Moreton Says: Hearing the missing voices

1. Introduction

On the surface, the *Moreton Says* program looks like any other survey. However, underneath lies a complex social licence model and best practice engagement program designed to ensure communities can – and do – influence Council decision-making. Moreton Bay Regional Council (Council) developed the program to reconnect with disengaged communities, embedding a scientific research process to create a program that achieves the following:

1. Creates a comprehensive evidence base to support better Council decision-making while also providing meaningful data to support community groups and organisations.
2. Restores and strengthens relationships between Council and community members.
3. Creates a seat at the table for the community to feed directly into Council decision-making, improving community ownership and acceptance of outcomes.
4. Allows Council to track community sentiment and trust over time, as well as the drivers of trust and approval, and take direct action to address emerging community issues.
5. Breaks down silos and improves collaboration between Council departments.

The three-year program establishes regular points of contact with our communities and provides longitudinal research on their values and priorities through:

- ongoing internal engagement and collaboration across Council teams
- an extensive hybrid digital and face-to-face engagement program
- regular surveys with core elements that are tracked over time
- a publicly available dashboard of survey results.

The outcomes can be seen in the number of Council projects refined based on community views and priorities; the use of qualitative information to change how Council communicates; and major policy position changes, including embracing climate change action and establishing a strong position on the issue.

Council officers regularly access and filter data about community preferences and issues to support their planning and decision-making. Community members are also able to use the publicly available data for anything from providing better community services to supporting grant applications.

The community engagement and relationship-building element are critical to the success of the *Moreton Says* program. Faced with low trust levels in the community, the first year of the program focused on reconnecting face to face and then on continually demonstrating how results were being used. Raising awareness of the program and the critical issues it would address has been key to attracting, retaining and organically growing the participant base.

The initial baseline survey was completed by more than 4,000 people, including a representative sample of each area within the Moreton Bay region. Six subsequent surveys in the series have also attracted thousands of responses with a >50% participant return rate, creating a robust, diverse and statistically powerful data set for research and analysis. Council Community Engagement officers monitor demographics of incoming results during survey periods and adapt engagement activity to target the 'missing voices'. These impressive survey numbers are a direct result of engagement efforts to build recognition, understanding and trust in the program.

With this success, reliance on the research outcomes has grown and is now an embedded part of Council decision-making processes.

'We layer this data in literally every one of our projects. Community values, sentiment and feedback are integral for everything we do. We are planning for the community, so it's essential for us to use this data to inform planning.'
Sport and Recreation Officer

2. The problem and challenge

Moreton Bay Regional Council (Council) is one of the largest and fastest growing council areas in Australia, with a population nearing 500,000. Over the next 20 years, an additional 200,000 people are expected to call Moreton Bay home. The region is facing major growth pressures and heightened expectations for community consultation.

Council strengthened its approach to community engagement with the appointment of CEO Greg Chemello and election of Mayor Peter Flannery in 2020, both of whom publicly committed to improving engagement in the region. This followed a decade of mistrust and poor engagement, with Council officers and Councillors having to rely on limited feedback from the 'loudest voices'.

One of the key issues for Council was a lack of reliable community data to inform decision-making. Existing data sources consisted of a handful of project-specific surveys (using online tools like Survey Monkey) and Facebook polls kept in a multitude of Excel spreadsheets across the organisation. This limited understanding of who the community was and what they wanted from their Council inevitably led to inconsistent decision-making across Council departments and community distrust of the decision-making processes.

Council needed a better understanding of the diversity of different communities in the region to establish a clearer picture of their values, and a way to use this information within the decision-making framework.

The objective of the *Moreton Says* program is to reconnect with communities, develop and monitor trust, and develop a reliable evidence base that demonstrates values and priorities across the region. There was strong internal desire and momentum to use evidence-based research to help inform Councillors' decisions and overcome the 'loudest voices' and the 'squeaky wheels'. Barriers included a community that felt disconnected from their Council, a history of very limited interaction and reporting back to communities, and the need to embed a culture of using evidence-based research for and by Council departments.

Accordingly, *Moreton Says* was designed foremost as an engagement program with the dual goals of rebuilding community trust in Council and establishing a data set that could be used to support Council decision-making. Council worked with social research experts Voconiq to create a scientifically robust dataset.

The major challenges facing the *Moreton Says* program included:

- breaking down the trust barrier and communicating internal changes through a new approach
- awareness of the program and the need for community members to be involved to help inform decisions affecting their future
- maintaining interest over the three-year program
- ensuring the resulting data was easily accessible and understood both internally and externally.

The first (anchor) survey was supported by an extensive engagement program (see Figure 1), including officers from across Council departments, to assure a disengaged community that their feedback would be heard and used. Subsequent surveys have also been supported by engagement activities, although not as extensive. This engagement component has been critical to creating a robust data set that includes the 'missing voices' that did not trust Council or its decision-making processes.

Figure 1. Summary of engagement support for the first (anchor) Moreton Says survey in 2021.

Moreton Says; Moreton Bay Regional Council
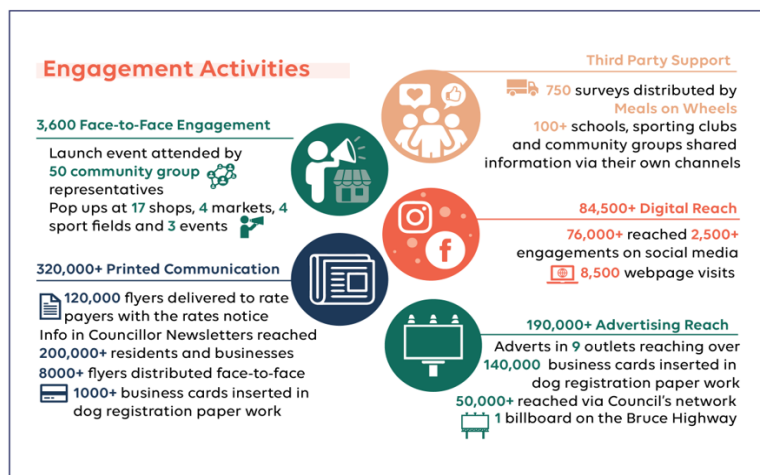
3. Methodology and theoretical frameworks

Moreton Says was designed to ensure the outcomes of extensive engagement and research were captured and made available for multiple uses throughout the organisation. This has been integral to the program's success, incorporating early identification of potential application uses for data, and anticipating the needs of key upcoming projects. The framework outlined the need to:

- define a social baseline of diverse communities
- collect and use data to build on corporate understanding
- use research outcomes to inform decisions on a multitude of strategies, programs and plans
- target communication to reflect the language and issues of the community
- use research outcomes to input into new project planning that reflects community needs.

Baseline data is continuously added to through a series of 'pulse' surveys with outcomes collected and made accessible in a single data bank. The longitudinal nature of the program enables data to be compared over time and identification of the impact of changes made by Council.

Social research methods

Voconiq was engaged to build a sophisticated social research methodology that measures a range of factors that contribute to trust in and approval of Council. This forms the foundation of the program's social baseline.
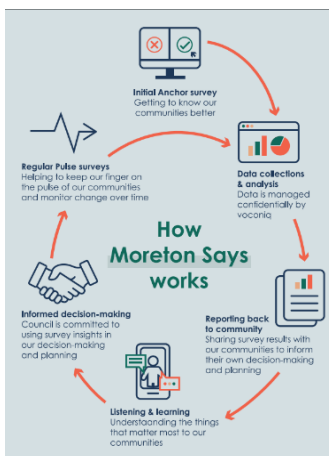
The methodological structure of the *Moreton Says* program includes an initial 'Anchor' survey to gather broad baseline data, followed by regular 'Pulse' surveys to delve deeper into specific issues and monitor trends against baseline data. Each Pulse survey focuses attention on tailored themes, which are supported through promotion of the program and targeting of those most affected by those themes. Previous participants are invited to each round of surveys, creating a broad, diverse and continually growing participant group.

Voconiq uses 'path modelling' analysis to identify factors that drive trust in and approval of Council. This 'why' factor is the key to improving decision-making and service delivery to support the community. Application of this understanding has been used to inform Council decision-making at all levels, from day-to-day program implementation to major strategy development.
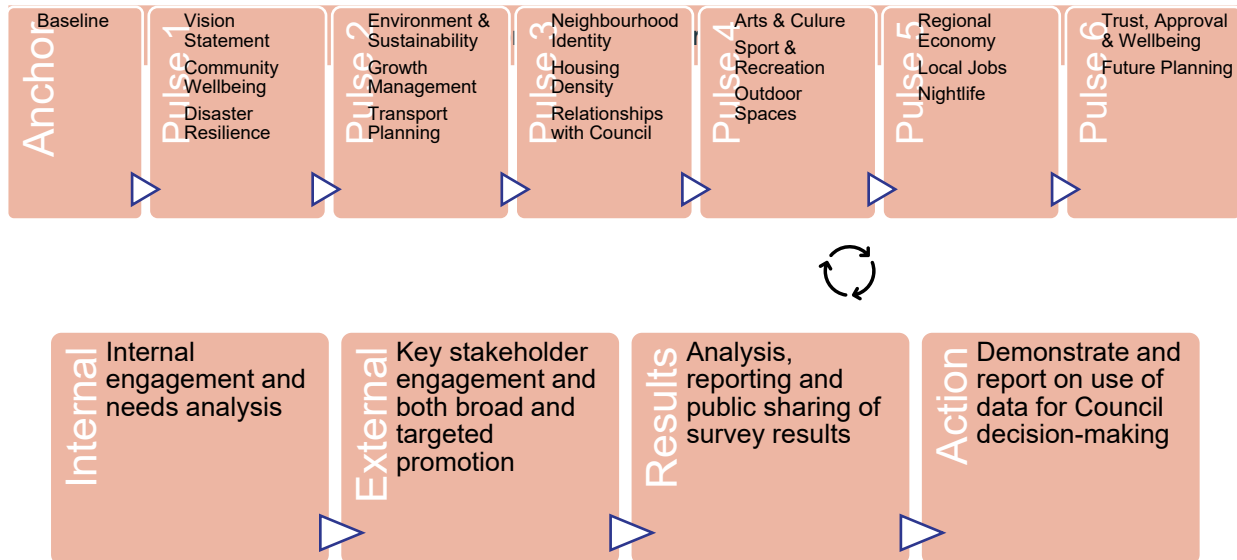

Targeted engagement

Council identified nine geographic subregions with an aim to secure a representative sample from each during survey periods. Council also targets communities of interest, including youth, older persons, people with disability, First Nations people and business owners.

By monitoring the geographic and demographic profiles of responses during the survey period, Council can adapt engagement activities to ensure a representative sample of all groups and reach the 'missing voices'. Targeted engagement activities have included sharing information through peak bodies or community support organisations, public forums, attending markets or shopping centres, attending school gates at pick-up time or playgrounds on weekends, and attending local events. Council also uses targeted advertising on social media channels.

Anchor	Pulse 1	Pulse 2	Pulse 3	Pulse 4	Pulse 5	Pulse 6
Baseline	Vision Statement, Community Wellbeing, Disaster Resilience	Environment & Sustainability, Growth Management, Transport Planning	Neighbourhood Identity, Housing Density, Relationships with Council	Arts & Culure, Sport & Recreation, Outdoor Spaces	Regional Economy, Local Jobs, Nightlife	Trust, Approval & Wellbeing, Future Planning

Internal	External	Results	Action
Internal engagement and needs analysis	Key stakeholder engagement and both broad and targeted promotion	Analysis, reporting and public sharing of survey results	Demonstrate and report on use of data for Council decision-making

Each Moreton Says round follows the same process to gather meaningful and usable community data on specific areas of Council responsibility.

Data collection

The primary data collection tool is a survey (online or printed) with assistance available if needed. Council's research partner Voconiq confidentially collects, manages and interprets the survey data. This was communicated to potential survey participants to help build confidence in the process. An online dashboard reflects participation levels and demographics in real time to Council Engagement Officers during the survey period.

The survey results are analysed and interpreted by Voconiq. The *Moreton Says* public reports following each survey are presented in an easy-to-understand format for participants. *Moreton Says* data is publicly shared through an online dashboard at voconiq.shinyapps.io/mbrc_public/ and via a project website at yoursay.moretonbay.qld.gov.au/moreton-says

Council officers across the whole of the organisation have access to a more comprehensive data dashboard, which includes free text comments, to inform their planning and decision-making.

'I strongly support that community engagement led by Moreton Says allows multiple projects to undertake engagement under one banner and is easier for the community to participate in.'
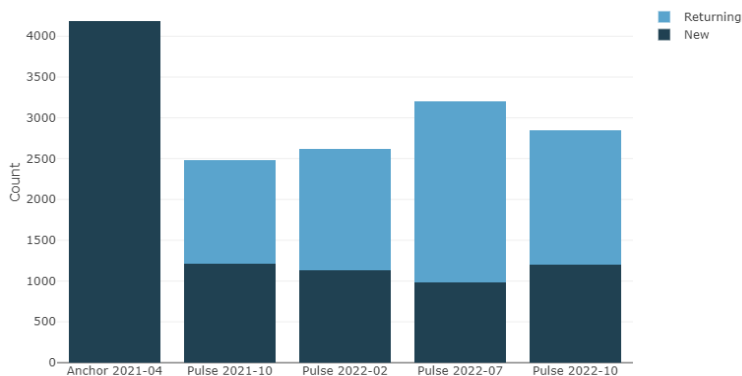
Media and Communications Officer

4. Research results

Participation rates for all *Moreton Says* surveys to date have far exceeded the requirement for a statistically representative sample, both at a regional level and for each of the nine identified geographic subregions (see graphic). Each pulse survey has included >50% returning participants, indicating a high level of community trust in and support of the program (see graphic). This has provided to both Council and community members who access the online dashboards a reliable longitudinal data set to support planning and decision-making.

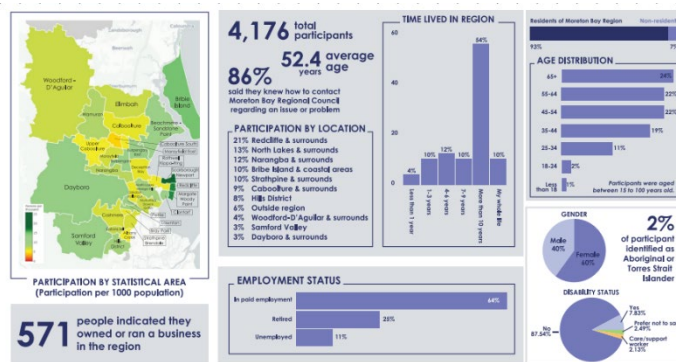*New vs returning participants for each survey round.*

The primary outcome of the *Moreton Says* program is a broad, statistically reliable data set that can be searched and manipulated to provide relevant data for particular geographic or demographic groups within the region across a range of topics (visit yoursay.moretonbay.qld.gov.au/moreton-says/survey-res). Some specific examples of findings include:

Demographic and geographic representation in Anchor Survey, 2021.

- People aged over 55 and people living in the Hills District subregion are the most likely to recycle and take other actions to support a sustainable environment.

- Residents in identified growth areas (such as Caboolture and Morayfield) are generally supportive of new developments if they can see planning for supporting infrastructure, like roads, and that the natural features of the area are preserved.

- People living on the Redcliffe Peninsula would like to see more open spaces for recreation in their parks, while people living around Caboolture would like to see more and better playground equipment in their parks. People living in the Samford Valley put a higher priority on picnic and BBQ facilities.
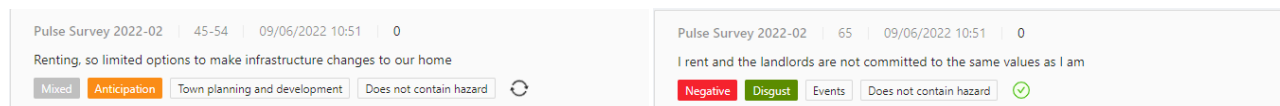
Analysis of free text comments using the Otso AI platform provides qualitative insights into trends in quantitative data. For example, looking at comments related to the finding regarding recycling and actions to support a sustainable environment shows the importance of home ownership as a factor. Renters comment that they are less able to order a larger recycling bin, install water saving features or solar panels, or plant drought-resilient gardens. This understanding allows Council to better tailor actions to increase rates of recycling and other sustainability actions.

A sample of Pulse 2 comments from the Otso AI system

P ... https://youtube.com/watch?v=30I6cDV6eKY&si=EnSIkaIECMiOmarE for more). These include:

- transparency, fairness and integrity of the decision-making process have a far greater influence on community trust than the actual decision outcomes or communication about decisions

- relatively low level of satisfaction with long-term planning contributes to lower overall trust levels

- satisfaction with day-to-day services, community identity and community resilience all rated relatively highly. These scores contributed positively to approval of Council but did not affect trust in Council.

This understanding has helped Council shift its priorities from trying to improve community satisfaction to focusing on improving community trust. Council has an increased focus on demonstrating the transparency, fairness and integrity of its decisions and engaging the community on long-term planning issues. By identifying the 'why' driving trust and approval, Council is empowered to directly address community issues and priorities through evidence-based decision-making.

The transparent use of this data to directly inform all aspects of Council decision-making is having a positive impact on Council's relationship with the Moreton Bay community and is contributing to rebuilding trust. Open community access to their own local data is enabling residents to track how their feedback is being considered in Council decisions, as well as enabling community groups and local businesses to make more informed decisions on new community initiatives.

'We talk about community values in relevant correspondence, we use the information to justify projects and we regularly include relevant Moreton Says feedback in our Council briefings to justify new initiatives. The entire Environment and Sustainability Strategy has also been designed to respond to the feedback from the community. We are very proud that Moreton Says feedback regarding the need for Council to focus on reducing its greenhouse gas emissions has meant that we are now working towards a formal target for reducing our emissions. This is a very clear direct response to that feedback.'

Environment Officer

5. Contribution to the body of knowledge

Moreton Says is an Australian first in the application of social licence models combined with best practice community engagement techniques for a local government planning and service delivery process. The result is a model that allows residents and community members to influence decision-making across all aspects of Council, without them being engaged on every decision separately. This in turn reduces consultation fatigue resulting from over-engagement and allows Council's Community Engagement Team to focus more of the community's attention on the most important issues through targeted project consultations.

Moreton Says data is now used daily by officers across Council to inform decision-making. The data available to officers, including access to and analysis of free text comments, provides an understanding of the diversity of views and preferences within a community and allows balanced and fair decisions to be made. Media and community engagement regularly include findings from *Moreton Says*, including free text comments, to demonstrate how the communities voice is influencing Council decision-making.

A recent survey of Council officers found:

- 86% of respondents use *Moreton Say*s data
- the top three uses are to better understand community perspectives on issues (95%), to identify community needs (89%) and to support briefings and recommendations to Council or management (74%)
- 93% agreed or strongly agreed that '*Moreton Says* has helped Council's engagement to be informed, rather than assumed'.

Specific examples of the direct impact of *Moreton Says* data on Council decision-making include:

- changing the proposed Vision Statement in the new corporate plan to reflect community priorities
- adoption of a 'Green as we grow' policy, with a goal to protect 75 per cent of the region's land from urban development

- a major planning scheme amendment to ensure new developments meet expectations for green space, parking, lifestyle facilities and lot sizes
- inclusion of a net zero carbon emissions target in the Environment and Sustainability Strategy.

Moreton Says provides high-level data that can support deeper discussions at forums, workshops and summits. This approach is currently being used on land-use planning, programs, plans, projects and services. The research framework provides the valid evidence base upon which courageous conversations are being conducted with communities.

Through the quantitative and qualitative data sources developed by *Moreton Says*, Council officers can plan and propose decisions consistent with community expectations. Application of the social licence framework helps decision-makers focus on actions that will improve the transparency, fairness and accountability of decisions. The continual reporting back to the community of how *Moreton Says* data is influencing decisions, and the public availability of all *Moreton Says* data have contributed positively to improving relationships and trust.

This approach is distinctly different from the use of one-off or annual satisfaction surveys or project-specific surveys, which often do not attract a representative sample. *Moreton Says* involves an ongoing communication campaign and extensive community engagement to secure participation that is demographically and geographically representative across a longitudinal program. Through this approach, Council has captured and heard the 'missing voices' that are so frequently drowned out by the 'loudest' ones.

6. Alignment to core values

IAP2 Core Values	Example of how this was considered in the design of your project methodology
1. Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process	This is the core purpose of *Moreton Says* – giving the community a seat at the decision-making table. Council is committed to involving community members in the decisions that affect their homes and lifestyles. Engagement actively seeks out those most affected to promote participation.
2. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision	*Moreton Says* includes a commitment that data and comments will be used to improve Council decision-making. That data is transparently shared so the community can hold Council accountable. Individual projects and programs communicate how they have used *Moreton Says* data.
3. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognising and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision-makers	*Moreton Says* allows community sentiment and preferences to be a central consideration of Council decision-making, balanced with other Council priorities and requirements. By asking questions on multiple aspects of Council responsibilities, it reinforces the need for Council to balance competing priorities.
4. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision	By monitoring the demographics of incoming surveys, Council Community Engagement officers are able to adapt engagement activities to target the 'missing voices'. Engagement with community organisations and advocates improves the reach in disengaged and isolated communities. A mix of online and in-person engagement strategies, including the option to complete the survey on paper or online, maximises the reach of activities.
5. Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate	*Moreton Says* surveys can be accessed both online and in paper format. Council partners with community organisations to support participants who may need assistance to have their say. Library and Customer Service Centre staff are also equipped to help residents participate. Council's Community Engagement Team promote their attendance at public events and invite direct

		feedback in person. Residents can also choose to register for additional engagement activities that may support some planning activities, such as forums or workshops.
6.	Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way	The extensive community engagement supporting the *Moreton Says* program, including online and face-to-face resources and partnerships with community organisations, ensures participants have the information they need to participate. Messaging promoting each survey reinforces the importance of specific topics being investigated and how community feedback can help Council deliver better services. Transparent sharing of results demonstrates to potential participants how their data could be used.
7.	Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision	The *Moreton Says* program provides a transparent evidence base for decision-making. Council projects and programs communicate how they have used *Moreton Says* data, and community members can – and do – use Council's own data to question decisions. The publicly available data sets make Council more accountable to the communities it serves than ever before.