

I signed up for the Community Panel as I thought it would be a good opportunity to get an idea of what services the council is providing and to meet members of the community. Being new to the area I saw it as a way of an introduction and induction in a sense.

I was as sceptical as the next person, but when I got the call – despite not knowing what to expect - I decided to put all scepticism and cynicism aside and enter into this commitment with an open mind.

The main eye openers for me were:

- how complex the workings of the council are - the many issues, rules, regulations, and layers of other governing bodies they need to comply with
- the extent of future planning that they are involved with
- much of what the community wanted has already been identified by council

It is difficult enough to get a consensus in your own small family group, let alone a group of 30 complete individuals. I saw this as the biggest challenge. This was, at the same time, a strength and advantage. You have an explosion of different views, ideas, agendas, perspectives and visions for the future.

The councillors and staff of Penrith City Council (PCC) were very supportive, committed and forthcoming with their time, information, facilities, and catering.

The newDemocracy Foundation (nDF) gave us the guidance and encouragement we needed to be liberal with our ideas and requests for further information. With their careful guidance and S.M.A.R.T principles, they enabled us to achieve our final objective.

The panel members provided a steady flow of ideas and discussion points. Respectfully, we listened to each other's arguments for and against and discussed the different viewpoints. A couple of hot topics were the Tourist Information Centre – whether there should be one, where it should be located; the other was parking in the Penrith CBD – more of it, how to fund it, paid or metered. Though we didn't always agree, we were able to come to a point somewhere in the middle that everyone was comfortable with. Additionally, the panel had access to feedback and submissions from members of the public, and an online forum that was provided for us by the PCC and nDF to further the discussions and exchange ideas.

This understanding between all parties allowed for the panel to come to a consensus.

I would recommend participating in a community panel to everyone who is interested and concerned about the world they live in. I learned a lot about my new community from the information that was supplied by the PCC and also from my fellow panellists. It is easy enough to complain but it is better to have a voice and participate instead.

I don't know how much of our report the PCC will or is able to action, but the fact that the PCC have taken this initiative and facilitated an opportunity to have this communication with the community can only be a step in the right direction. It is a mutually beneficial experience and more organisations should get on board.

Gulcin.

Panelist

Penrith City Community Panel.