



Citizens' Panels

What is ... a Citizen's Panel

A Citizen's Panel is made up of residents who have volunteered to be consulted on a wide variety of issues such as Crime and Disorder, Recycling and Parks & Open Spaces. A Citizens Panel does not 'vote' on issues but the views and feedback that is received from the panel helps to plan services more effectively.

A Panel usually has between 500 – 1000 members. They are usually consulted via postal and telephone questionnaire.

Why use a Citizen's Panel?

Panels provide a representative view of public opinion which is useful in considering changes in services. You can tailor the membership of your panel so that it is demographically representative of the wider borough.

Because the panel is filled by volunteers your response rates will be much higher than consultations done randomly amongst the general population.

However, you need to consider that people of the panel may be representing particular interests that could introduce an element of bias into a consultation exercise.

When should you use it?

The Panel should be used to consult on service provision issues. This should be done when a particular issue occurs, where a service change is planned or has occurred and when you need to identify levels of customer satisfaction.

What type of information does it produce?

The information produced can be both qualitative and quantitative. Panels are often consulted by questionnaire either by post or telephone to provide predominantly quantitative data. However they may also take part in focus groups and workshops that produce more qualitative data (see the jargon buster for an explanation of quantitative and qualitative).

Whilst panels are useful as ongoing sounding boards you are more likely to get useful results when you ask questions about issues that the members know and care about.

What are the advantages?

- All participants are volunteers
- Participants are able to make informed judgements
- The process empowers, and informs policy making and provision of services
- It is dynamic, interactive and powerful
- It can help to track changes over time
- It can be representative of target population
- Once established panels can respond quickly


What are the disadvantages?

- It can prove difficult to recruit – particularly from hard to reach groups.
- Panel members may delay in responding
- Panels can prove costly to establish
- It can be expensive with fees and expenses being paid
- older people with more time available may dominate
- Panels will require constant recruiting as members drop out
- There is a risk of 'conditioning' and 'attrition' – over time panel members either become untypical (i.e. they become experts) or lose interest in participating

What are the costs?

Panels can be expensive to set up and maintain as members need to be replaced periodically, although costs will decline with use. One of the major costs comes in recruiting panel members.

Soft Panels have lower associated costs with members recruited through a postal survey or face-to-face but without being fully representative.



Hard Panels are recruited in a similar way but with extra effort to ensure traditionally excluded are included and put in place to ensure they are fully representative.

What are the Practicalities?

Panel members need to be kept interested to ensure continued participation so you need to maintain regular contact.

Panels need to be refreshed and replaced periodically to prevent them from becoming experts and there is also the danger that the consultation becomes stale as the same people get asked the same questions.

You need to ensure information is in appropriate formats and that the needs of individuals are catered for (i.e. disability needs).

