



Citizens' Panel Trial Report

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Introduction

The Talkabout panel is comprised of c1,000 residents who have committed to regularly receive council surveys with a response rate of 50-65%. The quarterly Monitor report includes information from the Talkabout Panel such as perception of council services, satisfaction with living in the city, etc. that is also used to compare the experience of living in York with neighbouring authorities. The Talkabout Panel typically responds to surveys and the budget consultation focus group is one of the first opportunities which members have been given to participate in a focus group.

City of York Council (CYC) appointed Pickersgill Consultancy & Planning Ltd (PCP), a York-based independent market research agency, to conduct a focus group with York residents recruited through their Talkabout Panel.

The focus group took place on Thursday 4th November 2021 and helped to explore the potential of setting up a sub sample of Talkabout Panel members to form a Citizen's Panel who would be willing to take part regularly in focus group discussion.

The topic of the focus group was a consultation about CYC's budget allocation for 2022/23 and this report is an accompanying document to that budget report. This report is an evaluation of the use of a sub-sample of the Talkabout panel for engaging the residents in surveys and for making recommendations to be put to residents as a whole via online surveys in general.

Overall Conclusions

Recruitment

Recruiting participants from Talkabout Panel members who had put themselves forward as willing to take part in focus group discussions worked well and the trial was very successful in this respect. The acceptance rate was very high and nobody who was contacted refused to take part. All wanted to participate and those that could not do so were either unable to attend due to the chosen date or due to Covid related concerns. This was not an issue but does need to be kept in mind for any future recruitment work. We do not know the original number of people who were invited to put themselves forward so we cannot evaluate the overall response rate.

One person failed to show on the night but this is fairly common occurrence when organising such groups.

Original information provided to PCP stated that the Talkabout Panel members had not been recruited with a view to taking part in focus groups. We would recommend that those joining the panel going forward are invited to indicate their interest in taking part in online surveys, telephone surveys, focus groups or depth interviews.

Engagement in Task

Respondents took the budget consultation task very seriously, giving it their detailed attention. This is further indicated by the fact that they showed no sign of restlessness even in the later stages of the two hour discussion.

It seemed clear that the respondents welcomed the opportunity to take part in the focus group as a more interactive way to express and debate their views compared to online surveys. It also provided the opportunity for a more detailed discussion and to absorb the views of others.

As a result of their willingness to give up time even to a topic that CYC had feared might be seen as dry and uninteresting, there was no strong need for gamification of the process. Respondents appeared to understand the need to give serious attention to a range of issues of interest to the council and the session would have worked equally well with a flip chart in place of the game. In fact, the only use of the game material provided was to write on the laminated board the savings achieved. There was no use of the money cards to record these savings.

Even though the respondents were very engaged we would suggest the need to provide an incentive to participants. We would suggest a minimum of £30 for an hour and a half session and £40 when the session length is two hours.

Sample Representation

As with all forms of research it is very important to have a representative sample across the sub-panel as a whole. It also needs to be large enough to allow representation of respondent types (e.g. by gender or area of York) that might be of interest for particular projects. We would suggest this sub-panel should consist of at least 100 Talkabout members.

PCP was able to draw a fairly representative sample from those who had agreed to take part in the trial although ideally it should have included some respondents under 35. We would suggest steps are taken to encourage younger residents to put themselves forward for inclusion on the sub-panel

Going forward we would suggest that the sample for a particular topic should be drawn from all those on the sub-panel and not based on only those putting themselves forward for a particular topic. We would not want those taking part in the discussion to be too knowledgeable about the subject or they would not necessarily represent the views of residents as a whole. For similar reasons, we would recommend that invitations to take part are rotated between the different members of the sub-panel.

The ideal group size for this activity would be 6 to 8 respondents. We would advise the recruitment of around 9 with the anticipation that one or two may drop out on the night. If all 9 were to turn up we would suggest all 9 are allowed to participate rather than being paid their incentive but then being sent away.

We would suggest that for most groups of this type a face to face discussion is preferable over Zoom. A face to face discussion produces much more rapport and a greater feeling of involvement by participants. However, Zoom would still be an option if necessary in some cases depending on the subject. On Zoom we would recommend a smaller number of respondents, for example 4-5 so that it is easier for everyone to participate and feel included. For a topic such as budget cuts with detailed material such as consequences being issued it probably would not be appropriate to use Zoom.

Duration of Task

Tasks given to the group as a whole, or to two or more subgroups, are a good way of increasing involvement by participants and help everyone to feel involved. In the case of the budget consultation group, 45 minutes of discussion without moderation seemed appropriate for the task, given the desire for respondents to reach their own independent conclusions. However, in most cases this length of time devoted to a task would not be necessary.

For a focus group as a whole one and a half hours would normally be the preferred length. Two hours could be used in circumstances where there is a great deal to discuss or a detailed task to be completed.

Conclusion

The principle of getting members of the sub-panel to make recommendations for consideration by residents as a whole is a good one but we would strongly suggest that one focus group is insufficient for this purpose . We would recommend a minimum of two and up to four groups to ensure that the recommendations put forward to residents have a solid base.