

Resilient Sydney Strategy: Engagement with Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Elders and community leaders in metropolitan Sydney

A Final Consultation Report

Prepared by Inside Policy for Resilient Sydney

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The fine print

This document has been prepared by Inside Policy Pty Ltd on behalf of Resilient Sydney to summarise the discussion and outcomes from the Resilient Sydney engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and community leaders meetings.

Resilient Sydney is part of the 100 Resilient Cities initiative pioneered by the Rockefeller Foundation. Resilient Sydney is working with the councils of metropolitan Sydney, the New South Wales government, businesses and community to strengthen our city's capacity to manage disruption. Resilient Sydney is hosted by the City of Sydney.

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Acknowledgement by the Resilient Sydney Office

Resilient Sydney acknowledges the 29 Elders and community leaders who generously shared their time, wisdom and deep cultural knowledge to contribute to our understanding of the resilience qualities of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

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Through-out this report the words / terms Indigenous, First Peoples, First Nations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander are used interchangeably to describe Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Introduction

Resilient Sydney engaged Inside Policy to plan, facilitate and report on four community meetings with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and community leaders in metropolitan Sydney as part of its participation in the 100 Resilient Cities initiative.

The purpose of the engagement with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is to understand the behaviours and qualities that have enabled First Nations Peoples to survive as the world's oldest continuous living culture. In particular the meetings sought to explore the following three questions:

1. What does resilience mean to you?
2. What can the broader community learn about resilience from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?
3. What is the preferred way to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in decision-making around the Resilient Sydney strategy?

This report captures the findings and implications of four 2-hour meetings held with Elders and community leaders between 7-11 August 2017 and a 1-hour meeting held on 4 December 2017.

These meetings were held in Darlinghurst, Redfern, Hornsby and Parramatta.

Each meeting was facilitated and scribed. The meetings took a narrative-based approach which enabled participants to share their personal and community stories of resilience and what they could mean for the Resilient Sydney Strategy.

[An overview of the Resilient Cities Initiative](#)

The New York city based Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilient Cities initiative aims to assist cities to adapt, survive and thrive in the face of increasing disruptions and uncertainty. Sydney is one of the 100 cities to be funded by the Rockefeller Foundation to participate in this initiative.

A key part of participating in the 100 Resilient Cities initiative is the development and implementation of a resilience strategy. Resilient Sydney must develop such a strategy for the Sydney metropolitan area.

Resilient Sydney seeks to understand the best ways to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members in decision making for metropolitan Sydney. Resilient Sydney prioritises practices that ensure the diversity of views within the community are considered, including the grass roots, residents' perspectives.

Workshop Outcomes

This section captures the findings – by theme – across all meetings held with Elders.

Reported here, in the words of the Elders and community leaders, are their views on:

- The context in which their resilience and the resilience of Sydney's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community exists.
- What resilience means to them.
- What the broader community can learn about resilience from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.
- How Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be included in co-creation and decision-making regarding the Resilience Strategy.
- Ideas for building a resilient Sydney.

Understanding the context of resilience for First Nations peoples

The shock event was colonisation and its effects are still felt through everyday stressors.

In telling their stories the Elders and community leaders identified a single key shock, the European colonization of the Sydney Basin, as the single most impactful event on their ancestors, their lives and the region.

Participants across all four locations agreed that physical and cultural survival in the face of colonization is a binding theme for First Nations individuals and groups in Sydney.

This shock was described in terms of:

- dispossession from people, country, families, culture, practices and kinship systems,
- massacres and conflict,
- resistance, and
- continuing to be pushed to the fringe of the city.

The skills, characteristics and behaviours that enabled First Nations people to survive this event continue to be employed by Sydney's First Nation's peoples to cope with ongoing stressors.

Both initial shock and ongoing stressors were seen as part of the same long process, and current concerns were clearly connected to past injustices.

The daily, ongoing stressors described as by participants 'enshrined poverty' which includes but is not limited to:

- racism,
- child removal,
- no access to traditional lands,
- educational issues,
- over-representation in the legal system,
- over policing,
- access to resources, and
- inadequate and unaffordable housing.

Participants were proud of the gains made by themselves, their families and communities in managing these stressors. All participants identified resilience as a direct result of the fight to survive. In this sense, strength and survival can be seen as function of struggle.

"I had to check what resilience was... I'd say Aboriginal people are the most resilient in the world."

What does resilience mean to you?

Resilience comes from our family, identity, a sense of belonging and community & our sense of humour.

Connection

This includes a sense of belonging and connection to family, community and culture as well as spaces that facilitate meeting, talking and working together.

“You have to know who you are and where you’re from.”

Sharing

Participants named First Nations people as likely to provide help to anyone who needed it, even if they don’t have much themselves. This identified as a resilience strategy, helping families and communities build structures of mutual obligations and respect.

Culture & identity

Elders identified themselves as givers and receivers of culture, respect and care. They do this by imparting cultural information, modeling strength and resilience and quietly taking care of those in need. Meeting places and community spaces were described as sites where communities could impart cultural protocols, set boundaries, model strength and resilience, and build a sense of belonging, especially for the younger ones.

Participation

Elders talked about their generation’s strong work ethic. This included paid employment but also identified the work of healing, rebuilding culture, caring for family and building community institutions. “*Just getting on with it*” is a value that re-emerged regularly in the meetings.

The next generation

Young people were identified as “our future, our leaders, our optimism” however they need the attention of the Indigenous and wider community to negotiate their way through many stressors. Elders wondered whether young people felt included in the broader community, connected to culture, and had access to opportunities and political development. Elders see their role as helping young people to take over the fight given the Elders themselves stated they were tired from fighting for so long. Some Elders wondered, “Are we doing enough for the next generation?”.

“...a yarn, borrow a quid, borrow a cup of sugar... if you have it you give it.”

What can the broader community learn about resilience from Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples?

Despite the little we have, we have survived by caring & sharing.

Self-determination, social capital & adaptability

Participants discussed Indigenous communities' capacity to make change with few or no resources, employing local social capital to make change. Communities have employed social and community capital to support individuals and build institutions for mutual benefit. These institutions may be formal such as Aboriginal Medical Services, Black Theatre, Aboriginal Housing Company and Aboriginal Legal Service. Or informal structures around cultural learning, recreation, sport, study or performance. Participants were proud of the commitment, innovation and adaptability apparent in these community led initiatives.

Contributing to Sydney & the nation

Participants spoke proudly about positive contributions from First Nations people to the resilience of the city. As well as pointing out better known positive role models in the arts, Olympic sport and football participants talked about First Nations people that helped build the Harbour Bridge, fought in wars, started community organisations and ran community dances.

“No matter what they throw at us we keep going.”

“[For those who say] I haven't met an Aboriginal person – maybe you have and just not known they are Aboriginal because they didn't fit the stereotype.”

Recognition & respect

It was suggested that a better understanding of these contributions as well as traditional practices and knowledge would serve to reduce the stereotyping of First nations people and also provide role models for resilience not only to Indigenous people but all Sydney residents.

Participants spoke about the need for respect at the core of all interactions in the city. Recognition of First Nations, listening and the importance of stories were also named as core values and central to 'truth telling' and the acknowledgement of First nations places and contributions. Importantly, everyone expressed a strong desire to move forward together into the future united.

What is the preferred way to include Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples in decision-making related to the Resilient Sydney strategy? *We want to be involved in a meaningful way.*

Participants were keen to be part of an ongoing process – that is meaningful, not tokenistic – for generating ideas with the Resilient Sydney initiative. Leaders and Elders proposed the following mechanisms:

- Test ideas and actions with existing Indigenous consultative bodies within Local Government Areas.
- Co-create ideas and actions with key Aboriginal organisations including medical services, legal services, education groups and Elders groups.
- Co-create ideas and actions with representatives of the grassroots community through specific forums for Elders and for young people.

Consultation with and involvement of Aboriginal people in the Strategy must be reflective of the many Aboriginal nations that comprise metropolitan Sydney as well as the skills and experience that different people can contribute.

Elders also expressed frustration of advisory mechanisms which didn't act on their advice. To be meaningful, any consultation mechanism must listen to and act on the advice of First Nation's peoples.

“Conversations. Conversations need to be had.”

“It's easier to go. And it's harder to stay. Because if you stay [in community] you have got to do something.”

“[Don't] say many words but mean something else.”

Ideas for building a resilient Sydney

Acknowledging and celebrating First Peoples' resilience.

Many of the ideas generated in the meetings involved the development of place/s for gathering, working and caring for community, or cultural activities and artefacts. The establishment of a cultural centre(s) and recognition of Indigenous legends were raised in all meetings as ideas for building a resilient Sydney.

The ideas captured in the largest circles were most frequently raised in all meetings by most Elders. The ideas in the medium-sized circles were raised in all meetings but by fewer Elders. And the ideas in the smallest circles were raised in one or two meetings by a small number of Elders.



Implications

What do these findings mean for metropolitan Sydney?

The overwhelming message from these meetings is that Sydney will only be resilient when it acknowledges its First Peoples. This includes acknowledging the:

- the history of dispossession and its impacts,
- the contribution that First Peoples have made to building Sydney,
- First Peoples' cultures, experiences and histories are part of Sydney's identity, and
- wisdom of its First Peoples and how this has helped them survive and adapt.

A mature, resilient Sydney will be able to hear and speak to the complete truth about colonial dispossession, the contribution of First Nations people to the city, a proud history of resistance to invasion and the diversity found within Sydney's Indigenous population.

Recognition includes but is not limited to declaring gathering places, artefacts such as place markers or statues and dual naming of significant sites.

Such a strategy must also acknowledge the struggles still faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, which stops them from thriving such as social exclusion, low participation in employment, lack of access to affordable housing and ongoing discrimination.

Therefore any strategy aimed at building the city's resilience must be framed around understanding and addressing racial inequity. This includes:

- developing appropriate measures for tracking the stressors experienced by Aboriginal people, and
- including actions to improve Aboriginal peoples' access to housing, employment and education.

The Resilient Sydney initiative cannot come up with the answers, First Peoples must be involved at all stages. Participants were direct and emphatic in applying the principle 'nothing about us without us'.

Implications

Recommendations

This process clarified priorities for First Nations Elders and community leaders. We recommend Resilient Sydney work with the First Nations community of metropolitan Sydney to explore the following actions:

- Developing a cultural centre(s) highlighting:
 - cultural practices of the various traditional owner groups in metropolitan Sydney,
 - the pre and post colonial history of Sydney and its impact on its First Peoples,
 - First Nations peoples' contribution to Sydney, and
 - the range of First Nations role models and leaders in fields such as arts, sports, politics, business, land rights, civil rights, community services and the military.
- Promoting Welcome to / Acknowledgement of Country at Sydney airport.
- Developing targeted aged care facilities for Elders.

- Co-creating community services operated by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community including access to affordable housing.
- Developing business hubs for Indigenous business to start-up and grow as well as for Indigenous people to find employment.
- Developing processes / practices / centres that provide safety and enable healing from trauma.
- Celebrating and recognising the contribution of Sydney's First Peoples through dual place naming and erection of statues / artefacts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legends.

The findings of this consultation process reinforced First Nations peoples' desire for nothing to be done for or to them without them. As such, it is recommended that any actions pursued are co-created with the First Nation's community.



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