Local Government Association

LONDON COUNCILS

Are you being served?
Benchmarking residents' perceptions of local government

Technical review of perception measures

February 2012

Ipsos MORI

Ipsos

Contents

Foreword

In July 2011, the Local Government Association (LGA) launched Local Government Inform (LG Inform). LG Inform is a new free service to provide easy access for local authority staff and councillors and, eventually, the public, to key data about their council and its area, and to enable comparison to other councils.[1]

Included among around 800 pieces of data within LG Inform are a number of items that were previously part of the National Indicator Set. However, with the cancellation of the Place Survey in 2010, there is currently no up to date comparable data on resident satisfaction contained within LG Inform.

Understanding resident or customer views is a key element of assessing the effectiveness of an authority, alongside cost and performance information. Furthermore, understanding resident satisfaction and being able to make informed comparisons can strengthen local accountability and be a key part of the sector's approach to managing its own performance.

Residents' perceptions of crime and cohesion have also been identified by members of London Councils and the London Councils Self Improvement Board as key areas where benchmarking would be beneficial.

However, although there is demand for some comparative data, there is no appetite within the sector for another fully prescribed survey. As such, the LGA and the London Councils Self Improvement Board commissioned Ipsos MORI to undertake this review to help develop a set of questions and accompanying guidance that councils can choose to use in their own local surveys. These questions will collect general resident satisfaction data, as well as data on resident views of crime and cohesion.

This is a flexible approach designed to suit local circumstances and minimise the cost to councils of collecting the data by allowing them to slot it in with existing survey plans, whilst also helping to maximise the benefit and insight that can be gained from this data, by making it broadly comparable.

This document outlines the findings of Ipsos MORI's review. It provides the evidence on which we have based the recommendations made in the consultation document *Are you being served? Consultation on benchmarking residents' perceptions of local government.*[2]

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[1] For more information about LG Inform and to register please see: http://www.local.gov.uk/about-lginform
[2] This can be accessed via http://www.local.gov.uk/about-lginform

We would encourage you to respond to the consultation to help ensure that the final set of questions and the guidance for how the data should be collected meet the needs of local government overall.

Local Government Association and London Councils, February 2012

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The Local Government Association is here to support, promote and improve local government.

Background and method

Background and method

The biennial benchmarking studies run by local authorities across England between 2000 and 2008 provided useful information on the performance of local services from the citizen perspective and, in general, allowed methodologically robust comparisons of perception-based indicators between authorities. Although the content of the questionnaires was prescribed by central government, the comparisons between authorities provided relevant performance management information, allowing the identification of poorer performing authorities and best practice. Further analysis of such datasets, such as Ipsos MORI's Frontiers analyses[3], allowed local authorities to identify the extent to which they were under or out performing, taking account of local conditions such as levels of deprivation (using the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)), the age profile of the area, and so on.

With the recent move away from central targets and the discontinuation of a prescribed survey for local government, local authorities have been concentrating on making efficiencies and dealing with reduced budgets.

However, some authorities now feel that the discontinuation of a national survey for local government has left a gap, as there is little robust, comparable, perceptions-based information about their residents available. As councils settle into their scaled down and restructured states, they are beginning to conduct, and in some cases commission, residents' perceptions surveys. It is clear a number are unable to set their progress on key issues (such as perceptions of satisfaction with the area and the council, or value for money) in a sensible context.

Developing perceptions based benchmarks for the future

The Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Challenge initiative and network, and other associated initiatives such as the LGA's Inform data service (LG Inform) will provide a useful source of support for local authorities – yet it will be essential to understand whether those who are heralded as high performers are perceived as such by their residents – and, arguably, for this the role of national benchmarking data is key. However, although there is demand for some comparative data, there is not an appetite within the sector for another nationally prescribed survey. Consequently, a short core set of questions that local authorities can add to their regular surveys will provide a useful compromise.

Therefore, we have approached the challenge of thinking about a core set of benchmarking questions, and how they might be used, in a practical way. The LGA and the London Councils Self Improvement Board requested a rapid review exercise, which might guide the sector on how to achieve a national benchmark. The review also looks at the range of questions and methods for measuring resident perceptions that councils are already using. It

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[3] http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/publications/1330/Mind-the-Gap-Frontiers-of-Performance-in-Local-Government-V.aspx

was not the intention, however, to canvass the views of every local authority or consider the technical aspects of survey design in great detail.

This review, conducted from late October 2011 to February 2012, consists of a rapid literature review of key technical issues, interviews with senior stakeholders – to gain insight to the needs of the sector – and a review of the questions that could form core benchmarking data – including two phases of cognitive testing (November 2011 and January 2012).

This research was supplemented by an informal consultation whereby local authorities were invited to submit their viewpoints along with information about their current research methods and benchmarking practices. This feedback was obtained via various channels including;

- LGA website;

- LGA research bulletin;

- Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association (LARIA) website;

- Local Government Chronicle (LGC)

Responses were used to assist evaluation of current practice and to identify key priority areas described in this report.

The role of LG Inform

LG Inform, the new data service from the LGA, will provide the mechanism by which authorities will be able to benchmark against each other. This service provides easy access for local authority staff and councillors and, eventually the public, to key data about their council and its area.

Clearly, to have effective benchmarking, the data needs to be consistent, robust and meet certain quality standards. Therefore, the recommendations in this report have fed into a short checklist which outlines a set of questions that councils can choose to use in their own local surveys to collect general resident satisfaction data. The checklist also outlines the quality criteria that will be required for authorities to upload and compare data in LG Inform, to ensure that all comparisons being made are valid and robust.

In this way, authorities will be able to input their local results for these questions into LG Inform, and make reasonable, 'fit for purpose', comparisons of their results with those of others.[4]

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[4] In addition, councils within London will be able to share their results with London Councils for benchmarking purposes.

Purpose and structure of this report

This report forms the output of the rapid review. It outlines the suggested core questions that the sector could benchmark on, and Ipsos MORI's appraisal of each, drawing on desk research, cognitive testing, interviews with strategic leaders in the sector (chief executives, leaders and deputies) and feedback from the sector. In addition, section 1 (the *Technical Review)* highlights the key points to be considered when conducting or commissioning resident surveys.

For convenience, a separate checklist available from the LGA summarises advice and recommendations in an easily accessible format.[5]

What this report involves

The report is divided into two main sections.

1) The *Technical Review* outlines the findings of a review of methodological work by the Ipsos MORI Research Methods Centre on a range of technical issues such as mode effect, question order effect, sampling, and seasonality.

It draws upon evidence from academic research, and market research agency examples to illustrate the conclusions and recommendations drawn. It is not intended to be a comprehensive review of the literature, as this can be found in a number of very good social research articles and textbooks. It does, however, identify useful or notable examples that help to shape our understanding of the implications of using a variety of research tools, and how perceptions-based benchmarks can be helpful.

Each technical issue is briefly explained and reviewed, and we then recommend best practice that will aid the collection of more reliable and robust survey data, against which comparisons can be made.

Councils want the freedom to conduct residents' surveys in the way that best suits their budgets and local circumstances. As such, we do not recommend a universal method or approach for the whole sector. The recommendations are not mandatory, but outline what the Ipsos MORI Social Research Unit believes to be best practice and should be helpful in drawing attention to the shortfalls of alternative practice if taken. However, if councils wish to upload their data to LG Inform to enable them to benchmark against others, they will need to meet the quality criteria outlined in the LG Inform checklist, which has been developed on the basis of these recommendations.

2) The second section provides **a review of twelve recommended questions**, their origins and how they might be used by the sector.

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[5] This can be accessed via http://www.local.gov.uk/about-lginform

In this section, suggested wording, question order and response options are provided; for the benefit of the sector, these questions should be considered (in their recommended form) for inclusion in forthcoming residents' surveys.

3) An annex to this report provides **a summary of the twelve qualitative interviews conducted with senior stakeholders** across the country. These were conducted to inform the question review. We interviewed a mixture of leaders and chief executives, or their nominees, and discussed their views of the pros and cons of perceptions-based comparative measures, and the benchmarks that they would find most useful.

Acknowledgements

Checked & Approved:
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Summary of Recommendations

Summary of recommendations

The benchmarking set

Outlined below are the questions we recommend for inclusion in a benchmarking set of resident satisfaction questions for local government. These recommended questions are based on the detailed review, which is outlined fully in the Question Review section.

We recommend three tiers of questions:

The core benchmarking set: **these three questions are recommended as a priority for benchmarking**

- Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your local area as a place to live?
- Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way [name of council] runs things?
- To what extent do you agree or disagree that [name of council] provides value for money? A couple of recommended sentences should precede this question[6].

The second tier benchmarking set: these are also recommended for benchmarking, but have been included as a second tier in recognition of the fact that they will be a priority for most, but not all, councils:

- Overall, how well informed do you think [name of council] keeps residents about the services and benefits it provides?
- How strongly do you feel you belong to your local area?
- How safe or unsafe do you feel when outside in your local area <u>after dark?</u> / How safe or unsafe do you feel when outside in your local area <u>during the day?</u>

A set of third tier questions: questions we have recommended for the third tier are those which will be of particular interest to some councils, but not a priority for others:

- The seven strand anti-social behaviour question: Thinking about this local area, how much of a problem do you think each of the following are…. [7]
- To what extent would you agree or disagree that people in this local area pull together to improve the local area?

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[6] A pre-amble should be placed before this question which reads: "In considering the next question, please think about the range of services [name of council] provides to the community as a whole, as well as the services your household uses. It does not matter if you do not know all of the service [name of council] provides. We would like your general opinion"

[7] Categories are: noisy neighbours or loud parties; teenagers hanging around the streets; rubbish or litter lying around; vandalism, graffiti and other deliberate damage to property or vehicles; people using or dealing drugs; people being drunk or rowdy in public places; abandoned or burnt out cars.

- To what extent do you think [name of council] acts on the concerns of local residents?

- The Advocacy Question: On balance, which of the following statements comes closest to how you feel about [name of council]?[8]

- How much do you trust [name of council]?

Definition of Local Area

Where a set of sequential questions seek to explore experiences of "local area", a definition should be included to ensure consistent interpretation. We recommend the inclusion of the following wording as a *preamble* to relevant questions:

"Throughout the questionnaire we ask you think about "your local area". When answering, please consider your local area to be the area within 15-20 minutes walking distance from your home".

For singular, stand-alone questions referring to "local area", the definition should immediately follow the question itself; "by local area we mean within 15-20 minutes walking distance from your home."

Criteria for benchmarking

Below we have outlined the set of criteria that we suggest should apply to any locally collected resident satisfaction data that is going to be benchmarked in LG Inform, to ensure that any comparisons made are robust, valid and fair. These recommendations are based on the findings of the Technical Review, which explains in more detail the reasoning behind these recommendations.

Wording and answer scales

The same question wording, answer scales, and respondent experience should be employed for surveys using the same data collection method. For example, in face-to-face research show cards should feature the same answer scales and be consistent about excluding the explicit reference to don't know or refusal answer options. The exact wording recommended for all questions covered by the review, plus corresponding response codes, is given in the Question Review section.

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[8] Response options are: *I speak positively of the council without being asked; I speak positively of the council if I am asked about it; I am negative of the council if I am asked about it; I am negative of the council without being asked; I have no views one way or the other; Don't know*

Two-tier authorities

In most instances, question wording will not need to be altered in two tier areas. However, where relevant, it is recommended that respondents are asked about a named council, instead of "your council". In two tier areas, this creates a challenge; authorities could consider asking the question twice (referring separately to the county and district council). Alternatively, the question could simply be asked once referring to one council. It is recommended that councils use the suggested preambles to help respondents identify correctly the responsibilities of their local council(s).

"Don't know" responses

It is recommended that answer scales include "don't know" options in self completion methods, but that they are only valid for *spontaneous* responses in face-to-face and telephone surveys. It is important that questions are asked in the same way within a method, and that base information is provided to LG Inform so that if don't know answers were not allowed or are excluded then this is clear.

Question ordering

It is strongly recommended that the core set of three satisfaction questions (satisfaction with area, the council and value for money) are placed at the beginning of the survey to ensure that any position or context effect is the same for each data set. It is also advised for those councils wishing to explore levels of advocacy, that this question is placed fourth after the core set of satisfaction questions. In addition, the question concerning perceptions of anti-social behaviour should not precede more general questions about attitudes toward the area, satisfaction with local organisations or community safety.

The position of other questions reviewed can be more flexible and this is discussed in more detail in the Question Review section.

Methods of data collection

All methods of data collection can be used; advantages and disadvantages of each are discussed in the Technical Review section. However, intra-mode comparisons are not desirable. Therefore, data included for comparison in LG Inform will be grouped into common methods to ensure that that only like-for-like data is compared across authorities. It is therefore very important to state which method was used when uploading data to LG Inform website to ensure reliable comparison.

One exception to this is postal and online methods - if the questionnaire is visually presented in the same way in postal and online methods, (and the samples are random) then it would be valid to make comparisons between the two.

Sampling

We would recommend a random sampling approach whereby all population members/households have a random one in "n" change of being selected. However, well-structured quotas samples can be used when conducting face-to-face or telephone data

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collection. For the purpose of comparison, it is important to state whether the sample is random or quota-based when uploading data to LG Inform.

Residents' panels

For the purposes of benchmarking data and drawing comparisons between authorities, we would not recommend the use of residents' panels. There is strong evidence to suggest a considerable response bias among panel members. It is therefore inadvisable to make comparisons with data obtained from random samples.

Weighting

We recommend that for self completion methods (postal/online), only data from random samples is used, and that data is then weighted to the known profile of the local populations. Variables that would typically be included are age, sex and social grade (or work status as a proxy for social grade).

Caution should be taken in comparing face-to-face and telephone data even though they are both interviewer administered. The different biases produced by each method may not be corrected by weighting. Information regards sampling and weighting should be explicitly stated for those viewing the comparisons.

Effective sample/base

Furthermore, caution should be used when weighting to ensure that the impact is not so great that it has a detrimental impact on the quality of the data (i.e. the effective sample size). It is advisable that an effective base of less than 500 is not used for any data set. This will ensure that the maximum margin of error will be $\pm$6 percentage points.

Seasonality

There is a possibility that a seasonal effect could impact results but Ipsos MORI do not recommend conducting the research at any particular time of year. However, when submitting data to LG Inform, please include information noting at what time of year the survey took place.

Wider context

The wider context in which the survey is conducted may shape residents' perceptions. Extraneous factors (for example the summer riots or severe weather) that may be liable to influence results should be noted when uploading information to LG Inform.

Section 1: Technical Review

The recommendations section outlined the final set of criteria that we suggest should apply to any locally collected resident satisfaction data that is going to be benchmarked in LG Inform, to ensure that any comparisons made are robust, valid and fair. This section explains in more detail the reasoning behind these recommendations.

Different means of data collection

Which methods? The key issues explained

Different means of data collection can generate different results (this is often referred to as 'mode effects'), suggesting that it is generally inadvisable to compare results generated by different methods.

When seeking to understand mode effects it is important to appreciate that differences observed can be caused by issues independent of the mode[9], in addition to the mode itself. Groves et al[10] identify the following;

- Sampling frames, coverage and respondent selection.

- The level of non-response.

- The role or absence of interviewers.

- The questionnaire design.

In questionnaire design, uniformity in approach is important to ensure that the influence of any mode effect is consistent across data sets (e.g. when comparing online self-completion with paper self-completion). Three key factors affect why people provide different responses via different interviewing modes: interviewer presence (which can result in greater levels of social desirability bias, compared with self-completion surveys); aural versus visual communication; and difference in question construction[11].

The example below provides an illustration of the differences observed in a specific council's satisfaction scores across a relatively short period of time using different modes of data collection, each with different sampling approaches.

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[9] For example, when authorities choose to conduct a telephone survey they will most commonly use quota sampling. This means of respondent selection can influence the results, so although not directly linked to the telephone mode it is an associated issue, as quota sampling is most commonly used in local government research in this mode.
[10] 2009 Groves et al *Survey Methodology 2nd Ed* John Wiley & Sons Inc: New Jersey
[11] Ibid

Q. Taking everything into account, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way [council] runs things?

Survey method	Timing	% satisfied
Telephone (Volunteering Survey)	March 2007	61%
Face-to-face (Residents' Survey)	March – April 2006	52%
Postal self-completion (BVPI)	Sept – Nov 2006	43%

In addition, mode issues also need to be considered during scripting, data editing and production stages of a research project. Specifically, it is vital to ensure that routing and consistency checks are identically applied (e.g. the same checks applied to online scripts as scanned postal survey data), and that identical edits are applied at the data cleaning stage for both online and paper questionnaires where a dual method survey is taking place, for example.

The following sections look in more detail at those characteristics of each mode of data collection which lead us to conclude that results generated by these different methods should not be directly compared – with the exception of online and postal self-completion questionnaires.

Face-to-face

The most important element of the face-to-face mode is the role of the interviewer; they are present to motivate respondents, deliver and clarify questions, answer queries, and probe incomplete answers. They can also monitor and react to non-verbal cues from respondents. These are all benefits of using face-to-face interviewers to administer a survey. However, their presence also creates the possibility that respondents might be encouraged to give answers consistent with social norms, rather than their true opinion, also referred to as social desirability bias.

Although interviewers can be trained to ameliorate the impact of social desirability bias, it is present in all interviewer administered survey modes, and should be acknowledged. A study conducted by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), illustrating mode effects in social capital surveys, found that respondents were more likely to downplay social problems in their local community when answering in a face-to-face interview compared with a postal interview[12]. This was not restricted to sensitive issues, but also the case for more commonplace social problems such as 'rubbish/litter lying around'. The ONS team concluded that this was related to respondents' self-consciousness about these particular topics.

The same study also found that respondents were more likely to refuse to provide an answer on more sensitive issues using the face-to-face mode compared to postal. This was

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[12] 2006 Nicolaas, G. and Tipping, S. *Mode effects in social capital surveys* Survey Methodology Bulletin, Special Edition, No. 58 pp56-74

particularly apparent for two questions about problems in the area: the problem of people using or dealing drugs (10.4% and 1.2% refused respectively) and the problem of people being racially attacked or harassed (4.5% and 0.6% refused respectively)[13]. This issue should be considered when deciding which mode to select for residents' surveys.

It is also important to be aware that respondents are more likely to 'acquiesce' (selecting agree rather than disagree) in an interviewer-administered survey[14], than when completing a questionnaire without the aid of an interviewer. This has been found to lead to higher levels of agreement and satisfaction.

The role of interviewing aids is also important for the respondent experience. In face-to-face surveys showcards are often used, something that is difficult to replicate in telephone surveys. And if there are any stimulus materials required, such as images of logos, this is particularly difficult to use in both telephone and self-completion modes.

The face-to-face mode, when using random probability sampling, is the most statistically robust approach, despite the fact that it does suffer from some bias (although not sampling bias), as discussed above. This bias means it is not advisable to compare results of face-to-face surveys with those gained by other methods.

It is also worth noting that a well designed face-to-face quota sample approach, with randomly selected locations, is also considered to be robust. This approach is prone to some sampling bias, however it is a good research option when random probability face-to-face is not financially viable.

Telephone

As with the face-to-face mode, conducting a survey via telephone allows the interviewer to be present to deal with any problems that might arise in relation to the questionnaire. In many surveys, interviewers often withhold response categories such as 'don't know' or 'refused to answer', only making it clear that these categories are available if the respondent struggles to answer the question. This leads to fewer respondents selecting these options, than would do so if offered in self-completion modes.

Interviewers often also have discretion over whether to provide clarification on particular questions, with questionnaires including interviewer instructions such as 'read out if required'. Again this allows the interviewer flexibility to react to the specific needs of respondents and tailor the questionnaire to maximise their understanding.

In the past, it has been suggested that telephone surveys are more likely to produce "extreme" answers for any given response scale, compared with face-to-face and postal

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[13] 2006 Nicolaas, G. and Tipping, S. *Mode effects in social capital surveys* Survey Methodology Bulletin, Special Edition, No. 58 pp56-74

[14] 1981 Schuman, H. & Presser, S. *Questions and answers in attitude surveys: Experiments on question form, wording and context* Academic Press: New York

surveys. Hochstim[15] found this to be the case between telephone and post methods. His study interrogated data from the question *Do you consider your health to be excellent, good, fair or poor?* In the telephone survey 38% of the sample chose 'excellent', compared to 30% of the postal survey sample. However, a 2009 review[16] argues it is hard to disentangle such acquiescence and extremeness from social desirability and response order effects, and hence *"we do not believe the earlier conclusion remains valid".*

Findings from a recent face-to-face study from Ipsos MORI have shown a difference in extremeness when considering responses to the question '*How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way your local council runs things?'* When comparing the findings from a national telephone study[17] conducted in September 2011, 16% reported that they were very satisfied with their council, but a national face-to-face study conducted in October 2011 recorded 7% very satisfied with their council[18]. But to echo Groves et al, it is not possible to say to what extent social desirability and question order had an effect on the extreme responses given.

Self-completion modes

Postal

Reviews of the different modes have found that in both postal and online surveys, respondents are more likely to reveal unfavourable information – when compared to telephone and face-to-face surveys[19]. Consequently, using a self-completion approach can help to obtain more accurate data on more sensitive questions, which is a key strength for this mode. It is also important to reiterate the impact of social desirability bias mentioned previously. Self-administered modes achieve lower response errors due to this[20], a further strength of this methodology.

The difference for respondents is in the absence of the interviewer. The interview experience is shaped by the information both implicitly and explicitly provided, and in a self-completion mode the questionnaire must be used to deliver all of the information required to provide a complete answer. Therefore if questions are complicated and require the provision of further information, which is not presented in the questionnaire, the quality of the data will suffer.

A particular difference between self-completion and interviewer administered surveys is the use of don't knows. If you wish to offer a respondent the option of selecting 'don't know' (even if you would prefer it was a last resort) it must be included in the answer scale in a self-

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[15] 1967 Hochstim, J. R. *A critical comparison of three strategies of collecting data from households* Journal of the American Statistical Association, 62 pp976-989
[16] 2009 Groves et al *Survey Methodology 2nd Ed* John Wiley & Sons Inc: New Jersey
[17] http://www.lgcomms.org.uk/lginsight/reports/report:78.
[18] October 2011 Ipsos MORI Omnibus data, Interviews conducted in-home with 874 adults aged 15+ living in England. Data are weighted to the profile of the population.
[19] 1992 de Leeuw, E. D. *Data quality in mail, telephone, and face-to-face surveys* TT Publications: Amsterdam
[20] 2009 Groves et al *Survey Methodology 2nd Ed* John Wiley & Sons Inc: New Jersey, Chapter 5

completion questionnaire. This generally leads to a higher incidence of don't know responses in self-completion modes (see later section on questionnaire design for more discussion on this). Respondents also have more freedom to leave answers blank, which in an interviewer administered survey would be referred to as a 'Refusal'. This provides the questionnaire author less control over the behaviour of respondents.

When considering making comparisons with postal survey data there is evidence to suggest that the presentation of individual self-completion questions is relevant. For example, studies by Christian & Dillman in 2004[21] and Toepoel in 2008[22] have found that answers to scale questions are likely to change if categories are displayed in multiple columns instead of in a linear format. Consequently, when preparing a survey where trend data is sought, it would be best to identify whether the layout of the question is the same as when asked previously.

Particularly important when considering developing trend or benchmarking questions, a series of studies have shown that even when question wording remains consistent visually and aurally received questions produce different answers. As mentioned previously, telephone respondents have been found to give more positive answers than respondents to postal or online surveys[23].

Online

A key issue with online approaches is the difference in sampling, where the general public do not have a random chance of being selected – if they are not online they are not in the sampling frame. Although increasing numbers of people in the UK are now online (80%), there remains a 'hard-core' of the population that is not. Older people and those in social grades D and E are heavily represented in the group without access to the internet (Online: only 23% of women aged 65+ in social grades D or E, and only 27% of men aged 65+ in social grades D or E[24]).

In addition, a random sample is hard to identify as there is no single database of British email addresses that matches the Postcode Address File (PAF) in terms of its coverage, or a means of systematically generating email addresses in the way that Random Digit Dialling might for a telephone survey.

It is important to note that a recent discussion paper by the Head of Methods at TNS BMRB[25], suggested that the likelihood of having access to the internet at home has only a

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[21] 2004 Christian, L. M. & Dillman, D. A. *The influence of graphical and symbolic language manipulations on responses to self-administered questions* Public Opinion Quarterly, 68(1) pp58-81
[22] 2008 Toepoel, V. *A closer look at web questionnaire design* CentER Dissertation Series, No. 220 CentER: Tilberg University
[23] 2010 Dillman, D. A. & Messer, B. L. *Mixed-mode surveys* Handbook of Survey Research 2nd Ed pp551-574 Emerald Publishing Group Ltd:Bingley
[24] Ipsos MediaCT Tech Tracker, Q3, 2011 http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Publications/IpsosMediaCT_TechTracker_Q3_2011.pdf
[25] http://www.tns-bmrb.co.uk/assets-uploaded/documents/iips-survey-methods-insight_1305719568.pdf

small role in explaining the differences in findings from online access panel (i.e. non random) samples and in-person probability samples. It is the difference between random and non-random respondent selection that he considers to be much more important in shaping the data. He concluded that quite extensive demographic weighting will not eradicate differences between the online panel and probability sample estimates. Another study by a Task Force for the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) concluded that researchers should avoid non-probability online panels when one of the research objectives is to accurately estimate population values[26].

A paper from Krosnick et al identified that measurement error in online surveys will be less frequent than in interviewer-administered surveys[27]. However, the article goes on to reiterate the TNS BMRB conclusion that weighting data gathered online from non-probability samples will not always correct the inaccuracies from the sampling bias. Consequently, a probability sample will provide more accurate data.

This reinforces the argument that research using random samples should not be replaced with non random online panels (the issue of panels is discussed in further detail below), and adds to the evidence that findings from different modes should not be compared. However, it is clear that online consultation is an inexpensive tool that can validly be deployed by local authorities for consultative purposes and indications of residents' views.[28]

An online approach does allow a survey to look appealing and encourage response from younger groups of people, who perhaps are less likely to participate in more traditional forms of research. It also presents the opportunity to control the routing and prevent non-response, which is not possible in a postal self-completion approach. However this could be problematic for comparing online and postal data as the potential for online survey technology to present survey questions in innovative ways can produce visual inconsistencies between questions.

It is important to note that although the literature and experiments on the impact of mode emphasise the problems associated with comparing data collected using different modes, it does report that postal and online data can be combined and compared if the surveys present the same experience for respondents[29].

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[26] 2010 Baker et al *AAPOR Report on Online Panels*
http://www.aapor.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=AAPOR_Committee_and_Task_Force_Reports&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=2223
[27] 2011 Krosnick et al *Comparing the accuracy of RDD telephone surveys and internet surveys conducted with probability and non-probability samples* pp709-747 Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol 75, Winter 2011
[28] For example, the TNS BMRB paper found that, with the exception of surveys about technology usage, most of the online panel estimates are in the same ballpark and will suffice when a high level of accuracy is not required.
[29] 2009 Dillman D. et al *Internet, mail and mixed-mode surveys: the tailored design method 3rd Ed*, Wiley & Sons Inc: New Jersey

Therefore, if data from postal and online approaches is to be compared the online survey should be designed to visually and experientially resemble the postal version, so without complex skips or routing, randomisation or edit checks[30].

Residents and user panels

Panels are used across each of the modes outlined above. Many local authorities use residents' panels to gauge reactions to prospective local budgets or particular policy issues, and they can form a useful consultative tool. They are particularly useful when identifying trends over time when the same questions have been asked of panel members.

However, as with online surveys, it is the sample in a residents' panel that prevents direct comparisons with general public data. The members of panels, even if they are recruited to proportionately represent the local population, cannot replace a random household survey. The act of volunteering to become a panel member marks a panellist out as different to someone who has not volunteered to do so.

Also, it should be noted that there are differential attrition rates among subgroups of panel members, with panel composition likely to change over the different waves of research. In general the recruitment and maintenance of panels is so varied that we would not recommend comparing benchmarks gathered in this way, as it would be difficult to distinguish whether any differences are real or related to respondent selection.

If the purpose of a panel is to provide an index where issues are tracked over time, they can provide a useful vehicle for this objective if the panellists remain largely the same (and therefore so does the bias). However, we would not recommend a panel for gauging the understanding of issues at a single point in time.

Our conclusion is that there is a place for residents' panels in the basket of research and consultation tools available to local authorities, but their limitations should be understood. And, data from panellists should not be considered comparable with data from random samples.

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[30] 2009 Dillman D. et al *Internet, mail and mixed-mode surveys: the tailored design method 3rd Ed*, Wiley & Sons Inc: New Jersey

Recommendations

As response rates fall, and particular sub-groups of the population become more difficult to engage in research there will be an increasing demand for mixed-mode surveys. Yet currently, the evidence suggests that intra-mode comparisons would not be helpful for local government seeking to understand where they might differ from each other on key performance data.

One exception is postal and online data – overall, the wider research suggests that it is possible to compare postal and online survey responses from random samples[31] if the questions have used the same visual layout[32].

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[31] For example, an online random sample could be generated from a random sample of households from a local area which is sent a postal questionnaire. Sample members could be given the opportunity to complete the survey on paper or online.

[32] 2010 Dillman, D. A. & Messer, B. L. *Mixed-mode surveys* Handbook of Survey Research 2nd Ed pp551-574 Emerald Publishing Group Ltd: Bingley

Question design

When designing questions for benchmarking, there are three overarching issues to consider.

- Reliability – is the question answered in a consistent way?
- Validity – is the question measuring what we intend it to measure?
- Administration difficulty – how easily respondents answer the question?

Cognitively testing a questionnaire presents the opportunity to consider these issues. For the questions considered in this study, we have reflected upon the findings from the cognitive interviews and the findings are discussed in the next section of this report.

Once the questions to be compared have been selected there are other issues to consider; primarily the order in which the questions are asked, the way in which rating scales are used, and whether don't know options are included.

Question order

Question order effect appears when responses to a question significantly change depending on a question's position in the questionnaire. The order effects are divided into two unrelated groups; serial position effects, where responses to questions change depending on when the question is asked; and context effects (semantic order) that apply when earlier questions affect the responses to later items.

Experimentation has consistently demonstrated the impact of questionnaire ordering on results. Krosnick and Presser highlight three key areas that questionnaire order can affect: motivation, learning, and fatigue[33]. Questions that appear at the start of the questionnaire have a particularly strong association with respondents' motivation to continue with the survey and their subsequent engagement with it. Consequently, it is standard practice to place questions that are particularly relevant to the survey topic and more interesting for respondents, at the start of surveys and demographics questions towards the end. The relationship between fatigue and item order is also well-documented: a number of studies have shown that items placed later in a questionnaire suffer from higher levels of missing data, greater levels of agreement, less detailed answers, and less differentiation among questionnaire items compared with the same items placed earlier in the survey[34].

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[33] 2009 Krosnick and Presser, *Question and Questionnaire Design*, from the Handbook of Survey Research (2nd Edition) by Wright et al. (ed)

[34] Johnson et al., 1974; Kraut et al., 1975; Herzog and Bachman, 1981; Backor, Golde, and Nie, 2007 – reported in Krosnick and Presser

Questionnaire ordering can also have more positive impacts: several studies have indicated that respondents' interpretation of questions can change – and even improve – during a survey, particularly when groups of similar questions are placed together[35].

Serial position effects

Evidence suggests that as respondents progress through a questionnaire their level of fatigue increases, their interest declines, and they make less effort. However, there are other features of the interview experience that might help to ameliorate the impact of fatigue, such as:

- the rapport with interviewer, which increases towards the end of interview;

- a respondent's learning and their understanding of the survey topic, which increases towards the end of interview[36].

There is also the issue of 'conditioning' which takes place in longer questionnaires, and is not restricted to a specific mode. This is a term used to refer to the learning that takes place during a questionnaire, where a respondent predicts the likely incidence of a greater number of questions if specific questions are answered positively. This can lead to respondents providing inaccurate answers to shorten their journey through the questionnaire. It is also more likely to happen with residents' panels, where the panellist has become inured to the survey process.

This evidence suggests that if perceptions-based data comparisons were to be made on data gathered from questionnaires that were not completely identical then ideally, the questions designed for comparison should be asked at the start of the questionnaire. However, this is not always possible and given the diverse range of priorities across local councils, it is often commonsensical for questions on similar subject matter to be grouped together. Thus we go on to recommend that the first tier core benchmarking questions (and advocacy) are placed at the start of the questionnaire in a fixed order, but allow a degree of flexibility in the ordering of tier two and third tier questions.

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[35] For example, one experiment asked a general life satisfaction question. When respondents were asked this question after a single question about marital satisfaction, they were more likely to exclude their marital satisfaction from considerations about life satisfaction, assuming that the question was asking about all aspects of life except that already asked about. When respondents were asked a life satisfaction question after several questions about different domains of life, they assumed the general question was asking them to summarise their satisfaction across the items already asked about. Quoted in Krosnick and Presser

[36] Knowles, E.S., M.C.Coker, D.A.Cook, S.R.Diercks, M.E. Irwin, E.J. Lundeen, J.W. Neville, and M.E. Sibicky (1992) *Order Effects within Personality Measures* in N. Schwartz and S. Sudman (eds)
Context Effects in Social and Psychological Research, pp 221-236.

Context effects[37]

This effect takes place when earlier questions affect the responses to later items. This is related to the questions that might come before the specific one under study, but also any other supplementary information or explanations provided before a question is asked, such as a definition of local area.

This point is illustrated by an experiment we ran for Harrow Council in 2009, where the sample for a residents survey was split and one half was asked to rate satisfaction with council followed directly by value for money, and the other half was asked to rate value for money followed directly by council satisfaction. As the chart below shows, asking satisfaction with council before value for money resulted in a higher percentage of satisfied residents.

When asked about Council satisfaction first, residents reported greater satisfaction.

Q. Taking everything into account, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way Harrow Council runs things?

■ % satisfied ■ % dissatisfied

	% satisfied	% dissatisfied
Satisfaction asked as Q10	54	19
Satisfaction asked as Q11	40	26
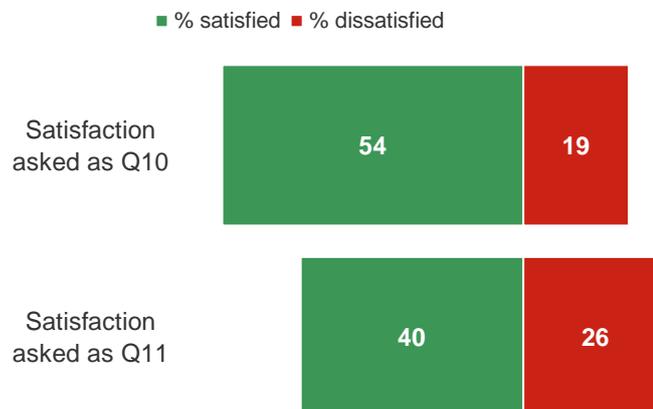
Base: 28 September 2009 – 4 January 2010. Harrow residents, all valid responses version 1 of the questionnaire 1,710, all valid responses version 2 1,745.

Ipsos MORI

The potential impact of question order is illustrated by a comparison of data from the Public Perceptions of the NHS survey and the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey. In the most recent published data we find that 65% of respondents are satisfied with the NHS[38] when asked in the BSA survey[39], but 73% of respondents are satisfied when asked in the Public Perceptions of the NHS[40].

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[37] Sometimes referred to as semantic order effects
[38] The question asked is 'All in all, how satisfied or dissatisfied would you say you are with the way in which the National Health Service runs nowadays?'
[39] http://www.natcen.ac.uk/study/british-social-attitudes-27th-report
[40]

http://www.dh.gov.uk/dr_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/documents/digitalasset/dh_125479.pdf

In the Public Perceptions of the NHS survey this question is asked first, but in the BSA Survey it follows questions on newspaper readership, political party identification, public spending and social welfare, and education issues. This presents a context that shapes the responses, which could explain the lower rating of satisfaction with the NHS, than if it were to be asked as the first question. However, it is important to note that as one uses quota sampling and the other uses random probability, the role of sample selection could also influence the difference in results.

We would recommend that if the sector opts to incorporate the first tier benchmarking questions, that not only are they positioned at the start of the survey, but they are asked in the same order, with the same explanatory context provided before each question. Some flexibility concerning the order of the second and third tier question set can be applied, which is discussed in the Section 2: Question Review.

The dilemma of '*don't knows*'

In our discussion of telephone and face-to-face modes above we refer to the respondent experience and the visibility of don't know as a valid response.

Interviewer-administered questions tend to be designed without explicit 'don't know' options but interviewers can code 'don't know' if respondents spontaneously say this. The reason for this approach is to minimise survey satisficing; i.e. respondents are tempted to choose the offered 'don't know' option rather than exerting cognitive effort to answer the question.

However, it is generally considered good practice for postal surveys to provide a 'don't know' response option. This is recommended so that researchers can distinguish between genuine 'don't knows' and other forms of item non-response such as 'refused to answer' or missed the question. This often leads to postal surveys having higher levels of item non-response than the interviewer-administered format.

If questions are to be suitable for different modes, then the handling of 'don't know' responses requires further consideration[41]. However, for our purposes – developing a short set of benchmarking questions for the local government sector – we would not recommend comparing data from different modes for example, postal with telephone. Consequently, it is more important that any comparisons are based on data gathered in a consistent way. For example a face-to-face approach where the 'don't know' option is not written on the showcard, or a self-completion approach when the 'don't know' responses are offered to respondents, but then excluded from the base. It is important that the questions are asked in the same way, and that base information is provided when reporting results so that if 'don't know' responses are excluded (as was the case for Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) General Survey and the Place Surveys) then this is clear.

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[41] 2006 Nicolaas, G. and Tipping, S. *Mode effects in social capital surveys* Survey Methodology Bulletin, Special Edition, No. 58 pp56-74

Recommendations

For our purposes (identifying questions to be benchmarked), it is important that the first tier benchmarking questions are placed at the start of the questionnaire, in the same order, and using the same answer scales. We would also recommend that councils adhere to our advice regarding the ordering of second and third tier questions.

We would recommend that answer scales include don't know options in self-completion modes, but that these are only allowed for spontaneous answers in face-to-face and telephone surveys.

Sampling matters

The origin of a sample is particularly important when deciding whether datasets are valid for comparison. Data gathered in the BVPI General Survey and Place Survey used random samples of households in local authority areas.

Previously we outlined some important issues for online surveys and residents' panels, which relate to sampling, and emphasised the importance of using random samples. The following section provides an overview of some of the key issues to be considered when deciding whether data should be submitted for comparison with data from other local authorities.

Sample selection

Some local authorities use a census approach to sampling, in which every member of the target population is contacted, arguing that it is more accurate than a sample survey. However, the literature provides evidence that even if the census has no sampling error; it is still subject to coverage error, non-response error, and measurement error[42].

Depending upon the population under consideration, if it is large, it can often cost more to conduct a census than a good quality sample survey.

From a statistical point of view, a good survey design satisfies four characteristics.

- Every individual in the population of interest has a known probability of selection in the sample.

- Results can be generalised to the population of interest.

- Quantities of interest can be estimated accurately and cost-effectively.

- The survey is flexible for some users with specific needs (such as in different languages or different formats to support people with disabilities).

Random postal and face-to-face surveys can use the Postcode Address File (PAF) to generate their sample. The PAF, maintained by the Royal Mail, is the most up-to-date and complete address database in the UK, containing over 28 million addresses. It is a database of all known UK addresses and postcodes. Therefore this presents an equal opportunity for households to be included in a sample. It is possible that some new housing developments may not be included in PAF, but it is the best sample frame available.

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[42] 2008 Lohr, S. *Coverage and Sampling* International Handbook of Survey Methodology pp97-112 Taylor and Francis Group: Oxfordshire

Random telephone sampling using Plus Digit Dialling[43] can be fixed to a specific area using postcodes; however it is dependent upon every household having a landline for households to have a chance of being selected for the survey. Increasingly this is becoming problematic as households become increasingly 'mobile only'.

A challenge for postal surveys is that the PAF database is address only, without the names of householders. Receiving mail addressed to the resident, rather than a named individual, could mean that the questionnaire is thrown away before its envelope is opened, which might help explain the level of non-response often found in postal research.

Data can be weighted to adjust for areas not included in a sample (e.g. those living in the Western Isles are often excluded from sample frames as it is very expensive to send out interviewers), and data can also be weighted to ameliorate non-response. However caution should be used when weighting to ensure that the impact is not so great that it has a detrimental impact on the quality of the data.

Non-response

Face-to-face random probability surveys tend to obtain higher response rates than postal surveys. It is uncommon for telephone surveys to publish response rates as often the sampling is to specific quotas, and once the quotas are met the interviewing stops. This is also often the case for face-to-face quota surveys where sponsors do not publish the number of addresses sampled for the successful achievement of the required interviews for each quota group.

In face-to-face research the response rate is improved by multiple calls to a household, where an interviewer can explain the purpose of the research and persuade a householder to participate[44]. In postal research it is typical to send a maximum of two reminders, but in face-to-face research it is not uncommon to make up to 10 calls to each address. The ability to tailor persuasion strategies to address respondent concerns is highest with face-to-face contact, and is minimal in self-administered surveys[45].

In postal surveys it is also harder to distinguish non-response from ineligible addresses in comparison to face-to-face surveys.

These differences reinforce that it is generally inadvisable to compare data gathered using different modes.

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[43] Plus Digit Dialling sample is generated by taking listings of all known listed landline telephone numbers in the targeted geographical area. These numbers are then appended to telephone 'stubs', the first part of the telephone number, for example 020 7347 30xx. Random two digit suffixes are then appended to the stubs to create a randomly generated telephone number.
[44] 2000 Cook, C., Heath, F., & Thompson, R. *A meta-analysis of response rates in web or internet-based surveys* Educational and Psychological Measurement 60 pp301-316
[45] 2009 Groves et al *Survey Methodology 2nd Ed* John Wiley & Sons Inc: New Jersey, Chapter 5

Weighting

Response rates alone are not quality indicators; high response rate surveys can also have high non-response bias (if the non-respondents are very distinctive on the survey variable). The best way to think about this is that high response rates reduce the risk of non-response bias. However, caution should be used when small groups of a sample are up-weighted, or large groups are down-weighted, to match the profile of the population – this often happens when a high proportion of older people complete questionnaires and a low proportion of young people complete them[46].

What is weighting?

A weight is a multiplying factor applied to some or all of the respondents in a survey. The weight applied to any one respondent may be less than or greater than one (but can't be less than zero) and a whole range of weights may co-exist among the respondents in a survey. The effect is, therefore, to change the relative importance of the respondents in determining the final data. The essential reason for doing this is to achieve a sample 'profile' (usually in demographic or geographic terms) that is closer to that of the actual population, which we know from previous surveys or published statistics.

What variables should be weighted?

This depends on the purpose of the survey but, generally, any variables that are particularly important for the analysis, or where the sample appears to be imbalanced, should be included. Variables that would typically be included are age, sex, and social grade (or work status as a proxy for social grade). Other candidates might be household size, presence of children or ownership of certain types of consumer goods. The weighting procedure can cope with some missing data (for example some people may refuse to give their age) but weighting variables should not have a lot of missing information.

What effect does weighting have?

The impact of weighting is to reduce the effective sample size. This means that a given sample is less efficient than it would be if it were unweighted. A high range of weights will reduce the efficiency of the sample considerably. This is not necessarily a bad thing if, for example, the priority is the analysis of a sub-group that was deliberately over-sampled, but, under these circumstances, care should be taken in drawing conclusions, about the significance of any differences at the level of the total sample.

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[46] 2011 Krosnick et al *Comparing the accuracy of RDD telephone surveys and internet surveys conducted with probability and non-probability samples* pp709-747 Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol 75, Winter 2011

The following example illustrates the problem that heavy weights can create, with the effective base greatly reduced by the impact of the weights.

	Unweighted base	Effective base
AnyBorough Residents' survey (postal, 2009)	3539	1684

If the profile of the sample varies greatly from the profile of the population as a whole, it may be advisable to cap the weights. This entails a compromise between the impact of the weighting on the effective base and the amelioration of non-response bias.

We would recommend that for any data that is to be collected by local authorities and then shared as benchmarks that the effective base for each question should be provided as a useful indicator of quality. We would also recommend that data with an effective base of less than 500 is not used for comparison, as that carries with it a maximum margin of error of six percentage points and any greater margin of error will make it difficult to make comparisons reliably.

Statistical reliability

Residents who take part in the surveys are only a sample of the total population of residents in a specific area, so we cannot be certain that the figures obtained are exactly those that would have been reached had everyone responded (the "true" values).

We can, however, predict the variation between the sample results and the "true" values from knowledge of the size of the samples on which the results to each question is based, and the number of times a particular answer is given. The confidence with which we can make this prediction is usually chosen to be 95% - that is, the chances are 95 in 100 that the "true" value will fall within a specified range.

When results are compared between separate groups, the observed difference may be "real," or it may occur by chance (because not everyone in the population has been interviewed). To test if the difference is real – i.e. if it is "statistically significant" – we have to know the size of the samples, the percentage giving a certain answer and the degree of confidence chosen. If we assume a "95% confidence interval", the differences between the results of two separate groups must be greater than the values given in the following table (which is based on the effective sample size):

Size of sample on which survey result is based	Differences required for significance at or near these percentage levels		
	10% or 90% ±	30% or 70% ±	50% ±
100 vs. 100	8.4	12.8	13.9
200 vs. 200	5.9	9	9.8
500 vs. 500	3.7	5.7	6.2
1,000 vs. 1,000	2.6	4	4.4

It is important to note that, strictly speaking, the above confidence interval (CI) calculations relate only to samples that have been selected using random probability sampling methods with a survey response of 100%. However, in practice it is reasonable to assume that these calculations provide a good indication of the confidence intervals relating to postal research, Digit Dialling telephone samples and face-to-face quota sampling, and the various sampling approaches described in this review.

Recommendations

When deciding whether data should be included in a comparative benchmark dataset we would recommend that for self completion modes (postal/online) that only data from random samples is used, and that data is then weighted to the known profile of the local populations.

For telephone and face-to-face surveys where the samples are based on quotas of the local population, rather than random one-in-'n' selection, we would recommend that it is explicitly recorded that the respondents were found to quotas matching the profile of the local population. We would recommend caution in comparing data from telephone and face-to-face surveys, even when they have used the same sampling method (e.g. quota or random probability) and/or have been weighted to the profile of the local population. Even in these situations differences can be observed for a number of reasons. For example, face-to-face and telephone surveys use different sample frames (e.g. telephone surveys employ sample frames that exclude part of the population).[47]

We would also recommend that comparisons are only made on data with an effective base of 500 or greater, to ensure that the comparisons are meaningful.

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[47] Other reasons include: (1) Unlike telephone surveys, face-to-face surveys use "clustered" designs. Addresses within specific narrowly-defined areas are issued together to minimise interviewer travelling time (2) Questions are often asked in a different way in telephone surveys compared with face-to-face surveys because of the absence of visual stimuli such as showcards. This is likely to affect the answers given by respondents. (3) The unweighted sample profile may differ in a face-to-face survey from a telephone survey, for a number of practical reasons such as the amount of effort made to persuade respondents to take part. The different biases produced by each method may not be corrected by weighting.

Seasonality and survey timings

Impact on responses to individual questions

Literature exploring whether the time of year a survey is conducted is important is generally inconclusive.

When the Public Perceptions of the NHS tracking study[48] was first commissioned it was thought that lower satisfaction with the NHS in winter might be due to the increased likelihood of flu and general illness during this time. However, this was never proved conclusively.

The wider literature suggests that it depends on the question; with the season found to impact on people's perception of well-being, but not on their general life satisfaction[49].

However, the context at the time of a survey has been found to have an impact on respondents' attitudes. Consequently, if you conduct a survey immediately after issuing council tax bills it is possible that this will influence residents' views of value for money.

When interpreting survey data it is important to be aware of the wider context that shapes perceptions, as this information will be essential for identifying local solutions. As it is not clear whether seasonality shapes individual responses it seems sensible that when collecting data for comparison, similar survey periods should be used. However, as this may not be practical, it may just be useful to make the fieldwork period information available to users.

Unplanned events

The impact of unplanned and uncontrollable events are likely to have a greater impact than seasonality; such as the riots in London and other cities, or the heavy snow across the country in winter 2010/2011. These events disrupt response rates to surveys, and are likely to shape respondent attitudes. This again emphasises the importance of setting results in context.

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[48]

http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/PublishedSurvey/ListOfSurveySince1990/Generalsurveys/DH_4129933

[49] 1979 Smith, T. *Happiness: Time Trends, Seasonal Variations, Intersurvey Differences, and Other Mysteries* Social Psychology Quarterly 1979 Vol. 42 No. 1 pp18-30

Recommendations

As the evidence about the impact of context and seasonality does not conclusively say that it has an impact on data, we would recommend that this information is provided for those making comparisons. This will help provide background and understanding for the data, while not making an explicit requirement that only data gathered over a particular period of time be compared.

Section 2: Question Review

The recommendations section outlined the final set of questions that we suggest should comprise the benchmarking set for local government and the order in which these questions should appear. This section explains in more detail the reasoning behind these recommendations.

Detailed question review

Based on previous research and an evaluation of methodological best practice, we undertook a detailed review of the perceptions questions that have historically featured prominently in nationwide surveys such as Place and BVPI. Many of these questions are still viewed as important areas of exploration and feature regularly in current examples of residents' surveys. However, whilst some authorities have retained the exact original wording of the Place surveys in their questionnaires, others have deviated and altered the questions to reflect local needs or to how they have best seen fit. Similarly, the order in which these questions are asked is not consistent as councils have reconsidered the format and structure of their questionnaires. There is considerable evidence to suggest that these two factors can invariably influence answer choice so it is important that a consistent approach is adopted when seeking to benchmark data.

This question review firstly recommends key benchmarking questions. It also advises on question order and the wording that should be used. These recommendations are based on a review of historic question wording in national surveys, an evaluation of how the question is currently used, academic thought, cognitive testing and Ipsos MORI's own extensive experience in delivering residents' surveys.

Satisfaction with the local area

Overall/general satisfaction with local area (NI 5)

The core question which has been used regularly in local authorities' residents' surveys to find how people feel about where they live is as follows: '*Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your local area as a place to live?'* This was the wording used in the 2008 Place Survey when the question was adopted as a national indicator (NI 5). A five-point Likert scale was provided for responses: very satisfied, fairly satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, fairly dissatisfied and very dissatisfied. The national indicator was defined as 'the proportion of the adult population who say they are "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the area as a place to live'.

Usage and availability of trend data

Understanding how people feel about where they live is fundamental to a wider understanding of attitudes. There are a number of questions which are frequently used to ascertain the detail of this. But NI 5 is perhaps the most used of all local authority residents' survey questions. There is therefore a wealth of trend data, including Ipsos MORI data from face-to-face surveys from the 1970s.

Survey	Methodology	Available data on this topic	
		Authority-specific trend data	National data
2003/04 BVPI General Survey	Postal (mainly)	No	No
2006/07 BVPI General Survey	Postal	Yes	Yes
2008 Place Survey	Postal	Yes	Yes
2010 Citizenship Survey	Face-to-face	No	Yes
2011 Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker	Face-to-face	No	Yes
Ipsos MORI face-to-face residents' surveys for individual councils	Face-to-face	Yes	No
2009/10 British Crime Survey	Face-to-face	No	No

The question was not included in the 2003/04 BVPI General Survey but was introduced in the postal 2006/7 BVPI General Survey, although it was not a BVPI. The 2008 Place Survey established this question as a national indicator (NI 5). The Government's rationale was that: *'Quality of place is a priority to residents and drives how satisfied people are with their local area as a place to live. This indicator provides authorities and service deliverers with a baseline of local satisfaction which helps them identify and address the sorts of issues affecting how residents feel about their local area.'*

The BVPI and Place Surveys used a comparable postal methodology, with an autumn fieldwork period. There is therefore broadly comparable trend data, and national results, for local authority postal surveys.

The question has also been collected via the DCLG's Citizenship Survey. As such, there are also national level results for local authority face-to-face surveys. The question is also included in the Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker, providing up-to-date trends and data for comparison.

Cognitive testing

Cognitive testing conducted by Ipsos MORI (November 2011 and January 2012) indicates that the current wording of the question is easily comprehensible and effective as a gauge for understanding levels of satisfaction with an area.

However it is evident that "local area" is perceived as being a relatively vague term, open to several different interpretations. Some interviewees understood the term as referring to their village/town, others thought the question was an assessment of the entire district, or the nearby larger town (as opposed to their immediate neighbourhood). The definition of local area as "15-20 minute walking distance" is therefore seen as a useful guide, despite some concern that this is an arbitrary measurement (particularly amongst those that do not tend to walk long distances, such as the elderly). For others, they only considered the route they would typically walk to work and not 15-20 minute radius per se. Furthermore, while the interviewees generally felt that this definition should be included as a guide, it is noteworthy it was not always read as part of the introductory text to the question.

Ipsos MORI recommendation: The definition of local area is useful and essential in order to ensure consistency across surveys.

The terms "satisfaction" and "dissatisfaction" are clearly understood although different interpretations emerged. Some of the older interviewees referred to the aesthetics of their locality such as levels of cleanliness. By comparison some of the younger interviewees based levels of satisfaction on accessibility of things to do.

Overall, as a general measure of the level of satisfaction, the nature of the question does not demand a prescriptive interpretation and current wording seems to work effectively.

The quality of NI 5 as a measure of satisfaction with the local area

The question wording adopted for NI 5 has generally been applied consistently over the years. There have been variations, however. The main issue of debate has been that the expression 'your local area' could have a range of meanings for respondents, depending for example on the rurality or prevailing tenure of their area. Those who favour the wording consider that this is not the critical point as the question seeks to engender a *general* view, a feeling, from the respondent.

The 2003 BVPI general survey did not include a statutory question on satisfaction with local area. Local authorities were provided, however, with a bank of additional discretionary questions, with recommended wording. The proposed wording of a question in that discretionary list was: *How satisfied are you with your neighbourhood as a place to live?'* Again the standard five-point satisfaction-based Likert scale was to be applied. The expressed purpose of this question was *'to monitor community well-being, and inform policy on the provision and quality of local services/facilities'*. There was no specific guidance on its position in the questionnaire.

This question on satisfaction with neighbourhood was excluded from the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey and 2008 Place Survey questionnaires in favour of the wording adopted in NI 5. The 2006/07 BVPI questionnaire did not provide any guidance to respondents about how to interpret the expression 'local area'. However, in Ipsos MORI's 2007 cognitive research commissioned by DCLG as part of its preparations for the Place Survey, the definition of 'local area' emerged as an important issue, particularly as this was to be a survey about *place*. Respondents in the cognitive research variously perceived 'local area' as their 'immediate area', their 'town', or their 'local authority area'. The research concluded that 'local area' needed to be defined fully and consistently across the questionnaire in order to avoid misinterpretation by respondents.

As a result, the Place Survey included general guidance in a covering letter to respondents that the expression 'local area' refers to 'the area within 15-20 minutes walking distance from your home'.

The 2010 Citizenship questionnaire, using a face-to-face methodology, adopted the same question wording as in NI 5. It also included a range of questions about respondents' 'immediate neighbourhood' which was not further defined, and 'your wider local area' which the interviewer defined at the beginning of a bank of questions on the issue as meaning 'within fifteen or twenty minutes walk', consistent with the Place Survey. The question on satisfaction with local area was the first in this bank of questions.

Some residents' surveys have tweaked question wording over the years, usually with minor modifications such as: 'Thinking about this area, on the whole, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with it as a place to live?'

These are relatively minor issues. However, consistency is important and we recommend the form of words adopted in the Place Survey. Local area should be defined in a preamble to the question or, if the question is self-standing, within the question itself.

The question in practice – what local authorities use

Based on those authorities that supplied examples of their use of this question in recent surveys; it appears regularly. Authorities tend to utilise the original wording from the 2008 Place Survey (and according response options) and the question has been used in both residents' panels and random sample surveys. Often, this included the definition of "local area" as "15-20 minutes walking distance".

It is worth noting that while this question is valued as providing insight into "softer", high level perception of an area, many current resident surveys are also designed to explore specific areas of satisfaction.

Question order

The question has generally been placed at or towards the beginning of questionnaires. It was the third question in the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey and the 2008 Place Surveys, following questions about what respondents considered to be most important in making somewhere a good place to live (from a list) and which, if any, most need improving. The question led the second bank of questions in the Citizenship questionnaire, following questions about respondents' local neighbourhood, and preceding questions on whether people believed that their local area had improved in the last two years and whether they enjoyed living there. In Ipsos MORI residents' surveys, the question has typically been placed first or second in the questionnaire.

We recommend that this question should be, whenever possible, the first in the questionnaire so that responses are unbiased. It will generally have less impact on responses to following questions than many alternative opening questions.

Effective discriminator between local authority areas

This is a very unthreatening question which respondents engage with and find easy to answer, and about which they generally have a considered view (a further reason for it being located at the beginning of a questionnaire). Responses are therefore not volatile. The postal Place Survey found 80% satisfied with their local area in England, while the face-to-face 2008/09 and 2010 Citizenship Surveys found 82% and 83% satisfied, the latter finding some switch from 'fairly satisfied' to 'very satisfied' since the previous survey.

The question provides a good discriminator between local authority areas, ratings of satisfaction in the 2008 Place Survey varying from 94% in two rural districts, South Hams (Devon) and Ribble Valley (Lancashire), to 56% in the London Borough of Newham. The question also discriminates well between demographic groups. The Citizenship Survey illustrated that, as people age, they are more likely to be satisfied with their local area as a place to live. This was particularly evident when analysing satisfaction at the extremities of the age scale. People aged 75 years or over were almost twice as likely as people aged 16-24 years to say that they were very satisfied with their local area as a place to live (50% compared with 26%). There were also differences in levels of satisfaction by ethnicity. More White people (36%) said that they were very satisfied with their local area than Black African (31%), Pakistani (30%), Indian (29%), Bangladeshi (27%) and Black Caribbean (27%). Socio-economic circumstances also affected people's satisfaction with their area, the overall deprivation of the area appearing to have a particularly strong impact, and there were strong differences between urban and rural areas.

Conclusion

The purpose of this question is to monitor community well-being, and inform policy on the provision and quality of local services/facilities. It not only engenders information in its own right, it contextualises and helps understanding of the answers to wider issues. It is also a

good question to ask at the beginning of the survey, giving respondents the confidence to answer the rest of the questionnaire. There is much local level trend data and national comparative data for both self-completion and face-to-face surveys, to enable responses to be interpreted effectively. It is therefore a good choice to include in a core set of local government benchmarking questions.

Recommendation

The wording now well-established from the Place and Citizenship Surveys, augmented by a general explanation that 'local area means within 15-20 minutes' walking distance from your home', is recommended as the first question in the core benchmarking set.

(i) When the question is the only one on the local area, we recommend:
Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your local area as a place to live? By local area we mean within 15-20 minutes walking distance from your home.'

(ii) Where the question is one of a battery of questions exploring experiences of local area, the recommended definition "Throughout the questionnaire we ask you think about "your local area". When answering, please consider your local area to be the area within 15-20 minutes walking distance from your home" should precede the question set. The subsidiary definition recommended in (i) can therefore be removed.
Response codes:
Very satisfied
Fairly satisfied
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
Fairly dissatisfied
Very dissatisfied
Don't know

Satisfaction with the council

Overall satisfaction with local council (not a national indicator)

The issue of residents' satisfaction with their council is of course the core question in local authority surveys relating to corporate health. It has been included in Ipsos MORI residents' surveys since the 1970s and was also included in the 2003/4 and 2006/7 BVPI general surveys and the 2008 Place Survey, although it was not identified as a Place Survey national indicator. The core question which has been used regularly in local authorities' residents' surveys is: '*Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way your council is running the area?'* although, as discussed below, the wording has been modified slightly in different surveys. In any event, a five-point Likert scale was provided for responses: very satisfied, fairly satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, fairly dissatisfied and very dissatisfied.

Usage and availability of trend data

The issue has been covered in almost all general residents' surveys undertaken or commissioned by local authorities and it is regarded as the key question to indicate how well-regarded the council is by its residents. When coupled with other questions it helps councils to identify the extent a combination of service, value for money, information, and communication-related factors impacts on its residents' perceptions of it as an organisation.

Survey	Methodology	Included data on this topic	
		Authority-specific trend data	**National data**
2003/04 BVPI General Survey	Postal (mainly)	**Yes**	**Yes**
2006/07 BVPI General Survey	Postal	**Yes**	**Yes**
2008 Place Survey	Postal	**Yes**	**Yes**
2010 Citizenship Survey	Face-to-face	**No**	**No**
2011 Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker	Face-to-face	**No**	**Yes**
Ipsos MORI face-to-face residents' surveys for individual councils	Face-to-face	**Yes**	**No**
2009/10 British Crime Survey	Face-to-face	**No**	**No**

There is therefore a wealth of trend and comparison data available for postal surveys. Up-to-date data from the 2011 Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker is available for national comparison purposes for face-to-face surveys. Historical face-to-face data for individual authorities is available from Ipsos MORI residents' surveys since the 1970s.

Cognitive testing

Overall, cognitive testing indicates that this question is an effective gauge for understanding general levels of satisfaction with a council. For those who base their answer on their satisfaction with provision of services, most cited visible examples of where the council operates in the community:

- o Keeping the area clean
- o Gritting
- o Rubbish collection / bins
- o Street lighting.

A small number of interviewees also considered the council's involvement in housing and planning and tourist information. Some living in social housing refer to their encounters as tenants rather than drawing on wider experience of council services.

Although interviewees assume that the "local council" referred to the district (and not the county) council, there is confusion as to which authority is responsible for their area. Some wrongly assume that their council is based in the nearest or largest town. For clarification, it is felt that it would be useful if the question cited the relevant council. On page 88 we discuss in more detail how to deal with this question in two tier areas and issues around defining different council responsibilities.

The quality of the question as a measure of satisfaction with the council

The question used in local authority face-to-face surveys has tended to be:

'Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way the council is running the area?'

The question wording in the postal 2003/4 and 2006/07 BVPI general surveys was slightly different:

'Taking everything into account, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way the authority runs things?'

The Place Survey adopted a slightly modified form of question:

'And now taking everything into account, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way [name of Council] runs things?'

The reason the BVPI and Place Surveys added the expression *'(and now) taking everything into account ...'* was that the question followed information about council functions and questions about specific services. This question therefore effectively wrapped up the issue of satisfaction with the council and its services. This wording is unlikely to affect responses significantly.

Potentially of more relevance is whether the name of the council should be included in the question as applied in the Place Survey. For the most part this has not been considered necessary because most surveys in which the question is asked, with appropriate branding, are about a specific authority. But there is a school of thought that the opportunity should be taken to reinforce this by naming the council in the question.

The wording of this question did not emerge as an issue in Ipsos MORI's 2007 cognitive research commissioned by DCLG as part of its preparations for the Place Survey. Nor has it been reported by interviewers in the hundreds of face-to-face surveys where this question has been included.

This is not to say that responses to the question should be taken at face value. Much work has taken place on this issue, notably editions of Ipsos MORI's *'Frontiers of Performance'* which identified how exogenous factors impact on perceptions of councils, notably deprivation and ethnic fractionalisation.

The question in practice – what local authorities use

Based on examples of recent council surveys submitted to us as part of the review, there is a high degree of interest in understanding levels of overall satisfaction with the organisation. Many view this area as a priority and there is interest in being able to track levels of satisfaction over time. As such, some authorities have retained the exact wording of the 2008 Place Survey and it often features as the opening question in residents' surveys.

Several examples of surveys indicate that councils are also keen to recognise how residents feel about individual services areas. Questionnaires tend to incorporate the high level question from the original Place Survey first, followed by a list to assess satisfaction with specific council services (for example, education provision, waste disposal, library facilities). In a minority of cases, the overall question comes second. We do not know what the impact of putting overall satisfaction in front of service specific satisfaction questions would be in individual cases, but there is no obvious reason why it should affect the answers to service specific questions that follow.

Question order

This is a very important issue. We know from our research that the question may engender a different response if asked after questions or information about the range of council activities. This will often be a more positive response but this is not necessarily the case. This has been tested by asking the question more than once in a face-to-face questionnaire – once at or near the beginning and again towards the end. It is because of the potential for responses to be affected by other questions, and the importance of maintaining comparability between surveys, that Ipsos MORI places the question whenever possible at or near the start of face-to-face questionnaires.

The national postal surveys have, however, taken a different approach. The BVPI General Survey and the Place Survey placed the question in the latter part of the questionnaire *after* a bank of questions about local government activities.

Which position is adopted is less important than that consistency is applied. There is an obvious advantage of asking the question at the start of the questionnaire in terms of obtaining less biased data. We would argue for this from the methodological point of view.

If, on the other hand, postal methodologies are to be adopted, and comparisons are to be made with previous national surveys, then it can be argued that the question should again be placed at the end of the bank of questions about local government services and activities. But it is one thing to do this when an identical questionnaire is being used by all local

authorities. It is quite another thing when different questionnaires are being adopted by each local authority. The nature of those preceding questions will vary from survey to survey. They will therefore affect the response to the question about satisfaction with the council in different ways.

On balance we recommend that the question be asked at the beginning of the questionnaire, as the second to the question about satisfaction with the local area. Overall satisfaction at the start at least gives you comparability across authorities, otherwise one would not know if differences in levels of satisfaction across areas are due to question order or "real" differences.

Effective discriminator between local authority areas

The question provides a good discriminator between local authority areas, with ratings of satisfaction in the Place Survey varying from 75% in Wandsworth Borough Council to 22% in Oldham Borough Council (combining 'very satisfied' with 'fairly satisfied' to create an overall 'satisfied' percentage). The question also discriminates well between demographic groups. Higher satisfaction is found, for example, among older residents and higher social grades.

Conclusion

The purpose of this question is to monitor overall attitudes to local authorities. It is regarded as perhaps the most important perceptual indicator of a council's corporate health. It not only engenders information in its own right, it contextualises and helps understanding of the answers to wider issues. There is much local level trend data and national comparative data for both self-completion and face-to-face surveys, to enable responses to be interpreted effectively. This is therefore an important question to include in a core benchmarking set for local government.

We recommend a change in practice from that adopted for the national BVPI and Place Surveys, where a standard questionnaire was adopted. Because residents' surveys will vary in their content, we have concluded that the balance of advantage lies with this question being towards the beginning of the questionnaire, as the second to the question about satisfaction with the local area. This will have the drawback of meaning that the data generated will not be broadly comparable with the national postal surveys, but it will ensure that new data will be methodologically more robust.

Value for money

Agreement that the local council provides value for money (not a national indicator)

Residents' perceptions about how well their local authority provides good value for money is a key driver of overall satisfaction with the council. Perceived value for money has been explored in a number of ways in residents' surveys. In Ipsos MORI face-to-face surveys, the question has generally been: *'To what extent do you agree or disagree that the council gives good value for money?'* A five-point Likert scale is provided for responses: strongly agree, tend to agree, neither agree nor disagree, tend to disagree, and strongly disagree.

No question on value for money was asked in the postal 2003/04 BVPI General Survey, although it was included in a bank of possible additional questions. The issue was included in the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey when the question used was: *'To what extent do you think that ... my council provides good value for money?* A four-point scale (not the five-point Likert scale used in Ipsos MORI surveys) was applied for responses: a great deal, to some extent, not very much, and not at all; a 'don't know' option was also provided.

A question was also included in the 2008 Place Survey, this time using the same wording as used in Ipsos MORI residents' surveys with the same five-point Likert scale for responses.

This was not a national indicator in the Place Survey.

Usage and availability of trend data

There are therefore a number of sources of trend and comparison data.

Survey	Methodology	Included data on this topic	
		Authority-specific trend data	National data
2003/04 BVPI General Survey	Postal (mainly)	**No**	**No**
2006/07 BVPI General Survey	Postal	**Yes***	**Yes***
2008 Place Survey	Postal	**Yes**	**Yes**
2010 Citizenship Survey	Face-to-face	**No**	**No**
2011 Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker	Face-to-face	**No**	**Yes**
Ipsos MORI face-to-face residents' surveys for individual councils	Face-to-face	**Yes**	**No**
2009/10 British Crime Survey	Face-to-face	**No**	**No**

* Different question used

Trend and national comparison data for postal surveys is available from the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey for the *'To what extent do you think that ...'* question with the four-point response scale. It is available for postal surveys from the 2008 Place Survey for the '*Agree/disagree'* question with the five-point response scale.

For face-to-face surveys, trend data for the *'Agree/disagree'* question is available from Ipsos MORI residents' surveys from the 1970s, and up-to-date comparison data for that question is available from the face-to-face Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker.

Cognitive testing

Interviewees view this question as important and wish to air a viewpoint and avoid selecting the "don't know" box. Despite some difficulty in answering the question, this evidence suggests that this is an area worthy of further investigation.

> *I don't really know the answer, but I want to put something*

The first phase of cognitive testing indicated that interviewees find this question difficult to answer. This is predominantly because they struggle how to assess "value for money" and to have an understanding as to which criteria should be considered, and how councils spend the public's money via Council Tax. The issue is even more problematic for those who do not make Council Tax contributions. In general, people do not feel they know enough about

budgets and council spend and general answers are hard to provide because opinion is likely to be limited to an individual's experience with specific service areas. There is a general absence of knowledge as to what the council does, as the following verbatim comment illustrates:

> *It's a hard question to answer, you don't really see your money, you don't know where it is going and you can only base it (your answer) on things you see*

For those able to cite instances of relevant service provision, most typically, tangible and visible examples are considered such as: the upkeep of roads, emptying bins and clean streets.

In the second phase of cognitive testing we sought to give respondents reassurance that they did not need to know all of the council's activities in order to give a general assessment of value for money. The following preamble was tested:

> *In considering the next question, please think about the range of services [name of council] provides to the community as a whole, as well as the services your household uses. It does not matter if you do not know all of the services [name of council] provides to the community. We would like your general opinion.*

The above preamble was felt to be useful in addressing some of the issues described above. It was commented that it "almost acts as a disclaimer," providing respondents with the confidence to answer the question.

The quality of the question as a measure of councils' perceived value for money

No concerns about the proposed value for money question wording emerged from Ipsos MORI's 2007 cognitive research commissioned by DCLG as part of its preparations for the Place Survey. We do know, however, that residents' understanding of local government finance is generally very hazy indeed. When asked what they think the budget might be of their local authority, few residents are anywhere near, most guessing a small fraction of the true amount. This encapsulates the importance of good communications: how can people decide if their council offers good value for money if they do not know the full range of services it manages and responsibilities it has[50]. Yet, they will still have a perception of whether their council provides value for money, from their own experience of council services, their contact with council staff, the experiences of their family and friends, from the media, or from the council's own communications. In other words it is an important part of the image which residents have of their local authority.

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[50] *cf 'People, Perceptions and Place', Ipsos MORI, 2009*

The question in practice – what local authorities use

Based on the evidence from examples of current surveys sent to us for inclusion in this review, councils consider understanding perceptions of value for money as a priority. Amongst councils that conduct regular residents' panels, questions concerning value for money often feature amongst a small handful of other questions that are used to benchmark performance.

In general residents' surveys, typically questions around value for money reflect the wording used in the 2006/07 BVPI survey (or a slight variation of it). However, there are examples of some surveys offering a greater level of detail, for example;

Taking into consideration that only 12% of your council tax is given to X Borough Council…do you think that X Borough Council provides value for money?

Yet typically, this level of detail is omitted. There is a general tendency for all questions investigating value for money to be placed towards the end of individual local authority questionnaires.

Question order

In contrast, the value for money question has generally been placed within a bank of attitudinal statements in the middle part of national questionnaires, including in the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey and the 2008 Place Survey. There is no direct evidence about the impact of question order on this question. Respondents will be influenced, however, by what has preceded the question. For example, respondents may be more favourably disposed to an authority's value for money after being reminded of its breadth of responsibilities. There is therefore a case for placing this question relatively early in a questionnaire so that it is less liable to affected by the rest of the questionnaire.

Effective discriminator between local authority areas

As our previous analysis shows, agreement with value for money follows satisfaction with the council overall.   Similarly, the question provides a good discriminator between local authority areas, the percentage of residents perceiving good value for money in the 2008 Place Survey varying from 72% in the London Borough of Wandsworth to 16% in Oldham Borough Council. The question also discriminates between demographic groups, with older residents and those in higher social grades feeling most positively about the issue.

Conclusion

The purpose of this question is to establish residents' broad perception of their council's value for money. It is one of the most important image statements in that it impacts significantly on perceptions of the council as a whole. Value for money is a key driver of reputation among local residents, second only to perceived quality of the council's services. It

therefore not only engenders information in its own right, it contextualises and helps understanding the answers to wider issues. There is much local-level trend data and national comparative data for both self-completion and face-to-face surveys, to enable responses to be interpreted effectively. It is therefore a good question to include in a core set of benchmarking questions for local government.

We would not have a strong view on whether the question adopted in the 2006/07 BVPI general survey or the 2008 Place Survey should be adopted. But on balance, we have concluded that the latter should be recommended, augmented by the cognitively tested preamble. It is the most recently used, it coincides with the question adopted by Ipsos MORI in face-to-face surveys including the Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker, and it has the most trend data available.

Recommendation

We recommend the following wording along with the tested preamble, and suggest the question is placed third in the core benchmarking set.

In considering the next question, please think about the range of services [name of council] provides to the community as a whole, as well as the services your household uses. It does not matter if you do not know all of the services [name of council] provides to the community. We would like your general opinion.

'To what extent do you agree or disagree that [name of council] provides value for money?'

Response codes:
Strongly agree
Tend to agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Tend to disagree
Strongly disagree
Don't know

Informed about the council

Extent to which residents feel informed about the council's activities (not a national indicator)

The core question which has been used regularly in local authorities' residents' surveys is: '*Overall, how well-informed do you think your local council keeps residents about the services and benefits it provides?*' This is the wording used in face-to-face Ipsos MORI

surveys since the 1970s. The same wording was also used in both the 2003/04 and 2006/07 BVPI General Surveys. A four-point response scale was provided: very well informed, fairly well informed, not very well informed, and not well informed at all.

The question was excluded from the 2008 Place Survey and it is not therefore a national indicator, although a similar (but clearly different) question was asked as part of a bank of questions about 'being informed', as follows: *'Overall, how well informed do you feel about local public services?'*

Usage and availability of trend data

Research points to a significant relationship between the effectiveness of a council's communications and residents' satisfaction with the council. This was described in 'Connecting with Communities'[51] and in a range of subsequent research[52]. In BVPI findings in London, for example, Ipsos MORI found a correlation coefficient of 0.7 between residents 'feeling informed' and being satisfied with the way the council runs the area. This question is therefore important as an indicator of the effectiveness of council communications and as being one of the most important drivers of reputation among local residents.

Survey	Methodology	Included data on this topic	
		Authority-specific trend data	National data
2003/04 BVPI General Survey	Postal (mainly)	Yes	Yes
2006/07 BVPI General Survey	Postal	Yes	Yes
2008 Place Survey	Postal	Yes	Yes
2010 Citizenship Survey	Face-to-face	No	No
2011 Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker	Face-to-face	No	Yes
Ipsos MORI face-to-face residents' surveys for individual councils	Face-to-face	Yes	No
2009/10 British Crime Survey	Face-to-face	No	No

There is a wealth of trend and comparison data available for postal surveys from the BVPI General Surveys; contextual data is also available from the postal 2008 Place Survey for the different question asked, as above. Up-to-date data from the 2011 Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker results are available at a national level for face-to-face

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[51] *'Connecting with Communities', ODPM, Audit Commission, IDeA, LGA, MORI, 2002.*
[52] *Notably 'People, Perceptions and Place', Ipsos MORI, 2009*

surveys. Historical face-to-face data for individual authorities is available from Ipsos MORI surveys since the 1970s.

Cognitive testing

Interviewees were able to answer this question with relative ease and identify how satisfied they felt with general communications from their council.

As with previous questions, the most "visible" services are typically recalled; for example waste collection, rubbish disposal, road works. However, on occasion, interviewees refer to services not administered by a council. There is also some indication that interviewees base their answer on how informed they feel about community facilities (for example, Mother and Toddler groups), rather than service-specific communications.

In the first phase of cognitive testing, there was some indication that the term "*benefits*" is interpreted in a very narrow sense (i.e. state or welfare benefits or pensions even); whilst this is not strictly speaking incorrect, it suggests that the standard question is not always understood as querying the wider benefits the council provides to the whole area. Therefore, in the second phase of cognitive testing, we tested two alternative definitions of "*benefits*" to emphasise wider community benefits. These are:

a) *By benefits we mean the positive impact it might have on the local area.*

b) *By benefits we mean the positive things it does for the local area.*

Definition b) was preferred by respondents for a number of reasons. *"Positive things"* is understood as referring to tangible things such as services and buildings, e.g. schools. By contrast, *"positive impact"* is felt to relate to more ephemeral but larger scale changes such as increased housing (e.g. housing developments). Definition b) is also considered to be easier to consider as it is interpreted as referring to the present whereas definition a) is understood to be referring to possible future delivery (given the wording "positive impact it might have"). That most respondents preferred b) does not fully address the problem of accurately defining the word *"benefits".* This is because the "positive things" mentioned at definition b) are largely interpreted as services or facilities provided. Therefore, the preferred definition seeks to reinforce the council as primarily a provider of services and facilities, a model which is becoming outdated.

The quality of the question as a measure of 'being informed' by the council

The question wording has been tried and tested over the years and is well-established. That is not to say it provides complete information about a council's communications of course. It can be used effectively as part of a bank of questions about specific aspects of communications for example paying bills, electoral arrangements, getting involved, local decision-making and many other areas, along with other questions asking from which media residents get their information, and the efficacy of each medium.

This was the approach adopted in the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey when the question was the final part of a question which explored ten different aspects of 'being informed', before asking respondents about how they received their information. Although a more general question about 'public' rather than 'council' services was asked in the 2008 Place Survey, this again was the final part of a bank of questions about specific aspects of 'being informed'.

Overall, this is a well-established question with a wealth of trend data.

The question in practice – what local authorities use

Of the authorities that submitted examples of their questionnaires, most were interested in exploring the extent to which residents felt well informed. Many view this as a priority. One borough council for example, cited this area as one of three which they would like to be able to benchmark in the future.

Across authorities, the wording of the question varies slightly: some use the phrasing of the Place Survey, others the BVPI General Survey. Although most councils seek to obtain a high level view about perceived quality of communications, a small number of authorities look to explore the provision of information in specific areas. Five out of sixty nine questions, for example, in one collaborative citizen's panel questionnaire are focused on general council communications, but additional questions also explore communications disseminated by the Police.

One County Council offers another slight variation and asks residents to respond to the statement; "I know what the County Council does".

Question order

The question has generally been placed in the middle part of questionnaires, as part of a bank of questions about communications. In the 2003/04 BVPI General Survey it was asked after information and questions about council services, but before the question on overall satisfaction with the council. In the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey, it also followed detailed questions about services but this time it also followed the question on overall satisfaction with the council.

As discussed elsewhere, we have concluded that the question on overall satisfaction with the council should always appear at or towards the beginning of residents' survey questionnaires. The question on 'being informed' must inevitably therefore be placed somewhere after that question, but not necessarily immediately following it. It seems to us to be reasonable for it to form part of a bank of questions about specific aspects of information, and its position in a questionnaire is not as critical as with some other questions. We would, however, recommend that, as a *general* question, it should precede questions about *specific* aspects of communications so that a 'top of mind' response is obtained.

Effective discriminator between local authority areas

The question provides a good discriminator between local authority areas, the proportion who felt 'well-informed' (combining 'fairly well-informed with 'very well-informed') in the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey varying from 70% in the City of London and 65% in Rushcliffe Borough Council (Nottinghamshire) to 25% in Northampton Borough Council. The question also discriminates well between demographic groups, which is particularly important in analysing the effectiveness of communications and where future efforts should be placed. Older residents feel most informed, along with higher social grades. White residents feel more informed than residents from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups.

Conclusion

The purpose of this question is to identify how well residents feel they are informed about the council's services and other benefits, and to inform policy on future communications and relationships with the media. It not only engenders information in its own right, it contextualises and helps understanding the answers to wider issues, in particular relating to residents' overall satisfaction with the council. The question can follow questions on satisfaction with place and council, but ideally it should precede questions about specific aspects of 'being informed'. There is much local level trend data and national comparative data for both self-completion and face-to-face surveys, to enable responses to be interpreted effectively. It is therefore a good question to include in a core set of benchmarking questions for local government. The question would be considerably enhanced by a clarification of "benefits" to emphasis wider community benefits rather than state or welfare benefits received by individuals.

Recommendation

We recommend this is included in the second tier of a core set of questions for local government. We have included the recommendation that there is a second tier of questions in recognition that some questions will be a priority for most, but not all, councils.

We recommend the tried and tested wording which is now well-established from face-to-face residents' surveys and the postal BVPI General Surveys.

We also recommend that councils add a definition of '*benefits'* to clarify that it relates to wider community benefits.

The positioning of this question is not critical, although it should be placed before any more detailed questions about communications.

> *Overall, how well informed do you think [name of council] keeps residents about the services and benefits it provides?'*
>
> Response codes:
> Very well informed
> Fairly well informed
> Not very well informed
> Not well informed at all
> Don't know

Community identity

Strength of belonging to immediate neighbourhood (NI 2)

This issue has had an important place in a number of key policy initiatives including decentralisation and localism, community resilience, and place/community identity.

The purpose of this question, outside the context of the local government review described below, is to help to monitor how strong and cohesive communities might be, and hence resilient to challenges and crisis. As the Place Survey Manual put it, the object is to establish *'thriving places, in which a fear of difference is replaced by a shared set of values and a shared sense of purpose and belonging. A sense of belonging to one's neighbourhood is therefore a key indicator of a cohesive society.'*

The core question which has been used regularly in national surveys, as well as local authorities' own residents' surveys, is as follows, albeit with some modifications discussed below: *'How strongly do you feel you belong to your immediate neighbourhood?'*

A four-point response has been used: Very strongly, fairly strongly, not very strongly, not at all strongly (plus 'don't know').

Usage and availability of trend data

Community identity has played an important role in a number of reviews of local government since the War, culminating in the reviews of the early 1990s undertaken by the Local Government Commission for England. Ipsos MORI research on community identity differentiated between 'affective community' (geographical sense of identity) and 'effective community' (where in practical terms one looks for work, shopping, leisure etc)[53]. Quantitative and qualitative research from all two-tier local authority areas is available from that time.

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[53] *'In Search of Community Identity', Joseph Rowntree/MORI, 1996*

A sense of belonging to a neighbourhood is an example of 'affective community' and questions have typically been asked about it as part of a bank of questions seeking how much respondents felt they belonged to four geographical areas – their neighbourhood or village, their town or nearest town, their district council area and their county council area. This line of questioning was conducted by councils outside the metropolitan areas in the early 1990s and in 2003/04 in the North-East, North-West and Yorkshire and Humberside to form part of the review of local government in the context of the proposals for regional governance. The issue of affective community was explored again in some areas in 2006/07 when authorities were invited to consider the establishment of unitary councils in their areas, leading to the creation of five new county-based, and four new sub-county, unitary councils. More recently, residents' identity within their neighbourhood has been explored because of the increased appreciation of the importance of a sense of place for effective local governance.

The issue was not included in either of the BVPI General Surveys. But it was explored in the cognitive research undertaken in advance of the 2008 postal Place Survey. In that research, the question wording was *'How strongly do you feel you belong to your local area?'* The cognitive interviews did not identify any specific problems with the interpretation of this question. However, in the Place Survey itself, the wording was brought into line with the form previously used in DCLG's Citizenship Survey, i.e. the use of 'neighbourhood'. It was designated as a Place Survey National Indicator (NI 2). The issue is not included in Ipsos MORI's face-to-face Local Government Reputation Tracker.

Survey	Methodology	Included data on this topic	
		Authority-specific trend data	National data
2003/04 BVPI General Survey	Postal (mainly)	No	No
2006/07 BVPI General Survey	Postal	No	No
2008 Place Survey	Postal	Yes	Yes
2010 Citizenship Survey	Face-to-face	No	Yes
2011 Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker	Face-to-face	No	No
Ipsos MORI face-to-face residents' surveys in connection with local government reviews	Face-to-face	Yes	Yes
2009/10 British Crime Survey	Face-to-face	No	No

There is a great deal of data over the years on this issue – using the postal methodology in the Place Survey, providing trends for individual councils, and face-to-face methodologies in the various tranches of local government review and the recurring Citizenship Surveys providing national level data.

Cognitive testing

Whilst a small number of interviewees do not differentiate between "immediate neighbourhood" and "local area", overall it is felt that this question refers to a narrow radius. Typically "immediate neighbourhood" is understood as fundamentally comprising of one's residence and street, for example; "my cul-de-sac, the street behind and the local shops". There is some indication that younger people feel that the question refers to a slightly more extensive area, whereas for older residents "neighbourhood" resonates with the term "neighbour" which is understood as referring to a small number of people in close proximity to their home.

Common themes emerge when assessing "strength of belonging" and tend to be centred on the broad concept of identification with an area. Criteria included:

  o the length of time respondents had lived in an area
  o how many people they knew / familiarity with them
  o multi-generational experiences; watching young people grow up and have children of their own
  o levels of participation in community / group activities

Interestingly, one young black man interpreted "strength of belonging" as having an aspirational quality; e.g. "do you meet the criteria to be able to live in this area?"

Despite some disparity in interpretation, the cognitive testing indicates that there is largely similar understanding of the question and it is an appropriate measure for gauging levels of satisfaction on a narrower area.

 The quality of NI 2 as a measure of identity with the local neighbourhood

The question has stood the test of time. There was discussion at the time of the cognitive research in preparation for the Place Survey of replacing the word 'neighbourhood' with 'local area'. This would have the advantage of using an expression which is consistent with other questions including satisfaction with local area (NI 1), discussed elsewhere. However, the balance of advantage, at that time, was felt to be maintaining the form of words used in previous research in order to facilitate direct comparison, contextualisation and trends.

Nevertheless, some minor changes in wording have been used. Local government review research referred to '*this* neighbourhood'. The Place Survey referred to '*your immediate* neighbourhood', which was the form of words used in the Citizenship Surveys. The word 'neighbourhood' was not defined, but in the local government review surveys, respondents in rural areas were asked about their 'village or nearest village' rather than their 'neighbourhood'.

However, we would suggest, for internal consistency within the benchmark question set, that the term "local area" (along with the corresponding definition) is applied to this question rather than referring to "immediate neighbourhood".

The question in practice – what local authorities use

A review of the residents' surveys submitted for consideration in this review suggests that perceptions of belonging are not consistently sought. This is particularly true of councils who prefer to focus on getting a detailed understanding about levels of service satisfaction. However, a small number of councils do explore this area and retain the original wording of the 2008 Place Survey. For them, it is an area which provides indication into "community spirit", which could feed into policy work around building community resilience and increasing civic participation.

Question order

We do not regard its place in the questionnaire to be as critical for this question as for some other questions, although we would suggest that the question is asked before other more detailed questions about the strength of local communities such as trusting neighbours.

Effective discriminator between areas

Research has shown that there is usually a hierarchy in residents' sense of belonging to various geographical areas. Attachment is generally highest with the most local areas (local village or neighbourhood), and progressively lower with district council area and then county council area.

This question has always acted as a very good discriminator between areas. In the Place Survey the percentage feeling they belonged to their immediate neighbourhood very or fairly strongly varied from 75% in Eden district (in Cumbria) and 74% in Derbyshire Dales and South Hams (in Devon) districts – all mainly very rural districts – to 42% in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and 44% in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham and Reading Borough Council.

Overall, the postal Place Survey found that 59% felt a strong attachment to their immediate neighbourhood. This was lower than found in the face-to-face Citizenship Survey (because of the provision of a 'don't know option'), where the finding was 76%, more in line with findings in other face-to-face research. Subgroup-analysis of the Citizenship Survey shows that

people in the oldest age group, aged 75 or more, were more than twice as likely as those in the youngest age group, aged 16-24 years, to have reported a very strong sense of belonging to their neighbourhood (54% compared with 25%). There were also differences by ethnicity. Asian groups overall were more likely than other ethnic groups to feel a strong sense of belonging to their neighbourhood. Feelings of belonging were also stronger among those in lower skilled work.

Conclusion

The purpose of including a question about strength of belonging is multiple. It feeds into a number of policy areas such as localism, the big society and place shaping. It is therefore highly useful on a number of fronts and a good question to include in a core set of benchmarking questions for local government.

Recommendation

The wording from the Place Survey but modified to refer to 'local area' rather than 'immediate neighbourhood', is recommended to be included in the second tier of a core set of questions for local government.

The positioning of this question is not critical although it should be placed before any more detailed questions about a sense of community or belonging.

'How strongly do you feel you belong to your local area?'

Response codes:
Very strongly
Fairly strongly
Not very strongly
Not at all strongly
Don't know

Community Safety

How safe people feel when outside in their local area (a) during the day and (b) after dark (not a national indicator)

The core questions which have been used regularly in the British Crime Survey are:

'How safe do you feel walking alone <u>in this area</u> during the day? Would you say you feel very safe, fairly safe, a bit unsafe or very unsafe?'

How safe do you feel walking alone <u>in this area</u> after dark? Would you say you feel very safe, fairly safe, a bit unsafe or very unsafe?

(In both cases, respondents who never went out alone were asked how *would* they feel).

Usage and availability of trend data

National data is available from the national British Crime Survey which has been carried out since 1982 and now reports annually. Although data from the survey is not available for individual local authorities, demographic sub-analysis is available.

The questions were not asked in BVPI General Surveys, although in 2006/07 respondents were asked the extent to which they thought that their council was working to make the area safer.

Survey	Methodology	Included data on this topic	
		Authority-specific trend data	**National data**
2003/04 BVPI General Survey	Postal (mainly)	**No**	**No**
2006/07 BVPI General Survey	Postal	**No**	**No**
2008 Place Survey	Postal	**Yes**	**Yes**
2010 Citizenship Survey	Face-to-face	**No**	**Yes, refers to neighbourhood**
2011 Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker	Face-to-face	**No**	**No**
Ipsos MORI face-to-face residents' surveys for individual councils	Face-to-face	**Yes**	**No**
2009/10 British Crime Survey	Face-to-face	**No**	**Yes**

In cognitive research in advance of the 2008 Place Survey, a slightly different question was asked from that in the British Crime Survey, with different response options: '*How safe or unsafe do you feel when outside in your local area during the day*' and '*How safe or unsafe do you feel when outside in your local area after dark?*' The main difference was that 'walking alone in this area' as used in BCS was replaced by 'when outside in your local area'. A fifth response option was added: neither safe nor unsafe. No negative feedback emerged from the cognitive research and this question wording was included in the Place Survey itself. It was not designated a national Place Survey indicator, although a number of other indicators were concerned with community safety.

Another difference was that in the Place Survey, *"your local area"* was not clarified but was assumed to be defined as per the beginning of the survey (15 – 20 minutes walking distance from your home). Similarly, in the British Crime Survey, *"this area"* was not clarified but was assumed to be defined as per the beginning of the survey as *"15 minutes walk from here".*

The Citizenship Survey includes only the 'after dark' question, not the 'during the day' one. The question wording in the Citizenship Survey is closer to the British Crime Survey and uses the same four response options but covers yet another different geographical area: *'And how safe would you feel walking alone in this neighbourhood during after dark?'*

Some face-to-face data, using the same question as used in the British Crime Survey, is also available from Ipsos MORI surveys for individual local authorities. The question is not included in the Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker.

Cognitive testing

Results of cognitive testing for this review reveal that this question is clearly understood and interviewees are able to answer with ease. There is some indication that most interpret the question as exploring perceived safety when walking alone. Interviewees tend to base their answer on perceived likelihood of encountering criminal activity; however, the question was also interpreted as referring to road safety.

At phase two, we tested a definition of 'local area' as there is evidence to suggest that perceived safety varies according to whether the question refers to a specific vicinity (for example, the local neighbourhood as opposed to town centre).The two definitions are:

a) *By this area, I mean within about a 15 minute walk from here.*

b) *Please consider your local area to be the area within 15-20 minutes walking distance from your home.*

Overall, a definition of local area is felt to be needed – without it, some respondents would consider local area as the immediate neighbourhood, others the borough or town as a whole. The majority view is that explicit reference to the distance from "your home" is preferable to "from here" which is favoured by the British Crime Survey.   The latter is felt to be too

ambiguous, particularly if the respondent is answering the question whilst travelling, at their workplace or in-street. In Clitheroe (the location of ten of the interviews), the different definitions of local area e.g. '"15 minutes walk from here" and "15-20 minutes walking distance from your home" were felt to make minimal difference to respondents' judgements. Residents felt that in an additional 5 minutes walk they were unlikely to encounter any dramatic change in their views of community safety. However, in Southwark (inner London) it was felt by a majority of the respondents that the additional 5 minutes could have a major impact on perceptions of safety. Some suggested that they would never walk an additional 5 minutes in a particular direction and so, as a result, would feel less safe after dark. Others commented that a further 5 minutes afield would mean that would enter an area that was understood to be less safe.

"An extra 5 minutes and I'd be in Elephant and Castle which I don't know at all"

Assuming there is nothing atypical about Southwark then the definition of local area will make a difference to how respondents consider and answer questions about community safety in inner city areas. It is therefore, important to decide upon an area definition across the sector to allow for sensible benchmarking.

The quality of the question as a measure of feelings of safety in the local area

The question wording adopted for the British Crime Survey is broadly similar to that used elsewhere. However, the different response options mean that the data is not comparable with that from the Place Survey, quite apart from the fact that they use different methodologies. The lack of comparability between the response codes used in the postal Place Survey and the two major face-to-face surveys, Citizenship and British Crime, is reflected in the findings from the surveys. The postal 2008 Place Survey, which includes a 'neither /nor' response option, shows that 51% feel very or fairly safe after dark. According to the 2010 face-to-face Citizenship Survey, where there was no 'neither/nor' response option, the respective figure was 74%.

The advantage of using the Place Survey question wording and response options within the set of LGA benchmarking questions is that trend information is available for individual authorities who are using a postal methodology. The advantage of adopting the British Crime Survey form of words is that robust and long-term face-to-face national data is available for authorities using a face-to-face methodology.

On balance, we have recommended the use of the question wording used in the 2008 Place Surveys rather than the major national face-to-face surveys. Again, this would provide better internal consistency throughout the questionnaire and would allow councils to use Place Survey trend data if they choose to use postal methods in future surveys.

The question in practice – what local authorities use

An evaluation of questionnaires submitted by local authorities suggests that some councils view understanding perceptions of safety as a priority. The phrasing of questions varies; whilst some retain the wording of the Place Survey, other councils alter the wording or explore the issue as a subsection of another topic (for example, understanding satisfaction).

Some councils are keen to understand comparative perceptions of safety between different areas. In one specific example, an authority's residents' survey incorporates two separate questions (mirroring the wording of the former Place Survey) but asks residents to make a separate judgement for the "local area" and "city centre".

There is some interest in understanding residents' perception of crime over time. One district council includes a question asking whether crime has increased or decreased over the last 12 months. Based on the feedback from other authorities, such examples are however, atypical.

Question order

The questions are placed towards the beginning of the face-to-face British Crime Survey and Citizenship Survey, and in the latter part of the postal Place Survey. We have concluded that the questions' position in the questionnaire is not as critical as for some other questions under consideration. However, we recommend that the questions should precede, as far as possible, further detailed questions about community safety.

Effective discriminator between local authority areas

The questions provide a good discriminator between local authority areas. According to the Place Survey, 97% of residents feel safe when outside in their local area during the day in Craven district (North Yorkshire), compared with 70% in the London Borough of Newham. After dark, 83% feel safe in the City of London and 81% in South Hams district (Devon) compared with 27% in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. The questions also discriminate well between demographic groups. The 2010 Citizenship Survey illustrated that fewer women than men felt safe after dark (64% compared with 85%). Generally older people, people with a long term illness or disability, and certain Asian ethnic groups (Indian and Pakistani), were also less likely than average to feel safe.

Conclusion

The purpose of these questions is to enable local authorities and their partners to monitor people's sense of security when outside and to devise strategies for dealing with residents feeling unsafe. It is a key role for councils and it is therefore a good question for including in a core set of local government perceptual measures.

Recommendation

The wording from the 2008 Place Survey is recommended to be included in the second tier of a core set of questions for local government. However, the local area should be defined clearly. For internal consistency, we recommend the Place Survey definition of '*within 15-20 minutes walking distance from your home.*'   Question order is not key but the questions should ideally precede more detailed exploration of community safety and anti-social behaviour issues.

When answering, please consider your local area to be the area within 15-20 minutes walking distance from your home.

How safe or unsafe do you feel when outside in your local area <u>after dark</u>/when outside in your local area <u>during the day</u>? Would you say you feel...very safe, fairly safe, neither safe nor unsafe, fairly unsafe, very unsafe? (Don't know to be included if postal survey is employed).

Anti-social behaviour

The extent to which a range of anti-social behaviours is perceived to be a problem in the area (NI 41[54]).

This issue was tested in an almost identical way in the 2003/04 and 2006/07 BVPI General Surveys, the 2008 Place Survey – all postal – and the face-to-face British Crime Survey and some individual face-to-face residents' surveys. It was not included in either the 2010 Citizenship Survey or the Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker.

The core question which has been used in the British Crime Survey is as follows: *'For the following things I read out, can you tell me how much of a problem they are in your local area. By your local area, I mean within 15 minutes walk from here.'*

a) *Noisy neighbours or loud parties.*
b) *Teenagers hanging around the streets.*
c) *Rubbish or litter lying around.*
d) *Vandalism, graffiti and other deliberate damage to property or vehicles.*
e) *People using or dealing drugs.*
f) *People being drunk or rowdy in public places (NI 41).*
g) *Abandoned or burnt out cars.*

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[54] *The national indicator NI 41 specifically relates to the measure of 'people being drunk or rowdy in public places'.*

In the Place Survey 2008 the question wording changed slightly for the postal self-completion questionnaire: *'Thinking about this local area, how much of a problem do you think each of the following are…'*

A four-point response scale has been adopted: a very big problem, a fairly big problem, not a very big problem and not a problem at all, plus no opinion[55].

Usage and availability of trend data

Questions in the other surveys were essentially the same as in the British Crime Survey, except for a change in preamble as appropriate to fit into the survey. In addition, Ipsos MORI residents' surveys add 'if at all' after 'in your area' in the main question. The BVPI surveys did not define 'local area' but the Place Survey introduced a similar definition: 'within 15-20 minutes walking distance from your home'.

Survey	Methodology	Included data on this topic	
		Authority-specific trend data	**National data**
2003/04 BVPI General Survey	Postal (mainly)	Yes	Yes
2006/07 BVPI General Survey	Postal	Yes	Yes
2008 Place Survey	Postal	Yes	Yes
2010 Citizenship Survey	Face-to-face	No	No
2011 Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker	Face-to-face	No	No
Ipsos MORI face-to-face residents' surveys for individual councils	Face-to-face	Yes	No
2009/10 British Crime Survey	Face-to-face	No	Yes

There is therefore a wealth of trend and comparison data available for authorities using either a postal methodology or a face-to-face one, although the latter will not be available on an individual authority level for most councils.

Cognitive testing

This question is easily comprehended and interviewees base their answer on their own, and others, experiences. Interviewees comment that the list is fairly comprehensive and covers

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[55] The no opinion code was excluded from calculations for NI 41.

the key areas of concern although dog fouling and illegal parking are also considered worthy of investigation.

There is evidence to a certain extent that interviewees consider the prevalence of these issues, rather than the degree of the problem. For example, it was commented that there were large numbers of teenagers loitering in the streets yet respondents were not concerned by their presence. There is also a tendency for respondents to alter their geographical frame of reference when considering each issue. Noisy neighbours, for instance, are felt to be a problem in the street whereas drug dealing might be a problem principally in town centres.

The quality of the question as a measure of perceived anti-social behaviour

The question was tested as part of Ipsos MORI's cognitive research in advance of the 2008 Place Survey. Participants in the cognitive interviews understood the question and had a consistent interpretation of the issues.

As respondents have the opportunity to say that each measure is 'not a problem at all', the use of the expression 'if at all' after 'in your area' (as used by Ipsos MORI in its residents' surveys) may have been considered superfluous and therefore omitted from the questions in all the national surveys. However, without the addition of 'if at all', the question runs the risk of implying that there *is* a problem to some degree in respect to each measure. We would therefore normally propose that this is added to the question, as is the case in Ipsos MORI residents' surveys. But it is not a critical issue and, in this particular case, we would not wish adversely to affect the comparability of data with the national surveys. We are therefore content to propose that the expression is omitted from the question if used in the local government benchmarking set.

Participants in the Place Survey cognitive research had different interpretations of 'local area' for the different parts of the question, regardless of the text preceding it. We therefore propose that local area is defined in a consistent way with other questions in the benchmarking set - that is, *'within 15-20 minutes walking distance from your home'.*

The seven measures of anti-social behaviour listed above are the seven which are used in the Place Survey and the British Crime Survey. The 2003/04 and 2006/07 BVPI General Surveys each added two further measures.

Should councils wish to ask about other anti-social behaviours which are not featured in the seven strand index, we suggest that a new battery of questions is added to accommodate them, rather than add to the existing battery of seven items.

Subject to these considerations, the question generates data which effectively tracks perceptions over time of these aspects of anti-social behaviour.

The question in practice – what local authorities use

Collaborative surveys which are jointly conducted on behalf of the local police force, tend to explore anti-social behaviour in greater detail than those questionnaires disseminated solely by the council. Detailed explorations are likely to list various criminal/anti-social behaviour issues and ask residents to state to what extent they are perceived as a problem in the area and how satisfactorily they are dealt with. Questions tend to incorporate a diverse list of offences which include intimidating behaviour and dog fouling which were not included in the original Place Survey.

Anti-social behaviour does not tend to be explored as a general concept (as opposed to perceived levels of safety); rather questions request residents to be specific about key problem areas. Overall, there is some active interest in exploring this area, but it is not perceived as a priority across all authorities.

Question order

The question was placed towards the end of the 2003/04 BVPI General Survey and 2008 Place Survey questionnaires but was located towards the start of the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey. We do not consider that question order is as critical with this question as with some others proposed for the benchmarking set. But the issues raised by the question could impact on respondents' general perceptions about the area. The question therefore should certainly not precede more general questions about attitudes to the area, satisfaction with local organisations, or community safety.

Effective discriminator between local authority areas

The question provides a good discriminator between local authority areas. The percentage of respondents who considered each anti-social behaviour measure to be a problem in their area ('very/fairly big'), according to the 2008 Place Survey, varied as follows:

a) Noisy neighbours or loud parties: between 31% in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and 6% in Eden District (Cumbria) and Derbyshire Dales district.
b) Teenagers hanging around the streets: between 70% in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and 17% in the City of London.
c) Rubbish or litter lying around: between 70% in the London Borough of Newham and 16% in Broadland district (Norfolk).
d) Vandalism, graffiti and other deliberate damage to property or vehicles: between 57% in the London Borough of Newham and 11% in Richmondshire district (North Yorkshire).
e) People using or dealing drugs: between 61% in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and 10% in the London Borough of Richmond.
f) People being drunk or rowdy in public places: between 52% in the London Borough of Newham and 9% in South Cambridgeshire district.
g) Abandoned or burnt out cars: between 30% in the London Borough of Newham and 1% in Ribble Valley district (Lancashire).

Conclusion

One of the bank of measures, concerned with people being drunk or rowdy in public places, was identified as a national indicator in the Place Survey (NI 41), with the following objective: '*Activity by local authorities, the police and partner agencies to deliver local alcohol strategies will, in combination with public awareness campaigns, contribute to reducing the overall problem of drunk and rowdy behaviour in local communities.*' In the case of this particular measure, authorities are responsible for the licensing of premises and for securing and designing environments that reduce the likelihood of drunk and rowdy behaviour (e.g. in design and control of the night-time economy, in town-centre management, and by working with transport providers).

In fact, each of the seven measures assists authorities and their partners to work to understand changing perceptions of these aspects of anti-social behaviour. There is much local level trend data and national comparative data for both self-completion and face-to-face interview modes, to enable responses to be interpreted effectively.

Recommendation

We recommend this to be included in a third tier of benchmarking questions. Questions we have recommended for the third tier are those which will be of particular interest to some councils, but not a priority for others.

The wording, now well-established from the Place Survey and British Crime Survey, should include a general explanation that '*local area means within 15-20 minutes' walking distance from your home'.*

This question may impact on respondents general perceptions about the area. It should therefore not precede more general questions about attitudes to the area or community safety.

'Thinking about this local area, how much of a problem do you think each of the following are…? By your local area I mean within 15 – 20 minutes walking distance from your home.'

  a) *Noisy neighbours or loud parties.*
  b) *Teenagers hanging around the streets.*
  c) *Rubbish or litter lying around.*
  d) *Vandalism, graffiti and other deliberate damage to property or vehicles.*
  e) *People using or dealing drugs.*
  f) *People being drunk or rowdy in public places.*
  g) *Abandoned or burnt out cars.*

Response codes:
A very big problem
A fairly big problem
Not a very big problem
Not a problem at all
No opinion

Community cohesion

People from different backgrounds get on well together (NI 1)

There exist a number of tried-and-tested perception-based measures that relate to community cohesion which have previously been collected as national indicators by local government and are regularly used in local authority residents' surveys.

Usage and availability of trend data

One of the most widely used measures is NI 1. This looks at the level of agreement - using a four point scale (*definitely agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree and definitely disagree* plus *don't know, too few, all same*[56]) - with the statement: '*My local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together.*'

Survey	Methodology	Included data on this topic	
		Authority-specific trend data	**National data**
2003/04 BVPI General Survey	Postal (mainly)	**No**	**No**
2006/07 BVPI General Survey	Postal	**No**	**No**
2008 Place Survey	Postal	**Yes**	**Yes**
2010 Citizenship Survey	Face-to-face	**No**	**Yes**
2011 Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker	Face-to-face	**No**	**No**
Ipsos MORI face-to-face residents' surveys for individual councils	Face-to-face	**Yes**	**No**
2009/10 British Crime Survey	Face-to-face	**No**	**No**

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[56] In calculating NI 1, don't know, too few and all the same codes were excluded from the base.

The official description of this indicator states that it aims to measure whether '*the economic and cultural benefits of diversity are experienced by everyone in each community, recognising that this means promoting similar life opportunities for all*[57]'.

As this was previously a national performance indicator, there exists national and local trend data for this question going back to 2006 when it was first made a statutory data requirement of local government through the postally administered BVPI surveys. NI 1 has also been collected via the DCLG's Citizenship Survey. As such, there is also national comparison data for those favouring face-to-face interview-led methodologies for data collection. Therefore, in terms of the availability of local level trend data and national comparative data for both self-completion **and** face-to-face interview modes, NI 1 is good question to retain in a core set for local government – if having trends is considered by a local authority as providing important context for understanding performance.

However, the degree to which NI 1 truly measures cohesion has been contested. Although cognitive testing for the 2008 Place Survey showed that people did not find this a difficult question to answer, it raised queries as to what the data would be used for and why it is asked.

Cognitive testing

The first phase of cognitive testing for this review, we explored reactions to the following question: "*To what extent do you agree or disagree that your local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together?*"

There is an indication that some struggle to answer this question as easily as others, seemingly because it requires thought beyond relaying their personal opinion. Others respond to the question based on how well *they* get on with people of different backgrounds.

There are also various interpretations of the phrase "get on well together". Whilst some interviewees feel that this term refers to the absence of conflict, others feel that it means being actively sociable and friendly (for example, going to each others' houses).

Perhaps more importantly, the dominant interpretation of *"people from different backgrounds"* refers to people of different *ethnic* backgrounds. But some interviewees did consider that this question might also refer to people of different social backgrounds. Given this, it was felt by some that it would be useful to have separate statements referring to examples of individual groups of people from "different backgrounds".

During the second phase of the cognitive testing, we wanted to test two things in relation to NI1. A possible definition of '*getting on together*' and to test whether the generic question about different social backgrounds is understood differently when followed by a specific question on ethnic different backgrounds (as shown below):

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[57] http://www.data4nr.net/resources/948/

a) To what extent do you agree or disagree that your local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together? By getting on well together, we mean living alongside each other with respect.

b) To what extent do you agree or disagree that your local area is a place where people from different <u>ethnic</u> backgrounds get on well together? By getting on well together, we mean living alongside each other with respect.

The definition of "*getting on well together*" was useful. In the main, people claimed it affirmed their understanding of it, although some post-hoc rationalisation is probably involved given the word "respect" prompted a couple of respondents to re-interpret the phrase which they originally understood as an "absence of hate" or "not doing anything wrong".

Out of 10 interviews in phase two, six respondents interpreted statement a) as referring to ethnic differences. Ethnic differences were most top of mind particularly in London. Some respondents also considered social, occupational, educational, cultural and disability differences. However, one respondent only considered these wider social characteristics once they had seen the explicit reference to ethnicity in statement b) and thus re-interpreted statement a) as referring to broader social issues.

An alternative question about community cohesion, taken from the Citizenship Survey, was also cognitively tested at phase two: '*To what extent would you agree or disagree, that people in this neighbourhood pull together to improve the neighbourhood?*' This uses a four point scale (*definitely agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree and definitely disagree* plus *nothing needs improving* and *don't know[58]*).

 This question tested much better than NI1 in that the phrase *"pulling together"* was interpreted consistently (as 'team work' to improve the surrounding area) and has clear resonance with collective action. Examples of collective action included residents' associations, voluntary work, projects to clean up park space, picking up litter, raising issues with the council, petitions. However, the word "neighbourhood" was not interpreted consistently. Some felt it referred to the immediate vicinity around their homes, whereas others felt it referred to a much larger area (e.g. borough-wide). Inserting the word "immediate" before neighbourhood might provide greater clarity. Alternatively and preferably the wording could be changed to refer to the local area - providing internal consistency within the benchmark question set. The definition of local area as '*within 15-20 minutes' walking distance from your home'* could be applied.

We tested both NI1 and the alternative question (*pulling together*) using their four point scales: *definitely agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree and definitely disagree.* Whilst the scale did not produce any negative feedback, it is notable that most other questions we tested provide a mid-point for those who genuinely have no view one way or the other.

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[58] Both the codes don't know and nothing needs improving are excluded from the bases when calculating the results of this question.

There is mixed evidence about whether including/excluding mid-points affects the results:

- Some argue that by omitting mid-points, it forces the genuinely neutral to state a view, but offering a mid-point allows the lazy to avoid thinking.

- Others (including a study by Malhotra, 2009) suggests that "respondents who placed themselves at the mid-point belonged there".

- Others argue that "Neither/nor" is ambiguous as it can mean being generally neutral or having no opinion (i.e. don't know) and is thus flawed.

Our Research Methods Centre suggests that although most mid-pointers are actually saying "don't know" in a face-saving way, rather than having genuinely neutral views, it is important to provide a mid-point for those who feel their views lie in the middle between the extremes. Whether a mid-point should be introduced into the response scale for these two cohesion questions should be carefully considered. It will provide an opportunity for those who really are neutral to have their views reflected and would provide some internal consistency with the other questions being considered by this review. On the other hand, by introducing a mid-point means that we cannot compare with previous Place Survey or Citizenship Survey data.

The quality of the question as a measure of perceived social cohesion

Our analysis of the *2009-10 Citizenship Survey Community Action Topic Report* (published by CLG December 2011)[59] shows that socio-economic group is the strongest demographic factor causing variation in agreement with the statement – with lower socio-economic groups having greater chance of feeling that their local area is a place where people of different backgrounds can get along. However, by far, the strongest overall predictors of people getting on well together are area-based attitudes around respect and **enjoying living in the area** as well as views on diversity.

The Citizenship Survey data[60] also shows that NI 1 is not a particularly strong predictor of community spirit. The attitudinal factors that we found to underpin the concept of community spirit or a sense of community are:

- Trust in many people in their neighbourhood;
- They feel that people pull together to improve the neighbourhood;
- They feel that ethnic differences are respected in their area, and;
- They perceive or experience no racial or religious harassment in the area.

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[59] http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/statistics/citizenshipsurvey200910action

[60] Ibid

The question in practice – what local authorities use

In a few cases, authorities have amended the wording of this measure to make it more specific to the cohesion issues of the local area. For example, one London borough has posed the question: *To what extent do you agree or disagree that people of **different ethnic backgrounds** get on well together?* At a regional level, the Greater London Authority has taken a similar route with the question: *To what extent do you agree or disagree that my neighbourhood has good relations between different ethnic and religious communities?*

At the other extreme, local authorities have augmented NI1 so that it conveys to the respondent that the question is about general community spirit: *Would you agree or disagree that your local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together and treat each other with respect and consideration?*

Other authorities have tried to mitigate the unspecific nature of NI1 by providing a definition:

a) "*By different backgrounds we mean people of different ages, gender, ethnic groups, and people with disabilities etc.*"
b) "*By different backgrounds we mean people from different age, gender, ethnic and religious groups, people with disabilities, and people of a particular sexual orientation*"

Question order

We do not regard its place in the questionnaire to be as critical for this question as for some other questions, although we would suggest that the question is asked after the overall question about satisfaction with the area.

Effective discriminator between local authority areas

Inspection of the scores on NI 1 obtained through the 2008 Place Survey, shows there is a decent gap between lows of 49% in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham and 50% in Oldham up to the highs of 87% for the London Borough Richmond, South Northamptonshire District Council, South Hams District Council and 88% for Stroud District Council[61].

So it appears to be a fairly good discriminator between high and low performers. But the problem lies in the extent to which respondents in Barking and Dagenham are thinking about cohesion in the same way as people in Stroud.

Conclusion

Current Government policy in this area has shifted focus towards integration rather than cohesion, specifically looking at how to get different groups of people to hold shared values,

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[61] The highest score from 2008 was 92% for City of London, but this local authority is unique for a variety of reasons, primarily due to its very small population of about 10,000.

how to generate social interaction and how to combat religious extremism. Given this shift, questions such as NI1 (which measure the degree to which people "get along") may not be as useful at measuring the impact of state-funded community cohesion programmes as accurately as questions that measure the degree to which people of different backgrounds mix, share common values or work together for the good of the area or wider community.

The Near Neighbours programme launched last November, which runs in four locations across England, is one such state-funded programme. It aims to "*bring people together who are near neighbours in communities that are diverse, so they can get to know each other better, build relationships as people and collaborate together on initiatives that improve the local community they live in*." The Programme website invites people living in the four areas to complete a survey about living in the area and the selection of measures is interesting. NI 1 is not one of the 14 questions posed and has not been tailored in any way to measure social cohesion from a faith angle. Instead, the survey tends to favour questions such as: *Do you agree or disagree that people in this neighbourhood pull together to improve the neighbourhood? -* which better reflects the policy shift to common values and social action.

Recommendation:

We do not recommend NI1 for inclusion in a benchmarking set. We feel that NI1 is not a particularly useful measure of community cohesion for comparison between areas – the primary reason being that different backgrounds will be interpreted according to local context. If this question must be used in a residents' survey, it should retain the wording from the Place Survey 2008 to allow for tracking and should be accompanied by a definition of *'getting along together'* as tested by Ipsos MORI.

"To what extent do you agree or disagree that your local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together? By getting on well together, we mean living alongside each other with respect. "

Definitely agree
Tend to agree
Tend to disagree
Definitely disagree
Don't know
Too few people in local area
All the same background

A mid-point may be introduced into the above four point scale to allow for genuinely neutral views to be recorded, but this will mean the loss of trend data from Place 2008 and comparison with the Citizenship Survey.

It would be more useful to allow local areas to tailor the cohesion question to satisfy their own agendas/reflect local context on this issue, e.g. asking about *ethnic differences* specifically. If the general question must be asked, it should not be the only question on cohesion or shared values in an authority's survey.

A recommended supplementary question for tier three is: '*To what extent would you agree or disagree that people in this <u>local area</u> pull together to improve the <u>local area</u>?*'

Definitely agree
Tend to agree
Tend to disagree
Definitely disagree
Nothing needs improving
Don't know

Again, a mid-point may be introduced into the above four point scale to allow for genuinely neutral views to be recorded.

Community Empowerment

Influencing decisions in local area (NI 4)

The question which has been used in major national, and some local authority, surveys to find out whether residents feel able to influence decisions is as follows: '*Do you agree or disagree that you can influence decisions affecting your local area?*' This was the wording used in the 2008 Place Survey when the question was adopted as a national indicator (NI 4). A four-point scale was provided for responses: definitely agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree and definitely disagree, with an option to say 'don't know'. The national indicator was defined as *'the proportion of the adult population who agree that they feel able to influence decisions affecting their local area',* i.e. combining the percentages of those who tend to agree and definitely agree that they can affect decisions in their local area.

Usage and availability of trend data

Survey	Methodology	Available data on this topic	
		Authority-specific trend data	National data
2003/04 BVPI General Survey	Postal (mainly)	No	No
2006/07 BVPI General Survey	Postal	Yes	Yes
2008 Place Survey	Postal	Yes	Yes
2010 Citizenship Survey	Face-to-face	No	Yes
2011 Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker	Face-to-face	No	No
Ipsos MORI face-to-face residents' surveys for individual councils	Face-to-face	Yes	No
British Crime Survey or British Attitudes Survey	Face-to-face	No	No

The question was not included in the 2003/04 BVPI General Survey. It was, however, introduced in the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey, although not as a BVPI. The question was part of a bank of questions relating to empowerment which reflected the 2006 White Paper '*Strong and Prosperous Communities'*, which emphasised the Government's focus on improving outcomes for local people and places.

The 2008 Place Survey established this question as a national indicator (NI 4). The rationale was that: '*The Government aims to build communities where individuals are empowered to make a difference both to their own lives and to the area in which they live. A key indicator of community empowerment is the extent to which people feel able to influence decisions affecting their local area.'* This was in the context of the Government's increasing focus on citizen empowerment through the 2008 Community Empowerment White Paper, *Communities in Control*, which was concerned with making public services generally more in tune with and accountable to local citizens. In the words of DCLG's Guidance to local authorities about the survey, the question sought to measure how residents felt they were able '*to make a difference both to their own lives and to the area in which they live*'.

The BVPI and Place Surveys used a comparable postal methodology, with an autumn fieldwork period. There is therefore direct trend data, and national level results, for local authority postal surveys. NI 4 proved to be a popular national indicator, selected for inclusion in 86 local area agreements[62].

The question has been included in DCLG's Citizenship Survey since it began in 2001. It was designated PSA 21 on empowerment. There is therefore national level data for local

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[62] *Local area agreements were required to have up to 35 NIs out of the complete set of 188*.

authority face-to-face surveys, and tracking data for the six surveys to date. It has also appeared over the years in Ipsos MORI council-specific residents' surveys but its inclusion by authorities has been variable.

The political context has changed now but citizen engagement with local decision-making remains on the public policy agenda and the question was on the most recent Citizenship Survey questionnaire.

Cognitive testing

In Ipsos MORI's 2007 cognitive research commissioned by DCLG as part of its preparations for the Place Survey, participants found this question difficult to answer. That essentially appeared to be because the question might imply by its wording that the respondent wanted to affect decisions and had tried to do so. Our report on that research concluded that this might partly have explained a poor response, as participants found that they did not have an opinion to express, and some would therefore choose not to answer the research questionnaire because of this. Further cognitive research was undertaken on the question in 2010[63] when Ipsos MORI, along with Urban Forum, and the Institute for Political and Economic Governance at University of Manchester, was commissioned by the Community Development Foundation to undertake research to help understand whether people feel they can influence decisions in their local area. This cognitive research also found problems with the question as a reliable measure. Respondents interpreted the question in different ways, variously assuming it to be asking about: being consulted; being effective in creating change or influencing decisions; influencing public services; tackling the behaviour of other residents (both directly and via public services); about political representation, electoral activity and the effective operation of 'democracy' more broadly; or being engaged in 'having a say'.

The quality of NI 4 as a measure of community empowerment

As discussed above, our research for the Community Development Foundation with Urban Forum and the University of Manchester showed that although residents interviewed felt strongly about influencing local decisions, their feelings about influence were contradictory. This ambivalence resulted in some respondents commonly wanting to change answers or make them less definite. Our report[64] concluded: '*The interviews suggested that people's response to NI 4 is not simply ambivalent but is different, depending on which decision-making body, at which level of government, and which issue or decision they are thinking about. Some of those interviewed debated with themselves within the interview the answer they gave on this, finding it hard to generalise across different sorts of decisions.*'

The report also concluded that using NI 4 as a measure of performance presents particular challenges as local authority area scores on NI 4 are to a large extent associated with the nature of the population in an area.

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[63] *'Citizens and Local Decision Making: What Drives Feeling of Influence?', published by Urban Forum, 2010.*
64 Ibid

However, the research did show patterns and links between feelings of influence and other attitudes and factors. There were three main areas of local activity that were found to impact on feelings of influence:

- Provision of information;

- Consultation, listening to views and acting on them; and,

- Attitudes towards local authority and partners.

From the perspective of local authorities looking to increase residents' involvement with its affairs, it is therefore encouraging that local activity can indeed directly impact on residents' perceptions of influence.

The question in practice – what local authorities use

Among the authorities that submitted their questionnaires and views to the review, it is evident that there is a relatively high level of interest in understanding residents' perceived ability to influence decisions in their local area. A sizeable number of these authorities submitted examples of questionnaires that include questions exploring the topic. Furthermore, several of these councils explicitly stated that understanding levels of perceived influence was a priority, particularly going forward. One borough council in the South East for example, acknowledged influence on decision-making as one of their top three priority benchmarking areas.

It is apparent that the councils interested in understanding levels of perceived influence also tend to be concerned with understanding how well people feel informed; both areas are seen to be important in understanding general attitudes toward "community empowerment" and "community engagement". For example, in their most recent survey, one southern county council explored the topic area amongst this battery of questions:

To what extent do you personally agree or disagree with the following statements about X County Council?

   a) *"The County Council publishes information that shows how local residents' views have been used in decision making"*
   b) *"The County Council takes local people's views into account before making decisions*
   c) *"I can influence decisions that affect my area"[65]*

However, the vast majority of local authorities that explore the topic in their residents' surveys have retained the original question format and response scale used in the 2008 Place Survey (NI 4).

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[65] Response options for all three sub-questions: 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'disagree', 'strongly disagree', 'don't know'

Whilst understanding perceived levels of influence is an increasing area of interest, not all authorities identify the issue as a priority topic. There are a small number of authorities that have retained almost all of the original 2008 Place questions in their revised surveys, but have omitted questions exploring influence. Other councils are clearly keener to understand satisfaction with "core" service delivery and thus do not focus on exploring perceived levels of influence or associated themes (such as how well informed residents consider themselves to be).

Question order

In the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey, the question was located in the latter part of the questionnaire, after questions on the local area, council services, information and contact with the council. There was no definition of what was meant by 'local area'. It was the second in a bank of three questions on local decision-making, the other questions relating to satisfaction with the opportunities for participation in local decision-making provided by the council, and the wish to be more involved in the councils' local decision-making.

In the 2008 Place Survey, the question was brought forward to around the middle of the questionnaire, after questions about the local area and council services. It headed a section of two questions about decision-making, the second asking respondents whether they would *like* to be involved in the decisions that affect their local area. There were then questions about community engagement. The question was immediately preceded by a reminder of an earlier statement that 'local area' meant the area within 15-20 minutes walking distance from home; this definition had not been included in the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey.

In the 2010 Citizenship Survey, the question was placed early in the questionnaire, following questions about identity and the community. The definition of 'local area' as used in the Place Survey was given to respondents earlier in the questionnaire.

While question order may not be as sensitive on this issue as on some of the other questions reviewed here, particularly overall satisfaction with the local area and with the council, it remains an issue. As discussed earlier, cognitive research indicates the question can be interpreted in many different ways. Respondents may be open to suggestions from their responses to earlier questions. We would therefore recommend that the question, if used, is placed towards the start of the questionnaire as other priorities permit.

Effective discriminator between local authority areas

The most recent data from the 2010/11 Citizenship Survey[66] indicates that 38% of people felt that they were able to influence decisions affecting their local area. This figure is a slight increase on 2009-2010 but is lower than the 44% measured in the first Citizenship Survey in 2001. However, in the interim, in the four surveys from 2003 to 2009/10, the figure had

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[66] '*Citizenship Survey 2010-2011 Community Cohesion Statistical Release Number 16', published by CLG, 2011 at http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/statistics/pdf/1992885.pdf*

remained remarkably constant at 37%-39%. This was in the context of major government investment seeking to empower local communities, which has proved on the evidence of these findings, to have been an ambitious undertaking. The decline in people's perception of how well they can influence local decision-making was also evident from the national postal surveys: from 32% in the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey to 29% in the 2008 Place Survey[67].

The question proved to be a relatively poor discriminator between areas. Indeed it is the poorest overall discriminator of all the questions reviewed in this report. In the 2008 Place Survey, the majority of local authorities fell within a fairly narrow range of 23%-35%. Between the top authority (45.7% in the London Borough of Newham) and the bottom score (19.8% in Gosport Borough Council) there was a 26 percentage point difference. This is relatively narrow compared with most of the other NIs. There was, for example, a 43 percentage point difference between the top and bottom range scoring areas on NI 1, the cohesion question in the Place Survey.

Nor is the question a good discriminator between demographic groups. The Citizenship Survey illustrated that, as people age, their feelings of influence over decisions affecting the local area tend to decline: 38% of those aged 16-24 and 40% of those aged 25-34 felt able to influence decisions affecting their local area, compared with 31% of those aged 75 years or more (this is a relatively narrow band compared with the other measures reviewed in this report). Other discriminators – ethnic minority (45% ethnic minority groups compared with 36% white) and income (47% for those earning more than £50,000 year compared with 37% for those earning less than £5,000 a year) were again not very wide.

Conclusion

The purpose of this question is to provide a measure of community empowerment. The case for including it in a core set of benchmarking questions is that it is well-established through national surveys and there is a wealth of national and local tracking data. National findings have not been volatile. On the other hand, there is strong evidence that respondents interpret the question differently. It is a relatively poor discriminator between authority areas.

The issue of community engagement and empowerment remains as pertinent now as over the last ten years, not least in terms of the Government's localism agenda, and there is value in the issue being within the benchmarking question set, to shed light onto what it is that local policy makers can focus on to increase citizens' feelings of influence over decisions that affect them and their area when they are making choices on what to do and where to target resources.

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[67] *While the questions on influence in the BVPI and Place Surveys are the same, other changes in the questionnaires and methodology between these two studies mean the trends should be treated only as indicative.*

However, on balance, we would be cautious about including this in the benchmarking question set and we conclude that that alternative measures should be considered which are clearer for respondents, thereby producing more reliable data, and which are better discriminators between authority areas. An alternative measure is reviewed in more detail in the following section.

Recommendation

That, provided an alternative question is available which is better understood by respondents, this should not be included in the local government benchmarking set.

Were it to be included, we recommend the now well-established wording from the Place and Citizenship Surveys, augmented by a general explanation of 'local area', and that it is placed as near the beginning of questionnaires as other priorities allow:

Do you agree or disagree that you can influence decisions affecting your local area?

Response codes:
Definitely agree
Tend to agree
Tend to disagree
Definitely disagree
Don't know

Council responsiveness

Perceived responsiveness of local council

The issue of how responsive local councils are to their residents has been tested in a number of ways. This section considers one of them: *'To what extent do you think ... that your local council acts on the concerns of local residents?'* This was the wording used in the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey, though not as a BVPI. A four-point scale was provided for responses: *a great deal, a fair amount, not very much and not at all, with an option to say 'don't know'*.

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Usage and availability of trend data

Survey	Methodology	Available data on this topic	
		Authority-specific trend data	National data
2003/04 BVPI General Survey	Postal (mainly)	No	No
2006/07 BVPI General Survey	Postal	Yes	Yes
2008 Place Survey[68]	Postal	Yes	No
2010 Citizenship Survey	Face-to-face	No	No
2011 Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker	Face-to-face	No	No
Ipsos MORI face-to-face residents' surveys for individual councils	Face-to-face	Yes	No
British Crime Survey or British Attitudes Survey	Face-to-face	No	No

The issue of community engagement and empowerment was not included in the 2003/04 BVPI General Survey which focused on council services and quality of life. It was, however, introduced in the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey, although not as a BVPI. It was the ninth in a bank of ten attitudinal statements in the final main section of the questionnaire, immediately following the section of questions on community engagement. Most of the attitudinal statements tested quality of life issues. But the last four were about community engagement: *'Here are some things that other people have said about their council. To what extent do you think that these statements apply to your local council? My council ... (vii) is remote and impersonal; (viii) promotes the interests of local residents; (ix) acts on the concerns of local residents; and (x) treats all types of people fairly.'*

The 2008 Place Survey included a similar, but importantly modified, question in a bank of five attitudinal statements towards the start of the questionnaire. This time, the question asked about whether the statements applied to local *public services* rather than the local *council*. Because the statements were placed before questions about the council, the potential for respondents being conditioned by earlier questions to think primarily about the council when answering this question was reduced. But the covering letter was from the council and referred to the questionnaire being about how well the council (by name), and its partners, are doing, so respondents are likely to have had this in mind when answering the question. The three last statements were about community engagement in a broad sense: *'Here are some things that people have said about their local public services. To what extent do you think that these statements apply to public services in your local area? Local public services*

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[68] A question was included in the 2008 Place Survey that refers to public services rather than the local council, and is discussed in more detail the text.

... (iii) promote the interests of local residents; (iv) act on the concerns of local people; (v) treat all types of people fairly'.

The BVPI and Place Surveys used a comparable postal methodology, with an autumn fieldwork period. However trend data is not available because of the change in wording.

The question has also appeared over the years in Ipsos MORI council-specific face-to-face residents' surveys, along with a number of other attitude statements, of which the most used has been the degree to which the council is remote and impersonal, which was also included in the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey, but its inclusion by authorities has been variable.

The question is not in DCLG's Citizenship Survey or the other large national surveys. Nor is it included in the Ipsos MORI Reputation Tracker.

Cognitive testing

This question relating to public services was not tested In Ipsos MORI's 2007 cognitive research for the Place Survey. In the second phase of cognitive testing for this review, we asked respondents to consider the following question which is adapted from the BVPI 2006 battery of 10 questions about the council: "*To what extent do you think [council] acts on the concerns of local residents?*"

This question is easily understood and interpreted consistently as the council listening and responding to local issues and problems. It has not encountered any difficulties with its interpretation. As such, this question appears to be better alternative to NI4 (influence) as it is understood more easily.

The quality of the question as a measure of council responsiveness

This question, when asked about the council (not public services), appears to be straightforward and easy to understand. As with any question, unless respondents are asked to do otherwise (for example, if they are specifically asked to answer from their personal experience), they will answer it on the basis of their own experience and what they have heard from their friends, family and the media.

The question about public services is clearly more ambiguous and is also not such a good discriminator of good and poor performance. Although this does not rule out its use as a general indicator of perceptions it would be of limited value as a benchmark indicator for local authorities.

The question in practice – what local authorities use

It is evident from an evaluation of the questionnaires submitted to this review, that not all councils utilise this question in their residents' surveys. Instead, a number of councils prefer to measure community empowerment through the NI4 question which asks explicitly about

perceived ability to influence (i.e. d*o you agree or disagree that you can influence decisions affecting your local area?).*

Some authorities, however, do seek to explore the extent to which residents believe that the council *acts* on their concerns. They sometimes opt to retain the original question wording from the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey, by exploring the issue amongst a battery of similar questions. Other authorities tweak the wording slightly and ask residents to state the extent to which their local authority *listens* to the concerns of local residents. Alternatively, there are further instances of questionnaires that ask respondents to state the extent to which they believe that the council *acts in the interests of* local residents.

Although the original wording of the 2006/7 BVPI survey is not always used consistently, it is apparent that there is some interest in the notion of understanding perceptions of community empowerment other than solely through the NI4 (influence) question.

Question order

As discussed earlier, in the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey, the bank of attitude statements including the question on council responsiveness, was located towards the end of the questionnaire, while in the 2008 Place Survey the (similar) question was asked towards the start, just after questions about perceptions of the local area.

While responses are always liable to be influenced by preceding questions (and, with postal questions, there is no scope for randomising the order of the bank of attitudinal statements in which this question has appeared), question order may not be as sensitive on this issue as on some of the other questions reviewed here. We would, however, err towards the approach taken in the Place Survey rather than the one in the BVPI survey and place the question as near to the start of the questionnaire as other priorities permit, and preferably before questions about council communications.

Effective discriminator between local authority areas

In the 2006/07 BVPI Survey, about the *council*, 52% of residents thought that it acted on the concerns of local residents. The question was a good discriminator between areas, from 33% in Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council (West Yorkshire) to 70% in the City of London and 67% in the London Borough of Wandsworth and two district councils, Rushmoor BC (Hampshire) and former Alnwick DC (Northumberland).

In the 2008 Place Survey, about *public services*, 44% of residents thought that the services acted on residents' concerns. This may in part reflect a general decline in ratings over the preceding two years or the change in question. This question was not as good a discriminator as the BVPI question. This is to be expected, given the more general nature of the question where responses potentially could be about many disparate organisations. The findings ranged from 31% in Older Metropolitan Borough Council (Greater Manchester) to 58% in Christchurch Borough Council (Dorset).

Conclusion

The purpose of this question, when asked specifically about the council as in the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey, is to provide a measure of perceptions of council responsiveness. It appears to meet that purpose well. It is relatively clear and unambiguous. There is tracking data from the BVPI Survey and it is a good discriminator between different areas. It can be asked as part of a bank of attitude questions which can be an efficient use of space on a postal questionnaire and quick to complete by the respondent, or as a standalone question as per Ipsos MORI's cognitive test.

Recommendation

We recommend the following question to be included in a third tier of the benchmarking question set.

The recommended wording should be placed towards the front of the questionnaire, and before questions about the detail of council communications.

To what extent do you think [name of council] acts on the concerns of local residents?

Response codes:
A great deal
A fair amount
Not very much
Not at all
Don't know

Advocacy of the local authority

Speaking highly of your local council (not a national indicator)

Advocacy among stakeholders and residents is a well known measure of reputation. Advocates of council services share their positive views with friends, family and colleagues. Monitoring levels of advocacy, and changes in it, can form an important part of understanding stakeholder, staff and resident attitudes and behaviour. It is distinct from measuring recommendations of an organisation (a measure devised by Reicheld, Bain and Company known as NPS), which works less well where monopolies on service provision exist (i.e. public sector).

Advocacy has been measured in Ipsos MORI face-to-face residents' surveys by asking: *'Which of the following statements comes closest to how you feel about your local council? Followed by a choice of six responses including don't know: I speak highly of the council without being asked; I speak highly of the council if I am asked about it; I am critical of the*

council if I am asked about it; I am critical of the council without being asked; I have no views one way or another; don't know.'

Usage and availability of trend data

Advocacy data is used by individual local authorities as part of reputation tracking and feeding into service and communications policies. Advocacy questions were not asked in any of the national postal BVPI or Place Surveys and comprehensive trend data for all local authorities is therefore not available. It is not a national indicator and has not been subject to cognitive research for the Place or Citizenship Surveys. Nor has it been identified as a discretionary additional question for the national postal surveys. It was also not included in the Citizenship Survey.

The question is, however, included in Ipsos MORI's face-to-face Local Government Reputation Tracker. Sub-group analysis is available by the main demographic groups and also by broad region, though not by authority type. This therefore provides face-to-face comparison data for authorities and also a broad context for postal surveys. The standard question, as above, is used in this survey.

Survey	Methodology	Included data on this topic	
		Authority-specific trend data	National data
2003/04 BVPI General Survey	Postal (mainly)	**No**	**No**
2006/07 BVPI General Survey	Postal	**No**	**No**
2008 Place Survey	Postal	**No**	**No**
2010 Citizenship Survey	Face-to-face	**No**	**No**
2011 Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker	Face-to-face	**No**	**Yes**
Ipsos MORI face-to-face residents' surveys for individual councils	Face-to-face	**Yes**	**No**
2009/10 British Crime Survey	Face-to-face	**No**	**No**

Cognitive testing

In the first phase of cognitive testing for this review, respondents were able to interpret this question with ease and offer a reasoned answer. However, there is some indication that the current six point response scale does not seem to encapsulate the exact nature of resident views. Particularly problematic is the option "I have no views one way or another"; which may be chosen if an interviewee holds two strong but polarised opinions of the council

concurrently. Furthermore, it is felt by some that the alternative options are worded too extremely.

I don't speak 'highly' of them, but I am not 'critical', which is a strong word. I am 'happy'

The second phase of cognitive testing, therefore, sought to test an amended version of the standard response scale which is:

a) *I speak positively of the Council without being asked*
b) *I speak positively of the Council if I am asked about it*
c) *I am negative about the Council if I am asked about it*
d) *I am negative about the Council without being asked*
e) *I have no views one way or another*
f) *Don't know*

The revised scale is received more positively than the original *highly/critical* scale. It is easier for respondents to think about their council in positive or negative terms, rather than in relation to whether they would speak highly or be critical of it. It was commented that *"speak highly"* was not an everyday, colloquial expression; one respondent expressed the view that the phrase seemed old-fashioned. "Speaking highly" was also understood to be somewhat self-serving and "too extreme".

Reflecting findings from the first phase of cognitive tests, there was some support for a response code that better represents the middle ground than *"I have no views one way or the other."* In this respect the revised scale works better as the gap between the two ends of the scale do not feel so extreme.

To further encourage respondents to avoid settling for the middle ground, we also recommend adding "on balance" to the beginning of the question wording to indicate a overall impression is required taking account of both negative and positive experiences.

The quality of the question as a measure of advocacy

The question wording is easily understood and the majority of respondents express a view on the question, either positive or negative. In the Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker[69], however, 39% of respondents answer that they have no view one way or another. This may not be surprising as it is one thing for a respondent to have a view about the council but quite another to express it to someone else strongly and unreservedly as the term *"speaking highly"* suggests. It may also reflect in part the non-specific nature of the question, i.e. it is not about a named local authority. We would also recommend adding the name of the authority to the question wording.

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[69] From Ipsos MORI Capibus: 7 – 13 October 2011

The question can be asked of all council stakeholders, not only residents, allowing comparisons to be made between residents, staff and external stakeholders. This can assist an understanding of where exactly advocates are most likely to come from and what relationship advocacy might have between different stakeholder groups. This question should also be seen as (an important) part of a wider set of measures looking at confidence, trust and communication – including council communications, feedback from residents about their experience of council staff, engagement with the council and its responsiveness, views on services, and other factors.

The question in practice: what local authorities use

An evaluation of submitted residents' surveys as part of this review suggests that questions around advocacy are not commonly asked. Whilst almost all authorities seek to understand general levels of satisfaction with their organisation and despite being viewed as a good means of understanding reputational issues, questions relating to levels of advocacy do not occur frequently.

Question order

The question has generally been placed towards the latter part of questionnaires, after questions about the area and council services. However, there would be advantages in placing it earlier in the questionnaire, for example as soon as possible after the question on council satisfaction. The detail of the issue – factors which help to explain the finding - can be asked within the body of the questionnaire. But the core question ought to be subject to as little bias as possible if it is to be used as a key monitoring tool by the council.

Effective discriminator between local authority areas

This question has not been asked as part of the national surveys included in this review and it is therefore not possible to identify the degree to which this is an effective discriminator between authorities. However, the Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker shows distinctions between findings in different parts of the country, there being distinctly higher ratings in London than the rest of the country, with the lowest ratings in the north. The question does not discriminate between demographic sub-groups as much as other questions.

Conclusion

The purpose of this question is to monitor advocacy among residents as a way of understanding how the council is perceived by residents and how they act on those perceptions in a way that is negative or positive towards the council's reputation. Many aspects of the council's performance will impact on advocacy levels, not just service delivery but also the interaction of its staff and the effectiveness of its communications. The issue also closely relates to a council's relationships with the media. When placed with more detailed exploration about what impacts on residents, data from the question can help

councils to diagnose the impact of council communications to help refocus or target future communications policy and practice.

There is relatively little trend data available, but it remains important for the council to track its own performance. This is undertaken effectively at the moment by some authorities, for example Westminster City Council. Given the importance of the issue, this is a good question to be included in a set of local government benchmarking questions, if understanding reputation is a priority.

Recommendation

The wording used in residents' surveys and the Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker is recommended for inclusion in the third tier of benchmarking questions, with a <u>revised</u> response scale show below. We also recommend referring to the specific name of the authority in the question.

Where an authority decides to include this question, it should be placed immediately after the three core questions, as the fourth question in a survey. This is because it should be subject to as little bias as possible.

'On balance, which of the following statements comes closest to how you feel about [name of council]:
I speak positively of the council without being asked
I speak positively of the council if I am asked about it
I am negative about the council if I am asked about it
I am negative about the council without being asked
I have no views one way or another
Don't know

Trust in local institutions

How much do you trust local institutions such as the local council (not a national indicator)

The issue of trust in a local authority has been explored in different ways in residents' surveys.

The question was asked in the postal 2006/07 BVPI General Survey, and is generally asked in Ipsos MORI face-to-face residents' surveys, by testing the extent that respondents feel that their local council has a range of characteristics such as being bureaucratic, efficient, faceless and other images. The BVPI General Survey used a standard four-point scale to measure the extent of agreement or disagreement:

Here are some things that other people have said about their Council. To what extent do you think that these statements apply to your local council ... Trustworthy?

A great deal
A fair amount
Not very much
Not at all
Don't know

Usage and availability of trend data

The Standards Board for England concludes that a range of factors have been found to influence public perceptions of services, and therefore their favourability towards and trust in councils: experiences of council services, levels of council tax, individuals' loyalty toward an organisation, the political party in control at that council and the extent to which individuals identify with their local area[70]. Residents' trust in individual councillors and officers is also important. The biennial reports on public attitudes undertaken for the Committee on Standards in Public Life illustrate that the public has sophisticated and comprehensive views about the standards which those in positions of public trust should be meeting, and that it matters to them that those standards are met. Ipsos MORI research for the Young Foundation in 2006 concluded that there had been a significant and worrying decline in some aspects of trust.[71] It is therefore important to measure and monitor public perceptions as these will impact on public desire to engage in local democracy.

There is less trend data available on this issue than for many other key local government measures. The issue was not included in the 2003/04 BVPI General Survey or the 2008 Place Survey; it is not therefore a national indicator. Though included in the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey it was not a BVPI. In the Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker, the issue is covered differently. Respondents are given a list of characteristics but instead of being asked *the extent to which they apply* (as in the BVPI question above) they are asked *whether* they apply[72]. Findings are therefore not comparable.

A set of questions is also included in the Citizenship Survey which asks respondents to rate how much they trust (a lot, a fair amount, not very much or not at all) a number of institutions including '*your local council'*. Again, this is not comparable with either the Ipsos MORI Reputation Tracker question or the BVPI 2006/7 question.

Ipsos MORI resident's surveys generally adopt the same question wording as in the BVPI General Survey.

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[70] *Assessing the Impact and Effectiveness of the Ethical Framework in Local Government in England, Richard Cowell, James Downe and Karen Morgan, Cardiff University, 2009.*
[71] *'Who Do You Believe? Trust in Government Information', Young Foundation/MORI, 2005*
[72] *The question in the Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker is: 'Please read through the list and tell me which of the words if any that you think apply to your local council.'*

Survey	Methodology	Included data on this topic	
		Authority-specific trend data	National data
2003/04 BVPI General Survey	Postal (mainly)	No	No
2006/07 BVPI General Survey	Postal	Yes	Yes
2008 Place Survey	Postal	No	No
2010 Citizenship Survey	Face-to-face	No	Yes, different question wording
2011 Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker	Face-to-face	No	Yes, different question wording
Ipsos MORI face-to-face residents' surveys for individual councils	Face-to-face	Yes	No
2009/10 British Crime Survey	Face-to-face	No	No

Authorities using a postal methodology will be able to refer to the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey results. If, on the other hand, the question wording used in the Ipsos MORI Local Government Reputation Tracker or Citizenship Survey is preferred, these will provide face-to-face trend and comparison data.

Cognitive testing

Cognitive testing explored three questions relating to trust:

a) *To what extent do you trust local institutions such as the local council, police and local health services?*

b) *To what extent do you think [Council] is trustworthy?*

c) *How much do you trust [Council]?*

The term "trust" proved to be problematic in relation to question a) with some respondents interpreting the question as assessing "favourability" or "rating performance" instead. Providing examples of "local institutions" is useful but other organisations people considered included the local bus/train service and fire services. However, it is felt that the question needs to provide scope to assess each organisation separately and that it would be unfair to make a judgement on all three organisations collectively. Younger interviewees, particularly those who had previous negative involvement with the police, felt it is particularly important to be able to assess institutions separately. For some, the word "institution" bears negative connotations, which might be best avoided.

However, a lack of definition of trust for question c) did not prove to be problematic and none of the respondents indicated a definition of trust would be more helpful at c). Respondents based their answers on various criteria including; transparency and openness, "whether they deliver what they say they will", upholding promises, responding to residents, reliability and any recollection of "scandal" or "anything dodgy."

Overall, statement c) is felt to be the better question relating to trust. There were several examples of respondents explaining that they interpret the word *"trustworthy"* used at b) as being more appropriate for describing a relationship with an individual rather than an organisation and its associated services. For instance, they would describe a friend as trustworthy but this is not felt to be a word naturally assigned to a collective or organisation. The response scale is also felt to be more appropriate for statement c). It is understood as a "closed" question whereby individuals feel confident offering a definitive answer.

The quality of the question as an indicator of trust in local councils

In the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey, 61% thought their council was trustworthy (combining the percentages of those who thought that this was the case 'a great deal' and 'a fair amount'). There is no national comparator for the postal survey method.

The results of the Citizenship Survey (which is administered face to face), shows a national figure of 64% who trust their local council a lot or a fair amount, which is the highest recorded level of trust for councils from all the survey waves. This suggests trust was on the rise, certainly until December 2010.

Methodological consistency is always important in perceptual research but on this subject it is vital. Even interchanging the words 'trust' and 'trustworthy' may generate different findings. There is a range of other, related perceptual data which will inform understanding of this issue. General data was collected regularly on a national basis by the now abolished Standards Board for England (focusing on local government) and the Committee on Standards in Public Life (focusing on ethics and national standards), which provide valuable contextual data, for example, trust in local politicians. Certainly we know that people generally feel more positive of the local context than of the national context. People will trust their local councillors and local MPs to tell the truth more than politicians generally.[73]

On balance, we would suggest that if local authorities wish to ask a question about trust that they adopt the form of words similar to that used in the Citizenship Survey. This is principally because it is less generic than the question about institutions (at statement a) and avoids the use of the word trustworthy (at statement b) which is not deemed appropriate. Of the three measures, it will provide a more focused response.

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[73] *'Public reaction to the expenses scandal, Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute, Understanding Society, The Perils of Perception', Julia Clark, summer 2009.*

The question in practice – what local authorities use

An evaluation of the surveys submitted to this review suggests that questions focused around trust are relevant, but not typically viewed as high priority. Related questions include asking residents to assess statements such as:

- o "I trust my local council to spend money wisely"
- o "I know how my council makes decisions"

However, arguably, these could equally be seen as questions measuring "value for money" or "feeling informed".

Yet, a small number of the councils that were involved in the stakeholder research (see Appendices) expressed an active interest in exploring levels of trust, and for them, it is highlighted as a key priority. One unitary authority for example, stated "we will definitely be looking to explore issues around the reputation agenda" and wishes to explore whether residents feel the council "builds trust and confidence" in what they do. Similarly, a borough council has identified an exploration of vertical trust (defined as "trust between citizens, elected members, public institutions") as one of six key areas which could be used to inform outcome indicators in their community strategy.

Question order

While accepting that all questions are affected by bias from what precedes them, we consider that the location of this question is not as critical as with some other questions. However, we would propose that it precedes any questions seeking more depth about the issue of trust.

Effective discriminator between local authority areas

Versions of the question have provided an effective discriminator between local authority areas. In the 2006/07 BVPI general survey, trustworthiness varied from 82% of the City of London and 80% of Broadland district (Norfolk) to 36% in Doncaster Borough Council.

Conclusion

The purpose of this question is to monitor an important aspect of corporate reputation which is likely to impact on key objectives such as democratic legitimacy and engaging residents in its affairs. The question not only engenders information in its own right, it contextualises and helps understanding of residents' perceptions of wider issues. The placing of the question within a questionnaire is not as critical as with some other questions but we have concluded that it should precede any questions exploring trust and confidence in more depth.

Local level trend data is available from Ipsos MORI face-to-face residents' surveys and national comparative data for postal surveys is available from the 2006/07 BVPI General Survey and the Citizenship Survey. In addition, general contextual data (albeit not directly

comparable) is available from previous waves of Ipsos MORI's Local Government Reputation Tracker.

On balance we have concluded that it is a good question to include in a core benchmarking set for local government.

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Recommendation

A form of wording similar to that used in the Citizenship Survey is recommended for inclusion in the third tier of benchmarking questions.

We recommend that it should precede detailed questions on the issue of trust. We also recommend referring to the specific name of the authority in the question.

How much do you trust [council]?

A great deal
A fair amount
Not very much
Not at all
Don't know

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Two tier issues

In most instances, question wording will not need to be altered in two tier areas. However, where relevant, it is recommended that respondents are asked about a named council, instead of "your council".

In two tier areas, this creates a challenge where both the county council and district council are being rated on certain key questions (such as overall satisfaction with the way the council runs things). Where authorities want to ask the same question twice (referring separately to the county and district council), we suggest providing a short introduction to clarify the different councils' responsibilities. Even when the question is only asked once referring to one council, a short explanation will be helpful as our cognitive testing suggests.

Cognitive testing

We tested different three slightly different preambles to reflect three different scenarios:

a) A questionnaire designed to understand perceptions of a district only, operating in a two tier area;
b) A questionnaire designed to understand perceptions of both the district and county on certain key questions; and

c) A questionnaire designed to understand perceptions of a single tier authority.

The preambles were:

a) *Your local area receives services from two councils, Ribble Valley Borough Council and Lancashire County Council. This survey asks about Ribble Valley Borough Council, which is responsible for services such as refuse collection, street cleaning and planning.*

b) *Your local area receives services from two councils, Ribble Valley Borough Council and Lancashire County Council. Ribble Valley Borough Council is responsible for services such as refuse collection, street cleaning and planning. Lancashire County Council is responsible for services such as schools, social care services and road maintenance.*

c) *Your local area receives services from Southwark Council. Southwark Council is responsible for a range of services such as refuse collection, street cleaning, planning, schools, social care services and road maintenance.*

In both single and two tier authorities, the majority of respondents felt the descriptions of the council(s) were very helpful in answering the question. The explanations boosted knowledge of relevant council services or served as a welcome reminder of service areas that would not otherwise be top of mind. Had we not defined the respective services in Clitheroe, the scores for the Borough Council would have been lowered as views of the County were less positive among this group. In Clitheroe, respondents feel more familiar with, and thus prefer the Borough.

However, it is evident that the examples provided in the preamble **did narrow** and limit the focus of the respondent. This is particularly true in the two tier area where there is some confusion as to the differing functions of the Borough and County councils. Not all respondents based their answer solely on their opinion of the services listed in the preamble; there were also references to parks, leisure facilities and street lighting.

Ipsos MORI recommendation: On balance, we think it is better to provide a preamble such as those outlined, particularly in two tier areas where questions will be asked about one or both of the councils. But there will be some risk that we limit judgements to those services listed.

Appendix A: Stakeholder Interviews

Chief Executive	County council	North West
Chief Executive	County council	North West
Asst. Director	Unitary	North West
Chief Exec	County council	South Eastern
Chief Executive	District/borough council	South East
Chief Executive	Unitary	South West
Leader	District/borough council	South East
Assistant Chief Executive	Unitary	North East
Chief Executive	London borough	London
Deputy Leader	London borough	London
Leader	Borough	North East

Current data collection

Levels of interest in residents' perceptions vary significantly amongst senior stakeholders in different authorities. Attitudes range from a passive acceptance of the role of surveys, to a deep and active interest in understanding resident views.

It'll feed lots of different things, our reputation management, overall performance management framework and our area planning

(County Council)

However, some are reluctant to engage in data collection, preferring to conduct research only when absolutely necessary and to let residents air their views through their electoral vote.

*I work on the basis that once every four years through the ballot box…
People have got the opportunity every four years to show their displeasure*

(District Council)

The type of perceptions data and the frequency with which it is currently collected ranges widely. Yet, many of those interviewed had participated in some form of non-compulsory data collation exercise since the abolition of the Place Surveys. Projects are commissioned by individual authorities in order to investigate the immediate locality, although there is also research being led by partnerships. Exercises commissioned by individual authorities include:

- Residents' surveys including:
    - postal surveys,
    - resident panels, and
    - website surveys,
- Bespoke consultations with the public.
- Informal discussions with peers and friends about council progress.

Exercises commissioned by partnerships include:

- Participation in region and sub region-wide surveys (e.g. London annual survey).
- Collaborative surveys amongst several councils (e.g. tri-borough initiatives, North East Councils).

Residents' surveys are the tool most commonly used by interviewees, however the frequency and scale to which they are conducted varies. Some endeavour to consult their residents on a regular basis, whereas others opt to conduct one-off consultations as and when necessary (typically to inform major decisions or to address specific issues). Subsequently, one-off consultations tend to be large scale and general (e.g. prior to budget setting) or alternatively, small-scale and bespoke to a particular business area (e.g. recycling). One interviewee representing a newly formed unitary council spoke of face-to-face surveys with 7,000 residents during the development period.

We commissioned a large scale survey in the summer of last year, where we really boosted it to make sure that we were able to have statistically representative samples for a lot of our locality areas... it's obviously expensive to get the information to that level. But members just really appreciated the fact that we're able to give them real information about their areas

(Unitary Council)

Some councils utilise their websites as a means of obtaining insight by encouraging users to make suggestions or leave comments.

Other less formal methods include discussion with peers and friends in other authorities to assess council progress.

Recent restructures across local government has led to some resident research being postponed until re-modelling of services has taken place. Similarly, in some authorities surveys are designed to omit references to services currently under review.

We're just very conscious of not asking about satisfaction of those services when we are in the middle of quite a complex consultation around how those services could be remodelled going forward.

(County Council)

Areas of interest

Senior stakeholders suggested a number of subject areas where it would be useful to obtain residents' opinions. For some, understanding residents' views is a worthy exercise in itself, particularly in terms of understanding lifestyles and reaction to external events / pressures. However generally, most senior stakeholders were principally concerned with understanding perceptions of the council as an organisation. Most commonly interest was expressed in ascertaining:

1) Overall levels of satisfaction with the council (and levels of satisfaction with services).
2) Perceived value for money.
3) Satisfaction with the local area.

My view is that there are two areas that matter to me. One is do our residents think we're doing broadly a good job? How satisfied are they? And do they think we're delivering value for money

(London Borough)

These three areas are also understood as being of principal interest to elected members.

However, to varying degrees the interviewees also wish to understand:

- Whether residents feel informed.

- Perceived levels of crime and anti-social behaviour.
- Perceived levels of community cohesion.
- Big Society (including perceived ability to influence/volunteering).
- Reputational issues (including levels of advocacy/trust).

Interest in these factors is largely dependent on the current circumstances and priorities facing each authority. For example, one unitary authority reported that they are particularly concerned about reputational issues given recent negative media coverage. Similarly, in localities encountering problems with social cohesion or crime, leaders are more inclined to wish to understand residents' views on these issues rather than more general measures such as satisfaction with the council. Conversely, where these issues are less pertinent (especially in the case of crime), there is significantly reduced interest in discussing residents' perceptions on the topics.

The interviewees are divided as to the value of collating information around themes associated with the Big Society agenda (such as perceived ability to influence council decisions and volunteering levels). Some already actively collate this information, and use the data to measure against internal targets, although one interviewee noted that they would omit specific references to "Big Society" for political reasons. Whilst obtaining an understanding of residents' involvement in their communities was considered significant by some, it is felt that this is a particularly problematic area of exploration for others, and in some cases there was some cynicism about the value of collecting data on self-reported volunteering for example.

What I would hope data like that would do is stimulate positive debate as to why did it happen in one place and not another. Therefore you get a greater understanding of where people volunteer, about what they volunteer for and where it takes place

(Unitary Council)

Interviewees are also divided about measuring reputational issues, especially around the subject of "trust". Whilst some (and particularly a council which had encountered recent reputational issues) were keen to explore the area, others thought the concept of trust was "nebulous" and the word itself too subjective to individual interpretation. However, there is some indication that it is more relevant to explore notions of trust now, than in previous years, because of the importance of building social capital, and the possible role an authority can have to facilitate this in communities.

Measuring for what purpose?

It was commented by some interviewees that in light of extensive budget cuts, it is extremely important that current research has a clear and defined objective. Typically, collecting perceptions-based data serves overarching purposes.

The first is to **inform or support policy,** which includes;

- service improvement;
- budget setting;
- identifying priorities;
- informing innovation and new initiatives (e.g. how to share services and resources, and between neighbouring authorities).

Some interviewees value the additional insight that perceptions measures can bring to policy-making. It was commented by some that where satisfaction levels were low, if possible, greater resource would be directed toward that area.

Where there has been resident dissatisfaction with say, anti-social behaviour, then we've tended to try to put additional finance in place for that

(Borough Council)

However, whilst perception-based data is viewed by many of the interviewees as important, it is used principally to contribute to developing existing plans rather than to initiate new policy. Data is typically used as reassurance of council action or as means of guidance for highlighting areas for service improvement.

If satisfaction [in an area] looks low, then I'm pretty confident that colleagues will take a look at that, they will think about it, they probably dive down into the detail of the data and see what else they feel they need to learn about it

(London Borough)

In some cases, interviewees value findings only if they supported current plans.

I don't use it as a thing to make me set policy. I will use it to justify policy… I'll ignore it if it doesn't justify what we want to do

(District Council)

The second role for perceptions data is to measure performance. This includes;

- benchmarking against other authorities;
- track service performance over time;
- demonstrate attainment of targets;
- forecasting; and
- identify out-performers/learn from other authorities.

Some interviewees are also keen to include resident satisfaction as an element of their performance management framework and to be able to benchmark on it. A few high performing authorities were particularly interested in obtaining information on satisfaction

levels, in part because the information could be useful politically (for example in discussions surrounding council tax) and because it attracted positive media coverage.

Another view expressed was that it is essential to have an external measure of performance that can be used to counterbalance the council's own self assessment, or the views of inspectorates and other third party assessments – that it is useful to identify where a gap exists between citizen perceptions around the performance of a service (or the council more generally) and other assessments, so that the gaps can be addressed.

Authorities that had recently undergone considerable upheaval or restructure were especially keen to be able to track performance over time. Others used resident satisfaction as an internal key performance indicator tracked year on year.

We had some data pre-unitary, so it was important for us to see what it was like after a year of the new authority

(Unitary Council)

Comparisons with other similar or neighbouring authorities were considered useful by some (discussed in further detail in the section titled 'Comparing Data'). Others found it useful to be able to track resident feedback over time as a way of assessing performance.

We've got our new council plan that was agreed in February that sets out our priorities, and some of these [perception] measures will be part of our performance management framework to help us monitor how well we're doing

(County Council)

Further reasons for collating data include;

- o informing conversation with partners;
- o stimulating debate;
- o informing elected members; and
- o driving communications campaigns.

Limitations and challenges of using perception data

Perceived usefulness of perception data for guiding policy and measuring performance varies amongst interviewees. It is generally accepted that this data is useful for gaining insight into resident satisfaction and understanding the lives of residents, but views differ as to the extent it can be used as a tool to influence policy or demonstrate levels of progress in achieving some council or partnership plans.

In the main, interviewees acknowledge some limitations and challenges of using such data. There is a belief that residents do not understand which services their authority is responsible for and inaccurate assumptions would influence their view of the authority. Similarly, there are views that the public do not fully understand the pressures and issues facing councils and therefore resident input has limited practical value.

I don't think that people have sufficient understanding of what councils do to be able to give a balanced judgement. Most people don't know that we're not responsible for hospitals or the buses

(County Council)

There is also some concern that data related to overall perceptions of the council can be extraneous given that that perception is influenced by many unrelated external factors. Overall perception is seen as being heavily influenced by "big events" (e.g. the handling of severe winter weather) or significant issues reported in the media. There is also concern that residents do not necessarily hold "a view" of the council as an organisation.

They don't spend a lot of their time thinking about councils...They expect their bins to be emptied, to be places for their kids at school

(London Borough)

Likewise, there is an acknowledgement that public perception does not necessarily mirror statistical evidence (particularly in relation to levels of crime where there is a gap between perceptions and incidence), thereby complicating the performance narrative.

In the work we do about setting priorities, it's crime, antisocial behaviour that are top of the list when we don't actually have a problem with it. So it's important to understand that, or else we could waste loads of money on priorities that are irrelevant in reality

(County Council)

Robust quantitative evidence was perceived by some as being more important in directing service provision.

What would be more useful to me is actually have statistics about service delivery that are accurate, that I can compare...about tonnage of waste collected, separating back out again, green waste collection, green recycling, dry side recycling

(District Council)

On a practical level, some interviewees believe that the public are apathetic toward residents' survey research and even that local residents' might actively disapprove of collating such data given resources could be directed toward other priorities.

Actually what we also find is most people say to us, 'will you get on and do the job. That's what we elected you for, to do the job, don't mither us'

(County Council)

Comparing data

Attitudes towards the value of comparing perceptions data varies significantly amongst interviewees. Some are keen to contextualise the performance of their authority against other

councils and maintain that data is of greater use if it can be used to draw comparisons. It is felt that by drawing comparisons with other authorities, councils will be able to learn from each other and seek out innovation. It is sometimes felt that members in particular wish to draw comparisons to benchmark progress.

I think it is always important to reach out and see where are we exceptional and that tells you a little bit more about your place but also it helps you perhaps look out for solutions that you may not have thought of in your place

(Unitary Council)

Typically, comparisons between those authorities seen as being statistically "similar" or geographically close are particularly useful. In some instances, comparative data can be valued as a means of reassurance; it is felt that it can be useful to know that other councils are facing similar difficulties or issues.

For others, access to nationwide benchmarks is of less value. It is felt by some that comparative data is of greatest significance if it is "deep and narrow" in scope; that is, benchmarking information is useful if it reflects a smaller area in greater detail. This level of information is understood as being increasingly important given the current drive for very local level collaboration. However this was not the case for all. There are also those who are more concerned with monitoring progress internally given the different priorities and populations covered by the sector.

I actually find far more value in comparisons here year-on-year

(County Council)

You can't use comparative data to understand what needs to be done on your patch because it's different isn't it? That's the whole point to local government. What I do in my space needs to be different to fit the people that I'm looking after

(District Council)

We have found that interviewees representing high performing councils are keen to contextualise performance in the context of other authorities, whereas others have concerns about the way in which comparative data could prompt negative reactions. This is seen as a particular issue if the data is published on a national scale.

The only danger I see with comparative data is that you know the unhelpful elements, the media or whoever it will be take hold of it and actually potentially create some quite negative conversations. That's the risk around it

(Unitary Council)

The methodological issues of obtaining reliable comparative data are also important. It is felt that there needs to be a consistent approach to data collation across authorities to ensure that findings are meaningful. This is seen as being particularly important given that there is no longer a single prescribed residents' survey method as was the case for Place and BVPI surveys.

Similarly, obtaining meaningful comparative data is viewed as being dependent on the commitment of other authorities to gather data in a uniform way but this is difficult to impose given the differing priorities and budget pressures faced by all councils.

Going into the surveys that we're planning for after Christmas, we've got a mixed level of commitment. We've got the county council and health and police who are supportive, some districts but not all. And one of our districts has paid for additional questions. But it's not consistent, so we're looking at having to develop different looking surveys for different parts of the county

(County Council)

Another local example, as described by one senior stakeholder in a London Borough, is the demise of the annual London authority survey which in recent years has struggled to attract more than a handful of participating London boroughs. As levels of participation fall, the usefulness of the data as a benchmarking tool has decreased and has resulted in discouraging others' continued involvement.

When asked whether benchmarked perceptions data would be a useful source of open data to release for public scrutiny (as suggested by the White Paper on Public Service Reform[74]), there was little certainty. For most interviewees, their residents were interested in the quality of local services, and benchmark data was more useful as an aid to understanding over or under performance.

If the [public] say to me 'okay what percentage of the council's budget is spent on adult social care?' or….'how do service levels compare with elsewhere?' I think that's really useful. But if they say to me what's public perception in [local authority area] compared to [name of another county]. I can't believe that they would ask that

(County Council)

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[74] *Open Public Services White Paper, (*presented to Parliament July 2011*)* sets out the coalition Government's programme for public services over the next few years. It sets out principles for reforming public services in line with both existing policies and new agenda.
http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/open-public-services-white-paper.pdf

Conclusions

Amongst senior stakeholders, views on the usefulness of perception-based performance measures vary considerably. Whilst some place considerable value on measuring public perceptions as part of a performance framework, others do not use it to inform the development of policy or services, instead using alternative means of consultation and communication. The frequency in which perceptions based data is collated and the variety in measurements used, reflect the different priorities and circumstances of each local authority we interviewed. For example, interest in perceptions of crime and social cohesion is very much dependent on whether or not authorities face challenges in these areas.

However, broadly speaking, there is a general interest in understanding levels of satisfaction with the council and perceived value for money. This information is typically used to inform (rather than create) policy and to measure performance. However, senior stakeholders are aware of the limitations of using data based on resident perceptions. There is also concern about statistical rigour. This is particularly relevant if data is to be used as a tool for comparison amongst authorities or for measuring performance.

There is no desire for a prescriptive or compulsory replacement for the abolished Place and BVPI surveys. However, there is some demand for standardised questions that will provide insight into resident views across England. Yet, any methodology will need to consider issues of cost/time and perceived reliability which will inevitably influence uptake. The content will need to be carefully considered, to include pertinent (but high level) subjects of investigation but avoid being too specific as to alienate councils to which some issues are simply not relevant.

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