

What is a panel?

In research terms, a panel can be defined as a sample of people who are representative of a particular population and have agreed to take part in activities such as surveys or focus groups on a regular basis.

Background information

Large-scale consumer panels have been run by market research agencies for many years, and have also been adopted by national and local government as a cost-effective and reliable consultation tool.

Many local authorities use their own citizen's panels (ranging in size from 100 to several thousand members) for consultation purposes. Several authorities also use staff panels as a method of consulting their employees.

How do panels work?

Panels are usually established following an initial recruitment exercise, where a random 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 as possible of the population. The demographic details (age, gender etc) that are collected at the recruitment stage can then be used for the purpose of sub-group analysis every time research is carried out, as well as being used to check how representative respondents are.

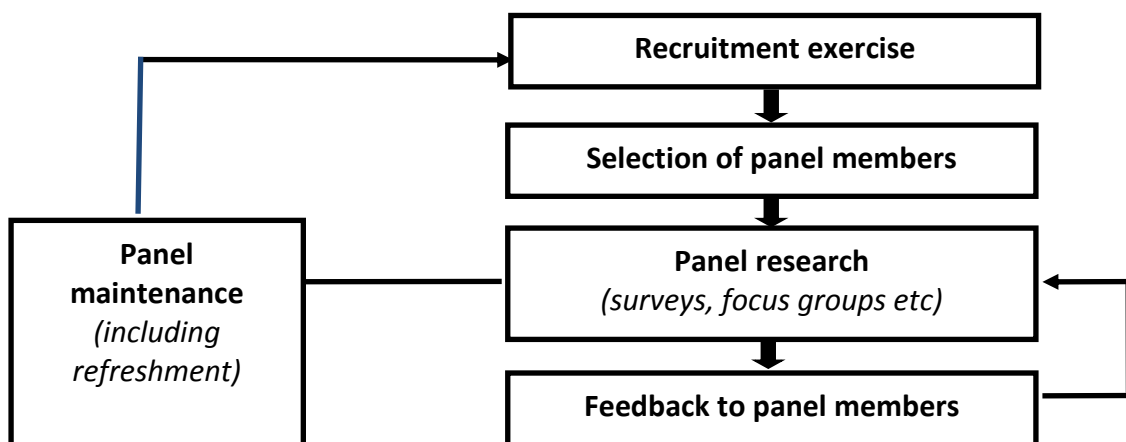
Feedback should be provided to panel members following each piece of research that is undertaken, and ongoing maintenance of the panel is also necessary. This involves periodically replacing leavers and 'refreshing' the panel with new members via a top-up recruitment exercise.

Panel research in Kirklees

Kirklees Council has set up and maintains an e-panel, made up of around 1000 local people that have opted in to being a member. E-panellists are invited to take part in around three online surveys each year, on topics including local budgets, parks and open spaces, crime, local democracy. Panellists are also given opportunities to take part in focus groups and website testing. You can find out more about the e-panel, including how to join, at www.kirklees.gov.uk/epanel

The process for maintaining a panel is summarised by the following diagram:

The panel process



Panel Research

a 'how to...' guide

Advantages and disadvantages of local authority panels

Panels have a number of clear advantages as well as some drawbacks. These are summarised by the following table:

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Higher survey response rates than ad-hoc surveys as panel members have already agreed to participate in research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Panel members are likely to become more informed over time which may result in their views becoming atypical (conditioning)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More cost-effective than a number of one-off surveys as different subject areas can be included on a single questionnaire 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over time, panels attrition (i.e. panel members leaving or not responding) may become a problem
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrates a long term commitment to consulting with residents and/or staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ongoing panel maintenance is required to deal with the problems of conditioning and attrition
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relatively quick method of providing a representative sample for consultation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Residents/staff who are not part of the panel may feel excluded
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Holding demographic information means that specific groups of people can be targeted for particular pieces of research 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can be used for a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research, and for continuous research (i.e. tracking views over time) as well as ad-hoc consultation 	

What next?

If you would like to know more about this topic please get in touch:

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