

Council

# Panel delivers key report

Communication is the key to Council's success, community panel finds

DALE DRINKWATER

34 residents have realised first-hand how hard decision making for 200,000 people is.

During six days between September and December last year, residents gathered to find answers to issues in the community.

The attempt at deliberative democracy by Penrith Council sought to find what services and infrastructure everyday people believe Penrith needs, and how they suggest it's paid for.

The Panel's recommendations were presented at a Council meeting on Monday night.

"It was probably with a bit of trepidation that Council went into this exercise," said Deputy Mayor, Ross Fowler.

"It has allowed us to hear from a very diverse group in the community on how they think this Council operates."

The randomly selected Community Panel is an initiative of the newDemocracy Foundation, a not-for-profit group that researches how decision-making works in democratic institutions.

newDemocracy Program Manager, Georgina Inwood, said the Panel handed Council a clear document containing what



Council's Community Panel with Penrith Mayor, Karen McKeown

they want from them both now and in the future.

"What they are saying broadly is that Council has been doing a fantastic job, but they weren't aware of the breadth of what Council did," she said.

Resident and Panel member, James Irwin, said one of the biggest issues they found was communication from Council to the community.

"A lot of times [in meetings] we emphasized that communication is key," he said.

"A lot of people in the local area aren't aware of the great things people are doing in the community. It was pleasing for us to know that for so many things, Council was already in progress with."

Panel member, Katherine Hardacre, said the group assessed everyone's ideas based on cost, impact, long-term benefit and sustainability.

Council accepted the recommendations in the Panel's report across 43 areas of focus.

## Not all pleased with Community Panel

While Council's Community Panel dedicated their time and learnt a whole lot about Penrith Council, there are several who are sceptical of its impact and intentions.

Conservative Councillor Marcus Cornish said while he thanks the Panel for participating, they were essentially paid to usurp Council.

"That's the job of the Council. I think it would be received much better if it were called consultation," he said.

Cr Cornish said it just reinforced issues Council already set.

"Maurice Giroto's 'Welcome to Penrith' signs issue, Mark Davies and his river precinct issue," he said.

"Their recommendations are reinforcing what we already know, the biggest issue they came to is parking and roads and everyone knows I've been banging on about that for years."

Panel member, Shane Bryant, who was one of 34 who got paid to participate, said it was political justification.

"I got on the committee because I thought this might be a bit different," he said.

"The committee was steered as to what to talk about, and we didn't get down to gutsy issues."