Byron Shire Community Solutions Panel

CASE STUDY SUMMARY

Katie Hirono, University of Edinburgh

June 2021

Executive Summary

In 2018, Byron Shire Council, with support from newDemocracy Foundation, ran a citizen's jury ("community solutions panel") on infrastructure spending prioritisation. This case study was selected as part of research I am conducting for a doctoral thesis on global health policy at the University of Edinburgh. The community solutions panel (CSP) was aimed at both informing infrastructure spending and also trialing a new approach to community engagement in Byron. Thirty-two local residents were randomly selected to participate and through the process they produced a report with values-based recommendations for Council. These recommendations were formally adopted by Council and have since then been integrated into various Council strategies and approaches, including the 2018-19 Delivery Program.

Beyond directly affecting Council's infrastructure spending prioritisation, the CSP appeared to have a range of follow-on effects. Panellists described various ways that their involvement had led to personal changes for them, including feeling more confident, being more politically engaged, or for a few people, feeling empowered. Not everyone felt that the process had been a success, with a few panellists saying that the CSP had generated little impact or had been a missed opportunity. However, the majority of panellists described it as a positive experience.

The aim of my research is to understand how participatory processes, like the CSP, can lead to better health and health equity outcomes. Whilst the CSP included community wellbeing and equity as core values within the final report, it was not clear how these values in particular were affecting Council decision making and how, in turn, this was affecting community health in Byron. However, theories of public health posit that enhanced community engagement can ultimately improve community health, and this is something I will continue to explore in my thesis.

Introduction

It is well known that social, environmental and political factors are major contributors to health and health equity. It is also recognised that people are often best positioned to know how to achieve optimal health conditions within their communities. Recent initiatives have aimed to involve communities more directly in decision making with the aim of achieving more optimal health and equity outcomes. This research, part of my doctorate in global health policy at the University of Edinburgh, investigates how, if at all, health and equity can be achieved through public participation in decisions that affect the social determinants of health. The Byron Shire Community Solutions Panel was one of four case studies I selected for this research. I conducted interviews with participants of the CSP and what they told me, along with other relevant documents that I analysed, have been used to write this case summary. Below, I summarise my findings about the CSP process along with what it achieved.

Background

Byron Shire is an area of northern New South Wales renowned for its natural beauty and is a popular tourist destination, particularly Byron Bay. Part of the attraction for both tourists and those who have relocated to the area is both the nature and unique character of the Shire. Byron has a large percentage of foreign-born residents (17.8%), which is higher than the regional NSW average (11.2%). The Bundjalung Nation of Byron Bay including the Akrawal people, Minjungbal people and the Widjabul people are the traditional custodians of the land. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples represent 1.8% of the population (Byron Shire Council).

The local government area has approximately 35,000 residents, but as many as 2 million visitors annually. This massive influx of tourists each year boosts income for local businesses, but does not increase revenue for Council, despite the considerable strain this puts on infrastructure. In 2017 Byron

Shire Council (Council) approved a rate increase of 7.5% over 4 years to be invested into infrastructure. Community engagement prior to the CSP demonstrated that infrastructure was a key area of concern and there was a desire for community-led decision making.

Around this time, newDemocracy Foundation (nDF) had been in conversation with Council about opportunities to strengthen participation of residents in Council decision making. Council staff had expressed a view that that their typical models of engagement, in which residents respond to Council decisions, was leading to frustration and a lack of trust from the community. nDF suggested that a citizen's jury could enable Council to share in the decision-making process, particularly for complex community issues or 'wicked problems.' Council had convened a citizen's jury in the past on tourist management and several of the Councillors were familiar with and supportive of this approach, including the Mayor.

In 2018 Council, with support from nDF, undertook a citizen's jury (what they called a Community Solutions Panel or CSP) to address prioritisation of spending for infrastructure. The remit of the CSP was to address this question:

> *"How should the money generated through the rate increase and earmarked for expenditure on infrastructure be prioritised, and how should those priorities be funded if rates alone are not enough?"*

This question was designed to be open-ended and non-partisan so as to avoid influence by decision makers to take a certain decision. Furthermore, Council agreed in advance to adopt the recommendations generated through the process.

The CSP was run independently by nDF with support from Council in March 2018. The final report with the recommendations of the panel was produced during the final session of the CSP on 25 March 2018. I conducted interviews for this case study in March 2019.

How was the process designed?

A citizens jury is a form of 'mini public,' a type of democratic innovation designed to enable more direct and participatory democracy (Escobar and Elstub, 2017). Mini publics are made of randomly selected citizens that act as representatives for the larger population. Most are intended to convene and deliberate on a specific issue and dissolve thereafter.

Citizens juries are loosely modelled after a legal jury in which jurors are presented with the evidence on a decision, are provided time to deliberate, and conclude with a recommendation or 'verdict'. They can be designed in a way so that the jurors have some control over the process including choice of key witnesses and evidence provided to them. This was the approach taken by nDF for the CSP.

The CSP comprised of 32 participants who were randomly selected using Council's database. Of the several thousand people contacted initially through the database, over 400 responded with interest in participating, and of those, 32 were selected to participate based on their demographics in order to reflect a cross-section of the local population. Thirty-one people completed the process.

Panellists met for 4 sessions over the month (approximately 27 hours) which is slightly shorter than nDF's typical model (35-40 hours). Panellists were offered an honorarium of AU$300 for their work, which is customary in mini-publics as a measure to reduce barriers to participation.

The process was run by nDF and moderated by an external facilitator who was trained in facilitating citizen's juries. Panellists were provided with a briefing book prior to commencing. This 127-page document covers the aim and process of the CSP but also provided panellists with extensive background information on Council infrastructure, spending, revenue and other processes (e.g. community engagement strategies, monitoring process). The information provided in the briefing book was compiled by Council staff. During the CSP, Council staff and elected representatives from across the political spectrum provided expert testimony.

Given the considerable community interest on this topic, Council invited community members to make submissions which would be provided to the panellists. Forty-nine submissions were received[1]. Furthermore the local media was briefed about the CSP in advance and a member of the press was invited to attend several meetings. Given the comprehensive and accessible information it provided, the briefing book was also made available to members of the public.

Council commitment

nDF explained that one of their prerequisites for leading a project like the CSP is to get some commitment from Council up front to respond to the recommendations of the panel. What seemed to surprise nDF was the unanimous commitment of all elected officials to not just respond to, but fully adopt, the recommendations. Council committed to implement the panel's recommendations in the Delivery Plan when it is adopted in June 2018.

This commitment to implement the recommendations of the CSP was communicated to the panellists upfront in the Briefing Book. However, through my interviews there seemed to be some cases in which panellists were skeptical of that commitment.

> *"So I definitely got the sense that this process might have been politically motivated in the sense that Council often bears the brunt of accusations of favoritism, or lack of consultation, or a lot of things get leveled at it negatively when a decision is made. So this process is definitely seen, like in one respect, a way that they could point to the process and say, 'Look, this wasn't political. This wasn't a partisan thing. This wasn't a decision based on the incompetence of internal staff members, it was, you know, we put this to the community'... I think any person who is an elected member who has to think politically would see the benefits in something like that, even though you could also hear it cynically and say, they're only doing this so that they can absolve themselves of having to deal with public backlash or whatever."*
> *Terry, panellist[2]*

Similarly, one panellist expressed a feeling of Council 'passing the buck' in order to avoid blame: "I mean, it wouldn't be the first time that politicians used a group of people who aren't politicians as a cover to do what they wanted to do or not do what they want to do or avoid blame." (Roger, panellist).

However, despite the potential tension between Council wanting to improve community engagement whilst also avoiding blame for themselves, one panellist explained that this wasn't enough of an issue to change his perspective of the process: "there might, would have been some tension. I don't know if it was palpable enough to like leave a bad taste in anyone's mouth or to affect the process as a whole." (Terry, panellist).

---

[1] Although interestingly, the panellists voted not to consider these submissions as part of their deliberation.
[2] All names are pseudonyms

One panellist explained that the fact that Council had made a commitment to adopt their recommendations strengthened this perception of Council valuing their input and added extra gravitas to the CSP:

> *"At first I wasn't sure whether they were going to completely use all of our information …or whether, you know, they're just going to take recommendations and then decide themselves. But, you know, they made it clear within the first day that whatever we said, and whatever we did, they were actually going to use that money in those areas. So we started taking it really seriously then. It wasn't like we were just giving them advice. We were actually making decisions for, you know, 32,000 people, right?" Tiffany, panellist*

What was the aim of the CSP?

Beyond informing Council spending on infrastructure, the CSP served as a mechanism to achieve several other goals. The perceived aim of the CSP was multi-layered and looked slightly different to decision makers, process organisers and panellists (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Different aims of the CSP

Council Aims
- Providing opportunity for shared decision making with the community
- Informing a "wicked problem"
- More balanced community input

nDF Aims
- Improving democratic decision making
- Citizen empowerment
- Making a case example in Byron

Panellist Aims
- Improving community engagement

For Council, the CSP was intended to both improve infrastructure spending and provide an opportunity for shared decision making with the community. Leading up to the CSP, Council had "taken a beating" by the community for their approach to decision making and community engagement. In particular, one member of Council staff told me that Council had some bad experiences with decision making in the past which had really damaged community trust in them. The local newspaper, The Echo, was a vocal opponent to Council and regularly published critiques of Council decisions. The level of activism and vocal community opposition in Byron is well known across Australia, as one interviewee explained:

> *"Byron Bay is a great place to do this, because pretty much everyone in government would have a view about the difficulties of governing in Byron Bay. Even the Councillors there across all different positions and perspectives would agree that they operate in a place with the most highly active community groups. There's a protest group about everything. I don't mean that in a negative way, it's just the nature of that community is a very, very active community. You could say this to anyone in federal parliament, 'Byron Shire Council' and they would go 'Ho, that's got to be tough.'" John, process organiser*

Therefore, the CSP was intended to provide a role for community input into Council decision making while also bringing vocal community opposition into the process (such as through providing submissions to the CSP). This approach to shared decision making, it was hoped, would instill further trust in Council and therefore less opposition.

The decision to focus on infrastructure was due to its relevance. Council had just approved the rate increase and considered infrastructure to be a 'wicked problem.' Even with the rate increase Council wouldn't have enough money to improve all key infrastructure, let alone priority projects of community members. As one representative of nDF stated:

> "They were kind of damned if they do and damned if they don't. So I think they were looking for that layer of support for what they were recommending around things like road priorities, to make sure that once something got all the way through to actually being adopted by Council, it didn't then come back to haunt them because the community didn't feel like they hadn't had their say in it." Sallyann, process organiser

Furthermore, it was the perception of Council that their standard community engagement activities were only enabling them to hear from 'the loudest voices.' By running the CSP, which is more representative of the community, they hoped to be able to elicit a more comprehensive and balanced view of community opinions.

What were the outcomes of the CSP?

Impact on the decision

True to their commitment, Council adopted the panel's recommendations in their 2018-19 Delivery Program. The document specifically states how the panel's recommendations have been integrated:

> "The Delivery Program (DP) Actions listed below are just a snapshot of our Actions and 2018-2019 Activities (found on pages 18 to 38) that relate to the Panel's decision making framework. This is not a definitive list since many of the Panel's recommendations are put into practice every day, for example risk and safety is always our main concern when performing our actions, regardless of what we're working on." p.4 (Byron Shire Council, nd)

The document then lists each of the recommendations set out by the panel and provides detailed information on how this will be addressed in the 2018-19 Delivery and Operational Plan. For example, for recommendation 1 "Risk and safety is the first priority across all infrastructure types" the Delivery Plan lists five actions in which this will be addressed, for example:

> "You'll see us prioritise and complete requests for works by undertaking highest priority works within approved budgets and refine risk based methodologies and predictive modelling to strategically prioritise maintenance and renewal of infrastructure. The review and report of the risk matrix for high risk assets will be reported to the Transport and Infrastructure Advisory Committee."p.5 (Byron Shire Council, nd)

Furthermore, the document provides a response and future actions to the key considerations published by the panellists in the CSP final report. The recommendations and key considerations are also integrated into the 2017-2021 Delivery Program. Community objectives (which are determined by Council through engagement with community) are listed and where appropriate, recommendations from the CSP are listed to show where there is alignment or agreement.

Diane, a representative of Council told me that they had applied the CSP recommendations to delivery objectives that were more obvious, such as on road network infrastructure, but also for broader objectives like Council operations and financial integrity. She further explained that Council had been deliberate in communicating how they were taking on board the CSP recommendations, in order to allow community members to clearly see where a recommendation had led to a formal action.

Beyond this formal adoption of the CSP recommendations, she explained that the recommendations had also filtered out across the organisation in multiple ways. For example, the CSP listed safety as their number one priority and Council staff had used this to prioritise their own actions:

> *"And the criteria that the Mayor actually brought up is, 'Well, you know, if we're going to build whatever it was, let's say we're going to build a playground. Or we need to retrofit a community hall because it's got asbestos in it. The playground's really sexy, the asbestos is a safety and risk, we're putting that one as number one.'" Diane, decision maker*

Furthermore, some of the recommendations from the report were being applied across Council, such as providing more opportunities for shared decision making. In 2019, Council commissioned nDF to undertake another citizens jury to examine models of shared decision making in Byron. This 'Byron model' was designed similarly to the CSP but with the question: "How do we want to make democratic decisions in Byron Shire that can be widely supported." This 'Byron model' aims to develop a process by which to embed deliberative community-led governance into Byron Shire decision making.

One interviewee felt that the success of the CSP was that it enabled Council to trial other democratic innovations. For example, following the CSP, Council had embarked on 'kitchen table conversations' to examine their tourism strategy. This interviewee felt that there was more interest from Council to use these deliberative approaches because "It wasn't their first foray into this area…they had that behind them as something that they kind of knew would work. So it wasn't, you know, completely risky. " (Cat, process organiser).

This was confirmed by the representative of Council:

> *"So our sustainable environment and economy directorate are doing a similar process on tourism. So, again, that kind of that built from the success of the infrastructure solutions panel because they saw the effects of it, and they're like 'Right, we're gonna do that for our topic.'" Diane, decision maker*

What were the indirect impacts of the process?

As described earlier, the aim of the CSP was not just to inform Council's spending on infrastructure, but to improve the relationship and enhance trust between the community and Council.

How did this affect the relationship between community and council?

Interviewees stated that a major outcome of the process had been a change in panellists' understanding of Council processes and challenges. Through the process of learning about infrastructure spending and Council revenue, panellists gained a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the challenges of Council and therefore were more sympathetic to how they take decisions, leading some to even defend Council actions.

"I thought they were a bunch of malarkers before [laughs]. I didn't, I couldn't understand their decision making process… and then I went to the solutions panel and everything was explained. You know, why these things happened. How state government regulation impacts the decision." Harris, panellist

"So when people complain, I say 'Hang on. Council are really trying hard, but they can't do this because state regulation or because of budgetary constraints…' I stick up for them whenever I can, support them whenever I can." Harris, panellist

"I certainly have a very clear understanding of how the Council operates, and I have a lot more sympathy for the Councillors and the people who work on the Council than I had prior to getting involved." Alan, panellist

According to one of the CSP organisers, the process is designed to provide a space to allow this shift in understanding to occur:

> "*People as they would go through one of these juries or panels where, you know, on day one they'd come in and there'd be a healthy degree of 'Council is full of shit, they don't know what they're doing, they're just a bunch of, you know, bureaucrats sitting in an office and you know, I can fix this problem in the next half an hour'. You know, or some variant thereof, and watching them over the course of four or five, six sessions over many times, that they would come in, and they would learn about some of the issues that were facing with Council, they'd start to see it from the different perspective, they'd start to feel some empathy for the people in the Council, it'd start to shift and then you'd almost hear the language change, and you'd go from it being 'them' and 'they' to it being 'we' and 'us.'" Sallyann, process organiser*

Panellists expressed that through their interactions with Councillors they were able to have a more human and personable interaction with and understanding of them. This change in their perception of Councillors then seemed to help participants feel more comfortable and confident in Council. As one panellist explained: "And I got to know a couple of the Councillors a little bit. For me, they're pretty genuine people." (Alan, panellist).

One panellist explained that the process of becoming more familiar with Council workings and the individual Councillors made them feel more accessible:

> "*Yeah, that's it. Oh, that's how the process the political process the decision making process is working. And then you suddenly realise 'Okay, so that's, that's how it works. It's not that complex actually'. And it makes you feel closer." Bret, panellist*

Council similarly felt that the CSP had made panellists more aware of the difficulties they face and had changed the way that they engage with Council. As a Council staff member explained:

> "*I think we have had conversations with some of the panellists about that they have now got a much broader understanding of council business and are our advocates. You know, they've got, someone used the example if they've gone to a barbecue and be like, 'man, the roads are*

so shit.' They're like 'Hey, hang on a minute. This is the reason why they're shit. And this is what Council's doing about it.' So they've become our kind of spokespeople in a way. And they have come to Council meetings. So they've been, they're more active in the Council space now that they've kind of had that experience and that insight into Council." Diane, decision maker

How did this affect trust?

It seems that trust was a two-way street that needed to be built through the process. Participants needed to trust the decision makers and planners to run the process in a way that was 'fairdinkum' and the Council staff needed to trust that the participants would produce something that was useful. There was an initial hesitancy by Council to let go of control and trust the process, but the Council staff member stated that the process had been successful in Council developing trust in the panellists and the process.

Reservations about the process were not just about how the process would run but about the usefulness of the outcomes. Some Council staff, in particular, had reservations about the utility of the process. "It's also probably a level of trust. You know, you've got a traditional infrastructure engineering department. They're trained like, 'Why am I going to listen to the man on the street about how I should do my job?" (Diane, decision maker). However, Diane explained that due to the success of the process (that it produced useful recommendations) a lot of the hesitancy of Council staff had been overcome.

Most panellists, in turn, felt that the process was trustworthy. As a panellist describes: "I definitely got the impression that the Councillors were fairdinkum [honest and trustworthy] when they said, we're going to get this and we're going to implement what you say." (Doug, panellist). Other panellists stated that the CSP had led them to feel more trust for Council: "… all those Councillors do hold, you know, beliefs at heart that they want to do better things for the community. So I'm not skeptical of their intentions." (Keith, panellist). Importantly, a major contributor to this trust in Council seemed to stem from the fact that Council was willing to take on the recommendations provided by the panellists.

How did it affect shared decision making?

Lastly, one of the stated aims of the process was to trial an approach for shared decision making and community engagement in Byron. Most panellists felt that the CSP had achieved improved co-working between Council and community: "But I think by the end of that, they had seen the benefit, which we all had, of working together and being able to negotiate and synthesise our ideas and get to a common place of understanding which was good. And elected Councillors themselves were a lot more on board." (Terry, panellist).

Other participants expressed that the process had felt like a genuine effort from Council to engage in more meaningful community engagement: "But yeah, I thought that, my early thoughts I said going in were one of slight pessimism. But yeah, I found that, you know, that was wrong. In the end, that it was a genuine sort of effort by the Council to engage." (Keith, panellist).

One panellist explained that the collaborative approach used in the CSP enabled a shared approach to decision making between Council and the panellists:

"It wasn't 'shut up and do what you're told. Shut up. Listen to us. Get out of the way. You're wasting our time.' It wasn't that, it was, 'Okay. Come and tell us what you think. Oh, this is what we think. What do you think?' It's that collegiate, not necessarily cooperative, but collaborative, collaborative, and consultative. And it gave them another, it expanded their database, because they were getting all this other information that was hidden from them. And us, too." Harris, panellist

As this participant describes in the quote above, shared decision making was achieved not just from Council learning about the needs of the community members, but also through the panellists learning about the needs of Council. In fact, the final report of the CSP concludes with a similar assertion about the value of shared working:

> *"The panel concludes with this observation: that communities thrive when they are given time and authority to develop their own assets. Community members are willing to own their community's problems and issues. Having accepted that it is a shared community problem, community members will be more likely to work together to develop a solution, and a solution is likely to be better than one provided solely by external experts." p. 14 (Byron Shire Community Solutions Panel, 2018)*

In the Council delivery program and operational plan, they reflect on this desire of community for more shared decision making and make explicit commitments to grow in this area. The document states: "Council knows its community cares deeply about the culture and lifestyle which makes Byron Shire unique, and that you want to be involved in decision-making about the things that impact this culture and lifestyle." p.3 (Byron Shire Council, nd)

Furthermore, in response to the CSP's key consideration to "encourage, support and facilitate shared ownership of community issues," Council provides several actions in their delivery program, including:
- "embed[ding] community led governance principles into operations which looks at shared ownership of projects and empowering communities" p.8 (Byron Shire Council, nd); and
- "community led decision making which is open and inclusive" p.16 (Byron Shire Council, nd).

On the whole, one of the process organisers felt hopeful that the process would lead to broader cultural shifts and embeddedness of deliberative processes in Council:

> *"I don't know that I've got an insight on whether it left any internal cultural impact. And I think that's actually personally something that would have really interested me, having come from working within councils and seeing, what would often happen is, you know, you go through a project like this, it would finish, and then it would just be back to business as usual. Council of Byron was one of the few times that I actually saw that potentially, that wouldn't happen. And I think it would have been really fascinating to watch as they go through this second project with nDF now, whether those, those commitments to deliberative processes internally have been embedded, and whether the staff are now deeply engaging with them. My hope is that they probably are." Sallyann, process organiser*

What did panellists think about the impacts on decision making?
On the whole, participants were satisfied with what they had produced through the process. Some participants, though not all, had tracked the process to see what Council did with their recommendations: "I watched to see what Council did with the tool. And, you know, I perceived that they have used them. So to that extent, that feels good." (Doug, panellist).

There was also a general perception from panellists that Council would take on board the recommendations of the process "…[they're] actually going to adopt this in the policy and use it to guide decisions in the process. They did reinforce that. And I think people believed that to an extent." (Terry, panellist). However, not all participants felt certain about whether or not, and how, the recommendations of the CSP had been incorporated into Council planning. "So at the end of the day, I

don't know how much difference it will have made to the way that spending is prioritised." (Terry, panellist).

One panellist had concerns that there was no mechanism to ensure that Council would continue to refer back to the document "to go back and check" or whether it would allow Council to do what they "would have done…anyway." Some panellists felt skeptical about what would happen with the recommendations in the long run: "I'm just, I've been around a little bit too long to just take everything that's said as a fact. I do think generally though, generally people were very appreciative." (Alan, panellist).

Several of the panellists and process organisers perceived that the final recommendations of the CSP would be useful to Council decision making: "Oh, I think they thought they were just incredibly sensible, the recommendations." (Cat, process organizer). However, many panellists also had concerns that what they had recommended would not necessarily be useful to Council. As one participant explained: "So, yeah, there was definitely engagement and desire to show us that they had adopted the principles. But again, It just goes back to how useful the principles were for that specific question we were tasked with." (Terry, panellist).

Similarly, several participants voiced concerns that the question posed to the group about infrastructure spending was too broad and technical for them to have provided any meaningful recommendations:

> *"But see, this is where it's so complicated, because there's so many little projects going on absolutely everywhere. And unless, you know, the only people that really have the data on that are the people that are actually on the ground in the Council, and we never got near any of those… And so it's very, very, I find it very difficult to come up with other than the motherhood statements that will come up for something as complicated as that." Roger, panellist*

Similarly, there was concern that because the recommendations from the CSP were more value-based, they could be tokenistically adopted by Council.

> *"We gave them a weighted set of values against which they had to prioritise their decisions on infrastructure spending. But by the same token, it seemed like they were very abstract or intellectual values that could be ticked to agree with whatever decision they had already made retroactively." Terry, panellist*

Another panellist was skeptical that they had been able to produce any new information to Council, and that without clear feedback from Council about how the recommendations were being implemented, he continued to remain uncertain about the usefulness of the process:

> *"The benefits? The real benefits for me, they're hard to plug upon because I'm not sure we delivered nothing more than what is pretty much the strategy that Council already had in place because of how they're spending their money. And unless there's something produced which clearly measures our recommendations against expenditure, some, it's like, we have to be able to measure effectiveness in that way. So, even attending Council meetings hasn't been helping me a great deal around my own question of, 'So, are they following what we recommended?'" Alan, panellist*

However, one person expressed that while Council had adopted the recommendations at what might appear to have been a "really superficial level," this was actually important for Council strategic planning: "And that really did drive their framework for things." (Sallyann, process organiser).

Several participants stated that it would have been helpful if there had been more clear communication back to them about how their recommendations had been used by Council: "So I think they used it. But we didn't really have any feedback about how the Council used it." (Bret, panellist).

A handful of panellists volunteered to present the final report at a Council meeting following the end of the CSP. Several of the people who presented at this meeting expressed more trust that Council would implement the recommendations of the CSP than the panellists who did not attend. This might have been because the panellists had an opportunity to directly speak with Councillors about the final recommendations and to hear feedback directly from them. As one panellist explains: So by seeing them working, I felt much more confident about how they're going to use the report. And if they were going to use it and so on. It really helped. And that's where, I felt like, Okay, this is legit, you know, and this is a real way of trying to get the community more involved." (Bret, panellist).

One panellist expressed that as a whole, she felt that the CSP was a missed opportunity. The focus of the question and the way the process was facilitated to answer that question, rather than being more open-ended, was, for her, a missed opportunity to capitalise on the creativity and inventive nature of the people of Byron:

> *"And I expected really great brainstorming because this is the Byron Shire, it's one of the most creative places Australia. Yeah, you would have fantastic discussion. But it didn't really happen… And that there was such a chance and opportunity to make a difference and change. And that they just didn't take it up. Really, but that's what really upsets me. You know, that's when you've got the opportunity, and then you just run with all the old stuff. Because we need to change the whole world. If we could just change a little bit like that it would have been good." Carol, panellist*

Outcomes for Panellists

In my interviews with panellists, they described a variety of personal outcomes arising from their participation in the CSP. Overwhelmingly the experience seemed to be a positive one with participants describing multiple positive experiences arising from their involvement (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Personal experiences resulting from participation in the CSP

In addition to this range of positive experiences, there were three key outcomes that panellists described from their involvement in the CSP: increased knowledge; civic engagement; and empowerment.

Knowledge

Some panellists described a range of ways that the CSP enabled them to gain new knowledge. Panellists described having a better understanding of how Council works and the challenges and complexities of governance. Panellists also described a range of skills that they had developed through the process, such as learning how to speak and deliberate in a group setting.

> "So it was almost like there was a crystallisation deepening in understanding of how Council functions, and how spending works and how prioritisation works and how policy works."
> Terry, panellist

Panellists described a range of ways that the process had enhanced their relational skills, such as "interpersonal and group relations". For example, one panellist said that the decision of the process organisers to let the panellists work out how they wanted to answer the question, and develop a process to achieve that, was an important process for the group to develop these skills. Panellists also seemed to develop relational knowledge through their experience of peer learning. They described ways that their perspectives and understanding had changed through interacting with other panellists.

Panellists also described a type of broadened understanding that seemed to reflect both procedural knowledge about how Council works, along with relational knowledge about working with Council and each other in the community. For example, one panellist explained that this enhanced knowledge had made him more empathetic to the difficulties of Council governance. Panellists also described how enhanced knowledge was a two-way process in which they learned more about Council, but Council similarly learned more about the community.

Civic Engagement

Several participants shared that the CSP had galvanized them to become more civically involved, such as through involvement in Council activities, local politics, writing to the local newspaper, or other community activities. A post evaluation survey conducted by nDF similarly showed that participants were more motivated to participate in a range of civic activities, including: contacting council (78%), attending a community meeting or rally (67%), or contacting local state or federal member of parliament (56%). The fact that the majority of respondents most strongly reported that they would be motivated to contact their local council supports the increased engagement and relationship between panellists and Council discussed in the previous section.

"And so I thought, Okay, well, why not try to give it a go getting interested in the politics and so on. And actually, I got a bit hooked, I got a bit hooked. So I've been starting to read the newspaper. And then even after participating on that community panel, I've been following different issues… so I'm getting more involved into the subject, which I wasn't really before. So yeah. I feel personally more involved in all this." Bret, panellist

One panellist explained that the reason why he had continued to become more involved in local politics and engagement with Council is because he learned through doing the CSP that Council decision making and Councillors are much more accessible than he had thought:

> *"… And then I understood that actually, it was possible to change things. Because you can write letters. You can write to the Council, you can call them, they're not that far, actually, if people wanted to get more involved. And the people just understood that a letter can actually make a quantum, like a big difference. Well, I think they'd write more. Because I've been writing more as well." Bret, panellist*

Empowerment

The process organisers stated that empowerment is an aim of any process they run and overwhelmingly felt that this goal had been achieved:

"Whether that outcome is necessarily, you know, the optimum or exactly what they want, I think they felt like they had opportunity to be part of it. And felt heard. Actually more than heard. They didn't feel heard because that's, that's too passive. They actually felt like that they had a level of control over it." Cat, process organiser

> *"…the fact that they've commissioned a second project on how to embed this is the hundred percent marker, that the empowerment of citizens was achieved in such a way that it was constructive for elected and bureaucratic members of Council, that they want more. If you've got a goal of empowering people, and as a result the people delegating authority say, 'show us how to do lots more permanently' I'd argue that's fairly good proof point that we hit that goal well." John, process organiser*

One of the panellists I interviewed felt that the process had been empowering to himself and other participants. However, most panellists were not as explicit in stating that the process had been empowering. Instead, they described a range of positive experiences that could be viewed as part of an empowerment process, including developing confidence, improved self-esteem, influence, and having a say.

Many participants described ways that the CSP had increased their confidence. One panellist explained that the process of doing the CSP had challenged her own limiting self-beliefs about her intelligence and capabilities:

> "So I didn't really know how to write properly until I was like, 27, I sort of spellchecked, like spellcheck taught me how to write because school didn't. So I guess, going through that and brainstorming with everybody, and I would have to write it out. I'd have to present it. You know, it was constantly 'Oh, you're the peacock. You do it.' You know what I mean? They kept throwing it at me. So it was kind of like, 'Yeah, okay, I'm more capable than maybe I thought I am.'" Tiffany, panellist

Interestingly for this panellist, this increase in her confidence and self-belief had inspired her to consider pursuing further education.

One panellist explained that the reason why he didn't personally feel empowered by the process, and why others might have felt the same, is due to the high level of confidence and influence that participants already had going into the process. He explained that the process of self-selecting to participate on the jury meant that the process was more likely to attract already highly empowered people.

However, this was not the case for all panellists. One panellist in particular, who had a negative history of engaging with social benefits agencies felt strongly that the process had allowed him to feel that he was intellectual, valuable and influential and that this had helped to make the process feel empowering.

One of the process organisers explained that the way the process is designed and facilitated, through enabling participants to learn from each other and have a say, is key to enhancing their confidence:

> "Oh, it's just that it's respectful conversation, firstly. So they're talking to people who have a contrary view, but they are allowed to be heard with their contrary view. So that's pretty amazing. They will usually say, 'Oh, my God, I just talked for four days with people I disagreed with, and nobody was abusive, or yelled at me.' So that can build your confidence. But I think much more importantly, that the personal experience is completely valued, you know, that your own experience of that community, of your street, of your everyday experience is exactly what's needed in this circumstance. So, you don't need to be an expert, you don't need specialist knowledge, you just need to be an observing resident, you know, you just need to notice what's going on in your community, and to communicate that to others. Now, you know, that can build your confidence, like 'Oh, that's important. [laughs]. You know, it's important that, that I do that, and that someone is actually going to value that'. So all of their contributions should be valued. And when they are, I think it does build one's confidence, like 'Oh I had something to say, and people listen to me.' And what's more, it wasn't stupid. You know, I think people really think they're not as smart as they are. I think there's an incredible lack of confidence about people's ability to participate in decision making, which for me, has always been like, thinking of it as an unused muscle that is just atrophied through lack of use. No one's ever asked them to participate in this. So why would they think that they were any good at? Which of course they are." Cat, process organiser

Several of the panellists felt strongly that the CSP had given them a say in the decision making process and that this was a valuable outcome of the process.

How did this affect health and equity?

The final report of the Byron Shire CSP explicitly defines equity and community wellbeing as essential values to be considered when deciding upon infrastructure spending (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 CSP definitions of community wellbeing and equity

Community Wellbeing	•Infrastructure enables positive health outcomes for our community and visitors. Positive health includes physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and social components.
Equity	•All people are able to safely use and benefit from all types of infrastructure.

Whilst the panellists had chosen to include these values as a key consideration in the final report, many of the participants I interviewed felt that these were likely to have a limited influence, or weren't new information, for Council. One participant explained that because the Council is a majority of elected representatives from the Green party, values relating to health and equity would likely have already been on their agenda. However, one participant did feel that these values might be useful information for Council staff if not for elected Councillors:

> *"The elected Councillors, I imagine, because they are constantly hearing from their constituents would be aware of that broad range of things. This Council staff probably hadn't considered it as much. You know, like I said before, I feel like a lot of Council staff, not just in Byron, but a lot of local government areas in Australia, you know, they're kind of rested on the mix of kind of old bureaucratic types, who only think about their one particular specialty and are quite myopic, or close minded about how it relates. You know, like, they would never even think to walk across the hall to the next department let alone think about the broad issue like health or equity. So I think for them it was probably more helpful than the elected Councillors…. Because a lot of big decisions are made by internal staff, and people don't realise it, and they don't realise the follow-on effects or the consequences you might gain or lose from a decision that's made." Terry, panellist*

As demonstrated by the final statement in the quote above, the fact that these values might be new information for Council staff is important as they are often the ones who have considerable influence on how big decisions are made.

Conclusion

The Byron Shire Community Solutions Panel was widely perceived to be a successful process. Both decision makers and the panellists provided a range of positive outcomes that had occurred for infrastructure spending prioritisation, and also on a personal level. The fact that Byron Shire Council had committed to implement the recommendations of the CSP is rare (none of the other cases I researched had a similar level of commitment). The fact that Council had also undertaken a second community solutions panel looking at increased shared decision making further reiterated the value that Council perceived to have arisen from this type of process. Not every panellist was happy with the outcome of the CSP, with some highlighting the limited impact the values might have or feeling like it was a missed opportunity. However, the majority of the people I interviewed were able to describe a positive

outcome of the process, with many people describing positive personal outcomes such as increased confidence and civic engagement.

Whilst it is well known that the built environment, including public infrastructure, is a major determinant of health and health equity, it was not clear from my research to what extent the CSP would affect the health and wellbeing of residents in Byron Shire. Increased public engagement, particularly engagement that has the potential to be empowering for participants is also theorised to improve health equity, but again, this was not an outcome identified from this research. The potential impact processes like the CSP can have towards improving health equity will be further explored through my thesis.

References

BYRON SHIRE COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS PANEL 2018. Byron Shire community solutions panel: What infrastructure spending should we prioritise, and how should we fund these priorities if the rates alone are not enough? Final Report.

BYRON SHIRE COUNCIL. *Byron Shire Population and Dwellings* [Online]. Available: https://profile.id.com.au/byron/population [Accessed 20 May 2021].

BYRON SHIRE COUNCIL nd. Our Byron our future: Delivery program 2017-2021 (revised) and Operational plan 2018-2019.

ESCOBAR, O. & ELSTUB, S. 2017. Forms of Mini-publics: An introduction to deliberative innovations in democratic practice. *Research and Development Note 4.* newDemocracy.