

## A potential role for electoral commissions in deliberative engagement

26 April, 2022

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*This draws from lessons from MosaicLab's experience facilitating deliberative processes for nine local government authorities in the first round of deliberative engagement under Victoria's new Local Government Act. newDemocracy was involved in the formal review workshop.*

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## A potential role for electoral commissions in deliberative engagement

### ***What is the question?***

How can many deliberative panels be recruited in a cost-effective manner, and are there any other benefits from doing so?

### ***What is the usual answer?***

Deliberative engagement is based on the principle of the deliberating group being representative of the relevant community, whether a local area, a state or a nation. The typical method for ensuring that the group is representative is to recruit the group using a random and stratified process by an independent recruiter, otherwise known as a democratic lottery.

Randomness is achieved by sending (usually by post) several thousand invitations drawn from a population-wide database to randomly selected households in the relevant area. People who receive the invitation are invited to register their interest via an online form or telephone and in doing so provide basic demographic information (e.g. gender, age, geographic location) (See, [Recruitment](#)).

Stratification is achieved by selecting those people who match stratification goals (e.g. the number of people needed from each gender, age group, and location to match the demographics of the relevant community). This is usually done by a computer program that ensures that people matching a specific demographic are chosen randomly.

People who are selected are contacted by telephone to confirm their participation.

A decision will have been made on the size of the panel e.g., 40 people. It is recommended that ten times (400 people) and at a minimum 3 times (120 people) the number of people required to register their interest to allow the panel to be truly random and meet the stratification goals.

The need for inclusion across as many households as possible means that recruitment is address driven (using land titles or Australia Post datasets), leading to invitations necessitating print and postage, and hence is expensive. Email suffers two problems: first, there are few sufficiently comprehensive databases and second, email communication is less trusted due to the prevalence of scam and phishing attempts in unsolicited emails that seek to look official.

### ***And what are the advantages?***

The key advantage of this form of recruitment is that it is the best form of recruitment to meet the goal of a deliberating group being representative of its community. Even though there are some deficiencies in this process (there can be a bias in who volunteers) it provides a much more diverse group than those people who typically attend public (open) engagement meetings. Decision-makers can be much more confident that they are hearing from everyday people rather than just those people with a stake in the outcome.

### ***What are the disadvantages?***

Recruitment is one of the major costs of undertaking a deliberative engagement process.

The key elements are the cost of the database, the cost of printing and postage, and the time and cost of the phone calls to confirm the participation of those people who are selected.

This cost is reduced if there is an existing database with email addresses and an email invitation can be sent rather than using the postal system. Even though some organisations have email databases, they are often not comprehensive, they are easily out of date or cannot be used for privacy reasons (data collected for another purpose).

Typical recruitment costs for a 45-person panel are around AUD30,000 including AUD12,000 to set up the registration process, invitation package, selection, stratification, and confirmation plus approximately AUD500 for a database and another AUD15,000 - AUD20,000 for printing and postage. A recent panel for 45 people was a total cost of AUD29,570.

Part of this cost is due to the low response rates in Australia to invitations to participate in a deliberation and hence the need to send out so many invitations. It is these low response rates that create the need for thousands of invitations to be issued.

Low response rates are due to several factors and include deliberations not being well known or understood by the public, hence people do not understand the opportunity being offered to them. Nor do people trust that their involvement will make a difference in decisions made by governments and hence they do not respond to the invitation to participate. It may also be because the stipend is too low to offset the desire to do other personal activities on weekends or evenings (this seems particularly relevant in this new 'living with' COVID environment).

### ***What is an alternative approach in Victoria?***

Given that the Local Government Act requires all councils to undertake 'deliberative engagement practices' at least every four years for four major plans (Community Vision, Council Plan, Asset Plan and Finance Plan) there could be considerable savings for councils if the recruitment was undertaken centrally on a state-wide basis whether this undertaken by the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC), an independent recruitment organisation or a state government department (See, [Democracy Commissions](#)).

This could work in the following way:

1. A responsible organisation (independent of local government) is appointed to undertake a state-wide recruitment process.
2. The organisation issues invitations to 10,000 households (randomly selected) in each of the 79 council areas to gain expressions of interest to participate in a deliberative panel (and remain available for up to 2 years). Widespread publicity by the State Government and Local Councils is likely to increase the response rate.
3. The organisation collects the EOIs. They would ideally need 10:1 EOIs to panel places for every council area to enable both randomisation and stratification (See, [Recruitment](#)). There may need to be a top-up process every 1-2 years.
4. There are at least two ways in which these panels could be used by local councils:

- a. One-off panels – Panels are only selected when a council requests the independent organisation to select a certain number of people (say 50) to form a panel for a particular topic. Councils may make several requests over the life of the Council (4 years).
- b. Standing panels – This is where a Council chooses to appoint one ‘Standing Panel’ that operates over a longer time period and provides advice to Council on more than one issue/topic. The independent organisation would then select people to match the demographics of the municipality and they become a standing panel for 2 years (or an 8-meeting commitment).

### ***Conditions for success***

Some conditions for success for an independently run process are as follows:

- Widespread publicity so that people are aware of the opportunity to be involved, what is involved (what deliberation means) and also the benefit of involvement based on the experiences of previous deliberation participants.
- The responsible organisation understands the fundamental principles of deliberation and recruitment and follows the principles set down by the OECD – That is, a market research company is not charged with recruiting the equivalent of a large-scale focus group.
- On-going communications are put in place for maintaining the interest of people who have registered interest prior to them being selected for a panel.

If a standing panel is proposed, there are a number of conditions for success that are known from previous experience:

- That participants are only appointed for one year and then a proportion of new members are rotated into the group as it is important for members to not be ‘inculcated’ into the system, open to lobbying or consider themselves replacements for elected representatives.
- Sufficient time (several days) and information is provided to enable the group to deliberate on each topic, there have been examples where these standing panels are given too many topics and hence only provide opinion rather than informed and considered recommendations based on deep deliberation. This also limits the effective level of influence the group can have on a topic.
- They need to meet sufficiently regularly to create a sense of ‘groupness’ and be able to work collaboratively including individual members being able to compromise.
- Topic selection is important whether chosen by the sponsoring organisation or the deliberating group. These need to be topics over which they can have real influence.

### ***Finally***

A recruitment process at a state government level with a high level of publicity is likely to lead to a big increase in people willing to take part in deliberations, particularly if the publicity includes information from previous participants who overwhelmingly judge these processes to be worthwhile and increases their trust in local government.

A state-wide recruitment process would provide a huge reduction in costs to Councils in undertaking deliberative engagement as is required by the Act, and would have the added benefit of publicising the fact that democracy is being done differently in Victoria at the local government level.

In Ireland, their history of successful national projects has led to response rates of more than 20% for projects using the approach recommended for the 2022 projects. The Irish organisers retained newDemocracy for advice on this giving them a unique point of comparison in response rates. This suggests that visibility and understanding of the practical use of assemblies dramatically boosts public willingness to participate.

***References***

MosaicLab (2020) A Short Guide to Deliberative Engagement for Victorian Councils

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