

Domestic customer priorities for water and wastewater services: A comparative evaluation of three elicitation methods

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Introduction

Public engagement promises to facilitate the incorporation of a wider range of views, values and knowledge into the decision-making process by acting to gain insight into the motivations, barriers and constraints underpinning the public's willingness to accept certain trade-offs¹. The integration of this rich data with existing knowledge fosters the generation of more informed, integrated and legitimate decisions which are less likely to attract challenge and be more efficient to implement².

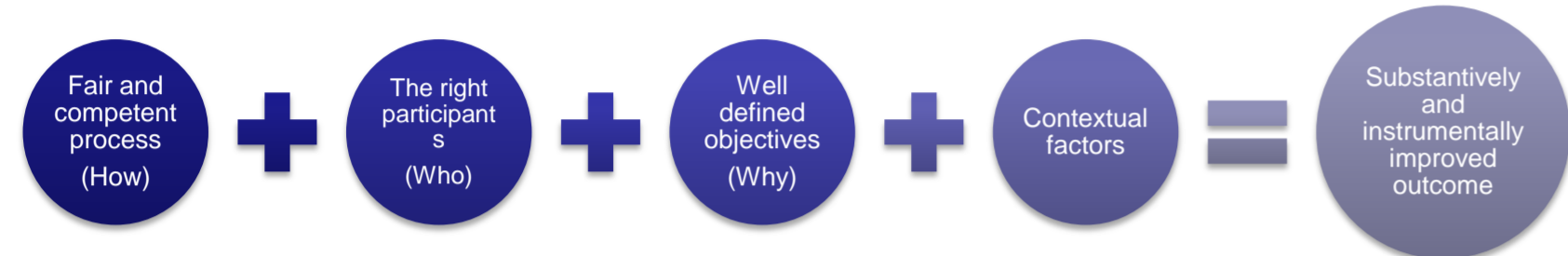


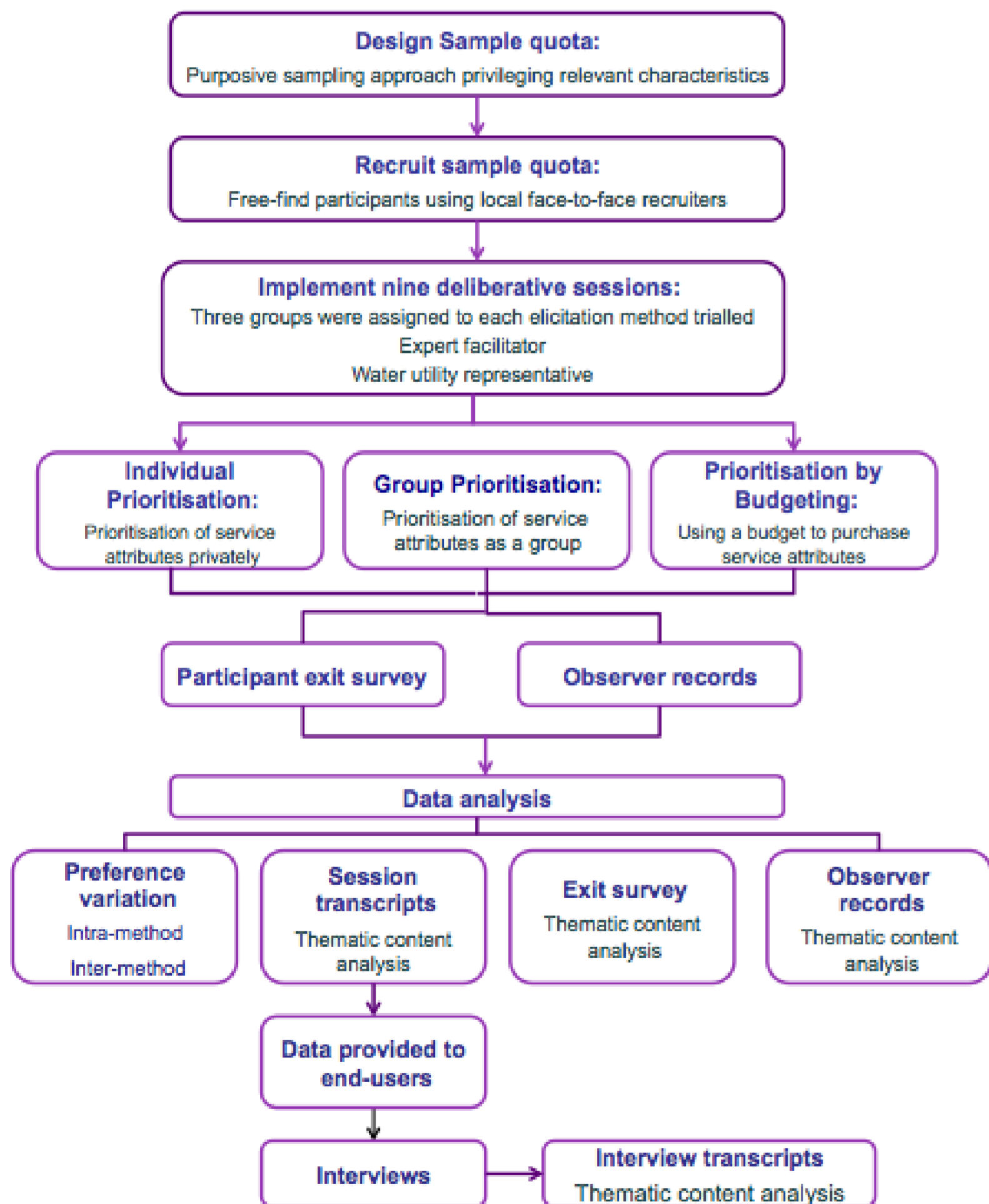
Figure 1: Key elements of a successful public engagement exercise

Mounting expectations on water utilities, from both regulators³ and interested stakeholders, to incorporate the views and preferences of their customers in its planning and decision-making presents with new and unfamiliar challenges. Responses to these challenges require water utilities to develop competencies in the design and deployment of a broad range of elicitation methods, the strengths, weaknesses and relative benefits of which are likely to be exposed to greater scrutiny by regulators. Furthermore, the development of new organisational strategies and structures may be required to enable the incorporation and integration of these outputs with existing knowledge.

Methodology

A study was conducted to explore:

- The variation in customer priorities as a function of the elicitation method used
- The strengths and weaknesses of different elicitation methods from a participant, observer and end-user perspective



Findings

It was hypothesised that if low intra-method variation was coupled with high-inter method variation then the elicitation method could be inferred to influence the selection of participant priorities. Analysis of this data suggested that:

- Intra-method variation was low (i.e. participant characteristics did not significantly contribute to recorded priorities)
- A mixed picture emerged in the analysis of inter-method variation
 - Priorities elicited using individual and group prioritisation methods exhibited low levels of variation
 - When results were compared with those from the budgeting prioritisation the variation in preferences was high

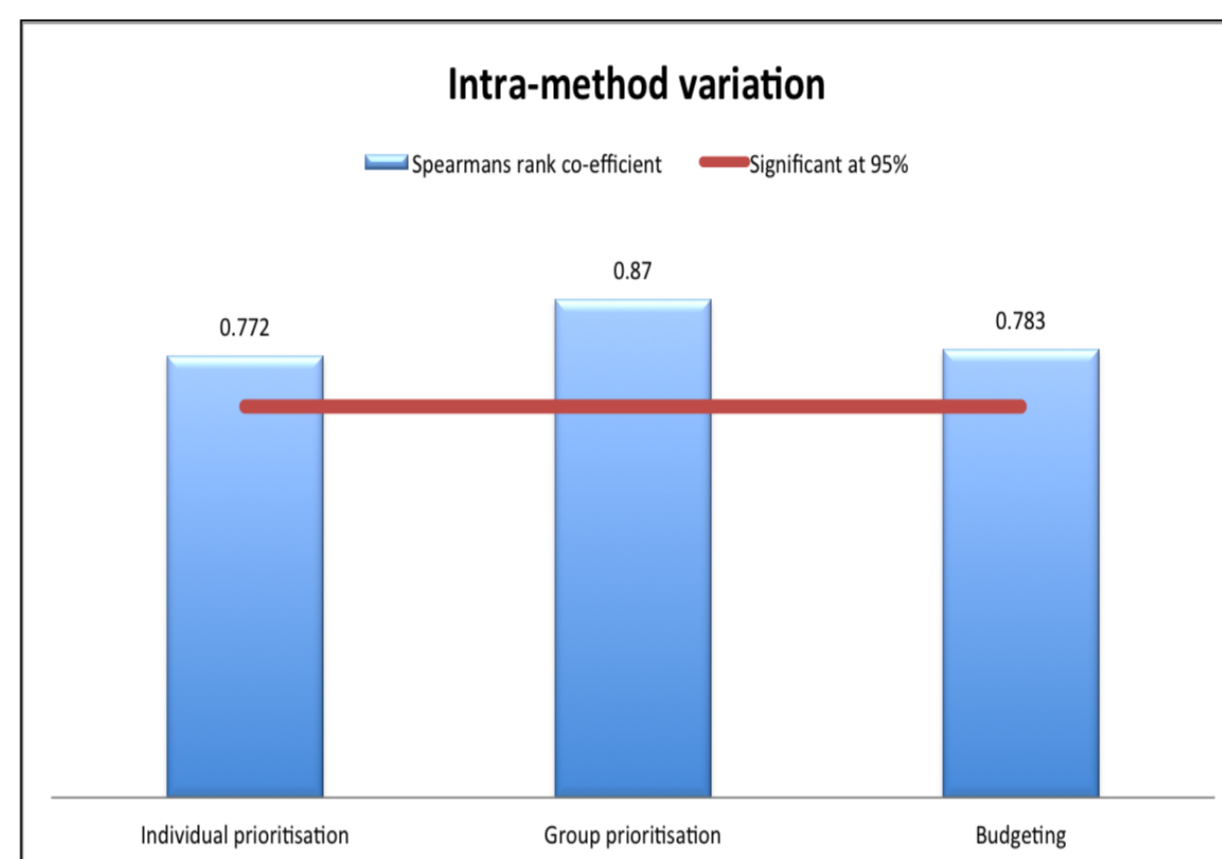


Figure 2: Intra-method variation

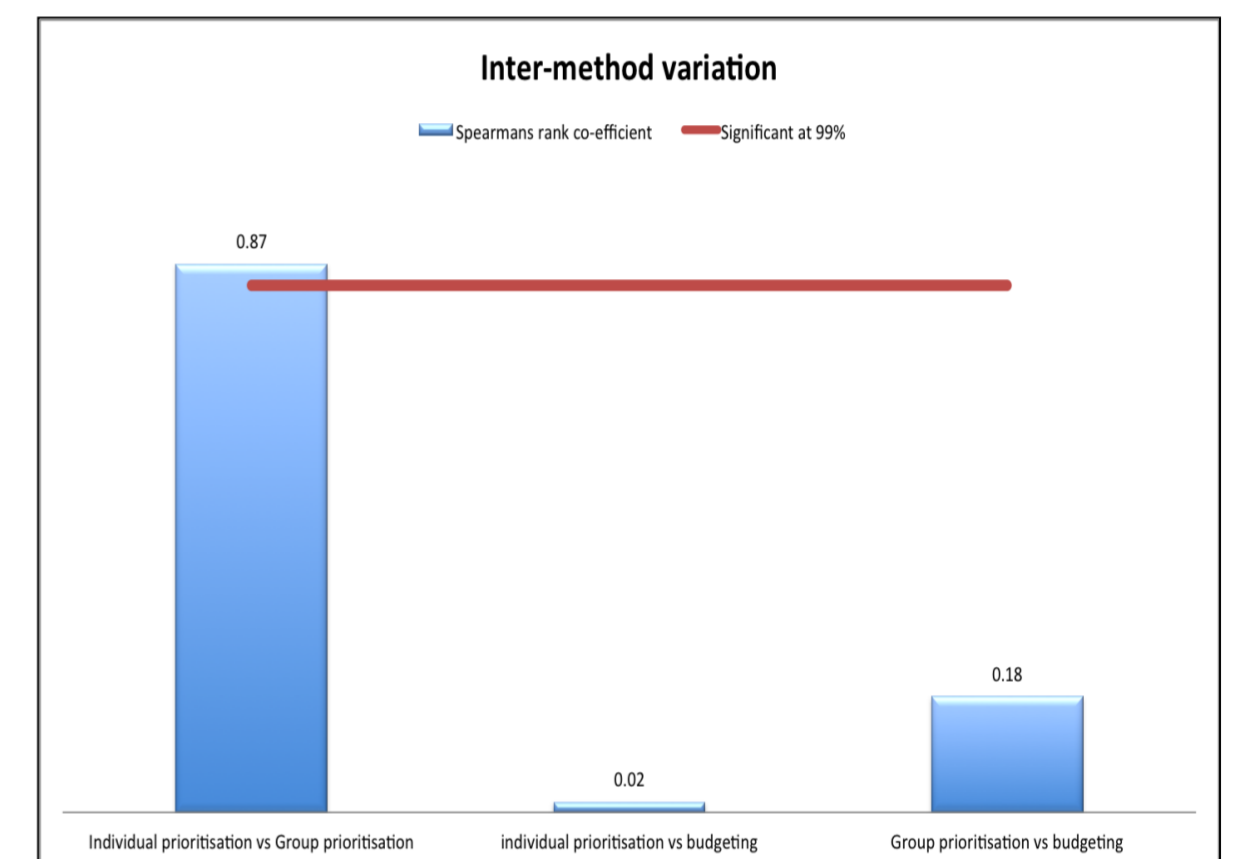


Figure 3: Inter-method variation

- This suggests that the prioritisation vehicle i.e. importance vs. financial budgeting may influence the selection of priorities
- It also suggests that the mode of prioritisation i.e. group vs. individual does not play a significant role in influencing the selection of priorities

The results from the participant exit survey suggest that:

- The main perceived benefits were increased knowledge and awareness of the extent of activity conducted by water utilities
- Participants appreciated the presence of a representative from the water utility attending each session
- Participants felt that the outputs from the sessions would be influential in the water utilities planning and decision-making
- The general view of the water utility held by participants was reported in many cases to be more positive

Conclusions and next steps

- The findings from this study so far suggest that the choice of method may influence the selection of priorities. It also suggests that in order to translate these outputs into decisions that are likely to be acceptable to customers it is necessary to ensure an in-depth framing of the issues with coverage of all trade-offs involved – including bill impact
- The exit survey participant responses provide insight into the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches from a participant perspective and will help to maximise the effectiveness of future engagement exercises in this context
- Further work will be done to undertake semi-structured interviews with practitioners across a variety of functions within the water utility to trace the user and influence of the outputs from this exercise in their planning and decision-making. This will help to explore and understand the both the strengths and weaknesses of each approach from an end-user perspective and provide an insight into other contextual factors that may play a role in the translation from outputs into substantively and instrumentally improved outcomes.



Figure 4: Future work

References

- ¹Webler, T., & Tuler, S. (2000). Fairness and competence in citizen participation: theoretical reflections. *Administration and society*, 32, 566.
²Reed, M. (2008). Stakeholder participation for environmental management: A literature review. *Biological conservation*, 141, 2417-2431.
³Owat. (2011). *Involving customers in price setting - Ofwat's customer engagement policy statement*.



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