

## Citizens' Panels

*In order to achieve an engagement and a deeper feeling of responsibility for the development of the local community among citizens, local authorities need to find systems where dialogue with citizens becomes a part of the management of the organisation and a basis for decisions.*

The development of citizen participation and engagement has become an ever more important matter for local authorities. Most local authorities have carried out dialogue activities with their citizens, but the knowledge that these activities have brought about has not been systematically used as a basis for decision making.

Developing systems for citizen participation requires external methods, a topical issue and different target groups.

One method which has been trialled for a number of years is citizens' panels. Citizens' panels came into use in the late 1980s and reached a breakthrough in the early

1990s. The method originated in USA where it was developed by Robert Putnam, a political science professor at Harvard University. Citizens' panels have been used in particular in the Anglo-Saxon world. In Sweden, they started to be used at the end of the 1990s, but to a lesser extent.

In the report by Kommundemokrati-kommittén (the Committee for Local Democracy) 2001:48, "Att vara med på riktigt" ("Real participation"), the panels are described as follows: "A citizens' panel refers to a group of local residents who are invited to be consulted and to discuss, together with politicians and experts, the municipal activities." This means that the citizens are invited to physical meetings. From the outset, an important aspect was that the citizens' panel should be strictly representative, in order to reflect the constitution of the community.

In the US, the UK, Australia and New Zealand, citizens' panels have been used to a great extent as a part of the work on modernising public services. The citizens' panels were set up so that the participants were selected in a representative way and were invited to participate in a panel to respond to questions from the local or regional authority. The panellists stayed on for a specific length of time, usually between one and two years. In order to avoid "professional opinion makers," the participants were continuously exchanged. A common way of working was to invite



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This fact sheet is about citizens' panels. In 2007, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) created a network with 26 municipalities and 4 county councils that are developing and trying out methods for citizens' panels. Here you can read more about citizens' panels and find more information about the work that is carried out throughout the country. On our website, [www.skl.se/medborgardialog](http://www.skl.se/medborgardialog), there is more

information and a number of web-TV interviews about the activities. We hope that you will find this information useful and that it will provide a basis for interesting discussions. More fact sheets will be published, and if you would like to receive them you are welcome to subscribe by sending an email to [marie.kullgren@skl.se](mailto:marie.kullgren@skl.se). If you want to know more about the project, please contact [lena.langlet@skl.se](mailto:lena.langlet@skl.se), [kjell-ake.eriksson@skl.se](mailto:kjell-ake.eriksson@skl.se) or [anders.nordh@skl.se](mailto:anders.nordh@skl.se).

working groups to discuss a shared theme during one to two days, after which they would give advice to the politicians. Other methods that have been used include consultations, focus groups, surveys and “mystery shopping” (anonymous controls – through mystery shopping, the contractor can find out how internal routines and processes actually work.) The intention has been that the panel should be a group that the local authority can turn to regularly.

Evaluations of citizens' panels have shown that it is difficult to achieve demographic representativity. Keeping a panel representative is expensive and often requires external resources. It is also difficult to get people to participate in the physical meetings. In countries where this method is used it has therefore become more and more common to use e-panels and SMS-panels as an alternative to physical meetings. Local and regional authorities have also given up the requirement for representativity and instead simply invited those who want to take part. In order to engage as many as possible, a large number of communication activities have been used, from knocking on doors to advertisement campaigns.

The citizens' panel is one of several citizen engagement methods. When a local authority has obtained the result of a question from the panel, they can check which groups have responded and which are not represented and then they make sure that they obtain the viewpoints of the latter in some other way. The idea is that it should be the task of the local authority to guarantee representativity through the use of several different methods. Once the citizens' panel is transformed into an e-panel or an SMS-panel, the main aim is that it should be easy to participate – you should be able to take part at any time and place. To be able to take part without having to attend physical meetings can be attractive for people who cannot easily find the time to go to meetings but who are able to spend a few moments by the computer to give their opinions. Participants only need an email address or a mobile phone in order to take part.

People can also choose their level of involvement in the panel.

- The simplest level is to respond to a question sent via email or text message.

#### *Common areas for citizens' panels in the UK*

- Planning processes – roads, building, planning of parks, etc.
- Community problems – crime/safety, graffiti, littering, youth pregnancies, etc.
- Forms for participation
- Visions for the future
- Budget – taxation, services, reductions
- Availability – opening hours, use of the internet, etc.
- New laws
- Environmental considerations

#### *Areas for citizens' panels in Sweden*

- Views on public service
- Requirements for service at the citizens' office
- Visions for the future
- Suggestions for cultural initiatives
- Suggestions for local authority marketing/communications
- Views on the information to citizens
- Questions of sexuality and family life
- Environment.

- The next level is an invitation via email or text message to participate in a consultation, focus group or similar, to discuss a particular issue.
- The highest level of participation is to take part, for an extended period of time, in a working group or advisory group on a particular issue.

### *Current work in Sweden*

In the autumn of 2007, SALAR invited municipalities and county councils to participate in a project to introduce e-panels and texting panels in Sweden. 26 municipalities and 4 county councils have joined. These authorities have now worked with panels for just over a year, and several of them have carried out a number of panels. In February 2009, SALAR conducted a survey about their experiences during this first year.

When the initiative started, the first step was to define the goals and purposes of the panels. The primary intention was to

strengthen democracy, but public service improvements were also stressed:

- Introduce new methods for democracy and participation.
- Support representative democracy by listening to the citizens.
- Further develop the methods of democracy through communication via the internet or texting.
- The citizens must feel that their influence in the community is stronger.
- Through online dialogue with groups of citizens, we collect opinions in order to widen the basis of local decision-making.
- The politicians will get a broader basis for their decisions.
- Make people more engaged and interested in community matters.
- To get inspiration, assistance and support to improve public services.
- The citizens' panel gives a snapshot picture of what a number of citizens think about a certain issue.
- The citizens' panel can stimulate people to engage in local matters.
- We will have a group of people to whom we can regularly turn with our questions, big and small.
- We need to demonstrate that people's engagement leads to result in the form of concrete actions within a near future.

Before the first question can be asked, it is important to work actively to get people to actually want to take part in the panel. The authorities in the SALAR network tried a number of different approaches with varying results. Direct contact with people – at local fairs, at the market, in the shopping centre, etc. – has proven to be an effective method. People who are directly asked whether they want to make their voice heard by participating in a citizens' panel often say yes. Information and the possibility to register via the webpage of the local authority is also a commonly used method. Experience shows that this type of information must be prominently placed on the webpage. The message can also be reinforced by being made by a municipal commissioner. A brief web-TV spot further emphasises the message.

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In the authorities that use citizens' panels, the experience so far shows that a panel which is actively marketed and has a good reputation attracts more participants. It creates rings on the water.

Here are some tips for marketing:

- Always have up-to-date information on the webpage.
- Establish good contacts with the media; positive articles are an advantage.
- Use the existing community information channels – newspapers, information sheets, etc.
- Look for participants via e.g. Facebook and other social networks.
- Engage the elected representatives.
- Seek people out actively.
- Always inform about the panel at public events.

The above items focus on the external marketing. The network's experiences also show that the internal communications are very important. Information about the panel needs to be spread throughout the organisation so that officers in daily contact with citizens are aware of it and can advise people that they can join a panel.

One question which has been discussed in the network is the optimum size of a citizens' panel. There is no single answer to this; a small, active panel may be just as valuable as a large one. The communities in the network have from 50 to 1,700 people on their panels. The more good publicity the panels get, the more people want to take part.

Some questions which are often raised when a panel is about to be set up are:

*Who are allowed to participate – local citizens only?*

There is no right answer to this; it depends on the purpose of the panel. To involve only citizens who live in the area may in some cases be unnecessarily limiting. It could be valuable to also get the views from, for example, entrepreneurs, school pupils, summer residents, tourists and others who do not live in the local authority.

*Should we create a panel for specific issues, or for the entire authority's activities?*

Experience shows that if you invite broadly and formulate questions on various are-

as of activity, the panellists select those questions that they want to discuss and respond to. In that way, panel members are given the opportunity to learn about issues that they would not otherwise have chosen to discuss.

In order to make good analyses of the responses from the panel on various matters, it is useful to know basic facts about the panel's composition. Useful facts are age, gender and postal code, which give a fairly good idea of who is taking part. Based on this information, the authority may then consider targeted efforts to reach for example more men, people in certain age groups or people living in a less-represented area of the community. The analysis may also suggest that different dialogue methods need to be used to reach different target groups.

*Which tools are available?*

There are a number of tools to choose from, such as simple questions on the webpage, surveys via email/text messages, etc. The authorities in our network have so far tried the following methods (see chart).

Text messages can be used for simple yes/no questions, but also to inform the panel that there is now a survey available via email or on the webpage.

Several of the authorities involved in the network combine online surveys with physical meetings. At physical meetings politicians have the opportunity to present themselves, the citizens' panel and the issues on which they want the panel's views.

Once the answers are gathered, the processing and analysis begins. Feedback to the panel is an extremely important

part of the work. This is what the authorities in our network do:

- When the survey is finalised, the panel receives a summary of the results. After a discussion in the political committee, the conclusions are reported back to the panel.
- The panel members are the first to be informed of the results of the surveys, via the webpage and email to the participants. Once the issues have been through the political decision-making process the results are fed back to the panel.

*Contact between surveys*

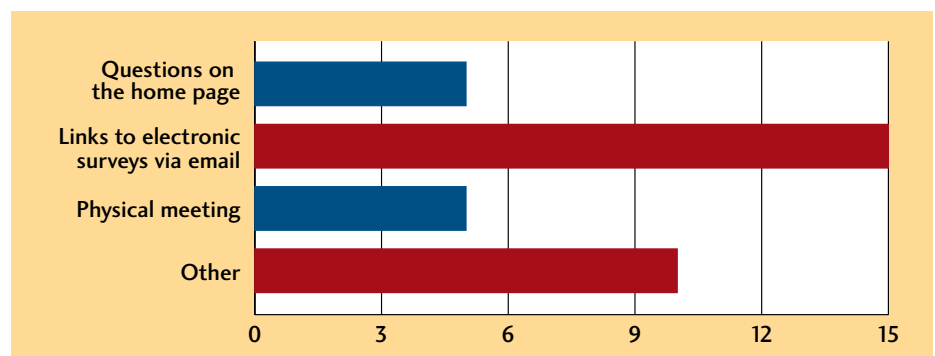
Experience shows that the panelists want to be contacted between the question rounds. Here are some examples of how this can be done:

- Email updates about what is happening in the authority.
- Information circulated when the first summary is presented and when the extended analysis has been completed.
- Invitations to physical meetings.

**Summary**

- A citizens' panel is one of several methods to gauge citizens' opinions on important matters.
- The citizens' panel is an established group which exists during an extended period of time.
- It is the elected representatives who invite people to the citizens' panel.
- An organisation to administer the panel is necessary.
- A citizens' panel works well when conducted via electronic media.
- Transparency is necessary in the handling of answers, results, etc.
- Marketing is necessary – both outside and inside of the administration.

**Examples of tools which have been used to query the panels**



In many cases, physical meetings have been combined with surveys

# Gnosjö

Christian Bagan, municipality secretary in Gnosjö.

Christian Bagan, municipality secretary in Gnosjö, chose an innovative method to find participants for an e-panel. "That's correct. One of the methods I used was Facebook. I became a Facebook member, and when I searched for the keyword 'Gnosjö' I got an enormous number of hits for people who live in the area, who work there and who used to live there. Of the people I found, around 260 are citizens in the municipality and Facebook members."

Christian wrote a personal letter to everyone where he explained about the citizens' panel and that he would like them to sign up. The response rate was around 10 per cent, which may not sound like much, but Christian was very satisfied. Many of those who registered are 20–40 years old and parents with small children. When the first round of questions was sent out via email, some 50 people registered. The response rate to the first survey was very high; more than 90

per cent. Christian also points out that it is very important to feedback the results of the survey to the panel, so that the panellists get an overview of all the responses. He also feeds back the results of political discussions where the views of the panel have been considered. In addition, he regularly briefs the elected representatives and the administration managers, so that everyone is updated. Christian stresses the importance of getting going and showing results. "Shoot from the hip sometimes; do not theorise too much, get going."

Right now the panel consists of 108 people, which is more than 1 per cent of the total population in the municipality. "We have made five surveys; the latest one in March/April. It was about democracy issues – how you want to participate and influence, what you know about your democratic rights, etc., and the response rate was 78 per cent."



# Upplands Väsby

Maria Fälth, (KD), municipal commissioner, Upplands Väsby. Photo: Michael Folmer.

"We have a panel of some 80 people," says Maria Fälth (Christian Democrat), municipal commissioner. "We sent an invitation letter to 500 people in Väsby, randomly selected, and in various age groups and neighbourhoods, inviting them to the Väsby panel. We received around 70 replies, and since then a few more have been added. We do not advertise for more participants, but anyone who gets in touch and wants to join is welcome. We've got a good age representation but would like a few more people with immigration background."

"We started our first round by inviting the panel to a physical meeting, where about one third of the panellists participated. At that meeting, we presented our aims for the Väsby panel and the cooperation with SALAR. We also gave a presentation about to the upcoming issues of future premises for cultural purposes. It is important that the people on the Väsby panel feel that we value their contributions."

"The panellists have received an email with login information and a link to a web-based survey. They also received a text message to remind them of that email message. The system works fine, and everyone takes the questions seriously."

"The first round of questions, in the autumn of 2008, had a response rate of 99 per cent. The second time it was 66 per cent. The answers were collected in a report, to which all Freertext replies were attached." Maria, too, stresses the importance of feedback. "The report was presented to the municipality council and the Väsby panel. It is also published on the community webpage. There we also have information about the panel and the results of our surveys."

"We have now initiated a discussion forum for the panellists, where they can discuss various topics with each other and with the politicians who are responsible for democracy issues," Maria concludes.



## Gothenburg

Lärjedalen has 25 000 inhabitants, a high immigration rate and a young population.

“Since we are a borough, not a municipality of our own, our range of matters to discuss is limited. But we also have a responsibility towards the inhabitants which means, among other things, that we must participate in the community planning and contribute to a good environment,” says Gunilla Kihlgren, planning manager in the Lärjedalen borough council, Gothenburg.

“We have tried all possible methods to publicise the information about our citizens' panel, but no single one has been more successful than the others. We managed to recruit 55 people in 3 months, which in comparison with other commu-

Gunilla Kihlgren, planning manager,  
Lärjedalen borough council, Gothenburg.

nities is a bit on the low side. Our first round of questions is now ready. We have asked the citizens to respond to questions on how they perceive the safety in their respective neighbourhoods. All communication is electronic. When you register with the panel on our webpage, you receive a return email that includes the survey.

“Our first survey had a response rate of 92 %. Since the panelists have joined on their own initiative, I think the willingness to respond is high,” says Gunilla.

The panel is fed back a statistical compilation of the results. In addition, the borough council gets an analysis of the responses. The borough council will discuss the project and decide on how to proceed



with the results. The panelists will be informed of the politicians' discussion.

“Despite the fact that we have a large number of immigrants, we only use Swedish in our communication with the panel. We have not had any reactions to this, but we can see that many of the panelists have non-Swedish names,” concludes Gunilla.

## Ale

“We have arranged three panels.” says Stefan Lydén, project leader. “The first one was about our Citizens' Office. We asked the people what services they want our Citizens' Office to provide.

“The second panel was about influence in Ale municipality – What do people think about influence? – What is lacking? – What is good? “The third panel is about the municipality's webpage, and how it should be improved. What information is of interest to the citizens?

“We try to reach out to people in many different ways,” says Stefan. “We have taken part in a local fair, we have published information on our webpage, we have been to the market and talked to people face to face.

“The personal meetings were the best,” says Stefan. “If you go up to someone and say, Hi, I'm from the community administration; we are putting together a panel with people from north to south living here. Do

you want to participate and influence what happens? Then many reply: Yes, I do! People have a strong will to participate. Today we have a panel of 150 people, and we've had a response rate of 70–85 per cent.

“Our surveys are entirely digital. We circulate a text message saying that they have been sent an email with a link to the survey. Within 3–4 days, around half of the panel has replied. It is quickly done, and you can see the overall trends early on.

“Working with a citizens' panel is enjoyable and important, but you must have made thorough preparations so that the resources are in place,” stresses Stefan.

“It takes time, but it also gives results. Both our politicians and the administration officers are extremely interested! The panelists are also very interested, so we have an exciting three-way collaboration. The authorities that do not yet have their citizens' panel have no reason to wait any longer, they should simply get going!”

