

Case Study: South Oxfordshire Citizens Panel project

AIMS AND ACHIEVEMENTS



Citizens Panels are a cost-effective way for councils to consult with local residents on a range of different matters. By taking a representative sample of the local population (by geographical area, age, gender and ethnicity, for example), you can get results that can be broadly representative of the population of the area. Citizen Panels generally achieve high response rates.

Panels are a good way to get feedback from residents on the performance of existing council services, get views on proposed service changes or determine the feasibility of introducing new services. Traditionally, panel members are consulted via postal surveys sent out periodically, gauging views and reviewing changes in opinion over time.

Panels can also be segmented into key interest groups, for example, we can create subgroups of the panel to concentrate on specific service areas that residents are interested in, such as Waste and Recycling, to get more detailed feedback on new ideas and test new initiatives such as introducing kerbside recycling schemes and so on. These give councils vital feedback on the actual experience and can help to plan for any issues or problems that could potentially crop up.

South Oxfordshire District Council's Citizens Panel is now in its 5th year of existence. Since September 2003, a panel of around 1200 residents has been consulted every quarter via a postal survey, on their views about council services, their priorities for the future and have helped the council make important decisions about changes to services or the introduction of new services.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

The Councils and Consultation Expert Practice Centre at M-E-L Research has been working with South Oxfordshire's Corporate Strategy Team since 2006 on maintaining and surveying the panel.

The first step taken was to refresh the panel via an initial random postal survey. Once the required demographic profile was compared to the demographic profile achieved from the recruitment, target quotas were set to make sure the panel was fully representative of the local population. As South Oxfordshire is 70% rural population and 30% urban, highly targeted on-street recruitment was needed across the entire length and breadth of the district, to ensure the panel was geographically representative.

Quarterly surveys are sent to members by post and now online (for those who specified this preference). Online is an extremely cost-effective and quick way to get residents opinions. Feedback from the council to panel members is a vital part of the relationship, as it helps to make panel members feel involved and that their views are being used by the council to make important decisions.

Recent additional consultation has taken place with the panel, in the form of a 'budget consultation' workshop and service-specific consultation workshops. These have been run by the council themselves, with recruitment being done by M-E-L Research. Most recently, a Panel Day was hosted by the council and attended by service departments and councillors, with around 50 members of the panel in attendance. The day was a huge success and gave the council great feedback about the panel and also was a nice 'thank you' to the panel for the important contribution they make.

CLIENT SERVICE AND SUPPORT

The project is led by M-E-L's Senior Research and Marketing Consultant, Karen Phillips, who works closely with the council's Corporate Consultation Officer. All fieldwork is organised and processed by our internal Field and Data team, which helps to ensure the entire project from start to finish, is managed internally by the M-E-L project team and is not outsourced to low quality providers.

For further information about our citizens panels work, please contact Karen Phillips @ karen.phillips@m-e-l.co.uk or call 0121 604 4664