

REPORT TO ENGAGEMENT P.D.G.

REPORT OF: Sue Griffiths- Head of People, Projects & Performance

REPORT NO: RCC06

DATE: 30 November 2012

TITLE:	Update on consultation processes	
KEY DECISION OR POLICY FRAMEWORK PROPOSAL:	N/A	
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INITIAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT:	Please see paragraph 7	Full impact assessment Required: N/A
Equality and Diversity		
FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT:	This report is publicly available via the Your Council and Democracy link on the Council's website: www.southkesteven.gov.uk	
BACKGROUND PAPERS		

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

The PDG is asked to note the activities to date in respect of consultation and to support the formation of a citizens' panel to further develop the council's processes.

It is proposed that the citizen's panel should have the following characteristics:

- A minimum of 500 members but costs to be obtained for upto 1000 members
- Membership to be representative of our local community
- Replenishment of a third of the panel annually (thereby ensuring regular turnover)
- A reserves list holding the personal details of those wishing to join
- Database to include details on how members of the panel prefer to be contacted
- A dedicated area of the website to be made available to promote future topics and provide feedback from consultations already undertaken
- Quotes be obtained from external providers for setting up, maintaining and refreshing a citizens' panel with separate prices for each element thereby allowing us to pick and choose according to our requirements
- The consultations using the citizens' panel to be carried out in house

2. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

2.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Engagement PDG with an update on consultation processes, including an overview on how Citizens' Panels function and their associated benefits, the actions undertaken in respect of the parish cluster map and the results of the consultation undertaken with parish councils. It also includes an update on the number of enquiries that have been received by the respective heads of service responsible for each parish cluster.

2.2 A Citizens' Panel is a large demographically representative group of citizens who have agreed to participate in consultation activities. They are used by local councils to consult on major issues that affect the area and to provide regular and accessible feedback on the attitudes and perceptions of local people. Work has been done to identify the parameters in respect of this method of consultation and these are identified below.

2.3 The parish cluster map has been designed to show which parishes are in which cluster and who the point of contact is for each. This has now been distributed to members and an outline of the steps undertaken is included below.

- 2.4 Also included is an update on the issues that have been received from parish councils as a result of a letter sent to them in August asking them to identify areas of concern for their local area.
- 2.5 Details of the number and nature of the enquiries received by cluster heads from parish councils have also been included to illustrate how this process is working.

3. DETAILS OF REPORT

Summary

- 3.1 The report below outlines the key factors involving in forming and managing a cost effective Citizens Panel, along with information on established panels from comparative organisations. It also includes details on distribution of the parish cluster map to members, information on the issues received from parish councils as a result of our contact and also as a result of the parish clusters.

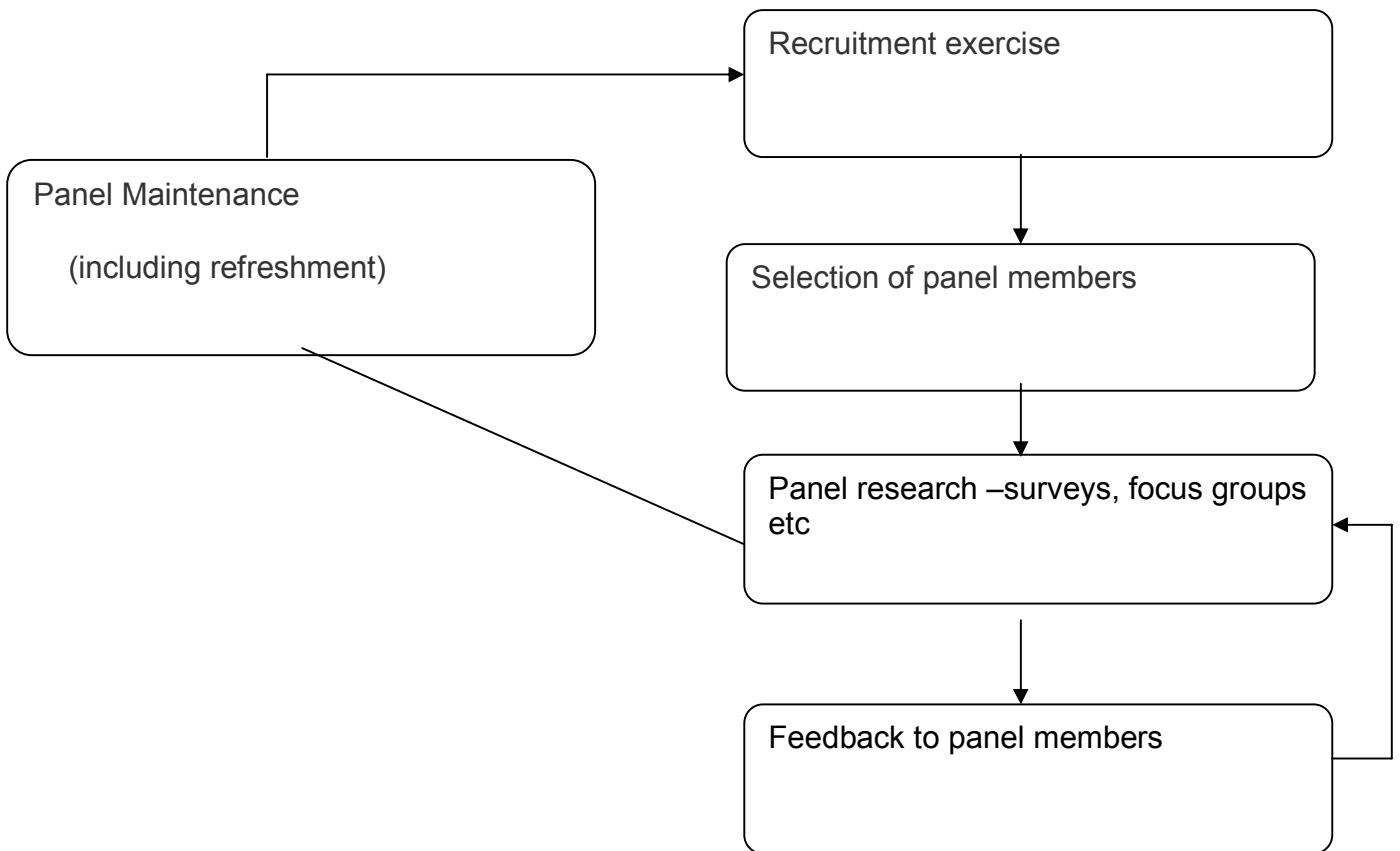
Detail

The Citizens' Panel

Recruitment of panel members

- 3.2 Panels are established following an initial recruitment exercise, where a sample of prospective members are contacted and invited to join the panel. Panel members are then selected from those who respond, with the overall membership being structured to ensure that the panel is as representative of the population as possible.

This process can be summarised by the following diagram.



The recruitment phase can be and often is carried out by an external company, contracted to form the panel thereby ensuring the time and cost commitments associated with this stage of the process are incurred by them.

3.3 In order to ensure that a Citizens Panel is representative of the wider community that it serves, many organisations will systematically review the make- up of the Panel and encourage recruitment at different intervals during its lifespan.

Benefits of selecting to refresh citizen panel membership include:

- Prevents loss of interest
- Helps to maintain higher response rates
- Prevents citizens becoming experts in subject areas
- Can increase the representativeness of the panel
- Over time, it will provide opportunities for larger volumes of the community to participate in the consultation process than otherwise might be achieved

A rolling recruitment campaign is an effective tool that ensures that there is a continuous flow of volunteers to update the panel regularly; this process is in place in a number of comparable organisations.

North East Derbyshire's panel members, like a number of comparable panels, serve for a maximum of three years before being replaced; this is achieved by replacing one third of their membership every year.

Erewash Borough Council have imposed a maximum capacity at 1000 panel members, and set up a reserve list for users to join when a position on the panel becomes available.

Number of members

3.4 A Citizens Panel can have between 500 and 5000 members. Below are examples of the size of established panels managed by local councils.

Mansfield District Council	1000 panel members
Erewash Borough Council	1000 panel members
North Kesteven District Council	1270 panel members
Nottinghamshire County Council	8000 panel members –broken down into eight districts of 1000 members each

Failure to recruit enough panel members can cause members to be over consulted which results in a loss of interest. In addition to this it can become difficult to replenish the panel and takes away the ability to be able to consult people relating to their interests and needs.

Organisations that have significantly in excess of 1000 members can also have difficulty managing the panel, including replenishing members and effectively analysing and feeding back results.

There will obviously be a cost associated with the number of panel members that are recruited and replaced and further work will need to be undertaken to clarify the impact this will have.

Methods used

3.5 Citizens' Panel members are consulted using a range of communication methods, the context in which they are used can help to keep the audience's attention and keep the overall costs of the consultation to a minimum. The following are either in practise or remain an option for most citizens' panels.

These include:

- Postal surveys
- Electronic surveys via email or on line

- Phone surveys
- Text message surveys
- Focus groups

The form of communication can be utilised to try and attract a wider representational group from the local area. For example, young people are a notoriously difficult group to engage in the consultation process; research from Charnwood Borough Council shows that young people liked to receive communications from the council by letter, but wanted to be able to reply by text.

In addition, ensuring that the survey is entirely applicable to the subject area and remains beneath the 10- 12 page margin, will help to encourage participation and thereby improve the response rate.

Frequency of consultations

- 3.6 Citizens' Panel members are typically consulted three to four times a year. North Kesteven advertises the frequency of their consultations as a positive note of being a member of the group, showing that the frequency of contact isn't too demanding. The frequency of consultation can ensure members remain interested and continue to participate.

Larger panels will not always contact all of their members on every consultation; they will either choose a group via random selection, or select members based on areas of interest. Involving members in consultations on areas they are interested in or with what is relevant to their circumstances can improve the number of surveys returned.

Costs

- 3.7 The costs of forming and running a citizens panel are low when compared to the cost of carrying out ad hoc surveys. The costs associated with having a panel commonly include:

- Staffing
- Stationery
- Printing
- Postage

Further information on this will be available at the meeting.

It should be acknowledged that the most cost effective means of consultation is undertaken electronically, which is why many organisations are encouraging their members to complete surveys via their websites, rather than using other more cost intensive methods.

Feedback and provision of other relevant information

- 3.8 It is important to provide feedback to panel members within an agreed timescale. This information is provided on a regular basis by newsletter and or a report surrounding the outcome of the consultation.

Nottinghamshire County Council provides an online consultation database along with a quarterly newsletter to their panel members. This shows information around the consultation, including the start and end dates.

Leeds City Council has created a visually engaging newsletter which provides the results in percentages and gives details on what they are working towards as a result.

North Kesteven District Council has a regular newsletter providing feedback to their panel members. This includes information on the outcomes of the consultations that have been undertaken.

Each of these organisations has made information on the panel available on their website via a page dedicated to the group. This provides information on the part that the panel plays within the council, how to apply, what is expected from members, and what will happen to their feedback.

The website is utilised for ongoing recruitment, with many of the organisations providing a downloadable application form. Most organisations with an existing citizens' panel, have formed an online database for consultation information; however the content of the database varies considerably between the different organisations. This is shown in the table below.

Organisation	Website advantages	Website disadvantages
Leeds City Council	The application page is easy to use and informative Consultations can be completed electronically via the website The newsletter is available to download	Information on the panel is limited on the front page (further information is provided in a separate link that is difficult to find)
North Kesteven District Council	Easy to locate Information on the panel is clear Application form can be downloaded from the site Visually stimulating and the images are used effectively for each section	Previous newsletters are difficult to locate

Organisation	Website advantages	Website disadvantages
North Kesteven (continued)	Wealth of information via the consultation database in a clear and accessible format	
Nottinghamshire County Council	In depth information about the use of the panel Information about the database is clear The electronic application process is easy to use	There are little visual aids There is a danger of too much information on the front page

Update on current consultation activities

The Parish Cluster map

- 3.9 Following a request from the previous meeting of Engagement PDG on September 20th an A3 colour copy of the parish cluster map has been distributed to each councillor (via their pigeonhole). An article, along with an electronic version of the map, was also sent to all members as part of the weekly members' news. This approach ensured that all members would have access to the information in the format they preferred (either hard copy or electronic).

Parish Council Issues update

- 4.0 To ensure that the clusters reflect and respond to local priorities, all parishes were contacted by letter on the 20th August and asked to identify upto five issues or areas of concern for their area. To date 17 parishes have responded. The issues from each of the parishes have been collated and most fall into the following themes:

- Planning applications, decisions and neighbourhood plans
- Traffic, speeding and road safety
- Broadband speeds
- Dog fouling and street litter
- Grass cutting, footpaths and verges
- Flooding
- Communication with the district council

A copy of the issues has been attached at appendix one for your information.

Enquiries received by cluster heads from parish councils

- 4.1 There have been a number of enquiries received by heads of service from parish councils. Most relate to members interests and code of conduct enquiries but

there have been two that relate to enquiries that the parish clerks weren't sure who to contact. These were an enquiry about population figures for Long Bennington and the surrounding area and Colsterworth and District about adoption of the telephone kiosk in Woolsthorpe by Colsterworth. Details are attached at appendix two.

Conclusion

- 5.1 Details on a number of activities undertaken by the consultation team have been provided. It is important that these are developed and built on to ensure that residents' views are taken into account in the council's decision making processes.
- 5.2 There are a number of benefits in forming a Citizens' Panel within a local council. Primarily it is an important way of communicating and consulting on important changes to a large volume of people in a cost effective and timely manner.

Advantages are:

- Having a Citizens' Panel can improve public relations, as organisations that have panels can show that they are actively involving their community in the overall decision making process. They can also achieve a much higher response rate than other methods.
- Holding demographic information about the members means that specific groups of people can be targeted for particular pieces of research. We would also be able to track the views of the panel and areas over time.

If they are not set up effectively and managed properly, there can also be some disadvantages of forming a panel.

Disadvantages are:

- The initial process of recruiting panel members can be difficult. If targets are not achieved, the panel may not be representative of the community.
- Panels can be costly to establish, many organisations will ask third parties to form the panel on their behalf.
- Constant recruitment is required to avoid numbers decreasing when people drop out.
- Panel members are likely to become more informed over time which may result in their views becoming atypical.

6. OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

Continue existing methods of consultation which may be less effective in reaching the target audience.

7. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

7.1 There will be a resource implication. A growth bid has been identified for consideration. This will allow us to go out to tender for setting up and refreshment of the citizens' panel, with the workload from the consultations that are carried out being met from existing resources.

8. RISK AND MITIGATION

9. ISSUES ARISING FROM EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

None identified

10. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

Not applicable

11. COMMENTS OF FINANCIAL SERVICES

There are financial implications associated with the establishment and retaining of a citizens panel but the report states that this consultation method is more financially effective than undertaking ad-hoc customer surveys. If the proposal is supported, then the set-up costs could be met from in-year service underspends within the 2012/13 budget framework.

12. COMMENTS OF LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

Any additional means of communication with members of the public should be encouraged to gauge opinion. Citizens panels have been used before and proved popular.

13. COMMENTS OF OTHER RELEVANT SERVICES

None.

14. APPENDICES:

- Appendix One – town and parish council issues
- Appendix Two – a summary of the issues referred through to heads of service