

**Open Report on behalf of Richard Wills, Executive Director for Communities**

Report to:	<b>Councillor M J Hill OBE, Executive Councillor for Policy, Strategy and Communications</b>
Date:	<b>19 March 2012</b>
Subject:	<b>Establishing a Citizens' Panel</b>
Decision Reference:	<b>02038</b>
Key decision?	<b>No</b>

**Summary:**

There would be benefits to the County Council in understanding the public's stance on a variety of issues. By establishing a Citizen's Panel, the council would be able to test public opinion on their views about LCC, whether LCC is doing a 'good job', their tolerance to changes and overall satisfaction which could be used to inform policies and practices.

This report recommends the development and establishment of the Citizens' Panel.

**Recommendation(s):**

A. To develop the principles of, and implement a 'Citizen's Panel' in Lincolnshire County Council.

**Alternatives Considered:**

1. The Citizens' Panel could be much smaller than proposed, which would be cheaper to operate but may not produce outputs that are statistically valid.
2. The Council could outsource the development of a panel itself with an external agency. This would be time consuming and we already have the capacity of relevant expertise, so would take longer to assemble.

**Reasons for Recommendation:**

A Citizens' Panel allows the Council to ascertain public opinion and tolerance of changes in key service areas.

A. This is potentially the most cost-effective way of operating a Citizens' Panel utilising existing LCC staff to assemble the panel, develop an approved question set and contact the panel via telephone to gain their feedback.

B. There is an appropriate level of local knowledge within LCC with expertise to assemble a representative group of people to form a Citizens' Panel.

## **1. Background**

A Citizens' Panel is a group of people living in our area who are willing to participate in occasional surveys to test public opinion on general or specific issues. It is also possible to track public opinion because there is some consistency in Panel membership. The Panel is "virtual" in that it does not meet, being contacted by, in the main telephone, or by e-mail or asked to partake on-line. It is recognised that the telephony channel to contact the panel is the preferred option. The views of such a panel will assist council decision makers to respond to public opinion and may influence councillors when they establish policies and practices.

The concept is not new and many councils have similar panels. Officers had proposed establishing a panel a few years ago but the suggestion was not adopted.

Customer service and satisfaction remains important to the council and it is sensible and logical to utilise the experience of the Customer Service Centre in this project. A Citizens' Panel should therefore be viewed as a component of the overall customer contact strategy and engagement with customers, consumers and citizens as part of LCCs conversational approach to deliver a 'Bigger Society' approach and be seen to be more transparent in how we have listened and responded to the public's views.

### Evaluation

The cost of operating a Citizens' Panel through an external public opinion agency is likely to be too costly, though it would have the advantage of being seen to be independent,

It will be feasible to interact with the Panel and gain their feedback in the Council's Customer Service Centre by telephoning the panel on an agreed basis. This becomes more practical if the questions that people are asked are simple, straightforward and of a reasonable number and we only use this group of people three times per year.

In addition, for wider general feedback we could instigate within the CSC a drive to sign-up as many willing people as possible for e-mail responses / online surveys to build up a larger cohort of people for a wider conversation, which would avoid direct contact altogether. This may result in a lower proportion of replies however it does develop that wider group who are interested in how our services are delivered and may be more interested in responding to requests for feedback from LCC. This is a future development of the initiative if needed.

There is one aspect where it may be advisable to use external help; that is in forming the Citizen's Panel in the first place. However we do have a wide internal knowledge inside LCC already and the partnership of customer service centres across Lincolnshire could also be utilised to obtain willing participants. To be statistically valid it would need to represent the demography of the county (assuming we are only contacting our own citizens) and have about 500 members. There is already a wide cohort of customers available to utilise for this type of information/feedback, and typically one third of these would be stood down each year and refreshed with new volunteers. That way, some consistency is obtained but staleness is avoided.

It is possible to do this in-house and will be far cheaper while achieving a good sample of the population.

The detailed proposition is attached.

## **2. Conclusion**

A Citizens' Panel should be established.

In summary:

- Once the decision is made to pursue the recommendation, then we can develop a small task and finish group co-ordinated by the Head of Community Engagement to advise on the number of people to include in a Citizen's Panel and assemble the initial Panel with further work within CSC to develop an ongoing virtual email panel for use in future, additional consultation and for the Communications Team to develop the question set
- The CSC can accommodate the operation of a Panel by prioritising its workload within the new staffing levels.

### **3. Legal Comments:**

The decision about setting up a citizens panel is a cross-cutting decision that could be taken by the Portfolio Holder responsible for Community Engagement or the Leader depending on who the Leader wishes to take the decision

### **4. Resource Comments:**

The establishment of a Citizens' Panel through the Customer Service Centre will not commit the Council to any additional expenditure. All costs will be funded from the existing Customer Service Centre revenue budget

## 5. Consultation

### a) Has Local Member Been Consulted?

n/a

### b) Has Executive Councillor Been Consulted?

Yes

### c) Scrutiny Comments

This has not been considered by a scrutiny committee.

### d) Policy Proofing Actions Required

n/a

## 6. Appendices

These are listed below and attached at the back of the report	
Appendix A	Proposal details

## 7. Background Papers

No background papers within Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972 were used in the preparation of this report.

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