



Deliberative processes

Description

Deliberation is an approach to decision-making that involves an informed constituency thinking critically together and discussing options from multiple points of view. Deliberative processes allow informed discussion and avoid reducing questions to a simplistic either/or response. There are a range of deliberative mechanisms including deliberative polls, consumer panels and citizens' juries.

How it works

A **deliberative poll** is like an enhanced opinion poll. Participants are selected randomly and then come together to discuss the issue. The profile of the participants can be structured to provide a sample that is representative of the whole group according to specific characteristics, for example, age, gender, or service used. It generally involves large quantities of participants (up to several hundred).

A deliberative poll requires information to be given to participants in advance. Extended small and large group discussions take place when participants meet. It is preceded by a poll and leads to a vote or series of votes at the end, the results of which can be compared with the first poll.

Consumer panels may also be called consumer feedback panels. An organisation establishes a pool of potential respondents within a defined area (interest or geographical). This pool may then be called upon to participate in a range of quantitative research methods, such as phone surveys, face-to-face interviews or self-completion postal questionnaires, on any issue. They may also be called upon to participate in one or several qualitative consultation methods, for example citizens' juries or deliberative polls.

A consumer panel can involve a large number of consumers and is typically maintained over an extended period of time (2-4 years). Based on Residents Feedback Panels, such panels of consumers can provide input into planning and can track changes in consumer attitudes over a period of time.

A **citizens' jury** is created by those with authority to define an issue and act on the jury's recommendations. The facilitators recruit experts, gather briefing information and arrange the selection of a panel via random selection which matches a representative profile (in the context of housing and homelessness services, this might include a representative group of consumers from across the organisation's programs). The convening of the jury and the topic they will

deliberate is widely publicised.

When the jury meets, deliberations are held and expert witnesses are called. A report is prepared outlining the jury's recommendations.



Degree of participation

From consultation to delegated power.

Timeframe

Short to medium.

Resource level required

Medium to high.

Resources required are similar to strategies like surveys and focus groups, that is, consumers need to be paid for their time and any expenses incurred in participating. However, some level of expert advice to ensure the process is more deliberative will be important to start with. While you might need to pay expert consultants for their time, some academics are interested in the application of these processes and will provide a level of assistance voluntarily.

Maintenance of a Consumer Feedback Panel database requires administrative resources on a long-term basis.

Strengths

The key advantage of deliberative participatory strategies is that they encourage enlarged perspectives, opinions, and understandings, and thus can result in better decisions and policies.

Deliberative processes increase the likelihood that consumers' contributions to decision making will be well informed as well as being backed by their experiences of homelessness or housing disadvantage. Consumers have access to briefing material and have the opportunity to consider the issues.

When consumers meet together to participate in these strategies they are also able to socialise, learn and develop skills and knowledge.

The participant group of a deliberative poll can be large and allows for responses in different places or across different services to be compared. It is also a

convenient consultation method to engage those who face barriers associated with travel/transport.

Citizen juries allow for the inclusion of expanded levels of expertise, knowledge and skills in the process and the opportunity to scrutinise the information presented. This method is useful when the issues involved are complex and expert involvement is required to clarify these complexities.

Weaknesses

Deliberative polling can be costly when participants are brought to a single site and their expenses are paid, although the use of televoting may overcome these drawbacks. With a televote, participants are sent information and encouraged to discuss the issue with family and friends. However, televoting does not bring consumers together and the process is therefore less deliberative.

The model citizen jury process is potentially a lengthy and costly process, involving participants meeting over several days. Significant organisational commitment and resourcing is required to make this happen. A condensed version over a shorter timeframe may be possible.

Example



Public housing tenants in the Southern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne were selected onto a citizens' jury to deliberate over methods of participating in the Tenant Participation Framework, prior to its finalisation.

The jury met over two days with access to expert witnesses; after each witness presentation, they met as a small group to deliberate. An experienced facilitator led them through team building and decision making skills as well as assisting them to formulate questions to scrutinise the information presented by the witnesses. The participants collaboratively produced a written report with recommendations that was circulated to all tenants in the region. The regional manager undertook to act on as many as she could.

Tips

- ☞ To keep a Consumer Feedback Panel current requires some process for maintaining regular contact with people on the database. Mechanisms must be put in place to replace participants who lose interest or move away.
- ☞ The question(s) to be deliberated on by a Citizens' Jury need to be clear in advance.
- ☞ Deliberative consultation methods are in their infancy in Australia and there are a growing num-

ber of academics who are interested in practical examples. They may be a good source of expert advice for your consultation.

For more information...

- More information on deliberative polls, consumer panels and citizens' juries: Ideas for Community Consultation viewed December 2007 at: <http://www.nswplanning.org.au/pia/engagement/stories/docs/ideasforconsult.pdf>
- Deliberative Democracy Consortium is a US website viewed December 2007 at: <http://www.deliberative-democracy.net>
- Active Democracy is an Australian website with case studies, links and references at: <http://www.activedemocracy.net>
- Brotherhood of St Laurence (2004). *Seeing is believing*. DVD of citizens' panel in Victoria. Purchase from BSL library. <http://www.bsl.org.au>