

Consult your community:

A handbook

A guide to using the
residents' feedback register

Consult Your Community
The Residents' Feedback Register
Authors:
Lyn Carson
Max Hardy
Mary Hutchinson

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Phone: 61 2 9351 3089
Web: www.hydra.org.au/activedemocracy/

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Introduction

The residents' feedback register (RFR) offers an affordable and representative way for local government to obtain input and feedback concerning a broad range of issues and concerns. The term 'residents' feedback register' should be unfamiliar –because we made it up! It is a method that has much in common with people's panels, citizens' panels and 'quick response citizens' panels'. We have elected to use this term as we believe it better describes the distinguishing characteristics of this method of consultation.

The RFR approach to consultation has not been used extensively to date in Australia, although some pioneering councils, such as Brisbane City Council and Parry Shire Council, have been encouraged by their experiences so far.

Drawing on initiatives in Australia and overseas, this handbook will explain how a RFR can be used:

- ◆ regularly,
- ◆ flexibly, and
- ◆ cost effectively.

Using a RFR can increase citizens' understanding of local government and has the potential to deliver greater satisfaction with local government decision-making. Importantly, the RFR can also focus attention on issues of importance to the community and could be used in conjunction with more deliberative forms of consultation, such as a citizens' jury or a deliberative poll.

Information contained in this handbook should assist councils to prepare clear information about the purpose of RFRs, and the role of participants. This handbook is a guide to establishing and managing a RFR. It also provides models, references and some background information.



1. Snapshot: What is a residents' feedback register?

As the name suggests, the register is a randomly selected group of residents that is created to give feedback to a local government authority about their services and priorities. Although sometimes referred to as resident feedback 'panels' this group of residents may not ever gather together physically. It is not a committee. Rather it is a register of thoughtful and willing citizens who can be utilised by Council as required.

A register would usually involve some hundreds of participants (we've heard of a register with 50 residents, another with 6,500). Participants would normally serve for a period of two to four years and would be called upon to complete a survey, prepared by Council, about three to five times per year. The participants agree to make themselves available to respond to surveys for a fixed period, and perhaps to contribute to a focus group or planning workshop once per year. Sometimes they may be approached to participate in a deliberative qualitative consultation process, such as a citizens' jury, deliberative poll, or consensus conference.

Residents' feedback registers can be used: as a sounding board to test ideas; to identify attitudes to various options being considered (say, with regard to the preferred location of a new health service or the proposed redevelopment of a park); to assess satisfaction with local services; and even to examine the needs and aspirations of the community.

The following scenarios provide examples of possible uses of a RFR.

- ◆ Council could test the attitude of the community toward the type of facilities people would like Council to build, and determine who such facilities would most benefit.
- ◆ Council could test the strength of feeling in the community about a present policy, such as restricting the location and number of approved brothels or nightclubs in the CBD.
- ◆ Council could gain some feedback about the groups of people who are not being catered for in the community (and this could feed into Council's social planning process).
- ◆ Council could receive feedback concerning the level of awareness of, or satisfaction with, some Council services or facilities, such as the library, children's services or recycling processes.



Importantly, the register is not called upon to make decisions. The feedback from the register's participants may help to inform better decisions, provide data to help with decision-making, and help to identify important issues that require more intensive research and consultation.

2. In practice: Using a residents' feedback register

There are three main components of using an RFR:

- ◆ establishing the register;
- ◆ conducting surveys; and
- ◆ evaluating the register.

2.1 Establishing the register

This involves:

- ◆ referring to Council's 'community profile';
- ◆ recruiting/selecting;
- ◆ collecting useful information for the register database; and
- ◆ setting up a management strategy for the database.

2.1.1 Referring to Council's community profile

Most councils regularly update a community profile that includes demographic information on:

- ◆ age group populations and/or gender by age groups;
- ◆ population trends;
- ◆ workforce/industry;
- ◆ educational attainment; and
- ◆ specific population groups, such as indigenous Australians, people of non-English speaking background and people with disabilities.

This information is critical to establishing a register that can be said to be broadly representative of the local government area (LGA). Without



reflecting the demographic features of the LGA it can be argued, quite legitimately, that the register produces biased and unreliable data.

It is important to recognise the limits of representation. It would be a misuse of the register if Council issued a survey related to the issues of a particular group (e.g. concerning physical access to buildings for people with mobility disabilities). A large sample of people may not recognise the problems faced by this particular group, and could not therefore be said to validly represent this part of the population.

2.1.2 Recruiting/selecting

Achieving a representative group for the register could be achieved through either of the following methods:

- ◆ self-nomination – individuals respond to a general invitation by returning a form through various avenues – (e.g. letter box drop, newspaper insert, flyer in rates notice); or
- ◆ random selection via direct invitation to people selected randomly from the electoral roll, random digit dialing, or phoning, say, every tenth number in the phone book.

The relative advantages and disadvantages for each method is outlined in the table below:

| Self-nomination | Random selection |
|---|---|
| <i>Advantages</i> Can be associated with publicity about the purpose of the RFR. Easy and cheap to administer. Will attract people who are most willing and able to participate. | <i>Advantages</i> Much more representative (although some self-selection is involved). Easier to match social profile. Means that any citizen has the potential to be invited onto the register. More credible results. |
| <i>Disadvantages</i> Much less representative, and more difficult to match social profile of LGAs. May not receive a strong response. Will often attract people who already participate in consultation processes. Will reduce credibility of data gathered from surveys. | <i>Disadvantages</i> May be challenging, or costly for some councils to do. May be difficult to gain the numbers required for the register. May recruit some people who are unreliable and somewhat apathetic. |



2.1.3 Factors to consider if using a self-nomination process

- ◆ Use a direct and engaging invitation which clearly spells out the function of the register and the process of recruitment.
- ◆ Use a variety of outlets to reach a wide range of people (don't just rely on the newspaper).
- ◆ Use councillors to build awareness of the initiative and to encourage people to apply.
- ◆ Make sure the method of response is simple (e.g. use a freepost return or free-call number).
- ◆ Use the press and other publicity vehicles to attract participants and to promote the purpose and activities of the RFR.
- ◆ Consciously explore ways of involving hard to reach participants, such as:
 - approaching youth groups and TAFE colleges to attract young people;
 - use newsletters to various occupation groups (e.g. association newsletters);
 - using meeting places, agencies and newsletters for people with disabilities;
 - use translated material.

2.1.4 Factors to consider if using a random selection process

- ◆ If using the electoral roll, use another method for attracting people under the age of 18.
- ◆ Train staff to 'cold call' people, or use experienced research companies.
- ◆ Use a direct and engaging invitation which clearly spells out the function of the register, the importance of gaining a representative group, and the process of recruitment.
- ◆ Offer translation services to people of non-English speaking background.
- ◆ Be clear about the size of the register you are aiming for so as to determine how many calls or invitations by letter you may need to send.



2.1.5 Inviting participants

Whatever method is used it is important to clearly explain the purpose of the RFR, its benefits and the commitment required.

Some councils use simple incentives to encourage citizen involvement. Councils in the United Kingdom have offered incentives such as the chance to win cash or prizes worth £100.

This is how the Parry Shire Council in NSW uses incentives.

THANK YOU

We do appreciate your decision to help Parry become a better place to live.

To show our appreciation you will receive:

- ◆ A Parry Citizens' Panel [i.e. RFR] Newsletter letting you know about the results of surveys, what events are coming up, and most importantly, what action has been taken;
- ◆ A \$20 gift voucher every year in recognition of the contribution you have made to the local community;
- ◆ An invitation to a yearly social function with councillors and staff.

We hope you enjoy being a member of the Citizens' Panel and find it to be a rewarding experience.

Remember, you only get one opportunity to make a good first impression. Anticipating or even presuming that people will want to exercise their responsibilities as citizens, and avail themselves of the opportunity to more actively act like one, may gain a more favourable response. In Appendix 2 you'll find an example of how Kirklees Metropolitan Council in the UK did it.

2.1.6 Collecting participant information for the register

It is important to collect socio-demographic information about participants in order to maximise the register's use as a consultation tool and to ensure the integrity of data collected from the register. The validity of the feedback will be challenged, as findings from the research may challenge or confront some of the powerful spokespersons in the community. The information collected will help to demonstrate that the register reflects the



demographic characteristics of the area, and to ensure that the selection process is transparent.

Basic information to be collected from participants should include:

- ◆ name;
- ◆ address;
- ◆ sex;
- ◆ age;
- ◆ occupation;
- ◆ ethnicity;
- ◆ rural or urban (if non-metropolitan); and
- ◆ special needs (for instance if assistance is required for hearing impaired, or for people with a mobility disability – in case they are invited to participate in a focus group or jury/panel at some stage).

At times it may also be appropriate to collect more information to help understand and interpret the results of register surveys. For example if a road safety survey is anticipated it may be appropriate to find out whether participants have a driver's licence, ride motor cycles or bicycles. Experience has shown that it is unwise to ask for too much or unnecessary information in the early stages of recruitment. Probing detailed questions tend to put people off.

By collecting baseline information about participants, Council could use the register to conduct specific consultation. For example, young people aged 16 to 24 may be surveyed about their aspirations on the design of public space. Or Council may wish to only consult people aged over 65 concerning their views about the use of a senior citizens' centre.

In addition, Council could conduct focus groups with similar participants to explore an issue from different perspectives. An example could be to gain qualitative feedback about the potential use of a deteriorating park from the perspective of:

- ◆ young people;
- ◆ older people;
- ◆ young parents; and
- ◆ people with disabilities.

In collecting baseline data on the register it is imperative that participants are reassured about the importance and purpose of the data, and, just as importantly, what the register will *not* be used for (e.g. unwanted market research).



2.1.7 Setting up a management strategy for the register

The RFR is essentially a database of randomly selected people who are willing to provide feedback on, or give input toward, matters of relevance to the local government area in which they live. Its effectiveness is dependent largely upon the ongoing agreement of participants and maintenance of the register database.

Management of the register will entail:

- ◆ briefing participants of the register about the purpose of the register and the function of participants (it is especially important to inform people that they are *not* decision-makers – i.e. they are not participating in a legally binding referendum);
- ◆ preparing simple but informative briefing material to assist participants before being surveyed (for some issues, when an issue is commonly understood, briefing materials may not be necessary);
- ◆ reinforcing the value of the register by publicising participants' contribution to decisions or matters of policy;
- ◆ providing feedback to participants about what has resulted from the findings of surveys in which they have participated;
- ◆ publicly recognising the contribution of participants in the media (public events);
- ◆ checking the contact details of participants prior to each survey (and topping up the number of register participants if there is a significant drop in numbers);
- ◆ conducting exit interviews with participants who choose to cease their involvement (in order to learn as much as possible from their experience) – see Appendix 1 for example;
- ◆ conducting mid-term and end-term participant surveys regarding their experience as a participant – see Appendix 1 for example; and
- ◆ ensuring that the register is held by Council and access is limited to essential staff only.

To ensure smooth running of the register a manager or coordinator should be appointed. Even though the RFR can be used by all sections of Council, it is best to give responsibility to one person, to maintain consistency and continuity. This means that the RFR coordinator will be able to share with colleagues their skills in relation to the important tasks of conducting useful and credible surveys.



2.2 Conducting surveys

Surveys are not the only way to collect information. In the context of community consultation they tend to be favoured by researchers or 'consulters' when:

- ◆ deliberation by respondents is not required (at least at this point);
- ◆ there is no current data available about community attitudes on a particular issue;
- ◆ public debate is dominated by powerful individuals or interest groups;
- ◆ representatives of interest groups claim to be speaking on behalf of the community;
- ◆ the issue is of sufficient importance that people are likely to respond to the survey; and
- ◆ detailed technical knowledge is not required to provide valued feedback through the survey.

Preparing a useful and credible survey questionnaire requires a great deal of thought. It is crucial for a team of people, perhaps including some key stakeholders, to decide upon the main purpose of the survey, or the question that the survey will help answer. The clearer this is, the easier it will be to formulate questions and undertake analysis.

Surveys can be broad in nature or quite specific. A survey can be conducted by post, phone or email – though the latter eliminates anonymity. Surveys can be specific or broad. An example of a broad survey would be to gauge community priorities for attention in Council's business plan. For example, Council could ask respondents to rank the relative importance of Council improving:

- ◆ the standard of roads;
- ◆ the standard and provision of public space/green space;
- ◆ air and/or water quality;
- ◆ rubbish collection;
- ◆ community services; and
- ◆ community consultation practices.

Examples of more specific issues are:

- ◆ whether Council should increase rates, and to what extent, in order to fund a major project;
- ◆ whether Council should continue with a policy in relation to development restrictions; and
- ◆ whether Council should locate a skate park in one location or another.



The more structured the questionnaire the easier it is to analyse. An open question may be useful in that it allows people to express their views freely, but may be nearly impossible to use. For instance, asking 'What is your view about renaming the Civic Centre?' could result in a range of comments that would make it very difficult to quantify.

In contrast, if a number of choices is provided for respondents to select (by ticking a box) it would be quite simple to quantify the percentage of respondents who strongly support, support, oppose or are undecided about this matter.

Structured questions can include:

- ◆ A list of possible responses where respondents can select any or none of the responses available;
- ◆ selection of a response category (such as very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied, and very dissatisfied);
- ◆ ranking of responses in a particular order – say from most important to least important; and
- ◆ quantity responses – such as how often, on average, do you use the public swimming pool during the Christmas holidays.

There are excellent books and guides available for structuring questionnaires¹. To use the survey to guide decision-making or to move onto more informed deliberative processes it is essential that the survey is credible from a research perspective. Criticism may be leveled at Council if it is not very careful with the wording of questions.

Some common problems are:²

- ◆ *Ambiguous questions* – a word, phrase, or sentence is ambiguous if it has more than one meaning. For example:
'Do you believe the recreation managers should supervise young people on skateboards?'
- ◆ *Imprecise questions* – using terms that will be interpreted individually. For example:
'Do you think Council should warn residents about closures of roads due to roadworks:
a) well in advance?
b) a little in advance?
c) just before closures occur?'

¹ Youngman, M. B. 1982, *Designing and Analysing Questionnaires*, Rediguide 12, University of Nottingham, School of Education; Bell, J. 1993, *Doing Your Research Project*, Open University Press, Buckingham.

² These questions are adapted from Bell, J. 1993, *Doing Your Research Project*, Open University Press, Buckingham.



- ◆ *Exclusive questions* – not allowing for a different possibility to occur.
For example:
'Do you believe your children are safe walking around your neighbourhood between 7pm and midnight?'
(This assumes that the respondent has children, and excludes those that do not.)
- ◆ *Questions that presume specialised knowledge* – asking questions that presume a level of knowledge that is unrealistic For example:
'Do you believe that Council should use ultra violet disinfection for its tertiary treatment of effluent?'
- ◆ *Double questions* – these questions ask for one answer to two separate questions. For example:
'How easy is it for residents to access the local library and Council's main administrative centre?'
- ◆ *Leading questions* – the way a question is put makes it difficult for respondents to express a different view to the one obviously held by the 'asker'. For example:
'Do you agree that Council should provide excellent facilities for older people in the Shire?'
- ◆ *Presuming questions* – as with leading questions, these often reflect the views of the asker – everyone may not feel the same way. For example:
'Does the Council provide adequate services for older people in the Shire?'
On the surface this seems like a reasonable question, but does not allow someone to offer the view, for example, that they believe this to be a State Government responsibility.
- ◆ *Hypothetical questions* – these can provide responses that are not terribly useful, as social researchers have found that what people 'say' they might do, is usually different to what they actually 'will' do. For example:
'How often would you use an aquatic centre if Council constructed one on the edge of the CBD?'
- ◆ *Offensive questions* – questions that are likely to upset respondents, create suspicion about the purpose of the survey, and potentially exacerbate problems in the community. For example:
'Do you believe that there are too many people of Asian origin moving into this area?'
or
'Do you believe that developers, in general, have any concern about the quality of life of residents in this area?'



It is a good idea to have several people involved in developing and checking survey questionnaires. It is also highly desirable to test the survey on several respondents to check for clarity and ease of use prior to distributing it. Particular groups may need assistance to understand survey questions, so it is a good idea to trial surveys with people of non-English speaking background, people who have reading difficulties, people who are visually impaired and indigenous people.³

Another option for local government is to use research companies to conduct telephone interviews instead of mailing out surveys to the register. The advantage with this method is that:

- ◆ data can be easily cross-tabulated (especially if computer-assisted telephone interviewing programs are used);
- ◆ analysis can be undertaken quickly, as reports can be printed straight after the final interview; and
- ◆ the data is gathered by an independent and accredited social research company (this adds credibility to the process).

The disadvantage is simply one of cost; although local government may be able to negotiate cost if they can promise ongoing work for a company for a set period (there may also be an opportunity for many councils to negotiate collectively and reduce cost accordingly).

Analysis of written surveys will be assisted by a well-structured questionnaire and a clear purpose for the survey. Problems will be avoided in RFRs if surveys are relatively simple, and if caution is exercised with interpreting results. Some common problems with survey analysis are:

- ◆ selecting an appropriate database for entering data from returned surveys (e.g. you may want to cross-tabulate responses from older people who live in a particular precinct, but find that you can only tabulate the responses from older people from the whole area, or all respondents from a particular precinct, but not the combination older people/precinct. If cross-tabulations are deemed important it will be necessary to use a more sophisticated relational database);
- ◆ reporting percentages without regard for the number of respondents (e.g. presuming you have a relational database, you could 'correctly' report that 100% of people aged over 65 in the northern precinct believe that Council should build a senior citizens' centre in their

³ In the case of indigenous people, problems could be identified regarding cultural appropriateness – for example, a question about the use of land which has significance for indigenous people may require a great deal of careful wording, and some reference to this significance.



precinct – while an actual count of respondents may show that only one person responded to the survey); and

- ◆ drawing definitive conclusions from sample sizes that are insufficient (e.g. stating that ‘it is clear that all young people would prefer active recreational spaces than passive recreation spaces’, when only 50 young people completed surveys in a population which has over 20,000 young people).

Many councils employ social planners or other professionals with skills in questionnaire development, layout and analysis. Support is also often available from local government associations.

2.2.1 Case example: Brisbane City Council

Brisbane City Council used a survey to obtain views on how Council could contribute to solving Brisbane’s transport and traffic problems. It was constructed as shown on the next page.



Listed below are some things that could contribute to solving Brisbane's transport and traffic problems. Please indicate if you would support Council in these initiatives.

| | I would support this | I would NOT support this | I am unsure if I would support this | Rank* |
|---|----------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------|
| 1. Council building new roads to allow better traffic flows in and around Brisbane, such as the proposed City Valley bypass. | | | | |
| 2. Council providing more road space for transit lanes (i.e. lanes for vehicles with three or more occupants). | | | | |
| 3. Council providing more lanes for buses only. | | | | |
| 4. Council providing incentives for companies to locate existing regional business and commercial districts such as Mt Gravatt and Chermside rather than the CBD. | | | | |
| 5. Council and the State Government providing an integrated public transport system (e.g. timetable connections and being able to use the one ticket for use on trains, buses and ferries). | | | | |
| 6. Council introducing measures such as increased parking fees to discourage people from bringing their cars into the CBD. | | | | |

*1 = most important

Council is unable to fund the estimated additional \$1 billion required over the next five years to solve Brisbane's transport and traffic problems. Please indicate how you feel about the following funding options.



| | I would support this | I would NOT support this | I am unsure if I would support this | Rank* |
|---|----------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------|
| 1. Increased share of State and Commonwealth revenue for roads and public transport. | | | | |
| 2. A special levy for fuel of one or two cents per litre, with the revenue directly funding road and public transport improvements. | | | | |
| 3. Council to borrow the additional funds needed. | | | | |
| 4. Increase user pays, for example, public transport fares, car parking fees, tolls. | | | | |

*1 = most important

To allow us to better understand the survey response please provide the information below.

How frequently do you use public transport?

- Daily.
- 4-5 times per week.
- At least once per week.
- At least once per month.
- Less frequently.
- Never.

Thank you for your participation



2.3 Evaluating the register

Evaluation of the register could be undertaken for a variety of purposes, and depending on the purpose, will need to be undertaken in different ways. For instance, evaluation could involve:

- ◆ considering the extent to which RFR surveys have influenced decision-making (impact evaluation);
- ◆ considering the level of participant satisfaction with their involvement in the RFR (process evaluation);
- ◆ assessing the level of awareness and community support for the RFR (process evaluation); and
- ◆ assessing the way Council has decided to use the RFR (impact and process).

Rather than seeing evaluation as something that happens at the end of a project, or period of time, evaluation needs to be considered at the beginning. Thought needs to be given to:

- ◆ what Council hopes to achieve from the register;
- ◆ what types of issues/decisions Council is seeking input/feedback on;
- ◆ obtaining a shared understanding of what a 'successful' RFR would look like and contain; and
- ◆ developing some baseline expectation targets about the percentage of respondents:
 - who will see through their two-year term
 - who would recommend to others accepting an invitation to participate in an RFR
 - who believe that their participation has made a contribution to better governance and decision-making.

Evaluation can be undertaken by internal or external personnel, although for added credibility an external consultant may be preferable. It is important that the success of an RFR project not be dependent solely on performance indicators. To undertake evaluation appropriately it is usually advisable to:

- ◆ conduct interviews and/or focus groups consisting of participants, councillors, relevant Council staff and key stakeholders that have had involvement in the establishment and oversight of the RFR;
- ◆ survey non-participants to see whether other residents are aware of the RFR and whether they believe it has added value to decision-making;



- ◆ examine data related to the operation of the RFR;
- ◆ audit the processes used to recruit participants; and
- ◆ compare progress and explore other ideas by conducting a literature search, and review other RFRs or similar consultative processes. Mid-term reviews may not be as extensive, and could simply focus on the operational aspects of the RFR. These could be performed internally and rely on surveying RFR participants and council staff.

3. What a residents' feedback register offers

The RFR method of consulting provides another way for democracy to go beyond the ballot box. This method specifically offers:

- ◆ an efficient method of consulting regularly with a broadly representative group of citizens;
- ◆ a convenient way of drawing respondents for other forms of consultation, such as focus groups, citizen juries/panels, deliberative polls and consensus conferences;
- ◆ a time-effective method, given that it provides some useful information quickly to Council, and is not overly time consuming for participants;
- ◆ a cost-effective method – because it can be used by all departments of a local government authority (once the register is established);
- ◆ a way for Council to demonstrate its commitment to consultation;
- ◆ an opportunity for participants, over time, to understand and appreciate the process of local government decision-making; and
- ◆ a way to increase satisfaction with local government decision-making processes and outcomes.

‘An instant database of people who don’t mind doing things – fabulous!’

(Lismore City Council staff member)



The RFR presents a number of advantages in terms of methods of consultation. Consider the following table.

Comparative effectiveness of consultation methods

| | Representativeness | Deliberation | Scrutiny | Authority | Cost | Time |
|--|--------------------|--------------|----------|-----------|------|------|
| RFR | 2 * | 1 | 1 | X | 3 | 3 |
| Focus groups | 1 | 0-1 | 0 | X | 2 | 2 |
| Deliberative poll | 2 | 2 | 2 | X | 1 | 2 |
| Citizens' jury or consensus conference | 1 | 3 | 3 | X | 2 | 2 |
| Referendum | 3 | 0-1 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 1 |
| Public meetings | 0 | 0-1 | 1 | X | 3 | 3 |

3 = excellent, 2 = good, 1 = fair; 0 = poor; X = variable

KEY

Focus groups – small groups are recruited to discuss a topic; little information is offered; an in-depth version of an opinion poll.

Deliberative poll – involves a statistically significant sample of citizens (e.g. 300) who are surveyed, then brought together in a single location to discuss a topic (in small, facilitated groups) then surveyed again.

Citizens' jury or consensus conference – a small group, usually randomly selected, is brought together for in-depth discussion and interaction with experts, moderated by an independent facilitator, usually over a period of several days.

Referendum – usually conducted at the same time as an election; a binding plebiscite; information is usually distributed beforehand.

Public meeting – called by a council to inform the public about a proposal, often with little opportunity for discussion.

Representativeness – how representative are the participants of the wider population?

Deliberation – do participants have the opportunity to ask their own questions about the subject matter and receive answers before responding to the question?

Scrutiny – do the participants have the opportunity to ask their own questions about the subject matter and receive answers before responding to the question?

Authority – do the participants' answers carry any authority?

Cost – how expensive is the consultation method to implement?

Time – how much time is needed to organise and implement?

The RFR has some obvious advantages over most other methods of consultation. It is more representative than public meetings and citizens' juries, and cheaper and less time-intensive than referenda or deliberative polls.

The main weaknesses with this method is that there is little deliberation or scrutiny, which relies on groups working together and being able to challenge information providers. However, the RFR provides a representative group of people from which Council can easily draw for other purposes – such as citizens' juries and consensus conferences, which offer these advantages.



4. Frequently asked questions

Do participants ever meet?

The residents on the register are a pool of information providers, not a committee. They may never meet.

How many participants are on the register?

A significant sample of a population may involve numbers from 50 to 3,000. Most social researchers prefer at least 150 people, randomly selected. For example, with a sample size of 174, there is a 95% confidence that the answer for a population as a whole will be within less than 4% of the results (Fowler 1993, p. 28).

When invited, do people generally agree to being on the register?

Yes – surveys and evaluations overseas, especially in the UK, show a strong positive response.

Does the participation rate drop off over time?

Experience has shown that many participants are enthusiastic about contributing, even though there is no obligation to do so. While ever participants are informed about the usefulness of their efforts (e.g. via regular newsletters) participation is maintained with very little attrition.

What makes you think that people support this idea, or would want to participate?

Many observers and researchers confirm that people in the Western world generally trust authorities less, and are very cynical about decision-making processes. Voters are generally dissatisfied with the act of voting as being their only experience of participating in a democracy. People are more educated and have more access to information from which to form their own views; after all, the experts disagree about most issues anyway! A recent example of these trends can be seen in the town of Lismore, in northern NSW. A telephone survey of 100 residents, selected at random, to ascertain their willingness to participate in a RFR showed that:



- ◆ 23% were definitely interested;
- ◆ 47% were interested;
- ◆ 15% were not interested at all;
- ◆ 15% were not sure or didn't know.

This means that a total of 70% were either definitely interested or were interested. While not all these would translate into an actual decision to actively participate it does suggest that most people value such an activity. Survey respondents made some interesting comments when asked why they would want to be involved in an RFR:

- ◆ 'I think if I want a change or I'm not happy I have to be prepared to help solve the problem.'
- ◆ 'Who wouldn't want to be?'
- ◆ '... because it's my duty as a citizen; while they [i.e. councillors] represent groups they don't know what the majority of people want.'
- ◆ 'I believe it is good for us to know what is going on and good for them to get feedback from residents'.

What happens if people no longer want to be on the register?

They simply stop responding to surveys (see 'Setting up a management strategy for the register' for more details).

Will participants be vulnerable to lobbying and unsolicited information?

The register is held by Council and access is limited to essential staff only. Register details are never disclosed to a third party. The council should not use the register to distribute information about activities that are not related to surveys.

What if participants don't understand the issues?

- ◆ With surveys, providing simple, clear briefing materials are part of the effective use of the register.
- ◆ Some participants will understand some issues better than others.
- ◆ Surveys on particular issues also provide valuable feedback on how well Council is informing the community about them.
- ◆ Participation in the surveys encourages a better understanding of the issues.



Should the council be bound by the majority view of participants?

Participants in the register are not decision-makers. Their views offer a sounding board for councillors. Councillors are not bound by feedback, and participants should be clearly advised that feedback is sought but the results are not binding.



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Websites

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<http://www.hydra.org.au/activedemocracy/articles.htm>
- Australia's first consensus conference
<http://www.abc.net.au/science/slab/consconf/splash.htm> or
<http://www.choice.com.au>
- Australia's first deliberative poll
<http://rsss.anu.edu.au/DeliberativePoll.html>
- Issues Deliberation Australia
<http://i-d-a.com.au/>
- Jefferson Center in US
http://www.jefferson-center.org/citizens_jury.htm
- Citizens' panels
<http://www.loka.org/pages/panel.htm>
- International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)
<http://www.iap2.org/>
- UK Government's people's panel
<http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/servicefirst/>
- European Participatory Technical Assessment EUROpTA
<http://www.tekno.dk/europta/>
- Teledemocracy Action News + Network (TAN+N)
<http://www.auburn.edu/tann/>
- Loka Institute's page on worldwide consensus conferences
<http://www.loka.org/pages/worldpanels.html>
- Center for deliberative polling
<http://www.la.utexas.edu/research/delpol/cdpindex.html>
- Constructive citizen participation
<http://www.islandnet.com/~connor/happenings.html>



Appendix 1

Mid-term review⁴ An RFR participant survey

1. For how long have you been a participant of the residents' feedback register?

| | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Between 2-3 years | <input type="checkbox"/> 6 months to 1 year |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Between 1-2 years | <input type="checkbox"/> Less than 6 months |

2. How many consultation methods have you participated in?

| | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> None | <input type="checkbox"/> 2-3 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> 4-5 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Over 5 | |

3. How many surveys have you participated in?

| | |
|---|-------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> None | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Focus group | If yes, how many? _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Citizens' jury | If yes, how many? _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Deliberative poll | If yes, how many? _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Consensus conference | If yes, how many? _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ | If yes, how many? _____ |

4. Which statement is closest to how you feel about your involvement in the Residents' feedback register? (please tick)

| |
|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I believe it has made a real difference to the way decisions are made at local government level |
| <input type="checkbox"/> It has been an extremely rewarding experience for me personally |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I'm glad that I did it, but I'm not sure that it has achieved anything |
| <input type="checkbox"/> It has been a total waste of time, money and effort! |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ |

⁴ This survey could also be used as a participant exit survey.



5. What has been the major reason for deciding to withdraw early from the Residents' feedback register?
- I'm moving out of the area
 - Too busy
 - It's taking up more time than I thought
 - I'm not convinced that it is helping council make better/more informed decisions
 - I don't think Council is genuine about gaining feedback/input
 - Other _____
6. Would you recommend being part of the residents' feedback register to friends?
- Definitely
 - Basically
 - Perhaps
 - Not at all
7. Highest educational attainment:
- Postgraduate qualification (e.g. Doctorate, Masters)
 - Undergraduate
 - TAFE qualification
 - Apprenticeship
 - Higher School Certificate
 - School Certificate
 - Nil
 - Other _____
8. Age:
- 16-24
 - 25-39
 - 40-59
 - 60+
9. Gender:
- Female
 - Male
10. Would you like to make any further comment?
- _____
- _____
- _____

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.



Appendix 2

Case example: Kirklees Council's RFR

TALK BACK

LISTENING TO YOUR VIEWS ON COUNCIL SERVICES AND HEALTH SERVICES

DO YOU have anything to say about Kirklees Council and the services it provides?

DO YOU have any views on the services provided by the Kirklees Health Authority?

DO YOU want to help shape the future of the services in your local area?

DO YOU want your views, on council services and health issues, to count, both locally and nationally?

Join our residents' 'TALKBACK' panel and be involved in the future of your local area.

You could win £100 in our prize draw!

Not interested? Well don't say we haven't given you the opportunity!

Interested? Then read on, it couldn't be simpler.



Kirklees Talkback Panel explained

What will I have to do if I become a panel member?

You will receive three to four questionnaires per year. You will have plenty of time to fill in the questionnaire and we will provide you with a freepost envelope to return it in.

From time to time we may contact you to see if you are interested in taking part in occasional discussion groups or short telephone surveys on issues of particular importance. Whether or not you take part is up to you.

How will I know what you have done with the information you receive from the survey?

You will receive regular newsletters to keep you up to date with how the information you provide us with has been used and any changes made to council or health services as a result of your feedback.

Will the information I give you be confidential?

All the information you provide us with will be treated in the strictest confidence. The results from the surveys will only be used, in an anonymous form.

Who will have access to my personal details?

Your name and address will be held on a secure database. Access will be strictly limited to essential staff only. Your details will not be seen by, or passed on to, anybody else.



How can I be confident that my details and the information I give to you will be treated in confidence?

We are bound by a Market Research Code of Conduct and you have our assurance that all research you will be involved in will be carried out in an ethical manner.

What if I would like my questionnaires in a different format?

If English is not your first language we can arrange for an interpreter to telephone you or visit you to complete the questionnaire. If you would like to receive this in large print or have any other requirements, just let us know, and we will try to help.

I want to become a panel member, now what do I do?

All you have to do is fill in the enclosed form and return it in the freepost envelope.

What happens after I have returned the enclosed form?

We will enter your details onto our database and select, at random, the number of new panel members we need. If you are not selected we will place you on a reserve list. We will always let you know what is happening.

How do I enter the prize draw?

All you have to do is fill in the enclosed form and return it in the freepost envelope and you will be entered. The winner will receive £100.

I still have more questions.⁵

Please contact either of the following officers who will be happy to answer your questions.

Ruth Sothon
Research Officer
Kirklees Metropolitan Council
Tel: (01484) 221486
Ruth.southon@kirkleesmc.gov.uk

⁵ A brief message in several key community languages about contacting council in relation to the RFR was also included here.



Maureen Mellodew

Communications Officer Calderdale and Kirklees Health Authority

Tel: (01484) 466 172

Appendix 3

Example of an RFR application form

The following is provided as a general example of what to include in an RFR application form, which would accompany material explaining what an RFR is (see Appendix 2).

The following information will help us ensure that the Resident's Feedback Register reflects the make-up of the local community.

- I would like to become a member of the Residents' Feedback Register (RFR).
- I am willing to take part in postal questionnaires.
- I am willing to take part in informal discussion groups.
- I am willing to take part in occasional short telephone surveys.

Your contact details

Name: _____

Address: _____

Daytime telephone: _____

Evening telephone: _____



ABOUT YOU

Gender:

Female

Male

Age:



Which of these activities best describes what you are doing at present?

- Full-time employee (30+ h/week)
- Part-time employee (16-30 h/week)
- Self-employed (full- or part-time)
- Government supported training program
(e.g. Apprenticeship/training for work/adult education)
- Full-time student (school, TAFE or university)
- Unemployed
- Permanently sick/disabled
- Retired
- Looking after the home
- Other
-

What is/was your occupation?

- Manager or administrator
- Professional or technical
- Clerical or secretarial
- Craft or skilled trade
- Services
- Sales
- Plant or machine operator
- Other
-

Do you speak a language other than English at home?

Yes No

If yes, which language(s)? _____

Do you identify as an Aborigine or a Torres Strait Islander?

Yes No

Education:

- Secondary (high school)
- Tertiary (university, TAFE)



Other



Do you:

- Own your own home
- Rent from a private landlord
- Rent from the Department of Housing
- Other
-

ABOUT YOUR HEALTH

Do you have any long-term illness, disability or infirmity that limits your activities in any way?

Yes No

Details:

Please return this form in the prepaid envelope supplied, as soon as possible, free of charge, to:

Smithville Residents' Feedback Register
PO Box 1111
WA 2222

Thank you for your participation!