
ARGYLL AND BUTE COMMUNITY PLANNING PARTNERSHIP

MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

3 October 2007

Future arrangements for the Citizens' Panel

1 Key points

The contract the CPP has with IBP, the consultancy responsible for carrying out the Citizens' Panel surveys, ends with the current (thirteenth) questionnaire.

Revised arrangements need to be in place by March 2008, for future surveys.

We have identified three alternatives for how future contracts could be organised:

1. Try to extend the current contract with IBP. (Eddy Graham has verbally expressed a desire to continue administering the surveys or tender for the next contract as appropriate.)
2. The CPP puts the citizens' panel contract out to tender.
3. A community planning partner with suitable research expertise takes on responsibility for the Panel, and manages or implements the surveys on behalf of the partnership. The CPP will still need to fund this activity.

We would like partners to discuss the various options and make recommendations accordingly

2 The current contract

The current contract has run for a three year period, covering surveys 8 (February 2005) to 13 (September 2007) inclusive.

The current contract encompasses the following activities:

- Refreshment of one third of the panel on an annual basis.
- Maintaining and updating of the database of panel members.
- Administering two questionnaire surveys a year
- Analysing the surveys' results
- Reporting on, and providing additional feedback for, each survey
- Recruiting of focus groups from the panel's members for additional consultation activities, if required. (The Council has recently used this facility to help with the development of its Corporate Plan. Other CP partners may wish to use the panel in similar ways.)

3 Future contracts

Depending on partners' views as to how the panel should be administered in

the future, partners may be asked to:

- Contribute more money to allow continuation of the panel as at present
- Change the programme of surveys to fit available resources.

4 Response rates and panel membership

After three years of using the current panel, response rates are declining.

This may be due to a variety of factors including:

- A failure of some questions to catch the imagination of respondents. (Anything riddled with jargon or seen by panellists as being remote from their everyday experiences are likely to reduce response rates.)
- A growing level of consultation fatigue. (A failure to refresh panel membership since 2005, will have contributed to this.)

Declining response rates highlight the need for more active refreshment of the panel. The CPP will need to make sure that the next contractor understands the need to keep response rates high.

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It was agreed at the Management Committee Meeting (03/10/07) that the contract would be put out for tender. Anyone considering tendering for the contract should be aware of the following requirements -

- Surveys are carried out twice a year. This requires **time, capacity and resources**. (Even managing consultants who actually implement the surveys takes time.)
- **Research skills** to design questions and questionnaires. Themes to be surveyed need to be collated in advance of the survey period. Whoever manages the questionnaire needs to liaise with partners who have proposed themes for the surveys throughout the questionnaire process. Although question and questionnaire design can be done in negotiation with consultants a good understanding of the principles of both is necessary.
- **Sampling skills**: the panel members have to be recruited and selected in such a way that the panel is representative of the demographic and geographical make-up of Argyll and Bute's population. Failure to do this will mean that the panel is not statistically representative. The panel needs to be refreshed at regular intervals.
- **Data processing, analysis and dissemination**: questionnaire responses have to be entered into appropriate software and analysed. IBP -- the current consultants -- use specialist survey software and scanning equipment for data entry. Without these software and hardware resources, all responses would have to be manually entered into an appropriate spreadsheet or database. In turn, these have to be set up in an appropriate way to enable data to be stored and analysed effectively. Responses have to be analysed and presented appropriately. (I don't think that Excel is particularly effective for analysis. Software such as SNAP or SPSS are much more suitable for this kind of work. Excel is, however, fine for producing charts etc.)
- **Administration**: the database of panel members has to be maintained and updated. This is not just to keep track of panel membership, but also to keep track of who has responded to the questionnaires and to whom follow-up letters should be sent. There are other administrative tasks that have to be managed: organising proofing and printing of questionnaires; getting relevant approvals and signatures for the questionnaires and letters before they go out; organising reply-paid envelopes.

The current contract also includes the possibility of using IBP to run focus groups. This requires particular **skills in leading, moderating and facilitating discussion, as well as qualitative data analysis (content analysis)**.

The Panel can only be managed effectively by one of the CPP partners in-house if they have the resources to do all the above. Otherwise, the surveys should be contracted out to consultants, with management responsibilities resting with one of the partners.

In summary: any organisation, whether it be a consultancy or a partner, implementing the Citizens' Panel surveys needs:

- Skills in quantitative research methods
- Skills in qualitative research methods
- Administrative skills
- Access to appropriate software and hardware
- Adequate capacity and resources (including time) to implement the surveys.

If any of the CPP partners were to take on responsibility for the panel in-house, the other partners would need to be extremely confident that all the requirements set out above could be met.

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