Citizens Panels in New Zealand

The use of Citizens’ Panels as an effective consultation tool by Local Government in New Zealand

This paper supports the use of Citizens’ Panels as a consultation tool for local government. It summarises the legislative context for consultation, and the way in which councils currently meet their obligations to consult the community. It describes the concept of a Citizens’ Panel, and the advantages of using a Panel. The paper concludes with a case study of the Citizens’ Panel developed by Palmerston North City Council.
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Executive Summary

PublicVoice has produced this paper with the purpose of explaining the concept and advantages of Citizens’ Panels to local government in New Zealand.

Councils are legally required to consult with their communities; it also makes good sense to. There are, however, a number of problems with how New Zealand councils currently do this. The ‘tried and tested’ methods fail to engage significant groups within the community. Over a third of the population have said that they are unlikely to express their views to their local council, many citing reasons such as not being bothered or not having enough time. The conventional consultation methods of requiring people to attend meetings, or to be proactive in seeking information and making submissions, all of which take time to do, are simply a further constraint to people giving their views. Current practices enable the ‘vocal minority’ to contribute while the ‘silent majority’ and ‘hard to access’ groups within the community are disengaged and ignored. Because of this, there is a real concern that consultation feedback, on which councils base important decisions, is not representative of the wider community.

A Citizens’ Panel is a group of people selected from the community, with whom a council regularly consults on a range of issues. Care can be taken to ensure that Panel membership is representative, and that people are interested in participating. It is possible, through rigorous selection methods, to focus on and engage with traditionally hard to reach groups. Panel consultation can be carried out online, making it simple and quick for Panel members to be involved. Online Panels, in particular, are very effective at engaging people who have not previously participated in local government consultation. Regular interaction with Panels encourages feedback, and provides councils with useful and relevant information to make good quality decisions. It is also easier to collaborate with other community organisations when there is a need to consult on wider issues.

Palmerston North City Council became concerned about the validity of its consultation exercises and subsequent feedback. The Council wanted to know the views of the ‘silent majority’, and capture feedback at an early stage, to ensure good service provision. The Council commissioned an online PublicVoice Citizens’ Panel that was representative of the community. This Panel has been regularly consulted on a wide range of issues. Over 80% of Panel members are engaged and interested in participating.

Citizen Panels are an effective tool for local councils to consult with the local community. Panels provide councils with valid community feedback, and enable councils to make informed decisions.
About Public Voice

PublicVoice are a Wellington-based market research company, providing research solutions for a variety of local, national and international organisations. We provide the full breadth of research services and specialise in developing research communities.

Our company helps New Zealand organisations gain valuable insight into the thoughts and opinions of New Zealanders; information that enables those organisations to make smart decisions. We have developed strong relationships with Local Government, the Education Sector and Industry Associations to fulfil research and public consultation requirements.

Key clients that we have worked with include:

- Palmerston North City Council
- Manawatu District Council
- Hastings District Council
- Urbanplus
- Hutt City Council
- University of Otago
- University of Auckland
- Education New Zealand

With a strong focus on public consultation, PublicVoice understand that councils are answerable to their communities, and the necessity for consultation methodologies to withstand public scrutiny while offering cost-effectiveness.

Our public consultation methods include the following:

- Customer Satisfaction Surveys
- Employee Surveys
- Online Surveys
- Citizens Panel
- Custom Online Panels

We use established market research tools and methodologies, and the latest survey technology, to provide research solutions that are cost effective, flexible and focused.
Local government – consultation requirements and practice

Before considering the concept of a Citizens’ Panel in more detail, it is useful to summarise the rules that councils work within when consulting with the community, and identify what councils presently do to meet those requirements. This provides a framework for understanding how the Citizens’ Panel model adds value to what councils currently do.

The legislative requirements

The Local Government Act (2002) requires local authorities to consider the views of affected or interested people when making decisions, and to consult the community. In defining principles for consultation, the Act makes clear that councils should actively encourage people to contribute their views, and that people should be able to give those views in a way that is appropriate for their needs. Aside from being a legislative necessity, it simply makes good sense for local authorities to enter into dialogue with people who are affected by council decisions.

While the Local Government Act requires that consultation takes place, it does not stipulate what general consultation practices must look like. Over time, accepted norms have developed in the ways that councils in New Zealand have consulted with their constituents.
New Zealand councils – current community consultation techniques

Research into consultation techniques undertaken by New Zealand councils shows that receiving submissions and holding public meetings remains the mainstay of consultation for the vast majority of councils.

The graph in Figure 1 illustrates in more detail the type and frequency of current consultation techniques.

(Source: www.localcouncils.govt.nz)

While councils have established ways of consulting the community, which seem to meet legislative requirements, there are considerable problems with current practice.
Problems with current consultation methods

One key issue is that despite having these consultation methods in place, a significant proportion of the community still feels disinclined to engage with their local authority. In the New Zealand survey Public Knowledge About Local Government (Department of Internal Affairs, 2006), 36% of respondents said they were unlikely to give their views on an issue to a council. Two main reasons given were that people could not be bothered, or did not have the time to give their views. In the same survey, however, 57% of people agreed that, as a member of the community, it was their duty to take an interest in what the council did. 55% of respondents acknowledged that councils provide useful services. This clearly demonstrates that people are interested in their council’s activities. A significant contributing factor to the public’s reluctance to express views is the lack of ease for people to engage with current consultation techniques.

It is well known that all communities have segments of their populations that are ‘hard to reach’ – those ‘individuals or groups whom an institution finds difficult to contact or engage for a particular purpose’ (Brackertz et al 2005, p.25). This can be for a number of reasons, with research\(^1\) identifying the following factors as affecting accessibility to individuals or groups:

- Language
- Age (such as younger or older people)
- Household composition (families)
- Geographic location (rural, metro)
- Gender
- Housing status (public housing, homeless)
- Income
- Ethnicity
- Religion
- Indigeneity
- Employment status
- Residential status (new or established resident)
- Health status (disability, drug dependent)
- Access to transport
- Hours worked.

As the length of the list above demonstrates, a large proportion of the community falls into the category of ‘hard to reach’. Councils cannot afford to ignore these groups in their decision making.

The ‘silent majority’ also creates an issue for councils – do the views of the people that participate reflect the views of people who don’t get involved in their consultation exercises? And are the decisions councils make based on those views in the best interests of the wider community?

Often it is the case that the ‘vocal minority’ drowns out the voice of the ‘silent majority’. Because of the time and energy required, conventional consultation techniques generally require a level of motivation that only those with a keen interest in the topic possess. The traditional research approaches that councils currently use tend to attract the same ‘usual suspects’, and fail to provide councils with the representative view they desire.

The next chapter discusses the concept of a Citizens’ Panel, and how establishing such a Panel can help councils reduce the barriers to effective consultation with their communities.
What is a Citizens’ Panel

A Citizens’ Panel is a representative group of people selected from the local community, with whom a council regularly consults on a range of issues. Citizen Panels provide councils with an efficient and effective way to consult with their communities.

A Citizens’ Panel is recruited using a variety of random sampling methods to ensure that panel membership is broadly representative of the local population. The number of participants can vary from 500 to 5,000 people. Panel members reflect the demographic and geographic variables found in that community. The random sampling methods used also ensure that the panel consists of people who are interested in being consulted on a range of issues to do with their local community.

Once people have been recruited onto a Panel, they are invited to participate in consultations with the council. This consultation is carried out online, as people are generally more willing to share their views through online participation; it being easier and more convenient than more traditional consultation methods.

Citizens’ Panel members are invited to complete surveys regularly. A Panel recruited to provide feedback on a wide range of issues will be less likely to be affected by the non-response bias often found with single issues. As a group, the Panel is likely to present a more balanced community view than a sample of those respondents who decide to become involved in consultation on a single issue.

A flexible approach can be taken to conducting surveys as it is possible to target particular groups, such as young people or minority ethnic groups. Once the panel is established, survey possibilities are as diverse as conducting large-scale quantitative research or small-scale qualitative research.
Benefits of using a Citizens’ Panel as a consultation tool

There are many benefits for councils in using a Citizens’ Panel over other forms of consultation. A Citizens’ Panel:

1. Increases public engagement with councils
2. Provides better access to the ‘hard to reach’ communities
3. Is faster and more cost effective than traditional consultation techniques
4. Provides better access to the ‘silent majority’
5. Incorporates research from alternative community stakeholders.

These benefits are discussed in more detail in the sections below.

1. Increase public engagement with councils

As acknowledged previously, the problem is not necessarily that people are reluctant to make their views known to their council, but that the inconvenience of current consultation techniques hinders them from doing so. They simply need a quick and easy communication method in order to participate.

Providing feedback to a council is simple with a Citizens’ Panel. Survey invitations are distributed by email, and the survey contains well-crafted questions that focus on a current issue. The significant advantage of an internet survey over traditional consultation methods is that it can be completed online, at a time and place that suits each respondent.

2. Access the ‘hard to reach’

Many people who fall into the category of being ‘hard to reach’ would still like to share their views with their council. Because of their individual circumstances, however, it may be impossible for these people to attend council meetings or other community occasions. As Brackertz et al. (2005) point out, there is an argument that people are not necessarily hard to reach, but rather that councils are not consulting in the right way.

With online Citizen Panels, time and travelling distance are no longer barriers to participation. It is also possible to put in place a recruitment strategy for the Citizens’ Panel, which engages relatively disadvantaged groups. A key benefit of the Citizens’ Panel as a consultation method is being able to ensure that membership is representative of the whole community.
3. Faster and more cost effective than traditional consultation techniques

A Citizens’ Panel provides a council with a ready-made sample group. Ultimately, this means that a council can design and issue a survey quickly, and begin to receive responses without delay.

The fact that all communication is essentially done online means that the maintenance costs and survey deployment costs are a fraction of more traditional consultation methodologies.

4. Access the ‘silent majority’

By making consultation simple and straightforward, a Citizens’ Panel makes it easier for the ‘silent majority’ to make their views known to a council.

In their paper Online citizen panels as an advance in research and consultation: A Review of pilot results, Sharp & Anderson (2010) conclude that online panels effectively engage a new audience of constituents who have not participated in local government consultation before. They found that in one panel 68% of respondents had never attended a council meeting, and 72% had never previously participated in any form of council consultation.

The panels reviewed by Sharp and Anderson were basically recruited by open invitation, with participants self-selecting when visiting the council website. A way to provide additional statistical rigour to the process is to randomly select panel members to participate. The value of this approach is that it enables a statistically representative sample to be developed. This also provides a further benefit of preventing the panel from being hijacked by special interest groups.

5. Incorporate research from alternative community stakeholders

As well as being a resource for assisting council decision makers with core business, a Citizens’ Panel also provides a useful resource for projects on which councils work in collaboration with other community stakeholders, such as:

- New Zealand Police
- New Zealand Fire Service
- Community Health Services
- Community Interest Groups
- Council Owned Enterprises
- Local Iwi
- Environmental Agencies
- Recreation Services.
Citizens’ Panel case study – Palmerston North City Council

The situation

Palmerston North City Council (PNCC) became concerned that when it usually consulted on plans and projects, using the traditional methods outlined previously, it only heard from people with a strong interest in the issue. While these views were valid and useful, the Council was never sure whether the views received represented those of the whole community.

Some theories suggest that communities have moved from a consumer society to a customer society, and have now moved to a citizen society. This model assumes that people want to take active roles in discussions and decisions about the future of their communities, and that councils have not kept up with this change in community expectations.

PNCC thought that this theory oversimplified the situation. Some people do expect to be involved in decision about their communities; they want to come to meetings and to make submissions. But there are many other people who do not want to do this. Nor are they particularly interested in using new social media techniques, like Facebook and e-petitions. What they do want is to be treated as good customers, and they will get involved if they feel they are receiving poor service. This type of feedback is too late in the day, however. PNCC wanted to hear the community’s views at an early stage, to ensure effective service provision.

The National Research Bureau’s Communitrak™ Survey results for PNCC support this view. Survey results over the past ten years consistently show that about 20% of people want to be involved in all levels of council decision making, about 65% want to be involved in major decisions only, and about 15% want the Council to just get on with doing things.

Based on these survey results, PNCC divided people into the following three (broad) groups:

1. People who are very interested in what the Council does.
2. People who are not particularly interested in what the Council does unless they are directly affected. This group is the ‘silent majority’.
3. People who are not interested at all.
PNCC needed to better understand the views of the ‘silent majority’. But by their very nature, PNCC could not rely on this group of people coming to the Council and saying what they think. It needed to find a better way of interacting with them.

The solution

In order to access the thoughts and opinions of the ‘silent majority’, PNCC commissioned PublicVoice to develop a Citizens’ Panel.

The PublicVoice Citizens’ Panel is designed to ensure that PNCC get the views of a group of people that they would not otherwise hear from. Panel members are randomly selected, and people cannot choose to go on to the Panel. The surveys are designed so that it is very simple – and interesting – for people to respond. The panellists are randomly selected and most of them do not take part in PNCC’s other consultation exercises. This means that PNCC Councillors and Managers are getting information from the ‘silent majority’. This improves the quality of the Council’s decision making; PNCC can be assured that it is basing decisions on reliable information from a representative group within the community.

The PNCC Panel has around 400 randomly selected residents who answer monthly surveys. The survey is emailed to the panellists, and the panellists respond by clicking on appropriate buttons and typing in responses to open ended questions. The process is very straightforward and quick for Panel members.

The outcomes

The Citizens’ Panel has provided PNCC with a very easy way to gather views on a wide range of topics. It has also succeeded in engaging the local community, with 85% of participants finding the role interesting, as shown in Figure 2.

The Panel has been used to ask questions about a whole range of topics, including rates options for the Draft Annual Plan, how safe people feel, and how prepared people are for civil defence emergencies. The results are mainly used for policy and plan development. The Panel also provides useful information to the Council to assist it in monitoring community outcomes. Remembering that Panel members are representative of the Council’s population as a whole, the Panel has greatly assisted the Council by providing qualitative community feedback to inform its decision making.
Citizen Panels FAQ

What about people who do not have access to the Internet?

The recent growth in Internet connectivity means that in most countries a majority of the population can be reached online. In New Zealand, 83% of the population is using the Internet regularly (World Bank, 2009). Current trends and the proliferation of Internet based technology are certain to see Internet usage rates increase.

Are Citizen Panels really a viable approach to community consultation?

Yes, without doubt. Our experience in running Citizen Panels for New Zealand councils has demonstrated the practical use these panels offer to local government. This is supported by an 18-month pilot study undertaken by the University of South Australia in collaboration with three metropolitan councils (Sharp and Anderson, 2010). The overall conclusion from the pilot scheme was that online Citizen Panels can provide councils with the ability to effectively engage a new audience, satisfy community participants, and improve citizens’ perceptions of local government.

What are the response rates to surveys like?

The survey topic and length are generally the main factors to influence response rates. One of the most important things is to keep surveys brief and focused on the key issues.
We have found that response rates to surveys generally range from 50% to 80%.

Doesn’t placing a survey on the council website achieve the same ends as a Citizens’ Panel?

Surveys and forums hosted on council websites are commonly used as a method to capture feedback. This methodology, however, has its limitations; it is often the people who are already engaged with local government affairs who tend to notice them and make the effort of responding.
As a Citizens’ Panel provides a pre-recruited sample, the results are less likely to contain the non-response bias that a website survey has.
References


Local Government Act 2002: Part 6: s.78(1), 82(1)(b) and 82 (1)(d), Wellington: Parliamentary Counsel Office.


