FOCUS GROUPS REPORT FOR THE TOWN OF WELLESLEY
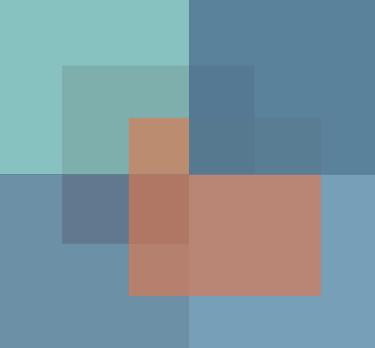
Racial Equity Group

ELITE RESEARCH

Table of Contents

Introduction

The Racial Equity Group (REG) requested assistance from Elite Research, LLC (ER) with recording and reporting focus groups in September 2024 for the Town of Wellesley. This initiative aimed to capture the lived experiences of residents and stakeholders, contributing to efforts to foster a more inclusive Town.

The purpose of these focus groups is to help the Town of Wellesley identify the experiences of residents and stakeholders to create more inclusivity in the town. In general, focus groups are ways of obtaining in depth experiences of people who share similar experiences according to their role in a community, race, language spoken, gender, and other identifying information.

All participants were encouraged to share their opinion, even if it differed from what others stated. Participants acknowledged that their participation was completely voluntary, and they may choose only to answer certain questions, and leave the focus group at any time. To help foster an honest and safe discussion, all participants were asked not to share what they heard in their focus group with others. Finally, participants were informed that the focus group data and report would be de-identified and not link to any individual who participated in the discussions.

ER provided REG with feedback on the focus groups questions to ensure open-ended and question relevance to the project goal. ER also provided written reports of each focus group and interview. After the interview and focus groups were completed, notes were written for coding and analysis. To analyze the data, ER staff took a qualitative thematic analysis approach in which they reviewed the data, applied codes to summarize concepts, and organized codes into major themes that helped to complete the project goal.

A total of 15 residents and stakeholders participated in the focus groups, which were conducted remotely. For qualitative research like focus groups, we typical strive for three focus groups of 5 to 8 participants. The maximum number of participants would have been 24 participants, and we achieved 15 participants. Best practices for achieving "data saturation," which indicates that qualitative data collection ceases once we are unable to observe new themes, insights, or patterns from participants. Information related to each focus group is summarized in Table 1 below from participants' self-identification of their gender, race, and ethnicity:

Table 1
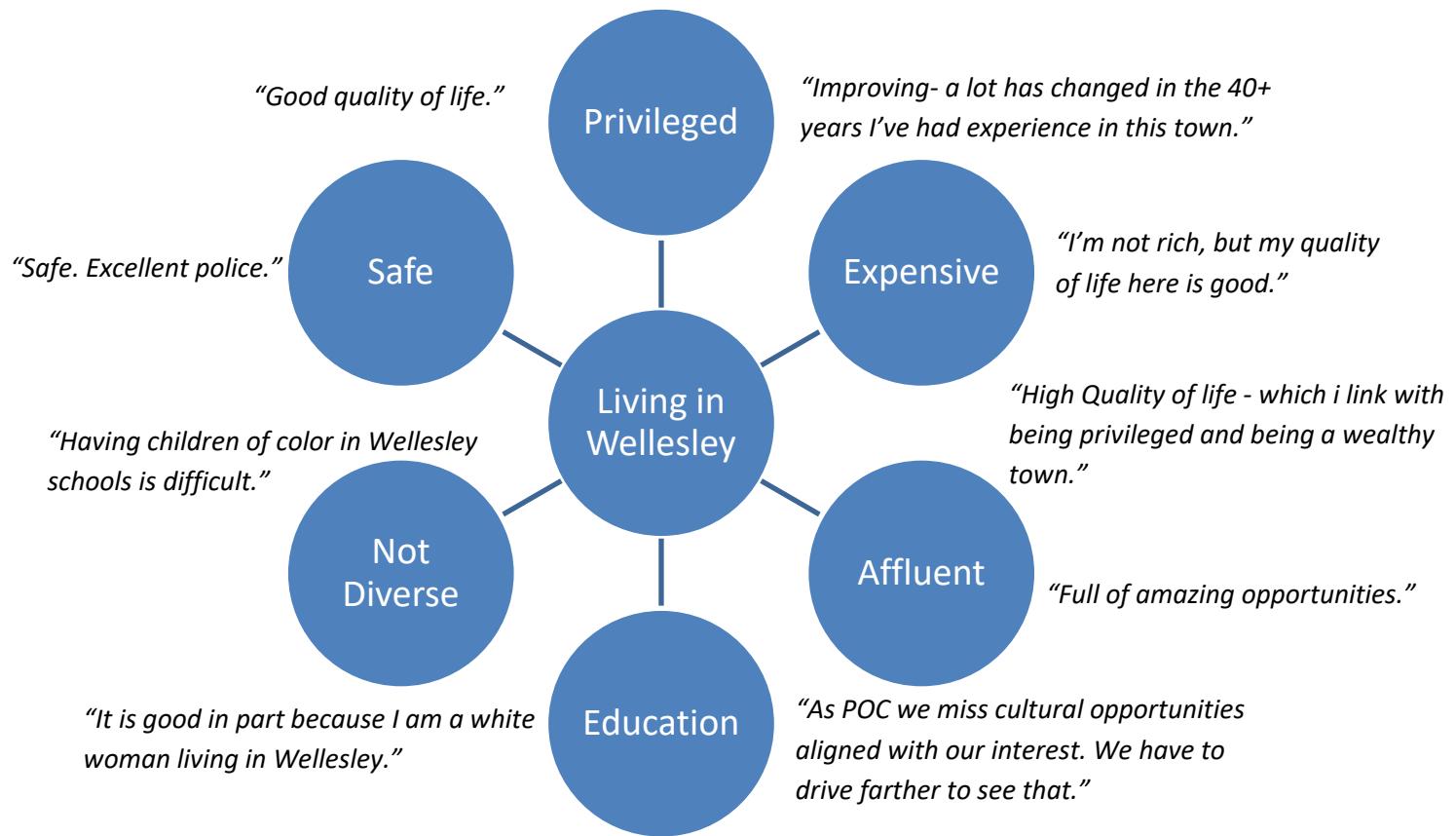*Focus Group Type and Number of Participants, *POC= people of color*

Focus Group	Gender	Demographics	Number of Participants
Focus Group Residents	11 Females; 3 Males	African American (2) Asian (3) White (6) *POC (3)	14
Focus Group Stakeholders	1 Female	White (1)	1
Total	12 Females; 3 Males	African American (2) Asian (3) White (7) *POC (3)	15

Executive Summary

One Word

All participants were asked to provide one word that describes their quality of life in the Town of Wellesley, as well as one word that describes the town. Below are their responses.

"Good quality of life."

"Improving- a lot has changed in the 40+ years I've had experience in this town."

Privileged

"Safe. Excellent police."

Safe

Expensive

"I'm not rich, but my quality of life here is good."

Living in Wellesley

"High Quality of life - which i link with being privileged and being a wealthy town."

"Having children of color in Wellesley schools is difficult."

Not Diverse

Affluent

"Full of amazing opportunities."

Education

"It is good in part because I am a white woman living in Wellesley."

"As POC we miss cultural opportunities aligned with our interest. We have to drive farther to see that."

Based on the focus groups, participants made several recommendations for the Town of Wellesley to consider:

- Offer diverse events and activities that cater to various cultural, and ethnic groups within town, and improve communication to ensure wider participation.
- Celebrate diverse holidays and cultures to make all residents feel more welcome and inclusive.
- Support diverse events and activities by having town government staff and/or elected officials attend and provide resources to host culturally diverse events that foster a sense of belonging and inclusion.
- Address disparities in representation within Town government departments and boards and committees.
- Encourage diverse representation of staff within Town stores and restaurants and develop a strategy to attract diverse business owners to serve diverse population.

Focus Groups Themes

Discussions during the focus groups revealed several key themes. Themes are the main responses that were discussed in the focus groups.

Qualitative analysis revealed five overarching themes across the focus groups. These themes are Lack of Diverse/Cultural Events, Positive Town Staff Interactions, Barriers to Accessing Resources, Barriers to Inclusive Civic Engagement, Discrimination Experiences.

Lack of Diverse/Cultural Events

Focus group participants were asked to *share their thoughts on the social and cultural events and activities in the Town and in what ways do these events and activities embrace diversity and foster belonging and inclusion according to their culture and other identities*.

Nearly all participants expressed a notable lack of diverse and inclusive cultural events and activities organized and/or supported by Town government:

- "People here don't deliberately exclude you, but they don't deliberately include you either."
- "Lacking, but Library does a good job."
- "Other volunteers are doing their own thing. No focus on bringing cultures together."
- Colleges do various activities but hard to get the community to come out."
- "There are pockets of activities available if one is connected with them or seeks them out. You have to know about these events. More activities in other towns."
- "We go to Natick because they celebrate diversity. Wellesley seems to steer clear of that as a town."
- "It's a narrow group of activities, places like World of Wellesley, but town does not like things at night or loud music or lights."
- "There could be more. if the town was more welcoming to good chaos."
- "There are events and activities, but 98% are geared to majority population of the town."
- "I was disappointed that nothing was done to recognize Juneteenth."
- "Same traditional Town activities for years. Nothing new to adjust to changing needs of diverse people."
- "Not widely publicized or reaches me."

Positive Town Staff Interactions

Participants were asked to *reflect on their interactions with Town government staff and elected officials and describe how they are treated*. Most participants noted high levels of fair treatment, professionalism and inclusivity among town staff, volunteers and elected officials. The majority of participants noted that town staff are polite, respectful perceived as inclusive. A few participants noted little interaction with town government.

- "I think town staff is very polite, eager to help, for example recreation and utilities.
- "I have limited interactions. I have never had a negative experience."
- "I wonder if I would have the same experience if I identified as different identity."
- "We have a partnership between the town and the college and I work closely with various town depts. and it always has felt like a partnership."
- "I have been super involved in town boards. I would say staff top notch."
- "I found elected officials receptive to feedback."
- "I was encouraged to run for town meeting member."
- "I think the select board office and town office works hard to be welcoming."
- "I was pleased when Wellesley recognized indigenous people day."
- "Overall interaction pleasant"

Barriers to Accessing Resources

Participants were asked to *share their experiences with accessing and utilizing Town government services and programs, and if there were any barriers related to their identity*. One stakeholder identified Catch Connect as a strength for student access to transportation. Other participants identified barriers for accessing transportation within certain parts of town (e.g. Nines) town and also challenges for visually impaired persons unable to drive at night to attend town meeting and lack of transit options. Finally, a few participants repeated the need for accessing meeting space to host events and activities.

- "It's become difficult to get free town space to put events together. If I want to run an international event, I have to pay $800 to $1200 to rental facility. It would be great if town let us rent for free if it benefits the whole town."
- "Babson students use Catch Connect. Gone very well for our students."
- "One thing I found upsetting is that it is VERY expensive to use the meeting rooms at the Wellesley Library. I was shocked to discover that to use a room for a nonprofit group it was hundreds of dollars."
- "Tax-payer supported facilities should be accessible to all—affordable."
- "I have an issue with the Nines, transportation is a big issue for people on Barton road and the Nines."
- "I have poor vision and can't drive, transit isn't an option. Town meetings are at night. They end at 11pm at night and can be challenges for those who don't have cars or poor vision."
- "Be more supportive and encouraging. Its hard to find space to hold events that's not expensive."

Barriers to Inclusive Civic Engagement

Transitioning to civic engagement, participants *shared their experiences and identified barriers to participating in Town meeting, and serving on boards and commissions related to their identity*. Some participants shared barriers and challenges for participating in Town meeting and serving on boards and committees.

- "I felt like an outsider back in the day, I have been treated very well in town meeting, and boards and commissions."
- "I do think some boards make incorrect assumptions. They would assume barton road, they needed to go there to recruit people to register to vote. Well intentioned people need some data to help with their decisions."
- "The town does not handle diverse opinions well. People on town boards are mostly white."
- "A lot of leadership on boards is "like recruiting like.""
- "Maybe term limits for board members. Same people on boards for years. Some people may be deterred from running against them."
- "I don't think they are excluding people who are different. But they are not thinking to include people."
- "I think there is a feeling that a small group of people run the town. It seems like a closed group of people like the way town runs and likes to keep it that way."
- "I think communication. Its unfortunate the townsman has gone, getting the word out and hearing what people want, can't just rely on the Swellesley report."

THE REMAINING PORTION OF THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

Discrimination Experiences

To better understand experiences of discrimination, participants were asked to *share their experiences and any experiences of their or family members who felt denied, excluded, or treated less favorably than others because of their identity (e.g. race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or other identities)*. As well as how the experiences impacted them, and which aspects of their identity they believe influenced the treatment received.

All focus groups shared individual experiences and anecdotal experiences of others who felt denied, excluded, or treated less favorably because of their identity (e.g. race/ethnicity) within the community and not specifically from town government staff or elected officials.

- "You don't have enough time for me to tell you. It's been a lot it's been rough and living in public housing, we got it all around."
- "It's hard to think of just one."
- It's different now and it's improved, but nowhere near what it needs to be."
- It's hard to put into words."
- "I haven't had experience but something I fear for my children and entering the school system. I worry about my children; I feel like I have to take my child outside this community to interact with other diverse children."
- "None of my siblings would ever move back to Wellesley."
- "College students of color have felt targeted when entering stores in Wellesley, being watched."
- "My 13-year-old daughter had white boys run up to her and ask do black lives matter.
- "I have not myself, but I do hear about racist jokes at school, but the schools don't do a good job of teaching what racism is. Kids don't understand what this means and how harmful they are being."
- "People who staff all board and committees need to have training ongoing. Schools need to have discussions on these ongoing."
- "Students walk into stores they feel targeted when they walk into the door in those stores and in those restaurants."
- "Cars going by told faculty of color to go home when walking around."
- "For people who are black I can think of many instances they have had many years."
- "These call outs tend to come from members of the public, the town has less control of their citizens."
- "I have heard anecdotally these kinds of experiences. I think its very clearly present and its painful very painful. Its unacceptable."

Recommendations

In order to address concerns derived from their discussions, participants were asked *what measures can Town government implement to enhance residents' quality of life and sense of belonging and inclusion?* Below is a summary of their voices and recommendations.

Celebrate and Support Diversity

Most participants in two of the three focus groups suggested Town government should offer culturally diverse events and/or support diverse events and activities.

- "Celebrations of diversity within this town in order to make residents feel welcome."
- "Especially Juneteenth. I saw nothing, it would have been nice to have a guest speaker or something."
- There is no town support or manpower from the town or advertising for cultural events. I see other towns seem to place it as a higher priority."
- 'Town officials should show up to cultural events."
- "The town does not outright discriminate but they don't support."
- "Put resources to it. It's not just money, there is tons of space, schools, town hall, library, but they all charge money."
- "Offer workshops, training sessions, and seminars for residents and town employees on implicit bias, cultural competency, and anti-racism."
- "The town should give residents who want to organize events tools to help and show how to organize an event. Help with communication, provide them with counseling. How to get started."
- "Have a committee receive anonymous feedback from town residents or any incident and that committee has authority to do something about it. I think the freedom team does that, but they just give you a hug, they have no authority."
- "METCO and Wellesley schools give kids a better chance, these groups are successful of bringing diverse groups into Wellesley, but can they get more support and resources."
- "Alot of school staff don't know diverse holidays or talk about equity with kids. Teachers say we can't talk about anything that's not academic."
- "As an adult I don't worry about myself. I worry that we have systemically not educated the larger population in Wellesley and how other children are going to treat them."
- "Its so insular. We go outside Wellesley to teach our children, and I fear that."
- "Host cultural events, festivals, and celebrations that highlight the diversity within the community."
- "The SWellesley Report is a good way to reach the community but I never see ethnic events mentioned."
- "Everyone has been friendly and welcoming, but sometimes I feel like my ethnicity is ignored or invisible."

Encourage Diversity in Stores and Restaurants

Residents and stakeholders shared the need to see more diversity of staff who work in town restaurants and retail stores. A few participants also mentioned attracting minority owned businesses to serve diverse demographic groups within town.

- "Storefronts lack diversity in employees. We don't see students of color hired in retail stores.
- "It seems the hiring comes from a very narrow range. Students look for jobs in town."
- "We need to have more diversity in town stores and restaurants and have more diverse businesses come to town and serve diverse residents."
- "Maybe the town needs to follow Needham. There is really nothing here."
- "Town employees at restaurants and businesses are not diverse."
- "If we look at where our students can go to now, there are no stores students can go to. Rents are so high; we can't get stores that serves diverse students. Keeping our students close to campus instead of sending them to Boston or Cambridge is a missed market opportunity."
- "Create initiatives that encourage growth of minority-owned businesses, such as grants, business incubators, and networking events that provide mentorship and resources."

Reflect the Population being Served

A few residents identified the lack of diverse representation within town government, committees, and school administrators and faculty, that reflects the town population.

- "We have an Asian population, and Wellesley should expand to recruit people to work in Wellesley."
- "I don't think there is much diversity in fire, police and schools. We should look for more diverse people to work in our town, the diversity is completely not reflective of the population."
- "There is no reflection on diversity, the schools are a clear example, how can your child go through 13 years of school in Wellesley and not interact with a teacher who looks like them."
- "Ensure that town boards, committees, and leadership positions reflect the diverse makeup of the community. Proactively recruit candidates from underrepresented groups and encourage their participation in decision-making processes.

Conclusion

Administering this evaluative work speaks to the Town's commitment to ask difficult questions and engage in self-reflection regarding the lived experiences of all residents and stakeholders in Wellesley. It reflects the beginning of a journey to create a town that is responsive to the unique values and needs of different demographic groups. This commitment will fuel action and efforts to create a strategy based on the feedback presented in this report.

It is essential that the overall findings and observations discovered are further developed and prioritized such that solutions are aligned from multiple perspectives.

Addressing the issues identified will require a deliberate and sustainable effort from town leadership, staff, and the community. By implementing the recommendations in this report, the town can move towards a more inclusive and equitable town where all residents have a voice and a sense of belonging and inclusion.

For any questions related to this report, please contact bird@racialequitygroup.com

About Racial Equity Group LLC,

Racial Equity Group is a management consulting firm that provides advisory services to public and private organizations on Racial Equity, diversity and inclusion strategies, as well as customizing and facilitating Racial Equity audit assessments, and implicit bias training experiences. Our vision is to equip organizations to make Racial Equity standard operating procedure.

About Elite Research, LLC

In 2020, Elite Research, LLC celebrated its sixteenth year globally assisting researchers and practitioners. Since its inception, Elite Research has had the mission of empowering researchers in the nonprofit, academic, and business realms by educating and mentoring clients, providing research and editing expertise, and stepping in at the research point where clients are ready. Elite Research has assisted with thousands of projects ranging from research design, survey development, and data collection to advanced statistical models, data analytics, and dissertation preparation. Due to Elite Research, LLC's excellence in empowerment and ensuring project success, many clients return for multiple projects.

Appendix

Appendix A: Focus Group Script and Questions

Interview Questions

Welcome and thank you for participating in this focus group. My name is [facilitator's name]. We also have my colleague [recorder name], who will be taking notes during our discussion so that we are able to capture your thoughts and experiences. We are with Racial Equity Group and Elite Research, who have been contracted by the Town of Wellesley to conduct a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Audit. The focus groups are one component of the overall audit. The purpose of this focus group is to identify and understand the lived experiences of Town residents and stakeholders, ensure residents and stakeholders are treated fairly, and have a sense of belonging and inclusion.

Ground Rules

Before we begin with the questions, I want to go over a few guidelines for our discussion:

- First, feel free to share your opinion, even if it differs from what others have said, because there are no wrong or right answers, only different opinions.
- Next, your participation in this focus group is completely voluntary and you may choose only to answer certain questions. You may leave the focus group at any time. Remember, you do not have to answer every question.
- To help us foster an honest and safe discussion, please do not share what you hear in this focus group with others.
- All reporting documents will be de-identified and not link to any individual who participates in this focus group.
- Lastly, at the end of this session, we encourage you to use this opportunity to connect with each other to continue this discussion, share your experiences, and learn from each other to build new relationships.

1. For this first question, what is one word you would use to describe the Town of Wellesley and why? (Example. If needed: welcoming, friendly, supportive, exclusionary)
2. How would you describe your quality of life in Wellesley?
3. What are your thoughts on the social and cultural events and activities in the Town?
4. In what ways do these events and activities embrace diversity and foster belonging and inclusion according to your culture and other identities?
5. Reflecting on your interactions with Town government staff and elected officials, how would you describe how you are treated? (e.g. respectful, condescending, biases)
6. In your opinion, how do you think people of diverse backgrounds are treated according to race/ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, gender, and other identities?

7. Transitioning to civic engagement, can you share your experiences with accessing and utilizing Town government services and programs?
8. Additionally, what are the barriers, if any, do you feel in accessing Town services or participating in its programs, especially related to your identity?
9. What barriers, particularly those related to race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities, have you encountered with participating in Town meeting, and serving on boards and commissions?
10. In your opinion, what measures can Town government implement to enhance residents' quality of life, sense of belonging and inclusion?
11. What experiences in Wellesley, if any, have you, your friends or family members had where you felt denied, excluded, or treated less favorably than others because of race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or other identities?
12. How did these experiences impact you?
13. Which aspects of your identity do you think influenced the treatment you received?
14. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences as a resident of the Town that has not been discussed in the previous questions?

This concludes our focus group. We appreciate your time and feedback. Thank you for your participation!