PROJECT BACKGROUND
In late 2007, five South Australian Councils commenced a pilot program to establish an online Community Panel for the purposes of undertaking ongoing low-cost, effective and representative community engagement.

The project originated from a discussion between Jim Myhill, General Manager Corporate Services at the City of Tea Tree Gully and Jane Trotter (then the Governance Manager at the City of Unley) who had a joint interest in establishing a Panel for their respective communities. The two saw the value in partnering on this project and developed a vision for a state-wide approach that would provide economies of scale, cost efficiencies, knowledge sharing and benchmarking opportunities. This would be a first for local government and a boon for the state. The concept is still relatively new in Australia with only a small number of Councils running such Panels. Those that are in operation are generally mail based, with associated limitations of size and manageability. Jim and Jane researched the concept for 12 months, including visits to other Councils and discussions with a number of potential software vendors and market research providers.

During these investigations the team spoke with the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute based at the University of South Australia. The Institute were immediately interested in assisting as they had a research agenda around online research methodologies and could see great value in this project. As a non-profit organisation the Institute formed a true partnership with the Councils providing invaluable expertise and in-kind support. The LGA provided a small grant through the Research and Development Scheme to assist in running a pilot program. Two regional Councils were also invited to participate in the project; Whyalla and the Coorong. During the course of the pilot, Jane Trotter moved to Burnside Council who then also came on board.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION
The Pilot is a partnership project between Tea Tree Gully, Burnside, Unley, Coorong, Whyalla, the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute and the Local Government Association of South Australia. The Institute manages all the technology to manage the panel, collect and analyse responses from the survey engine and also provides specialist skills in research design, questionnaire development and analysis. Councils are responsible for recruitment of Panel members.

Community Panel provides a method for regular consultation with community stakeholders across a broad range of topics including Council services, budgets and strategic plans. Councils recruit residents of all ages and backgrounds to join their panel, building an online ‘community’ that is a demographically representative snapshot of their residents.

Each Community Panel goes through a validation stage once the panel has reached critical mass (approx 300 members minimum). A wide range of demographic, geographic and psychographic variables are considered to see how closely the panel reflects the profile of the council area and what additional targeted recruitment may be necessary. Additionally a research
survey is run both online using the new panel and through a traditional method and the results of each compared.

Panel members are invited by email to complete a number of on-line surveys each year for their local council. Respondents are provided with incentives for responding including entry in a prize draw for completing surveys, newsletters and feedback on survey results. They are also invited to participate in Panel Member only events such as a free movie night. The Panels are also promoted heavily on the Council web-sites, with Panel member profiles, prize winners, survey results and upcoming surveys.

Once a successful model is established, the panel concept can be made available to all Councils, which may then create a very large State-wide community panel which can be used to measure community feedback at both a Local and State level. This level of consultation and engagement would be unique in Australia and would provide a very innovative, cost effective and powerful means to engage our communities.

PROJECT BENEFITS
Community Panel provides Council Administration and Elected Members access to timely and accurate research results in a more cost-effective manner than traditional market research methodologies. Benefits include:

- Representative community consultations – not just the views of a select few residents
- Timely results – available in days rather than weeks
- Quickly check the ‘pulse’ of a community on an issue
- Low incremental cost – allowing for more frequent engagement with greater numbers of residents
- Flexibility of research design – respondents can view images, read detailed information and write about their opinions
- The opportunity to interact with a network of Councils – sharing research approaches, information and developing benchmarks
- Providing a vehicle for surveying a cross section of the South Australian community on broad sector wide issues
- Demonstrate a commitment to leading practice community engagement

The panel members themselves have provided positive feedback about their involvement in the Panel via the surveys, email and in person at Panel events. One Burnside Panel member wrote “Thank you for letting me know of my win! What with a free movie and a shopping voucher I feel I am getting more out of this on-line survey than you are! Anyway it certainly encourages me to keep taking part and I will let my friends know about it too.”

PROJECT OUTCOMES
The pilot project has been very successful and has exceeded all expectations. Community members have shown a great interest in getting involved, with over 1700 members of the Community Panel amongst the five member Councils already. These numbers are predominantly within the three metro Councils, Tea Tree Gully, Unley and Burnside.
Surveys and consultations have been undertaken with the Panels on a diverse range of issues including general satisfaction with Council services, views on nudity in art, indigenous issues, review of Strategic Plan, use of community facilities and a consultation on renewal of SANFL football club licence.

Validation studies have been undertaken by the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute for the City of Unley and the City of Tea Tree Gully. The City of Burnside validation is in progress. The two completed studies have demonstrated that the Panels closely matched the demographic profiles of the alternative validation methodologies (phone and mail) as well as the ABS profiles for the two areas. The studies confirmed that the Community Panel is a methodology that can capture the respective communities in a representative way and recommend the Panel as a valid community engagement methodology.

With the pilot complete, the Panel team has developed best practice guidelines and a pricing model for rollout of Community Panel to other South Australian Councils. The model has been market tested with several interested Councils who have endorsed the concept and are keen to join the project. Discussions are being held with the LGA to identify their ongoing role and involvement with the project.

CONCLUSION
The Statewide Online Community Panel Pilot Project was successfully implemented and demonstrated the value of this research approach for South Australian Councils. It is a practical tool that can be implemented by any Council according to established guidelines and with the support of a mentor Council for not much greater expense than the cost of running a telephone survey of residents. Longer term it provides the sector with benchmarking opportunities and the previously untapped potential of access to the views of a cross section of residents across all Councils and all demographic groups.