

Appendix 1 – Report on Citizens’ Panel Research

West Dunbartonshire News
Report on Citizens’ Panel Focus Group Research

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1. Introduction

This document presents the findings emerging from focus group research among members of the West Dunbartonshire Citizens' Panel on their experiences of the Council's newspaper, ***West Dunbartonshire News***.

In its brief for the assignment, the Council stated the requirement to test Panel members' opinions of the current ***West Dunbartonshire News*** format against newspapers and magazines produced by other local authorities. Against this overall requirement, the assignment would evaluate three key themes:

- Receipt of ***West Dunbartonshire News***
- Attitudes to ***West Dunbartonshire News*** and preferred changes or improvements
- Comparison of ***West Dunbartonshire News with other Council newspapers and magazines***

Section 2 outlines our approach to the assignment while Sections 3 to 5 deal with the views of Panel members on each of the three themes.

2. Our Approach

The recruitment of the West Dunbartonshire's Citizens' Panel established if Panel members would be willing to take part in focus groups. It was agreed to hold two focus groups, one in Clydebank and one in Dumbarton, and a random sample of Panel members was contacted in each area to invite them to attend the focus groups on **West Dunbartonshire News**.

2.1 Recruitment

We issued letters to twenty Panel members in each area, inviting them to indicate if they were willing to attend their local focus group (Appendix 1). The letter stated that the first eight responding would be invited.

One week before the focus groups were due to be held, we had received written and telephone confirmation from fifteen Panel members that they would like to attend (eight from Clydebank and seven from Dumbarton).

2.2 Discussion Guide

The focus groups would probe issues identified in the brief and a discussion guide was developed and agreed with the Council to reflect these (Appendix 2 encloses a copy of the discussion guide).

2.3 The Focus Groups

The focus groups were held on the 1st July 2009 as follows:

- 11am Council Offices, Garshake Road, Dumbarton
- 2pm Council Offices, Rosebery Place, Clydebank

With the agreement of focus group participants, each discussion was recorded and from this a transcript was made used as the basis for our analysis and reporting purposes.

3. Receipt of *West Dunbartonshire News*

The Multi Subject Survey of the Citizens' Panel in April 2008 repeated some questions on the receipt of **West Dunbartonshire News** from a similar survey in 2006. The survey found that although all households across West Dunbartonshire should receive a copy of **West Dunbartonshire News**, just over three quarters of Panel members (76%) recalled receiving a copy in the last six months (although this represented a rise from the 62% recorded in the 2006 survey). However, almost a quarter (24%) said they did not recall receiving a copy.

Received a copy of West Dunbartonshire News in last 3 months?

	Regeneration Areas		Rest of West Dunbartonshire		West Dunbartonshire	
	2008	2006	2008	2006	2008	2006
Yes	70%	65%	78%	60%	76%	62%
No	30%	30%	22%	37%	24%	35%
Not stated	0%	5%	0%	3%	0%	3%

Source: Multi Subject Survey April 2008

These findings are very consistent with the experiences of Panel members attending the two focus groups. While the majority said they recalled receiving **West Dunbartonshire News** every 2-3 months, others (all from Dumbarton) said its delivery was erratic and one claimed she had never received a copy during the years she had lived in Dumbarton.

For example, one respondent who lives in a multi storey flat, said the delivery problem was often because bundles of **West Dunbartonshire News** were tossed onto the landing and not delivered directly through his door:

'I think it's delivered by Royal Mail but they do the same as they do with things like Yellow pages; they just toss them into the landing and before you know it there are pages blowing all over the place. The Council should be carrying out random checks to make sure the paper is delivered properly. I know that happens

with papers like ‘The Glaswegian’ and the Council should make sure the money it’s spending on delivery results in the job being done correctly. ’

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

Another respondent felt that the delivery of the paper may stand out in people’s memory if each edition was more effectively branded to reflect when it is issued rather than simply having the month of issue on the copy:

‘Perhaps part of our uncertainty about receiving West Dunbartonshire News on a regular basis is that we don’t know when and how often it’s meant to be issued. If they branded each issue better, say as “Spring”, “Summer” and so on, it might be easier to recall.’

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

Only one respondent said they have never received it and was confident her neighbours didn’t receive it either.

‘Is it supposed to come to every household in West Dunbartonshire? I’ve never received a copy and I’ve lived in Dumbarton for over five years. I’ll ask my neighbours when I get home but I’m sure they haven’t received it either.’

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

4. Attitudes to West Dunbartonshire News

Respondents were asked to comment on the balance, content and format of **West Dunbartonshire News** and their feedback is summarised below in relation to six issues:

- Balance
- Performance Reports
- Repetition of content
- Geographical coverage
- A community focus
- Format

4.1 Balance

Panel members attending the focus groups tended to fall into two distinct camps when the balance of the articles appearing in **West Dunbartonshire News was raised** ; the minority (three out of the fifteen attending) said they found the content of **West Dunbartonshire News** to be balanced and enjoyed reading the articles on how the Council was performing. However, a clear majority felt the articles in the paper were geared to presenting the Council in a positive light and were seen as a platform for the Council to 'flag wave':

'I think the paper is written for the benefit of the Council and not local residents. The language is often very bureaucratic and full of jargon. And the number of articles praising the Council, with photographs of Councillors or officials, outweighs those which might be of help to the average citizen.'

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

'You expect to get good news stories about the Council and that's what you get. They should ditch these and concentrate on what is important to local people, not use the paper as a propaganda tool. When you keep reading good news stories,

with the Council winning award after award, you get very cynical. It doesn't reflect the world we live in.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

'Too many of the articles seem to be there to help boost the careers of the suits in the photographs.'

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

'It's all about the Council blowing its own trumpet, about how well they are performing, what awards they have won. But as the Council writes the stories, you get very cynical about how accurate and balanced these are. It's the opposite of the local papers where you know they deliberately look for an angle to report bad news. The Council filters out anything negative to produce articles that are too good to be true.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

It doesn't meet problem areas head on, such as Council Tax collection rates where West Dunbartonshire is second bottom or third bottom of the 32 Councils. It will say what the collection rate is but not how poorly the Council is performing.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

'The Audit Commission has criticised the Council pretty badly about a lack of community engagement. I bet the paper won't mention that part of the Audit Commission report. It will mention any good points in the report so really it's a propaganda sheet.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

4.2 Performance Reports

Since August 2005, West Dunbartonshire Council has included two pages of articles about its performance in ***West Dunbartonshire News***. Panel members' experience of reading these articles and their value in reporting Council performance was assessed in the 2008 Multi Subject Survey. Mixed views were recorded:

- Just over half (52%) of those reading the articles in 2008 found them 'quite interesting', while over a third (35%) said they were 'not very interesting'
- While almost three quarters (74%) felt the articles were 'fairly balanced', only 10% thought they were 'very balanced'

One Panel member attending the focus groups referred, unprompted, to the performance reports, saying they were not presented in an appealing format:

'Sometimes there are a lot of figures in it, rows and rows of them, about Council targets or performance, and they just go right over my head. I'm sure if I wanted to get information like that, I could, perhaps from the Council's website. I think the paper should be written to appeal to the needs and interests of local people and how their day and daily lives can benefit from what the Council is doing.'

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

When the December 2008 issue of ***West Dunbartonshire News*** was handed out to focus group members, several agreed the format and style of the report, ***'Public Performance Report Dunbartonshire and Argyll and Bute Valuation Joint Board'*** was difficult to digest because of the dense typeface and tables of small figures:

'I'd look right over that. You have half a page of densely packed writing and tables full of tiny figures. Compared to other articles nearby, they have also used a much smaller size for the text. They really don't want anyone to read this.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

The two page article on pages 8-9 on ***'Meeting the Corporate Plan'*** was also criticised for the unattractive way it tried to get its message across:

'Yet again, the type size is dramatically smaller and there are about twenty tables of figures with supporting paragraphs in even smaller text!'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

'A lot of people wouldn't read that. The way it's laid out in very small typeface doesn't reach out to the general public. We can all read and write well but there are many in West Dunbartonshire who can't and the Council should be thinking about how it presents this type of information.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

'Do they honestly think people are going to sit down and read that? It's not because I don't understand it, it's because it is not written or presented in a way that connects with the general public.'

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

This latter point was picked up by other respondents who agreed the information was important and that made it vital to present it in a way that the public can identify with. There was also a view that, as the information was often available from other sources, a greater effort should be made to personalise the version issued through **West Dunbartonshire News**:

'I might be unusual, but I'm interested in things like this (the performance reports). But as there is an important message behind all of this, surely someone could turn it into a punchier article, perhaps personalising it in some way by describing what it means to a member of the public, say someone who has just turned 18 and is looking forward to voting for the first time.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

'It's very important information but they need to develop a style of reporting this in the newspaper that appeals to the average reader and not simply paste in articles written in 'officialese' for a Council audience.'

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

'The performance figures are important but it would be more interesting if they were presented along with the views of the public, to give them some meaning and context. There never seem to be any views from the general public.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

'Throughout the financial year, you get the performance figures anyway from the same departments. These figures are delivered on other occasions and can be accessed from different sources, so if they want to release them in the newspaper, they should make an effort to write a newspaper style article on the figures, not just regurgitate the performance report – make it more relevant to the average reader.'

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

There was also a concern that the performance reports did not say what the Council was doing about not meeting a target or performing poorly:

'They should also be reporting on the areas where they are not performing well and telling the community how they hope to turn that around. It's an opportunity for dialogue with local people and there should be a better balance in what they decide to tell us. They only ever seem to show us one side of the coin.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

'If you look at some of the commentary in the Corporate Plan article, you read that a target has not been met but there is no statement why this is the case and what is being done about it. Surely the Council can see it's more important to tell us what they are going to do about poor performance.'

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

4.3 Repetition of content

A view expressed by several respondents was that the articles in **West Dunbartonshire News** seem to get repeated from edition to edition as well as appearing in other local newspapers:

'Sometimes it's useful and sometimes it's not. A lot of stories get repeated; perhaps just to fill out the space they have, without thinking about the reader.'

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

'The content of it seems to be repeated and repeated.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

‘One of the problems is that many of the stories are picked up by local papers as well and you will probably have read quite a few before the Council gets its paper out.’

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

4.4 Geographical coverage

A number of the Clydebank respondents felt that the paper focuses too much on events in Dumbarton with little reporting relating directly to Clydebank:

‘It’s always Dumbarton, isn’t it? It have very little of interest to people in Clydebank.’

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

‘If the Council wants to keep Clydebank folk informed, they should include more articles about what’s happening in our community or else produce different versions to suit each community.’

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

4.5 A Community Focus

When focus group respondents were asked to identify the articles they thought were most relevant and interesting in the December 2008 edition of **West Dunbartonshire News**, they singled out five articles in particular:

- The headline story dealing with a new strategy to tackle drugs misuse
- Advice to stop cold callers
- An article showing vandalism had fallen by 10% - one respondent wondered why this was on one of the back pages when it was very important
- Safe Drive – the two page article that was part of the CPP four page insert – as one respondent remarked, ‘careless driving by young people is a real problem in our community’

- The article on 'safer streets'

These were seen to be useful and interesting because the issues affected them or their communities directly, a view taken up by other respondents:

'The articles on the drugs strategy and the investment in safer streets are very good and are of interest to a lot of people; these are things that affect the quality of people's lives.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

'The best parts are the articles about local events, such as the development of the waterfront, or about the introduction of new services that may affect you personally.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

'It should be less about West Dunbartonshire Council staff and Councillors and more about West Dunbartonshire and its people. Maybe they could do more features on local people who have achieved something notable, or invite contributions from local people; perhaps a letters page or reader's stories. That would be a lot more interesting than one of those performance reports.'

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

'The content of a Council paper should address issues that directly impact on the welfare and well being of local people.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

'There is a big difference between how the Council is performing and what that does for me to me and my local community. These articles concentrate too much on the former. The newspaper should aim to give us more community news.'

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

One respondent said he had tried to get more of a community focus in **West Dunbartonshire News**, specifically in terms of some of the area's Community Councils, but he was told there was not enough space for this:

'There are ten active Community Councils in West Dunbartonshire and I've asked the guy who helps to edit the content to highlight maybe one Community Council in each edition but he has said repeatedly there is not enough space. Yet you look at this edition and some photographs take up a quarter of a page and there's an advertisement that takes up an entire page! I think the excuse about not enough space is insincere.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

4.6 Format

When focus group respondents were assessing the December 2008 edition of **West Dunbartonshire News**, only two made any comments on the format of the newspaper, with unprompted views that prefer the magazine format adopted by other Councils:

'I think around 2006 the Council made a great play of moving their newspaper onto recyclable paper so I guess that's why we have this format, although I think it looks very cheap. My daughter lives in Glasgow and she gets a much better magazine style publication for the Council.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

'I've seen what Glasgow Council produce; it's an A4 size glossy magazine and maybe 16 pages in full colour. It's much more attractive than newspaper format.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

5. Comparison with other Council Publications

Copies of four other Council publications were handed round the focus group respondents and their views on these, particularly in comparison to **West Dunbartonshire News** were invited:

- **'er'**, the magazine from East Renfrewshire Council
- **'edlife'**, from East Dunbartonshire Council
- **'Glasgow'**, from Glasgow City Council
- **'Westlife'**, West Dunbartonshire's staff magazine

The feedback provided by focus group participants centred on three main issues:

- Their views on the use of an A4 magazine format
- Attitudes to the varying production standards used
- The content

5.1 Magazine Format

Respondents' attitudes to the magazine format were overwhelming positive; the examples were seen as a very attractive and effective way for Councils to engage with local people:

'Fewer pages, better quality, bright, cheerful. They are fantastic! I used to be a marketing manager with Makro and the 'Makro Mail' was the Bible – you had to get key messages out to your customers in a simple but attractive format and it looks like other Councils are doing that much better than West Dunbartonshire.'

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

'I think the magazine style is brilliant. People would be more attracted to West Dunbartonshire News if it was in that format.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

'That is more likely to get you to sit down and read it. It looks good, like a magazine you would buy, rather than a few pages of newsprint that leaves ink on your fingers.'

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

There was also a view that, even if the magazine format was more expensive to produce, it should be more cost effective as more people would read the articles:

'Even if the magazine costs a bit more to produce, I think it would be well worthwhile as it will get important messages over to people, it will be more cost effective. I think a lot of people just chuck the Council's newspaper after they have scanned the first few headlines so it couldn't really be regarded as cost effective..'

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

5.2. Quality of production

In addition to welcoming the magazine format, there was a clear view that the production standards of the magazines were much higher than **West Dunbartonshire News** and which contributed significantly to their appeal to the reader:

'Looking at these two pages alone of West Dunbartonshire News, there must be at least five different type sizes and at least four different fonts. All the Council is doing is picking articles and then reducing or expanding them to fit into the space available. If you look at the magazine I've got ('er'), there is a constant font and style all the way through which is much more professional looking and easier to read.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

In both focus groups, the majority regarded 'er' as the magazine with the highest production quality, although this prompted some respondents to reflect on whether this would be seen as too extravagant for a Council publication and that the slightly lower

standards used in **'edlife'** and **'Glasgow'** may reflect a better balance between quality and cost:

'I like the 'er' one the best. It has the best quality of production and it's the most attractive looking.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

'I can understand that some people might feel that the production quality of 'er' and 'Westlife' is too high for a Council magazine. I think the slightly lower quality of the 'Glasgow' magazine and 'edlife' is certainly good enough.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

'There is really no need to have anything as expensive looking as the 'er' magazine. It looks great but at a time when Council spending may be under pressure, it could send out the wrong message. I think 'edlife' is also very good but it doesn't feel as extravagant.'

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

5.3. Content

Focus group respondents were given some time to read through the magazines and asked to identify any aspects of the content that they particularly liked and would welcome in **West Dunbartonshire News**. One key area was the way all of the magazines provided photographs and contact details of all the local Councillors:

'What I like about 'Glasgow' is that it puts faces to the Councillors. When you read stories about Councillors in West Dunbartonshire, it's just a name. I honestly couldn't tell you which Councillors represent my area, but if 'West Dunbartonshire News' had a regular feature, showing all the Councillors, which wards they represent and how you can contact them, that would be very useful. You could then put a face to your local representative. I'd also be more likely to hang on the magazine for a few weeks or months in case I needed to contact my Councillor about something.'

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

'The magazines all seem to have photographs and contact details of local Councillors – that's very useful to have.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

'Sometimes 'West Dunbartonshire News' does a profile of one Councillor, almost like a mini interview with them, but if the paper is only issued about four times a year, it may take a long time before they get round to the ones representing your area. What they have done in 'edlife' is very good.'

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

'With the new multi member wards, it's not always easy to remember who your Councillors are, so the idea of photographs and contact details of all Councillors is a good one. All the magazines seem to have that so I wonder why they don't do that in 'West Dunbartonshire News.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

With the limited time they had, respondents also felt that the articles in the magazines seemed to have a greater community focus, for example on local sports events, festivals and local school projects. Two respondents also referred to an article in 'er' about becoming a lollypop woman, which they believed would appeal to many while another welcomed another article in 'er' in which the Council explained why some building projects have had to be delayed because of the economic downturn:

'There's a story in this one ('er') about how you can become a lollypop woman. A lot of people would find that interesting or amusing and I'm sure there could be a series looking at a range of Council funded jobs. It's definitely the sort of article that should be included in a Council paper because it's about real people.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

'We talked earlier about 'West Dunbartonshire News' only reporting good news stories when we know life's not like that. What they have done in 'er' is refreshing; rather than pretend there isn't a problem, the Council have tried to explain why things aren't going as well as they had planned.'

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

Several respondents also noticed the competitions in all three magazines and felt these would be a welcome addition to **'West Dunbartonshire News'**:

'In 'Glasgow', there's a chance to win driving lessons and in 'edlife' you can win shopping vouchers if you answer a question about one of the articles in the magazine. That's just like the magazines you would buy on the high street and it makes them more appealing to people.'

Dumbarton Focus Group Respondent

'There's a competition in it ('er') to win a clockwork radio. That would interest readers as well as providing an opportunity to get an important message across about saving energy. I think that's a great idea.'

Clydebank Focus Group Respondent

6. Concluding Comments

The two focus groups with members of the West Dunbartonshire Citizens' Panel have provided extensive feedback on '**West Dunbartonshire News**' and how it compares to the publications produced by other local authorities. Overall, respondents were more critical of the paper than Panel members as a whole (based on Citizens' Panel survey findings) and it is important to bear this in mind when evaluating the results.

Nevertheless, focus group respondents raised concerns with several aspects of '**West Dunbartonshire News**', most notably:

- It promotes an overly positive image of the Council at the expense of providing a more balanced stance
- There is not enough focus on issues and events that directly affect local people and the communities they live in
- The articles on performance reporting are not presented in an engaging format suitable for the average member of the public
- The production quality was regarded as poor, with a wide range of font sizes and types used and with very small text and figures used in some features on Council performance
- Many of the articles are repeated in different editions of '**West Dunbartonshire News**' and in other local papers

Consequently, respondents felt the Council should examine how they communicate with the general public through '**West Dunbartonshire News**'. In particular, the move to a full colour, glossy style magazine format would be unanimously welcomed as a more effective way to engage with local people. Respondents also felt this should provide the opportunity to re-evaluate the content, with a greater focus on articles that appeal to local communities and a more balanced approach to reporting the Council's performance.

Appendix 1
Recruitment Letter



16th June 2009

Dear Panel Member

West Dunbartonshire Council Focus Group Discussion

Recently, we invited you to take part in a focus group discussion on voting arrangements in West Dunbartonshire. This was very successful and we have now been asked to hold another focus group, this time on the Council's newspaper, **West Dunbartonshire News**.

We are therefore writing to find out if you would be interested in attending a focus group about the Council's proposals for **West Dunbartonshire News** on:

Wednesday 1st July at 11am in Meeting Room 2 of the Council offices at Garshake Road, Dumbarton

The discussion will take no more than an hour and anything you say will be treated with the strictest confidentiality. **Each resident who attends the discussion group will receive £25** to cover any expenses and to say thank-you for being involved. We can only accommodate the first eight people responding to this invitation, so please fill in the enclosed form and return it to us as soon as possible in the Freepost envelope.

Yours Sincerely

Jim Patton

Director

I **am / am not** interested in attending the discussion group on:

Wednesday 1st July at 11am in the Council offices at Garshake Road, Dumbarton

My name is:.....

My telephone number is:.....

Please return this form in the FREEPOST envelope enclosed. If you have any queries or questions, please call the office free on 0800 121 4897.

Appendix 2 Discussion Guide



West Dunbartonshire Council

West Dunbartonshire News Focus Group Discussion Guide

<p>1. Introduction (5 minutes)</p>	<p>Welcome respondents</p> <p>Outline purpose of the discussion</p> <p>Emphasise confidentiality</p>
<p>2. Receipt of West Dunbartonshire News (5 minutes)</p>	<p>Do you receive West Dunbartonshire News?</p> <p>How often?</p> <p>Problems with delivery?</p> <p>Reading West Dunbartonshire News Prompt: All items; some items only (specify)</p> <p>Kept for reference purposes?</p>
<p>3. Views of West Dunbartonshire News (15 minutes)</p>	<p>(Hand out copies of West Dunbartonshire News)</p> <p>Overall views</p> <p>Most positive aspects</p> <p>Most negative aspects</p> <p>Prompt: Language</p> <p>Balance</p> <p>Quality of articles</p> <p>Issues covered</p> <p>Format</p>

	<p>Quality of production</p>
<p>4. Changes to West Dunbartonshire News (20 minutes)</p>	<p>What changes would you like to see made to West Dunbartonshire News?</p> <p>Prompt: Language</p> <p>Balance</p> <p>Quality of articles</p> <p>Issues covered</p> <p>Format (glossy magazine or tabloid newspaper?)</p> <p>Quality of production</p> <p>What changes to the content would you like to see? Prompt: More features on local areas and people</p> <p>More for young people</p> <p>Diary of events/'what's on'</p> <p>More/less information on the Council/Councillors</p> <p>More/less information on Council services</p> <p>More articles on national issues and how this impacts on WD</p> <p>More articles on how WD compares with other parts of Scotland</p>
<p>5. Comparison with other Council magazines/newspapers (15 minutes)</p>	<p>(Hand out copies of other Council magazines and newspapers)</p> <p>Overall views</p> <p>Most positive aspects</p> <p>Most negative aspects</p> <p>Prompt: Language</p> <p>Issues covered</p> <p>Format</p> <p>Quality of production</p>

	<i>Perception of cost</i>
6. Concluding Comments (5 minutes)	Main changes to West Dunbartonshire News
7. Close (5 minutes)	Next stages Thank respondents and close