

# Federal Village Community-led Masterplan Evaluation Report

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## Methodology

### Aim

This is an evaluation of the community-led deliberative democracy process that was trialled in Federal, Byron Shire, NSW between 2020 and 2022.

The evaluation responds to the following project aim:

- to test community-led planning that could be a framework for other locations in the Shire going forward.

It aims to evaluate the process undertaken to deliver a masterplan document.

### Participants

In total 15 participants were invited to take part in the evaluation. The participants included the ten Steering Group members along with five members of Council staff. The Council staff involved included Place Planning staff, Manager Environmental and Economic Planning, Director Sustainable Environment and Economy, and the Infrastructure Planning Coordinator.

It should be noted that the members of the wider Federal community have already provided feedback with regard to the Federal Village Masterplan document itself.

### Design

The evaluation was of mixed method design that collected data through the following:

- an online survey delivered through Survey Monkey comprising qualitative and quantitative questions; and
- follow up interviews with all participants.

The evaluation has been designed by an external consultant, a representative of the Federal Masterplan Steering Group and Council staff. The interviews were conducted by experienced interviewers who were not involved in the process. The data has been analysed and the report written by a newly employed Council staff person who has not been involved in the masterplan in any way, under the supervision of the external consultant.

This two phased approach allowed participants to respond and expand on their survey feedback.

The mixed methods data collection strategy was an efficient approach that allowed for the data collected in one phase to contribute to the data collected in the next. Data collected in this design provided more information about results from the earlier phases of data collection and reduced the time required for in-depth discussions of emergent themes. It provided members of the research team with the opportunity to review and analyse the survey results and tailor the subsequent follow-up interview.

## **Survey**

The survey was administered to the 15 participants as an online survey via Survey Monkey and was available from 15 May until 29 June 2023.

The survey questions were designed and accessed through survey monkey and although closed for submissions, the design of the survey can be accessed via the [survey link here](#).

## **Interviews**

Participants were made aware in the evaluation invitation that a 30-minute interview was offered to each participant. Four interview questions were designed around the themes of the evaluation being timing, resources, communication and the overall success of a community-led/deliberative democracy process.

The interviews took place between 29 May 2023 and 29 June 2023. The six Steering Group members who were available were interviewed via phone call. Council staff were interviewed by an independent facilitator who attended Council administration building for in person interviews with three of the staff whilst the one remaining staff member was interviewed via video conferencing. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed using the online software Otter.ai, with consent of the participating interviewees.

The interview questions were designed around the themes identified with the survey questions and results. They were centred around time, resources, communication and the overall success of the process as per below:

1. Could you tell us more about how you felt about the time you spent on this process? For example, when/on what was your time best /least spent?
2. What resources would you like to have had?
3. What could have been improved in relation to communication (e.g. method/frequency/quality)?
4. What advice would you give to someone starting this process again?

A thematic analysis was undertaken of both qualitative and quantitative data collected which presented key findings and recommendations.

## **Limitations**

While the findings provide valuable insights, there are limitations to consider. The survey was conducted among those directly involved in the process and not the greater community. Not all survey participants were available for a follow-up interview and the results may not fully represent the perspectives of all participants.

Efforts were made to address areas for bias with the survey itself collated by both representatives from Council, the Steering Group and an independent member of the Byron community. For the interviews a Council staff member not part of the process interviewed the Steering Group and an independent facilitator from the community volunteered their time to interview the four staff members. The information was collated, interpreted and analysed by the Council staff member who was not involved in the masterplan process.

## Responses

Role	Invited	Survey Response	Interview Response
Steering Group	10	10	6
Council staff	5	4	4
<b>TOTAL</b>	15	14	10

## Results

The collection and analysis of the structured survey and open-ended participant interviews have been reviewed in an analytic process to provide important information on emergent and unexpected themes.

### Overall

As an overall observation those who participated in the process over the two-year period were generally satisfied with the process. When asked how satisfactory the role they played in the process over 75% of responses were satisfactory or very satisfactory. The model worked well for the context of the community and the demographic.

Issues that arose over the two-year period in relation to the process were due to a variety of factors. Such issues have potential solutions that can be addressed in improving the framework moving forward.

Council staff believing how “there's hybrid methods which could yield really good results as well. Perhaps less intensive on community, less intensive on Council”. The Federal community-led process should be noted as a successful potential model, however it should be acknowledged that where appropriate, across the Shire, tweaking will be required for each differing context.

The Steering Group was well equipped with internal resources from experienced members across relevant disciplines. The group was formed from existing community groups and other interested community members.

## **Project inception and initial stages**

When asked what can be improved in the process in the future a majority of the participants highlighted concern with the level of preparedness at the start of the process. The interviews revealed particular issues that occurred throughout the process. The conclusion from the Steering Group was that these matters may not have arisen should this information been detailed at the start of the process. There was one response that recounted:

“There was an initial meeting at Council to introduce some of this, but in hindsight I don't think it was sufficient and needs to be more comprehensive”.

One group member response detailed what exactly information would be beneficial to the group within the initial inception stages. Their response is as follows

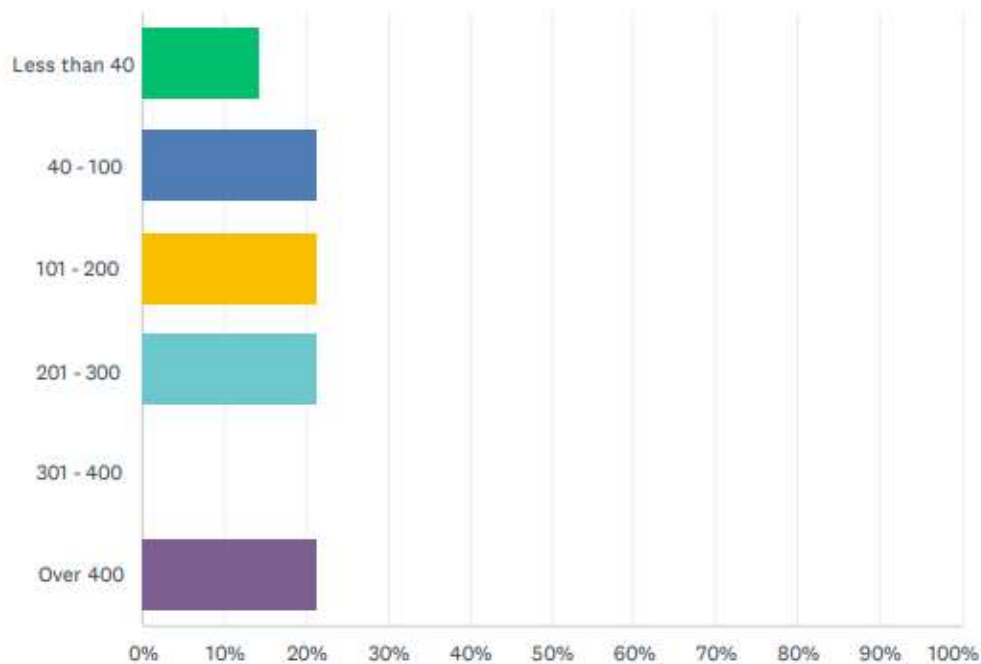
“Council meeting process, timeframes for formal approvals — what a masterplan can and can't do, how does it work in relation to DCP/LEP, how do Council staff work with the final product — understanding conflict of interest/legals — models of community engagement, working with community, facilitated meetings, conflict resolution — what happens after it is endorsed, how does the group transition to actioning the plan, succession planning if members are exhausted etc”

Council staff echoed this thought noting “a key recommendation is to better prepare the Steering Group members before the process begins. They become key advocates for the process between Council and their own community, and it's very important that they are given the tools to do this well”. Another staff member suggesting there ‘could have been more information provided to the group at the beginning of the process to streamline communication’. A suggestion from Council staff was “a weekend of workshops to lay the groundwork information for community members as background”.

## **Length of the process and time involved**

There were many responses collected concerning the overall time of the process raised within both the survey and interviews. These opinions were shared by both council staff and the Steering Group. There were two main factors of time, firstly the amount of time spent by individuals on the process and secondly, the length of the process all together.

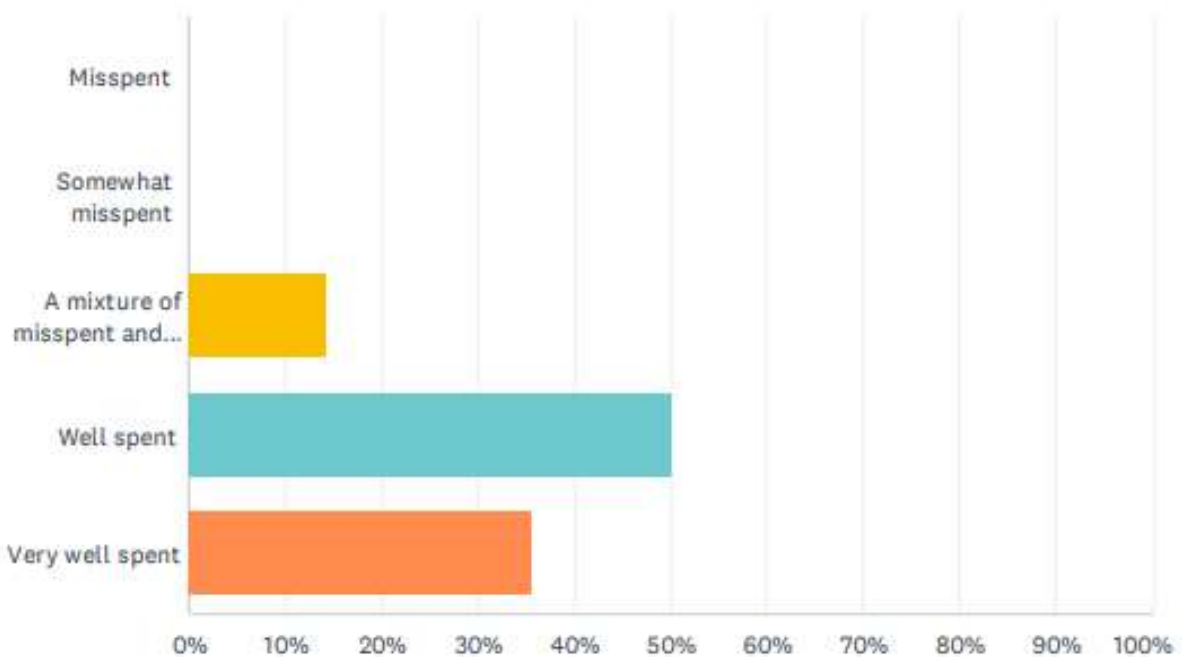
There were certainly expectations of time that were not anticipated at the inception of the project. Key members such as the Place Planning staff along with the Steering Group coordinator who put in a considerably larger amount of time than others involved. Over 50% of the participants nominated they spend upwards of 200 hours over the two-year process, with 3 of those responses recording over 400 hours being invested (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Survey results – How much time did you invest in the process(hours)

When asked if the time spent on the process was worth it for both the participants self-satisfaction and the result of the final document, there was an overall conclusion that although there was a greater amount of time spent that exceeded most participants expectations, it was worth it for the final outcome. In saying that, 50% of participants said that the time was well spent, 35% said it was very well spent and 14% said it was a mixture of misspent and well spent (Figure 2). Follow-up interviews allowed for an exploration of these answers. Where most participants believed length of time was out of the control of both Council and community, one member expressing there was “a lot of time invested in it from the community and those individuals on the Steering Group, [they] wouldn’t say it was time wasted, [and that] it was a really great process”.

A Steering Group member recounted their thought on the process at the time with the following comment “I remember at the time thinking it was definitely going longer than I thought but I can’t say I think that was wasted time. I think it was really valuable”. Council staff mirrored this thought however after finishing the process have already started discussion around ways to possibly reduce the time frame, raising the question, “is there a way that you can workshop in short intensive bursts to try and get to the same outcome where you still have, a core community group who are deeply involved and come together, two, or three times across a 6 to 12 month period?”. Council staff shared this suggestion also recommending “a shorter timeframe with more intensive workshops, that get the level of input needed while not taking up too much of community and staff time”. In addition to a more concise time frame reducing the length of the process, when asked about the input from other sections of council on the process staff mentioned how “potentially a short and sharp model could result in more buy in and improved ways to have more interaction from sections of Council”.



**Figure 2.** Survey results – “In your opinion was the time you invested:”

Council Place Planning staff member was impressed by the community resilience and ability to stick with the process despite the length of time noting how they were “really grateful to have a group that stuck with it for so long, even though it was kind of hard and drawn out over a period”. Although frustration with the length of the process was a key theme in the responses, much of this was noted as a result of the external factors.

One Steering Group member did mention personally how they believed they would have benefited from a shortened and more concise project as the unforeseeable delay of the final outcome meant less engagement within the final stages which impacted on momentum. Another concern raised was the allocation of time across stages of the process. One individual stating “while the design of the document was given great weight, the document suffered a little editorially from being rushed in the end”, suggesting an improved editing period with an in-person workshop.

### **Extraneous factors**

There were certain external factors that impacted the process and led to both delay in the final outcome and some confusion amongst community. The first issue raised by members was a large Development Application in Federal. The assessment of this application by Council ran concurrently with the master planning process which was ultimately recommended by Council staff before going before Council at a planning meeting. This caused a level of frustration within the Steering Group members and greater community, with one participant observing that “admittedly the Masterplan process was prolonged because of covid but one got the feeling that in Council the left hand didn't know what the right hand was doing”. The element of concern by the group was given the significance of the developments impact on the village. A few members of the Steering Group raised frustration with the communication around the DA and believed this had a great impact at the time.

Other factors included the Covid-19 pandemic which was a major interruption in the process. All participants acknowledged how this event was the leading factor in the process taking as long as it did. One Steering Group member noting how “the whole process was truncated by Covid of course, which really did complicate it with regard to time which stretched out to be a two-year sort of process that was beyond our control and to deal with. The major issue was just continuity which could have gone a little smoother”. Moving towards online engagement was welcomed by all participants as the new normal. It was also mentioned that given the remote nature of the community the digital communication worked well when making sure everyone one was included in everything. It was observed that despite the negative impacts of the pandemic the process brought the community together one noting how they “valued the opportunity to connect and contribute in a positive way after lockdowns”.

In addition to the pandemic, at the start of 2021 the impacts of the floods was felt within Federal. Although not felt as much as an impact on the process as Covid-19 or the concurrent DA, the floods and changes within staff was highlighted as a concern noting that this may have taken away some staff time from the project.

### **Role of the community Steering Group coordinator**

The role of the coordinator within the Steering Group was integral for the success of delivery of a masterplan document. This role however was incredibly time intensive. The Steering Group chair noting that “it became a full-time job” for them and “for if not more than two years, [he said] for at least a twelve-month period”. Discussing this further it he raised that it would be “a high expectation of a volunteer in future”. The level of work taken onboard by the coordinator of the group was by far more than any other community member. Knowing this now, the level of work is to be communicated and should this not be suitable for one individual the job could be shared amongst co-coordinators.

Steering Group members were unanimously grateful for the coordinator who acted as key communicator between the group and Council. One member noting how “it is important to have a coordinator who is a good communicator both with Council and the Steering Group”. Not all members were experienced in dealing with Council and benefited from the coordinator who was able to act as a ‘buffer’ between the group and Council. The other Steering Group members not involved in the direct communication to Council were grateful for the coordinator and highlighted how that role was integral in having leadership amongst the group and a point of contact.

It was noted by staff that “weekly meetings between Council and the Steering Group coordinator were the basis for a high level of rapport and communication”. The coordinator weekly catch-ups with Council staff was seen as beneficial way of communication by both Steering Group and Council. It was suggested by Council staff however that maybe “it might have been better to have more people at these catch ups” in order to alleviate the workload for the sole coordinator. A suggestion was made that similar to the two staff working within Council an additional person from the community to communicate with might assist.

### **Working as a community**

As echoed by one of the Steering Group members, “the communication within the steering committee mirrored what we hoped to achieve in the community as a whole”. The interviews allowed the opportunity to ask individuals where their time was spent and what tasks they were assigned to. As volunteers there was many hours of work out in their community. The general feedback was that this time was necessary for the Steering Group as part of their process. There was a notable sense of pride amongst steering members when detailing the work, they had taken and the benefits that had to developing the actions for the community. One member sharing their response:

“When you’ve done your work and actually held that data, you can hold your head high knowing that you are going forward with a document that the majority of the community agrees with”

Where Steering Group members felt processes took a lot of time one member mentioned that they believed “a less consultative process would have involved less time, but the result would have lacked legitimacy”. There was great satisfaction from the community when the document was complete knowing they had put the time and effort into development and finalisation of the final document. From the perspective of staff, they believed “the federal community did a fantastic job in terms of communicating with each other and communicating outside to others that were either participating in the process or had an interest in the process”.

Despite an overwhelming positive response to the community satisfaction one Steering Group member in their interview raised some distress at the negative comments they received from those in the greater community to the work the Steering Group were doing. They received these comments via social media. Another survey response uncovered, when asked about the positives and negatives of the process they identified a negative as “some of the divisions that emerged”. The community-led model really worked for the community of Federal that was unique in its nature, level of expertise amongst the community and drive. When asked both Steering Group members and staff advised they would give to the next group there was a shared response that demography plays a large role in the success of this model. Council staff commented saying:

“I think this format wouldn't be suitable for every community in the Byron Shire”

There is certainly the opportunity to adapt the model to future community groups which would need to be explored.

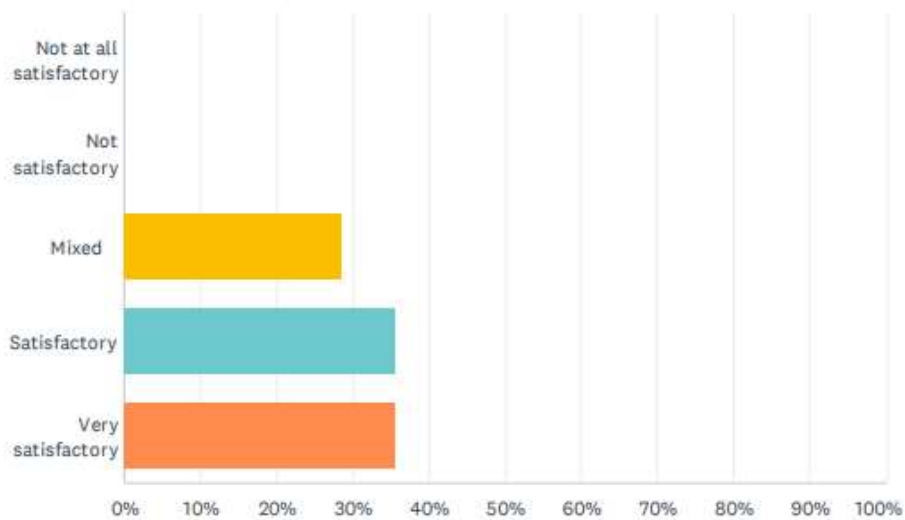
### **Council support and engagement**

There was overall satisfaction with the channel of communication between Council and community, one Steering Group member expressing, “there was a fantastic communication really and the channels were very open and very approachable”. Survey responses show that 35% of participants found the communication between Council and the community very satisfactory, 35% found it satisfactory and 29% responded with a mixed opinion (Figure 3).

Council staff mentioned that the community with the support of Council “completed this plan with very, very minimal budget allocation” and expressed how “having more



money would have been useful at times”. The volunteer effort of the Steering Group and the time spent on projects such as traffic counting, and door-to-door surveying may have been reduced with the allocation of external consultants.



**Figure 3.** Survey results – ‘In your opinion did you find communication between Council and the community:’

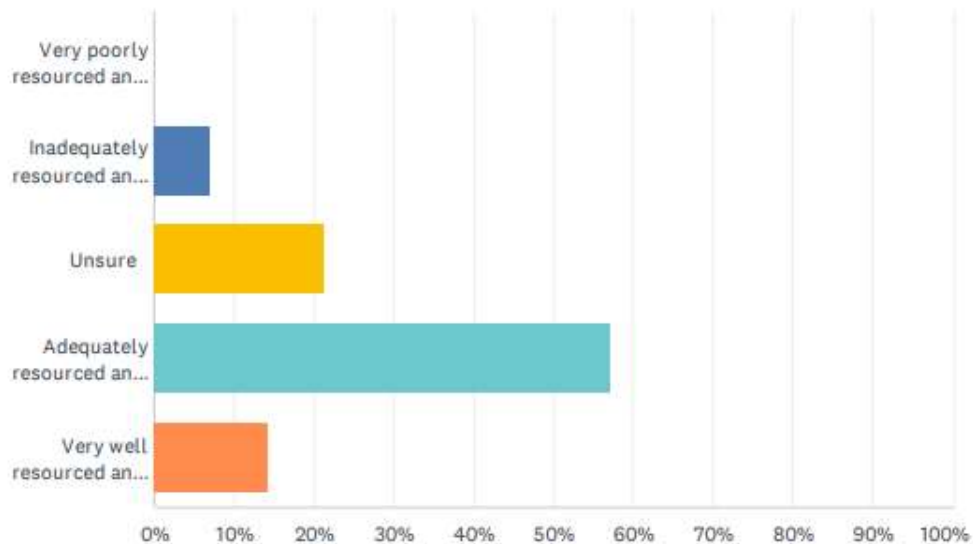
Regarding the response to the communication between Council and the Steering Group, there was general positive feedback with those expressing “the presence of Andrew and Isabelle were important to feel heard by Council”. Another member noting “I feel like council was right there with us”. When looking to the ultimate aim of the deliberative democracy process one response observed the following:

“The intention of a 'bottom-up' process is to put Council officers in the position of listeners. I think this was successful”

The survey responses show that 78% of participants believed that the process met their expectations of a community-led/deliberative democracy process. The remaining responses selected ‘somewhat’ as an option to the questions. Reflecting on Council’s involvement in the community-led process, one staff member provided the following responses:

“If councils are wanting to chaperone a community to work in a space, then it's really in my mind the responsibility of council to enable that to happen to use space, will they need any equipment, was there a need for some sort of specialist work to assist that really, we should be able to fund and support that”

When asked how participants felt how well the project was resourced and supported there was a somewhat mixed response, however most participants believing the project was adequately resourced and supported (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Survey results – ‘In your opinion how well was the project resourced and supported by Council staff and/or Council Executive?’

Staff highlighted how “the communication was the most intensive aspect of the process from a staff perspective”. Much of the communication between Council and the community was by the two Place Planning staff. From the perspective of Council staff, they believed greater resourcing in terms of budget would have supported the Steering Group better.

Despite the general feedback with resourcing being that everyone felt they had enough resourcing support from Council, where issues were raised throughout the process it was noted that it was due to or would have been beneficial having more information at the start of the process. A benefit of the evaluation and the completion of the first community-led masterplan is that now a community groups have undertaken the process, greater information is available to council staff on how the procedure will look at various stages and possible issues that may occur which can be relayed early in the process.

## Findings and Recommendations

The aim of this evaluation was to test community-led planning that could inform a master planning framework moving forward. The evaluation has resulted in key findings unique to the process that delivered Byron Shire Council’s first masterplan document created for the community, by the community. The overall finding was that this process worked for both Council and the community and should certainly be a process that could be adopted again in the right setting, following improvements and modifications.

Based on the surveys and interviews several findings have been realised. With each finding, recommendations have been detailed that would improve the model should it be carried forward for future place plans.

**Finding 1: A motivated and skilled Steering Group with great leadership is integral to a community-led model delivering the intended outcome**

Recommendation 1.1: Whilst the role of the Steering Group Coordinator is extremely effective there is a lot of work for a sole person to undertake. An additional co-coordinator for the Steering Group should be provided to share the workload and leadership role.

Recommendation 1.2: The unique community model within Federal was integral for the process to work and future Steering Group members should be empowered to want to make and create vision for their town or village based on their needs and aspirations.

**Finding 2: A deliberative democracy model requires great support from Council to effectively empower the community group**

Recommendation 2.1: To support a community-led model for place planning, Council should be able to provide the maximum level of support to deliver real and lasting results. With greater budget some of the time and effort of volunteering community members may be alleviated through the hiring of consultants to fulfil certain roles which has multiple benefits across the process and final outcome.

Recommendation 2.2: There should be recognition that community-led planning does not mean a lighter resourcing load from Council necessarily. In order to effectively support and empower a community more staff time is required and a greater, more intensive support from many officers.

**Finding 3: Greater information on the process and expectations provided at the start will better support the community group**

Recommendation 3.1: Establish a toolkit as a resource for community-led place planning. A toolbox of resources and tools should be established to help empower communities within the Shire to identify, plan and deliver their own neighbourhood projects. The toolkit would comprise the videos produced, relevant strategic and statutory planning documents, how-to guides, useful links to audit and mapping tools, helpful community contacts and should be made available to the community throughout the process. There is the opportunity to have this information on Council's website to educate community groups and possibly inspire and empower other community groups. Examples of such toolkits include those established by local governments such as [Christchurch City Council](#).

Recommendation 3.2: Following a suggestion for a series of intensive workshops that form the place planning process, a key intensive workshop should take place at the commencing stages of the Steering Group to provide all necessary information on the process from the start, and to check collective understanding.

**Finding 4: The process took a lot longer than anticipated and a different methodology could support outcomes being achieved in a shorter time**

Recommendation 4.1: Keep the process to a 12-month timeline with more intensive community engagement sessions over a shorter period of time. It was concluded that a shorter more intensive approach would not only reduce the time of the process and therefore limit participant fatigue and improve motivation but would encourage greater opportunities for engagement from other Council departments.

It would allow for greater structure in the model and ensure each part of the process be given a sufficient amount of time.

An example being the final editing stages where not all community members felt their feedback was heard and that this stage may have been rushed. An intensive in-person workshop for this stage would work well.

### **Finding 5: The process was a great way of bringing community members together and a relationship building process between Council and community**

Recommendation 5.1: Where the process may benefit from external consultants assisting parts of the project in terms of time efficiency, many of the community enjoyed the door-to-door surveys and traffic counting. They noted that this was part of the experience and what brought them closer to the community. Council within the community-led model should have the resources to be able to offer support where needed and listen to the requests of the community.

Recommendation 5.2: Council staff were able to strengthen relationships with the Federal community throughout the process and were able to develop a greater level of trust in the community to deliver a successful master plan. Council through the Place Planning Collective should continue to maintain this relationship with representatives of the community coming together to discuss priorities on actions for their village. The community-led process is a great opportunity to get more villages and towns together to create visions for their community and therefore bring them to the table. Council is now in the position to take the success of this model and adapt it to different communities to efficiently get place plans developed and conservations happening about creating liveable and enjoyed places happening sooner.

## **Conclusion**

The evaluation has provided valuable insights into a community-led framework of master planning. Based on the analysis of both the qualitative and quantitative data collected, several key findings have emerged which will hope to guide the framework for the next masterplan process if a community-led model is again adopted. The deliberative democracy process, despite the disruptions of external factors, was conducted in a way that allowed the community to establish a shared vision for Federal with the support of Council. There have been notable key takeaways from this evaluation process.

Firstly, the majority of participants expressed a high level of satisfaction with the process, The qualitative data indicated a mostly positive experience over the two years that met expectations with regard to developing a document with their community for their community. This suggests that the model has been successful in achieving its intended outcomes. The process overall satisfied what was envisioned and delivered a community-led model that worked to achieve a successful and highly detailed and well-developed master plan document.

Second, the detailed data collected revealed key areas for improvement. Participants identified the need for greater communication and information at the start of the process as well as streamlined communication and available support. These findings indicate potential areas where changes can be made to improve the overall

framework of the model, participant experience and better manage expectations. The data has provided suggestions to better the model, further streamlining the process for both community and Council.

Importantly, the survey results highlighted the positive impact of the process on participants' community relationship. Many respondents reported an increased sense of personal satisfaction and sense of achievement working with and for Federal. This outcome aligns with the deliberative democracy models key benefit of empowering individuals within their community. The community-led process undertaken in Federal is a successful suggested model for community-led planning other locations across the Shire. However, it should be acknowledged that where appropriate adjusting this for each village or town will be required.