

An assessment of Rapid Community Polling by ZenCity

Research report from the MPS Strategic Insight Unit – April 2024

Prepared for the ZenCity Oversight Board

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Executive Summary

The MPS procured the services of ZenCity - a rapid community polling company - in September 2022. After a short (3-month) proof of concept, the MPS embarked on a longer 12-month pilot of their 'blockwise' continuous polling offer to establish whether this approach could contribute to the mission of establishing *more trust* in the MPS. The Strategic Insight Unit (SIU) has appraised this offering and found that:

- **ZenCity's 'blockwise' offering collected anonymous views and feedback from over 100,000 Londoners a year.** ZenCity respondents are exposed to ZenCity adverts on social media platforms, websites and in-game apps. Most engagement is via mobile devices. Usefully, around 20% of respondents state that they would not be willing to contact the police if they were a victim or worried about something, so ZenCity is reaching people who would not engage with other reporting routes.
- Around 1-2% of those sent the online survey choose to respond, raising considerable risks related to self-selection bias. **ZenCity respondents include an over representation of younger, female individuals**, compared with London's resident population.
- **MPS successfully applied ZenCity's survey approach to explore a number of different topics**, including trust and confidence, perceptions of safety, safer ever neighbourhood policing, London race action plan, precision stop and search, and the stop and search charter. ZenCity provided a useful route to reach and engage with large numbers of respondents in London, but – given the lack of representativeness – the findings could not be used to reflect the views of Londoners and other approaches (e.g. representative polling) may be cheaper and/or more effective, depending on the objective of the work.
- **Detailed free text responses to ZenCity surveys have given boroughs the ability to address issues raised.** Respondents are offered the opportunity to give written feedback on what they consider the biggest issues in their local area, or areas they feel unsafe (among others). While many comments are not actionable (too brief or lack specificity), there is sometimes enough to drive police activity, though it is unclear whether other, more operationally focused data sources may hold similar information, such as reports of antisocial behaviour. If they do, this may be a more effective way of targeting police activity.
- **In a separate SIU methodology review, we found that ZenCity was unable to collect responses from small geographic areas.** The precision stop and search survey received just 31% of its responses from residents from within targeted 3-ward clusters and only 14% of responses were from residents when targeting individual wards. PAS is also unable to collect trust and confidence metrics with such specificity.

- **We tested ZenCity's ability to create and re-sample a 'panel' of willing residents who could be surveyed frequently. We found that maintaining engagement, especially among younger respondents, was difficult.** While half of a group of respondents were willing to provide their email address, only 42% of these (less than a quarter of the original sample) responded to a follow-up email. The demographics also changed dramatically (the proportion aged 44 and under dropped from 39% to just 14%).
- **As noted in the separate methodology-focused SIU report, ZenCity does not provide data that are representative of Londoners' views and their data should not be used to measure trends over time. This means it is unable to provide reliable population estimates of trust and confidence.** This manifests itself in markedly lower scores for the same trust and confidence questions asked by the Public Attitude Survey (PAS). The rank order of the boroughs also correlates poorly with the rank order from PAS and this order is unstable over time within ZenCity data.
- **We surveyed officers who had access to the ZenCity dashboard and data to understand their views of the offer. In general, respondents had mixed views of its utility, and the dashboard was clearly underutilised.**
- **ZenCity has two new offerings; 'pulse' and 'engage'.** These are independent of 'blockwise'. 'Pulse' is an on-demand time limited offering otherwise similar to blockwise and 'engage' is an ad boost on-demand offering which is geographically targeted and comes with substantially less ZenCity support (and cost).
- There are many other internal and external survey options that are available to survey the public and other stakeholders and (within the SIU) the MPS has built its capability and capacity to understand the available options and how we can quickly access and apply them. It is recommended that the MPS ensures it has access to a range of such tools and is better able to commission the specific approach/tool needed for specific situations and projects.

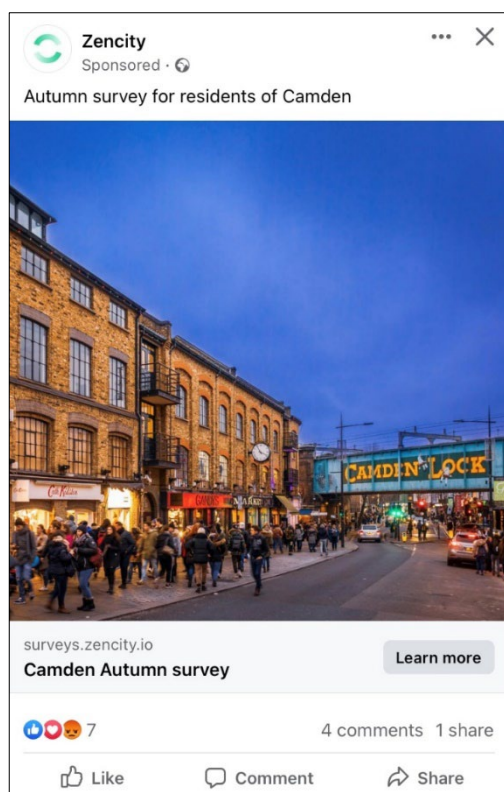
Implications:

- Based on our assessment of the use-cases that we have tested, and the findings from our methodological assessment of the ZenCity offer – and given the costs associated - **the SIU does not recommend renewing ZenCity's ongoing 'blockwise' service in its current form.**
- ZenCity's alternative Pulse or Engage offerings may complement other internal and external survey options that the MPS has available. The SIU has built a framework with examples of other available options (see [here](#)). Including ZenCity options – alongside other suppliers – as options for engagement/surveys as and when required would add to the MPS's engagement capability without the need to procure an ongoing service.
- **It is recommended that the MPS exploit specific internal and external surveying options that meet the requirements of each use case/requirement, rather than attempting to procure a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.**

Introduction

In September 2022, the Metropolitan Police Service started trialling a rapid community polling offering provided by ZenCity, which they call 'blockwise'. ZenCity collects the views of Londoners via continuously running short online surveys and provides this information to the MPS through an interactive dashboard. This report reviews the trial by summarising the offer, describing how ZenCity targets and collects its responses, who the respondents are, the questions that were asked of Londoners and what MPS officers thought of the information gathered. This is the second paper from the Strategic Insight Unit (SIU) on ZenCity and accompanies a previous paper exploring ZenCity's survey methodology¹. These papers have been written to support the MPS in deciding on future procurement decisions re community polling/engagement.

Who are ZenCity?



ZenCity are a US-Israeli technology company founded in 2015, they offer a number of community feedback and engagement products to police and local governments across a number of international markets including in the US, UK, Australia and Canada. The MPS has been testing the 'blockwise' product that provides a rapid London-wide community polling, via online adverts. The results are presented on an ZenCity created and updated dashboard showing a daily feed of comments on free text questions by location. This is supplemented with some thematic insights such as the number of comments that refer to drugs, violence or anti-social behaviour etc. Alongside this sits trends on sentiment which is updated monthly.

ZenCity now have a couple of new products, a pulse survey that has the features of blockwise but is only active for a limited time. The final offering is called 'engage' which is both short term and localised, seeking to gather supplemental responses from a small geographic area either independently of, or alongside, their other offerings.

Figure 1: ZenCity social media advert (from Facebook)

¹ See SIU review of ZenCity methodology [here](#)

The ZenCity blockwise survey

This section summarises the MPS ZenCity blockwise offering, describing the process from ‘ad’ creation to data provision.

Adverts are placed by ZenCity on websites and social media targeting London residents. This geographic targeting is a feature of online ad networks such as Facebook owner Meta and others. Respondents are exposed to an ad banner similar to the one shown in Figure 1. These are designed to encourage participation without initially exposing it as an MPS survey. This helps prevent those with strong opinions about the Met from either immediately avoiding or clicking the banner and going to the survey and skewing the results towards those with strong views. Approximately 1-2% of displayed adverts are clicked on. It is at this point that the respondent is informed that the survey is for the MPS, is anonymous and voluntary.

The surveys are designed to be short and simple to do. They take just a few minutes and consist of around a dozen sentiment questions and half a dozen demographic questions concluding with a request for the respondent’s postcode. It is the provision of the postcode that is used to validate the respondent and place them and their data into a particular ward and borough. Around 95% of respondent who provide their post code live in London and can be appropriately placed.

The MPS has a lot of freedom on what questions to ask and how to ask them. All surveys in the pilot have followed the same three part structure: 1) benchmark or index questions, 2) thematic questions, and 3) demographic questions. We consider each in turn in the next sections.

1) Benchmarking questions

The first section asks five questions that are always the same: four trust and confidence measures lifted directly from MOPAC’s public attitude survey (Table 1) and one free text question that asks the respondent what the biggest issue is in their area.

Table 1: ZenCity benchmark questions

Subject	Question
Confidence (police work)	Taking everything into account, how good a job do you think the police in your local area are doing?
Trust	To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The Metropolitan Police Service is an organisation I can trust
Confidence (approachability)	How willing would you be to contact the police if you were a victim of crime or were worried about something?
Confidence (fair treatment)	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The police in my local area treat everyone fairly regardless of who they are
Local policing issues	What is the number one issue or problem in your local area that you would like the police to deal with? (free text)

The purpose of these questions is to index or benchmark the respondents. By understanding the level of trust and confidence we can put their comments into context. For example, approximately 20% of respondents state that they would be unwilling or very unwilling to contact the police if they were a victim or worried about something; responses from this group may provide information that would not be found via other police data, such as calls for service. High and low trust residents may also have different concerns in their local area and these can be compared (but not generalised).

The free text question allows the respondent to tell MPS about problems in their area; it is designed to elicit actionable information. The responses are analysed by ZenCity and labelled with various themes such as violence, anti-social behaviour or drugs. The comments are provided in full alongside the labels. Officers on boroughs can assess the comments from respondents in their areas and take any appropriate action.

2) Thematic questions

The thematic questions are a group of questions that the MPS have changed on a relatively frequent basis in order to explore different topics and use cases. Topics have included perceptions of safety, safer ever neighbourhood policing and the London race action plan (see Table 2 for topics and Figure 2 for timings).

Table 2: Example Thematic Questions

Survey	Question
Proof of Concept PAS questions	On average, how often do you see the police patrolling on foot or bicycle in your local area?
Perceptions of Safety	Is there anywhere in your local area you consider unsafe?
SENP Engagement	How important is it for you to be kept informed on the work your local officers do?
London Race Action Plan	To what extent do you agree or disagree that the police in your local area are currently representative of the local community?
Stop and Search Charter	To what extent do you agree that the Police should conduct Stop and Search?

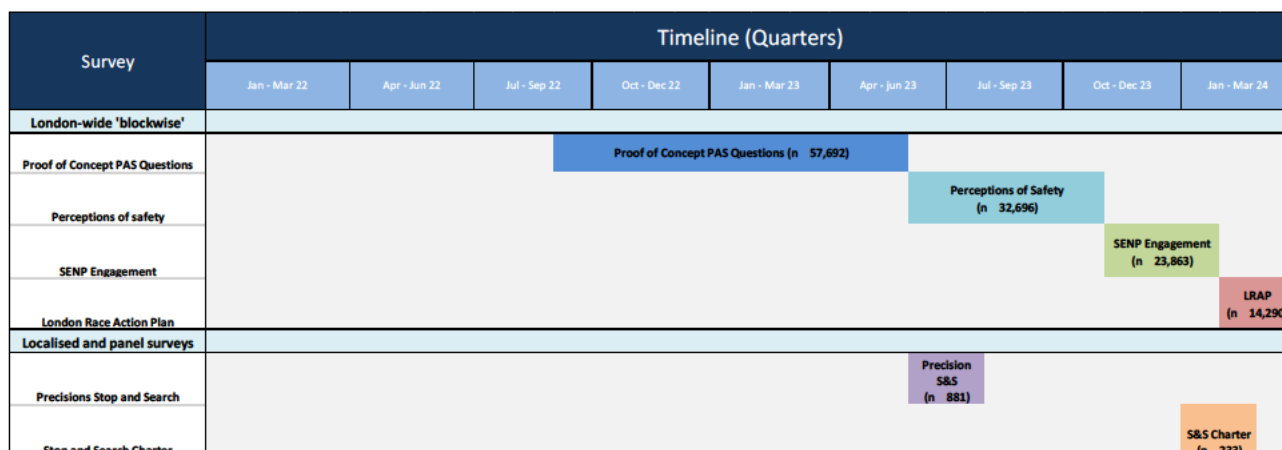


Figure 2: Surveys conducted using ZenCity.

Additionally, two more targeted surveys were conducted to follow up groups who individuated in an initial survey that they would be happy to follow-up with: 1) a follow-up of residents of areas where precision stop and search was undertaken; 2) a follow-up of respondents to a survey about the stop and search charter. Both of these were small scale with low numbers of respondents and were intended to test ZenCity's ability to hyper-locally target and build survey panels.

3) The full question sets and analysis packs prepared by the SIU for SENP engagement and LRAP leads can be provided on request. Demographic questions

The demographic makeup of our respondents were self-reported. We requested age, sex, ethnicity, sexual orientation and residence location (Table 3). This allows us to understand who completed the surveys and how they differed from resident populations from the census. It also gave context to the problems raised in the free text questions, such as reasons for feeling unsafe. A separate SIU report explores the demographic make-up of ZenCity respondents and how they compare with PAS data and the wider Census data for London.

Table 3: Types of demographic questions asked in ZenCity surveys

Subject	Question
Age	How old are you?
Sex	What is your sex?
Ethnicity	What is your ethnic group?
Sexual orientation	What is your sexual orientation?
Residence	Please select the borough you live in
Residence	What is your postcode?

Officer feedback

Survey of ZenCity usage

289 officers used the ZenCity dashboard during the pilot. All of these users - and a further 185 officers who had links but never logged in (5% of overall sample) - were sent a survey and offered the opportunity to give feedback about the ZenCity dashboard and its use. In total, 71 officers chose to respond, 35 of which stated that they had used ZenCity. This sample is too small to properly understand overall officer sentiment of ZenCity other than to say officers had a wide range of views and that, within this small group, they considered the usefulness of ZenCity to be similar to the public attitude survey (PAS - see Table 4). Most of the 36 users of the dashboard only used it once (44%) or a few times (47%).

Table 4: Usefulness of ZenCity and PAS in supporting officer decision making (n=35)

How useful are the following data sources in supporting you with decision-making in your role?	ZenCity	PAS
Extremely useful	4 (11%)	2 (6%)
Very useful	8 (23%)	9 (26%)
Somewhat useful	14 (40%)	15 (43%)
Not very useful	6 (17%)	5 (14%)
Not at all useful	3 (9%)	4 (11%)

The text comments were more valuable and provide useful views about ZenCity offering:

“The data tends to be very broad and does not have specifics. It will often give a % point on trust levels but then no real context. I've not found ZenCity surveys particularly useful. The free text boxes that are fed back don't have actionable information and are limited to one line about minor/one off issues. I've also found it is not tailored to the area we work. Typically, useful and actionable data comes from community meetings held locally where we have a consistent presence and are able to follow up and get details about ASB and crime problems. Collection of data at the scale of ZenCity hasn't been of much use.”

Use of free text responses

While there are a large proportion of responses that do not provide the requisite level of specificity or detail to allow for specific police activity, the large volume of ZenCity responses means that invariably there will be some comments that can be acted on.

West Area are leading in this space and have advanced the most in operationalising ZenCity's feedback. They regularly go through the comments identifying issues at a ward level, from this they target the worst three wards and conduct an operation on something that the community have asked for, such interventions include drug warrants, or high visibility patrols where people suggest they don't feel safe. Each tasking is accompanied by some local social media communication following the 'you said we did' approach. They also act on any intelligence or specific information and work with partners to solve issues.

Case Study: Dealing with a derelict building

A lady in Chiswick gave an account via ZenCity that there was a derelict building at the back of her house and she had watched a number of youths going in and coming back out with packages. She felt scared to leave her house. The ward team went to check out the area to locate the building. They then worked with the environment agency and together they had the property boarded and closed. Although the lady remained anonymous, specific ZenCity sentiment data can be used to make a positive impact.

Other ZenCity use cases

Recruiting a survey panel

The SIU explored using ZenCity to recruit for a survey panel using the localised precision stop and search survey (Figure 2). This was done by asking respondents if they would like to volunteer their email address to enable future contact. It was ostensibly a success with 465 of the 881 (53%) respondents choosing to provide an email. When surveyed using this email address 197, or 22% of the original group responded.

When this was explored further to understand if the recruitment of the panel were representative it became apparent that this was not the case. Figure 3 shows the age distribution of adults (over 18) in the census, standard ZenCity blockwise surveys, the recruitment survey (precision stop and search) and the follow up stop and search charter panel. Normally the standard blockwise surveys have an over representation of younger respondents (49% are aged between 18 and 34); this also has more females (Figure 4).

The Stop and Search survey used to build the panel comprised of 881 respondents; this differed in age profile compared to the standard blockwise surveys with a lower percentage of respondents aged 44 and under compared to both the census (-14%) and the standard ZenCity blockwise (-28%). The age profile of those who responded to the panel survey via email was almost exclusively older participants, only 14% of respondents were aged 44 or under. Using emails via ZenCity for repeat contact does not retain younger London residents.

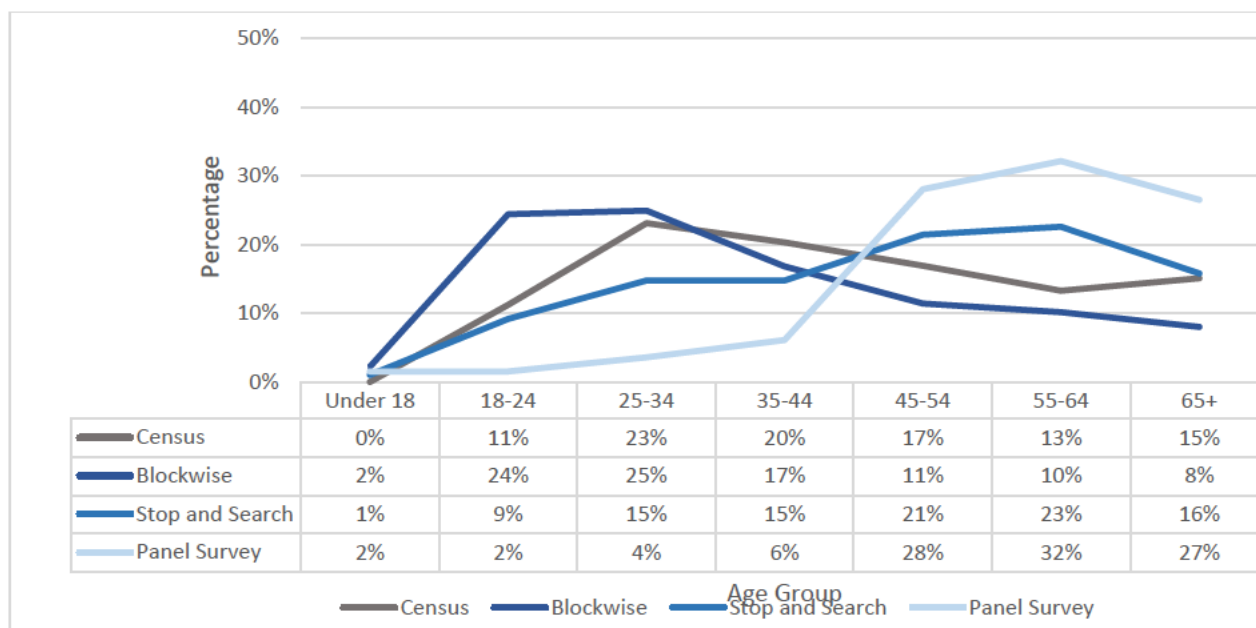
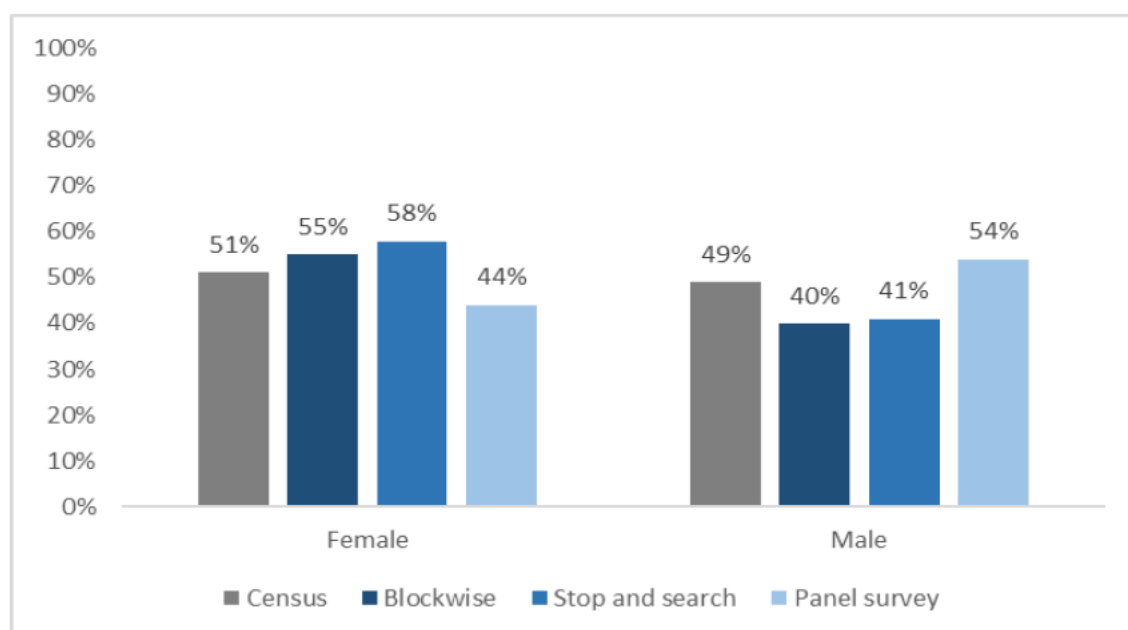


Figure 3: Age distribution of participants for Census, ZenCity Blockwise, Stop and Search panel recruitment and follow up charter panel survey

The same shifting pattern is present for sex (Figure 4). According to census figures the proportion of the sexes is almost equal, females (51%) and males (49%). ZenCity's online ad surveys generally have more female respondents compared to male with 58% of the 881 stop and search recruitment survey stating their sex as female, similar to their ongoing blockwise offering. The panel survey respondents who replied via email showed the reverse pattern, a majority of males (54%). Due to anonymity rules we do not know if this is because females did not provide their email address or did, but then not respond to the email survey invites (or both).



Base: Stop and Search survey participants n = 881, not included 'other' n = 3 and 'prefer not to say' n = 7. Panel survey participants n = 196, not included 'prefer not to say' n = 4.

Figure 4: Gender of respondents from Blockwise, Stop and Search survey and Panel survey compared to the census figures.

These results suggest that ZenCity can get repeat responses from London residents but panels are unlikely to be representative, given the overrepresentation of older, male respondents. Alternatives to email may alleviate much of this given the younger, female bias of the original methodology.

Conclusions

This report, and the separate SIU report about ZenCity's methodology, explore the ZenCity blockwise offering that the MPS has been testing since September 2022. There are a number of positives for MPS community engagement, including;

- Large volumes, over 100,000 responses a year
- Speed, with responses collected every day
- Full question flexibility
- A subset of actionable insights from respondents who provide sufficient detail and specificity in their free text responses
- An ability to hear from Londoners who explicitly state that they would be unwilling to report something to police if they were a victim of crime or worried about something. This is approximately 20% of the sample.

These are offset by a number of weaknesses, including;

- An inability to get representativeness, meaning the results cannot be used as a proxy of wider Londoner's views, it also cannot be used as a performance tool or a mechanism to safely direct activity based on metrics that change over time.
- Notwithstanding the linked benefit above, the majority of responses to free text questions do not have the specificity or sufficient detail, making this an inefficient approach to gathering this information.
- Only 1-2% of people who see an advert click through on it and the views of these people are likely to differ from the wider population, risking bias. Further evidence of sampling bias can be observed in the age and sex profile of respondents.

Therefore ZenCity may be best utilised in cases where;

- We do not want or need a representative view
- We would like to collect a large amount of feedback quickly and from residents that are not linked into the MPS through other channels
- We want to supplement our public consultations to boost our reach and the number of responses.
- ZenCity's other offerings of the pulse surveys and ad boost may be more appropriate than blockwise to best achieve these outcomes in an affordable way.

Alternative options

The MPS has built its capability and capacity to understand and use a range of survey options and tools for engagement and sentiment analysis. The SIU have mapped out a non-exhaustive list of survey options to measure public engagement as shown in Figure 5 and Figure 6. They explore the methodological approaches from large, London-wide representative surveys down to localised non-representative in-depth interviews and other alternative options (Figure 5). ZenCity can be found in the top right blue section. Figure 6 shows what each survey type allows us to say from the results. Going forwards, this is how the SIU would recommend identifying the appropriate survey/engagement option for each particular challenge or survey requirement.

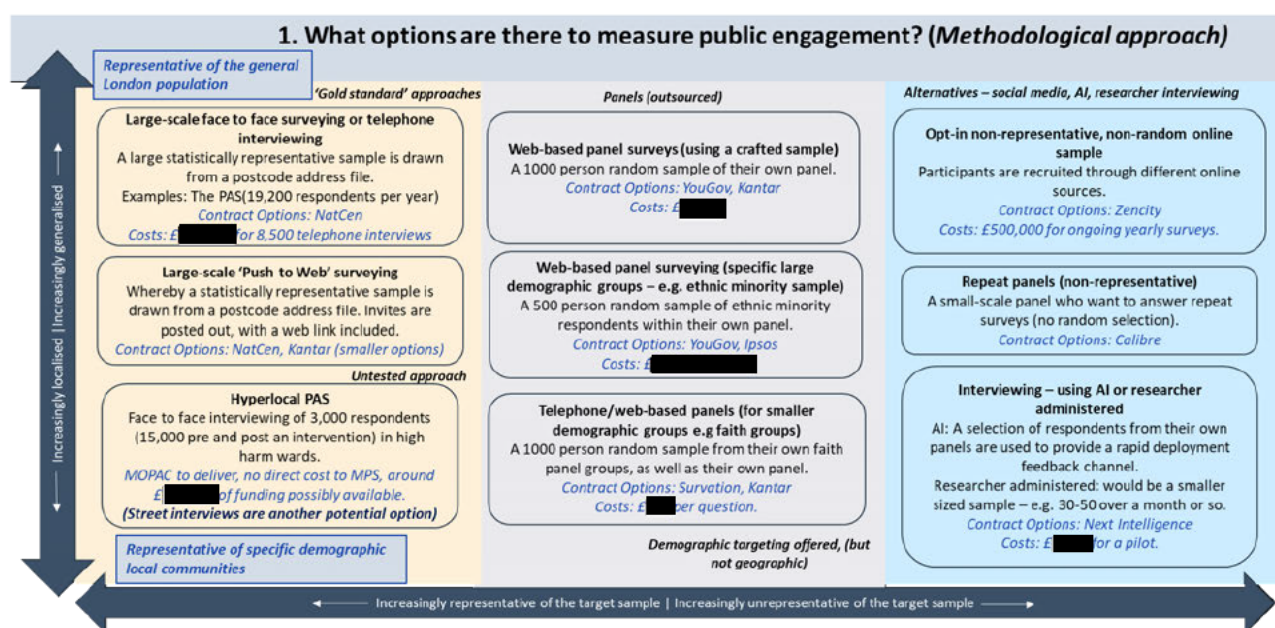


Figure 5: Methodological public engagement options

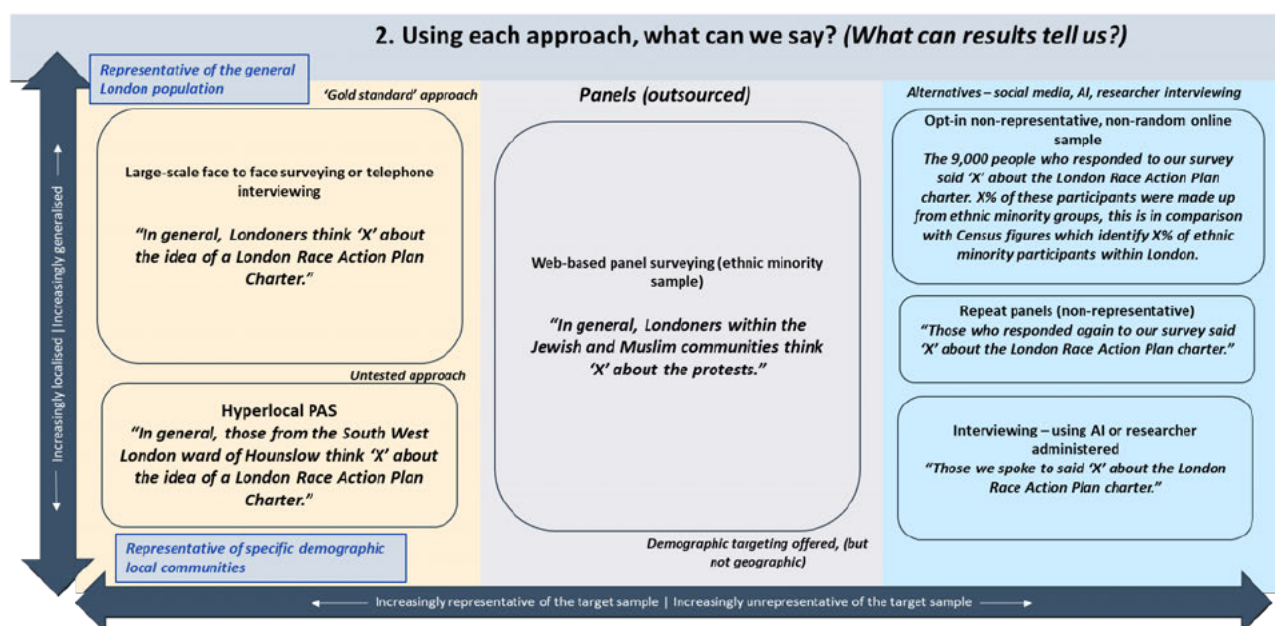


Figure 6: What different methodological approaches to community engagement surveys can tell us