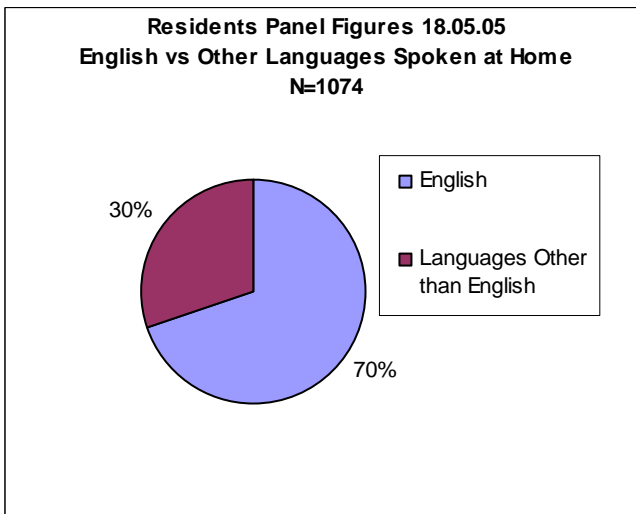
Age spread chart for the Panel, 18 May 2005



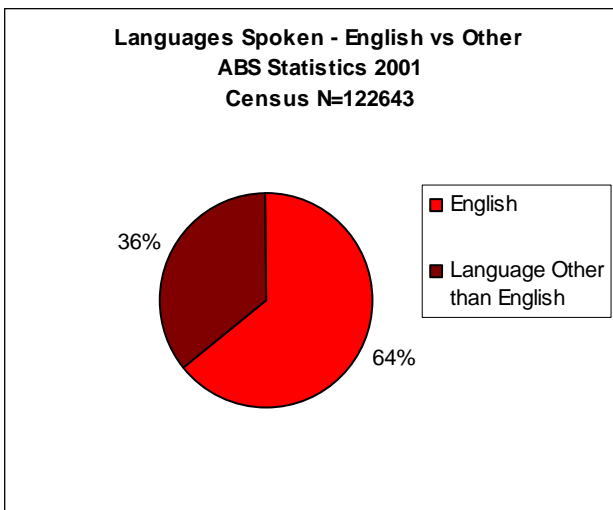
Panel statistics — Born in Australia vs overseas, 18 May 2005



ABS statistics — Born in Australia vs overseas



Languages spoken — Panel statistics, 18 May 2005



Languages spoken — ABS statistics

Panel consultations

The Residents' Panel has been involved in the following consultations in the past six months:

- Paid parking meters feasibility consultation — focus groups and survey
- A small randomly selected group of panellists to review the Residential Development Strategy Housing Survey prior to being sent to all households in the LGA
- A small randomly selected group of panellists to participate in a Customer Service Satisfaction Survey conducted by an external group, Human Synergistics
- A major survey on the 2005–06 Management Plan and the feasibility of a rate rise has been conducted by mail and online
- Survey on Volunteer Motivation, sponsored by Community Development. This survey focussed on volunteer motivations. Current volunteers with Parramatta Councils Community Care were surveyed by mail, telephone and online. An online survey aimed at members of the public who do not volunteer with council was also conducted. This survey was done to trial software. The results of this survey were not available at the time of publication.
- A major survey on Parramatta's Vision for Twenty25 and the triple bottom line is planned for the near future.

The way forward

For the Panel to be sustained and succeed in the future, further work is required on the following issues:

- An innovative rewards program needs to be developed that will sustain interest and motivate residents to join and remain on the Panel. Possible ideas at this stage are to have a points system where points are gained for each consultation that can be redeemed on council services.
- Procedure for the renewal and turnover of Panel members will be determined as the Panel progresses by monitoring the natural attrition and renewal rate.
- Further attention will be paid to the retention of Panel members and how to keep the Panel exciting and engaging
- A further focus on genuine involvement in decision making and education of staff within council on where in the decision-making process the public and Residents' Panel should be consulted.

Conclusion

The Resident's Panel has been a great success, with almost 1500 residents showing interest in being on the Panel. The implementation of the Panel has led to increased consultation with the community by council and further accountability of council to residents. Research conducted using the Panel has been valued by councillors and staff and has become an important asset to council while also empowering the community.