

In 1997, Hertfordshire Police Authority, together with the County Council and the local Health Authority, contracted MORI to set up and manage a Citizens Panel for Hertfordshire. This provided a successful tool for consulting a representative sample of the population about broad spectrum of issues and concerns.

During the four-year life of the contract, the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 came into being, placing a wide range of statutory responsibilities on local district and borough councils in relation to community safety, including a duty to consult. Aware of the potential for costly duplication, the original partners invited the districts to form a consultation consortium.

Although not all districts joined, MORI was awarded the contract in 2002 to provide a county-wide panel and six district-based panels, each consisting of between 1,700 and 2,000 residents who are broadly representative of Hertfordshire's population.

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From the Police Authority perspective, one of the most important benefits of the Hertfordshire Panel is its total independence; it is not the police consulting about the police. It provides an excellent tool for scrutiny, enabling the Authority to survey on public levels of satisfaction, trust and confidence in relation to police services. The results are analysed and backed-up by one of the best known names in market research, which provides credibility.

The Panel also provides a way of tracking changes to opinion – the Authority consults annually on policing priorities, with the results feeding into its annual planning process for the local Policing Plan. Results from the Panel are tested by repeating the same questions in other surveys, such as those carried out at public meetings and in the Authority's annual report newspaper "Herts Beat".

Another annual use of the Panel is as a sounding board in relation to acceptable levels of council tax. Results of postal surveys have provided the Authority with quantitative information that informed the decision on the police revenue budget. The Panel survey was complemented by focus groups, drawn from the Panel, which enabled in-depth discussions about the reasons behind peoples' choices.

The Consortium has enabled practitioners in the county to identify areas for joint working and develop a more co-ordinated approach to consultation. It has helped to eliminate duplication of consultation exercises, and made it easier to benchmark, with partners sharing information and results.