

Executive summary

This report provides an assessment of the pilot electronic democracy project undertaken at Darebin City Council during 2004. The *Darebin eForum* provided Council staff and Darebin residents the opportunity to discuss policy related issues via electronic mail in a structured manner which allowed the Council to summarise topics of interest and concern to feed into pre-existing decision-making processes.

Based on research conducted with participants during the pilot project, a number of conclusions can be drawn regarding the value and future viability of the online forum. These are:

- The pilot project did not attract a wide number of participants from outside of the Council organisation and participants reflected a relatively narrow slice of the diversity within the City of Darebin. Overall, the average eForum participant was a forty-year-old English speaking, educated, and computer literate woman in full time employment. These participants tended to exhibit characteristics that would classify them as “joiners” who tend to be in well-developed social and work networks, and tend to have a consociational and communitarian outlook, who would therefore be attracted to discussion lists of this type. This finding indicates that the work of recruitment for the eForum of residence of the city needs to be a priority for future iterations or implementations of this concept.
- The selection of topics for discussion on the eForum allowed discussion to develop amongst the list participants, even where some topics were outside of the specific knowledge for interest of members. This was advantageous in the development of an active group of participants as topics were inclusive of participation across a number of levels. The selection of topics, however, may have been overly broad and fail to deliver instrumental outcomes either to participating staff members with responsibility for policy development, or a reasonable minority of non-staff list participants who focus their interest on local government with regards to the delivery of very specific service-oriented outcomes. While the broad nature of discussion topics was seen as favoured by senior managers in the Council organisation, it would appear that list participants require a mixture of broad, generalised discussion topics and specific topics that can deliver short-term policy outcomes.
- Given the instrumental view of the *raison d’etre* of the eForum, it would appear that this online consultation forum needs to be positioned clearly within the formal policy-making process of the Council, and consideration be given to the structural position the project team occupies in the Council institution. Should the instrumental motivation of some list participants (both Council employees and general members of the community) be accommodated, failure to situate the online consultation method within the formal Council governance policy will undermine ordered policy making processes and structures leading to tensions and invariable conflict over the acceptable role for the eForum.
- Given the relatively new and innovative nature of the pilot there was a degree of uncertainty expressed by Council staff about the expectations of their participation in the online arena. For some, this precluded participation (and should therefore be seen as problematic), while others identified a clear distinction between professional and personal participation. Overall, the Council need to determine a set of professional expectations and guidelines for staff to encourage and facilitate their participation in future online consultation or discussion fora.

Overall, the pilot project has demonstrated that the online discussion list represents an interesting addition to local government community engagement strategies, and that the approach taken in the pilot project was viable and sustainable over time. Should the City of Darebin continued to invest in online consultation, it is recommended that the organisation considered the structural and



technical basis upon which this area of expertise will be sustained, maintained, and promoted over time.

Introduction

This report was prepared by Dr Peter Chen, on behalf of the City of Darebin to provide an assessment of the pilot application of their electronic democracy experiment conducted during 2004: the *Darebin eForum*. This report complements an internal document prepared by the project team (*Darebin eForum Pilot Project Report*) and should be read in conjunction with that document. The associated document contains a review of the internal processes, motivations, objectives, and management of the eForum, and, as such, this document focuses on an assessment of the policy-related value of the forum and internal issues associated with the management of the project, and its position in the political decision-making process of the Council.

This report focuses on the following research topics:

- An assessment of the characteristics of users and participants of the eForum;
- An evaluation of the perceived value of the forum by council officers, and;
- An examination of the relationship between the forum and senior decision-makers in the Council.

This report is based on primary research conducted within the City of Darebin, as a pro bono service.

Electronic democracy and decision-making

The introduction of new communications technologies, such as the Internet, has been associated with the potential to increase public participation in the Democratic process (Davis, 1999:4-5). The Internet, as a two-way medium, provides a number of advantages to political participation (Casey, 1996):

- Ease of publication of written material at low-cost;
- Select media characteristics (the ability to target specific groups, multiple presentation of the same primary data);
- Interactivity;
- The ability to combine static and dynamic media forms (multimedia);
- Advanced storage and search capacities, and;
- The ability to apply data-processing technologies to collected information.

Because of these advantages, the Internet has been considered useful for:

- Voting and polling;
- Information distribution;
- “Social networking” – the ability to establish virtual or physical communities of interest (Trippi, 2004:84);
- Alternative, or- small-press publishing;
- Building social capital, and;
- Online consultation and deliberation.

This final point has been the area of practice that many governments (including local government) have focused upon, recognising either a deficit in public participation or normative desires to increase community involvement in political decisions (Norris, 2001:95). Online consultation and collaboration takes a wide variety of forms including simple presentation of plans or proposed



decisions for informal feedback to highly structured consultation processes driven by well-developed methodologies and software (Latta, 2003:7-8).

To date the value of these forms of participation have been questioned (Bimber, 1998). Areas of concern include:

- The representative nature of participation, particularly around linguistic differences in communities and differential access to information communication technologies;
- The cost of establishing software platforms for administering online consultation;
- Legal risks, such as defamation and privacy;
- Political concerns, such as “hijacking” deliberation forums by minority interests;
- Difficulties determining the identity of participants in the online discussions, and;
- Wider concerns about the value of general public consultation in specialised policy areas.

Overall however, it should be noted that there are a number of drivers behind the increased adoption of new communications technologies to political and policy decision-making processes which invariably encourage experimentation in electronic democracy activities (Chen, Roberts, and Gibson, 2002). These are:

- Static, or in some cases declining, levels of public participation in decisions that directly affect their lives;
- Increasing use of new media technologies in the general public for a variety of non-political purposes leading to increased expectations that political processes will have the capacity to be accessed online;
- Changing work and lifestyle patterns that limit some people’s capacity to participate in political processes during formal work hours;
- The accessibility and managers do people with decreased mobility, either due to disability or other social commitments (carers), and;
- The potential to improve decision-making through the automation of information processing or storage.

Electronic democracy and local government

The adoption of electronic democracy in local government around the world has not as yet been extensive. Internationally, electronic democracy tends to be a phenomenon of first world countries, with some exceptions. Local government electronic democracy examples include:

- Extensive use of the Internet is to publish policy and related information;
- Distribution of video material via the Internet of council meetings;
- Internet voting (predominantly in the United Kingdom and parts of Canada);
- Interactive planning “games” to develop alternative planning proposals, or as educative tools, and;
- Online discussion lists.

The use of online discussion lists by local government has taken a variety of forms, examples include:

- Highly structured ad hoc discussion lists used to support specific offline consultation activities;
- General, and bulletin board style threaded discussion systems that allow participants freedom to initiate, and participate in conversations of interest to list members, and;
- Structured, ongoing discussions based around specific policy topics or local issues.



The Darebin eForum represents an example of the last type, the objectives of this model include:

- Establishment of an ongoing group of participants with shared interest in local government issues;
- Instrumental focus on policy outcomes (justifying the structured nature of the discussion), and;
- Deliberate use of moderation to minimise political and legal risks to the Council.

Research methodology

The primary objective of the research was to examine the value of the pilot project to a variety of stakeholders involved in either the forum directly, or indirectly. Overall, the research focused on determining the relationship between participation on the forum and policy processes within the Council. In addition the research aims to provide some conclusions with regards to the sustainability of the pilot project in terms off participant interest and organisational management.

Three specific research methods were employed in this project:

- An online survey of list participants was conducted to determine:
 - The characteristics of list members,
 - Motivation for participation, and
 - The degree of political efficacy exhibited by the participants.
- A focus group and interviews with members of the forum, to determine:
 - What value, if any, they gained from participation,
 - Concerns, or criticisms, about the operation of the forum, moderation, selected topics, or outputs/outcomes,
 - The relationship between participation on the forum and the role of Council officers,
 - The impact of discussions on the policy work of Council, and
 - Recruitment and promotional issues.
- Interviews with senior counsel decision-makers, including the Chief Executive Officer and Mayor.

Overall, this represents a standard triangulated social research methodology, and was developed in consultation with the project team.

Research limitations

In actioning the methodology outlined above, the research encountered one significant limitation: difficulty accessing non-council staff as research participants. In the initial research design it was envisaged that significant participation in the research project would be solicited from general members of the community who were participants of the forum. While a number of attempts were made to recruit this target group to participate in the online survey and focus groups, this was not possible to achieve high levels of participation in the research project. Thus, the participants' survey included only 38% of respondents from this group, while no general members of the community were willing to participate in the qualitative component of the study (interviews and focus group).

Clearly, this represents a significant research limitation which should be considered in reading this report. This low level of participation should also be interpreted to provide the following observations about online consultation participation:

- Low interest in participating in the research component of the pilot project can be interpreted as reflecting relatively low levels of involvement (personal interest and psychological investment) in the eForum. Had the forum developed high levels of



participant commitments to the community, it would be likely that participation in the research component of the pilot process would be higher. While this could be interpreted in a very negative manner, it should be noted that participation levels in the forum remained relatively static over time (see: *Darebin eForum Pilot Project Report*), thus not negating the value of the forum to participants by indicating that levels of commitment by participants remaining an area of concern that will need to be monitored at a time, should the pilot continue all be replaced with a permanent online consultation process;

- The capacity for the researcher make additional requests to forum participants for contributions to the research component were limited by the initial forum rules that stated only one request for participation would be made to members of the list. This decision was made on the grounds of ensuring participants were free from harassment, however this policy decision may need to be reviewed in future iterations of the forum to ensure that more meaningful research can be conducted sure the pilot continue, and;
- Positively, the unwillingness of forum participants to engage in face to face research reiterates the value of the online environment to this target group. Given that forum participants were unwilling to attend a focus group or interview but maintained their level of participation on the discussion list indicates that this target group may be very difficult to recruit for consultations offline.

Key research findings

Given the limitations of the research method, as outlined above, the key research findings are restricted to the following topics:

- Characteristics of list participants;
- The policy-making value of topics selected for discussion;
- Relationship between the pilot project and policy-making in Darebin;
- The relationship between the project team and other organizational units, and;
- The role of Council staff as list participants.

Characteristics of list participants

One of the initial points of interest in any evaluation of new consultation methodologies is the degree to which these communication channels allow un- or under-represented community segments to participate in policy deliberation processes. Based on that the survey of list members, a profile can be developed to show the characteristics of members of the eForum.

In general terms, while approximately 50% of the eForum membership was comprised of Council staff during the pilot process, the eForum represented a relatively homogenous community. When aggregate (composite) responses to the online survey are compared with a subset of the survey results from non-employees of the Council, survey results show that the eForum represented a group of largely female, middle-aged, English-speaking¹, educated, and computer literate group (see figures one, below; and A10 and B9 in Appendix A and B).

It is worthwhile noting from figure one the particular gender bias of participation on the discussion list. While public employment does tend towards a higher proportion of female participation², the disproportionately large number of women participating in the discussion list is an interesting finding. One respondent to the interviews did make the observation that political participation

¹ 100% of respondents indicated that English was the primary language spoken in their home.

² 59.6% of Darebin staff are women (City of Darebin, 2003).



differences between men and women, with women more likely to be attracted to a conversational style of policy oriented deliberation than men. Overall, it would appear that gender differences in participation is an interesting element of this research outcome that should be further investigated in further comparative analysis of consultation.

Figure 1: Age, Gender

	Composite	Non-Employees	Composite		Non-Employees		
			Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	
average	40.3	41.83	Female	24	77.41	9	75
SD	9.24	9.66	Male	7	22.58	3	25
<i>n</i>	30	12	<i>n / %</i>	31	100%	12	100%

Importantly, reflecting the argument that asynchronous (not real-time) discussion list are of value to time poor individuals, the results of figure two indicate that the majority of those non-employees participating in the eForum were engaged in full-time work or study. The innovative nature of the pilot project did attract a number of participants in the discussion list to word from other local government organisations, however overall modest non-employee participants on the discussion list were residents of the city.

Figure 2: Employment Status

Employment Status	Composite		Non-Employees	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Full time employment	24	77.41	8	66.66
Part time employment	6	19.35	3	25
Student	1	3.22	1	8.33
Retiree	0	0	0	0
Not working	0	0	0	0
Unemployed	0	0	0	0
<i>n / %</i>	31	100	12	100

Figure 3: Residency Status

Residency Status	Composite		Non-Employees	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Residents	16	51.61	7	63.63
Non-residents	15	48.38	5	36.36
<i>n / %</i>	31	100	11	100

In addition to these basic demographic statistics, an additional objective of the survey was to determine the perspective of those members of the discussion list with regards to do the nature of local government (as a political entity), their levels of political efficacy (personal sense of ability to influence policy outcomes; Langton and Karns, 1969), and levels of social capital (Putnam, 1995) in terms of the characteristics of list participants as “joiners” or people who are generally not involved in civic organisations. The rationale underpinning this aspect of the research design was:

- To determine what were the surface and core (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993) motivations behind participation, particularly by members of the public;
- To determine if the eForum attracted participants who are normally disconnected from mainstream cortical processes, and;
- To understand where list sit within local community networks.



With regards to the motivation for participation on the eForum, figures A2 and B1 show that list participants generally indicate their participation was motivated by general curiosity and a desire to be appraised of local issues. Thus, at the surface level, we can see that membership was not motivated by any specific motivation to instrumentally affect council decisions through this medium. While this may indicate that membership commitment to the list was somewhat shallow, non-employee respondents to the survey identified in figures B4 and B5 a recognition that policymaking is not simply achieved through formal structures like elections and the holding of official office, and almost universally agreed that policy processes are not a zero-sum game – indicating a communitarian outlook in line with consensus decision-making values. What this means is that, while stated motivations for this participation were generalised concerns and interests in information and awareness of local political issues, this participants demonstrate characteristics that would indicate commitments to consensus decision-making that are fostered in consultative fora.

When considering the characteristics of eForum and their generalised engagement in other policy making processes, the demographic figures listed above combined with the findings in figure B6 would indicate that non-employee participants would appear to be well placed to realise their political interests through existing council structures: both employees and non-employee participants report that they have a high or very high understanding of Council decision-making processes. While this finding could be interpreted as indicating a somewhat redundant audience is being attracted to the eForum, figure B3 indicates that non-employee respondents to the survey have limited belief in their personal capacity to influence decision-making in government. These two findings show that, while the discussion list participants have a good understanding of policy processes, they feel that these processes deliver limited outcomes with regards to their political interests. Working within the theory of political efficacy, which argues that participation and the achievement of political outcomes are interrelated, this finding would indicate that these respondents would generally be disengaged from alternative political communications channels.

Finally, with regards to the tendency of participants to the members of other civic associations, we can see that for both employees and non-employee respondents figures A8 and A7 show that participants on the discussion lists have classic “joiner” behaviours: list members tend to be active participants in a range of other non-work related social, cultural, and political organisations and communities of interest. The implication that can be drawn from this finding is that these individuals are “central nodes” in social networks which gives a magnifier effect to the information pushed out from the council via the discussion list, as well as increasing the representative nature of communications drawn into the discussion list from these participants.

Overall, the data collected from the online survey provides the pilot with a mixed response to the question of broadening the representation of the community via the online channel. On the one hand, eForum participants reflect a relatively comfortable segment of the community, in terms of interest in, understanding of, and potential to influence council policymaking. On the other, the low levels of political efficacy demonstrated by non-employee respondents combined with their strong centrality in social networks would indicate that the pilot project has touched on an aspect of the community that maybe not well serviced by existing political structures. Overall, should the pilot continue further work will need to be done to expand this base and determine if participation in the discussion list has an effect on levels of efficacy.



The policy-making value of topics selected for discussion

One particular area of interest for any evaluation of the eForum has been the relationship between the topics selected for discussion and concrete policy outcomes within the City of Darebin. Any evaluation of an online discussion list must separate out factors associated with the specific technical nature of the medium (the use of electronic mail as the mode for communication with all its inherent characteristics) and the content of messages communicated.

For the pilot process seven topics were selected for discussion which were considered to be of relevance to list participants and could be supported by initial briefing material provided to the discussion list and generated by Council employees. The topics selected for the pilot were:

- Community Adversity and Resilience,
- Family Violence,
- Alternative Medicine,
- Access to Parks,
- Melbourne 2030,
- Sustainable Home, and
- Improve Public Transport.

Based on the interviews conducted with Council staff, a number of conclusions can be drawn regarding the nature and utility of the topics included in the pilot process. At the broadest level, many participants felt that the selection of topics that were brought in nature was advantageous in facilitating discussion amongst list participants. Each of the topics in question can be seen to have both broad (strategic) and narrow (specific) characteristics which allow participants to select “a comfortable level” of participation. As list participants could engage with most of the topics at different levels this stimulated the “conversational” characteristics of the list. This finding is important as the longevity of discussion lists such as this are dependent on the establishment of a shared community of interest which increases levels of psychological involvement in participation (Romm and Pliskin, 1998).

Alternatively, the broad nature of the discussions presents positive and negative outcomes with regards to the instrumental objectives commonly associated with community consultation processes. While the eForum was a pilot project, and in some way isolated from wider and formal policy making processes within the City (see discussion below), Council decision makers had two different perspectives on the value of broad policy oriented conversations:

- On the one hand, senior decision makers, such as the Mayor or CEO, appreciated broad policy-oriented discussions as a mechanism by which the Council can advance strategic level policy objectives. A classic example of this was raised by Mr. Shanahan with regards to the relationship between the Melbourne 2030 plan and perennial disputation over land use issues. For him, the advantage of broad discussions around these issues feed into a process of community education, consensus building, and the development of “mandates” for action. This view was also supported by others within the senior management team.
- On the other hand, general staff within the Council, and some policy specialists, found the general nature of discussion somewhat limiting. While most participants agreed that the list was useful in developing a general understanding of issues (interview: Kate Myers; Focus Group Participant 1), many of the council staff with responsibility for policy development expressed concerns that the level of discussion was too broad and uninformed to provide specific concrete outcomes to feed into their policy-making functions.



Overall, this last finding should be considered seriously in any review of the future of this project. While the general survey of eForum participants (as outlined in appendices A and B) illustrates that list participants tend towards political values that except and support consociational-style political engagement, most of the interviewees and focus group participants did express relatively instrumental objectives in participating on the list related to their employment with the Council. In addition, survey results from non-staff list participants indicates that (figure B2) a sizeable minority of list participants do see the primary focus of local government as the delivery of specific services. What this means is that, with regards to maintaining participation by both staff and non-staff members over time, topics that are selected for discussion on the list will need to provide medium and short-term policy outcomes to satisfy the instrumental objectives of a reasonable proportion of list members.

Thus, future iterations of this concept will need to develop a structure which allows topics to be introduced that focus on macro- and micro-policy concerns. This point is taken up in the next section.

Relationship between the pilot project and policy-making in Darebin

Given that the eForum was a pilot project, it is unsurprising that this communication channel remained somewhat disconnected from formal policy processes within the City. However, given the finding above it is important to note that future development of this concept will need to be considered with regards to the way information and deliberation conducted online will form part of formal policy processes.

This finding is made for a number of reasons:

- First, if ongoing participation by a reasonable proportion of list members is dependent on the achievement of short- or medium-term policy outcomes (to sustain and maintain efficacy). The relationship between the eForum and established policy processes will be strengthened. Partially, this is because basic dialogue between staff and members of the community through an online channel that is not open to wider participation (e.g. those members of society who are unfamiliar or uninterested in using email and online systems of communication) can be seen to be undemocratic nature, and privileging those with the interest, time, and/or resources to access the Internet. In addition, the interactive nature of this channel does mean that drawing decisions from the eForum will provide poor strategic outcomes. This was apparent to both senior managers who wish to avoid *ad hoc* micro-level decision-making in this way (interview: Kevin Breen), but also was a concern to junior staff members (focus group participants 2 and 3) who saw that this channel could simply become a system which dictates their ongoing work schedule.
- Second, while the eForum did articulate a particular object, namely increased and improved dialogue between council staff and general members of the public, some interviewees did express concerns that the objectives of the discussion list were either unclear, or not sufficiently well articulated. Mr Breen has suggested that that he is uncomfortable with the connotation that the eForum is considered “electronic democracy”, giving rise to an assumption that this forms a decision-making, rather than a consensus-building tool. Mr Williamson, himself well versed with consultation methodologies, was uncertain as to the aims and objectives of the project: if the eForum was simply a professional discussion list then he was unconvinced as to the value it added to the overarching nature of community engagements within the City.
- Third, should the eForum remain disconnected from formal policy processes its use unlikely that the system will be recognised as an important tool (but one among many) of community



consultation and engagement within the Council organisation. Overall, without a clear indication of specific outcomes drawn from the discussion list, a number of council staff may be unlikely to continue participation over time. At present, many of the staff interviewees indicated that their participation was specifically based around their work duties and interests, and their participation in the discussion was largely only limited by time pressures associated with the work. Clearly, these forms of communication will require demonstrated and specific outcomes with regards to the work of Council participants, something that requires this form of community consultation to be integrated within the emerging *Governing Darebin* strategy.

Overall, therefore, if the project is to move beyond the pilot stage, the continued viability of the concept will require that it be more closely integrated with formal policy development processes – both to demonstrate value to participants with instrumental motivation for membership, but also to justify participation by council staff as a meaningful element of their work duties. It should be noted, however, that this finding remains somewhat formative: given the short duration of the pilot project to date it is unclear how the deliberations have fed into the work of participating staff with policymaking functions and the deliberations of relevant reference groups for whom summaries of discussions have been generated.

Relationship between the project team and other organizational units

One subsidiary finding related to the discussion above requires consideration of the relationship between the work of the project team and other organizational units within the City of Darebin. It should be recognised that consultation within the city takes a wide variety of forms. These include face-to-face meetings between Council staff or Councillors and the public, *ad hoc* submissions, surveys, paid focus groups, and deliberative meetings between Council and community organisations. The use of online communication tools provides alternative methodologies to conventional consultation methods, but can also be seen as yet another communications channel to facilitate conventional, well-established, and well understood social research methods.

In interviews with Council staff who have specific expertise in consultation methods, it appears that the eForum remained disconnected from their conceptualisation of other consultation tools (interview: Libby Hynes and David Williamson). As the Council develops greater expertise and understanding of the cost, benefits, and limitations of online consultation tools, the maintenance of a specific team around the eForum will present some limitations to the effective application of this approach to consultation. These limitations may include:

- “Ghettoisation” of the eForum outside of other areas of policy making,
- Limited awareness and participation in the eForum,
- Restricted learning by the project team through exposure to different areas of policy making, and
- Limited return from investments in systems and staff.

There are practical confines on the capacity of all policy making units of the Council to develop expertise across the wide range of available consultation processes. Mr Williamson has identified that Council uses a networking approach to sharing expertise about different consultation methods, with areas of expertise within the Council identified as such and used as professional references for staff who are intending to engage in particular consultation methods. This specialisation will be matched in the development of expertise in online consultation and participation methods. The relative newness of Internet-based consultation mean that the skills of online moderation will take



time to develop and are unlikely to be generalised across the organisation, and the development of a technical platform for online consultation will tend to be centralised in some way.

While this presents a barrier to distributing expertise in the use of online consultation throughout the organisation, the major problem will be recognition and integration of this channel in other consultation strategies and plans undertaken outside of the immediate work area of the eForum project team. For example, while the pilot project suffered from relatively static levels of participation, some of the participants had access to communities of interest that could have been incorporated into elements of the discussion but were unaware of the potential provided by the online consultation form (interview: Libby Hynes). One finding, therefore, of the research project is that the current structure of the project team within one specific area of the Council limited broad organisational learning about the potential provided by the medium. Should the council extend this project is further, consideration will need to be given to how the organisation will overcome this barrier.

Some alternative models include:

- The creation of a specific functional business unit based around an advanced version of the eForum platform that is tasked with increasing generalised organizational awareness of the range of functions that the online consultation method could be applied, and delivering online consultation solutions within broad consultation strategies undertaken by areas of the council;
- The creation of a cross organizational working group tasked with maintaining and developing this online consultation process; and/or
- The instigation of a formal promotional strategy for online consultation for relevant council staff.

Overall, it should be recognised that the variety of consultation strategies and needs within the Council organisation, combined with findings regarding the need to deliver short and long-term instrumental outcomes to different types of Council decision makers, would indicate that any further developments of the pilot process will need to consider the establishment of a technical system that supports a new wider variety of consultation methodologies. The technical approach taken within the pilot context (while appropriate for a pilot process) would be limited in the future due to the:

- ability of this system to be “scaled up” to handle large numbers of participants without overburdening the manual process of moderation,
- flexibility of the system to be incorporated within wider consultation strategies undertaken by the variety of policy-making units within the Council,
- capacity of the system to be used to run consultations with variable time requirements as well as multiple consultations in parallel which may be required as online consultation becomes more mainstream,
- integration of other components (such as multimedia or web-based polling), and
- broadening the capacity of non-staff to initiate topics for discussion.

This last point is particularly relevant, in that, while list participants were generally comfortable with the system of topic initiation, it is likely that any general discussion list maintained by the Council will need to become more self-maintaining overtime. Examples abound of online discussion systems (see, for example: <http://www.e-thepeople.org/>) that allow list members to initiate and rank the popularity of topics of conversation. This approach allows these discussion systems to be self-maintaining, but also allow an assessment of the popularity of different topics. Overall, the eForum maintained a relatively strict timeframe for discussion which, while ensuring



discussion and debate did not become stalled on any particular topic, will be problematic in the selection of future areas for deliberation and debate. Thus, it would appear that the need to consider the organisational needs of online consultation combined with a suitable structure for management. Organisationally, it is likely that this may require the creation of a more flexible platform to facilitate online consultation over time.

The role of Council staff as list participants

The final research finding that needs to be considered in reviewing the performance of, and future directions for, the eForum is the expectations and role of Council staff when they engage in these forms of online consultation. One topic that was raised by a large number of the interviewees was a degree of hesitancy in their participation online due to lack of clarity as to the organisational expectations of their participation in the eForum. This finding operates at number of levels.

For relatively junior staff who participated in the eForum, a number of interviewees and focus group participants were unclear as to the expectations of the Council organisation with regards to their participation online. While most staff identified their participation was motivated by their employment at the City of Darebin, and tended to participate in the discussion in areas of specific work expertise, most indicated that they were comfortable participating as either: an informed expert who provided specific information on topics discussed on the list, or as a general member of the community expressing their opinion or personal experience. Most indicated that they were unsure how to present themselves online, and some expressed caution about being perceived to be presenting organizational points of view in their participation on the list. Most staff took a clear view on what constituted “work” and “non-work” contributions and indicated where they felt themselves talking in an official capacity by including their work title in relevant messages to the list³.

While junior staff members were hesitant about how to present themselves online, both the CEO and Mayor also expressed reticence about participating actively. For Mayor Perry, the ability to “lurk” on the list represented a welcome alternative to other consultation forums where the presence as Mayor demands active participation. Similarly, Mr Shanahan was comfortable in only observing discussion amongst his staff and the community. Overall, both the Mayor and CEO felt that their organizational position is concluded active participation in the eForum, either because it would be seen to suppress debate and discussion (due to the intervention of an “authority figure”), or because their contribution would not be seen as genuine and interrupted the conversational nature of the list (e.g. that their contribution would be seen to be “well he would say that, wouldn’t he?”).

These findings indicate that participants, while somewhat uncertain about the extent to which they could participate in the eForum, did generally make professional and reasonable decisions about disclosure or the impact of their contribution on discussion. Overall, however, it would appear prudent that for future online consultations involving general and senior staff effort be taken to clarify the roles and expectations of people participating online. While constraints on the political activities of public servants tends to be well articulated at the Commonwealth and State government levels, the close relationship between staff, the public, and the political layer in the local government environment does create some uncertainties that could be exacerbated by the lack of specificity of role expectations in these processes⁴. Thus, it is recommended that, should the eForum continue beyond the pilot process, consideration be given to some form of guide to

³ With one exception where this designator appears to have been accidentally lost in the moderation process.

⁴ It should also be noted that a high proportion of council employees are also residents of the local area, who therefore have a political interest in the work and activities of their employer.



behaviour for council staff, not as a constraint upon participation but as a means to clarify this degree of uncertainty which would encourage greater participation from some council staff.

With regards to senior staff members or councillors, consideration may need to be given to a formal mechanism by which their participation can be facilitated in initial parts of the online consultation process to provide by background, context, and a degree of legitimacy to the process, but then turn over the discussion to wider participation in manner that does not close off genuine debate.

Determining an acceptable role for leadership figures (Senior Management Team, Councillors) in online discussions and consultations will be necessary over time, particularly should recruitment increase the scope of public participation to the level where these fora outstrip participation levels from community meetings (e.g. ward meetings)

Conclusion

Overall, this evaluation of the eForum pilot project has found that the online consultation process has provided a number of beneficial outcomes to the policy-making processes of the City of Darebin, and represents an interesting and self-reflective pilot project informing the organisation's use of new media in their governments practices. The results of the user survey and interviews indicate that there are a number of aspects of the current approach which should be considered in further developments of this technique. These include: a significant consideration of the relationship between online consultation and the organisational and political context in which it is situated, the level of participation and engagements of participants in the online discussion list, and the importance of developing a flexible technological platform that can support wider organizational objectives.

Given the significant limitations associated with this research (particularly around detailed qualitative information from non-staff list participants), a high degree of caution should be taken in considering the findings and recommendations included above. Any future iteration or implementation of the eForum concept should specifically include a concerted effort to gain detailed feedback from general members of the community. Overall, further development of online consultation within the City of Darebin and should be undertaken with the aim of developing a specific area of practice expertise based around online moderation, and the development of a flexible toolset for the delivery of a range of online consultation types tailored to the specific needs of different policy-making units within the Council.

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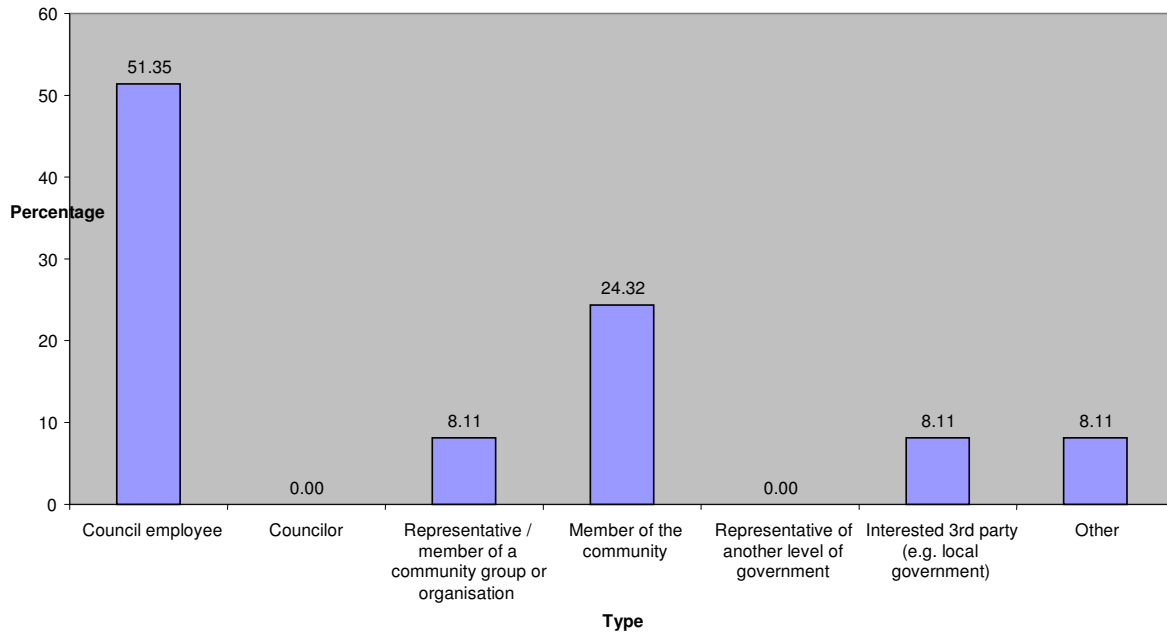


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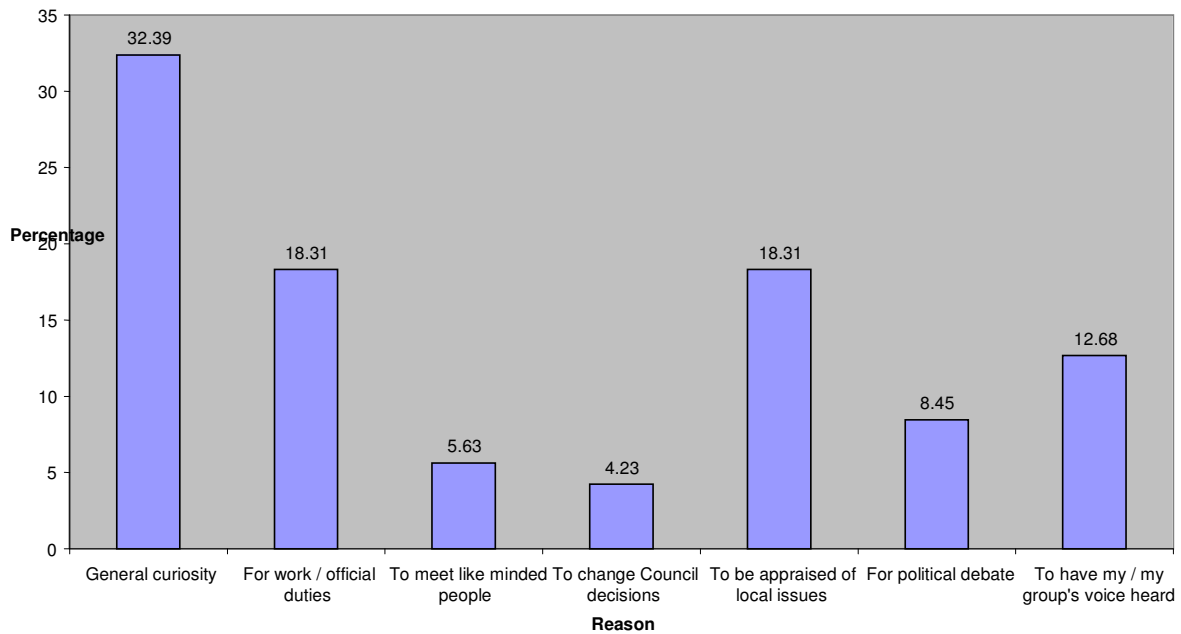


Appendix A: Survey Results: Composite

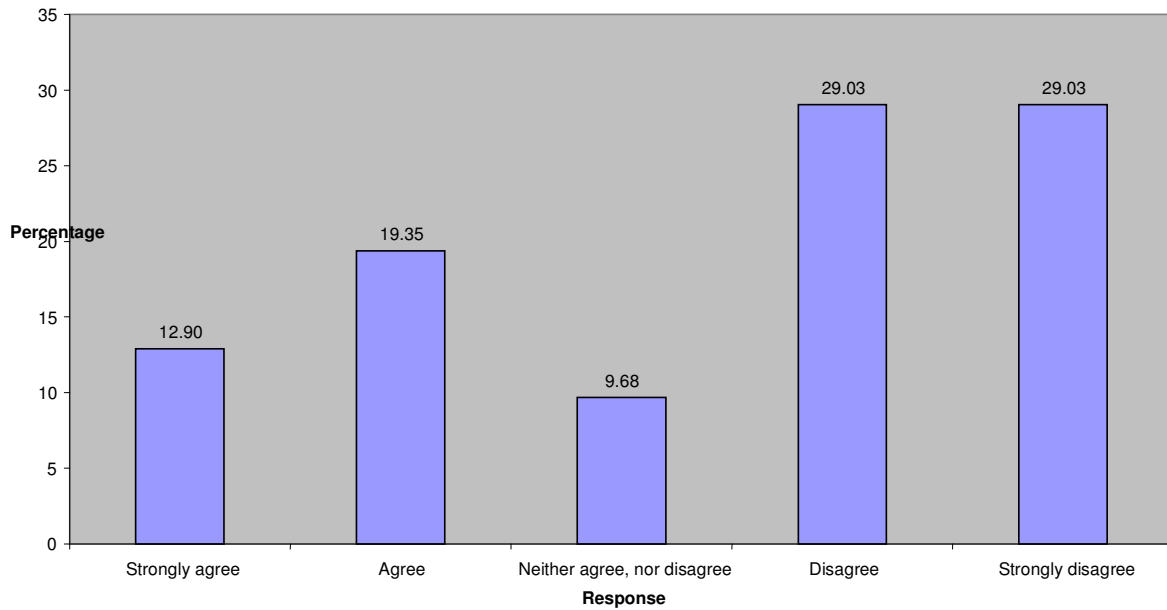
A1 Respondents, by Type



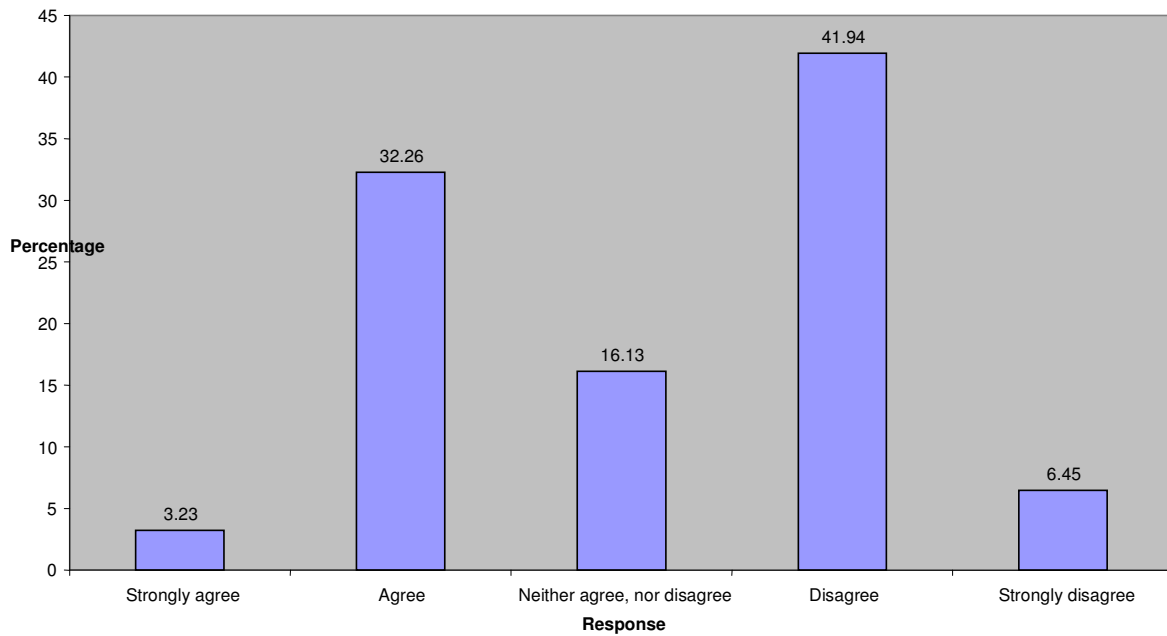
A2 Reasons for Participation



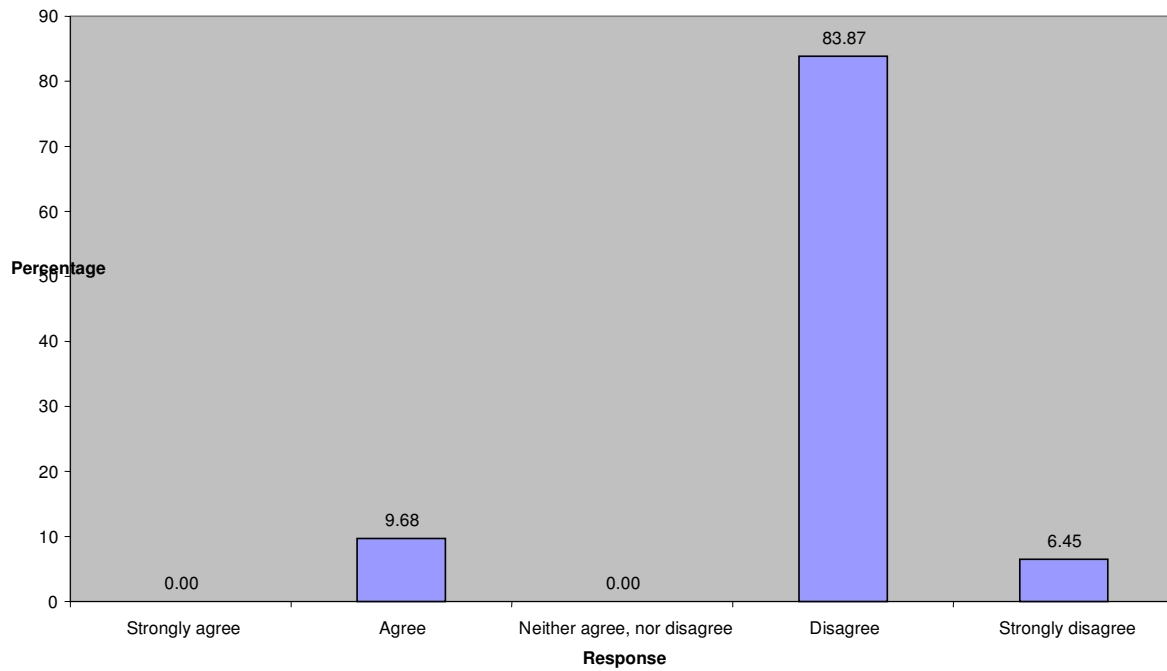
A3 "Local governments are primarily for the purposes of delivering services to the community, rather than having a representative or political function"



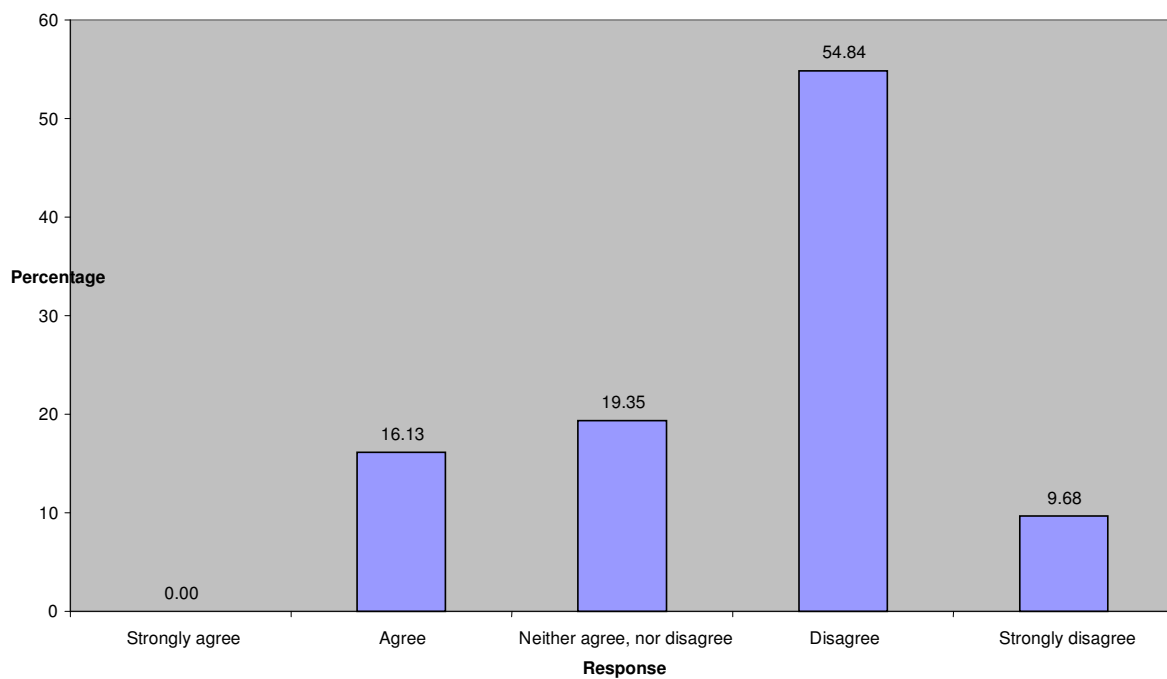
A4 "I have very little personal power to influence the decision making of government"



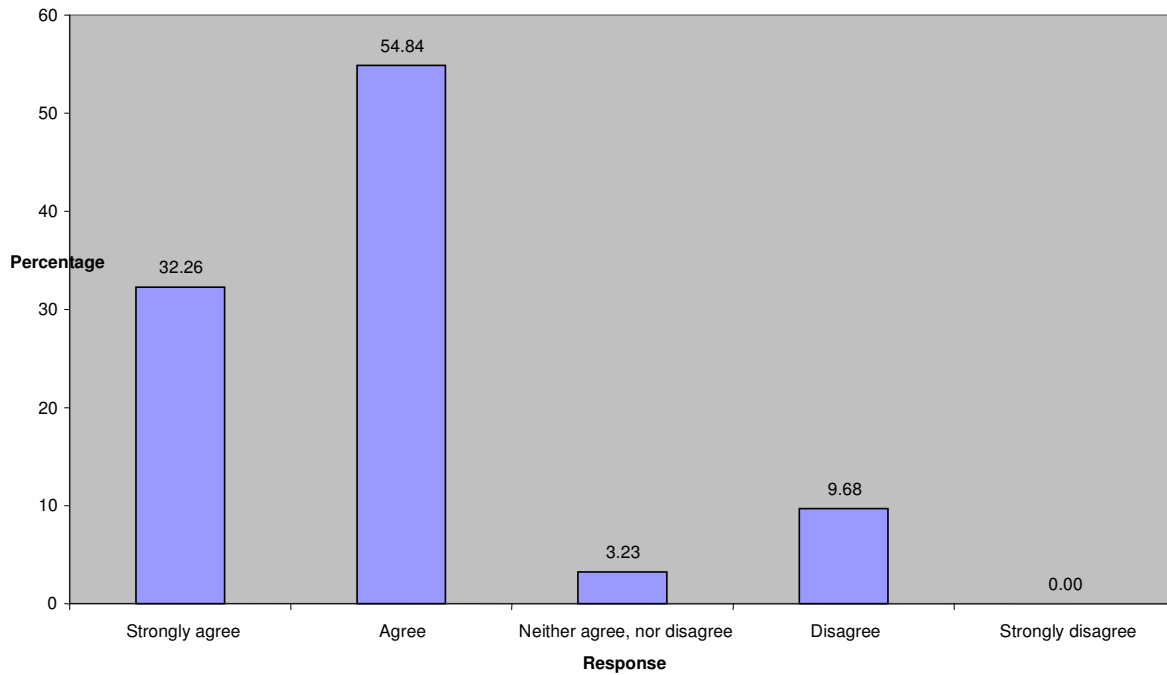
A5 "The only effective means to influence government decision making is to run for elected office"



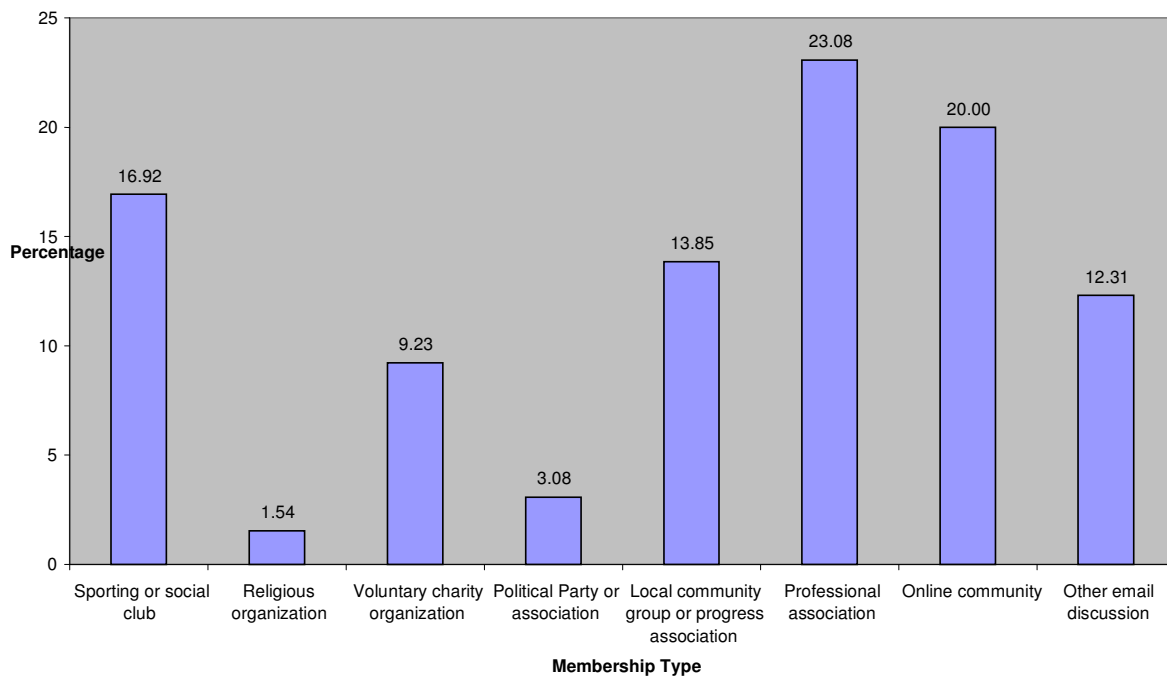
A6 "For one group in society to gain benefits from government, another group must loose some benefits"



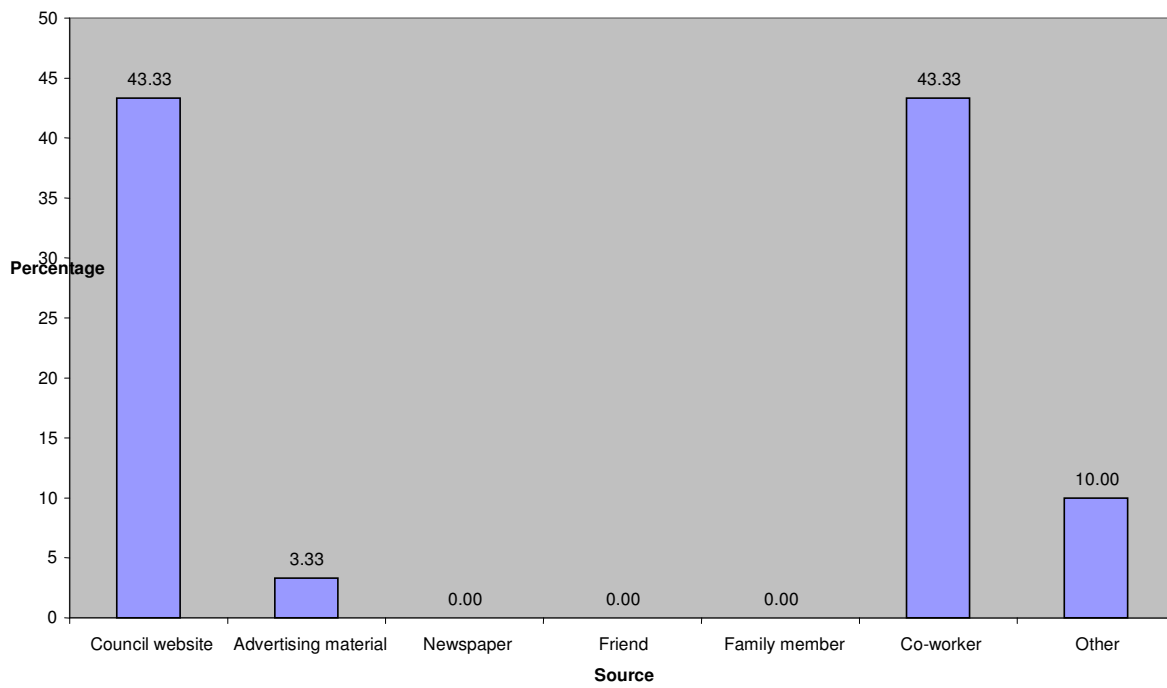
A7 "I have a very good understanding of the responsibilities of local government and how decisions are made in my municipality"



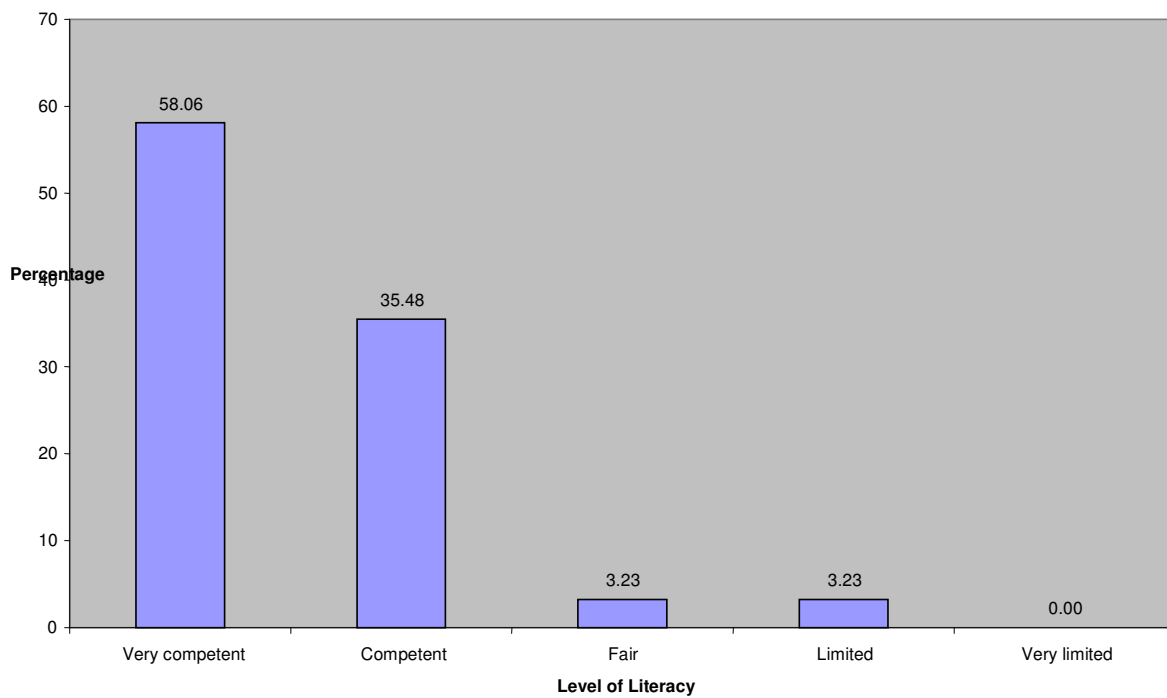
A8 Respondents, Other Memberships



A9 Recruitment Source

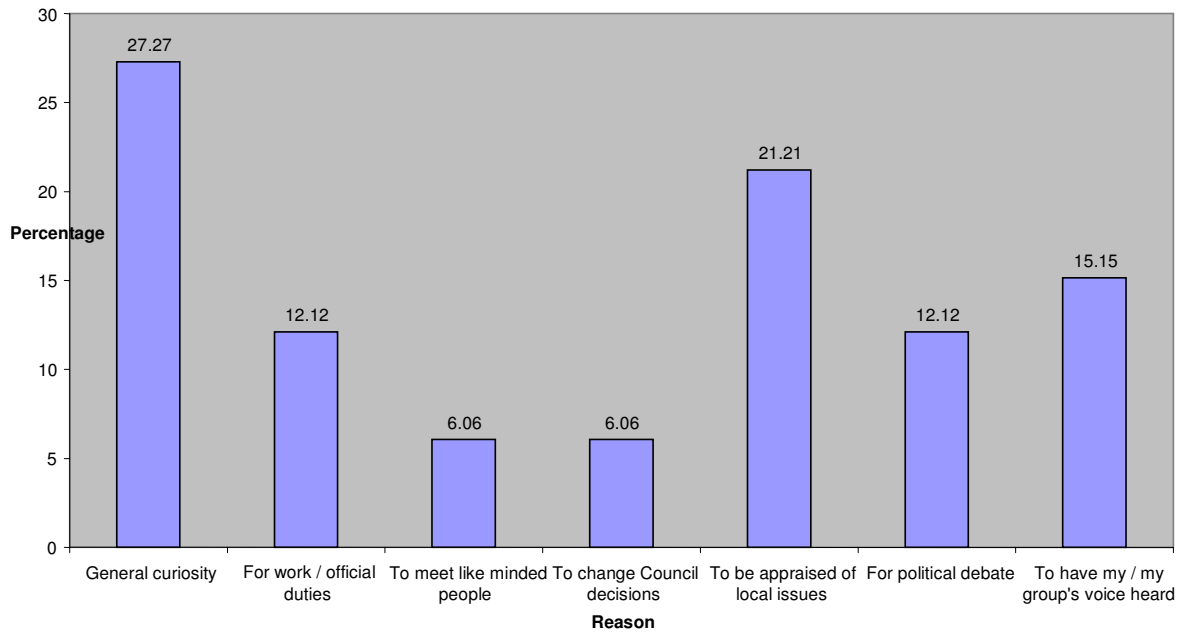


A10 Computer Literacy

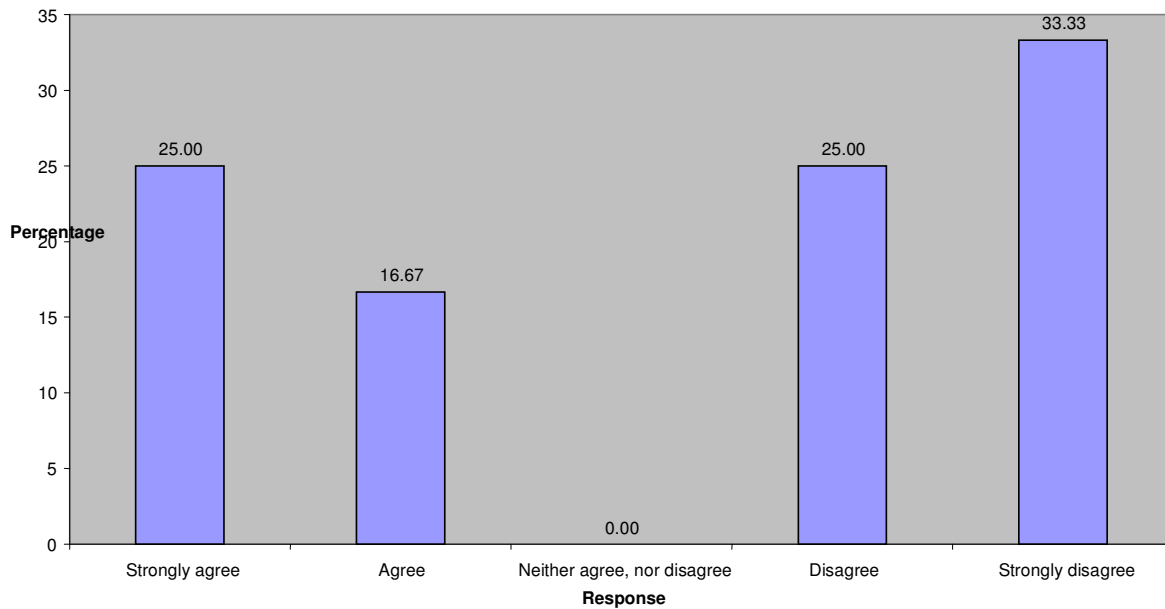


Appendix B: Survey Results: Non-Employee Respondents

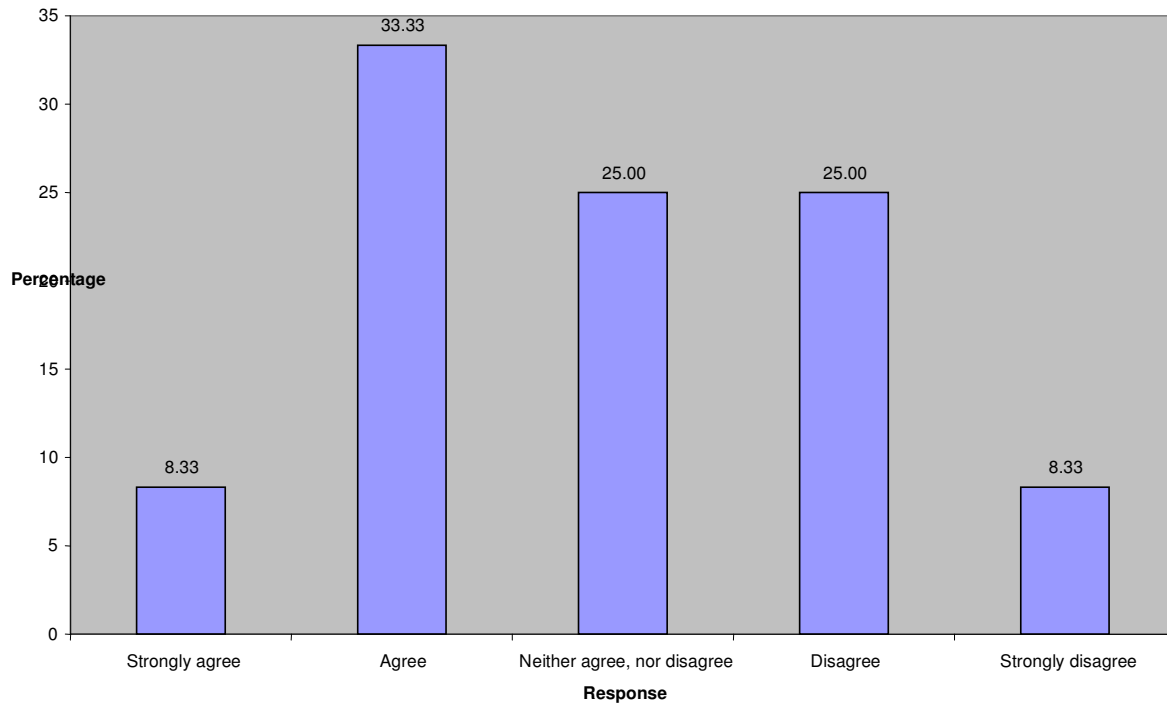
B1 Reasons for Participation



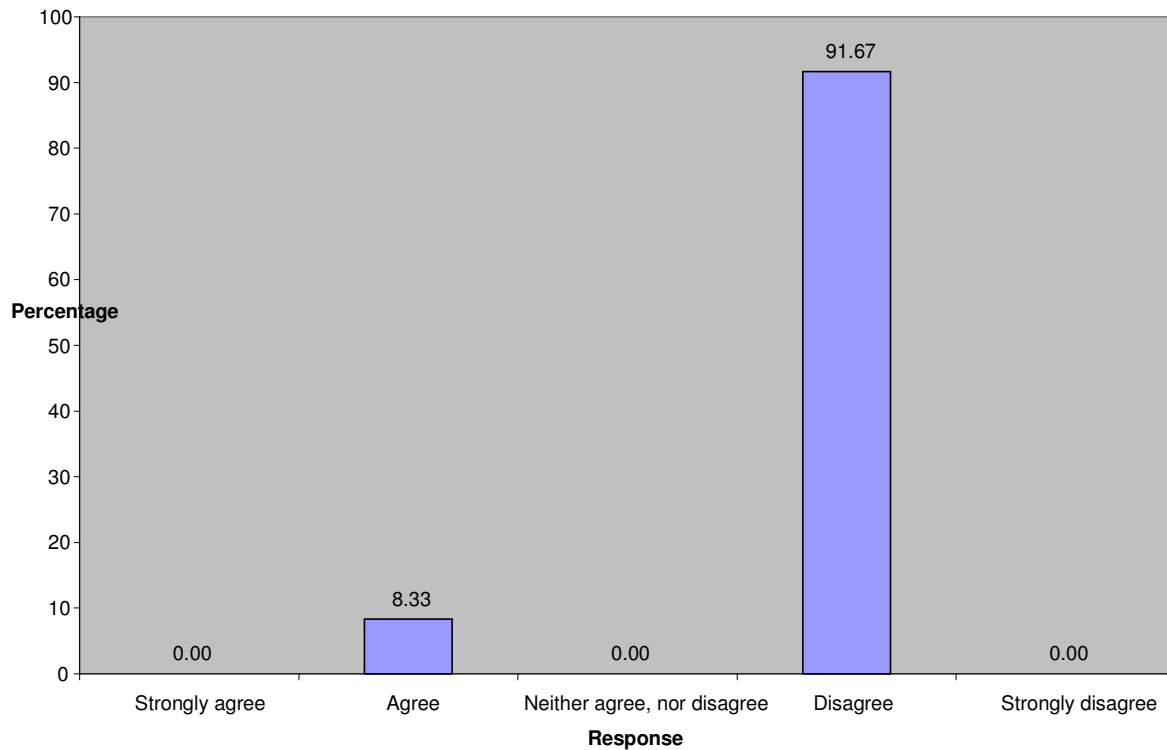
B2 "Local governments are primarily for the purposes of delivering services to the community, rather than having a representative or political function"



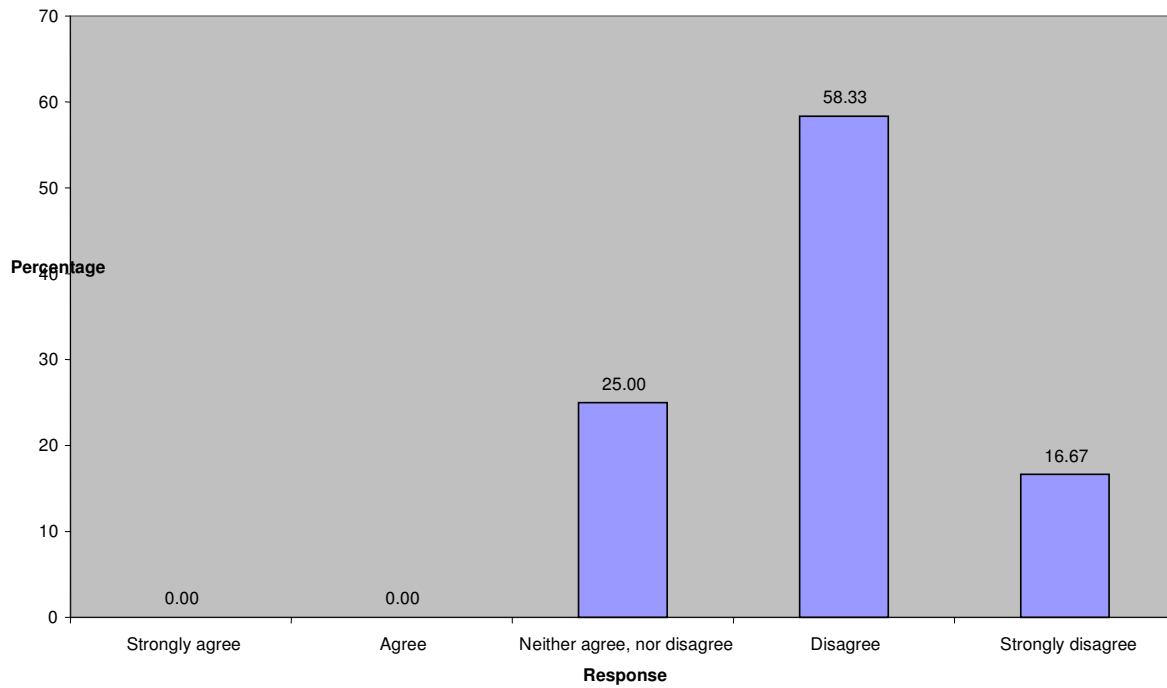
B3 "I have very little personal power to influence the decision making of government"



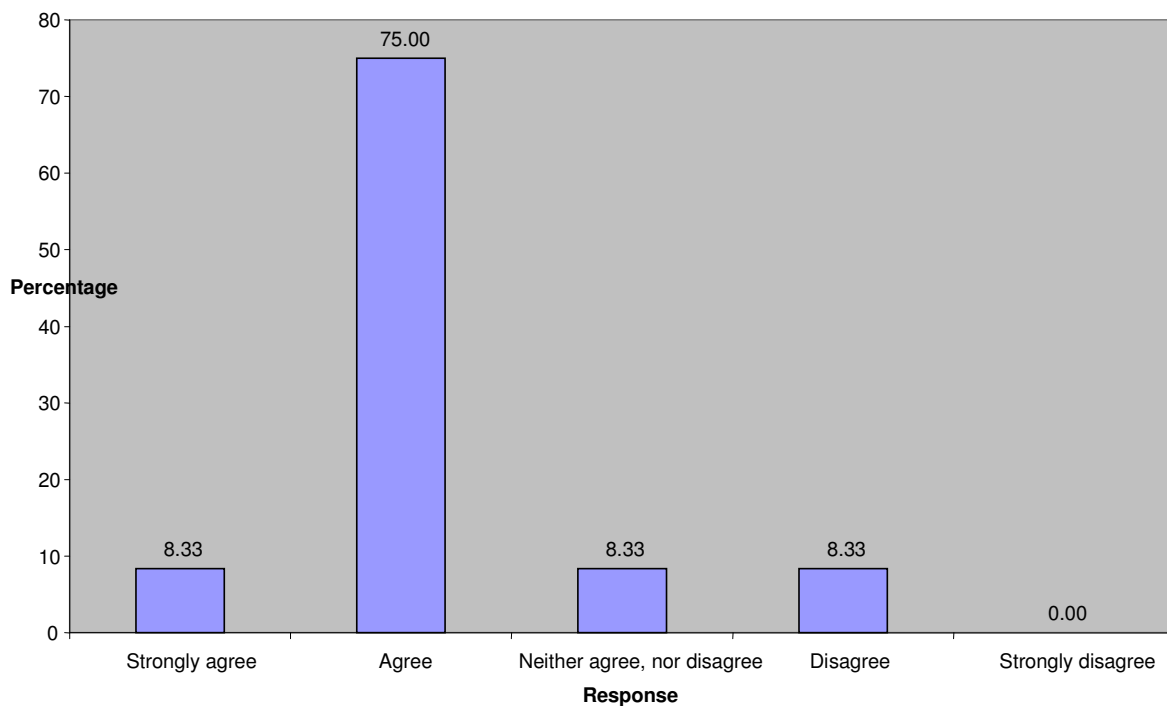
B4 "The only effective means to influence government decision making is to run for elected office"



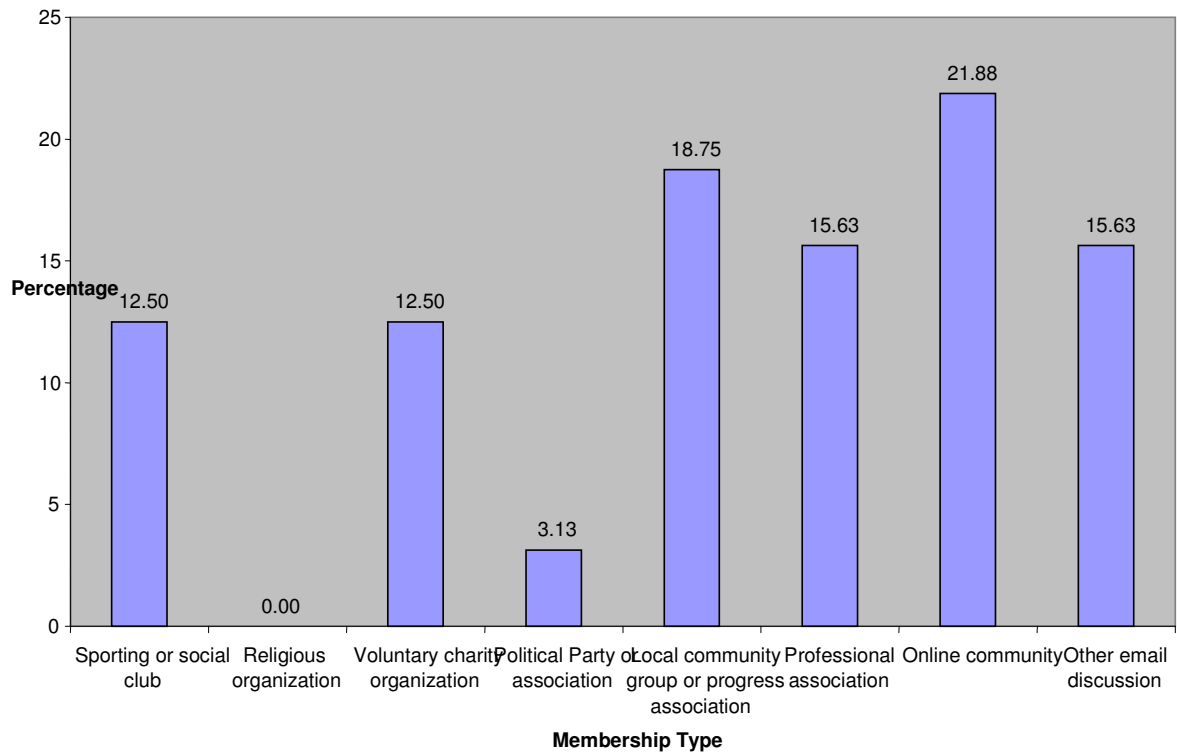
B5 "For one group in society to gain benefits from government, another group must lose some benefits"



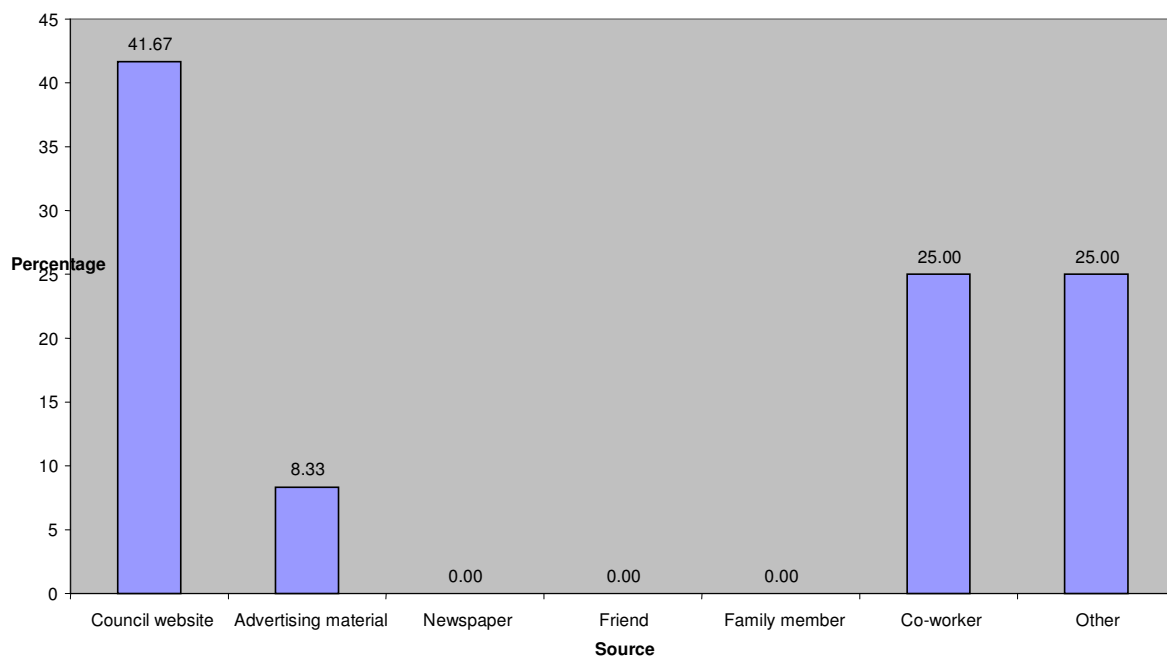
B6 "I have a very good understanding of the responsibilities of local government and how decisions are made in my municipality"



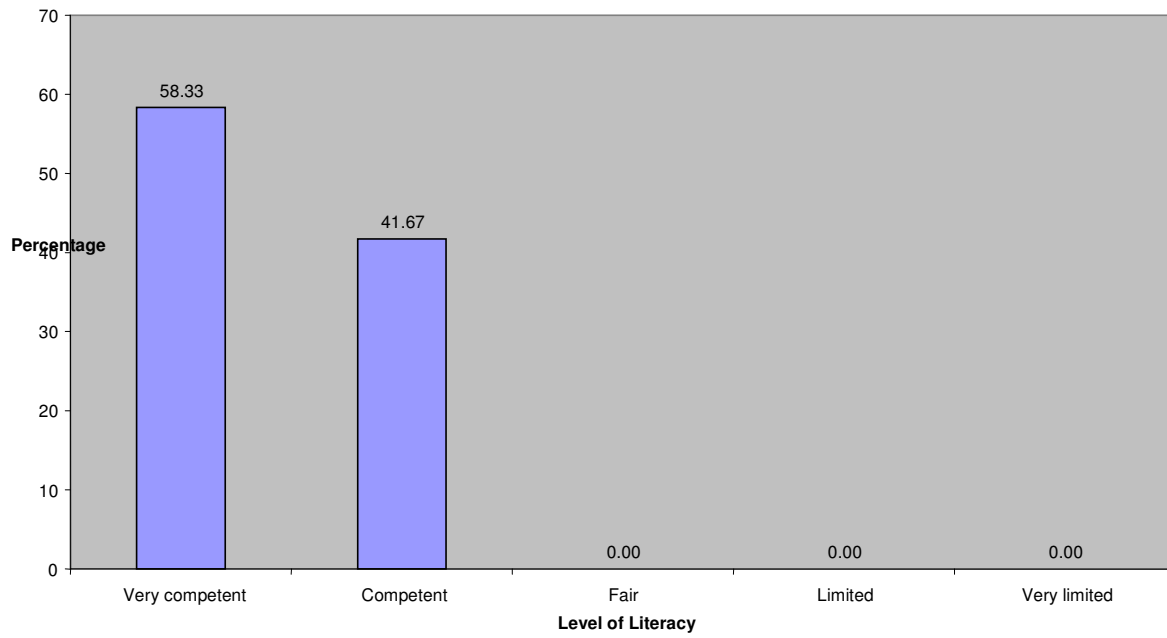
B7 Respondents, Other Memberships



B8 Recruitment Source



B9 Computer Literacy



Appendix C: List of Interviewees

Interviews conducted at the City of Darebin Offices (Preston) on the 21st July:

- Kevin Breen
 - General Manager of Strategy & Governance
- Libby Hynes
 - General Manager of Environment and Amenity
- Roderick McIvor
 - Manager of Community Planning and Advocacy
- Kate Myers
 - Sustainable Transport Officer
- Rae Perry
 - Mayor
- Philip Shanahan
 - Chief Executive Officer
- David Williamson
 - Community Safety Officer
- Focus group comprised of four staff members of the City of Darebin, referred to as “Focus Group Participants 1 though 4” conducted at the Northcote City Hall, 20th July





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