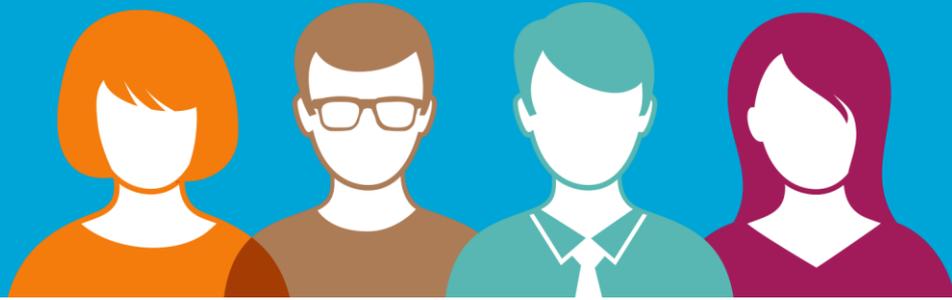


White paper: Online community panels for local councils

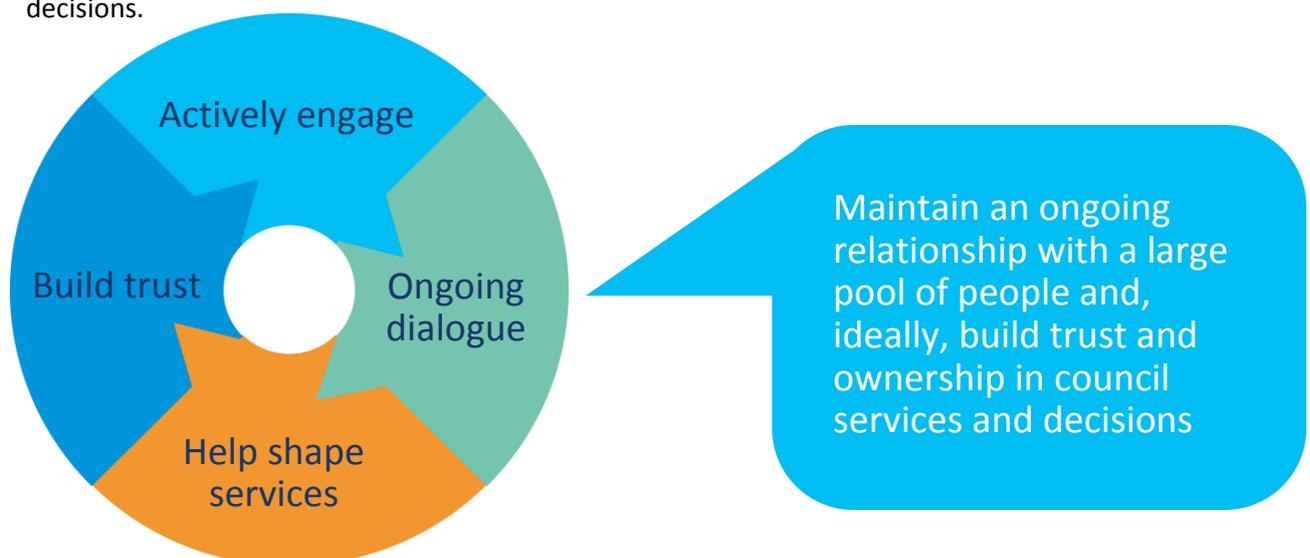


The rapid spread in internet capable devices and improvements in connectivity seen in the last few years¹ means that a large section of the population are happy to interact with their service providers through online channels such as emails, websites, e-newsletters, blogs, online surveys, forums and social media. Indeed, with a rise in connectivity has come a rise in community expectations that public sector organisations (like councils) will be more transparent, and actively engage their communities in the organisation's decision-making.

We live in an increasingly complex and interconnected world, where people have, and demand, ready access to a wealth of information. Organisations that encourage public participation, share substantial information so their publics can make informed decisions, give balanced reports that hold them accountable, and open themselves up to public scrutiny, are more likely to be trusted².

For this reason many New Zealand organisations, including a number of local councils, have established their own community panels, in order to actively engage and/or conduct research with their communities and stakeholders. By joining these panels, members are able to enter into ongoing dialogue with their council - they receive useful, timely and relevant communications and also are able to give input to help shape services, policies, planning and decision-making.

A well-managed panel allows the council to hear from its wider community, maintain an ongoing relationship with a large pool of people and, ideally, build trust and ownership in its services and decisions.



¹ In 2012, 1.3 million New Zealand homes (80 percent) had some form of Internet connection. *Household Use of Information and Communication Technology: 2012*

² *Measuring the relationship between organizational transparency and employee trust*, Public Relations Journal 2008

Benefits to a council from having a dedicated online community:

- provides an easy way to reach out and engage with the wider community, and encourage them to participate in a two-way dialogue about council matters
- allows a council to send targeted messages and opportunities to participate, to specific members/groups within the panel (for instance residents of certain areas, members of particular demographic groups or people who have expressed an interest in specific topics or issues)
- demonstrates an openness and willingness to involve the community, stakeholders, residents and ratepayers in the council's decisions
- increases public awareness and knowledge of their council, its services, processes and plans
- gives a recognised and consistent means for the community to have its say, and allows people to participate quickly and easily, with a low barrier to participation
- provides a quick and cost effective way to find out more about the wider community and/or seek feedback on specific topics – which allows decision-makers to build a full picture of issues and potential solutions surrounding their services, plans and proposals
- makes it easy to publicise other consultation/engagement/research opportunities and other council activities e.g. specific media campaigns, events, workshops, open days etc
- acts as a catalyst for broad organisational collaboration and coordination between the various teams within the council (i.e. a central hub) and/or between different councils in a region
- enables recruitment for a wide variety of research activities e.g. co-design processes, focus groups, forums, interviews etc
- enables recruitment of community representatives and can help develop “champions” and advocates in the community
- provides a simple mechanism for council to ‘close the loop’, demonstrate the extent to which public opinions have shaped decisions and what the next steps are – which helps build trust over time.

Allow people to participate quickly and easily, with a low barrier to participation



Benefits for panel members:

- provides increased understanding of their council's plans, activities and processes through ongoing communications and dialogue
- gives an opportunity to participate in council decision-making simply and conveniently
- gives them increased confidence in council's decision-making over time (provided the council does genuinely listen and provides balanced information on how it is using public input to make decisions)
- receiving personalised and regular communication establishes a relationship with the council, with members seeing the panel as an alternative communication channel – a means of raising problems, asking questions etc.



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Considerations and questions for the councils

How representative of the general population are council community panels?

Parallel surveys conducted both with council panels and independent panels structured to be representative of a population show opinion expressed in council panels is broadly similar to that expressed by the wider public. However, council panels have some characteristics which, to a certain extent, limit their ability to be regarded as truly representative of the wider public:

- council community panels are likely to attract those who are already knowledgeable and interested in council activities (unless the recruitment strategy very clearly mitigates this bias) and they may have different perspectives than other members of the community

- the aspects of the panel that both council and members value, i.e. the opportunity to engage more fully with a council and its decision making, means panellists' knowledge and understanding of their council's services, processes and plans grows over time. While this is a fantastic outcome in its own right, it does make panellists' views less representative of the general public
- panel management techniques used by research companies to keep their independent panels fresh and as representative as possible (e.g. "retiring" members who have taken part in too many surveys, or too few) aren't appropriate for panels where everyone is encouraged to have their say.

So, the more we encourage participation and knowledge sharing, the less representative the panel becomes over time.

Using it as an engagement panel

Treating a council panel as an "engagement panel" rather than purely a research panel greatly expands its scope and usefulness. If the panel is seen as part of the council's stakeholder network and is used to involve residents in council's activities and decision-making processes, then the more informed the members become, the better. Such panels provide an opportunity to build an ongoing relationship with the community based on genuine engagement, knowledge sharing and dialogue.

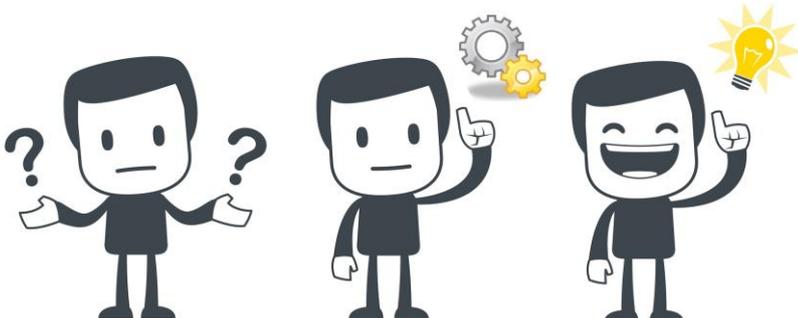
Where it is important for a council to hear from a representative sample of the community or if it needs statistically robust research results (e.g. for statutory research obligations), it is probably better to conduct additional research with an independent panel run by a research company (rather than use the council's own community panel), taking advantage of their active panel management, ability to deliver quotas and additional panel resources.

Conducting surveys with members of online community panels

Online surveys completed by panel members allow councils to:

- hear the public's experiences and opinions of council's services– transport, waste, community services, libraries, dog control etc, and their thoughts on how these could be improved
- find out more about the community – about the daily lives of members and their families and whānau, the environment they live in, the issues they face, what they like doing, what their neighbourhood is like, and what services they would like
- test the water before policies, plans, bylaws etc are drafted – to determine what the public's views are likely to be and identify ahead of time any problematic proposals or options

Hear the public's experiences of their council services and their thoughts on how they could be improved



- engage the public in formal and informal consultation topics – most members of the public are more likely to have their say in an online survey delivered directly to their email than attend public meetings or make a written submission. There are ways to ensure online submissions are accepted in the formal consultation process
- get feedback on the less ‘public facing’ aspects of council’s work, e.g. strategic plans, regulations, governance etc. While generally less popular than other topics, if the context and importance of hearing from the public on these topics is explained at the start, useful insights can be gained

Dedicated community panels are less suitable for measuring public **awareness** of council’s services, and plans. As is discussed above, membership of the panel heightens awareness of the council and what it does. For a true test of this it is better to look to an independently run research panel.

It’s not all about surveys!

While surveys and feedback forms are often the simplest way to seek feedback from panel members, Buzz Channel encourages our clients to use



their panel to conduct a range of other engagement and two-way dialogue – online forums, regular emails, newsletters, sharing results and generally working to build a sense of community among the panel.

What do members of council community panels think?

Members tend to appreciate the fact that their council is delivering them timely information and asking for their views:

- they find it an easy way to give feedback – they don’t have to attend meetings and complete submission forms
- they feel they are being involved in the council’s decision-making processes
- they get to know what their council is planning, and how the consultation/decision making process works.

Engage the public in formal and informal consultation topics – most members of the public are more likely to have their say in an online survey delivered directly to their email

However the panellists also want to be assured that their views are being listened to

- They want to know why their opinion is being sought and how it will be used.
- They like to be kept informed about the findings of panel surveys and other engagement exercises.
- They don't want to be asked to give their opinion if it will not influence decision makers.

This makes it critical that if panel members are asked to give their views, the council must commit to genuinely heeding what they have to say, and ensuring that panel members are kept informed about how their feedback has affected services, influenced decision-making or has been otherwise used. Otherwise, panellists will grow increasingly cynical and interest in the panel will wane.

Find out more about council community panels and how they can be used

If you'd like to discuss the pros and cons of a community panel for your council, whether this might be right for you, how to recruit panellists or any of the other considerations in establishing and managing a successful community panel, please get in touch. We manage a number of successful community panels for clients and we'd love to share some of our experiences with you.

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